

FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION:
HOW BUSINESS LEADERS IN SWITZERLAND TRANSLATE VALUES
INTO DECISIONS UNDER SYSTEMIC DISRUPTION
– DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROOT-TO-FRUIT MODEL

by

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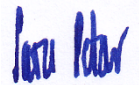
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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis and my work to the future generation of leaders who will inherit a world shaped by both disruption and renewal.

I feel deeply privileged to pursue this DBA while carrying, quite literally, a part of the future within me. Completing this thesis at a relatively young stage of my life, while expecting my first child, has given this work meaning far beyond academia. In many ways, we are both symbolically and literally responsible for shaping the present and the future together.

As I sought to better understand, through leaders' lived experiences and existing literature, how to lead through turbulent times, this journey continually reminded me that leadership is not only about those who stand before us today, but equally about those who will come after us. It is about the values we embody and the courage with which we respond to uncertainty, shaping the world and the realities we live in.

May this work reach and inspire those who will one day lead with courage and compassion in a world where change is the only constant. May we all try our best to navigate uncertainty with resilience that protects human dignity, strengthens ecosystems, and honours the planet we all share.

Acknowledgements

My life has rarely followed a predictable script, which has been both deeply beautiful and relatively chaotic. Uncertainty has been a constant companion. Out of that uncertainty, and through a journey supported and accompanied by many people, this doctoral thesis was/is born.

I am thankful to my supervisor, Dr. Olesya Meskina, whose guidance has combined intellectual rigour with genuine human care. Her trust in me as I explored the intersection of responsible leadership, resilience, and practice has profoundly shaped this work. I also wish to thank Dr. Amira Simcox and team at SSBM Geneva, whose commitment to an Executive Doctor of Business Administration that is both academically demanding and firmly rooted in real-world practice created the conditions in which this project could take shape and grow.

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To all of you, thank you for walking with me.

ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates how business leaders, especially of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) navigate responsible and resilient decision-making in conditions of polycrisis, the contemporary state in which interconnected ecological, economic, geopolitical, technological, and social shocks compound across systems and time.

The investigation consists of carefully reviewing over eighty different credible sources of literature publications which form eight interconnected theoretical domains, coupled by listening directly and actively to nineteen leaders who run, build, and steward businesses in conditions of compounding uncertainty.

This study presents a multimodal qualitative design involving the primary contribution of 19 business leaders. 10 of which, took part in the semi-structured interviews of 35 to 60 minutes (average 45 minutes). While 9 of which, following initial discussions, preferred to provide their responses through written Google Forms designed to closely mirror the interview structure and questions. Additionally, a public portfolio of supporting documents and field observations across leaders working in Switzerland (15), Mongolia (2), Belgium (1), and France (1). The sample comprises 5 leaders of large enterprises, 5 of medium-sized companies, and 9 of small firms. For confidentiality reasons, participants and their organisations are anonymised in the published work as P1 through P19 and Company A through Company S.

Methodology and transparency: the explorative study began with no prior hypothesis. Leaders were invited to speak in their own language freely about responsibility, resilience, the disruptions they had recently navigated, the development pathways they had used, and the cultural sources from which they drew. Form responses, websites, governance documents, and publicly available material from each respondent's organisation were used as triangulating evidence. The use of artificial intelligence is treated as a methodological choice to be declared rather than a convenience to be concealed, consistent with the transparency norms increasingly expected in qualitative research conducted in the mid-2020s.

Audio recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai. All sources identified or verified to better understand existing research gaps through Perplexity.ai were subsequently confirmed against the original source prior to inclusion. No citation was retained solely on the basis of AI-generated output. All writing and final theme refinement was performed by hand on a word document against the verbatim record.

Six primary themes emerged: responsibility as concentric obligation, resilience as iterative

standing-up, disruption as leadership accelerator, informal networks as development pathways, culturally encoded leadership logics, and relational trust as decision infrastructure. Five emergent themes operate across cases: inner practice and embodiment, psychological safety, AI and technological adaptation, generational tension, and stakeholder co-creation. The most frequent informant pattern is that formal leadership programmes function as catalysts and shared vocabulary, while sustained development happens in informal relational and cultural settings. Inner practice, although rarely institutionalised, appears as an emerging baseline expectation among leaders who report higher resilience. A further cross-cutting finding is that disruption does not universally function as a catalyst for transformation: for more developmentally mature organisations, disruption often operates instead as confirmation of already-embedded resilient capacities and values.

This study proposes “*responsible-resilient leadership*” as an extended construct of existing responsible leadership and resilient leadership frameworks by integrating ethical stewardship with adaptive capacity under sustained systemic disruption. The integrated construct, responsible-resilient leadership, is therefore defined in this study as the capacity to make values-guided decisions that maintain stakeholder trust and enable organisational adaptation during conditions of polycrisis, drawing on relational resources, cultural formation, developmental experiences, and sustained inner practice.

The discussion proposes a new conceptual contribution, the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model. ROOT-to-FRUIT is a slow-cycle, horticultural model in which leaders Reflect, Orient, Observe, Translate, Refine, Unite, Integrate, and Track, treating meaningful change as seasonal rather than daily or weekly and acknowledge that responsible-resilient leadership matures over seasons rather than days. The term “ROOT-to-FRUIT” functions as a metaphor for the full developmental arc rather

than as a strict letter-by-letter acronym, with the eight verbs together cultivating the “fruit” of visible leadership practice. A companion self-assessment tool and an example is presented in Appendix.

Implications are theoretical, practical, and professional. Theoretically, the study contributes to a polycrisis-aware integration of responsible leadership and resilience scholarship, anchored in the Inner Development Goals tradition, in particular the De Gruyter volumes edited by Egel and Campos Suarez (2025). Practically, the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model and assessment tool are offered as instruments for leaders, programme designers, and policy actors. Professionally, the study positions the leader’s inner work as a public good rather than a private hobby in a polycrisis era.

Keywords leadership, resilient leadership, polycrisis, values-based decision-making, SME leadership, ROOT-to-FRUIT Model, inner practice, leadership development.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The early years of the 2020s have produced a leadership context for which the management literature was not designed. Leaders of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) now operate inside what Edgar Morin first called a *polycrisis* in 1999, a condition in which multiple crises do not arrive sequentially but interlock, amplify each other, and produce effects that no single domain of expertise can fully explain (Morin, 1999; Lawrence et al., 2024). The contemporary polycrisis bundles a climate emergency, biodiversity collapse, a fragile post-pandemic economy, geopolitical realignment, accelerating artificial intelligence, demographic transition, and a generalised crisis of meaning. Homer-Dixon and colleagues (2022) describe it as a state of “synchronous failure” across global systems. Schmachtenberger (2023) and others extend the analysis by introducing the term *metacrisis*, which adds the inner and cultural dimensions of the polycrisis: a crisis of sensemaking, attention, and the relational fabric that holds collective action together. Where polycrisis names what is breaking outside, metacrisis names what is breaking inside the people who must respond.

This study takes the polycrisis-metacrisis pairing as its starting frame. It asks how SME leaders, who carry an outsized share of employment, innovation, and cultural production in countries like Switzerland, navigate responsibility and resilience in this condition. SMEs constitute roughly 99% of enterprises and employ approximately two-thirds of the workforce in Switzerland (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2023). Yet the leadership literature continues to be shaped by large-

organisation contexts, formal programmes, and quantitative survey instruments. The lived texture of SME leadership in polycrisis, where decision-making is concentrated in a single founder or small team, where personal and professional life are inseparable, and where the next existential shock is rarely predictable, is comparatively underdescribed (Battisti & Deakins, 2017; Herbane, 2019; Johnston et al., 2024).

The frame of this study is also shaped by a recent public testimony that anchors the academic argument in a contemporary practitioner voice. In April 2026, Mrinank Sharma, an Anthropropic alignment researcher, published an open resignation letter in which he set out his reasons for leaving a leading AI laboratory to take up the metacrisis directly. He cited David J. Temple's *First Principles and First Values* (2024), Mary Oliver's poetry, Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, and William Stafford's poem *The Way It Is* as touchstones. Sharma's letter named the polycrisis and metacrisis, located himself within them, and called for leaders who can hold both technical capability and inner reorientation simultaneously (Sharma, 2026). The letter is treated in this thesis as a contemporary practitioner document because it makes visible the precise problem this study seeks to investigate empirically: how individuals in positions of consequence translate a polycrisis-metacrisis framing into decisions about how to lead.

The study is also informed by Otto Scharmer's Theory U work on presencing, by Sharma and colleagues' systems work, and most centrally by the Inner Development Goals (IDG) tradition. The IDG framework, conceived as the inner companion to the Sustainable Development Goals, organises leadership capacities across five dimensions: being, thinking, relating, collaborating, and acting (IDG Foundation, 2021). The two recent IDG anthologies provide the most current scholarly anchor. The first volume, *From "I" to "WE": Stories from the Inner Development Goals*, edited by Egel and Campos Suarez (2025), traces the journey from individual transformation to relational

maturity. The second volume, *From “We” to “Systems Change”: Inner Development Goals*, also edited by Egel and Campos Suarez and published by De Gruyter (2025), pushes further into the systemic register, asking how groups of leaders move from collective awareness to systems-level change. Both volumes inform the conceptual architecture of this thesis and are returned to in Chapter II and Chapter V.

1.2 Polycrisis and Metacrisis as Contemporary Backdrop

To situate the study precisely, it is worth dwelling on what polycrisis and metacrisis actually name, and why those names matter for organisational leadership research. Adam Tooze, the economic historian, popularised the term polycrisis in Anglophone public discourse through a 2022 *Financial Times* essay in which he argued that the early twenty-first century is characterised not by isolated crises amenable to isolated solutions, but by simultaneous, mutually reinforcing failures across financial, ecological, geopolitical, and institutional systems (Tooze, 2022). Tooze drew on the earlier theoretical work of Edgar Morin, who had already argued in *La Methode* and in subsequent writing that complexity theory requires us to recognise that systemic crises do not obey linear causation: each crisis becomes fuel for adjacent crises, and the whole is more dangerous than the sum of its parts (Morin, 1999). The Cascade Institute’s research group, led by Thomas Homer-Dixon and colleagues, formalised this into a research programme beginning around 2022, demonstrating empirically that global systems are connected through tight coupling and high interdependence in ways that make single-domain interventions insufficient (Homer-Dixon et al., 2022). Lawrence and colleagues (2024) extend the analysis into the domain of governance and Earth-system science, arguing that humanity now operates in a “crisis of crises” that demands fundamentally different institutional responses than those designed for the era of stable Holocene conditions.

The metacrisis framing, most consistently developed by Daniel Schmachtenberger and colleagues in the Consilience Project, adds a second layer of analysis that is directly relevant to this study. Where polycrisis describes the external structural condition, metacrisis describes the interior civilisational failure that makes the polycrisis so difficult to navigate: the breakdown of shared epistemology, the fracturing of attention under digital information environments, the erosion of the trust that collective action requires, and the degradation of the cultural capacity for long-horizon thinking (Schmachtenberger, 2023). The metacrisis, in this reading, is not separable from the polycrisis. It is the reason the polycrisis is so resistant to intervention: the very cognitive and relational tools needed to respond are themselves under stress. For leadership research, this framing has a direct implication. If leaders are being asked to navigate interconnected external crises while their own inner and relational infrastructure is simultaneously under strain, then the standard repertoire of leadership competencies, designed for a world in which leaders are assumed to be psychologically stable agents making decisions inside reasonably predictable systems, may be insufficient.

