Gordon Institute of Business Science
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Harmonising paradoxes in responsible leadership in local government in emerging markets

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy (insert programme name here).

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this exploratory study was to learn more about the responsible leadership in emerging markets and government organisations through the lived experiences and perceptions of executives. The study covered four main areas. Firstly, it explored how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local government by understanding how executives defined and understood responsible leadership. Secondly, the study explored factors that were affecting the development and implementation of responsible leadership in South African local government. Third, the study explored the role of executives in shaping ethical climate in local government. Lastly, the study probed how executives dealt with competing interests and needs from stakeholders.

Research relevance: Responsible leadership is an emerging construct in leadership theory. Currently its development has been influenced by Western perspectives. Given that leadership does not happen in vacuum – and that cultural and organisational context has influence in leadership orientation, exploring how responsible leadership is understood, developed and implemented in different contexts and various organisational types contributes to the advancement of the construct.

Design / methodology / approach: The approach was inductive. The methodology was mono-qualitative study involving 15 semi-structured virtually conducted interviews with local government executives.

Findings: Responsible leadership is about consideration of broader stakeholders. Contextual factors influenced the responsible leadership orientation. Responsible leaders promote ethical climate through promoting accountability and providing supporting knowledge and skills development to employees. Responsible leaders hold multiple perspectives and focus on promoting ethical decision-making when dealing with completing stakeholder interests.

Implications: The findings contribute to the knowledge development of responsible leadership. They offer insights to law policy makers in local government about leadership development challenges.

Key words: responsible leadership, dealing with paradox, political instability, ethical decision making, value-based leadership.

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Change Leadership at the Gordon Institute of Business, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Name:

Signature

Date: 24 November 2025

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESEACH PROBLEM

1.1 Business Relevance

Those in leadership positions have the power and control to influence their environment of business (Yukl, 2012; Eisenbeiss, 2012), and their influence can negatively or positively impact stakeholders, environment, society and the sustainability of their organisations. Recent corporate and public scandals globally, involving dishonesty, greed and unethical business practices by executives have suggested a disregard for stakeholders, the environment, and society by organisational leaders (Witt and Stahl, 2016; Markoczy et al., 2023). Examples include scandals such as Volkswagen, Shell, and several unethical leadership behaviours in the South African context (Markoczy et al., 2023; Grobler & Koen, 2024). This has sparked a debate among academics for the need to explore an alternative leadership behaviour centred around the needs of broader stakeholders, to complement the traditional leadership models (Varma, 2021).

Responsible leadership has emerged as an alternative leadership behaviour (Witt and Stahl, 2016) that focuses on the broader stakeholder needs, including organisational stakeholders internal and external to the organisation, and the environment (Voegtlin et al., 2020; Afshari et al., 2024). Unlike traditional leadership roles, this leadership orientation emphasises incorporating ethics, sociopolitical and sustainability considerations as part of economic benefits in leadership decision-making processes (Voegtlin, 2016; Tan, 2023, Hei, et al., 2026).

Waldman et al. (2020, p.5) defines responsible leadership as “an orientation or mindset taken by people in executive level positions toward meeting the needs of an organisation’s stakeholder(s)”. This entails adopting positive stakeholder interactions founded on ethical behaviours to ensure sustainable organisational growth (Agarwal and Bhal, 2020). Whereas Marques et al. (2021, p.1) suggests that responsible leadership may be defined as “a values-based leadership approaches that through stakeholder and system orientation, caters for the needs of constituencies directly and indirectly impacted by organizations.” Javed et al. (2024, p.8) defined responsible leadership as “an orientation or sense of obligation that forms the basis of actions of individuals in executive level positions toward meeting the needs or

interests of those groups who are deemed to constitute an organisation's salient stakeholder(s)".

Given the increasingly challenging and complex business environment (Pless & Maak, 2011), organisational leaders are expected to appreciate stakeholder interdependencies (Freeman et al., 2020) and stakeholder power (Schneider, 2002). Organisational decision-making process and outcomes should be guided by stakeholder values (Washburn et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2022). Responsible leaders create value for all stakeholders by ensuring a delicate balance of the diverse interests and needs of their stakeholders (Voegtlin et al., 2020; Afshari et al., 2024). James and Priyadarshini (2021) contend that responsible leadership is not about the sole focus on shareholder interest but ensuring the advancement of all stakeholder interests. Additionally, responsible leaders should be concerned about the long-term impact of their decisions on society and the environment (Voegtlin et al. (2012). Organisational leaders are urged to demonstrate that they consider the interests and needs of all stakeholders through their decision-making processes and actions (Barney & Harrison, 2020; Freeman et al., 2020).

Using relational and ethical lenses, Maak and Pless (2006) suggest that responsible leadership is a social and ethical interaction between organisational leaders and stakeholders inside and outside the organisation. They suggest three roles suitable for organisational leaders to adopt for effective engagement with stakeholders and navigation of the complexities of the business environment.

Several studies have acknowledged the importance of stakeholder engagement as a key element of responsible leadership, such as Agarwal and Bhal (2020), who propose a multidimensional scale integrating ethics and strategy as key components of leading sustainable organisations. When exploring how responsible leadership cultivates social capital, Maak (2007) suggests that, unlike the traditional leadership model, responsible leadership is based on moral relations that seek to build lasting stakeholder relations.

Given the ethical misconduct in South African local governments, the South African Auditor General (AGSA) has called for the leaders of local government systems in South Africa to create a responsible and accountable system (AGSA, 2023). The South African local government system has been battling never-ending unethical leadership issues (Enaifoghe et al., 2023) despite the documented legislation and

policies on how to lead public service (Mbandlwa et al.,2020). This has resulted in key local government stakeholders, communities, and staging service delivery that protects across the width and breath of the country (Mamokhere, 2022).

The positive organisational benefits of adopting responsible leadership are clear; however, the question is whether responsible leadership alone is sufficient to affect the desired organizational outcomes (Marques & Gomes, 2020). Given that most research demonstrating the positive effects of responsible leadership is based in the Western context, it was worth exploring the contextual factors that might affect the enactment of responsible leadership. For example, individual leaders' orientations, such as leaders driven by specific performance, might respond differently to the concept of responsible leadership compared to those who are not (Afshari et al., 2024). Additionally, leadership does not occur in a vacuum; therefore, organisational culture and context, including industry norms and regulations, might affect the effectiveness of responsible leadership (Ahmed et al., 2023). Despite these potential challenges, the study underscores the need for organisations to find practical ways to develop and promote responsible leadership within the context of business.

1.2 Theoretical relevance

This study explores how responsible leadership unfolds in the emerging market context. This study is important because of the positive effects of adopting responsible leadership has on the organisation, society and environment. Unlike other traditional forms of leadership, responsible leadership calls for leaders to prioritise ethical, social, and environmental considerations while holding them accountable to broader organisational stakeholders (Voegtlin, 2016). Adopting responsible leadership has multiple organisational benefits: it has a positive effect at the individual, team, and organisational levels, including external-level benefits such as the macro-economic level (Miska and Mendenhall (2018). The concept broadens the responsibility and accountability of the leader beyond shareholders and employees to include broader stakeholder accountability, such as society (James and Priyadarshini, 2021). Adopting responsible leadership creates value and trust for all legitimate stakeholders (Voegtlin et al., 2020; Afshari et al., 2024).

Several studies have empirically tested the concept of responsibility. These include the quantitative study by Markoczy et al. (2023), which looked at how a CEO's political orientation influences institutional logic and strategic decision-making

regarding corporate social irresponsibility. Some studies have highlighted the environmental and social benefits of leaders ensuring that their decision-making processes are founded on the principles of responsible leadership (Ahmed et al., 2023; Maak et al., 2016). Furthermore, some scholars have postulated the internal organisational benefits such as positive effect on employees, creating a culture of integrity and trust, enhancing collaboration and creating a shared vision (Cheng et al, 2019; Haque, et al 2019; Akhtar et al 2021).

However, the majority of the studies have been conducted in Western context, thus the gap exists in understanding how responsible leadership unfolds in different contexts (Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014; Filatotchev, et al., 2022; Meliou et al., 2021). The reliance on the Western perspective of responsible leadership has the potential to introduce a single perspective due to significantly different cultural and organisational settings of Western context verses say Africa or Latin America (Hincapie & Sanchez, 2022). Additionally, exploring responsible leadership in other contexts provides insights on unique challenges of how responsible leadership is understood, challenges and opportunities for implementing it (Heim et al., 2026).

There is consensus among scholars that theorisiing leadership within its context is needed (Child, 2022; Samimi et al., 2022), however, there are limited studies that intentionally position context as an outcome of leadership action. Pless, et al., (2022) suggested the need to explore micro-contextual factors that help leaders practice responsible leadership.

Responsible leadership studies in emerging markets like South Africa have been limited (De Klerk et al., 2022; De Klerk & Swart, 2023; Pless et al., 2022) and exploring contextual complexities and dilemmas of responsible leadership in emerging markets provide insightful knowledge that can expand the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. Exploring the contextual complexities and dilemmas of responsible leadership in emerging markets provides insights that can expand the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. This is paramount for both theoretical advancement and providing positive practical options that empower business agents, to generate knowledge that is useful for various types of organisations (Tsui, 2021; Heim et al., 2026).

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions were motivated by the call from several scholars to explore responsible leadership from different various contexts and organisatoion so to contribute to the development of the construct (Javed et al., 2024, Hiem et al., 2026). The main research question sort to explore how responsible leadership unfold in South African local government**.** Additionally, to gain understand of how responsible leaders delt with competing stakeholder interests and needs. The were four research questions that were explored to support the main research question, as follows:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do local government executives defined responsible leadership? (Miska and Mendenhall, 2018; De Klerk et al., 2022; De Klerk & Swart, 2023; Pless et al., 2022)

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership? (Waldman et al. (2020; Maak et al. (2022

Research Question 3 (RQ3): How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?? Voegtlin (2016; Chenga, et al., 2019; Waldman et al., 2020; Heim et al., 2026)

Research Question 4 (RQ4): How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands? (Maak et al., 2016; Stahl et al., 2018) Jiang et al.,2022; Voegtlin et al., 2020).

The research gathered insights and understanding from the experience and perceptions of executives who are working for various municipalities in South Africa.

1.3 Research aims

This study had the following objectives:

- Explore how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local governments.
- Understand how executives in the local South African government understand and define responsible leadership.
- Understand the factors affect responsible leadership in public organisations and how executives deal with competing stakeholder interests and needs.
- To understand the role responsible leadership plays in shaping ethical climate.

1.4 Research Contribution

The study has provided both theoretical and practical contribution. Firstly, delving into this research area has contributed to understanding how responsible leadership is understood and defined in different contexts and different types of organisations. Second, it shares light on dilemmas and challenges executives face whilst trying to lead responsible in government organisation. Third, it has provided insights into contextual factors that moderate the enactment of responsible leadership. Fourth, obtaining this understanding of how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local government contributes to further theorical development by provided some unique contextual elements that inform responsible leadership. Lastly, it shares insights on potential issues regarding selection and recruitment of leaders in local government and how this negatively affects the implementation of responsible leadership.

1.5 Scope of the research

The scope of the research was limited to professional executives working in South African local government (municipalities and municipal owned entities).

1.6 Overview of the research report

This research report comprises seven chapters, as follows:

Chapter 1 defines the research problem from the business and theoretical perspectives.
Chapter 2 provides a detailed literature review relevant to the research problem.
Chapter 3 sets out the research question and sub-questions.
Chapter 4 describes the research design and methodology used.
Chapter 5: presents the findings emanating from data analysis
Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to the literature.
Chapter 7: concludes the research and presents research outcomes, including research contributions and recommendations.

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study aims to explore the different responsible leadership orientations and their effects in the situational context of South Africa's local government system. In addition, we explore how responsible leaders harmonise the potentially conflicting interests of different stakeholder groups. Existing research has provided empirical evidence suggesting that situational context influences the unfolding of responsible leadership behaviour.

The literature review begins by providing an overview of responsible leadership as the theoretical framework for this study. The first section (Section 2.2) emphasises the importance of context in understanding a social phenomenon such as responsible leadership (Johns, 2024). This section also highlights the crucial role that South African local governments play in fulfilling key elements of the country's constitutional commitments.

Section 2.2 provides and overview of the importance of context in leadership theoretical development (leadership (Johns, 2024; Stahl et al., 2016; Muzio, 2022).

Section 2.3 provides an overview of the evolution of responsible leadership (Patzer & Scherer, 2018; Maak et al., 2016; Voegtlin et al., 2020). It begins by defining responsible leadership and its importance in ensuring sustainable organisations (Waldman et al., 2020; Patzer & Scherer, 2018; Maak, Pless, and Voegtlin, 2016; Voegtlin et al., 2020).

Section 2.4 provides a high-level comparison of responsible leadership with key modern leadership constructs (Javed et al., 2024; Voegtlin, 2016; Waldman et al., 2020). Section 2.5 compares responsible leadership with other forms of leadership (Javed et al., 2024; Voegtlin, 2016; Waldman et al.,2020).

Section 2.6 discusses responsible leadership as a construct. It unpacks the various orientations of responsible leadership, their benefits, and shortcomings (Pless & Maak, 2011; Waldman et al., 2020; Voegtlin et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021; Pless et

al., 2016, 2021). Section 2.7 discusses how context affects responsible leadership orientations.

Section 2.8 discusses responsible leadership and performing paradox with focus on ethical decision-making as the paradox management mechanism. Section 2.9 provides a high-level discussion of the theoretical approach.

In conclusion, the literature review was consolidated into a conceptual map that outlines the key themes that emerged from the review. Please refer to Figure 1..

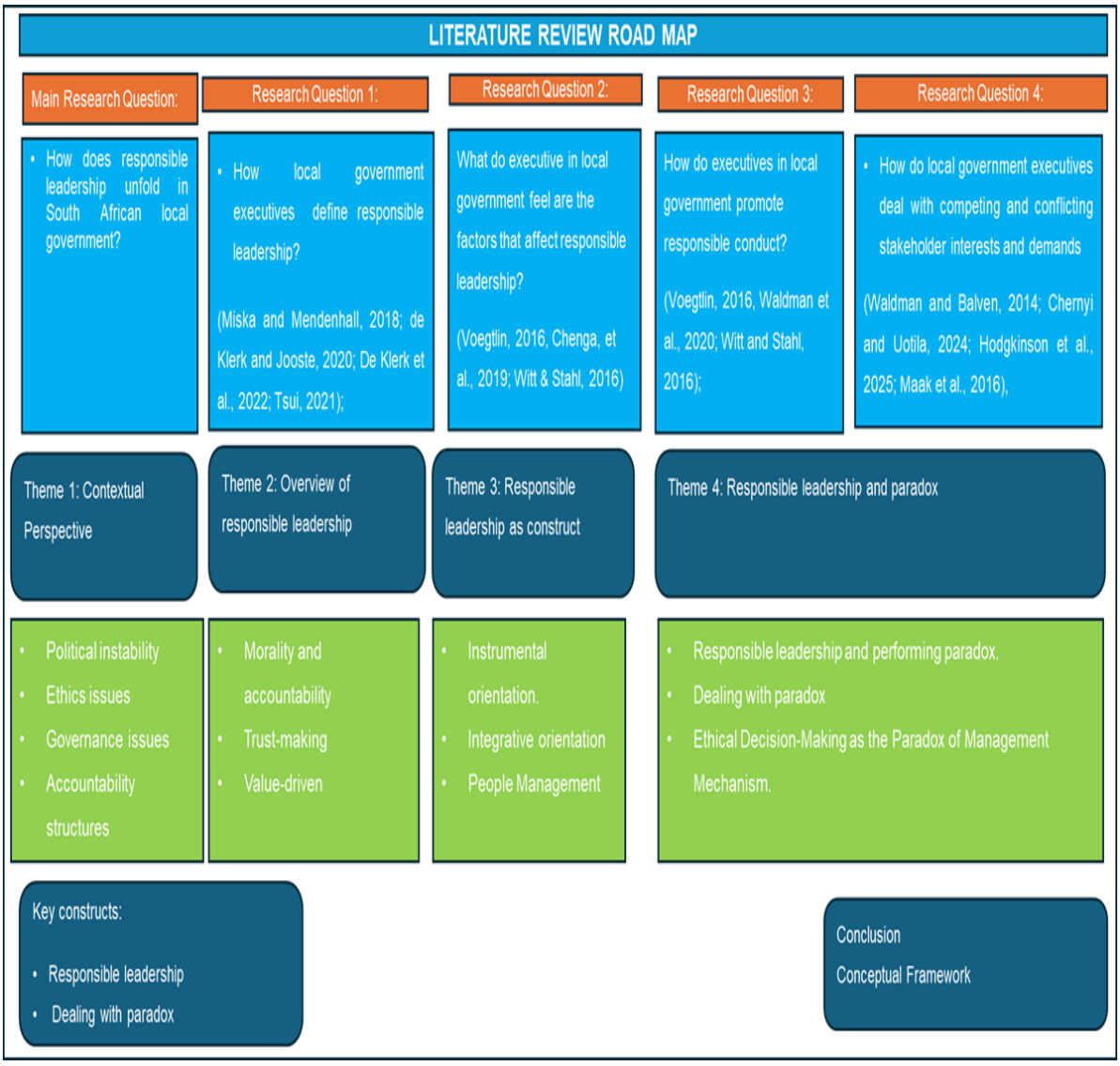


Figure 1: Literature review roadmap

2.2 Context

The pursuit of understanding a social phenomenon cannot be effectively explored in isolation from its context, because context moderates the relationship between leadership and its outcomes and directly and indirectly determines leadership (Johns, 2024). In the organisational sciences context, variables such as work design at the micro level (Oc, 2018), industry characteristics and organisational demography at the meso level, and variables such as national culture at the macro level (Hiller et al., 2020) can be broadly defined.

Contextual considerations are valuable in research as they facilitate a better understanding and development of theory, providing valuable insights for management practices and teaching (Stahl et al., 2023). Considering the organisational and societal contexts, for example, is likely to shed light on where and when. Why a leadership phenomenon occurs, and this will provide relevant learnings and practical insights (George, 2014). Furthermore, some leadership and management theories and concepts developed in the Western context may reflect interests, values, and perspectives that are not strictly transferable or valid in other national or institutional contexts (Muzio, 2022). Filatotchev et al. (2022) argue that theories such as urgency theory and stakeholder perspective are context-sensitive and applying them in a non-Western context could reveal insights that are beneficial to knowledge development.

Wickert et al. (2024) suggest that exploring leadership studies in non-Western contexts offers valuable insights into relational approaches and a deeper understanding of variations in global management practices. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to address the potential biases inherent in the widespread popularity of Western theories and their assumed applicability to all contexts (Filatotchev et al., 2022). The South African local government plays a crucial constitutional role in delivering basic services to the citizenry and, in turn, provides and maintains infrastructure that is the backbone of economic development. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the local government to ensure social cohesion by ensuring accountability and the responsible provision of services and promoting economic development. Despite these functions being governed by different legislations, constitutional provisions, various ethical standards and codes, and governance compliance requirements, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that leaders in South African local governments may be doing more harm than good.

Given the paradoxes that exist in South African local governments and the need for leaders to act responsibly and accountably, it is worthwhile to explore how leaders in municipalities address the paradoxes they encounter. This study aims to explore the social phenomenon of how responsible leadership unfolds in a paradoxical context. The context of this study is the South African local government. This study employs a qualitative research approach to identify a broad range of contextual factors that influence the development of leadership and its outcomes in local government.

2.2.1 South African Municipalities' Political Instability and Governance Volatility.

Many South African municipalities experience political instability, a defining factor that significantly influences the conditions under which leaders operate (Maak et al., 2016). The high rates of shifting political leadership, unstable coalition governments, and factional competition in local councils create an atmosphere of uncertainty that hinders continuity in decision-making and strategic planning. Varma (2021) argued that councilor turnover, mayors, senior managers, and the loss of institutional memory through staff turnover can hinder the formation of viable governance structures and lead to inconsistent organisational orientation, with a short-term focus (Mbandlwa *et al.,* 2020; Shava & Mazenda, 2021). Therefore, such dynamics undermine the administrative strength needed to maintain long-term service delivery and limit the possibility of leaders instilling responsible leadership practices in the system.

Political interference in the administrative process also contributes to governance volatility, a persistent issue in many municipalities over the long term (Maak et al., 2016). Politicians have a growing influence on procurement processes, high-level appointments, and resource allocation, with a heavy emphasis on partisan interests rather than effectiveness (Munzhedzi, 2016; Naidoo, 2020). In this regard, such disintegration of political and administrative functions compromises the independence of senior managers, limits their ability to make ethical decisions, and creates a sense of intimidation among leaders who seek to instill accountability or oppose corruption. Therefore, these types of pressures foster a situation in which responsible leadership requires acting in accordance with individual values. Additionally, pressure prompts responsible leadership to navigate deeply ingrained

political processes that define what is or is not permitted or encouraged within the organisation (Pless et al., 2022).

Mazibuko and Fourie (2017) proposed that instability undermines governance systems and compliance structures, thereby increasing institutional risk. Thus, political instability is one of the causes of service delivery failures, ineffective control systems, and the internalisation of immoral conduct in municipal processes (Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017; Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2016). In the context of leaders in executive positions, this situation presents a complex leadership paradox because executives are required to maintain high ethical standards, drive performance, and satisfy stakeholders as they navigate a volatile and politicised environment (Mbandlwa *et al.,* 2020). Leaders must comprehend political realities, considering that the broader governance climate significantly influences their motivation and ability to make strategic decisions (Pless et al., 2022).

2.2.2 Ethics, Governance, and Accountability Structure in Local Government.

Ethical governance has emerged as a key focus for enhancing democratic local governments in South Africa, driven by increasing scrutiny from the population, corruption scandals, and declining confidence in state institutions (Mbandlwa *et al.,* 2020). Formal mechanisms such as the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA), Municipal Systems Act (MSA), and Public Administration Ethics, Integrity and Disciplinary Technical Assistance Unit are frameworks aimed at regulating ethical behaviour, enforcing oversight and promoting an integrity culture in the functioning of municipalities (RSA, 2000; RSA, 2003). The tools focus on transparency, due process, and fiscal responsibility - concepts that are fundamental in the need to ensure leaders serve the interests of the people. Nevertheless, despite the presence of these structures, they are often compromised by poor implementation, political interference, and a lack of capability in oversight structures (Berti & Cuhna, 2023). This leads to ethical loopholes that continue to plague municipal performance.

The mechanisms of accountability are also enhanced by national and provincial procedures that aim to achieve better governance results and decrease systemic misconduct. Back to Basics Campaign (2014), Municipal Integrity Management Framework (2015), and increased authority of the Auditor-General under the Public Audit Amendment Act (2018) are some notable efforts to institutionalise ethical behaviour and improve consequence management. Mbandlwa et al. (2020) argued

that the measures aim to enhance internal controls, audit reporting, and guarantee that public money is handled responsibly and transparently. However, steady non-compliance, frequent irregular spending, and weak disciplinary procedures indicate conflicts between the policy intention and the organisation's reality (Auditor-General South Africa, 2023). Therefore, the distance between governing models and practice emphasises the structural issues of executives' attempts to maintain responsible leadership.

In this context, ethical governance serves as both a regulatory prerequisite and a source of ethical guidance for leaders in complex municipal settings (Voegtlin et al., 2020). Effective accountability systems enable leaders to make ethically informed decisions, set clear expectations, and manage stakeholder relationships in a transparent manner. However, such systems are of low quality or are unevenly applied. In such cases, responsible leadership is limited by organisational cultures that condone misbehaviour or are unable to administer accountability (Mbandlwa *et al.,* 2020). As such, the procedural environment of local governments is shaped by ethical governance and accountability structures. Also, it has a profound impact on the orientations of leaders and their ability to act with integrity, as well as their efforts to balance the demands of various stakeholders.