This is not merely a theoretical argument. Mrinank Sharma's April 2026 resignation letter from Anthropic illustrated the metacrisis in a single practitioner's testimony. Sharma, an AI safety researcher working at one of the world's most technically advanced laboratories, described his decision to leave not as a departure from the work of reducing catastrophic risk but as a deepening of it. He argued that technical alignment work, however important, cannot by itself address the civilisational and inner dimensions of the AI moment: that what is needed alongside technical capacity is a different quality of leadership, one that can hold uncertainty, relationality, and long-horizon responsibility simultaneously (Sharma, 2026). Sharma's letter is cited in this thesis not as an authority on leadership theory but as a primary document that illustrates, from inside a

practitioner's lived experience, exactly the problem this research sets out to investigate. The leader at the intersection of technical disruption and inner reorientation is not a hypothetical; Sharma's letter demonstrates that such leaders already exist and are already articulating their predicament in precisely the polycrisis-metacrisis language that this study treats as its conceptual frame.

1.3 Research Problem

The research problem of this study can be stated in three layers. First, the prevailing leadership literature treats responsibility and resilience as parallel constructs and rarely asks how they are integrated in lived practice (Javed et al., 2024; Pless & Maak, 2011). Second, the empirical base of that literature is dominated by large organisations and by survey instruments that capture attitudes more than actual decisions (Sargam & Pandey, 2025). Third, when the polycrisis frame is taken seriously, an additional layer of difficulty emerges: leaders are not asked to make better individual decisions inside a stable system; they are asked to make decisions inside multiple intersecting systems that are themselves destabilising in real time.

The specific problem this study addresses is the absence of a grounded, mechanism-level account of how SME leaders, under polycrisis conditions, hold responsibility and resilience together in everyday decision-making. The literature offers strong typologies and useful frameworks, but it does not yet describe the slow, granular, often quiet processes through which a Swiss family business owner, a francophone consultant, a Mongolian climate-tech founder, or a Geneva-based ecopreneur translates values into the next day's decisions when the ground is moving. This study takes that absence as its central problem.

A second-order problem follows. Where the literature does propose change models, it tends to assume relatively short translation cycles, a short-horizon view of change in which a workshop on Friday should be visible in behaviour by the following days or weeks. Practitioners and the present

empirical data both contest this assumption. Multiple respondents in this study explicitly resisted the idea that meaningful change in leadership behaviour can be observed on a weekly timescale. They described horizons of seasons, years, and even decades. The thesis takes this resistance seriously and adopts a horticultural temporal frame accordingly. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model proposed in Chapter V is itself a response to this second-order problem.

A third layer of the problem concerns the SME-specific dimension, which the broader leadership literature systematically underweights. Large-organisation leadership occurs within institutional structures that absorb, buffer, and distribute pressure: governance boards, legal departments, communications teams, strategic planning functions, and human resource divisions all serve as shock-absorbers between the leader and the external environment. The SME leader typically possesses none of these buffers. In many of the firms represented in this study, the founding leader is simultaneously the strategist, the chief risk officer, the lead communicator, the recruiter, and in some cases the production manager. This structural exposure means that the cognitive and emotional load of polycrisis lands disproportionately on a single individual or a small leadership team. The literature on SME vulnerability in crisis conditions (Battisti & Deakins, 2017; Herbane, 2019) confirms the pattern of structural exposure but stops short of asking how individual leaders absorb that exposure and continue to act responsibly. The present study takes this gap as one of its primary justifications.

A fourth problem-layer follows from the geographic specificity of the study. Switzerland occupies a structurally unusual position in European and global systems: it is embedded in the European economy without being a member of the European Union, it hosts a disproportionate number of international organisations, it has a tradition of federalism and subsidiarity that shapes how organisations relate to the state, and it has a leadership culture that values discretion, relational

trust, and pragmatic consensus to a degree that is rarely captured in anglophone leadership research. The SME leaders in this sample navigate not only the generic polycrisis but also its specifically Swiss articulation: a strong currency that strains export competitiveness, a tight labour market, a high cost of living that shapes both recruitment and consumption, and a multilingual context in which French, German, Italian, and Romansh operate as distinct cultural registers rather than mere linguistic alternatives. This specificity enriches the data and also limits its direct generalisability, a limitation acknowledged in Chapter III.

1.4 Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to produce a descriptive, integrative, and theory-generating account of how business leaders, especially, SME leaders navigate responsible and resilient decision-making during a polycrisis. The study has four sub-purposes. First, to document, in respondents' own language, what responsibility and resilience mean to them in current conditions. Second, to identify the development pathways, formal and informal, through which these meanings are formed. Third, to surface the mechanisms by which reflective insight is, or is not, translated into changed practice. Fourth, to propose a working framework, the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model, that is more aligned with the seasonal temporal experience reported by participants than short-horizon weekly framings.

The study is intentionally exploratory rather than confirmatory. It begins with no hypothesis. It assumes only that business and especially SME leaders living and working through polycrisis conditions have something to say that is not yet adequately reflected in the literature, and that active and careful listening, supported by structured comparison, can yield concepts of theoretical and practical value.

The research aims can be stated as follows. The first aim is descriptive: to document, with sufficient granularity and fidelity to the participant's own language, how leaders of SMEs in Switzerland and adjacent contexts understand and practise responsible and resilient leadership in a polycrisis moment. The second aim is analytical: to identify patterns across cases that reveal the mechanisms by which responsible-resilient leadership is developed, practised, sustained, and transmitted. The third aim is generative: to construct a conceptual model, grounded in the data, that is of practical use to leaders, programme designers, and policymakers seeking to cultivate responsible-resilient leadership across a realistic developmental timescale. The fourth aim is reflexive: to position the researcher's own location, assumptions, and relational stakes transparently within the study, so that readers can assess the interpretive lens through which the data has been processed.

These four aims are served by a multimodal qualitative design that combines semi-structured interviews, extended written form responses, organisational document review, and reflective field memos. The design is described in full in Chapter III. The four aims correspond to the four main sections of the findings, discussion, and conclusion chapters (Chapters IV, V, and VI respectively).

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study is significant on three grounds. Theoretically, it contributes an integrated account of responsible-resilient leadership grounded in polycrisis conditions, drawing the IDG volumes by Egel and Campos Suarez (2025) and systems-change scholarship into closer dialogue with responsible leadership theory. Practically, it offers a new conceptual instrument, the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model and its companion self-assessment tool, that can be used by SME leaders, leadership programme designers, and policy actors to evaluate the quality of leadership development across a longer time horizon. Professionally, it positions inner work, including reflective practice,

embodiment, and meaning-making, as a public good in a polycrisis era rather than a private hobby. The argument here is not that inner work replaces strategic action; it is that inner work is the substrate from which credible strategic action becomes possible when ground conditions are unstable.

A further significance lies in the multimodal design. By combining interviews, written form responses, organisational documents, and reflective field memos, the study attempts to honour the way leaders actually communicate. Some leaders are reflective in conversation; others are reflective in writing; still others are reflective only in artefacts they have built. The multimodal frame allows each leader to be heard in the register most natural to them.

For scholars, the study opens a line of inquiry that integrates polycrisis studies, responsible leadership theory, resilience scholarship, and inner development research in a single qualitative investigation. The integration has not previously been performed at the SME level with a multimodal design. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model, and the slow-cycle developmental logic it embodies, offers a theoretical alternative to linear stage models of leadership development and invites longitudinal testing across a range of cultural and organisational contexts.

For practitioners, particularly SME leaders navigating polycrisis conditions, the study offers a vocabulary and a framework that names what many participants described as an experience of leading without adequate language. Several respondents in the study noted that the interview itself was among the most useful reflective exercises they had undertaken: it provided an occasion to articulate, to another person with a shared frame, what they had been attempting to do and why. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model distils those reflections into a format that can be used in individual practice, team conversation, or programme design.

For policymakers, including those working on SME support frameworks, regional innovation strategies, workforce development programmes, and crisis resilience planning, the study offers evidence that the inner and relational dimensions of leadership are not soft supplements to technical capacity but structural prerequisites for it. If polycrisis conditions are to be navigated responsibly, the policy infrastructure that supports SME leaders needs to include provision for the kinds of reflective, relational, and culturally embedded development that the data in this study consistently identifies as decisive.

1.6 Research Questions

The overarching research purpose is to understand how business leaders and especially SME leaders in Switzerland and selected adjacent contexts navigate responsibility and resilience in a polycrisis. Four research questions organise the inquiry.

RQ1. How do business leaders define and enact responsible leadership in conditions of polycrisis?

RQ2. How do business leaders define and enact resilience under recurrent and interlocking disruption?

RQ3. Which development pathways, formal and informal, do business leaders credit with shaping their responsible-resilient capacity, and why?

RQ4. Through which mechanisms do reflective insight and inner practice translate, or fail to translate, into changed decisions over time?

The four questions correspond loosely to the four broad sections of the interview guide and form-response instrument. They are returned to as organising headings in Chapters IV and V, and they are used to structure the implications and recommendations in Chapter VI.

A fifth exploratory question, held open throughout the analysis rather than operationalised as a formal instrument question, concerned the cultural and contextual specificity of responsible-resilient leadership. This question, whether the patterns identified are specific to Switzerland and its immediate neighbours or whether they generalise across the culturally distinct cases from Mongolia, Belgium, and France, is addressed in the cross-case synthesis of Chapter V and in the limitations discussion in Chapter III.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

Several terms are used throughout the thesis with specific, theoretically grounded meanings. The following definitions apply consistently across all chapters.

Polycrisis refers to a condition in which multiple distinct crises from different domains interact, reinforce each other, and produce compound effects greater than the sum of their individual impacts. The term is used in this thesis in the tradition of Morin (1999), Tooze (2022), and Lawrence et al. (2024), all of whom emphasise the systemic and non-linear character of the condition. It should not be read as a synonym for “many simultaneous problems” but as a specific claim about the structural interdependence of those problems.

Metacrisis refers to the inner and civilisational dimension of the polycrisis: the breakdown of shared sensemaking, epistemic trust, and the relational and cultural substrates that collective action requires. The term is used following Schmachtenberger (2023) and is treated in this thesis as analytically inseparable from the polycrisis. The metacrisis explains why the polycrisis is so difficult to address: the tools of response are themselves impaired.

Responsible leadership refers to a relational and stakeholder-inclusive conception of leadership in which leaders understand themselves as accountable to multiple constituencies, including

employees, communities, future generations, and the non-human environment. The term is used following Pless and Maak (2011) and is distinguished from transactional or heroic models of leadership that centre individual authority and short-term performance.

Resilient leadership refers to a leader's capacity to absorb disruption, maintain values orientation and relational coherence under stress, and restore effective action across multiple cycles of disturbance without reducing adaptive capacity. The term draws on Herbane (2019), Johnston et al. (2024), and the empirical patterns in this study, which consistently describe resilience as iterative and relational rather than as a fixed individual trait.

While responsible leadership and resilient leadership have been independently explored in prior scholarship, the integrated construct of “**responsible-resilient leadership**” remains underdefined and theoretically fragmented in the existing literature. This construct extends existing responsible leadership and resilient leadership frameworks by integrating ethical stewardship with adaptive capacity under sustained systemic disruption. The integrated construct, responsible-resilient leadership, is therefore defined in this study as the capacity to make values-guided decisions that maintain stakeholder trust and enable organisational adaptation during conditions of polycrisis, drawing on relational resources, cultural formation, developmental experiences, and sustained inner practice.