2.3 Overview of responsible leadership.

The current challenges facing organisations worldwide require responsible leadership – a leadership approach that can integrate the concerns of all organisational stakeholders in its daily organisational decision-making process (Patzer & Scherer, 2018), while striking a delicate balance in delivering economic, social and environmental organisational performance (Maak et al., 2016; Voegtlin et al., 2020). The recent surge in corporate scandals, some of which have compromised public trust, has diverted attention from social capital and raised questions about the legitimacy and trust in corporate systems, driving growing interest in exploring responsible leadership (Voegtlin et al., 2012; Waldman et al., 2020).

Organisational leaders are expected to broaden their approach to leadership beyond financial outcomes and legal compliance (Haque et al., 2020; Waldman & Balven, 2014) to include the promotion of initiative-taking stakeholder well-being (Voegtlin, 2016). With its interdisciplinary approach to leadership that prioritises the impact and consequences of the decision-making process on ethical, social, and environmental

issues, responsible leadership is viewed as an appropriate leadership approach to address the current challenges facing organisations (Voegtlin, 2016). Waldman et al. (2020, p.5) define responsible leadership as “an orientation or mindset taken by people in executive-level positions toward meeting the needs of an organisation’s stakeholder(s).

Meeting organisational stakeholder needs entails adopting positive stakeholder interactions founded on ethical behaviour to ensure sustainable organisational growth (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). Responsible leaders rely on their values to orient their decision-making process and ensure that they cater to the needs of the organisational constituencies that are directly and indirectly impacted by the organisation (Marques et al., 2021). Responsible leadership orientation is particularly expected from individuals in executive-level positions; they should have a sense of obligation to ensure that the needs of the groups deemed salient stakeholders are fulfilled (Javed et al., 2024).

The relationship between a responsible leader and stakeholders is socially constructed from the executive's perspective to establish an accountability platform related to the value creation process and the long-term vision of an organisation (Maak et al., 2016; Javed et al., 2024). It is the responsibility of the executive to establish the relational linkages, being clear about whom they are responsible for (the stakeholders) and how responding to their concerns and needs entails (Varma, 2021). However, the relationship and responsibility orientation towards different stakeholder groups and their needs is not always evenly distributed (Javed et al., 2024). Executives can orient their beliefs and actions to meet the interests of one or various stakeholder types; any chosen orientation has its own implications.

Orientation is more concerned with the leader’s mindset than their responsible leadership behaviour (Waldman et al., 2020). It focuses on the leader’s process of balancing the potentially conflicting demands and expectations of external stakeholders with the internal organisational pressures of meeting the organisation’s long-term vision while being transparent and accountable (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). The chosen responsible leadership orientation depends on the executive’s value orientation (Maak et al., 2016). Empathy and personal values are considered the primary predictors of responsible leadership, which is a leader’s ability to perceive and consider the needs of others in alignment with their personal values (Voegtlin et al., 2020).

The orientation of responsible leadership unfolds in varying degrees of accountability, from one executive's actions and decisions to different organisational contexts (Pless et al., 2014). Scholars contend that executives have different views about the legitimacy of stakeholder groups and the role the businesses they lead play in society (Stahl and Sully de Luque, 2014) – on one extreme are those who hold a view that only the shareholders matter (traditional economic view). In contrast, others believe that executives are responsible for broader stakeholder groups (Pless et al., 2012). Contextual and situation contingency factors can moderate the leader's orientation (Maak et al., 2016). What is worth exploring in the public administration context, including the South African local government, is who executives consider to be the shareholder. This question is particularly intriguing for those executives with a narrow stakeholder orientation.

The theoretical concept of responsible leadership is founded on agency theory, based on Western perspectives and ideals of what leaders should do to advance the aims of stakeholders and refrain from harming their interests (Stahl and Sully de Luque, 2014). The extent to which these perspectives and ideals apply in different contexts remains an area of interest for researchers (Witt & Stahl, 2016).

In summary, responsible leadership is about the individual leadership orientation of organisational executives (Javed et al., 2020), as well as the coordination and cultivation of a sustainable relationship with organisational stakeholders to achieve the desired shared long-term vision of the organisation (James & Priyadarshini, 2021). Researchers have argued for the need to explore how contextual factors shape the understanding of responsible leadership (Javed et al., 2024; Markoczy et al., 2023; Pless et al., 2022).

2.3.1 Responsible Leadership as Moral Accountability and Trust-Making.

Responsible leadership has conceptualised as an intrinsically moral process that is based on accountability to a broad scope of stakeholders. A plethora of studies upheld that responsible leaders are not merely procedural participants who adhere to compliance guidelines, but moral agents who exercise discretion considering ethical obligations, social expectations, and the future welfare of stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). The moral aspect is further enhanced in the public sector, as leaders must interact within a governance system where

legitimacy, transparency, and ethical behaviour are core to ensuring that people trust them (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). Thus, responsible leadership is not just about fulfilling tasks. However, it is also about the context of justification, accountability, and integrity that leaders uphold in the face of complex situations and societal demands (Voegtlin et al., 2020).

More so, the moral orientation is based on trust-building (Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Responsible leadership fosters trust through open communication, fairness, responsiveness, and the consistent application of an agreed-upon set of values in the behaviours practised (Hernandez, 2012; Maak et al., 2016). Once built, trust becomes one of the important relational currencies that allow collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and organisational legitimacy. Within the municipal setting, where the community must guide people through public leaders to manage resources equitably, provide necessary services within the community, and overcome socio-economic disparities, the development of trust can serve as both an ethical concern and a strategic need (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). Therefore, open leaders with a sense of accountability in decision-making help build confidence in a local government, an institution that has been marred by corruption, mismanagement, and politics.

In addition, moral accountability in the form of responsible leadership has a stabilising effect in the settings that are both uncertain and conflictive (Voegtlin, 2016). It is through the foregrounding of ethical values and stakeholder interests that leaders can manage the conflicts that exist between political orders, organisational objectives, and community needs, when they are more explicit and justified. According to Waldman et al. (2020), such an ethical anchoring allows leaders to make justifiable, inclusive, and consistent decisions based on social values, which contributes to organisational credibility and enhances social cohesion. Responsible leadership, as a moral accountability and trust-building concept, therefore, provides a conceptual foundation for analysing leadership behaviour in South African municipalities (Voegtlin et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Value-driven Responsible Leadership.

Values-based leadership roles value the leader as the key force behind their behaviour, which affects the decision-making process, solving dilemmas, and the leader-stakeholder relationship (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Values serve as guiding anchors, including integrity, justice, fairness, respect, and a service orientation, which

enable leaders to navigate morally complex or politically challenging situations (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Pless, 2007). In the domain of responsible leadership, values are not mere abstract concepts, but they provide the cognitive and ethical models by which leaders set priorities, make trade-offs, and decisions should be aligned with the interests of the people (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). Against such a background, values can serve as a guide and stabiliser for responsible leadership practice in governance environments where ethical complexities are present.

The responsibility-based leadership approach, combined with a values-based approach, also encourages consistent ethical behaviour, which is critical in creating credibility and strengthening the organisational culture. Leaders who practice in line with well-defined values do so to form predictable behavioural patterns, which employees, citizens, and political stakeholders can trust (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). This uniformity reinforces the moral climate in organisations as it sends messages on what is acceptable as well as what norms shape decision-making. Values-based leadership proves to be a significant counterbalance to the pressures of corruption, political interference, and resource constraints (characteristic of South African municipalities), enabling leaders to remain upright in the face of paradoxical pressures or conflicting expectations (Berti & Cuhna, 2023). Values thus help leaders make principled decisions, as opposed to expedient ones.

Moreover, responsible leadership based on values promotes integrative and inclusive leadership by fostering empathy, fairness, and the ethical treatment of all parties involved. Being on the values-based level, leaders are more likely to balance conflicting interests and build relationships based on respect and understanding (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin et al., 2020). It is the component of relational ethics that is of special importance in local government, where stakeholder groups such as citizens, employees, councillors, and community organisations tend to have conflicting priorities. The values can help make transparent decisions that are balanced and legitimate to the actions of the leadership (Berti & Cuhna, 2023). In this way, the values-based conceptualisation of responsible leadership indicates that executives are using personal and organisational values as the primary sources of decisions to support ethical decisions, principled behaviour, and hold themselves accountable in complex municipal contexts.

2.4 Responsible leadership orientation

There is consensus in the latest responsible leadership literature on two normative orientations of responsible leadership: an “instrumental” and an “integrative” (Maak et al., 2016; Waldman et al., 2020). The orientation of an individual responsible leader could be such that they primarily prioritise the interests of organisational owners and shareholders, while the interests of other stakeholders, including employees and communities, become secondary (Maak et al., 2016; Waldman et al., 2020; Pless et al., 2022). This form of limited responsible leadership orientation is referred to as instrumental, focusing on using organisational resources to maximise shareholder wealth (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020; Patzer et al., 2018).

On the other hand, an organisational executive with an orientation that considers and prioritises the needs and interests of the broader stakeholder group (Maak et al., 2016; Waldman et al., 2020) is considered integrative. This form of responsible leadership orientation is an inclusive leadership orientation that considers strategic choices beyond the organisational business case (Maak et al., 2016; Waldman et al., 2020; Varma, 2021). Although the term “integrative” in responsible leadership literature is often used primarily to advance stakeholder needs and demands (Maak et al., 2016), an integrative responsible leadership orientation has the potential to foster social integration by enhancing shared norms and values (Patzer et al., 2018).

2.4.1 Instrumental responsible leadership

Instrumentally oriented executives tend to be reactive in their approach to stakeholder accountability (Varma, 2021). When they do address broader stakeholder issues, they do so for instrumental reasons (Pless et al., 2012). When dealing with stakeholders, instrumental executives take an exclusive approach, focusing on selective stakeholders who have the power to impact the organisation and are beneficial to it (Hahn et al., 2014). Broadly speaking, instrumental responsible leadership orientation tends to focus on leading by objective, with a narrow focus only on the most influential stakeholders (Maak et al., 2016).

Executives who adopt the instrumental orientation tend to be driven by self-interest and profit (Pless et al.,2022). According to the shareholder value model, external stakeholders are only relevant if they contribute to the creation of shareholder value (Scherer & Voegtlin, 2018). As much as they tend to comply with laws that affect

shareholder value creation, in the context of weak institutional controls, inadequate regulations, and ineffective law enforcement, executives oriented towards instrumental goals align their decision-making process and mindset with the conditions of the context (Pless, et al., 2022). This approach has dire consequences for broader stakeholders (Stahl et al., 2016). This is because executives with an instrumental orientation have a low degree of accountability for others (Pless, 2022); they tend to be driven more by fiduciary duty rather than a social welfare orientation. Fiduciary duty orientation refers to the sense of moral obligation executives have towards shareholders, whereas social welfare orientation is perceived as the sense of obligation executives have towards a broader group of stakeholders (Waldman & Galvin, 2008).

When dealing with differing views, executives with an instrumental orientation tend to acknowledge the opposing views yet focus on advancing their own views instead of aiming to reconcile the different views for a shared, positive outcome (Pless et al., 2022). Stahl et al., (2016) contend that an instrumental responsible leadership orientation may not be a suitable approach for executives to do good and avoid compromising the interests of broader stakeholders, especially those who are voiceless.

2.4.2 Integrative responsible leadership

Integrative-oriented executives assume a role in creating shared value for all business stakeholders, including broader society, without neglecting their organisational economic performance and value creation responsibilities (Varma, 2021). In line with the theoretical roles modelled by Voegtlin et al., (2020), they take on an initiative-taking, expert, facilitator, and stakeholder accountability role. As suggested by behavioural complexity theory, this approach is positively associated with effective leadership and positive stakeholder engagement (Voegtlin et al., 2020). Integrative-oriented executives recognise the potential vulnerabilities of affected and interested stakeholders and see them as ends in themselves rather than means (Pless et al., 2022).

With their broader view of stakeholder needs and demands, and an initiative-taking approach, an integrative, responsible leadership orientation is deemed more appropriate and effective in complex business environments with weak institutions and governance (Maak et al., 2016; Pless et al., 2022). This is because their actions

are founded on virtue, with a deliberate commitment to apply respect, integrity, and dignity when dealing with stakeholder needs, and they adopt a future-oriented approach (Pless et al., 2022). When dealing with differing views, executives with an integrative orientation tend to focus on harmonising the different views for a mutually beneficial outcome (Pless et al., 2022). This approach can be practical in regulating excessive self-interest and greed (Pless et al., 2012). This is because their orientation is guided more by social welfare considerations rather than solely by economic reasoning (Maak et al., 2016).

2.4.3 People Management Responsible Leadership

The concept of people management is becoming an increasingly important aspect of leadership responsibility, especially within the context of the public sector, where the nature of organisational performance and service provision relies on the level of engagement and collaboration among employees. Responsible leaders are not only able to manage tasks; scholars also highlight the importance of building relationships, sharing a purpose, and creating an environment that enables employees to flourish (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin, 2016). This relational orientation entails mentoring, empowering workers, fostering teamwork, and cultivating a culture of shared responsibility. People-centred leadership is a necessity in the context of complex situations and diverse expectations of the workforce, as it is essential to keep teams motivated, cohesive, and focused on organisational objectives (Javed et al., 2024).

Emotional intelligence and the capacity to handle various relationships with the stakeholders, both inside and outside the organisation, are also key qualities of responsible leadership (Pless et al., 2022). Emotionally aware, empathetic, and fair, leaders will find it easier to resolve conflicts, foster loyalty, and create strong teams that can withstand pressure and uncertainty (Javed et al., 2024; Hernandez, 2012). This human-centred approach can be applied in the public sector, where limited resources, political factors, and high expectations of service delivery constrain workers. As a result, their morale is boosted, and the organisation's stability is improved (Javed et al., 2024). Additionally, effective people management becomes a strategic tool that facilitates ethical conduct, enhances decision-making processes, and promotes continuous service improvement.

Moreover, responsible leadership is a practice that encompasses ethical considerations in people management, ensuring that workers are treated with dignity,

supported in their professional growth, and have clear expectations and fair feedback (Waldman et al., 2020; Voegtlin et al., 2018). Responsible leaders model ethical behaviour and foster participation to influence organisational cultures, promoting integrity, innovation, and shared ownership. Thus, executives emphasised that being a responsible leader entails strategy, vision, and an ethical orientation, as well as the capacity to motivate, lead, and develop individuals (Javed et al., 2024). Therefore, people management is core to responsible leadership, allowing leaders to balance the expectations of performance with the well-being of stakeholders and organisational legitimacy.

2.5 Responsible leadership vs other leadership constructs

When compared to other value-based leadership constructs, such as servant leadership and authentic leadership, responsible leadership places greater emphasis on a leader's balanced consideration of all stakeholder interests (Javed et al., 2024) and ensuring accountability for both direct and indirect actions (Voegtlin, 2016). Javed and his colleagues (2024) argue that, unlike other leadership constructs, responsible leadership focuses on one’s leadership orientation rather than behavioural style, with an emphasis on values, mindset, and obligation. Ethical leadership can be considered embedded in responsibility through the prioritisation of fair decisions and positive stakeholder relationships. However, the narrow view of the extent of stakeholder relationships and the much emphasis on leadership outcome and impact on stakeholders that ethical leadership tends to take, makes the two forms of leadership differ (Javed et al., 2024).

However, the servant leadership construct can be deemed relevant to responsible leadership, as it also considers the needs of both internal and external stakeholders – employees and the broader community (Waldman et al., 2020). For Javed and his colleagues (Javed et al., 2024), the implicit broad range of stakeholders considered under responsible leadership, and the fact that, with servant leadership, this aspect tends to be fuzzy, is what distinguishes responsible leadership from servant leadership. Most leadership forms, including servant leadership, tend to be conceptualised across all organisational management levels, but responsible leadership is conceptualised at the executive leadership level (Javed et al., 2024; Waldman et al., 2020).

It is its broader stakeholder consideration (internal and external), the focus on serving the needs and interests of targeted stakeholders, the executive leadership conceptualisation, and the emphasis on leader orientation instead of traits or behavioural styles that make responsible leadership unique (Javed et al., 2024).

2.6 Responsible as a construct

The need to explore responsible leadership as a construct to address deficiencies in the existing literature was postulated in the early research work by Pless and Maak (2011) when examining the phenomenon of high-profile global corporate scandals. Since then, a tremendous amount of research has been conducted on extending the definition of responsible leadership (Waldman et al., 2020), identifying its antecedents (Voegtlin et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021), mapping its orientation of responsible leadership (Pless et al.,2016; Pless et al., 2021), expanding its theorisation (Pless, 2012) and exploring its outcomes of responsible leadership (Varma, 2021; Javed et al.,2020). It has been explored as a multidimensional construct, encompassing leaders' concerns about ethics and strategy, rather than focusing solely on stakeholders (Agarwal, 2020).

There is consensus among leadership scholars that responsible leadership is an individual-level construct (Javed et al.,2024; Waldman et al.,2020) targeted at the executive management level of an organisation focusing on the orientation or mindset of executive managers on how they meet the needs and demands of a broad range of organisational stakeholders (Waldman et al.,2020). From the work of Washburn et al. (2018), looking at executive decision-making values, they postulate that leadership at the executive level should be viewed as a collective phenomenon (CEO and top management team). From the perspective of responsible leadership, the collective orientation, or at least the congruence, of organisational executives is an interesting phenomenon to consider.

Expanding on the theory of responsible leadership, Voegtlin et al. (2018) proposed three role models of responsible leadership: an expert and a facilitator who can display efficient orientation and leadership in fulfilling the needs and demands of internal stakeholders, shareholders, and employees. In contrast, a responsible leader whose orientation considers the broader societal implications of their leadership decisions is a responsible citizen. These three role models advance the idea that accountability towards both internal and external stakeholders is highly valuable and

paramount to responsible leadership (Voegtlin et al., 2018). The individual leader's empathy and universal value orientation have a positive influence on how these roles are enacted (Voegtlin et al., 2020). What requires exploration is whether these roles, models of responsibility, can assist leaders in harmonising conflicting and competing stakeholder needs and demands (Voegtlin et al., 2020).

In conclusion, it is the complex interaction with different stakeholders who have differing and conflicting interests that makes responsible leadership a unique element (Javed et al., 2020). Some research work has been done (Maak et al., 2016) examining how organisational executives in complex business environments incorporate various stakeholder interests in their strategy decision-making process. However, more research is needed to thoroughly explore context-specific responsible leadership behaviours that are appropriate in dealing with the complexity of stakeholder demands, such as paradoxical tensions (Voegtlin et al., 2020). Given that leadership occurs in a context, there is value in exploring whether leaders can be both responsible and irresponsible simultaneously, and what interdependencies and trade-offs influence their leadership choices (Waldman et al., 2020).

2.7 Effects of context on responsible leadership orientation

As indicated earlier, justice cannot be achieved without considering the context when examining a social phenomenon such as leadership. The corruption scandals in public administration have led to a decline in global citizen trust (Gracia & Ariño, 2015). South African public administration has experienced an enormous increase in several unethical behaviour events involving misappropriation of public funds (Vorster, 2012), with unethical decisions related to the procurement process being the most significant challenge (Munzhedzi, 2016).

There has been a suggestion that executives in the South African public administration are failing to create a culture of compliance, accountability, and transparency, which has perpetuated the extent of unethical practices (Mazibuko & Fourie, 2017). Trust in public service is paramount in fostering a healthy relationship between citizenry and government, and promoting good governance (Gracia & Ariño, 2015). On the other hand, a decline in trust between citizenry and government has the potential to undermine institutional legitimacy and democratic processes (Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2016). Responsible leadership has been proposed as a novel

theory for fostering public trust while addressing sustainable development goals (Voegtlin et al., 2012).

However, the effectiveness of responsible leadership orientation is contextual. Stahl and his colleagues (2016) postulate that a context with weak institutions, law enforcement, and control systems is likely to discourage responsible leadership and hinder responsible leaders from avoiding harm and doing good. In their paper exploring the emergence of responsible leadership in developing countries, Pless et al. (2022) support this view by suggesting that weak institutions hinder the development of responsible leadership.

Maak et al. (2016) suggest that, due to its limited view, instrumental responsible leadership orientation may be practical only in a business context with more stable institutions, regulations, and governance, but ineffective where these are weak. They add that this is because of its inclination to reduce complexity to exclusive stakeholder focus (the shareholders). This suggests that without sound and effective control and governance mechanisms, an instrumental responsible leadership orientation might not be appropriate in helping leaders do good and avoid harm (Waldman et al., 2019; Pless et al., 2016; Pless et al., 2022). On the other hand, integrative responsible leadership orientation is more effective in complex and unstable environments because of its focus on balancing conflicting interests and considering broader stakeholder needs (Maak et al.,2016)

There is limited empirical evidence relating to how responsible leadership unfolds in a public sector as an organisational context (Ntakumba & de Jong, 2023), besides some studies in public administration in Germany (Seibel, 2016), in Pakistan (Huo et al.,2023) and Ghana (Obuobisa-Darko et al.,2023). There is a scarcity of studies on responsible leadership in the South African public sector (Jonck, 2024). Given the leadership challenges faced by the South African local government, it is deemed appropriate to explore how responsibility unfolds. Given the lack of transparency, accountability, and a culture of non-compliance, it is worthwhile to explore the existing responsible leadership orientation and its effects.

Against such a background, there is consensus among responsible leadership scholars on the two current prominent orientations of responsible leadership. However, there is a need to explore whether the context, stakeholder needs and expectations and situation influence the leader's responsible orientation (Miska &

Mendenhall, 2018). Additionally, it is worth exploring the potential complex relationship between the chosen responsible leadership orientation and the different organisational contexts, and how responsible leaders harmonise the multiple, and potentially competing, stakeholder interests (Javed et al., 2024) while maintaining their values. Lastly, to explore what initiatives organisations put in place to develop and foster an integrative, responsible leadership orientation (Pless et al., 2016).

2.8 Responsible leadership and performing paradox.

The business environment has become brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible (BENI), and this means organisational leaders are likely to face increasing contradictory elements within their organisations (Zhang et al., 2015). Paradoxes are an inevitable part of any organisation (Batool et al., 2023), and responsible leaders are expected to embrace and navigate them responsibly as part of leading sustainable organisations (Hahn et al., 2018). Smith and Lewis (2011, p.382) define paradox as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time”.

The responsibility of leaders lies in balancing the various paradoxical needs and demands of stakeholders (Waldman et al., 2020). According to the early research work by Smith and Lewis (2011), the plurality of stakeholders and competing strategies and goals may create tension between internal and external stakeholders. Leaders can approach these tensions by focusing only on the needs and demands of one stakeholder group (either/or approach), or they can harmonise the different stakeholder needs and demands (both/and approach) (Lewis & Smith, 2011).

Reflecting on their 2008 exchange of letters with Seigel on the meaning of responsible leadership, Waldman and his colleagues (2020) contend that when executives decide to orient their responsibility and accountability primarily to the shareholder when dealing with a plurality of stakeholders, this can be compared to the “either/or” approach of performing paradox. They view this as an instrumental, responsible leadership orientation. However, when executives orient their responsibility and accountability to broader stakeholder groups, this can be compared to the “both/and approach of managing paradox (Waldman, 2020). They associate this approach with an integrative, responsible leadership orientation.

Seigal in Waldaman (2020) argues that executives are only judged by shareholders for developing and implementing strategies that are advancing the financial well-being of the organisation and should not be diverted from this objective. He adds that instrumental responsible leadership orientation does not mean ignoring non-financial stakeholders – efficiently managed organisations take care of their employees and customers. However, this approach may be appropriate for enhancing short-term performance, but harmonising the different stakeholder needs and demands is more sustainable for both the executive and organisation (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Given their broader stakeholder orientation (Maak et al., 2016) and their empathy and value-based judgement (Voegtlin et al., 2020), leaders with an integrative responsible leadership orientation are considered more suitable in harmonising different stakeholder needs and demands. An argument can be made that, with an orientation to broader stakeholder interests, integrative oriented leaders have more substantial stakeholder value, and they approach decision-making with a more complex perspective (Washburn et al., 2018). Their leadership orientation, the ability to harmonise paradox, would position them as more appropriate and effective in leading complex environments (Zhang et al., 2015).

The complex and diverse setting of public organisations, specifically public service delivery, makes the public sector a prime example of operating in a paradoxical environment (Backhaus et al., 2022; Franken et al., 2020). The variety of organisational goals to be implemented and the diversity of stakeholder needs and demands to be met with limited resources without trade-off are a source of paradoxical tensions (Torfing et al., 2020). Scholars on public leadership have argued that due to the ambiguous and vague work environment in the public sector, a shift of leadership approach to a paradoxical lens is warranted (Murphy et al., 2017; Trong Tuan, 2017). However, more traditional leadership approaches persist in government (Franklin et al.,2020).

In their study examining the impact of paradoxical leadership in the public sector on follower outcomes, Backhaus et al. (2022) confirm that paradoxical leadership is a valid and relevant construct in this sector. The findings of the study amplify prior research that emphasised the significance of paradoxical leadership in the public sector (Franken et al., 2020). When Franklin and her colleagues (2020) explored whether the paradoxical leadership approach can foster employee resilience in the public sector, they concluded that leaders who can manage paradox are more

suitable for the complex and dynamic public sector context. However, both studies were based in Germany and New Zealand, highlighting the need to explore how managing paradoxes in different public sector contexts can enhance knowledge (Backhaus et al., 2022; Frankline et al., 2020).

2.8.1 Dealing with paradox.

Furthermore, that paradox mindset, as postulated by Miron-Spektor et al., (2018), could predict responsible leadership orientation. Leaders with a paradoxical mindset can navigate with contradicting elements simultaneously without succumbing to the pressure to choose “either/or” (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). In contrast, a leader without a paradox midpoint would prefer to choose an option or engage minimally with both elements (Miron-Spektor). This approach can be likened to an instrumental responsible orientation, as it focuses solely on meeting external stakeholder needs and demands through a cost-benefit analysis (Waldman et al., 2021).

The paradox mindset refers to one’s ability to embrace paradox and see opportunities in competing demands (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), rather than approaching paradox rationally and linearly (Keller et al., 2017). Leaders who lack a paradoxical mindset tend to focus on choosing between conflicting and competing demands or adopt a moderate approach of engaging with both (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Miro-Spektor et al. (2018) suggest that it is through the acceptance of the paradoxical nature of existence that leaders can develop the awareness capabilities to embrace ambiguity and become innovative.

It is paramount for leaders to address paradoxical demands ethically (Waldman et al., 2020), as irresponsibly dealing with them can compromise stakeholder relationships, negatively affecting trust, morale, and the sustainability of the organisation (Sargam & Pandey, 2024). Based on the paradox theory, when leaders navigate paradox and tension from conflicting and even differing demands from the variety of organisational stakeholder they either focus their orientation in dealing with the needs and demands of one set of stakeholders and let them take precedence over others ("either/or approach"), or find way to harmonise and balance ("both/and approach") the needs and demands from the stakeholder despite any seemingly difference (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Waldman et al., 2021).

Several scholars have explored the concept of paradox as a construct, focusing on paradoxical leader behaviour. Zhang, Zhang, and Law (2021) explored how team leaders' paradoxical leadership enhances team and individual innovative outcomes, and they found a positive indirect relationship. Through a quantitative study, Franken et al. (2020) explored the facets of paradoxical leadership that can contribute to employee resilience in the public sector. Sparr et al. (2022) built on this understanding of the effects of paradoxical leadership on employee behaviour by examining how paradoxical leadership affects change-oriented performance. Research suggests that when leaders adopt a "both/ and" approach when dealing with paradoxes, both the leaders and their organisations benefit (Waldman & Bowen, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015).

However, recent scholars have raised concerns about organisational paradoxes and the approach to them being a double-edged sword (having positive and negative consequences) (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Shao et al., 2019). There is limited research knowledge on the condition and context under which leaders' paradoxes can work as a double-edged sword (Waldman et al., 2019). Lewis and Smith (2022) suggested that scholars explore the potential dual effects on leaders who adopt a paradoxical leadership approach at work before making decisions.

2.8.2 Ethical Decision-Making as the Paradox of Management Mechanism.

Ethical decision-making is steadily becoming a paramount process by which leaders can navigate complex and challenging situations, often caused by the clash of stakeholder requirements in intricate public sector settings. It is stated that ethical systems assist leaders in choosing between short-term political incentives and long-term social value, between limited resources and fairness, and between organisational success and social accountability (Van der Waldt, 2020; Mhlongo, 2022). By basing judgments on values such as fairness, transparency, and justice, leaders provide a steady point of reference against which they act, even when external forces are conflicting or unpredictable. Ethical decision-making thus functions as a stabilising logic- assisting leaders in justifying trade-offs, staying legitimate, and behaving consistently in such an environment where conflicting claims cannot be avoided.

Within the government structure characterised by complexity, the volatile ethical decision-making further enhances procedural clarity. It reduces discretionary abuse,

which often becomes a reality when leaders are confronted with grey or politically sensitive situations. Integrating ethical procedures, including an ethical review panel, a stakeholder consultation policy, and transparency requirements, offers a systematic method for accommodating divergent views and protecting integrity (Breakfast & Phago, 2019; Mazibuko, 2020). The processes help change the nature of decision-making, which is often either personality-based or politically responsive, to one that is pragmatic, rational, and defensible. Consequently, the process of ethical decision-making serves as the protection against corruption, political influence, and ad-hoc compromises that destroy trust in the community (Berti & Cuhna, 2023). Through this, ethics provide a form of moral filter and an operational device to handle paradoxical tensions of municipal governance.

Moreover, ethical decision-making makes stakeholders more confident and minimises conflict as the rationale behind the decisions becomes clear and justifiable. Studies indicate that by explaining the moral justification of decisions, stakeholders (including those who might disagree) are more likely to view the process as fair, transparent, and legitimate (Washburn, et al., 2018). This is essential in dealing with paradox, as this legitimacy ensures that challenging judgments are supported as principled, rather than being biased or politically inclined. This logic is precisely the one that executives in your findings emphasised when it comes to making ethical decisions, as it can assist them in ranking conflicting demands, ensuring organisational credibility, and responsible leadership in the face of elevated stakeholder expectations (Berti & Cuhna, 2023). Therefore, it is both an ethical requirement and a practical component in paradox management for local government executive roles.

2.9 Theoretical Approach

Stakeholder theory, as the framework originated from Freeman's work (1984) decades ago, has been effectively used by many scholars to explain and direct responsible leadership behaviour, as it effectively highlights the intentional consideration of legitimate organisational stakeholders. However, given that this study aims to explore the unfolding of a responsible leadership orientation in a paradoxical organisational context, paradox theory, as suggested by Javed and his colleagues (Javed et al., 2024), was employed in this study. Despite it appearing as a "fuzzy" concept (Berti & Cuhna, 2023), paradox theory researchers have adopted it as a theoretical lens to explore a variety of organisational phenomena (Carmine &

De Marchi, 2023), such as leadership (Lewis et al., 2014) and corporate sustainability (Hahn et al., 2018).

Smith and Lewis (2022) define paradoxes as 'contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time' (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). For example, leaders in the public sector are expected to manage a plurality of tensions by ensuring that the needs of diverse stakeholders are met, while also ensuring that stakeholders are satisfied with the approval of their political principles, all while maintaining effectiveness with limited resources (Head & Alford, 2015). The same applies to organisations across all sectors, where leaders are expected to utilise the same resource to explore new ways of doing business while simultaneously ensuring the efficiency of their current processes to remain competitive (Lewis & Smith, 2014).

Scholars in the traditional contingency theory have long held a view that when dealing with paradox, leaders must prioritise one element over the other, which is a "either/or approach (Lewis & Smith, 2014). However, there has been a growing number of scholars who have advocated for a shift in viewing organisational paradox – the need to address both sides simultaneously (Lewis & Smith, 2014). This approach of accepting and working with the two competing sides allows organisational leaders to achieve competing sustainability objectives simultaneously (Hahn et al., 2018).

Smith and Lewis (2011) postulated that there are dimensions of how leaders can address paradoxes. Firstly, leaders must navigate the complexities of performing, emerging from the plurality of stakeholders and competing needs and demands, by showing their followers how to address the present without losing sight of the bigger picture (performing paradoxes). Secondly, leaders must demonstrate to their followers how to apply current practices to develop innovative solutions (the learning paradoxes). Third, leaders are expected to role-model the ability to deal with both sides of the paradox – maintaining stability without compromising flexibility (organising paradoxes). Lastly, leaders must allow their followers to retain their own values whilst adopting the shared organisational values (belonging paradoxes).

Adopting a paradoxical lens to explore how the process of leadership unfolds and how leaders effectively manage organisational paradoxes can contribute to knowledge development (Javed et al., 2024; Backhaus et al., 2022). Scholars hold the view that leaders are responsible for making sense of paradoxes and are expected to serve as role models for effectively dealing with them in the workplace

(Sparr, 2018; Sparr, et al., 2015). However, there is minimal knowledge on how leaders at a micro-level harmonise paradoxes and help fulfil their leadership responsibilities (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Even though public organisations are riddled with paradoxes, there has been little research on how leaders deal with paradoxes in the public sector (Backhaus et al.,2022)

2.10 Conclusion

The literature has shed some light on the definition of responsible leadership and its distinction from other leadership constructs. It is its broader stakeholder consideration (internal and external), focusing on serving the needs and interests of targeted stakeholders, the executive leadership's conceptualisation, and the emphasis on leader orientation rather than traits or behavioural styles that make responsible leadership unique. Unlike other leadership constructs, responsible leadership emphasises leader orientation instead of traits or behavioural styles. There are two current dominant responsible leadership orientations that the literature has explored – instrumental and integrative. There are differing views on which orientation is superior. The current research gaps primarily relate to the contextual definition of responsible leadership and its unfolding under various contexts, including complex and paradoxical ones.

2.10.1 Conceptual Framework

In conclusion, Figure 2 below presents a conceptual framework derived from the literature review. It highlights key constructs and themes that emerged from the literature review on responsible leadership and addressing paradoxes in a given context.

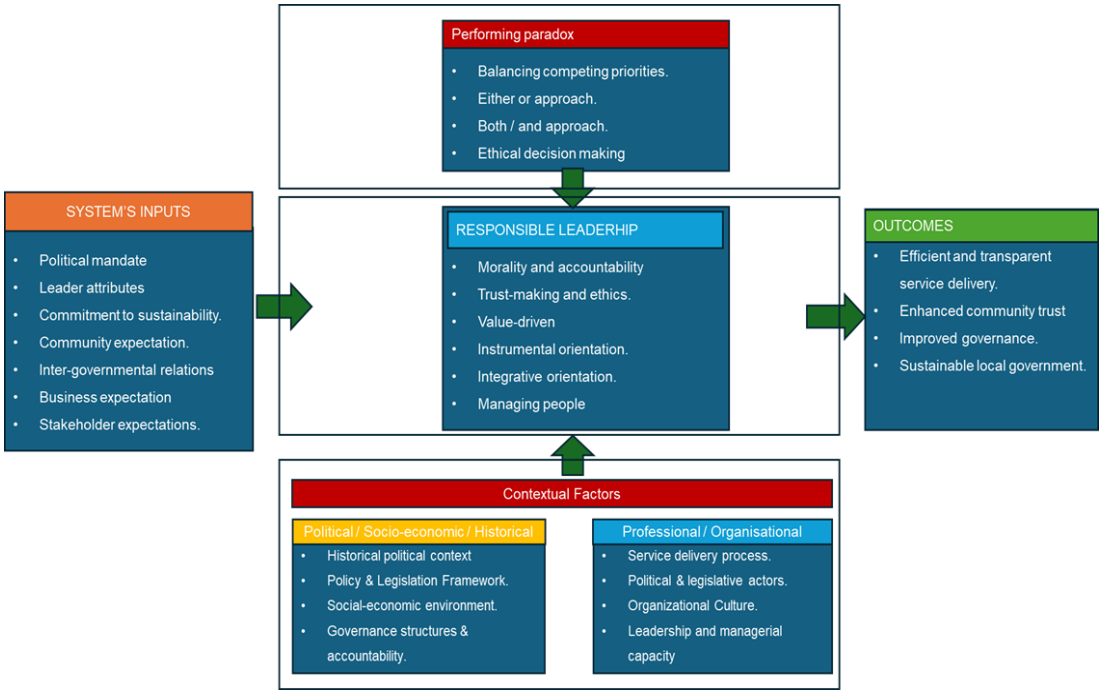


Figure 2: Literature review conceptual framework

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Introduction

Under chapter 2 of this paper a review of the literature relevant to the research question is provided. This chapter provides the research questions with the literature motivation for each question – a context for each question is also provided. The research topic and the questions were explored through an open-ended, exploratory questions based on the research strategy used (Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

3.2 Research Questions

3.2.1 Main Research Queston

How does responsible leadership unfold in South African local government.
The aim of the research was to explore how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local government. Additionally, how responsible leaders deal with competing stakeholder interests and needs. It set out to gather insights and understanding from the experience and perceptions of executives who are working for various municipalities in South Africa. It was motivated by research such as (Filatotchev, et al., 2022; Meliou et al., 2021) who suggest that despite the diverse, complex and ever-changing operating environment for business, scholars continue to rely on theories that emanate from the West and North America.

The research has four sub-research questions as follows:

3.2.2 Research Question 1 (RQ1)

How do local government executives define responsible leadership?

Literature influence: This question was motivated by the call from (Miska and Mendenhall, 2018) to explore the linkages between responsible leadership orientation / behaviours and various institutional and cultural perspectives. This call is supported by (De Klerk et al., 2022; De Klerk & Swart, 2023; Pless et al., 2022) who suggest that contextual complexities and dilemmas of responsible leadership in emerging economic would provide insightful knowledge that can expand the

theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. Stahl and Sully de Luque (2014), Tsui (2021) and Castillo et al. (2020) suggests the importance of exploring how "context" influences the observation or understanding of responsible leadership.

RQ1 Context: Given the dynamic nature of local government and the plurality of stakeholders, this question explored how executives in local government understood responsible leadership and how they defined their own responsible leadership approach. To establish the executive's responsible leadership orientations participants were asked to indicate which stakeholders they considered to be primary in their strategic decision-making process – they were requested to list them in order of importance.

3.2.3 Research Question 2 (RQ2)

What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?

This question was influenced by (Waldman et al. (2020) and Maak et al. (2022) suggest the importance of exploring possible contingent factor that might drive or hinder enactment of responsible leadership. This builds on the suggestion by (Matten & Moon, 2008; Witt & Stahl, 2016), that factors such as business systems, legal context, the nature of regulation, might affect responsible leadership. The context and its complexity might directly impact how leaders chose which stakeholders to prioritise over others (Waldman & Balven, 2014), and understanding these insights is valuable.

RQ1 Context: To explore a better understanding some of the contextual complexities and dilemma and to gain insight on what could informed the chosen orientation, participants were asked to share what they considered to be the most pressing responsibility issues in local South African government. Participants shared their own view and experience of the current responsible status in local government. They requested to share some insights on the role politics play in leading responsible.

3.2.4 Research Question 3 (RQ3)

How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct??

Literature influence: This question was influenced by the literature on responsible leadership and ethics. Voegtlin (2016) suggests that given that ethical and

responsible leadership are key element of “good leadership” there is a need to theorize further on the interaction between ethics and responsibility. The trickle-down effect of responsible leadership (Chenga, et al., 2019; Waldman et al., 2020), how it can affect employee’s behaviour and their service to customers (Agarwal and Bhal, 2020; Doh & Quigley, 2014; Javed et al., 2024). What role do specific leadership behaviours play in shaping employee’s moral behaviours (Ogunfowora et al., 2020). How responsible integrate leadership development programs and training initiatives to prepare future leaders to address the ethical, social, and environmental challenges they may encounter (Heim et al., 2026)

RQ2 Context: This question explored the role executives play in promoting a responsible conduct and preventing unethical conduct across their organisations. Participants were asked to share what they believed where the key drivers of ethical misconduct in local government, and the practices they have put in place to promote responsible leadership in their organisations.

3.2.5 Research Question 4 (RQ4)

How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders’ interests and demands?

Literature influence: This question was motivated by the literature that suggest that between instrumental and integrative responsible leadership orientations, integrative orientation is more suited in dealing with more complex contexts and stakeholders (Maak et al., 2016; Stahl et al., 2018) The suggestion that complex context and competing stakeholder interests require paradoxical leadership (Waldman, 2014; Waldman et al.,2020; Miron- Spektor et al., 2018; Jiang et al.,2022). Exploring the question of how leaders deal with persistent stakeholder disagreements (Patzer et al., 2018; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018) and how they use their role strategically to engage and harmonize stakeholder tensions (Voegtlin et al., 2020).

RQ3 Context: Given the complex environment of local government and the potential conflicting stakeholder interests, the participates where requested to share some of their most difficult decisions they have dad to deal. Participants were asked to share their own experiences of dealing with difficult decisions relating to their stakeholder group. It was important to explore where participants felt they could change unethical

decisions without fearing being victims and gain some insight on how they go about challenging decisions they disagree with.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter provided the motivation for each research question based on the relevant literature review and a brief intent for each research question. The following chapter provides a detailed methodology used to answer the research questions.

4. Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 outlined the theoretical justification of the study and provided a brief overview of the intent for each research question. The main research question was to explore how responsible leadership unfolds in South African government. Four sub-questions were developed to support the exploration of the main research question. This chapter outlines the research method used to answer the research questions.

4.2 Research design summary

Table 1 below provides a high-level summary of the key elements of the research design. The following sections of this chapter provide a detailed expansion of each element.

Table 1: Research design summary

Purpose	Exploratory
Philosophy	Interpretivism
Approach	Inductive
Methodology choice	Mono-method, qualitative
Research strategy	Narrative
Time horizon	Cross-sectional
Research population	Local Government Executives
Unit of analysis	Perception of local government executives about responsible leadership in local government.

Sampling method	Purposeful sampling as primary method, followed by snowballing and convenience sampling.
Sample criteria	Refer to Table 2 below.
Same size	15
Measurement instrument	The researcher used open-ended questions which formed part of the interview guide used during a semi-structured interviews conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams.

4.3 Research Purpose

This research study set out to explore and understand the lived experiences of executives in South African local government. Given that the focus was on describing the experiences of these executives, the research was exploratory with a phenomenological undertaking (Creswell & Crewell, 2018).

4.4 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy embodies researcher's philosophical assumptions which informed and influenced by the upbring, training and education, beliefs and professional experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2016). The same assumptions, beliefs and professional experience influenced the chosen research strategy and data collection methods (Crewell & Crewell, 2018). Given that the data was directly collected, analysed and interpreted by the researcher there is a possibility that the findings were influenced by the beliefs and experience of the researcher (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Based on the current and previous experiences, the researcher could relate to the research topic and its context on a personal experience. However, it is worth noting that there is no need to believe that researcher's experiences unduly impact the data collection, analysis and the interpretation of the findings contained in this research report.

Given that the study set out to explore and gain a deeper understanding and assign meaning of a phenomenon in organisations, specifically in relation to how executives in South African local government perceived responsible leadership in a specific context, the researcher adopted an interpretivist approach (Saunders, et al.,2019). With this approach the researcher could understand and interpret the subjective meaning and perceptions from the experience of individual participants with their social contexts to demonstrate the relevance of diverse perspectives within context (Harkison, et al., 2018). The researcher focused on the real-life experiences of the participants, including the interpretation into the findings of this research (Saunders et al. ,2019).

4.5 Research Assumptions

The are three philosophical domains that underpins business research (Bell et al., 2019). Firstly, is the ontology, which is the philosophy that represents how the researcher sees and addresses the nature of the truth, and it comprises of subjectivism and objectivism (Saunders et al.,2019). Secondly, the epistemology, which epistemology relates to knowledge transmission process over through multi-perspectives and perceived realities held by individuals (Negou et al., 2023). Lastly, is the axiology, which is concerned with the values that guide the researchers approach to the selection of study participants, data collection approach, analysis and how all these approaches relate and affect to the aims of the study (Saunders et al., 2019).

Organisations are social systems run by human being with an aim to achieve economic, social and environment objectives, hence the assumption that they socially constructed entities (Bell et al., 2029). When addressing the research question of how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local government the researcher constructed shared meaning and realities of human beings who work in an organised social system through social interactions, thus social constructionism was deemed an appropriate ontological philosophy (Sauders et al., 2019). Social constructionism suggests that there are several perspectives of the truth and realities, and they are subjectively and socially constructed (Sauders et al., 2019).

The researcher’s ontology guides how the researcher transmits knowledge through multi-perspectives and perceived realities held by individuals (Bell et a., 2019). With a constructionist ontology the researcher engaged social actors to explore how they

view their real world, and the data was collected through interviews to gain understanding of their experience and perceptions (Gioia et al., 2022). The data was interpreted using the social world constructed by the participants: a world which they continue to reproduce (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). The research was exploratory in nature as the researcher set out to explore and develop new insight on a phenomenon: hence interpretivism epistemological stance (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019).

The understanding of the phenomenon was determined through insight from the collected data (Sauders et al., 2019 and the interpretation of relevant data underpinned the development of relevant theme of the study (Bell et al., 2019). However, given the subjective nature of qualitative research (Bell at al., 2019), the researcher's' lens influenced the interpretation of the data, hence the interpretivism paradigm (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). The address this issues the researcher was intentional about suspending any personal biases and prejudices before and during interview and data gathering process.

4.6 Research Approach

The research study focused on the meaning and interpretation that participants attached to the responsible leadership phenomenon in their organisational contexts and their experiences of South African local government in general. There was no specific theory that was tested, hence the researcher set off with a broad generalization followed by specific theories, in line with the principles of inductive approach to research (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.7 Methodological choice

The method of choice for this research was a mono-methodology which encompassed qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Given that the researcher aimed to take a deep dive to explore and understand participants' beliefs, real-life experiences, perceptions and interactions with others, a qualitative study was deemed appropriate (Saunders et al., 2019). The researcher opted to get participation from fewer participants who had experience in South African local government. The data used on this research was collected using open-ended questions, administered through semi-structured virtual interviews, and the data was analysed from granular level one codes to level three themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

4.8 Research Strategy

The researcher main aim and interest was to explore and gain a unique understanding and interpretation of responsible leadership by executives in local government context, hence a research strategy based on a narrative undertaking was used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The use of semi-structured interviews provided an appropriate structure to guide the interview sessions, whilst allowing the researcher appropriate flexibility to probe for deeper understanding and alter the sequence of the question where appropriate to enrich the contribution from the participants (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.9 Time horizon.

The study is a cross-sectional study because the data were collected between the moths of August 2025 and October 2025 (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.10 Population.

The research question informed the research population. When considering the question, the goal was to ensure that data can be collected to understand how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local government context. Given that responsible leadership is considered an executive phenomenon, the population for the study comprised of executive managers and heads of department from several municipalities in South Africa. The sample criteria table below provides more details.

4.11 Unit of analysis.

The unit of analysis for this study was the personal perceptions and real-life experiences of executives and heads of departments working for South African local government. This were individual who are responsible for developing, formulating and implementing organisational strategies, and had experience of the research phenomenon (Alase, 2017). As the social actors, the researcher was interested in gathering their experiences of responsible leadership in South African local government.

4.12 Sampling Method

The research question and phenomenon dictated the sampling method (Groenewald, 2004). Purposive sampling was used as primary sampling approach, followed by snowballing and convenience sampling methods. Given that the study is qualitative the sampling approach was not intended to generalise to the winder population (Bell et al.,2019), but to develop theme that helps to understand the phenomenon, hence purposive sampling was deemed appropriate (Devers & Frankel, 2000). As the data gathering process, snowballing and convenience sampling methods were used (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.13 Sampling criteria

The criterion for selecting participants was also informed by the research question and the phenomenon (Bell et al.,2019). The study was interested in participants with experience and knowledge of the phenomenon. This was in line with the views of Creswell (2016) and Alase (2017) who suggested the importance of research participants to have similar lived experience of the phenomenon being studied. The participants were chosen on the basis that they had experiences of the phenomenon being studied (Groenewald, 2004). Table 2 below provides a summary of the participants sampling criterion.