SME refers to a small or medium-sized enterprise, defined in accordance with the European Commission's standard as an enterprise with fewer than 250 employees and an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million. In this study, the category is extended to include some larger enterprise respondents in highly autonomous leadership roles, as noted in Chapter III.

Regenerative leadership refers to a mode of leadership that aims not merely to sustain existing systems but to restore and renew the social, ecological, and relational conditions within which

organisations operate. The concept draws on the regenerative development tradition (Mang & Reed, 2012) and is used in this thesis as an aspirational extension of responsible leadership, naming the direction in which several participants described their developmental trajectory.

Systems-change leadership refers to a mode of leadership oriented toward transforming the structures, norms, and power dynamics of broader systems rather than optimising performance within existing structures. The term is used following the second IDG volume, Egel and Campos Suarez (2025), and is treated as the organisational scale at which the inner developmental work described in the first IDG volume becomes collective and structural.

ROOT-to-FRUIT Model refers to the conceptual framework proposed in Chapter V of this thesis as the primary theoretical contribution. The model is a slow-cycle representation of how leaders move from Reflection through Orientation, Observation, Translation, Refinement, Unity, Integration, and Tracking toward sustainable, values-aligned action. It treats meaningful leadership development as horticultural in its temporality: change matures across seasons and years rather than across a single week.

1.8 Researcher Positionality

This study was conducted by Khulan van Eck Duymaer van Twist, a Swiss-based DBA candidate at the Swiss School of Business and Management Geneva. The researcher, brings to the study a biography that is simultaneously an asset and a source of potential interpretive bias. Born in Mongolia, raised in Singapore and professionally rooted in Switzerland, she holds membership in the leadership development communities that supplied some of the study's participants: the Caux Initiatives of Change network and the Chemin28 alumni community. Several participants are professional acquaintances; a small number are friends. This proximity enabled a quality of access

and depth of disclosure that would not have been available to an outside researcher. It also creates the risk that proximity shaped both who agreed to participate and what they chose to share.

The researcher addresses this risk through three practices. First, reflexive memos were written after each data collection encounter and at each major decision point in the analytic process, recording the researcher's assumptions, emotional responses, and evolving interpretations. Second, member checking was performed on selected quotations with willing participants, allowing them to confirm or correct the researcher's interpretation of their words. Third, this positionality statement is offered not as a disclaimer but as a constitutive element of the methodological account, arguing that reflexivity in qualitative research is not a limitation to be managed but a resource to be named and worked with. The researcher's location at the intersection of Mongolian, Swiss, and European cultural registers, and her personal deep curiosity in the question of how leaders navigate responsibility in difficult times, is a form of insider knowledge that the study is designed to make productive rather than suppressive.

1.9 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is structured across six chapters, each performing a distinct function in the overall argument.

Chapter I, the present chapter, introduces the study's central problem, purpose, research questions, key terms, and researcher positionality. It locates the study within the contemporary polycrisis-metacrisis context and explains why SME leaders in Switzerland represent a theoretically and practically significant population for this investigation.

Chapter II presents the literature review. It develops the conceptual landscape of the study across four domains: polycrisis and metacrisis theory; responsible leadership scholarship; resilience

theory as applied to SMEs and their leaders; and the Inner Development Goals tradition, with particular attention to the Egel and Campos Suarez volumes. Chapter II also introduces the construct of responsible-resilient leadership as an integration that the thesis proposes is more analytically adequate to the polycrisis moment than either construct alone.

Chapter III describes the methodology in full. It sets out the research philosophy (constructivist-interpretivist epistemology, relational ontology), the multimodal qualitative design, the sampling strategy, the data collection instruments and procedures, the analytic approach (thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021), the trustworthiness criteria employed, the ethical framework, and the limitations of the methodology. It also explains how the full set of nineteen cases, including P10 and P19, was integrated into the analysis.

Chapter IV presents the findings across the nineteen completed cases. It is organised thematically: the six primary themes and five emergent themes are each defined, illustrated with verbatim evidence, and compared across the case set. The chapter is the empirical core of the thesis and is written to be accessible both to readers of the full thesis and to those seeking a self-contained account of what the data contains.

Chapter V presents the discussion. It integrates the findings with the literature reviewed in Chapter II and proposes the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model as the study's primary theoretical contribution. The model is described, illustrated, and connected to the empirical patterns that generated it. Chapter V also addresses the fifth exploratory question concerning cultural specificity and identifies the theoretical implications of the findings for responsible leadership, resilience, and systems-change scholarship.

Chapter VI presents the conclusion. It restates the study's contributions, addresses the research questions directly, sets out implications for the three audiences identified in Chapter I (scholars,

SME leaders, and policymakers), acknowledges the study's limitations, and proposes a programme of future research. Chapter VI also presents the companion self-assessment tool derived from the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model, which is reproduced in Appendix E.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the scholarly literature underpinning the study's investigation of responsible-resilient decision-making among business leaders, especially SME leaders during polycrisis. The review is organised around eight interconnected theoretical domains: responsible leadership theory, organisational resilience and resilient leadership, the integration of responsible and resilient leadership as a unified construct, the emerging trajectory toward regenerative and systems-change leadership, SME leadership in contexts of systemic disruption, theories of change from reflection to action, leadership development pathways, decision-making under disruption, and cross-cultural leadership contexts. Each domain contributes essential conceptual resources to the study's integrated framework.

The theoretical framework integrating these domains rests on three foundational propositions. First, responsible leadership and organisational resilience are not independent constructs but are fused in practice, particularly in SME contexts where the leader's personal values and the organisation's adaptive capacity are inseparable. Second, leadership development occurs through a spectrum of pathways ranging from formal programmes (such as Caux Initiatives of Change and Chemin²⁸) through informal networks, cultural formation, lived experience, and inner practice, all of which shape decision-making in ways the literature has not yet fully mapped. Third, there is a critical translation gap between reflective learning and changed practice: the development of responsible-resilient capacity does not automatically produce changed decisions, and the mechanisms enabling or inhibiting this translation require specific investigation across slow, seasonal cycles rather than weekly ones.

Over eighty sources were reviewed during the literature search phase; the reference list records those directly cited in the thesis, prioritising seminal works that establish foundational theory, recent empirical studies (2022 to 2026) that reflect the current state of knowledge, and sources that directly address the gaps identified in Chapter I. The review proceeds from individual-level theory (responsible leadership) through organisational-level theory (resilience) and process-level theory (learning, development, sensemaking) to contextual-level theory (culture, polycrisis), mirroring the nested levels of analysis that characterise the research design.

2.2 Responsible Leadership Theory

Responsible leadership as a distinct scholarly field emerged in the early 2000s, catalysed by a growing recognition that traditional leadership theories, whether focused on individual traits, transactional exchanges, or transformational behaviours, inadequately addressed the ethical and relational dimensions of leadership in an increasingly interconnected and stakeholder-conscious world. The field's foundational architecture was established by Maak and Pless (2006a, 2006b), whose relational theory reconceptualised leadership as a fundamentally social and ethical practice. In their formulation, the responsible leader functions as a “weaver of relationships” between the firm and its diverse stakeholders, building social capital, nurturing trust, and enabling collaborative flourishing across constituencies. This relational framing displaced purely transactional models, centring the ethical dimensions of stakeholder relationships as constitutive of leadership rather than peripheral to it.

Pless and Maak (2011) subsequently developed a developmental perspective, proposing multiple pathways through which responsible leadership capacity develops over time. They argued that responsible leadership is not a fixed disposition, but an evolving capability cultivated through dialogue, stakeholder engagement, and critical reflection on one's role within broader social

systems. Their call for empirical research investigating how responsible leadership develops through engagement and dialogue remains pertinent, as this study's systematic review confirms the persistence of this gap more than a decade later.

Voegtlin (2016) offered a complementary theoretical contribution by integrating deliberative processes into the responsible leadership construct. Drawing on Habermasian discourse ethics, Voegtlin argued that responsible leaders must create conditions for inclusive stakeholder dialogue, enabling affected parties to participate in decisions that concern them. This deliberative dimension is particularly relevant to the current study, as it connects responsible leadership to the multi-stakeholder engagement processes that characterise both formal programmes of Caux Initiatives of Change - Leading with Humanity and Chemin²⁸, and the informal networks identified in the empirical data.

Waldman and Galvin (2008) provided a more bounded alternative, proposing a model of responsible leadership that connects ethical behaviour to economic outcomes. Their approach sought to bridge the perceived tension between stakeholder orientation and financial performance, arguing that responsible leadership produces organisational outcomes that are simultaneously ethical and economically viable. While this instrumental perspective has been critiqued for potentially subordinating ethical considerations to economic calculus, it remains relevant to the SME context examined in this study, where leaders face acute pressure to balance values alignment with financial survival.

The most comprehensive contemporary synthesis of the responsible leadership field is provided by Javed et al. (2024), whose systematic review analysed 194 studies published between 2005 and 2023. Their review confirms several findings directly relevant to this thesis. First, the field has been overwhelmingly quantitative, relying on survey-based measures of leader attitudes and

stakeholder perceptions rather than qualitative investigations of how responsible leadership is practised. Second, the empirical base is dominated by large-organisation contexts, with SMEs significantly underrepresented. Third, and most critically for the present study, the review identifies a persistent gap in understanding the mechanisms through which responsible leadership develops, calling for research that traces the formative processes rather than merely measuring the outcomes. This study responds directly to that call.

Sargam and Pandey (2025) provide the most recent evolutionary mapping of the field, tracing its development from individual virtue-based conceptions through relational and stakeholder-oriented models toward emerging systems-based approaches. Their analysis suggests that the field is moving toward understanding responsible leadership as embedded within broader social, economic, and ecological systems, a direction that aligns with this study's integration of responsible leadership with resilience, regenerative thinking, and polycrisis contexts.

Collectively, these foundational and contemporary works establish responsible leadership as a relational, developmental, and contextually situated construct. They also reveal the gaps this study addresses: the absence of mechanism-level investigation, the neglect of SME contexts, and the untested assumption that the development of responsible leadership capacity translates into changed practice in the slow timeframes that polycrisis conditions actually demand.

The intellectual heritage of responsible leadership is inseparable from stakeholder theory, which Freeman (1984) introduced as a re-orientation of strategic management away from a purely shareholder-centric model. Freeman argued that the firm is constituted by its relationships with all parties who affect or are affected by organisational activity, including employees, suppliers, communities, and customers. His subsequent work (Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2010) elaborated this position into a comprehensive philosophical framework for understanding value

creation as inherently relational and multi-directional. Carroll's (1991) pyramid of corporate social responsibility provided an influential complement, distinguishing economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities in a hierarchical model that shaped a generation of CSR scholarship. Carroll (1999) later traced the concept's evolution from early 1950s formulations through its growing conceptual rigour, noting the persistent tension between voluntary ethical aspiration and institutionalised compliance. Responsible leadership theory builds directly on both traditions: it operationalises stakeholder theory at the level of individual leadership behaviour and gives ethical responsibility a relational and developmental form that CSR frameworks, which typically focus on organisational policy rather than individual practice, do not supply.