Table 2: Participant sampling criterion

Participant Reference	**Position held**	**Number of years of experience as an executive**	**category of Municipality**
CM1	City Manager	Over 20 years	Metropolitan (Metro)
CM2	City Manager	Over 20 years	Local municipality
CM3	City Manager	Over 20 years	District Municipality
CO1	Head of Department	Over 20 years	Metro
CM4	City Manager	Over 20 years	Local municipality
CM5	City Manager	Over 20 years	District municipality
COT2	Chief Operating Officer	Over 20 years	Metro

HCS	Head of Department	Over 10 years	Local municipality
COT3	CFO	Over 20 years	Metro
JM1	Head of Department	Over 15 years	Metro
NMB1	Head of Department	Over 10 years	Metro
COF	CFO	Over 20 years	Metro
MOT	Head of Department	Over 20 years	Metro
CO2	Head of Department	Over 10 years	Metro
SPMO	Head of Department	Over 15 years	Metro

4.14 Sampling size

The sample size for this research was guided by its scope, and the target size was between 15 and 20 participants. Determining a sample size is paramount for any research (Fofana, 2020), and for phenomenological research a sample size can be between 2 and 25 participants (Alase, 2017). For this study, the researcher interviewed 15 participants as guided by Sanders and Lewis (2012).

The researcher noticed that from participant 12 there was no significant new data coming out of the interviews. As suggested by Braun and Clark (2021) this indicates data saturation, of which they contend “the gold standard for determining sample size is purposive sampling” (p.3). It is understood in qualitative research that saturation is a point of satisfactory data collection (Mthuli et al., 2022).

4.15 Measurement instrument

In qualitative research the research is considered a measuring instrument (Golafshani, 2003) hence the effort and skilfulness of the researcher is paramount for the integrity of the research. Hence Hammarberg et al. (2016) suggest that the researcher is both the researcher instrument and procedure. As part of the primary data collection a set of open-ended questions formed part of the interview guide which was used during semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams.

The semi-structured interview approach allowed the researcher latitude to appropriately vary the sequence of the question, probe deeper to gather more information, and ask clarity seeking question where necessary (Bell et al., 2019). This personal engagement and probing for more information add to the richness and value of the interview process (Josselson, 2013). All participants were confirmed using the sample criteria before interview sessions were scheduled. The interviewing as chosen method of data collection was informed by the research question and researcher's intention to gain a better understand of the real-live experience of the participants.

4.16 Data gathering process.

The researcher designed an interview protocol which was used as part of the data gathering process. In line with proposed principles by Josselson (2013), the interview protocol had the main questions main conceptual research question and interview questions per each conceptual research questions. Once the ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Approval Committee of the Gordon Institute of Business (GIBS), the researcher commenced with the data collection process. Firstly, the researcher tested the interview protocol by conducting a pilot interview with a coworker. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018) testing the interview protocol through piloting allows the researcher to establish content validity, consistency and expected duration of the interview. From the pilot interview the researcher made minor adjustments and could confirm that the duration of the interviews should not exceed one hour.

All the data was collected using the using the information from the interviews. The researcher used an email to request permission from the participants before scheduling the interviews. The consent form was attached on the same request for the participant to sign, granting the researcher the right to schedule the interview, record the interview, and use all data collected as part of the research report. The consent form highlighted the purpose and scope of the research and indicated that participation voluntary and participants can withdraw at any stage without being penalized.

The researcher did not share the interview protocol before the interview session, but it was shared during the interview as the base to structure the interview process. The participants were informed that there was no need for prior preparation for the

interviews but for them to share their experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon. The interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. The video and the recording platform of Microsoft Teams was used to record and transcribe the interviews. The recordings and transcriptions were securely stored in the researcher's Microsoft OneDrive, which is cloud storage platform.

The interviews were semi-structured. The longest interview lasted for 56 minutes whilst the shortest lasted for 19 minutes. Table 2 provides a summary of the duration of the interviews and the lengths of transcriptions.

Table 3: Duration of the interviews and length of transcriptions

Participant Reference	Position held	Number of years of experience as an executive	Interview duration	Number of pages transcribed
CM1	City Manager	Over 20 years	42:23	11
CM2	City Manager	Over 20 years	24:10	8
CM3	City Manager	Over 20 years	55:03	15
CO1	Head of Department	Over 20 years	49:14	13
CM4	City Manager	Over 20 years	21:16	7
CM5	City Manager	Over 20 years	28:51	11
COT2	Chief Operating Officer	Over 20 years	19:46	7
HCS	Head of Department	Over 10 years	24:41	10
COT3	CFO	Over 20 years	23:42	8
JM1	Head of Department	Over 15 years	31:04	13
NMB1	Head of Department	Over 10 years	34:12	11
COF	CFO	Over 20 years	35:12	12
MOT	Head of Department	Over 20 years	56:01	26
CO2	Head of Department	Over 10 years	27:57	10
SPMO	Head of Department	Over 15 years	33:35	10

4.17 Data analysis process

All the interviews were recording and transcribed verbatim on Microsoft Teams. The researcher had to clean up all the transcription and ensure that repetitive words and vernacular terms were removed and or replaced to reflect the participant's responses. The researcher used the services of independent professional transcriber, after signing a non-disclosure agreement. The researcher was responsible to ensure that the transcriptions from the professional transcriber were still reflecting the responses of the participants.

The data analysis process was iterative (Haven and Van Grootel, 2019) which meant that researcher had to methodically go through rounds of making sense and interpreting the data. The researcher followed a thematic analysis approach which allows for the identifying, analysing and reporting of patterns (Bell et al.2019). It was through the thematic data analysis approach that the researcher could later make meaning of the data by identifying and developing theme (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis entails two approaches, an inductive and deductive. With an inductive approach themes are derived from the collected data whereas with deductive approach themes are identified in relation to a theory. For the study, the researcher used an inductive approach where the data was coded into level one codes, level two codes and then themes. Figure 3 below provides an illustration of the inductive approach used by the researcher.

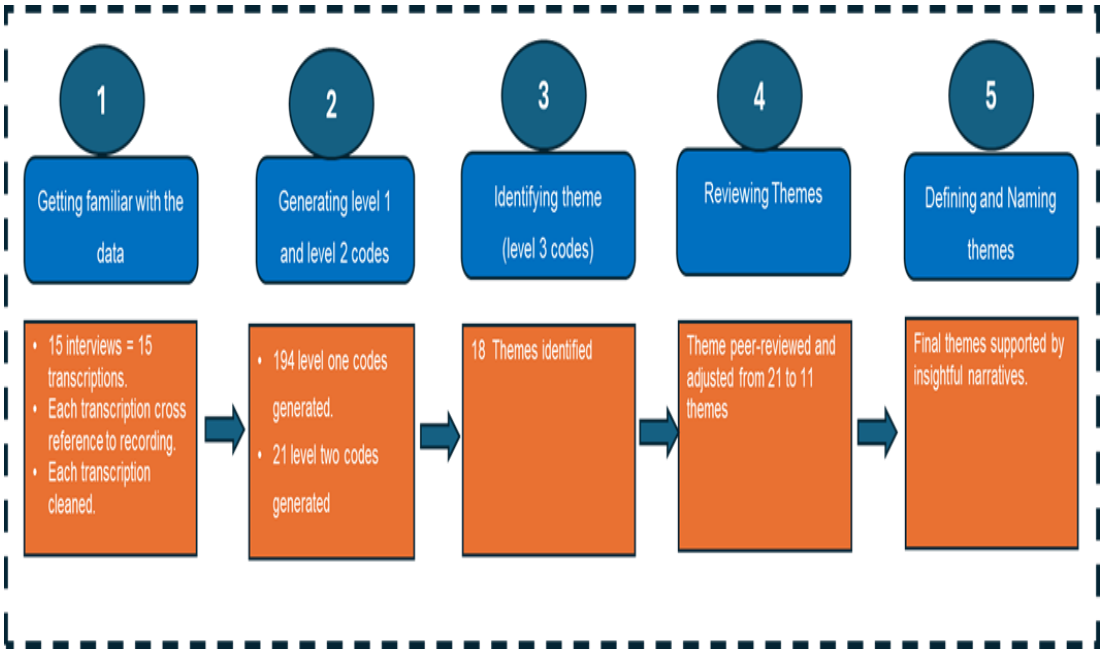


Figure 3: Thematic Analysis approach

4.17.1 Getting familiar with the data.

The transcripts were checked against the recordings and were cleaned to ensure that they represent the responses of the participants. As suggested by Braun and Clark (2006) the researcher went through the transcribe data to get a better understanding before commencing with the coding process.

4.17.2 Generating level 1 and 2 codes.

The data collected from the interview transcripts were analysed using Nvivo 15 and simultaneously captured on Microsoft Excell spread sheet with the corresponding quotes. The researcher identified only the data that was interesting and relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researcher used verbatim quotations, phrases and statements from the data which were then used to generate level one codes. The quotes and codes were grouped per research question. The codes were generated on three levels – level one (granular), level two (category) and level three (themes).

As suggested by Bell et al. (2019), as part of the thematic analysis process, the researcher identified recurring views and topics in the responses of the participants and differences relating to the same research question or topics. This allowed the researcher to group similar recurring level codes into Level Two codes (categories). The researcher generated 194 level one codes which were later merged into 21 level two codes (categories). The researcher used an Excel spreadsheet to track the generation of new codes, which made it easy to graphically depict the saturation, as shown in Figure 4 below.

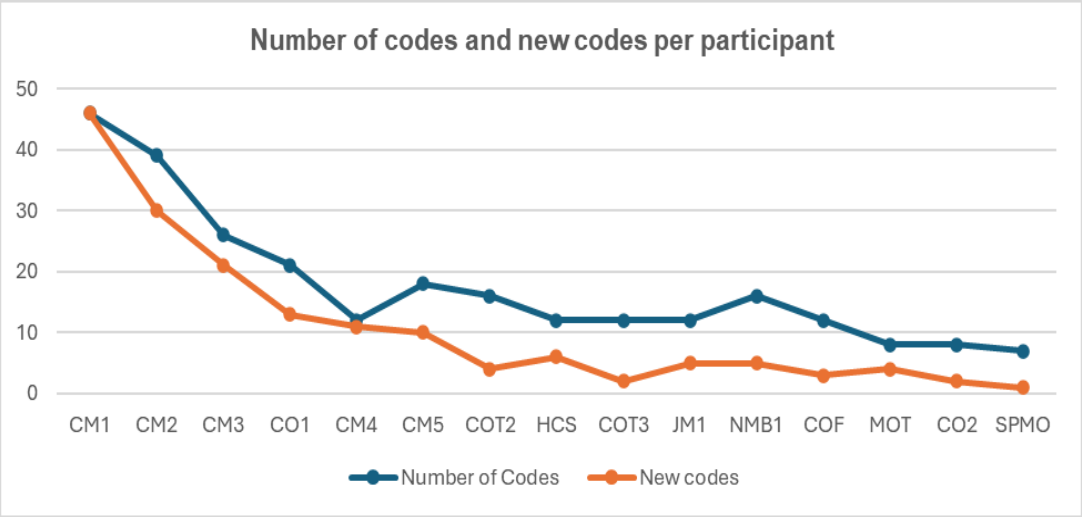


Figure 4: Rate of new codes generated.

4.17.3 Identifying themes.

Transitioning from level two codes to level three qualitative research requires the researcher to apply conceptual lens to bridge the gap between empirical data and theory (Gioia, 2021). Using this approach the researcher interrogated both level 1 and level two codes and further refined the level two codes into level three codes (themes). The refinement of the codes was done per research question and Figure 4 provides a summary of all three level codes.

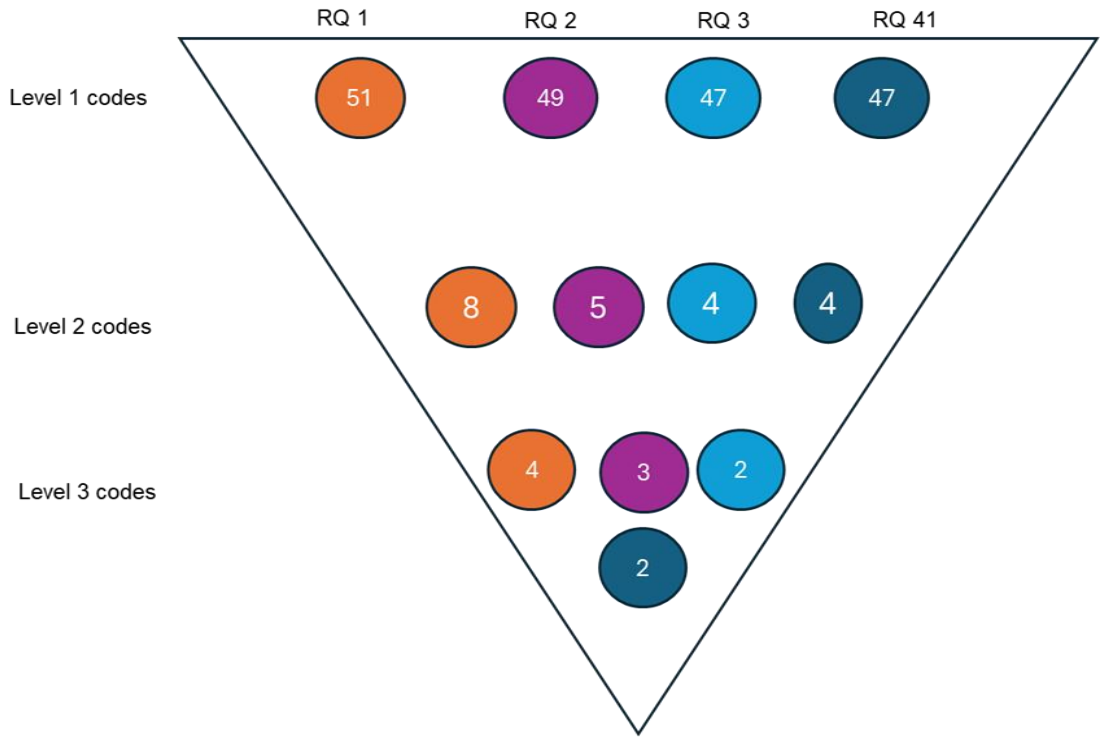


Figure 5: Code refinement process

4.17.4 Defining the themes.

Once the themes were identified they were peer-reviewed before the defining stage. The review process resulting in consolidation of the initially identified themes from 18 to 11 themes. The researcher deemed the final theme to be relevant to the collected data and the research questions and aligned to the research topic. This is line with Haven and Van Gootel (2019) assertion that in qualitative research the researcher plays the role of measurement instrument, thus influences the generation of the findings from the data. Table 3 below provides a summary of the themes per research question.

Table 4: Themes per research question.

RQ	Theme
How do local government executives define responsible leadership?	Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.
	Responsible leadership is about strategy execution.
	Responsible leadership is contextual.
	Responsible leadership is contextual.
What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?	Unethical leadership
	Lack of accountability
	Political instability.
How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?	Promoting accountability
	Supporting knowledge and skills development
How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?	Promote ethical decision-making
	Work with multiple perspectives

4.18 Research quality and rigor

According to Gioia (2021) a good interpretive qualitative study should generate a plausible and justifiable explanation of the phenomenon being studies. Stenfors et al., (2020) suggested that for qualitative research to be considered good it should conform to credibility, transferability, confirmability and reflexivity.

Table 5: Markers used to improve research quality.

Credibility	Highly credible and peer-reviewed journal were used to generate the theoretical justification for the study. Research questions are aligned to the research topic. Researcher adhered to the approved ethical conditions. Generation and naming of codes aligned with research supervisor. Research components were deemed to be appropriate to study the phenomenon.
Transferability	The researcher articulated the research process so that other researchers could follow. The is literature alignment between Chapter 2 and Chapter 6.
Confirmability	All interviews were conducted virtually and recording using Microsoft Teams. When discussing the findings the researcher used quotation directly from the data to substantiate the findings.
Reflexibility	The researcher used a standardized interview protocol that was designed the research question are defined under Chapter 1 to ensure consistency.

4.19 Ethical consideration

The data collection process only commenced once the ethical clearance was obtained for the Ethical Clearence Committee of GIBS. The researcher ensured that there would be no harm, or damage was posed to the participants for being part of the study (Bell et al., 2019). The purpose of research was explained in detail to each participant before every interview session. The participants were informed that their participation on the study was voluntary and that they had a right to withdraw anytime. The names of the participants have not been disclosed and collected had been save electronically on an online cloud platform, OneDrive without any identifies.

4.20 Limitation of the study

As novice researcher, the researcher has acknowledged the possibility of limitations in the research design and process followed. However, the researcher has ensured to follow the suggested research process in the existing literature, and the advised given from several research workshops the researcher attended during this research. The following are limitations are worth noting.

- The study focused on South African local government only.
- The data was collected at a point in time, therefore there is a possibility that the research findings might vary when the same research is conducted a different point in the future.
- Thematic analysis was applied during data analysis. The code development was subjective to the interpretation of the researcher. Despite the that the codes and themes were peer-reviewed, a different researcher and or reviewer might formulate different codes and themes.

5. Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Presentation of findings

The aim of the study was to explore how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local government. Second, it sought to gain insight on how executives in South African local government deal with conflicting and competing needs and demands from different stakeholders. The following section lays out the findings based on the analysis of the data. The analysis was conducted as per the research methodology outlined under chapter 4. Chapter 3 set out four research questions which the researcher aimed to answer using semi-structured virtual interview with 15 participants.

This research had four research questions, and the findings are presented per research question below.

5.2 Codes per research question

The following section provides an overview summary of the interview findings. A three-level coding approach (code, category and theme) was used to code the 15 transcribed interviews. Each code generated was linked to each research question. Table 2 below provides an overview summary of all three levels codes per research question.

Table 6: Codes per research question.

Research Question		Number of Codes (Level 1)	Number of Categories (Level 2)	Number of Themes (Level 3)
RQ 1	How do local government executives define responsible leadership?	51	10	4
RQ 2	What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?	49	5	3

RQ 3	How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?	47	4	2
RQ 4	How do local government executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?	47	5	2
Totals		**194**	**24**	**11**

The following section provides a detail breakdown of findings for each research question. For each research question there are two tables. The first table presents the number of Level one- Codes, Level two - Categories and frequency and Level three themes. The second table shows the level two code names, and the frequency per theme. The chapter concludes with the summary of the RQs and associated themes.

5.3 Research findings per theme per RQ

5.3.1 Research Question 1 Findings

How do local government executives define responsible leadership?

Based on the data analysed the participant's definition of responsible leadership in the context of local government can be summarized in the following four themes:

1. Theme 1: Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.
2. Theme 2: Responsible leadership is about contextual strategic leadership.
3. Theme 3: Responsible leadership is about values-based leadership.
4. Theme 4: Responsible leadership is about leading people effectively.

Table 7: Level two codes and level three codes, frequency for RQ 1:

RQ 1: How do local government executives define responsible leadership?

Level two codes (Categories)	Code Frequency	Level three Codes (Themes)
Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders. for sphere of influence and responsibility including job description.	22	Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.
Responsible leadership is about strategy execution.	2	Responsible leadership is about contextual strategic leadership.
Responsible leadership is contextual.	5	
Responsible leadership is about leading with ethics.	6	Responsible leadership is about values-based leadership.
Responsible leadership is about being transparency.	4	
Responsible leadership is about complying with local government legislation.	4	
Responsible leadership is about providing guidance and motivation to employees.	4	Responsible leadership is about leading people effectively.
Responsible leadership is about role modelling.	3	

5.3.2 RQ 1 Theme 1: Accountability to stakeholders.

The highest scoring theme for RQ 1 is centred around how executives in South African local government view their relationship with the various stakeholders and the power dynamics related to each stakeholder.

Table 8: QR 1 Theme 1 – Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.

Level two codes (Categories)		Level three codes (Themes)
Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders. for sphere of influence and responsibility including job description.	→	Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.

The theme responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders received the highest number of level 1 codes. The participant viewed the role of executives in local government is being accountability for sphere of influence, as accountable to Council, and as being accountable to broader stakeholders (internal and external), including business and communities. Additionally, as is being responsible to adapt to the needs of the stakeholders. In sum they view responsible leadership is being accountable to all legitimate stakeholders affected by their leadership context.

5.3.2.1 Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.

Firstly, the participants are acknowledged accountability starts with one's area of responsibility and influence. They suggested that responsible leadership is about being responsible for decisions your area of responsibility including decisions not made by you. The following quotations depict this observation. Additionally, they argued that it is a responsible thing to provide guidance of responsible decision making across the stakeholder across the organization.

"Leaders take accountability for what would happen within their sphere of competence, of responsibility" (CM1)

"I take responsibility for what is entrusted to me as far as my job description is concerned - not only that, as far as my morals are concerned, both inside as well as outside of the organisation." (CM5)

"You have to be accountable; you can't have responsibility without accountability on the other hand." (COT2)

“My understanding is responsible leadership, in terms of my position, is to guide the department.” (COF)

"Responsible leadership is the one that the person is able to take accountability for decisions make, for fulfilment of responsibility that you have " (CO1)

“Overall accountability then lies with the head of the administration who is the City Manager or Accounting Officer”. (CM1)

Second, given the democratic context under which local government operates in South African, the participants acknowledged the role and importance political leadership plays in leading local government. To this effect they viewed the political administrative leadership as the key stakeholder that affects strategic decision-making process. They referred to the political administrative leadership as Council or government of the day. They suggested that over and above the legitimacy criteria, power and influence of each stakeholder influenced the responsible leadership orientation on certain decisions. On strategic decision-making process the responsible leadership orientation of the participates was deemed to be skewed towards ensuring alignment (meeting the needs) with the political leadership of the day. The following quotations supports this observation.

“Strategic decision-making is done by politicians. They are the board of directors and the municipal manager, or the city manager is there to execute.” “Your alignment and your cooperation with the political leadership is important”. (CM2).

“My accountability lies with the local government (of the day), then with Council. Council holds me to account for the performance of the municipality, for the performance of the administration” (CM1).

“I think for me, for strategic decisions to really come to life, political positioning is actually very important.” (CM3).

“The most important internal stakeholder is obviously, is our council. (CM5).

“Council and Mayoral Committee are responsible for accountability towards the community.” (CM1)

“The key stakeholders would be the Councillors who are part of the political administration, and you always have to align to, because you are accountable to council.” (HCS)

Third, despite the power and influence of political leadership, participants acknowledged their responsibility towards broader stakeholders, both internal and external. They acknowledged that municipalities are meant to serve the citizenry, including businesses. However, they suggested that the Council is responsible for communities and that the role of executives is to execute what politicians have decided. This illustrates an interesting tension in terms of who is responsible for serving communities. The following quotations supports this observation.

"Responsible leadership, it's a leadership that responds to the needs of stakeholders" (JM1).

"My understanding is that as a responsible leader you care about your stakeholders, you care about the citizens." (NMB1).

“Everything is really centred around improving the quality of life for those living within the jurisdictional area of the municipality, because that is the purpose of a municipality.” (CM1)

“Most critical as well is the business, the industry, more especially at a city level, the significant percentage of the income that we generate from the services and the rates it comes from the business.” (COT2)

“Sometimes when we talk about stakeholders, we always have an outward-looking approach, when in fact, the most critically important part of any organisation, the internal people, because if you don't have the right people with the right competencies, your strategy is going to fall flat.” (COT2)

5.3.2 RQ 1 Theme 2: Responsible leadership is bout values-based leadership.

The second highest scoring theme for RQ 1 is centred around the role of responsible leadership and ethics. Fundamentally all the participants agree that responsible leadership does not happen without ethics. Ethical leadership is enacted in an environment that promotes accountability. In the local government context accountability is linked to compliance with the relevant laws and legislations.

Table 9: RQ 1 Theme 2 - Responsible leadership is about values-based leadership.

Level two codes (Categories)	Level three codes (Themes)
Responsible leadership is about leading with ethics	Responsible leadership is about values-based leadership.
Responsible leadership is about being transparent.	
Responsible leadership is about complying with local government legislation.	

First, all the participants believed that core to responsible leadership is the ability to make ethical decisions and create an environment founded on ethics. They suggested that without ethics leaders cannot lead responsible nor can they be considered responsible leaders. The participates emphasised the importance for leaders to create a conduce environment for ethical decision-making. They suggested that ethics cannot be taught but an environment can influence ones' behaviour. The following quotations support this observation:

"That then goes hand in hand with ethics, because I don't believe that there can be responsible leadership in an ethical vacuum. Ethical leadership goes hand in hand with responsible and accountable leadership." (CM1)

“If you have no basic or sound ethical leadership principles, you will not be a responsible leader.” (CM3)

“We have recently got all leaders, both from the administrative side as well as the political side, to sign a code of ethical leadership for local government.” (HCS)

“I always link responsible leadership with ethical leadership, which requires us to think deeply about the decisions that we make.” (COT2)

“Ethics come from internally, you know -you cannot legislate ethical behaviour.” (HCS).

“I think ethic cannot not be taught but the environment makes people behave the way to do.” (COF)

Second, the South African local government context is unique in sense that the conduct of its leaders as far as decision-making is concerns is clearly documented through several laws and legislation. The main ones include amongst others the Constitution of the Republic, 1996, the Municipal Systems Act (2000), Municipal Finance Management Act, Municipal Structures Act (1998) etc. Participants believed that being a responsible leader means complying with these main legislations. The participated believed that regardless of the dynamic and complex environment they operate in, not complying with these legislations in the decision-making process goes against being a responsible leader. The following quotations that support this observation.

“Responsible leadership, if it's a context local government, is basically guided by the constitution - it means we must act responsibility in providing services to communities.” (MOT).

“Your leadership is guided by legislation”. (CM4)

“It requires one person that has got quite responsible in making sure that you comply to respective legislation that governs the local government.” (CO1)

“To ensure that you lead the organisation with good governance.” (CM2)

“We work in terms of the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA), we work in terms of the Systems Act, the Municipal Systems Act, all the different acts that we are dealing with. -so, for me, it's very important that whatever decision you make, you make it in terms of the law, you make it in terms of the legislation.” (COF)

“We do operate in an environment where legal prescripts and regulation is of significant importance, we need to ensure that in executing our day-to-day responsibilities.” (CO3)

Lastly, given that local government leaders are entrusted with public money and providing services to citizenry, participants believed that transparency is key component of responsible leadership. Transparency extends beyond the decision taken to include decisions not taken and challenges faced by the leadership of the Municipality. The following quotations that support this observation:

“We need transparency and consistency in the way we do things. We need to be transparent.” (CO3)

“Responsible leadership is about being transparency.” (CO2)

“I think also transparency is what has actually been the key factor in my years of executive leadership.” (CM3)
“I feel like, at times we tend to be too defensive as an organisation – we need to be more transparent about the challenges so that we can face them and not trying to spin it too much.”

The participants associated transparency with providing account to affected and interested stakeholders. They believed that transparency is a pillar of service delivery and running a “clean governance” – a municipality that fully compliance with the legislation. The conceded that it is through transparency that democratic principles are advanced in local government.

“For example, we do have a financial in the city and it is important to share openly with the community to say that they also that if they do not pay their rates and taxes, we the Municipality will not be able to deliver these services.” (COF)

"Transparent and effective communication with all your stakeholders is important in ensuring that they constantly are briefed in terms of new developments, and they understand where we are. So, communication is very important." (CM2).

So, our organisation there is a lot of integrity, pride issue here, and very transparent government. We will do everything and anything to ensure that there is transparency, there is clean governance. (CM3)

5.3.3 RQ 1 Theme 3: Responsible leadership is bout contextual strategic leadership.

The third highest occurring Theme for RQ 1 is deals with the importance of context for strategic leadership. In the local government context technocratic leadership is shared with political leadership. In defining their responsible leadership approach, the participants suggested the importance of adapting one's leadership to the local government context. This includes adapting to the political dynamics and the fact that the politics of the day determines one's leadership success.

Table 10: RQ 1 Theme 3 - Responsible leadership is about contextual strategic leadership.

Level two codes (Categories)	Level three codes (Themes)
Responsible leadership is about strategy execution. Responsible leadership is contextual.	Responsible leadership is about contextual strategic leadership.

Firstly, participates argued that being responsible in local government means executing strategic objectives, which in the main is about delivering basic services to citizenry. However, for this to be successful they suggested that politics and political leadership plays a significant role. They made an example the approval not approval of strategic plans and budget and or ensuring that competent and experienced senior managers are recruited. Hence the participant believed that political positioning and

alignment is crucial for responsible leadership in the local government context. The following quote highlights this aspect of contextual strategic leadership.

“I think for me, for strategic decisions to really come to life, political positioning is actually very important.” (CM3)

“So sometimes just to pass a budget becomes actually very difficult because politicians know they are not necessarily going to benefit or somehow their people are not going to benefit on the ground. For that reason, they do not want to pass budget. And if they have to pass budget, you need to actually assure them what they are going to get, what is in for them in this particular budget. It makes it actually very difficult.” (CM3)

“Then you have stakeholders in the political leadership - I'm not a politician, but you have politicians that you must work with. So, those politicians are also an important stakeholder. So, your alignment and your cooperation with the political leadership is important.” (CM2)

“It requires vision and awareness of the political dynamics that I operate from.” (CO1)

“It requires one who has got emotional intelligence to be able to manage those dynamics and create a balance, whilst at the same time you're not compromising your own principles and responsibilities that are assigned to yourself.” (CO1)

“My responsible leadership style depends on the situation, and I adapt to the situation.” (CM2)

“It requires an ability to most probably accommodate the changing environment that we are always subjected to in local government.” (CO1)

Second, the participants conceded that executing the planned strategy is the main role of responsible leadership. They suggested that their performance by stakeholders is viewed through their effectiveness of strategy execution.

“Council holds me accountable for the actions that I take in order to execute the strategic plan, and together with the spending of the annual budget.” (CM1)

“It is also part of responsible leadership to execute the strategic plan together with the budget in a manner that is contemplated by Council.” (CM1)

“Responsible leadership is actually to ensure that you lead the organisation with good governance.” (CM2)

“Responsible leadership refers to strategy, driving the organisation to where it should go to.” (CO3).

Lastly, another significant observation on contextual strategy execution is the acknowledgment that local government faces resource limitation. The participants conceded that due to resource and capacity constraints local government is not always able to meet all its strategic objectives on its own, hence another important component of responsible leadership is creating boundaries for collaboration with external stakeholders.

“Collaboration with other stakeholders, for example, the community, we might not be there when other things are happening, but once we strengthen that collaboration with the community and build the trust with the community, we can be more efficient in providing service delivery – like fighting crime with the involvement of the community.” (JM1)

“We are inward looking; we think that we must provide all the services by ourselves instead to exploring collaboration.” (MOT)

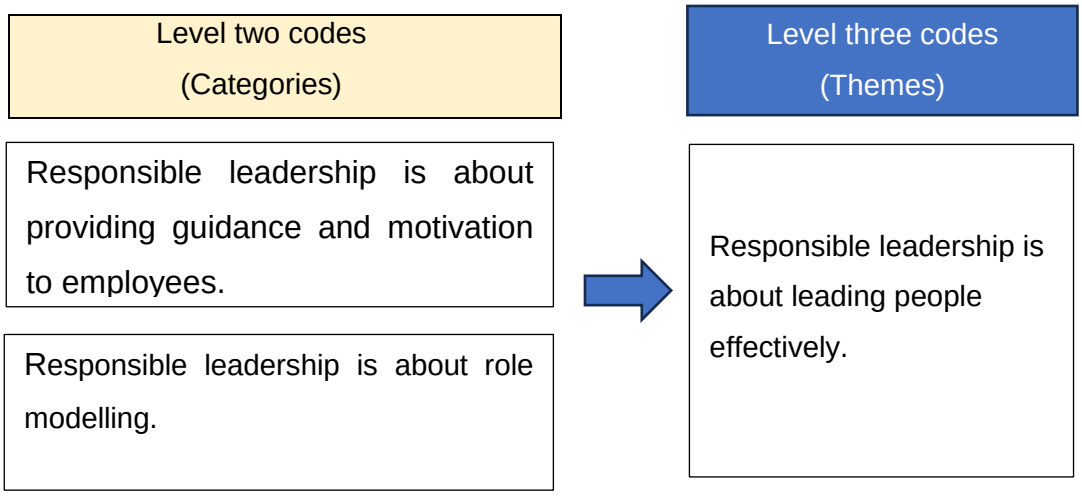
“I have key strategic partners that I often identify within communities - it could be your businesses and or it could be your organised residence associations.” (CO1)

5.3.4 RQ 1 Theme 4: Responsible leadership is about leading people effectively.

The last theme under RQ 1 is centred around responsible leadership orientation that focuses on organisational employees. The participant suggested that responsible leaders must lead by example and be role models to the employees. Additionally, they believed that part of responsible leadership is providing guidance and motivation

to employees – they felt that with this aspect was crucial in complex and dynamic context like local government.

Table 11: RQ 1 Theme 3 - Responsible leadership is about leading people effectively.



First, the participants suggested it is part of responsible leadership to ensure that employees are guided and always motivated for a successful local government. They acknowledged the role employees play in both delivering strategy and creating a responsible local government. The following quotations that support this observation:

"Responsible leadership, I think, is the ability of a leader to be able to plan, to organise, to give guidance and motivate." (CM3)

"How you are supporting those that report to yourself towards the fulfilment of the greater common good of the society and the organisation that you are representing." (CO1)

"And amongst other things responsible leadership is about making sure that we then take care of the people that we are leading internally." (JM1)

"As much as we still need to be strategic about issues, we need to be compassionate about the people that needs to do the job for us, their well-being is very important because without them, we will not be able to achieve the goals and the objectives of the city." (JM1)

Responsible leadership is creating an environment where you enable the City to thrive, where you enable colleagues to do what they need to do, to capacitate them accordingly, to ensure that they have the necessary resources to execute their functions. (COT3)

"I think as a leader it is very important to give motivation and direction to the people you lead -this is something lacking in our environment." (COF)

"Sometimes when we talk about stakeholders, we always have an outward-looking approach, when in fact, the most critically important part of any organisation, the internal people." (COT2)

The above illustrates the importance of caring for the people as a responsible leader. The participants suggested the importance of employees as an important stakeholder. Given the complex environment of local government this aspect of responsible leadership is deemed paramount.

Second, the participants conceded that responsible leadership is about leading by an example. They suggested that responsible leaders role model by demonstrating their words through action. They urged that responsible leaders are beyond reproach and model responsible conduct. They contended that the tone for responsible organisational culture is set by those in leadership positions – the reverse is also true that misconduct is perpetuated by the conduct of those in leadership position.

"I believe in that terminology that says a fish rots from head, so the culture must be driven by myself, I must be the example." (COT2

"Responsible leadership is about leading by example -role modelling." (CO2)
"When it comes to responsible leadership, as a municipal manager, you need to set the tone and to be the role model." (CM4)

"You must lead in such a way that when you must do something, you do it in a manner that people say that there's always a sense of urgency. And what you promise will happen on Friday, it happens on Friday." (CM2)

Additionally, the participants suggested that when role modelling extends to the political leadership level, the role of administrative executives become much easy as far as enacting responsible leadership is concerned.

"I have the greatest respect for my politicians -they said to, Municipal Manager we will never ever expect of you to do anything which is contrary to legislation or to do anything which we know and which you know is wrong." (CM5)

5.4 RQ 1 Summary

How do local government executives define responsible leadership?

The dominant view on the definition of responsible leadership amongst the participants is that it about accountability to stakeholders. The participant demonstrated appreciation of the plurality of stakeholders in local government context. They suggested the importance of being accountable first for one's sphere of influence and responsibility as component of responsible leadership. This suggested that executives in local government have a full appreciation that they are responsible for making responsible decisions in their areas of responsibility and expertise. This is particularly important for the City Mangers and Chief Executive Officers (CFO) because their roles are like that of managing director of a private company. The relevant government legislation like the MFMA delegates all the administrative powers to the City Manager of the Municipality, with the CFO expected to be responsible for the financial decision-making processes.

From the findings, it was interesting to note how the executives in local government saw the role of politicians regarding decision making. They viewed politicians as shareholders instead of considering rates payers and citizenry at large to be shareholders. This view shared some light on the complexity of the intersection of political leadership and technocrats. The fact that both executive and legislative authority are invested in the municipal council means that the political roles of councillors and the administrative duties of executive technocrats are blurred.

Another important observation from the finding is how executive in local government view the importance of political alignment and position as means of making their decision-making process easy. Having to adapt their responsibly leadership orientation to suit the politics of the day. This illustrated the importance of contextual

leadership in adapting to the complexities of local government. Despite the political dynamics participants viewed compliance with law and legislation to be a critical element of leading responsible in local government. Table 8 below provides a summary of the dominant level three codes and the dominant theme for RQ1.

Table 12: RQ 1 The top two level two codes and themes.

RQ1: How do local government executives define responsible leadership?	
Level two codes (Categories)	Level three codes (Themes)
Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.	Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.
Responsible leadership is about leading with ethics	Responsible leadership is about values-based leadership.
Responsible leadership is about being transparency.	
Responsible leadership is about complying with local government legislation.	

5.5 Research Question 2

What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?

Based on the data analysed the participant suggested that suggested that responsible leadership in local government is affected by the following three main dominant theme:

1. Theme 1: Unethical leadership

2. Theme 2: Political instability.
3. Theme 3: Lack of accountability.

Table 13: Level two codes and level codes and frequences RQ 2

RQ 2: What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?		
Level two codes (Categories)	Code Frequency	Level three Codes (Themes)
Political influence on recruitment of administrative leaders.	18	Unethical leadership.
Self-interest	12	
Lack of ethical leadership.	6	
Political instability.	9	Political instability.
Lack of consequence management	4	Lack of accountability.

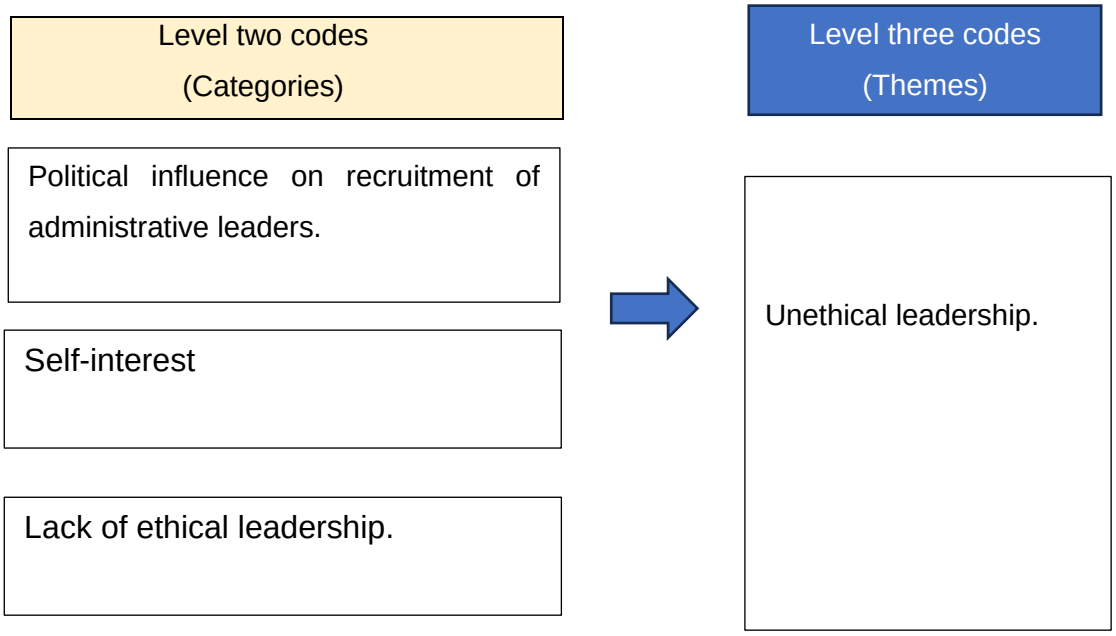
Only the highlighted top two dominant themes, unethical leadership and political instability, will be expanded on in the following sections.

5.5.1 RQ 2 Theme 1: Unethical Leadership.

The highest-scoring theme for RQ 2 was centred on ethical issues in the local government context. Fundamentally, participants agreed that the recruitment of executives and senior managers in local government is prone to political influences,

which negatively affects the enactment of responsible leadership. They all agreed that responsible leadership is negatively affected by personal interests and a lack of ethics.

Table 14: RQ 2 Theme 1 – Unethical Leadership.



First, the highest-ranking factor participant deemed key in affecting responsible leadership is centred around how executives in South African local government are recruited and how the recruitment process has an effect in their responsible leadership orientation. Given that responsible leadership in an organisation is enacted from people in executive positions, the quality of individuals recruited in executive positions is paramount for a responsible local government. The participants suggested that the recruitment process for executive and senior manager positions is prone to political interference.

It is worth noting that the structures and the laws that govern local government give executive authority and power to the political structure to recruitment executives. Hence, for example, the recruitment and appointment of a Municipal Managers is the responsibility of Council. Council then delegates the recruitment of other executives to the City Manager who may use a panel to assist and advise with the recruitment process. However, the final decision on who gets appointed as Head of a particular Department in local government rests with Council. This suggests that the separation

of power between the political structure and administrative structure of local government only exists conceptually, and the reality is different.

The participants suggested that politicians use their delegated powers to recruitment leaders who are associated with a specific political party and or agenda. They suggested that the responsible leadership of these executives would then be compromised, and their decision-making process would be skewed towards advancing the political agenda more that serving citizenry. They purported that politician only consider executives who are likely be agreeable to ensuring the fulfilment of political agenda. Additionally, that competency is not always deemed to be more important than patronage.

The participants suggested that when executives are recruited along patronage lines, their professional independence is compromised. They are unlike to disagree with incorrect or unethical political directives. Additionally, they held a view that the situation becomes dire when the appointed executives are not competent to executive the intended responsibilities. They suggested that only when executives are competent with moral orientation can they stand their ground against unethical decision from stakeholders.

“In my experience, one of the biggest problems in South Africa is the interference, political interference in the administration.”

“It all starts about patronage, where politicians appoint people that they know that they are weak, and they will easily manipulate.” (CO2)

“Unfortunately, we find ourselves in an environment where we have a lot of political interference in appointment of people in leadership positions. People who are qualified and experienced are overlooked because they don’t have political connections.” (JM1)
“Local government struggles to recruit responsible, ethical leadership because a leadership position has been very much associated with political association, and who you are rubbing shoulders with. There is always an extent of wanting to put those that are politically correct in positions of leadership.” (CO1)

If you have corrupt politicians and you have cadres deployed, then it makes it very difficult to say no, because you are a cadre who's not competent. (CM2)

"People say, but remember, we appointed you and you are there to enrich us. You must help us with funny supply chain contracts and decisions." (CM2)

"If you appoint somebody who doesn't have what it takes, that person is ordinarily must retain a favour. And that favour will be through the procurement processes and procurement procedures as well." (CO2)

"The general observation is that people who are hired at the top there are favoured by politicians. Most of these guys, in my observation, can't lead." (MOT)

Given the number of politicians that are in the environment, lines become blurred, even though you find that politicians will say we are not interfering, sometimes interference is there." (NMB1)

The participants suggested that the patronage entanglement affects responsible leadership both ways – where politicians give away their authority to hold executive accountable for their sphere of responsibility and competence.

"Politicians condone non-compliance with policies; they don't take hard decisions when they are supposed to do that because of patronage. This is particular the case when it involves the people they appointed." (CO2)

"Most of the leaders that you find now are highly compromised in nature because executive positions, most of the time they are associated with your political alliance." (CO2)

Second, participate viewed individual behaviour of leaders and key stakeholders, the political leaders, negatively affect responsible leadership in local government. The participant suggested that local government has become so complex such that the focus is less on service delivery but advancing personal and political interests. They argue that the entanglement between political administration and technocrats have made the situation worse. They pointed to some of the evident service delivery failures and evidence of a local government system that no longer serve its purpose

due to the self-interests and lack of responsible leadership. Additionally, they shared that some officials are participating in the political space in local government.

"Local Government is very challenging environment because of the political and nefarious interests. In my experience, interests go across political parties. So, it is really nefarious interests that cause havoc in local government." (CM1)

"Council is composed of political parties, which have certain interests, and their interests must be advanced at administrative level." (CM3)

"*Responsible leadership is lacking in local government, both at a political and administrative level, you have very few people that really practice that. What is currently prevailing now is about self-interest to a point you would not have all these protests, people who are disillusioned, who do not want to vote if responsible leadership prevailed."*

"We find ourselves in an unfortunate situation where people abuse their positions to benefit personally from government coffers." (CO3)

"The pressing issue in local government is corruption. There's no responsibility and accountability – it is all about greed and corruption." (CO2)

"Some of the officials are also participating in politics so that they can get political protection." (SPMO)

The findings suggest that the local government environment might not be conducive to any form of responsible conduct, nor does it support and protect those who want to raise issues with irresponsible conduct. The following quotations from the participants epitomise this tragic situation.
"In some instances, individuals within government at large, I even scared to say the word corruption." (CO3)

"When I conducted an ethical climate survey, it showed that there are people in junior positions who know what is happening, who know what is wrong and where, but they cannot stand up and speak, purely because it limits their career growth." (CO2)

"If you try to do the right thing, you're almost like the odd one out and now, you decide to keep quiet. (COF)

"I always tell people that I would never whistle blower. I am unfortunately, at that stage where I would never, never, ever whistle blow. because who do we go to, number one. And number two is, if you whistle blow, I think more resources and time will be spent to finding that person that whistle blew rather than to address the issue that was raised. (COF)

"It is quite challenging for one to be a leader an ethical, without being seen to be against the government of the time." (CO2)

5.5.2 RQ 2 Theme 2: Political instability.

The second dominant theme for RQ 2 is centred on the role of political instability in local government and its effect on responsible leadership.

Table 15: RQ 2 Theme 2 – Political instability.

Level two codes (Categories)	Level three codes (Themes)
Political instability.	Political instability.

The effect of political instability on responsible leadership is a unique contextual factor that local government executives suggested they were battling to navigate. The participants suggested that since the prevalence of coalition politics (multi-political party government) in the South African local government, political instability has made leading complex and responsible leadership difficult. They argued that uncertainty due to differing interests from the different political parties involved in the administration has made the decision-making process complex. This, in turn, affected their ability to lead responsibly.

They shared examples of how complex it has become to obtain critical approvals from the Council to deliver services. They allude to these challenges being

responsible for some recent service delivery breakdowns. The following quotations support these observations.

“It is a serious struggle to be a City Manager (Executive), particularly in places where there's no political stability, I must say. But where there is political stability like where I am now, I must be honest with you, it's not easy for politicians to just get rid of you because it will say a lot about them. It reflects on them because the buck stop with them, as they are the majority government. Whereas in a coalition government, it's easier to get rid of the Municipal Director or Head of Department, because one of the coalition parties pushed for it, and nobody takes responsibility.” (CM3)

“And I think the situation is much worse now that you've got this competing political climate at the helm of driving the seat. So, it is no longer about a single political party and them having a political mandate that you need to see yourself aligned to” (CO2)

“I feel that if there's no political stability, things can't go right in an organisation.” (CM5)

“For us we currently have no City Manager. We have had about 16 acting City Mangers since 2020. The current coalition has been in place for less than a year. We have had four of the coalition government changing power in the last four years.” (NMB1)

“So different political parties want to advance their matters and be assured that their interest is going to be served at a certain point because they are part of decision-making.” (CM3)
“The coalitions government over the years, have contributed to the complexity because I have realised that different political parties who form coalitions have different interests.” (COF).

An insightful observation is the difference in experience between executives leading under a coalition government and those leading under a single political party government. The following are the views of a participant leading under a majority government:

“Here where I am no nobody wants money from anybody, but everybody wants service delivery from all the administrators. And that's the headache you will have all your life in here.” (CM3)

“But where there is political stability like where I am now, I must be honest with you, it's not easy for politicians to just get rid of you because it will say a lot about them. It reflects on them because the buck stop with them, as they are the majority government.” (CM2)

5.6 RQ 2 Summary

What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?