The responsible leadership literature is further enriched by the closely related constructs of authentic leadership and ethical leadership. Avolio and Gardner (2005) positioned authentic leadership as a root construct underlying transformational, servant, and ethical leadership forms, arguing that self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing of information, and an internalised moral perspective are the four foundational components from which more specific leadership capacities grow. Walumbwa et al. (2008) operationalised these components in a widely validated scale and demonstrated empirically that authentic leadership predicts follower trust, engagement, and workplace satisfaction. Brown and Treviño (2006) distinguished ethical leadership more sharply, emphasising the role of the leader as a moral person and moral manager: leaders who are perceived as ethical set standards, communicate expectations, and use reward and discipline systems to reinforce ethical behaviour at the group and organisational levels. These constructs converge with responsible leadership in their shared emphasis on values-guided practice and stakeholder orientation, but responsible leadership's explicitly relational and societal scope, and its engagement with polycrisis conditions, extends the ethical and authentic leadership

frameworks into territory those traditions have not yet adequately mapped. The present study treats authentic and ethical leadership as constitutive dimensions of the broader responsible leadership construct rather than as independent variables.

2.3 Organisational Resilience and Resilient Leadership

Organisational resilience, understood as an organisation's capacity to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper (Duchek, 2020), has emerged as a critical concern in the post-pandemic scholarly landscape. The construct builds on earlier resilience research in ecology, psychology, and engineering but applies specifically to the organisational level of analysis.

Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011) provided the foundational conceptual model by distinguishing three interconnected components of organisational resilience: cognitive resilience (the ability to make sense of ambiguous situations), behavioural resilience (the capacity for robust action under uncertainty), and contextual resilience (the conditions and resources that enable resilient responses). Their framework is particularly relevant to this study because it positions resilience as a capacity that can be developed, not merely as a reactive trait, and because it identifies the contextual conditions, including social capital, relational networks, and learning routines, that enable resilient responses.

Duchek (2020) extended this work by proposing a process-based model of organisational resilience that distinguishes three temporal stages: anticipation (proactive capabilities that enable the organisation to detect and prepare for potential disruptions), coping (reactive capabilities activated during disruption), and adaptation (developmental capabilities that enable the organisation to learn from and be transformed by disruption). This process model aligns closely with the findings of this study's data, in which experienced leaders (P1, P2, P14, P15)

demonstrated capabilities across all three stages, while newer leaders (P12, P17, P18) were primarily engaged in coping, with less developed anticipatory and adaptive capacity.

Johnston et al. (2024) advanced the resilience literature specifically within the SME context, demonstrating that SME leaders develop resilience primarily through relational mechanisms rather than formal structures. Their findings indicate that peer networks, mentoring relationships, and family support systems are the primary resources through which SME leaders build and maintain resilience capacity. This finding resonates strongly with the data from the current study, in which respondents across all company sizes relied on informal relational networks as a primary developmental and support resource even when formal programmes were also accessed.

The Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework provides a complementary perspective on the developmental foundations of resilient leadership. Developed as a companion to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the IDG framework identifies five dimensions of inner development: being (relationship to self), thinking (cognitive skills), relating (caring for others and the world), collaborating (social skills), and acting (driving change) (IDG Foundation, 2021). Two recent volumes provide the most current scholarly anchor for this tradition. *From “I” to “WE”: Stories from the Inner Development Goals*, edited by Egel and Campos Suarez (2025), traces the journey from individual transformation to relational maturity through twenty-eight contributions from practitioners, scholars, and facilitators. Its companion, *From “We” to “Systems Change”: Inner Development Goals*, also edited by Egel and Campos Suarez and published by De Gruyter (2025), pushes the analysis into the systemic register, asking how groups of inner-developed leaders translate collective awareness into structural change. Both volumes inform the conceptual architecture of this thesis. The empirical pattern reported in Chapter IV, in which inner practice

appears as an emerging baseline expectation among the most resilient leaders in the sample, is consistent with the central argument of both IDG volumes.

Davies and Arrieta (2024) provide an essential critical perspective, arguing that resilience discourse has been co-opted to normalise austerity and shift responsibility from systemic actors to individuals and communities. They introduce the concept of “irresilience” to expose the limits of resilience frameworks when systems are fundamentally destabilised, as in the current polycrisis. Their critique is methodologically important for this study, ensuring that the analysis does not naively celebrate individual resilience without attending to the structural conditions, including inequitable resource distribution, extractive economic pressures, and inadequate policy support, that create the need for resilience in the first place.

Mollenkopf et al. (2022) demonstrated empirically that stakeholder networks are critical for SME resilience, finding that SMEs with stronger multi-stakeholder engagement demonstrated greater adaptive capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their work establishes the connection between the relational dimension of responsible leadership and the adaptive dimension of organisational resilience, supporting the current study’s theoretical integration of these constructs.

Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) made a foundational contribution by insisting that resilience be understood as an organising process rather than as a stable property. Their analysis, situated within the tradition of organisational reliability research, showed that resilient organisations are distinguished not by the absence of setbacks but by their capacity to remain functional and to learn during and after disruptive events. This processual framing is consequential for the present study because it shifts attention from the question of whether SME leaders are resilient to the question of how they enact resilience-building processes across time, which is precisely the empirical question that the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model addresses. Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal (2016)

extended the resilience argument into the financial domain, demonstrating longitudinally that firms with stronger social and environmental practices exhibit greater long-term financial stability than their less responsible counterparts, even though they may sacrifice short-term profitability. This finding directly undermines the premise that responsible leadership and commercial viability are in tension, and it provides the SME leaders in this study with an evidence base for their intuition that values-guided decisions are also sound strategic decisions. Linnenluecke (2017) conducted a systematic review of twenty-five years of organisational resilience research and identified three major theoretical streams: engineering resilience, which emphasises bounce-back and recovery; ecological resilience, which emphasises adaptive transformation; and socio-ecological resilience, which incorporates human agency and social systems. Linnenluecke's review noted that leadership has been undertheorised within the resilience literature, a gap this study addresses by foregrounding the SME leader as the primary locus of resilience development and enactment. Together, these contributions situate the present study within a maturing but still developing theoretical tradition, one that is increasingly attentive to process, temporality, and leadership agency.

2.4 The Responsible-Resilient Leadership Integration

This study argues that responsible leadership and resilient leadership should be investigated as an integrated construct rather than as parallel or independent constructs. This argument rests on both theoretical and empirical foundations.

Theoretically, the integration is warranted because the core mechanisms identified in both literatures converge. Responsible leadership theory emphasises relational trust, stakeholder dialogue, and values-guided action (Maak & Pless, 2006a; Voegtlin, 2016). Organisational resilience theory emphasises social capital, adaptive capacity, and sensemaking under ambiguity

(Duchek, 2020; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). These are not different phenomena; they are different descriptions of the same relational and cognitive capabilities. A leader who builds trust across stakeholder groups is simultaneously building the social capital that enables resilient response. A leader who engages in inclusive dialogue is simultaneously developing the collective sensemaking capacity that Weick (1995) identified as essential for navigating disruption.

Empirically, the data from this study confirms the integration. When respondents were asked separately about responsible leadership and resilience, their answers converged. P18 framed responsibility as stakeholder balance, “I can’t screw over our employees for the sake of customers and vice versa,” and then defined resilience as “to keep standing up after falling down and trying again.” Both constructs are enacted through the same relational and adaptive practices. P14’s five-layer responsibility model, moving from self and family through colleagues and clients to society and planet, is simultaneously a resilience architecture: each layer represents a relationship that provides support during disruption.

The integrated construct, responsible-resilient leadership, is therefore defined in this study as the capacity to make values-guided decisions that maintain stakeholder trust and enable organisational adaptation during conditions of polycrisis, drawing on relational resources, cultural formation, developmental experiences, and sustained inner practice. This definition synthesises the relational emphasis of Maak and Pless (2006a), the adaptive emphasis of Duchek (2020), the inner-development emphasis of the IDG tradition (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025), and the practice-oriented emphasis that emerges from the empirical data.

Paradox theory offers a particularly productive lens through which to understand the integration of responsible and resilient leadership. Smith and Lewis (2011) proposed that paradoxical tensions, understood as contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously, are pervasive in

organisational life and that effective leadership requires not the resolution but the management of these tensions. In the context of responsible-resilient leadership, the paradox is not merely conceptual: leaders must simultaneously attend to short-term survival and long-term stakeholder value, must be both decisively action-oriented in crisis and reflectively values-anchored in deliberation, and must balance personal integrity with contextual pragmatism. Smith and Lewis argued that the capacity to hold paradoxes without collapsing them into false binary choices is itself a learnable capability, one that develops through experience, reflection, and dialogue. This paradox perspective is reinforced by O'Reilly and Tushman (2013), who introduced the concept of organisational ambidexterity to describe the capacity to simultaneously exploit existing capabilities and explore new ones. In the context of the present study, responsible-resilient SME leaders are required to be ambidextrous in a values sense: exploiting well-established ethical commitments as a stable foundation while exploring adaptive responses to genuinely novel polycrisis conditions. The ambidexterity literature suggests that this dual capacity is difficult to maintain without structural supports, but that leaders with strong inner-development foundations are better positioned to hold the tension. Both paradox theory and ambidexterity theory thus provide theoretical enrichment for the integrated construct and explain why responsible-resilient leadership is not a simple additive combination of two constructs but a qualitatively different capacity that emerges from their sustained integration.

2.5 Beyond Sustainable to Regenerative and Systems-Change Leadership

An emerging trajectory in the leadership literature positions the evolution from sustainable leadership through responsible leadership toward regenerative and systems-change leadership as a progressive deepening of leadership ambition and practice. This trajectory is important for the

current study because it provides the aspirational horizon toward which the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model's later stages, Unite, Integrate, and Track, are oriented.

Sustainable leadership, as the field has traditionally understood it, focuses on doing less harm: reducing environmental impact, minimising negative externalities, and ensuring that current practices do not compromise the capacity of future generations (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). While this orientation represents a significant advance over purely extractive models, it has been critiqued as insufficient to address the scale of contemporary systemic challenges. The shift from “doing less bad” to “doing more good” requires a fundamentally different orientation, one that positions organisations not merely as harm-reducers but as active contributors to system restoration and flourishing.

Responsible leadership, as reviewed in Section 2.2, represents the next step: a leadership orientation that actively seeks to create positive value for diverse stakeholders through relational engagement, ethical decision-making, and systems awareness. The responsible leader does not merely avoid harm but actively builds social capital, nurtures trust, and enables collaborative flourishing (Maak & Pless, 2006a).

Regenerative leadership extends this trajectory further, calling for leadership that actively restores and revitalises the social, ecological, and economic systems within which organisations operate. Gibbons (2020) has proposed regenerative leadership as “the new sustainable,” arguing that sustainability's focus on maintaining current systems is insufficient when those systems are already degraded. The RIFT model identifies five leadership dimensions that characterise regenerative practice: consciousness, hallmarks, engagement, morality, and preemptiveness.

Systems-change leadership pushes beyond the regenerative horizon by asking how leaders contribute to changing the rules, incentives, and structures of the systems in which they operate.

The De Gruyter volume *From “We” to “Systems Change”* (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025) is the most comprehensive recent treatment, arguing that inner-developed leaders, working in collectives, are uniquely positioned to identify systemic leverage points and to act on them with both rigour and patience. Senge et al. (2015) on systems leadership and Scharmer’s (2018) Theory U, with its emphasis on presencing and operating from the highest future possibility, are companion sources that this study draws on. The empirical data of this thesis suggest that systems-change orientation is uneven across the sample: it appears most clearly in respondents whose business models are themselves systems-change interventions (P1 Company A, P3 Company C sustainability, P5 Company E (a bio-pharmaceutical services firm), P11 Drive Impact, P17 Company Q, P18 Company R (a climate and agri-tech start-up)), and it is less developed where the business model is internally focused.