Participants agreed on two main factors that affect responsible leadership in local government. Firstly, the role of politician in the recruitment of leaders in executive levels. They suggested that recruitment for these positions is done along political patronage, and that competence is not always the deciding factor. The participates urged that the implication of this interference is compromised responsible leadership and service delivery. They held a view that when executives are appointed based on political patronage there is an expectation of them to fulfil political a particular political agenda, and this compromises service delivery. Despite this being an issue of discomfort for the participates, they have accepted it as part of their context. This is mainly because the legislation and laws that government local governments give power to the politician to have the final say on recruitment of executive and senior managers.

Secondly, participants suggested that self-interest is also key factor that affects responsible leadership in local government. They pointed out the entanglement between politics and technocrats are amongst key drivers. Their observation has been that technocrats have decided to play politics for personal benefits. Given that the participants have executive powers in their organization, the researcher was interested in understanding how they deal with these challenges. As much as the participants were individual in disagreement with culture, they seemed to have decided to accept it as part of their context. This is mainly because they acknowledge the power dynamics between their levels and that of their political principles.

Lastly, the recent coalition politics prevalent across many municipalities in South African local government has brought a new normal for executives. The participants agreed that leading responsible has become complex due to the various political

interests they are expected to balance. They suggested that they had to adapt their leadership approach based on the situation at hand. The participants agreed that strategy decision making, and service delivery has been impacted by political instability. Table 12 below provides a summary of the dominant level three codes and the dominant theme for RQ2.

Table 16: RQ 2 top two level three codes and themes.

RQ2: What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?	
Level two codes (Categories)	Level three codes (Themes)
Political influence on recruitment of administrative leaders.	Unethical leadership.
Self-interest	
Lack of ethical leadership.	
Political instability.	Political instability.

5.7 Research Question 3

How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?

Based on the data analysed the participants suggested that implementation of training and awareness program and role modelling as two dominant approach they use to promote responsible conduct.

1. Theme 1: Promoting accountability.
2. Theme 2: Supporting knowledge and skills development.

Table 17: Level two codes and level codes and frequences RQ 3

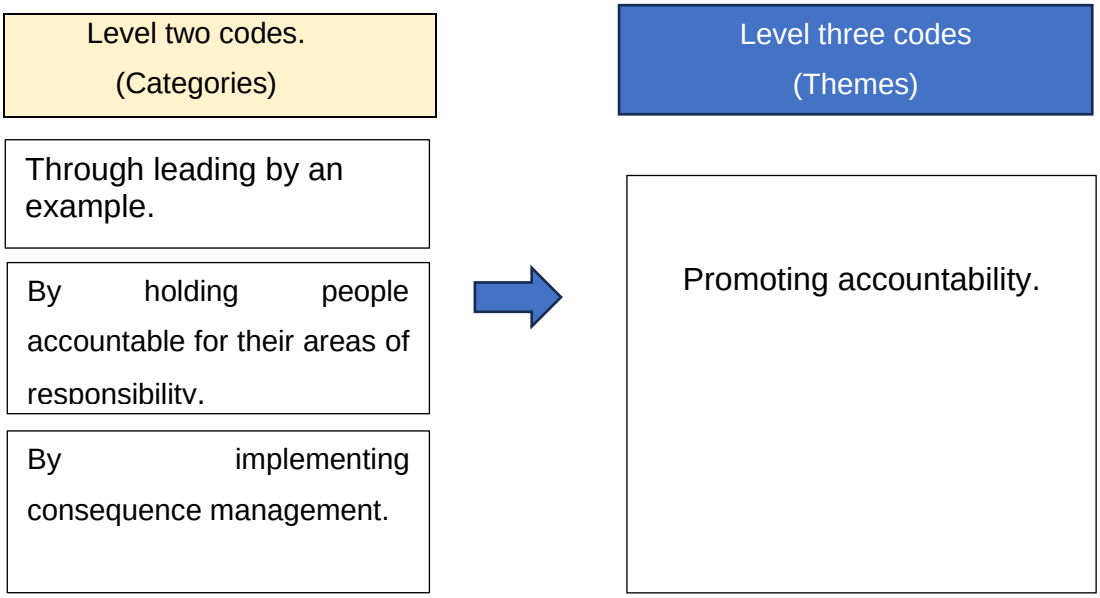
RQ 3: How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?		
Level two codes. (Categories)	Code Frequency	Level three Codes (Themes)
By implementing training on codes of conduct and creating awareness	22	Supporting knowledge and skills development.
Through leading by an example	15	Promoting accountability.
By holding people accountable for their areas of responsibility.	6	
By implementing consequence management.	4	

The following section will expand in more details under each theme.

5.7.1 RQ 3 Theme 1: Promoting accountability.

The highest dominant theme for RQ 3 is centred around promoting accountability though leading by an example, holding people accountable and implementing consequence management. Firstly, participants viewed leading by an example as the best way of promoting responsible conduct across the organisation. They further suggested that promoting responsible conduct in local government is a collective leadership responsibility: it includes the actions from political leadership. They accepted the fact that role modelling is currently lacking in local government.

Table 18: RQ 3 Theme 1 – Promoting accountability.



They suggested that when ethical misconduct is happing at top leadership it tends to cascade down to the various levels of the organisation – creating a slippery slope. The participants believed that the foundation for promoting responsible conduct is leading with ethics because ethics cannot be legislated.

"The role that the City Manager or the accounting officer, plays is important – he sets the tone. That person sets the tone of how things are done in a municipality. Just as the executive mayor also sets the tone at the political level as to how the political component engages with the administrative component. So, the executive mayor would set the tone there." (CM1)

The first thing is that the City Manager must really be beyond reproach when it comes to setting the tone. In other words, do as I do - you must walk the talk. When there is an ethical deficit at the top because the City Manager is not doing what he is saying, then that filters through." (CM1)

"It happens through ethical leadership. The first thing is you ensure that you lead by example. You can't expect people following you to do things that you yourself are not doing. So, you lead by example. If you want people to be punctual, you make sure that you are punctual." (CM2)

“I think equally to ethical leadership or responsible leadership, the message must be spread from the top. And beside the message being spread from the top, I need to live it. I need to be the responsible person. Culture is very key and important within our own institution.” (CM3)

Secondly, the participates agree d on the importance of holding people accountable when they have acted outside the provided codes of conduct. They believed that accountability and consistence consequence management positively affect responsible conduct across the organization, whilst the reverse is also true. The suggested that it is the role of responsible leaders to promote the culture of accountability and effective consequence management.

“Holding people to account is important when you are a responsible leader so that people will take each other seriously but they will also take you seriously”. (CM1)

"Promoting a culture where people do what they are expected to do." (CM2)

“Culture is very key and important within our own institution.” (CM3)

"We are not afraid to do disciplinary against officials who don't do their work or who are guilty of unethical conduct." (CM5)

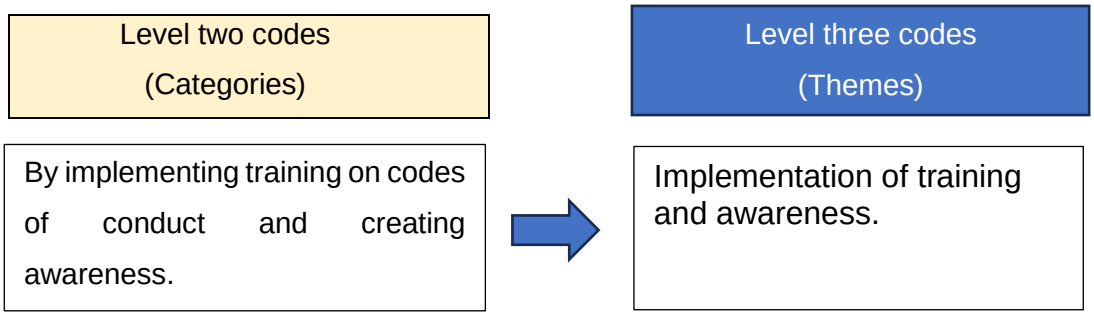
"You must be an assertive leader that articulates a clear strategy of where you want to go, how do you want to go there, and if people are not following the same route, what will be the consequences?" (COT2)

"There must be consequence management in the event that we do pick up any dereliction of duty." (COT3)

5.7.2 RQ 3 Theme 2: Supporting knowledge and skills development.

The second highest scoring theme for RQ 3 is centred around supporting knowledge and skills develop with a purpose of empowering employees through training and awareness creation programmers. This is aimed at assisting employee with better decision making.

Table 19: RQ 3 Theme 2 – Implementation of training and awareness



Despite the leadership complexities and political dynamics of their context, the participates acknowledged their responsibility of creating a responsible culture. They suggested that this is achieved through guiding and supporting employees in navigating the prevalent ethical dilemmas that exist in local government. They contended that the training and awareness programmes helped to ensure that employees are aware of the expected standards of conduct – this then allows for a fair implementation of a consequence management process in case of deviations. They argue that empowering employees with knowledge and being transparent with the conduct expectation should precede any form of consequence management.

"You must drive training and a high level of awareness on ethical conduct or anti-corruption measures." (COT2)

"People must know what kind of a leader you are and what are the decisions that you are going to take if people are engaged in unethical behaviour or corruption." (COT2)

"As leader of the department you have to constantly talk about the importance of responsible conduct – it is something we are always talking about." (CO1)
"it's very important that everybody knows what is expected of them and that feedback is given." (HCS)

"I need to ensure that every employee understands the contents of the code of conduct, and when things are unethical." (NMB1)

"There must also be safe spaces for people to come and say, I have observed deviant behaviour, and I want to report it. So, it's important for people to feel safe when they

come forward to report wrongdoing, because you can't have one and not the other." (CM1)

"We have got quite a number of awareness initiatives, particularly on disciplinary issues and ethical issues. The awareness programmes are led by top management, it actually starts from the top, from the mayor, me, the executive directors, must be there in that ethical awareness that we have." (CM3)

"I put a very strong emphasis to my colleagues about the importance of complying with the legislation whenever I get a chance to discuss these issues. The necessary training and awareness are done so that we ensure we comply with the law." (COF)

"It's important for people, if they need to know how to behave, then they must know what is expected of them -they need to be aware of our policies." (HCS)

5.8 Research Question 3 Summary

How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?

All the participates agreed that it is through role modelling by those in leadership positions that responsible conduct is promoted across the organization. They suggested that most of the misconduct in local government is due to the lack of role models because most of the leaders are either involved in misconducts or they perpetuate the culture of misconduct by not implementing effective consequence management systems.

The participates shared examples of what they have implemented in their various organization to promote responsible conduct. Most significant is the implementation of training programmes on responsible decision-making and the creation of awareness to assist employees with dealing with ethical dilemmas. The participants agreed that accountability is lacking in local government due to lack of consequences management. Table 16 below provides a summary of the dominant level three codes and the dominant theme for RQ 3.

Table 20: RQ 3 top two level three codes and themes

RQ 3: How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?		
Level two codes (Categories)	Code Frequency	Level three Codes (Themes)
By implementing training on codes of conduct and creating awareness	22	Supporting knowledge and skills development.
Through leading by an example	15	Promoting accountability.
By holding people accountable for their areas of responsibility.	6	
By implementing consequence management.	4	

5.9 Research Question 4

How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?

Based on the data analysed the participants suggested that given the dynamism and complexities of local government context and its stakeholders taking a situational approach is the most dominant theme when dealing with competing and conflicting stakeholder interests and demands.

1. Theme 1: Promote ethical decision-making.
2. Theme 2: Work with multiple perspectives

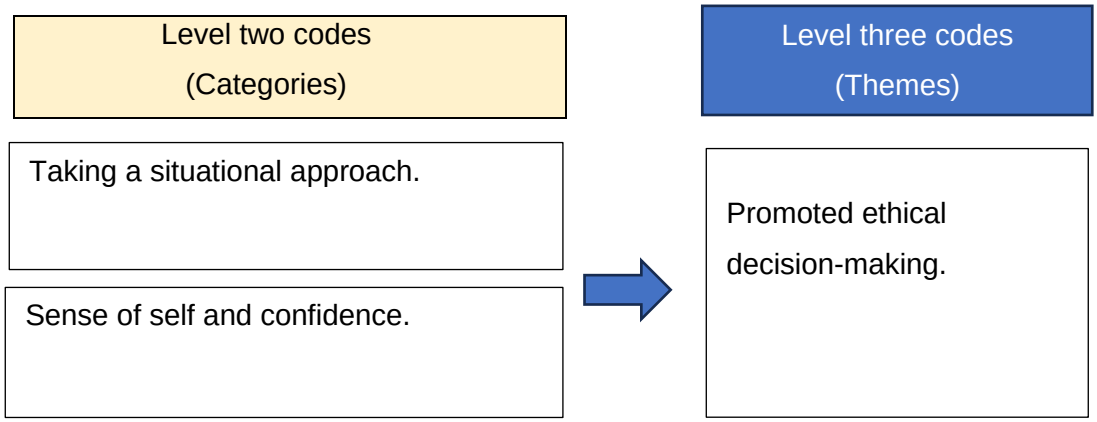
Table 21: Level two codes and level codes and frequences RQ 4

RQ 4: How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?		
Level two codes (Categories)	Code Frequency	Level three Codes (Themes)
Taking a situational approach.	16	Promote ethical decision-making.
Sense of self and confidence.	6	
Making sense and giving sense.	9	Work with multiple perspectives.
Acknowledging interdependencies of decision process.	6	

5.9.1 RQ 4 Theme 1: Promote ethical decision-making.

The highest scoring theme for RQ 3 is centred around acknowledging that decision making in the local government context is not always easy, so participants suggested that they take a situational approach when dealing with competing and conflicting stakeholder demands and interests.

Table 22: RQ 4 Theme 1 – Promote ethical decision-making.



Firstly, the participates argued that decision-making process in local government context is not always easy. The participants suggested the importance of reviewing each situation with its facts and merit before deciding on the best approach. They believed that some situations and or demands are not as clear as they might appear, so a situational approach is more appropriate. The following quotations supports this observation:

"It is not always clear what to do. If it's an ethical issue as it was in my case, or it can be a case, you simply disagree because you know, it is the best route to take." (CM1)

"At first you become rebellious, but you then think about the impact that will have or the effect that will have on you as a person." (JM1)

"Some stakeholders have personal interest - you need to know when to say no and when to you stick out."

"At the administrative level I can still challenge decisions I don't agree with, but then you need to say, who am I dealing with beyond this individual because local government is a very political environment, you sometimes feel that you not dealing with an individual, you are dealing with a political party behind this individual." (NMB1)

Lastly, the participants shared concerns of being victimized by their political principles should they challenge decisions that they disagree with. However, they emphasized

the importance to stand by one's moral values regardless of the possibility to be victimised.

"I don't care whether I am victimised or not, it's your job as the accounting officer and the CEO of the company to make it very clear that this decision is unethical or this decision is an incorrect decision." (CM2)

"The confidence comes from knowing that morally you're there, ethically you're there, academically you are qualified, you have the experience, all of that is in your toolbox." (CM2)

"When you are expected to take a decision that you know will have negative consequences for the municipality and yourself then you must be guided by your own notion of what is responsible leadership is." (CM1)

"It is important to stand your ground and advise when things are going wrong". (CM1)

"People will always respect you for the stance that you have taken even those that you don't know - they will remember that you consistently behaved ethically." (CM1)

"It is the responsibility of the administrators as professionals to actually get the political principles to understand the procedures to do some of these things." (CO1)

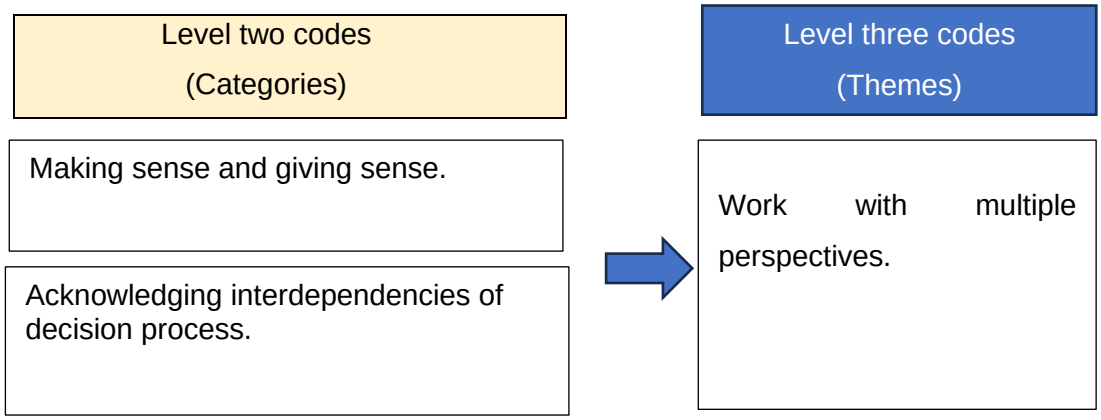
They argued that it is a choice made knowing the potential implications of their choices. They suggested that as a professional you are held accountable for the decisions you make in your area of competency, so either way you will still be held accountable for agreeing to doing wrong or challenging the politicians.
"I have realised that because the decisions that you make and the things that you do now have got a long-term implication, especially as a professional, you know, have got a long-term implication for one." (CO1)

This points to the potential tension in decision-making processes in the local government context.

The above quotation illustrates the fact that decision making is not always easy and an either/or approach might not be the most suitable, instead a combination of the different interests and expectations might be the most appropriate solution.

Table 23: RQ 4 Theme 2 – Work with multiple perspectives

The second Theme under RQ 2 illustrates the importance of working with multiple perspectives when leading in a context with plurality of stakeholders. The theme is supported by the of acknowledging the importance of helping yourself and others when dealing with difficult decision-making situation or when confronted with conflicting demands and needs. Additionally, that complex and dynamic environment usually have independencies, hence acknowledging interdependencies in decision making is paramount.



Firstly, the participate viewed their professional role as an expert role: they suggested the importance of playing a role of an advisor and provide guidance in navigating some complex decisions. With this perspective they aim to guide their relevant stakeholders through a responsible decision-making process. This is done with the acknowledgement of the existing tensions and at times different values and or needs. The approach allows for learning and unlearning to take place. The following quotations make this point clearly:

"As technocrats we are responsible for guiding the politicians on administrative matters and they guide us on certain political things." (CM3)

"Administratively, we must play an advisory role - grounded in principles and understanding the internal processes." (CO1)

"You give guidance, you assist in their decision-making processes." (CM4)

"When contentious issues come up, we can caution the councillors that what they want maybe might not be correct, and they will never force us to carry on with the wrong things." (CM5)

The participants suggested the importance of experience and expertise in demonstrating and arguing for a more responsible approach in cases of disagreement with stakeholders.

“You must actually prepare well, you must motivate your point as to why you disagree, and you must indicate the pros and cons of why you're saying.” (CM2)

“You cannot go and differ with people if you are incompetent in your own right.” (CM2)

“The way you deal with disagreement is you must prepare well, you must motivate your point as to why you disagree, and you must indicate the pros and cons of why you're saying, if we continue on this route that you would like to follow, the people disagreeing with you, what will the negatives be? What will the cons be? And then indicate to them, but if we follow a different approach and we do the following, here are two other alternatives, that here are the pros and the positives that you can take out.” (CM2)
“Together with the politician we must find the balance.”

Finally, the participants acknowledged the symbiotic relationship between their role and that of their legitimate stakeholders. They suggested that some situations would require making a compromise instead of choosing either/or. Compromise is made as part of managing the tension and the different values for the sustainability of the organization/system. This for them is significant part of leading in a complex context like local government. However, they contend that the compromise should not be at the expense of the organisational mission and purpose. The participates felt that it was it important to disagree or agree with the situational context in mind – they believed in providing reasons for disagreeing but also being open to different perspectives.

"We just want to make politicians happy, but at the same time, administration must not be compromised because the success of the institution brings about the success of a certain political party which is in power at that given moment." (CM3)

“In instances where there is big disagreement between administrators and politics, we normally get into a compromise decision.” (CM3).

“*You can take a compromise for political sake without running the municipality into debut or budget shortfalls.” (CM3)*

The most significant part of this finding is the importance of knowledge and experience that participants rely on in holding multiple perspectives that allow them to decide on the most appropriate approach.

5.10 Research Question 4 Summary

How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?

The key insight from the findings is that decision-making in local government context is not always easy and for this reason participants take a situational approach. They have suggested that the role of politics and its dynamics complicates decision making. All participants agreed that given that their role is to promote a responsible local government, their moral values guide their decision-making process.

The participant viewed their role as expert who is responsible for ensuring that the responsible decisions are made across the organization. Despite the different values between political administration and professional administration, the participates argued that executives are responsible for guiding politicians towards making responsible decisions.

The most significant findings are the acknowledgment that responsible leadership itself is dynamic – at times executives must be ambidextrous. They acknowledged that certain instances require the ability to accept different perspectives without compromising the bigger organizational purpose and mission. Table 20 below provides a summary of the dominant level three codes and the dominant theme for RQ 4.

Table 24: RQ 4 top level three codes and themes

RQ 4: How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?		
Level two codes (Categories)	Code Frequency	Level three Codes (Themes)
Taking a situational approach.	16	Promote ethical decision-making.
Sense of self and confidence.	6	
Making sense and giving sense.	9	Work with multiple perspectives.
Acknowledging interdependencies of decision process.	6	

5.11 Chapter 5 Conclusion

With the aim to fulfil the research objectives, the research finds have addressed the following questions:

1. How do local government executives define responsible leadership?
2. What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?
3. How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?
4. How do local government executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?

Under this chapter the experience and perception of executives in local government is shared from 15 participants. To demonstrate the richness of the date the findings are supported by at least one quotation from each participant.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the most important findings, interprets their meaning and importance in relation to the research questions. It explores how executives in South African local government conceptualise, experience, and practice responsible leadership in their complex and dynamic environment. The chapter is organised into a conversation based on the four research questions. It integrates the themes that emerge with each other to form a coherent picture of the realities, challenges, and approaches to responsible leadership at the local government level. These findings fills the gaps between the empirical data and the broader implications for theory and practice of leadership in the public sector.

6.2 Discussion of results for RQ 1

How do local government executives define responsible leadership?

6.2.1 Discussion of results for RQ 1

6.2.1 RQ 1 Theme 1: Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.

Responsible leadership was consistently demonstrated by South African local government executives as being entirely rooted in accountability to stakeholders. They pointed out that accountability does not simply mean following rules or even providing proper reports; rather, it is a moral and ethical duty to consider the interests of all stakeholders when making decisions. This aligns closely with the integrative view of responsible leadership outlined by Maak et al. (2016) and Waldman et al. (2020), where executives are expected to reflect the interests of a broad range of stakeholders, such as citizens, employees, and political authorities, rather than those wielding power or experiencing immediate impact. The executives' views demonstrate that responsible leadership entails an active commitment to transparency, responsiveness, and ethical conduct, which fosters trust between the local government and the communities.

The findings also suggest a continuum in how executives operationalise accountability, reflecting the tension between instrumental and integrative

responsible leadership orientations (Pless et al., 2022; Maak et al., 2016). Some executives adopt a more instrumental view, focusing primarily on stakeholders who directly influence the performance of the municipalities or the allocation of resources. Others employ an integrative approach, considering the needs of both strong and weak stakeholders in their decision-making. This duality underscores the importance of context in responsible leadership practices. In the South African local government context, characterised by a history of injustices, political oversight, and resource limitations, responsible leaders must strike a balance between competing interests while striving to deliver fair and ethical services.

Furthermore, the accountability-focused mindset of executives can also be linked to the growing relevance of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Varma, 2021) in public sector leadership. Accountability as a procedural matter is not just a strategic tool to enhance legitimacy, social cohesion, and maintain public trust. According to the executives' perspectives, responsible leadership involves maintaining relationships, clarifying responsibilities to stakeholders, and ensuring the decision-making process is transparent and justifiable. Therefore, responsible leadership within local government can be characterised by a complex, ethically informed understanding of accountability that simultaneously addresses governance requirements and responds to the diverse demands of stakeholders in complex, resource-constrained environments.