For this study, the sustainable-responsible-regenerative-systems-change trajectory serves two purposes. First, it provides a developmental map against which SME leaders’ current practices can be assessed. Second, it positions the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model’s later stages as bridges from individual reflection to systemic action. This evolutionary framing connects the polycrisis-metacrisis problem statement of Chapter I to the empirical findings of Chapter IV with particular force: when systems are themselves degraded, leadership cannot be content with stewardship of a static order; it must contribute, however modestly, to system regeneration and change.

The intellectual roots of regenerative thinking extend beyond the contemporary leadership literature into several adjacent traditions that deserve explicit recognition. Hawken (2007), in *Blessed Unrest*, documented the emergence of a vast, largely invisible global civil society organised around environmental sustainability, social justice, and indigenous knowledge. Hawken argued that this movement, comprising hundreds of thousands of organisations and millions of

individuals, constitutes humanity's immune response to biological, cultural, and political disease. His framing is relevant to the leadership development programmes examined in this study, particularly Caux Initiatives of Change, which functions as exactly the kind of values-anchored relational network Hawken described. Wahl (2016), in *Designing Regenerative Cultures*, extended the regenerative horizon by arguing that regeneration must be understood as a whole-systems orientation rather than a set of practices, requiring leaders to think in terms of living-systems patterns, nested scale, and the long view. His work draws on insights from biomimicry, ecological design, and indigenous wisdom traditions, and it provides theoretical grounding for the systems-change dimension of the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model. Laloux (2014), in *Reinventing Organizations*, offered an evolutionary account of organisational development structured around five stages of consciousness from red through amber, orange, green to teal. His characterisation of teal organisations, in which leadership is distributed, purpose-driven, and oriented toward wholeness, maps onto the most developed responsible-resilient leadership practices observable in this study's data. Bohm's (1996) work on dialogue, which Senge and colleagues drew on extensively, provides a further complementary resource: Bohm argued that genuine dialogue, as distinct from debate or discussion, requires the suspension of assumptions, attentive listening, and the collective exploration of meaning. This dialogic dimension is precisely what the Caux forum format and the Chemin28 circle process are designed to cultivate, and its connection to regenerative leadership practice provides a theoretical bridge between inner development and relational practice.

2.6 Leadership in Contexts of Polycrisis and Metacrisis

Polycrisis: Scholarly Foundations

The concept of polycrisis has acquired increasing theoretical precision in the wake of the compound disruptions of the 2020s, and its scholarly foundations merit systematic examination. The term's genealogy is most commonly traced to the French philosopher Edgar Morin, who used the expression polycrise in his 1999 work *La Tête bien faite* to describe situations in which multiple crises interlock in ways that amplify one another, rendering each crisis less comprehensible and less tractable in isolation than in combination. Morin's broader epistemological project, including his advocacy for complex thought and his critique of disciplinary fragmentation, anticipated the integrative, systems-oriented analysis that polycrisis scholarship now demands. His work prefigures the methodological choice of this thesis: an interdisciplinary, qualitative, longitudinal design is appropriate precisely because the subject matter, responsible-resilient decision-making under polycrisis, resists the single-variable analytical frameworks that disciplinary silos tend to produce.

The concept re-entered prominent circulation through the work of Tooze (2022), whose analysis of the cascading crises of the early twenty-first century, from the 2008 financial crisis through pandemic and climate emergency, argued that the defining feature of contemporary global instability is not the severity of any single crisis but the synchronicity and mutual reinforcement of multiple crises across domains that were previously analytically and institutionally separate. Tooze's argument is consequential for this study because it provides the macroeconomic and geopolitical context within which SME leaders are making responsible-resilient decisions: the polycrisis is not a background condition but the active medium through which leadership is enacted. Lawrence et al. (2024) operationalised the polycrisis concept in a systems-science framework, defining it as a cluster of interacting global risks with the potential for compounding feedback loops that can exceed the adaptive capacity of existing institutions. Their analysis

identified six global risk systems, climate and ecosystem, financial and economic, technological, geopolitical, social, and health, whose interactions define the polycrisis space, and they argued that leadership responses must engage with these interactions rather than treating individual crises as discrete problems. Homer-Dixon et al. (2022) complemented this systemic account with a focus on synchronous failure, arguing that the interconnectedness of contemporary systems creates synchrony risks in which previously independent failure modes become coupled, a dynamic they observed in climate-conflict interactions and in pandemic-supply-chain cascades. Rockström et al. (2009) provided the ecological boundary conditions within which the polycrisis must be situated: their planetary boundaries framework identified nine Earth-system processes within which human activity must remain if the planet is to remain in the stable Holocene state that has enabled human civilisation. Several of these boundaries, including climate change, biosphere integrity, and land-system change, have now been transgressed, providing the ecological substrate for the accelerating polycrisis that leaders in this study must navigate. Together, these scholarly contributions constitute the theoretical foundation for understanding polycrisis not as an unusual concatenation of bad luck but as a structural feature of the current historical moment, one that responsible-resilient SME leadership must engage with explicitly rather than treating it as external noise.

Metacrisis: Meaning, Attention, and the Depth Dimension

Where polycrisis describes the systemic interaction of multiple external crises, the metacrisis concept addresses a deeper question: whether the cognitive, cultural, and institutional capacities required to navigate complex crises are themselves in crisis. The metacrisis framing holds that the pervasive systemic failures of the contemporary world are not simply technical or political problems awaiting better solutions, but that they reflect a crisis in the foundations of meaning-

making, collective sense-making, and the values frameworks through which human societies orient themselves. This is the dimension to which the inner-development tradition, represented in this study by the IDG framework and the Caux and Chemin28 programmes, is most directly responsive.

Schmachtenberger (2023) has been among the most rigorous contemporary analysts of the metacrisis, arguing that the defining pathology of the current moment is the misalignment between the complexity of the problems human civilisation faces and the cognitive and ethical frameworks that individuals and institutions bring to those problems. He identifies the attention economy, rivalrous game theory dynamics embedded in political and economic institutions, and the fragmentation of shared epistemology as the three primary drivers of the metacrisis. For leadership, his argument implies that responsible-resilient practice must include a capacity for attention sovereignty: the ability to direct attention deliberately rather than reactively, to resist the colonisation of cognitive space by short-term incentive structures, and to operate from a coherent values framework even when structural pressures push toward values drift. Vervaeke's work on the meaning crisis provides a complementary perspective, drawing on cognitive science, philosophy, and religious history to argue that contemporary Western societies suffer from a systemic loss of the transformative practices, participation in communities of practice, contact with sapiential traditions, and cultivation of relevance realisation, that have historically enabled individuals to find coherent meaning and direction. Vervaeke's analysis is directly relevant to this study because the leadership development programmes it examines, particularly Caux and Chemin28, are precisely the kind of community-of-practice, sapiential engagement that his framework identifies as a response to the meaning crisis. The Long Now Foundation, established by Brand, Eno, and colleagues in 1996, provides an institutional counterpart to these individual-

level meaning-seeking traditions: its advocacy for long-term thinking across centuries rather than quarters offers a temporal reorientation that supports the seasonal, slow-time conception of leadership change that this thesis advances. The metacrisis framing, read alongside the polycrisis literature, thus provides the outermost theoretical frame for the entire study: responsible-resilient SME leadership is not merely a response to specific external disruptions but a contribution to the recovery of the depth dimension of human decision-making that the metacrisis has put at risk.

SME Leaderships in contexts of Polycrisis

SMEs occupy a paradoxical position in the contemporary economic landscape: they are simultaneously the engine of economic activity and among the most vulnerable to systemic disruption. In Switzerland, where fifteen of the nineteen respondents in this study are based, SMEs constitute over 99 percent of enterprises and employ approximately two-thirds of the workforce (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2023). In Mongolia, where two respondents operate, SMEs play a similarly dominant role in a smaller and more resource-dependent economy.

The SME leadership context differs from the large-organisation context in ways that are constitutive rather than merely scalar. Three structural differences are particularly relevant to this study. First, decision concentration: in large organisations, decisions are distributed across multiple levels; in SMEs, decisions concentrate in the founder or a very small team (Battisti & Deakins, 2017). Second, resource constraint: SMEs operate with fundamentally limited financial, human, and informational resources (Herbane, 2019), meaning every investment in development is an opportunity cost. Third, personal-professional blurring: in founder-led SMEs, the boundary between the personal and the professional is permeable or absent. These structural differences mean that the mechanisms shaping responsible-resilient decision-making in SMEs are likely to be different in kind, not merely in degree, from those operating in large organisations.

The Swiss SME context merits specific attention. Switzerland combines high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010) with a tradition of direct democracy and consensus-based decision-making that extends into organisational culture (Pugnetti & Steinmann, 2021). Swiss SME leaders operate within an institutional environment characterised by regulatory stability, access to highly educated workforces, and proximity to European markets, but also by high cost structures and intense global competition. The Mongolian context, represented by P10 (Company J) and P18 (Company R, a climate and agri-tech start-up), is shaped by nomadic cultural heritage, geopolitical exposure between China and Russia, and a young entrepreneurial generation that is highly internationally networked. The Belgian (P2, Company B) and French (P9, Company I, an energy services firm) cases provide adjacent European reference points.

The polycrisis frame is particularly consequential for SMEs. Where large organisations can absorb shocks through diversification, geographic spread, and balance-sheet depth, SMEs absorb shocks personally, in the body and bank account of the founder. The empirical evidence in Chapter IV suggests that this personal exposure is itself a development pathway: SME leaders become responsible-resilient not because they have spent more time in classrooms but because they have spent more time in conditions where the cost of disengagement is immediate.

The theoretical heritage of SME leadership scholarship provides essential context for understanding why the polycrisis challenge falls so unevenly across organisation size. Storey (1994), in his foundational treatment of small business and entrepreneurship, documented how the specific characteristics of small firms, including owner-management concentration, limited administrative infrastructure, and dependency on a small number of key relationships, create a qualitatively different management environment from large firms. His framework anticipated the structural differences discussed in this section and remains the standard reference point for

situating SME leadership within its economic and institutional context. The family business literature adds a further dimension that is relevant to several of this study's respondents. Habbershon and Williams (1999) introduced the concept of familiness to describe the idiosyncratic bundle of resources and capabilities that arise from the interaction of a family and a business system; they argued that familiness can constitute a competitive advantage or disadvantage depending on how family dynamics shape decision-making. Sharma (2004) extended this framework in a review that traced the evolution of family business research, noting persistent tensions between family-system logic, which prioritises loyalty, continuity, and relational harmony, and market-system logic, which prioritises efficiency, performance, and adaptation. These tensions are observable in the data of the present study, particularly for respondents who lead family-connected enterprises and who must navigate the intersection of personal and professional obligation in crisis conditions. Penrose (1959), whose theory of the growth of the firm remains one of the most influential contributions to strategic management, argued that the firm is fundamentally a bundle of productive resources whose development is constrained by managerial capacity. Her insight that managerial learning, not capital accumulation, is the primary limiting factor in firm growth anticipates the argument of this thesis: the responsible-resilient development of the SME leader is not merely a personal matter but a strategic resource whose cultivation or neglect shapes the organisation's trajectory over time.

2.7 Theory of Change: From Reflection to Action

The translation from reflective learning to changed practice is the central practical concern of this study, and it draws on several interconnected theoretical traditions. Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory provides the foundational framework, arguing that the most

significant learning occurs when individuals encounter experiences that challenge their existing frames of reference. When these frames of reference are sufficiently disrupted, individuals engage in critical reflection that can lead to “perspective transformation.” For the current study, polycrisis disruptions and leadership development experiences are both potential catalysts for perspective transformation. The question is whether the transformation translates into different decisions over time.

Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle provides a complementary process model, describing learning as a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The cycle suggests that reflection alone is insufficient for learning; it must be connected to experimentation and action. Day et al. (2014, 2021, 2024) have advanced the leadership development literature significantly, distinguishing between leader development (developing individual human capital) and leadership development (developing collective social capital). Critically, they argue that development is not a discrete event but a process that unfolds over time, often years.

Kirkpatrick’s evaluation model (1994) provides a useful framework for assessing translation from learning to practice. The model’s four levels (reaction, learning, behaviour, results) map directly onto the translation question. Most programme evaluations assess only levels one and two; this study’s ROOT-to-FRUIT Model is designed to assess levels three and four across a longer cycle. The reflection-to-action gap, as it emerges in both the theoretical literature and this study’s data, is not merely a matter of motivation or knowledge; it is a structural phenomenon requiring investigation of the contextual conditions in which decisions are made and the temporal horizons across which leaders operate.

A horticultural metaphor is increasingly useful here. Scharmer (2018) describes leadership development as a deepening of capacity rather than a quick acquisition of skills. The IDG anthologies (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025) treat inner development as compost-like: layered, slow, periodically turned. This framing prefigures the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model in Chapter V, which argues that change in responsible-resilient leadership is best understood across seasons, not weeks.

Argyris and Schön (1978) provided the conceptual infrastructure for understanding why the translation from reflection to action so frequently stalls. Their distinction between single-loop learning, which corrects errors within an existing framework of assumptions, and double-loop learning, which interrogates and revises the assumptions themselves, is foundational for this study. They argued that most professional and organisational learning is single-loop: practitioners adjust their techniques without questioning whether they are pursuing the right objectives. Double-loop learning, which is far rarer and more demanding, requires individuals to surface their governing values, examine the assumptions embedded in their theories-in-use, and redesign their action strategies accordingly. The responsible-resilient leadership development that this study investigates is precisely a double-loop phenomenon: the aim is not to help leaders apply better techniques to existing problems but to help them reconfigure the values framework within which they identify problems and choose responses. Senge (1990), building on Argyris and Schön, introduced the concept of the learning organisation and identified five disciplines, systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning, that together constitute the capacity for deep organisational learning. His argument that mental models are the most significant obstacle to organisational learning aligns with the findings of this study: respondents who have undergone genuine values transformation describe a shift in their mental

models, a reframing of what counts as success, who counts as a stakeholder, and what counts as a crisis, rather than merely an acquisition of new techniques. Schein (2010), in his comprehensive treatment of organisational culture, provided the further insight that culture itself, understood as the accumulated learning of a group expressed in its assumptions, beliefs, and values, is the deepest and most consequential mental model of all. His three-level model, distinguishing artefacts (visible structures and processes), espoused values (stated strategies and goals), and underlying assumptions (unconscious taken-for-granted beliefs), provides a framework for understanding why cultural formation, as discussed in Section 2.10, is the deepest and most durable of all leadership development pathways. Together, Argyris and Schön, Senge, and Schein constitute the theoretical spine of the theory of change that this study advances: transformation requires double-loop interrogation of mental models, cultivation of learning disciplines, and engagement with the deepest level of cultural assumption.

2.8 Leadership Development Pathways: From Formal Programmes to Informal Networks and Inner Practice

This section examines the spectrum of pathways through which SME leaders develop responsible-resilient leadership capacity, ranging from formal structured programmes through informal developmental experiences and inner practice. At one end of the spectrum, formal programmes such as Caux Initiatives of Change (forum-based, centred on trust-building, ethical leadership, and peacebuilding) and Chemin28 (immersive programme drawing on the IDG framework) provide structured, time-bounded experiences designed to shift mindsets. Ansell and Gash (2008) identified trust-building, face-to-face dialogue, commitment to process, shared understanding, and intermediate outcomes as essential elements of effective collaborative engagement; these elements are directly observable in both programmes.

B Corp certification represents a different formal pathway, combining values assessment, operational change, and community membership. P1 (P1 at Company A) describes B Corp as institutionalised 360-degree stakeholder accountability. At the other end of the spectrum, informal developmental pathways encompass the unstructured, ongoing experiences through which leaders develop their decision-making capacity. The data of this study demonstrates the significance of these pathways with particular clarity: across all nineteen respondents, informal networks are described as more decisive than formal programmes for sustained development.

Laurie and Serrano-Archimi (2025) provided evidence that multi-stakeholder initiative embeddedness alters SME CEO decision-making. Hamza et al. (2022) proposed a multi-stakeholder framework for sustainability leadership in SMEs. Cultural formation represents perhaps the deepest developmental pathway, as the data illustrates: P18's Mongolian nomadic heritage, P14's tri-cultural India-US-Europe synthesis, and P16's meditation background all function as foundational "programmes" that shape how subsequent developmental experiences are interpreted and integrated.

A third pathway, often invisible in the formal literature, is inner practice. Egel and Campos Suarez (2025) argue across both IDG volumes that inner practice, which they define broadly to include meditation, journaling, embodiment, retreat, dialogue, supervision, and contemplative reading, is a foundational pathway whose absence cannot be substituted by programme attendance. The data of this study confirms this. Respondents with the highest self-reported resilience consistently report some form of inner practice, whether explicitly named (P2, P7, P16, P5) or implicit in their description of how they prepare for and process disruption (P4, P18). The implication is that leadership development must be understood as a tri-spectrum: programmes, networks, and inner practice, with the third often the most decisive.

The scholarship on experience-based leadership development provides essential complementary grounding. McCall (2010) synthesised decades of research on how leaders develop through challenging assignments, adversity, and crucible experiences, arguing that developmental experiences in the field, rather than classroom instruction, are the primary driver of lasting capability growth. His work underscores the findings of this study: the most formative experiences reported by respondents were not programme modules but crises navigated, relationships built under pressure, and ethical dilemmas resolved without a clear script. Gardner (2011), in *Leading Minds*, traced the developmental trajectories of eleven major leaders across the twentieth century and identified storytelling, the ability to articulate a compelling identity narrative, as the central cognitive and relational tool through which leaders mobilise others and sustain themselves through challenge. His finding resonates with the emphasis in this study's data on narrative coherence: respondents who articulate a clear, integrated story of why they lead responsibly demonstrate higher resilience scores and more consistent decision-making under pressure. Kram (1985), in the foundational treatment of mentoring in organisations, distinguished two functions of mentoring relationships: career functions, including sponsorship, coaching, and visibility, and psychosocial functions, including role-modelling, acceptance, and affirmation. Her research established that the psychosocial dimension is frequently the more developmentally significant, particularly during periods of identity transition. This insight maps directly onto the data of the present study, in which informal mentoring and peer-advisory relationships are described by respondents not as information sources but as identity anchors: people who have held a reflective mirror up at critical junctures and enabled a deeper reckoning with values and direction. The developmental pathway from programme attendance through mentored experience to sustained inner practice constitutes, in the framework of this study, the full arc of responsible-resilient leadership formation.

2.9 Decision-Making Under Disruption

Understanding how leaders make decisions under conditions of polycrisis requires engaging with several theoretical traditions. Snowden and Boone's (2007) Cynefin framework provides the foundational sense-making model, distinguishing five decision contexts: Clear, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic, and Disorder. Polycrisis conditions operate primarily in the Complex and Chaotic domains where established heuristics fail. Lane et al. (2021) demonstrated the framework's practical applicability to crisis decision-making in healthcare and other high-stakes settings.

Heifetz et al. (2009), building on Heifetz's (1994) original formulation, developed the adaptive leadership framework, distinguishing "technical problems" from "adaptive challenges." Polycrisis conditions create adaptive challenges requiring changes in values, beliefs, and behaviours. Shams and Linsky (2026) provided recent empirical validation. Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory explains how leaders construct meaning from ambiguous situations. Dwivedi and Kundra (2022) demonstrated its contemporary applicability to COVID-19, while Raval et al. (2020) showed that managers' "theories-in-use" govern how they interpret environmental signals.

The decision-making literature contributes two essential insights for this study. First, decision-making during polycrisis is a sensemaking activity rather than a rational information-processing activity. Second, structural conditions, including value signals that reward short-term extraction and penalise long-term stewardship, shape the available decision space. Baran and Woznyj (2020) identified collaborative network building as a key agility enabler, and Raskovic (2021) proposed resilience meta-capabilities as the response framework for wicked problems. Schmachtenberger (2023) adds a metacrisis-aware dimension, arguing that under conditions where attention itself is

being colonised by attention-economy incentives, the leader's capacity to slow down and orient is itself a strategic capability.

Klein's (1998) research on naturalistic decision-making provides an essential corrective to normative models that assume leaders have the luxury of systematic rational analysis. Studying military commanders, firefighters, and critical care nurses, Klein found that experienced decision-makers under time pressure do not compare options and select the optimal one: they pattern-match against experiential templates and simulate the first plausible option, adjusting only if the simulation reveals a fatal flaw. His recognition-primed decision model explains why experienced SME leaders in this study describe crisis decisions as intuitive rather than analytical: they are drawing on accumulated pattern libraries built through years of analogous experience. This finding reinforces the emphasis in Section 2.8 on experience-based development, since the quality of intuitive decision-making is directly proportional to the richness of the experiential repertoire from which patterns are drawn. Kahneman (2011), in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, provided a complementary dual-process account, distinguishing System 1 thinking, which is fast, associative, and heuristic-driven, from System 2 thinking, which is slow, deliberate, and effortful. Kahneman demonstrated that System 1 is dominant in most decision contexts and is subject to systematic cognitive biases, including anchoring, availability bias, and loss aversion. Prospect theory, originally developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), showed that individuals are more sensitive to losses than to equivalent gains, and that this asymmetry systematically distorts decision-making under uncertainty. For the responsible-resilient SME leader, these findings are consequential: the loss-aversion bias may predispose leaders toward risk-avoidant decisions that protect the status quo even when transformation is required, and the availability heuristic may cause recent vivid crises to be over-weighted relative to slower-developing systemic risks. The present study's

finding that responsible-resilient leaders develop a capacity to slow down and deliberately override System 1 impulses through values-grounded reflection constitutes, in Kahneman's terms, a training of System 2 engagement under conditions where System 1 is most powerfully activated.

2.10 Cross-Cultural Leadership Contexts

The study's multi-country design requires engagement with cross-cultural leadership theory. The GLOBE study (House et al., 2004; Dorfman et al., 2012) provides the most comprehensive empirical foundation, identifying nine cultural dimensions and their impact on leadership prototypes across 62 societies. Hofstede et al. (2010) provide complementary cultural profiles: Switzerland (low power distance, individualist, high uncertainty avoidance), Belgium (high uncertainty avoidance, higher power distance), Mongolia (collectivist, high power distance), and France (high power distance, moderate uncertainty avoidance).