6.2.2 RQ 1 Theme 2: Responsible leadership is about contextual strategic leadership.

Responsible leadership was also referred to by the executives as contextual strategic leadership, which is the approach that puts decision-making in the context and complexities of local government in South Africa. They pointed out that accountable leaders should consider organisational limitations, socio-economic inequalities, political influences, and community demands when designing and executing strategies. This is reminiscent of Johns' (2024) claim that context has a direct impact on leadership performance and success. When strategists incorporate situational awareness into strategic planning, executives can ensure that the decisions made are not only technically valid but also socially acceptable, striking a balance between operational needs and the ethical obligation to serve the broader community.

The results suggest that contextual strategic leadership is associated with the integrative responsible leadership orientation, whereby executives act to balance opposing demands and harmonise the interests of stakeholders (Maak et al., 2016;

Voegtlin, 2016). The executives explained that they were using strategic foresight to foresee challenges, allocate their resources wisely and adjust their organisational practices to be in tune with dynamic political and social opportunity environments. The strategic orientation demonstrates both/and perspective of leading through paradoxes, as outlined by Smith and Lewis (2011), in which the leader can balance short-term operational demands with long-term developmental goals. This strategic flexibility is crucial for effective governance and service delivery in the high-stakes and stakeholder-expectation environment of a local government.

Against such a background, the conceptualisation of contextual strategic leadership among the executives promotes the interplay between ethical responsibility and organisational effectiveness. A strategic decision is not made without values attached; it incorporates ethics into its planning process to ensure that stakeholder needs are considered without compromising organisational performance. This aligns with Stahl et al. (2016) and Waldman et al. (2020), who emphasise that effective responsible leadership necessitates an ethical orientation and the capacity to operate in complex, dynamic environments. Thus, the findings indicate that responsible leadership in South African local government is both strategic, contextual, and integrative; leaders must balance organisational priorities with stakeholder interests, demonstrate foresight, ethical judgement, and responsiveness to change in highly dynamic settings.

6.2.3 RQ 1 Theme 3: Responsible leadership is about values-based leadership.

The executives consistently emphasised the importance of responsible leadership as a fundamental aspect of values-based decision-making. They viewed values as guiding principles in complex situations that influence decisions, behaviour, and priorities. This finding aligns with Waldman et al. (2020) and Voegtlin et al. (2020), who state that responsible leaders base their decision-making on personal and organisational values to deliver ethical, sustainable, and socially responsible outcomes. In the South African local government context, where resource limitations, political pressure and socio-economic disparities present a series of ethical dilemmas, values are regarded as essential foundations that shape behaviour and maintain integrity.

This information suggests that values-based leadership fosters an integrative, responsible leadership orientation by focusing on justice, respect, and the ethical treatment of all stakeholder groups (Pless et al., 2022; Maak et al., 2016). According

to the executives' reports, their decisions are typically guided by the values of honesty, transparency, and community service, which represent an ethical model that extends beyond mere compliance. This aligns with Agarwal and Bhal (2020), who argue that responsible leadership is a crucial element of ethical interaction with stakeholders, ensuring sustainable relationships and organisational legitimacy. Through leadership practice, which entails instilling values, executives can resolve ethical dilemmas and become role models to strengthen a culture of accountability and confidence in the local government institutions.

Furthermore, values-based leadership was mentioned as an approach to aligning the interests of conflicting stakeholders and ensuring consistency in decision-making. The executives noted that with clear personal and organisational values, they were able to deal with the tension arising from persuading conflicting priorities, including resource allocation versus social equity, or short-term performance versus long-term sustainability. This observation replicates the paradox theory approach as noted by Smith and Lewis (2011), which implies that values can provide the cognitive/moral framework that executives require to implement a both/and approach to paradoxical problems. Therefore, values-based leadership is a crucial aspect of responsible leadership that enables local government executives to make transparent, principled, and context-sensitive decisions, thereby retaining stakeholder trust.

6.2.4 RQ 1 Theme 4: Responsible leadership is about leading people effectively.

The executives consistently emphasised the importance of responsible leadership as a fundamental aspect of values-based decision-making. They viewed values as guiding principles in complex situations that influence decisions, behaviour, and priorities. This finding aligns with Waldman et al. (2020) and Voegtlin et al. (2020), who state that responsible leaders base their decision-making on personal and organisational values to deliver ethical, sustainable, and socially responsible outcomes. In the South African local government context, where resource limitations, political pressure and socio-economic disparities present a series of ethical dilemmas, values are regarded as essential foundations that shape behaviour and maintain integrity.

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6.3 Discussion of results for RQ 2

What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsible leadership?

6.3.1 RQ 2 Theme 1: Unethical leadership

Executives in South African local government cited unethical leadership as a significant obstacle to implementing responsible leadership. These behaviours include prioritising personal interests over those of others, misappropriating resources, nepotism, and making decisions that are not based on organisational and stakeholder needs, but on self-preservation. Such malpractices become embedded in organisational and political cultures, limiting executives' sense of responsibility. These findings align with those of Cloete (2018) and Tleane (2020), who show that systemic corruption, inconsistent procurement procedures, and established patronage networks are significant barriers to effective public management, reducing trust and undermining governance. According to the executives, these unethical

norms create a paradox for responsible leaders who must balance ethical standards with acting decisively in an environment where unethical behaviour is either tolerated or rewarded.

The effects of unethical leadership are not just short-term misconduct but also permeate organisational culture. Leaders in these environments find it challenging to foster a sense of accountability, transparency, and ethical decision-making among their teams because employees tend to emulate existing cultures of unethical behaviour (Hein, et al., 2026). Executives noted that once unethical behaviour becomes normalised, it creates a self-perpetuating cycle that damages morale, fosters cynicism, and reduces employee engagement. This makes implementing responsible leadership more difficult, as executives must balance the need to uphold ethical principles with the reality of managing a culture rooted in opportunism.

Furthermore, unethical leadership has a direct negative impact on the paradoxical tensions within local government, as executives are compelled to manage conflicting demands. Responsible leaders must serve the needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders, such as citizens, employees, and political actors, while also maintaining personal and organisational integrity (Grobler et a., 2018; Nkadimeng, 2021). The executives described how difficult it is to implement integrative, responsible leadership within a context driven by self-interest, and that ethical leadership in such situations is not simply a personal choice, but also a systemic pressure and form of power that can undermine even the most resolute leaders. Therefore, unethical leadership functions as both a structural and cultural constraint that influences the direction and behaviour of responsible leaders.

6.3.2 RQ 2 Theme 2: Political instability

Executives noted that political instability is a significant issue that hinders effective leadership in South African local government. The political structure is unpredictable and volatile due to frequent changes in leadership, shifting policy priorities, and inconsistent governance directives. Executives emphasised that political instability disrupts continuity, forcing leaders to make short-term decisions at the expense of long-term planning and strategy. These findings align with the work of Jerab (2023) and Mashigo (2021), who argue that leadership effectiveness depends on stability because uncertainty and political instability make it challenging to implement integrated strategies or maintain stakeholder trust. The accounts from executives reveal that political instability creates contradictory pressures, requiring leaders to

simultaneously address political expectations, the needs of the people, and organisational goals amid extreme uncertainty.

Sensitivity to political instability impacts both organisational decision-making and strategic direction. Executives often feel pressured to prioritise politically beneficial outcomes over responsible leadership that emphasises ethics or sustainability. Masuku and Jili (2019) highlight that political interference weakens governance and internal controls, complicating leadership decisions. In such contexts, leaders must navigate conflicting interests among political actors, citizens, and employees, requiring careful judgment and strategic compromises. These findings suggest that political instability serves as both a contextual constraint and a moderating factor, influencing the extent to which leaders can adopt integrative, stakeholder-oriented approaches.

Political instability also impacts relationships with stakeholders and organisational legitimacy. Another way this affects performance, as explained by executives, is that leadership instability and shifts in policy priorities undermine trust among employees, citizens, and partner organisations, making engagement difficult and hindering the delivery of meaningful results (Musaigwa, 2023). Furthermore, political instability heightens the complexity of leadership roles, which demand adaptive capabilities, resilience, and foresight to act ethically and meet organisational needs. The findings show that political instability is not a minor issue but a crucial factor in responsible leadership, influencing how leaders are oriented and their capacity to navigate conflicting tensions in local governance.

6.3.3 RQ 2 Theme 3: Lack of accountability

The executives cited the lack of accountability as one of the impediments to responsible leadership within the South African local government. The lack of robust mechanisms to monitor, assess, and enforce ethical and performance standards allows unethical practices to persist, creating vulnerabilities within the system. The leaders claimed that in case of weak accountability, the unethical behaviour and inefficiencies spread, diminishing the trust of the people and the motivation of the workers. The findings are echoed by Breakfast and Phago (2019) and Naidoo (2020), who emphasise that accountability is crucial to achieving legitimacy, fostering stakeholder trust, and yielding sustainable leadership outcomes. Against such a background, executives pointed out that the absence of accountability is creating tension between the principles of responsible leadership practices and the realities

of operating in a workplace where supervision and enforcement are uneven or not practised.

Accountability deficiency also impairs the relationships between stakeholders within the organisation as well as with the outside world. Poor performance and misconduct are often condoned without any action being taken, and workers become disengaged or demotivated, which in turn decreases the capacity of leaders to build an ethical and responsible organisational culture (Mbeki & Van der Merwe, 2017). On the outside, being unaccountable contributes to the lack of trust and legitimacy of leaders, as citizens lose confidence in the institutions that are supposed to serve them (Jonck, 2024). Therefore, executives emphasised that accountable leadership is impossible to achieve without enhancing accountability systems, ensuring that the decision-making process is transparent, actions are executed effectively, and consequences are enforced.

The executives also emphasised the need for responsible leadership to facilitate both ethical and integrative strategies for managing stakeholders. Even executives who are determined to pursue an integrative, responsible leadership style are limited without explicit structures of accountability when attempting to strike a balance between the interests of the stakeholders, resolve paradoxical tensions, and remain ethical (Cloete, 2018; Phiri, 2021). Therefore, ensuring that an enabling environment is created where responsible leadership thrives is thus necessary, whereby not only are leaders guided in the direction of stakeholder needs, but also the systems are in place that support ethical and accountable governance.

6.4 Discussion of results for RQ 3

How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?

6.4.1 RQ 3 Theme 1: Promoting accountability.

The local government executives in South Africa emphasised the need to promote accountability as a key to responsible behaviour. This entails establishing effective reporting lines, maintaining transparency in the decision-making process, and adhering to ethical and performance standards. Accountability mechanisms will help establish a culture in which employees understand the implications of their behaviour

and what is expected of them regarding ethical behaviour. The results can be compared to those of Breakfast and Phago (2019) and Van der Waldt (2020), who argue that structured accountability systems are essential in the leadership of the state sector to maintain ethical principles and foster trust between stakeholders. This is because, according to the executives, not only is it a procedural requirement to encourage accountability, but it is also a moral one, which legitimises leadership in the eyes of both employees and citizens.

Accountability promotion is also a strategic measure in avoiding the risks of unethical behaviour or lapses in governance. According to executive reports, regular performance reviews, compliance audits, and participatory oversight committees were the tools used to ensure conformity to organisational policies and standards. As Mashigo (2021) notes, institutional accountability fosters institutional integrity and enhances organisational resilience to systemic issues of corruption or inefficiency, as it becomes embedded in organisational routines. Practically, leaders insisted that responsible leadership is an indication of ethical values, encourages adherence to organisational values, and instils a sense of ownership in the workforce.

Also, advocating accountability will enable the establishment of a good organisational culture, where responsible behaviour is exemplified, identified, and rewarded. Leaders discussed celebrating ethical decisions, providing feedback on performance, and penalising people who acted contrary to the desired behaviour. Such strategies are based on the experience of Naidoo (2020) and Nkadimeng (2021), who believe that ethical norms internalised in an environment through responsible leadership will ensure that the authorities do not have to resort to coercive practices. As the executives projected, long-term encouragement of accountability reinforced the trustworthiness of stakeholders and organisational well-being, as employees and communities believe that leadership is impartial, open, and ethical.

6.4.2 RQ 3 Theme 2: Supporting knowledge and skills development.

The executives found the support of knowledge and skill development to be a key tool for encouraging responsible behaviour. Leaders inculcate a culture of competence and responsibility by providing employees with the technical skills, ethical consciousness, and decision-making capabilities they require to navigate complex organisational and societal environments. This finding is consistent with the results of Jonck (2024) and Phiri (2021), who argue that continuous learning and professional development are the most effective ways to achieve growth in individual

and organisational ethical capacity within the context of leadership in the public sector. The executives focused on the importance of employee development as it enhances service delivery and builds ethical awareness and compliance with organisational values.

The development of knowledge and skills is also an initiative-taking measure to reduce ethical breaches and foster integrative leadership practices. Additionally, some initiatives outlined by executives included ethical governance workshops, mentoring programmes, and training scenarios as ways to develop problem-solving and stakeholder engagement skills. Jerab (2023) argues that such capacity-building activities help leaders manage paradoxical tensions and complex decision-making contexts while maintaining responsible behaviour. Therefore, when employees are consistently guided and their skills enhanced, they will be better prepared to ensure their behaviours meet organisational standards and respond positively to new challenges.

In addition, the executives emphasised that development of knowledge and skills fosters empowerment, accountability and organisational learning. Investing in the capabilities of employees will help leaders establish an environment in which personnel feel good and confident in their decisions and actions and hold themselves morally responsible. Mokoena and Oosthuizen (2018) and Cloete (2018) concur with this, stating that a culture of learning empowers individual ethical behaviour, promotes innovation and reinforces organisational resilience. Thus, executives claimed that promoting responsible behaviour is not always about issuing rules or observing behaviour, but also about developing an informed, competent, and ethically aware workforce that can uphold integrity in the organisation over the long term.

6.5 Discussion of results for RQ 4

How do executives manage the competing and conflicting interests and demands of stakeholders?

6.5.1 RQ 4 Theme 1: Promoting ethical decision-making.

As one of the most crucial tactics in dealing with competing and conflicting stakeholders, executives in South African local government emphasised the promotion of ethical decision-making. They said that ethics-based decision-making

processes enable leaders to navigate complex cross-trades without compromising legitimacy and trust. Ethical decision-making entails comparing decisions with organisational values, social standards, and stakeholder expectations, ensuring that the results are both accountable and impartial. These conclusions align with those of Mhlongo (2022) and Voegtlin (2016) who observe that ethical frameworks in leadership enhance the credibility and efficacy of decisions in the public sector, particularly in situations where political and social pressures exist. The executives stressed that ethical decision-making should serve as a guide in prioritising competing demands, helping to minimise conflicts and strengthen stakeholder confidence.

In fact, to encourage ethical decision-making, there are processes and engagement mechanisms that are structured to promote transparency and inclusiveness. Executives discussed formal measures, such as ethics committees, policy reviews, and stakeholder consultation forums, that guide decision-making and uphold ethical norms. Musaigwa (2023) and Mazibuko (2021) argue that embedding ethical decisions in organisational practices would improve accountability and reduce discretionary behaviour based on self-interest or politicisation of decisions. According to leaders, the practices not only protected integrity but also established a sense of common ground among the stakeholders, which reduced the perception of favouritism or bias.

Additionally, ethical decision-making will help executives resolve any paradoxical tensions that arise between conflicting demands of different stakeholders. The leaders have to strike a balance between conflicting interests and maintain organisational goals and ethics, commonly being limited in resources or pressured by the political environment. Van der Waldt (2020) point out that to maintain legitimacy, trust by stakeholders, and resilience of an organisation eventually, ethical decision-making is vital. According to reports by executives, incorporating an ethical orientation into their decision-making process can enhance staff alignment, increase the organisation's positive reputation, and facilitate more advantageous negotiations with stakeholders, thereby promoting a culture of ethical leadership practices across local government institutions.

6.5.2 RQ 4 Theme 2: Work with multiple perspectives

Another key theme, reflecting the need to work with various perspectives in relation to stakeholder conflict, was highlighted by the executives. Through the initiative-

taking pursuit and evaluation of various perspectives, including those of employees, citizens, political authorities, and civil society, leaders will gain a more holistic understanding of competing priorities, their effects, and the associated trade-offs. This finding is consistent with those of Voegtlin and Patzer (2021) and Nkadimeng and Phiri (2019), who state that integrative solutions lead to lower conflict levels and enhanced legitimacy in decision-making within the public sector through inclusive leadership. Executives emphasised that the practice of considering multiple perspectives is not only a practical policy choice, but also an embodiment of responsible leadership principles, based on fairness, empathy, and inclusiveness.

Furthermore, interaction with various perspectives enhances the ability to develop adaptive and innovative solutions within dynamic and local government settings. Executives stated that they employed consultative procedures, stakeholder meetings, and interdepartmental partnerships to gather various insights and make informed decisions. Grobler, et al., (2018) point out that the ability to combine various points of view enables leaders to predict unintended consequences, recognise potential ethical issues, and develop strategies that accommodate both short-term needs and long-term goals. The leaders emphasised that by incorporating a diversity of views, they will be better equipped to make decisions that are stronger, fairer, and more aligned with stakeholders.

Moreover, the adoption of diverse views promotes relational and collaborative leadership, which is essential in a complex environment of stakeholders. The executives observed that the ability to learn more about various stakeholder needs and expectations enhances communication, negotiation, and conflict-resolution skills. Pless et al. (2022) and Phiri (2021) support this opinion by stating that trust, cooperation, and cohesion in organisations are improved through stakeholder-oriented leadership styles. Thus, by cultivating and recognising multiple perspectives, executives will be able to handle the paradoxical tensions, balancing competing interests with organisational objectives and upholding ethical and responsible leadership standards throughout the municipality.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the study's findings, aligning with the four research questions, and provides insight into how responsible leadership is understood and implemented by South African local government executives. The findings indicate that responsible leadership is a multifaceted concept involving

accountability to stakeholders, values-driven decision-making, effective people management, and strategic thinking tailored to different situations. Executives emphasised the importance of balancing ethical standards with organisational objectives as they manage paradoxical tensions arising from the conflicting needs of various stakeholders. The analysis also revealed that systemic challenges- such as ethics deficits, political instability, and weak accountability frameworks- play a significant role in shaping leadership behaviour and the practice of responsible leadership within local government.

Despite these challenges, the executives employed initiative-taking strategies to promote responsible behaviour, including fostering accountability, enhancing knowledge and skills, encouraging ethical decision-making, and considering the interests of various stakeholders. The approaches underscore that responsible leadership in local government encompasses both ethical standards and strategic thinking, demanding resilience, adaptability, and the capacity to balance multiple interests without compromising core values. The results effectively connect practical implementation with theoretical frameworks, demonstrating how responsible leadership is exercised within the complex, ever-changing, and often paradoxical internal environment of the public sector. Additionally, they lay a foundation for practical recommendations that aim to enhance leadership practices, governance, and stakeholder trust.

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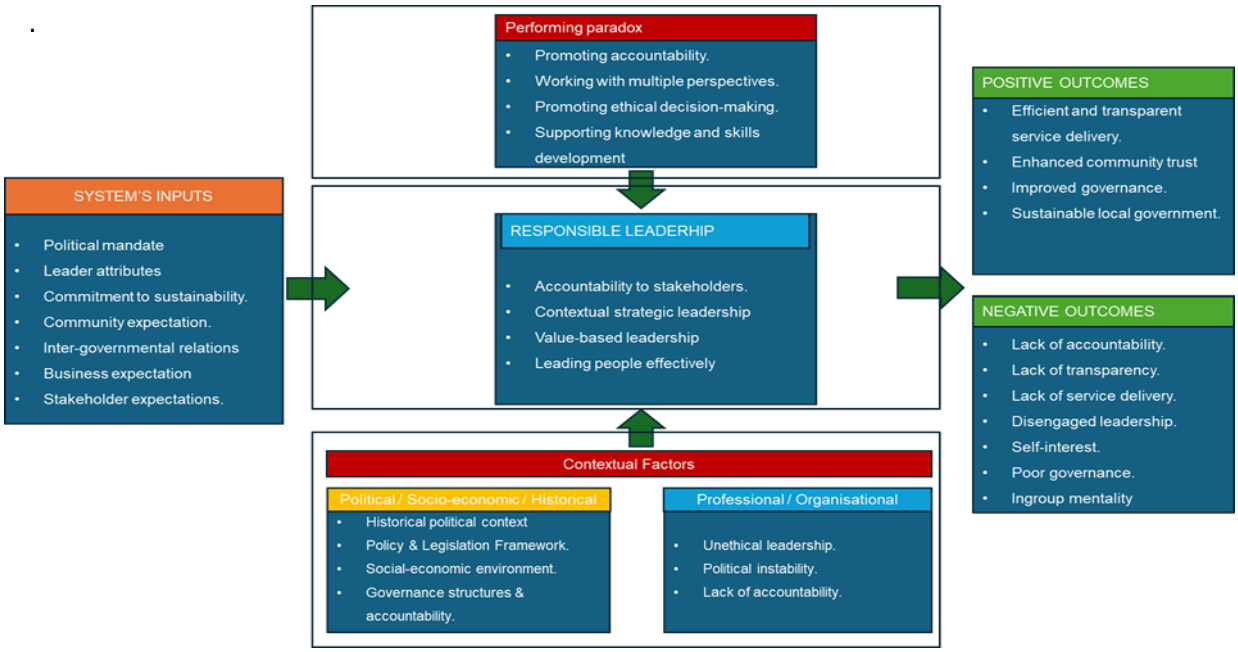

Figure 6: Complexity of responsible leadership in local government

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This chapter draws conclusions about how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local government and how responsible leaders deal with competing and conflicting stakeholder interests in needs.

The study set out to answer the following research questions:

Main Research questions: How does responsible leadership unfold in South African local government? How do responsible leaders deal with conflicting and competing stakeholders' interest and needs (Javed et al., 2024)

There were four sub-research questions as follows:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do local government executives defines responsible leadership? (Witt and Stahl, 2016; Voegtlin et al.,2020; Agarwal and Bhal, 2020; Maak et al.,2016: Filatotchev, et al., 2022; Pless et al.,2025).

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?

Research Question 4 (RQ4): How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?

Therefore, this chapter outlines the research outcomes of the research questions it set out to answer. The outcomes are discussed per research questions. The theoretical conclusions for each research question emanate from a comparative analysis of the findings of this research with the existing literature. The focus on areas of similarities between the research findings and the literature, and where subtle differences are observed.

7.2 Reminder of the research topic and research problem

Research topic	Research problem
Harmonising paradoxes in responsible leadership in local government in emerging markets	How does responsible leadership unfold in South African local government? How do executives deal with competing stakeholder interests and demands

7.3 Principal theoretical conclusion

7.3.1 Theoretical conclusion for RQ 1

How do local government executives define responsible leadership?

RQ1 explored how executives in the South African local government define responsible leadership and understand their orientations towards it. From the findings four main themes were discovered: responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders; responsible leadership is about contextual strategic leadership; responsible leadership is about values-based leadership and responsible leadership is about leading people effectively.

On the theme responsible leadership about accountability to stakeholder stakeholders the outcomes were consistent with literature, highlighting that the responsible leadership entirely founded in accountability to stakeholders (James & Priyadarshini, 2021). The outcomes were also consistent with the literature regarding the consideration of broader stakeholder needs and interest in decision-making, instead of only focusing on dominant stakeholder (Maak et al., 2016; Waldman et al., 2020). The importance of transparency, ethical conduct, responsiveness, came out

clear from the findings as key component of responsible leadership, and this is in line with how Agarwal and Bhal (2020) and Afshari et al. (2024) defined responsible leadership.

The finding demonstrated the contextual effects on responsible leadership where the local government executives suggested a continuum in how they operationalised accountability, reflecting the tension between instrumental and integrative responsible leadership orientations (Pless et al., 2022; Maak et al., 2016). In line with literature on the two main responsible leadership orientations (Waldman et al., 2020), some executives adopt a more instrumental view, focusing primarily on stakeholders who directly influence the performance of the municipalities or the allocation of resources. Others employ an integrative approach, considering the needs of both strong and weak stakeholders in their decision-making. This is line with the suggestion by Maak et al. (2016) of either orientation is contextual and, also is highly dependent on the individual leader value orientation and the degree of their perceived responsibility toward stakeholders. The operationalization of responsible leadership is dynamic, and changes based on situational, organisational and cultural sensitivities, thus leaders navigate and adapt their orientations (Heim et al., 2026).