Pugnetti and Steinmann (2021) demonstrated the relevance of cultural dimensions to Swiss leadership practice. The Mongolian context has received limited attention in the leadership literature: Moslehpour et al. (2018) found that collectivist culture moderates leadership effectiveness; Sarlagtay (2014) examined cultural identity tensions; Li (2023) found heavy reliance on informal mentoring; Gur and Matsui (2025) confirmed the significance of leadership style. Sobowale et al. (2024) found that effective cross-cultural leadership requires cultural intelligence, and Nazarian et al. (2024) demonstrated that trust-based leadership effectiveness varies across cultural clusters.

The data of this study suggests that cultural formation operates less as a fixed national trait and more as a negotiated repertoire that leaders draw from selectively. P14 explicitly theorises a tri-cultural India-US-Europe blend. P11 navigates an Indian cultural background through a European cooperative model. P18 draws on Mongolian nomadic interdependence. P15 imports Nordic co-

decision principles into a Swiss context. The cultural dimension is therefore both real and reconfigurable, and the cross-cultural literature is most useful when read as a vocabulary for self-description rather than as a deterministic typology.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) extended the cross-cultural framework in ways that are particularly relevant to this study's focus on values and decision-making. Their model identified seven dimensions along which cultures differ in how they reconcile opposing values: universalism versus particularism, individualism versus communitarianism, specific versus diffuse relationships, neutral versus emotional expression, achievement versus ascription, sequential versus synchronic time orientation, and internal versus external locus of control. For responsible-resilient leadership, the communitarianism-individualism and internal-external control dimensions are especially salient: respondents from Mongolian and South Asian backgrounds describe relational obligation and collective accountability in ways that Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's communitarian dimension captures, while Swiss and Belgian respondents tend toward universalist rule-based frameworks. Meyer (2014), in *The Culture Map*, complemented this framework with practical guidance on eight scales: communicating (low-context versus high-context), evaluating (direct versus indirect negative feedback), persuading (principles-first versus applications-first), leading (egalitarian versus hierarchical), deciding (consensual versus top-down), trusting (task-based versus relationship-based), disagreeing (confrontational versus avoiding), and scheduling (linear versus flexible time). Meyer's work is relevant to this study because it provides a granular vocabulary for the cross-cultural leadership dynamics observable in multinational contexts such as those represented in this sample. The trust dimension, distinguishing the Swiss and Northern European preference for task-based, competence-demonstrating trust from the relationship-first trust models that predominate in Asian and Middle

Eastern contexts, maps directly onto the varied approaches to stakeholder relationship management described by respondents. Reading Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner alongside Meyer and the GLOBE findings, the cross-cultural picture that emerges for this study is not one of fixed national types but of leaders who have developed the cultural intelligence to navigate multiple value registers simultaneously, a capacity that may itself be a component of responsible-resilient leadership in an internationalised SME world.

2.11 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

The literature review reveals four interconnected gaps. First, the *mechanism gap*: existing research measures outcomes but does not trace the concrete mechanisms through which leaders develop and enact responsible-resilient decision-making (Javed et al., 2024; Pless & Maak, 2011). Second, the *context gap*: leadership development research assumes large-organisation contexts (Battisti & Deakins, 2017; Herbane, 2019; Johnston et al., 2024). Third, the *translation gap*: a critical disconnect persists between reflective learning and changed practice (Mezirow, 1997; Day et al., 2014, 2021, 2024). Fourth, and newly named in this thesis, the *temporal gap*: change models in the literature implicitly assume short translation cycles, whereas leaders themselves describe change in seasons and years.

The integrated conceptual framework of this study positions polycrisis and metacrisis as the contextual outer layer. Within that layer, six interconnected domains shape responsible-resilient decision-making: (1) cultural formation as the deepest formative substrate; (2) leadership development pathways across the spectrum from formal programmes through informal networks to inner practice; (3) responsible-resilient leadership orientation as the integrated construct; (4) relational trust as decision infrastructure; (5) structural conditions that constrain or enable translation from orientation to practice; (6) the inner-outer cycle of reflection and action, refined

into eight stages in the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model presented in Chapter V. The translation gap sits at the centre. Arrows indicate bidirectional influence; the cycle is iterative across seasons rather than weeks.

A second conceptual figure positions the leadership evolution trajectory across four stages rather than three:

Stage	1,	sustainable	leadership	(doing	less	harm);
Stage	2,	responsible	leadership	(doing	good);	
Stage	3,	regenerative	leadership	(actively	restoring);	

Stage 4, systems-change leadership (nudging and influencing the rules of the game). Each stage builds on the previous. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model's later stages, Unite, Integrate, and Track, assess movement along this trajectory.

2.12 Summary

This literature review has examined eight interconnected theoretical domains that inform the study of responsible-resilient decision-making among business leaders and especially SME leaders in polycrisis. The review has established that responsible leadership theory (Maak & Pless, 2006a; Voegtlin, 2016; Javed et al., 2024) provides the relational and ethical foundations but lacks mechanism-level investigation. Organisational resilience theory (Duchek, 2020; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011) provides the adaptive framework but has been insufficiently integrated with responsible

leadership. The emerging regenerative and systems-change perspective (Gibbons, 2020; Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025; Senge et al., 2015) extends the aspirational horizon. The SME context (Battisti & Deakins, 2017; Johnston et al., 2024) introduces distinctive structural conditions. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) and leadership development scholarship (Day et al., 2014, 2021, 2024) leave the translation from reflection to action unexamined, and recent practitioner voices, including Sharma (2026) and Schmachtenberger (2023), confirm that the gap is now urgent. Decision-making theories (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Heifetz et al., 2009; Weick, 1995) illuminate cognitive and social processes. Cross-cultural research (House et al., 2004; Hofstede et al., 2010) demonstrates that all these processes are culturally situated. The integrated conceptual framework synthesises these domains into a unified model that takes polycrisis seriously and that operates in seasonal rather than weekly time.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview of the Research Problem

The methodological design of this study follows from the research problem set out in Chapter I. The problem is mechanism-level rather than outcome-level: how business leaders and especially SME leaders, working under polycrisis conditions, hold responsibility and resilience together in everyday decisions and across slow developmental cycles. Mechanism-level questions resist closed-ended survey instruments, and they reward designs that combine attentive listening with disciplined comparison. The study is therefore qualitative, multimodal, and inductive. It begins

with no hypothesis and seeks to generate, rather than test, theory. Where prior surveys have shown that responsible leadership and resilience correlate with positive organisational outcomes, this study asks how, in what conditions, and across what time horizons such leadership is actually practised by leaders of small and medium-sized enterprises.

3.2 Research Philosophy

3.2.1 Epistemological Position

This study is grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology. Constructivism holds that knowledge is not discovered as a pre-existing external reality but is constructed through the interaction between knower and known, between researcher and participant, and between the interpretive community and its shared frameworks (Crotty, 1998). This position has direct consequences for the study's design, analysis, and claims. It means that what participants say about responsibility, resilience, and the polycrisis is not treated as a direct window onto an objective state of affairs but as a constructed account shaped by their biographical position, their cultural context, the relationship they develop with the researcher, and the conversational occasion of the interview or written response. Interpretivist epistemology extends this position by insisting that the researcher's task is not to remove themselves from the act of interpretation but to make their interpretive framework visible and to work with it reflexively (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established the canonical alternative to positivist criteria in qualitative research, proposing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as the standards by which qualitative inquiry should be evaluated. These criteria, which are addressed in detail in Section 3.13, are fully consistent with the constructivist-interpretivist epistemological position of this study: they assume that knowledge is perspectival rather than universal, that context shapes meaning, and that the task of research is to produce accounts that are trustworthy rather than

accounts that are simply replicable. Crotty (1998) provides the foundational theoretical argument for this position, distinguishing between the ontological claim (what is real), the epistemological claim (how we can know it), the theoretical perspective (the intellectual tradition through which we approach it), and the methodology (the strategy of inquiry that follows from the combination of the preceding three). This study is explicit about each layer: the ontology is relational, the epistemology is constructivist-interpretivist, the theoretical perspective is grounded theory with phenomenological attentiveness, and the methodology is multimodal qualitative inquiry with thematic analysis.

3.2.2 Ontological Position

The ontological position of this study is relational. This means that the phenomena under investigation, responsibility, resilience, inner practice, and the leader's navigation of polycrisis, are understood to exist not as fixed properties of individuals but as relational accomplishments enacted in specific contexts. A leader's responsibility is not an inner attribute that can be measured independently of the relationships within which it is exercised. Resilience is not a trait that a leader either possesses or lacks; it is a pattern of response that emerges at the intersection of the individual, their network, their cultural tradition, and the specific pressures they face. This relational ontology is consistent with the stakeholder-inclusive conception of responsible leadership that this study draws on (Pless & Maak, 2011), and it shapes the analytic move, made throughout Chapter IV, of treating each participant not as a data point on a scale but as a relational subject embedded in a web of obligations, histories, and contexts.

3.2.3 Axiological Position

The axiological position of this study, that is, the researcher's values orientation and its relationship to the inquiry, is one of engaged ethical commitment combined with disciplined reflexivity. The researcher is personally invested in the questions this study asks: she is herself a leader, a member of the communities from which participants were drawn, and a practitioner of the inner-development tradition that informs several of the study's theoretical anchors. This investment is not treated as a disqualifying conflict of interest but as a form of insider knowledge that must be named, monitored, and worked with rather than suppressed or denied (Berger, 2015). The study's ethical framework, described in Section 3.14, reflects this axiological position: it prioritises participant welfare, transparency, reciprocity, and the responsible use of data.

3.3 Operationalisation of Theoretical Constructs

Three primary constructs are operationalised. *Responsible leadership* is operationalised as a leader's verbalised and observed orientation toward stakeholders, ethical decision-making under trade-off, and the layering of obligations that the leader articulates. *Resilience* is operationalised as the leader's capacity to absorb disruption, maintain values orientation under stress, and resume effective action across multiple cycles of disturbance. *Polycrisis* is operationalised as the recognition by the leader of multiple, intersecting, and reinforcing crises that affect their decision space. A secondary construct, *inner practice*, is operationalised as any reported activity, formal or informal, undertaken by the leader to maintain attention, regulate state, and clarify values.

The four research questions stated in Chapter I structure the operationalisation: each construct is investigated through the question that names it most directly, while remaining open to data that bridges constructs. The integrated construct *responsible-resilient leadership* is operationalised through the joint analysis of responses across all four research questions.

3.4 Research Purpose and Questions

The research purpose, restated for methodological convenience, is to produce a descriptive, integrative, and theory-generating account of how SME leaders navigate responsible and resilient decision-making during a polycrisis. The four research questions are returned here because they directly shape the data collection instruments and the coding architecture.

RQ1. How do business leaders define and enact responsible leadership in conditions of polycrisis?

RQ2. How do business leaders define and enact resilience under recurrent and interlocking disruption?

RQ3. Which development pathways, formal and informal, do business leaders credit with shaping their responsible-resilient capacity, and why?

RQ4. Through which mechanisms do reflective insight and inner practice translate, or fail to translate, into changed decisions over time?

3.5 Research Design

The research design is a multimodal qualitative case-comparison study. Semi-structured interview of 35 to 60 minutes (average 45 minutes), conducted in person or via video conference and recorded with consent. Secondly, to facilitate reflection and self-recording of answers, a long-form written response instrument that mirrors the interview guide and allows respondents who prefer the written register, or who have severe diary constraints, to contribute on equivalent terms. Both modes were complemented by publicly available organisational documents (websites, annual statements, B Corp impact reports, governance pages), and where appropriate by short reflective field memos written by the researcher after each encounter.