In line with Johns' (2024) suggestion that context has a direct impact on leadership performance and success, from the findings responsible leadership was also referred to as contextual strategic leadership, which is the approach that puts decision-making in the context and complexities of local government in South Africa. They pointed out that accountable leaders should consider organisational limitations, socio-economic inequalities, political influences, and community demands when designing and executing strategies. When strategists incorporate situational awareness into strategic planning, executives can ensure that the decisions made are not only technically valid but also socially acceptable, striking a balance between operational needs and the ethical obligation to serve the broader community. This suggest that contextual strategic leadership is associated with the integrative responsible leadership orientation, whereby executives act to balance opposing demands and harmonise the interests of stakeholders (Maak et al., 2016; Voegtlin, 2016).

On contextual strategic leadership the significant outcome was the importance strategic foresight in dealing with specific contextual challenges of balancing competing needs to ensure organisational sustainability. This is line with literature on the dealing with paradoxes as the executive's strategic orientation demonstrated both/and perspective of leading through paradoxes, as outlined by Smith and Lewis (2011), in which the leader can balance short-term operational demands with long-term developmental goals.

On the values-based leadership, this theme aligns with Stahl et al. (2016) and Waldman et al. (2020), who emphasise that effective responsible leadership necessitates an ethical orientation and the capacity to operate in complex, dynamic environments. The outcomes emphasised the importance of responsible leadership as a fundamental aspect of values-based decision-making and that values as guiding principles in complex situations that influence decisions, behaviour, and priorities. This outcome is supported by Waldman et al. (2020) and Voegtlin et al. (2020), who state that responsible leaders base their decision-making on personal and organisational values to deliver ethical, sustainable, and socially responsible outcomes.

Furthermore, the outcome suggested that values-based leadership fosters an integrative, responsible leadership orientation by focusing on justice, respect, and the ethical treatment of all stakeholder groups (Pless et al., 2022; Maak et al., 2016). In line with Agarwal and Bhal (2020), who argue that responsible leadership is a crucial element of ethical interaction with stakeholders, ensuring sustainable relationships and organisational legitimacy, the outcomes suggested that the executives' decision are typically guided by the values of honesty, transparency, and community service, which represent an ethical model that extends beyond mere compliance.

On dealing with contextual complexities values-based leadership was used as an approach to aligning the interests of conflicting stakeholders and ensuring consistency in decision-making. This outcome is supported by the paradox theory approach (Smith & Lewis, 2011), which implies that values can provide the

cognitive/moral framework that executives require to implement a both/and approach to paradoxical problems.

Regarding responsible leadership as about the ability to lead people effectively. This outcome with the idea that responsible leadership should be relational and require emotional intelligence, as outlined by Voegtlin (2016) and Javed et al. (2024). It spoke to the importance of responsible leadership towards employees – supporting and valuing employees to create an organisational culture founded on integrity and trust (Akhtar et al., 2021; Haque, et al., 2019; Lloyd et al., 2024) emerged from the findings. The outcome further exemplifies integrative leadership (Maak et al., 2016; Waldman et al., 2020), where the leader's focus is both responsive to stakeholder needs and aligned with organisational goals.

7.3.2 Theoretical conclusion for RQ 2

What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsible leadership?

RQ 2 explored the factors that local government executives felt affected responsible leadership. The research outcomes from RQ 2 had three main themes: unethical leadership; political instability and lack of accountability.

On the theme of unethical leadership as factor that affects responsible leadership the outcomes align with the findings from de Klerk and Jooste (2023) and Tleane (2020), who show that systemic corruption, inconsistent procurement procedures, and established patronage networks are significant barriers to effective public management, reducing trust and undermining governance. The outcomes suggested that the effects of unethical leadership are not just short-term misconduct but also permeate organisational culture and suggested in literate this makes leading responsible difficult (Hove & Tewari, 2018).

Regarding the effects of unethical leadership -it has a direct negative impact on serving the needs and expectations of the diverse local government stakeholders, and this goes against suggestion that responsible leaders must serve the needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders, such as citizens, employees, and political actors, while also maintaining personal and organisational integrity (Grobler & Warnich, 2018; Nkadimeng, 2021).

On political instability as theme that talks to factors affecting responsible leadership the outcomes support the findings of the work of Letsoalo and Venter (2017) and Mashigo (2021), who argue that leadership effectiveness depends on stability because uncertainty and political instability make it challenging to implement integrated strategies or maintain stakeholder trust. Furthermore, the suggested negative impact of political instability is supported by Masuku & Jili (2019) who highlight that political interference weakens governance and internal controls, complicating leadership decisions. In such contexts, leaders must navigate conflicting interests among political actors, citizens, and employees, requiring careful judgment and strategic compromises.

The research outcomes confirm that instability negatively impacts enactment of responsible leadership. This aligns with literature that argues that leadership instability and shifts in policy priorities undermine trust among employees, citizens, and partner organisations, making engagement difficult and hindering the delivery of meaningful results (Musaigwa, M. (2023); Kgomo, 2022). The research outcome is consistent with literature.

Regarding the theme lack of accountability, the research outcomes were consistent with the findings in literature that emphasise that accountability is crucial to achieving legitimacy, fostering stakeholder trust, and yielding sustainable leadership outcomes (Musaigwa, 2023; Naidoo, 2020). Furthermore, the research outcomes are consistent with the literature in suggesting that lack of accountability has negative effects across the organization, including employees (Mbeki & Van der Merwe, 2017). Additionally, being unaccountable contributes to the lack of trust and legitimacy of leaders, as citizens lose confidence in the institutions that are supposed to serve them (Jonck, 2024). The research outcomes are also consistent with the work of

Dlamini and Cloete (2019) and Phiri (2020) who highlighted that a lack of explicit accountability structures negatively affects enactment of responsible leadership.

7.3.3 Theoretical conclusion for RQ 3

How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?

RQ 3 explored set out to explore ways in which executives in local government use to promote response conduct. The research outcomes from RQ 3 had two main themes: promoting accountability and supporting knowledge and skills development.

On the theme of promoting accountability the research outcomes were consistent with literature, highlighting that responsible leadership is relational and process based between leaders and stakeholders, focused on ensuring ethical decision-making and accountability (Maak et al., 2016; Heim et al., 2026). The research outcomes are consistent with literature on the importance of promoting accountability in the public sector in line with the results of the research by Breakfast and Phago (2019) and Van der Waldt (2020), who argue that structured accountability systems are essential in the leadership of the state sector to maintain ethical principles and foster trust between stakeholders. The research outcomes also highlighted that leaders do not only have procedural requirement to encourage accountability but also a moral one, in with Maak and Pless (2011) and Zhang et al. (2022) who suggested antecedents of responsible leadership to include morality and positive organizational affect. Agarwal and Bhal (2020) share the same view that moral conduct is an essential in responsible leadership.

As suggested by Mashigo (2021), institutional accountability fosters institutional integrity and enhances organisational resilience to systemic issues of corruption or inefficiency, as it becomes embedded in organisational routines. The research outcomes are aligned to the strategies suggested by Naidoo (2021) and Nkadimeng (2022), who believe that ethical norms internalised in an environment through

responsible leadership will ensure that the authorities do not have to resort to coercive practices.

Regarding the theme supporting knowledge and skills development the research outcomes align with the research results of Jonck (2024) and Phiri (2021), who argue that continuous learning and professional development are the most effective ways to achieve growth in individual and organisational ethical capacity within the context of leadership in the public sector. The focus was on empowering employees with relevant knowledge and skills that will assist them to navigate the ethical dilemmas of local government and in turn reduce ethical breaches and foster responsible conduct. This approach is supported by Van der Walt and Botha (2021) who argue that such capacity-building activities help leaders manage paradoxical tensions and complex decision-making contexts while maintaining responsible behaviour. Therefore, when employees are consistently guided and their skills enhanced, they will be better prepared to ensure their behaviours meet organisational standards and respond positively to new challenges.

Furthermore, the development of knowledge and skills fosters empowerment, accountability and organisational learning which Mokoena and Oosthuizen (2018) and Cloete (2018) suggest that a culture of learning empowers individual ethical behaviour, promotes innovation and reinforces organisational resilience. The focus on the importance of employee development will not only enhance service delivery and overall organisational performance, but it will also cultivate a supportive and ethical work environment (Heim et al., 2026).

7.3.4 Theoretical conclusion for RQ 4

How do executives manage the competing and conflicting interests and demands of stakeholders?

RQ 4 explored how executives on local government managed the competing and conflicting interests and demands of stakeholders. The research outcomes from RQ

4 had two main themes: promote ethical decision-making and work with multiple perspectives.

On the theme of promoting ethical decision-making as means of dealing with competing and conflicting stakeholder needs and interests, the research outcome is supported by the research conclusions of Mhlongo and Van Niekerk (2020) and Botha and Van der Walt (2021), who observe that ethical frameworks in leadership enhance the credibility and efficacy of decisions in the public sector, particularly in situations where political and social pressures exist. The stakeholder plurality in local government comes with potential behaviours that are based on self-interest and or that are politicised, hence the research finding is supported by the suggestion from Breakfast and Phago (2019) and Mazibuko (2021) that embedding ethical decisions in organisational practices would improve accountability and reduce discretionary behaviour based on self-interest or politicisation of decisions.

Additionally, the research outcomes on ethical decision-making as a means of dealing with paradoxical tensions are supported by the conclusion of Maak et al. (2020), who suggest that organisational complexity and the need to balance conflicting stakeholder interests are high, and an integrative responsible leadership approach is more appropriate. Furthermore, promoting ethical decision-making is vital for maintaining legitimacy, stakeholder trust and ensuring organizational resilience (Van der Waldt & Cloete (2022).

Regarding to the need to work working with multiple perspectives when considering different stakeholder interests and need the research outcomes are consistent with those of Voegtlin and Patzer (2021) and Nkadimeng and Phiri (2019), who state that integrative solutions lead to lower conflict levels and enhanced legitimacy in decision-making within the public sector through inclusive leadership approaches. The research outcomes indicated that executives employed consultative procedures, stakeholder meetings, and interdepartmental partnerships to gather various insights and make informed decisions together and this is line with Tshabalala (2020) and Mokoena and Van der Walt (2018) who point out that the ability to combine various points of view enables leaders to predict unintended consequences, recognise potential ethical issues, and develop strategies that accommodate both short-term needs and long-term goals.

Furthermore, the research outcomes highlighting the importance of holding multiple perspectives in complex environments demonstrated an integrative responsible leadership orientation which is supported by Maak et al. 's(2020) assertion that integrative leaders facilitate an inclusive decision-making process when operating in a complex business environment. This research outcome is supported by Doh and Quigley (2014), who posits that integrative leaders are committed to considering the interests, needs, and rights of a broad range of legitimate constituencies, thus the need to keep multiple perspectives. Moreover, the research outcomes indicated that the adoption of diverse views promotes relational and collaborative leadership, which is essential in the complex environment of stakeholders. This is supported by Pless et al. (2020) and Phiri and Nkadimeng (2019), who contend that trust, cooperation, and cohesion in organisations are improved through stakeholder-oriented leadership styles.

7.4 Research contribution

This study answered the call to expand the research context for responsible leadership into non-Western contexts with a focus on emerging markets. It also responded to the suggestion that research on responsible leadership is scent in emerging markets. Given that leadership is contextual, this study explores how responsible leadership unfolds in South African local governments. With the paradoxical nature of local government and plurality of stakeholders, this research further explored how responsible leaders delt with competing interests and demands from stakeholders. The contribution of this study in demonstrating the influence of responsible leadership and dynamic and complex contexts and in so doing it adds to the expansion of existing body of knowledge in responsible leadership research.

7.5 Recommendation for management and other stakeholders

This research was conducted with participants who occupied executive positions in several municipalities in South African. Given the crucial role municipalities play in developing and maintaining social-economic stability in the country and the current leadership challenges it is faced with, the findings from this study will benefits

academic institutions and those institutions that responsible for the function of local government in South Africa.

7.5.1 Institutions that are responsible for local government.

Based on the findings of this research there is a need for the law makers that develop the law that govern local government to review the relevant laws relating to the recruitment of executives and senior managers in local government. The significant of the study suggest that political interference in the recruitment of executive and senior managers has ripple effects on responsible leadership in South African local government. There is need to consider the recruitment and selection processes of executive and senior managers. Furthermore, the practical implications of selecting an executives and senior managers with political alignment is that their responsible orientation is likely to focus only on addressing politically related interests and needs at the expense of servicing citizenry. This in turn compromises the basic purpose of local government and municipalities.

Lastly, given the aspirations to professionalized local government in South Africa, there is need to develop a recruitment and selection system that incorporates a requirement for leaders who can take multiple roles including ethical role, effective strategies and ability to collaborate (Eva et al., 2019). A continual development and training intervention focusing on developing responsible and ethical leaders is needed to address some of the current leadership challenges facing local government (Waldman & Balven, 2014). There is need to consider executive and managerial coach that will assist leaders in local government to develop an awareness of the multiple roles a local government leader is expected to play.

7.6 Limitation of the research

The limitations of the research design were discussed under chapter 4 – this chapter set the limitation of the study.

- The study focused on South African local government only.
- The data was collected at a point in time, therefore there is a possibility that the research findings might vary when the same research is conducted a different point in the future.
- Thematic analysis was applied during data analysis. The code development was subjective to the interpretation of the researcher. Despite the that the

codes and themes were peer-reviewed, a different researcher and or reviewer might formulate different codes and themes.

However, the above research limitations of the study did not impact the reliability of the findings.

7.7 Future research

Participants reported on several intervention they employ in promoting responsible conduct in local government. Given the time constraint on this research there was no way of exploring the effectiveness of this interventions. Therefore, future research to explore the effectiveness of several interventions aimed developing responsible conduct in local government would be valuable. The participants who were only executives in local government demonstrated clear understanding of responsible leadership and their roles as responsible leaders. Future research could focus on exploring how middle managers perceive the responsible leadership of executives in local government. Middle managers play a crucial role in strategy execution so they perception of executive would provide insight on how responsible the local government executives are. Lastly, participants were consistent in flagging the issues around the recruitment of executives and senior managers as one of the factors that negatively impact responsible leadership. Future research to take a deep dive in exploring the effectiveness of the existing selection and recruitments methodologies used for recruiting executives in local government.

7.8 Conclusions and remarks

The findings from research questions one indicated that responsible leadership in South African government organisations is understood to be about considering interests and needs of broader stakeholders. In line with existing literature, the two responsible leadership orientations, instrumental and integrative, emerged from this context. However, what was significant was learning that due to contextual factors, executives moved between the two orientations based on the situation at hand. The environment of local government and organisational culture was suggested is the main driver of the dynamic approach to responsible leadership.

From the findings of research question two specific contextual factors such are pollical instability, lack of accountability and unethical leadership were suggested is main factors that negatively impact the implantation of responsible leadership. Most

significantly was the issue around the recruitment and selection of executives and senior managers. The direct involvement of politicians in the recruitment of executives and senior managers was suggested as contributing negatively to developing and implementing responsible leadership. This suggested the deep root issue of unethical leadership and its implication on developing responsible leadership and effective public service.

However, the findings from research question three and four suggested that executives in local government remain committed in leading responsible. The findings suggested the importance of role modelling responsible conduct and use awareness and training programmes to empower employees to deal with ethical dilemmas. In dealing with competing interest and needs, the findings stressed the importance for executives to remain committed to promoting ethical decision-making regardless of the organisational dynamics. Lastly, the findings suggested the symbiotic relationship between political leadership and professional leadership in government organisations. This suggested the importance of leading with and considering multiple perspectives in decision-making processes when leading in complex environments.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

Name:

Organisation:

Job Title:

Date:

Research Question	Interview question
	1. How many years of experience do you have in local government? 2. How many years of experience do you in Executive Position?
Research Question 1: How do local government executives define responsible leadership?	1. What is your understanding of responsible leadership??2. Based on your understanding of responsible leadership, how would you define your own responsible leadership? 3. Which stakeholders (both internal and external) would you deem to be most important in your organisation? 4. Based on your response above, how would you prioritise them in the order importance?
Research Question 2: What do executives in local government feel is the most pressing responsibility leadership issue?	1. What do you feel is the most pressing responsibility issue in local government sector? 2. What is your view on the status of responsible

	leadership in local government? 3. What role would you say politics play in leading responsible in local government?
Research Question 2: How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?	1. What would you consider to be the key drivers of ethical misconduct in local government? 2. What role do you play in promoting responsible conduct in your organisation? 3. What role do you play in preventing ethical misconduct in your organisation? 4. How does the organisation encourage responsible behaviour across the organisation? 5. What policies and practices are in place in promoting responsible leadership in your organisation? 6. Based on your response above, how are these policies and practices institutionalised within your organisation? 7. Do you think you can challenge any unethical decision or policy that you

	strongly disagree with, without fearing being victimised?
Research Question 3: How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?	1. What are some of the most difficult decisions have you faced regarding complex stakeholder needs and demands. 2. Based on the above answer, how did you deal with these complex stakeholder needs and demands?

Appendix 2: Interview Consent Form

HARMONISING PARADOXES IN RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN EMERGING MARKETS.

Researcher: Siyabonga Genu, Master of Philosophy in Change Leadership Student at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria

I am conducting research which aims to achieve the following objectives with regards to responsible leadership in local government. First, the researcher aims to explore how responsible leadership unfolds in local government. Secondly, the aim is to explore how responsible leaders harmonize multiple, and potentially competing stakeholder interest whilst maintaining their values.

The anticipated duration of the interview is 45 minutes, all the information and insights gained through the interview process will help to provide a better understanding of how responsible leadership unfolds in local government. It will also help the researcher understand the paramount factors that assist responsible leaders to harmonise multiple and potential competing stakeholder interest whilst maintaining their values.

Participation in the interview process is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any stage without being penalised. The interview will be treated as confidential, no parts of the interview will be recorded without prior consent of the parties concerned. All data captured and any quotations from the interview will be treated as confidential and anonymous. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or myself. Our details are provided below:

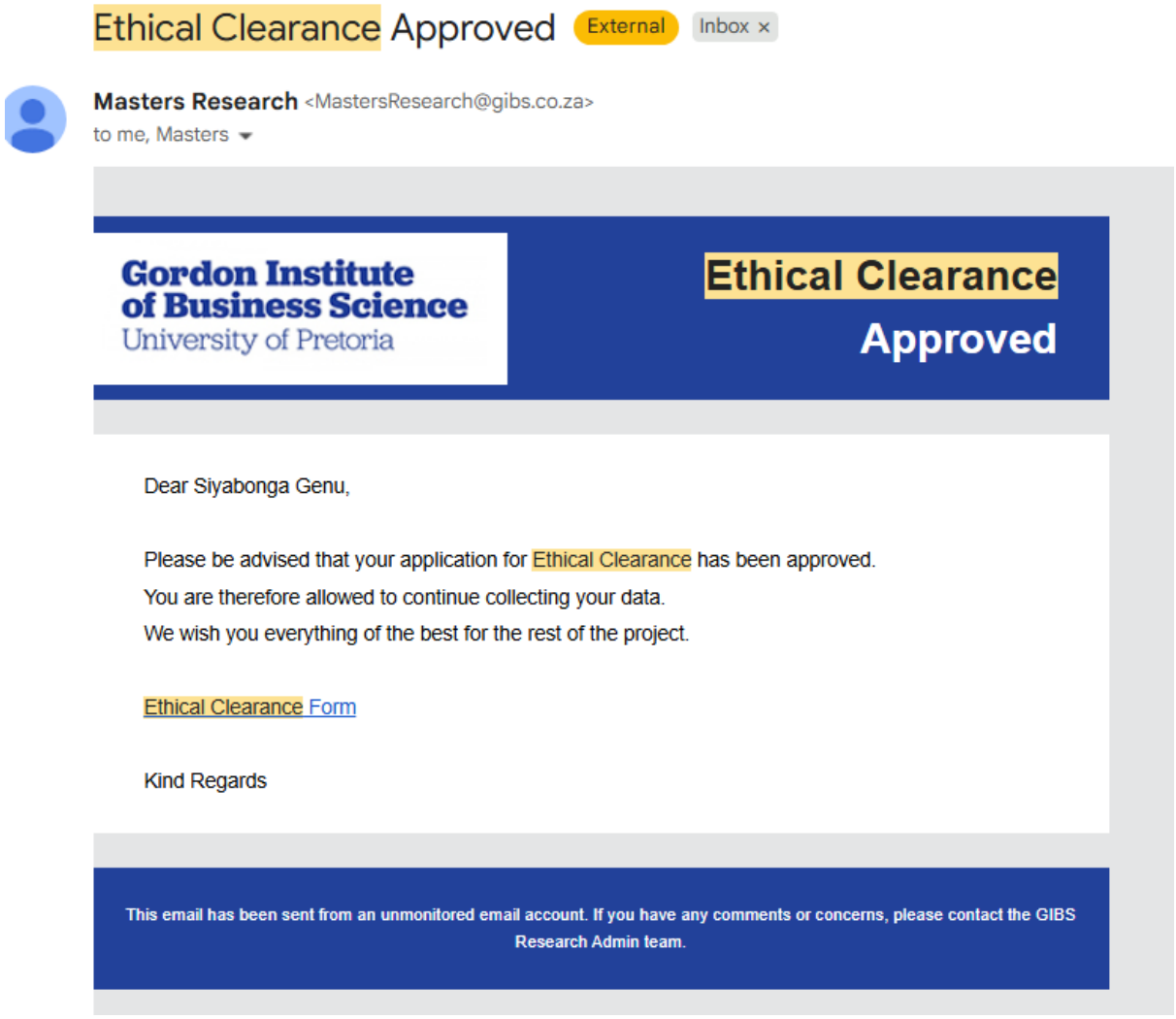
Siyabonga Genu
11252473@mygibs.co.za
071 675 1439

Dr. Doroty Ndletyana
NdletyanaD@gibs.co.za
082 378 5769

Participant's Signature: …… Date:

Researcher's Signature: …… Date:

Appendix 3: Ethical Clearence approval



Ethical Clearance Approved External Inbox ×

Masters Research <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za>
to me, Masters

Gordon Institute of Business Science
University of Pretoria

Ethical Clearance Approved

Dear Siyabonga Genu,

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

Ethical Clearance Form

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

Appendix 4: Level 2 and Level 3 Codes

Research Question 1: How do local government executives define responsible leadership?			
Category	**Frequency**	**Number of participants**	**Theme**
Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders. for sphere of influence and responsibility including job description.	22	13	Responsible leadership is about accountability to stakeholders.
Responsible leadership is about strategy execution.	2	2	Responsible leadership is about contextual strategic leadership
Responsible leadership is contextual.	5	2	
Responsible leadership is about leading with ethics	6	5	Responsible leadership is about values-based leadership
Responsible leadership is about being transparency.	4	4	
Responsible leadership is about complying with local government legislation.	4	4	
Responsible leadership is about providing guidance and motivation to employees.	4	4	Responsible leadership is about leading people effectively
Responsible leadership is about role modelling.	3	3	

Research Question 2: What do executives in local government feel are the factors that affect responsibility leadership?			
Category	**Frequency**	**Number of participants**	**Theme**
Self-interests.	12	6	Unethical leadership
Lack of ethical leadership.	6	5	
Political influence on recruitment of administrative leaders.	18	8	
Political instability.	9	6	Political instability.
Lack of consequence management	4	4	Lack of consequence management

Research Question 3: How do executives in local government promote responsible conduct?			
Category	**Frequency**	**Number of participants**	**Theme**
Through leading by example	15	4	Promoting accountability
Lack of ethical leadership.	6	3	
By implementing consequence management.	4	4	
By implementing training on codes of conduct and creating awareness.	22	11	Supporting knowledge and skills development

Research Question 4: How do executives deal with the competing and conflicting stakeholders' interests and demands?			
Category	**Frequency**	**Number of participants**	**Theme**
Making sense and giving sense.	19	9	Work with multiple perspectives.
Acknowledging interdependencies of decision process.	6	5	
Taking a situational approach.	16	18	Promote ethical decision-making.