The design is therefore not strictly a comparative case-study design in Yin's (2018) sense, nor strictly a phenomenological design in Creswell and Poth's (2018) sense. It draws on both. From case-study methodology it takes the rigour of within-case description and cross-case pattern analysis. From phenomenological methodology it takes the orientation toward respondents' lived experience and their first-person language. The design is best described as a multimodal qualitative inquiry oriented toward grounded theory generation, with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as the central analytic technique.

Yin (2018) establishes the case study as appropriate when the research question asks "how" or "why," when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. All three conditions apply here. The research questions are explicitly how-questions. The researcher exerts no experimental control over the conditions of polycrisis or over the developmental pathways of participants. And the phenomenon under investigation, leadership practice in conditions of active polycrisis, is precisely contemporary. Creswell and Poth (2018) extend this argument by observing that qualitative designs are appropriate when the variables of interest are not yet well enough understood to be measured, when the researcher wishes to preserve the participant's own language and conceptual categories, and when the aim is theory generation rather than theory testing. Again, all three conditions apply. The mechanisms of responsible-resilient leadership in polycrisis are not yet well theorised. The participant's own vocabulary, ranging from "regenerative circles" to "slow trust" to "inner seasons," is itself part of the theoretical contribution this study seeks to make. And the study is explicitly generative in its ambition.

The decision to use two parallel modes rather than insisting on interviews alone is methodologically important. SME leaders operate under severe time constraints, and many of them

communicate in writing as fluently as in speech. Excluding written responses would have biased the sample toward those with calendar capacity for an hour-long interview at the expense of those with equivalent expertise and willingness who could only contribute in writing. The decision is consistent with the multimodal turn in qualitative research and is justified by the alignment between the two instruments, which were designed to elicit comparable evidence. Patton (2015) argues that the richness of qualitative data depends not on a single data-collection method but on the triangulation of multiple methods that approach the same phenomenon from different angles. The multimodal design of this study is an implementation of that principle.

3.6 Population and Sample

The population of interest is SME leaders working in Switzerland, in roles of significant decision-making responsibility (founder, chief executive officer, managing director, or equivalent), in companies that have navigated at least two or more significant disruptions in the previous five years. The sample of 19 leaders comprises 5 leaders of large enterprises (defined here as parent companies of more than 250 employees in which the respondent holds a senior leadership role with significant SME-like decision-autonomy at the unit level), 5 leaders of medium-sized companies (50 to 250 employees), and 9 leaders of small companies (fewer than 50 employees). The geographic distribution is 15 leaders based in Switzerland, 2 in Mongolia, 1 in Belgium, and 1 in France. Sectoral coverage spans cosmetics and consumer goods, life sciences, technology and AI, hospitality and food, financial services, education and training, climate technology, agriculture, leadership consulting, and creative industries.

3.7 Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling, supplemented by snowball referrals from initial contacts. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the research question

requires participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences rather than when the goal is statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015). In this study, the purposive criteria required each participant to hold significant decision-making authority in their companies, to have navigated at least two significant disruptions in the five years preceding participation, to be willing to reflect at length on their experience, and to be able to communicate in English. These criteria ensured that all participants could speak meaningfully to the research questions rather than merely reporting indirect or observational experience of the phenomena under investigation.

The snowball extension of sampling was used after initial purposive contacts had been made, allowing the researcher to reach participants whose profiles matched the criteria but who were not already in her professional network. Saunders and colleagues (2018) argue that in qualitative research oriented toward theoretical saturation, sampling should continue until new data yields no new themes or conceptual distinctions. In practice, saturation on the primary themes was reached at approximately the twelfth completed case. The remaining cases confirmed and enriched the existing themes without introducing conceptually new categories. This is consistent with Saunders et al.'s (2018) observation that saturation in purposive samples tends to occur earlier than researchers expect and that continued sampling beyond saturation typically yields diminishing analytical returns rather than fundamentally new insights.

3.8 Pilot and Refinement

The interview guide and written response form were piloted with two colleagues of the researcher who have leadership experiences but were not included in the final sample. The pilot process was intended to assess three things: the comprehensibility of the questions as written, the adequacy of the time allocation for each section, and the extent to which the instrument elicited the kinds of reflective, first-person accounts that the research questions required.

The pilot feedback led to three categories of revision. First, several questions in the “disruption experience” section were reworded to reduce their evaluative framing: the original phrasing inadvertently suggested that the researcher expected respondents to have managed disruption well, which risked cueing socially desirable responses. The revised phrasing used temporal rather than evaluative anchors, asking respondents to describe what they did and felt rather than to assess whether they had responded well. Second, the time allocation for the development pathways section was expanded: pilot participants consistently spent more time on this section than the original instrument allowed, and the extended version of the guide reflects this. Third, a closing reflective question was added, asking each respondent what they would change about their own leadership over the next twelve months. This question was added in response to pilot feedback that the instrument felt analytically oriented but did not invite the respondent to complete a forward-looking loop. The closing question produced some of the richest material in the full study.

No instrument revisions were made after the pilot; the changes noted above were implemented before the first full participant interview was conducted. The two pilot participants reviewed the revised instrument and confirmed that the revisions addressed their feedback. Their data was not included in the main analysis.

3.9 Instrumentation

Two parallel instruments were used. The first is a semi-structured interview guide with seven sections: demographics and context, responsible leadership, resilience, disruption experience, development pathways, cultural context, and reflection to action. The full instrument is reproduced as Appendix D. Each section opens with a broad question and is supported by follow-up prompts that the interviewer could deploy depending on the respondent’s flow. The second instrument is a long-form written response form that mirrors the seven sections of the interview guide. The form

was hosted on Google Forms, accessible by direct link that has been shared by the researcher, and accepted free-text responses of any length. A total of around 18 open-ended questions. Eight respondents completed the form in full; their responses ranged from approximately 800 to 3,000 words.

The use of Google Forms as the platform for the written instrument reflected a deliberate choice to use an accessible, widely recognised tool that did not require participants to create new accounts or install software. The form was structured so that each section corresponded exactly to a section of the interview guide, with the same opening questions and equivalent follow-up prompts presented as guidance notes. Respondents were invited to answer as many or as few sections as they wished, though all eight form respondents completed the full instrument. Response length was unconstrained, and the instruction explicitly invited extended, reflective answers rather than brief responses.

A small number of supplementary instruments were used in specific cases. For the in-person interviews, a brief field memo was written by the researcher within twenty-four hours of the encounter, capturing non-verbal cues, atmosphere, and emergent hypotheses. For the form-only respondents, organisational documents and websites were used as triangulating evidence. No instrument required respondents to disclose financial information, and no instrument touched on protected categories beyond what respondents themselves volunteered.

3.10 Data Collection Procedures

Audio recordings were made with participant consent using the Otter.ai platform. Otter.ai was selected because it provides both live transcription during recording and a post-session transcript that can be reviewed and corrected. All interviews were conducted in English; no translation was required for the transcription process. Transcripts were cleaned by hand against the audio for

accuracy, and respondent-specific terminology, names, and references were corrected where Otter.ai had misrecognised them. The cleaned transcripts constitute the primary textual record for all interview-based cases.

Interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes, with an average duration of approximately 45 minutes. The semi-structured format meant that the researcher followed the guide as a general map but responded to the participant's flow: where a respondent opened a line of inquiry not anticipated by the guide, the interviewer followed it rather than redirecting. This flexibility is consistent with the exploratory and inductive orientation of the study and produced several of the most analytically significant passages in the data.

Form responses were exported in full from Google Forms and stored as clean text within the dedicated excel sheet. Organisational documents were collected from publicly available sources and stored alongside the transcripts and form responses in a single project workspace. Where documents were used as triangulating evidence for a specific case, they were linked to that case's within-case description file.

The use of artificial intelligence was deliberate and transparent: The use of AI tools is treated as a methodological choice to be declared rather than a convenience to be concealed, consistent with the transparency norms increasingly expected in qualitative research conducted in the mid-2020s.

Otter.ai was used for first-pass audio transcription, with all transcripts subsequently verified by hand. Perplexity.ai was used for source mapping and verification of citations, and for cross-checking the empirical claims of the literature review against current scholarship. Specifically, Perplexity.ai was used to identify sources that bore on the study's theoretical constructs, to verify that citations retrieved from secondary sources accurately represented the originals, and to surface recent scholarship published after the researcher's initial literature review. All sources identified

or verified through Perplexity.ai were subsequently confirmed against the original source prior to inclusion. No citation was retained solely on the basis of AI-generated output. ***AI tools were not used to write, generate analysis, code transcripts, or interpret data.***

Data collection took place between May 2025 and May 2026. All nineteen cases, kept anonymous for ethical and privacy reasons (P1 through P19) were completed in time for this submission and are coded in the analysis.

3.11 Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in three layers.

The first layer was a within-case description for each respondent, drawing on transcript or form response, organisational documents, and field memo where available. Each within-case description noted disruptions faced, definitions of responsibility and resilience, development pathways, cultural references, and any verbatim language that struck the researcher as theoretically significant.

The second layer was a coding matrix was maintained in spreadsheet form, recording each code, its definition, associated respondents, and supporting verbatim excerpts. Inter-rater reliability checks were not conducted, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis approach, which treats coding as interpretive rather than objective. Theme saturation was

considered reached when repeated reviews of the full dataset generated no substantially new candidate codes.

The third analytic layer, cross-cutting synthesis, draws on focused coding to move from the descriptive and interpretive levels to the theoretical level where the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model is proposed. This three-cycle approach is consistent with Saldaña's (2021) recommendation that qualitative coding be understood as a progressive analytical movement rather than a single classifying operation. The third layer was cross-cutting synthesis, in which patterns across the eleven themes were examined for theoretical structure. This layer produced the integrated conceptual contributions of the thesis, including the responsible-resilient leadership construct presented in Chapter II and the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model presented in Chapter V.

Coding was performed in plain text in google docs against the verbatim record. A coding sheet was maintained for each respondent and is preserved in the project workspace on Google Drive. Reflexive memos were written/journalled throughout the analytic process, recording the researcher's evolving understanding of the data, points of doubt, and decisions about coding boundaries.

3.12 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is assessed against Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This study attends to each criterion through specific practices.

Credibility, the qualitative analogue of internal validity, refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent the experiences and meanings of the participants. Credibility was pursued through prolonged engagement with the data (the researcher spent several months in close contact

with the corpus before finalising the thematic structure); member checking on selected quotations, in which a subset of participants were invited to confirm or correct the researcher's rendering of their words; and triangulation across data types, comparing interview transcripts, form responses, and organisational documents for convergence and divergence. Where the different data types pointed in the same direction, the finding was treated as more robust; where they diverged, the divergence was noted and explored rather than resolved by discounting one source.

Transferability, the qualitative analogue of external validity, refers to the extent to which findings can be applied in other contexts. Transferability is not claimed through statistical generalisation but is enabled through thick description: by providing sufficient contextual detail about each case and the conditions of data collection, the study allows readers to make their own judgements about whether and to what extent the patterns reported apply to their own situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The within-case descriptions in Chapter IV are written with this in mind, providing not only thematic summaries but specific contextual detail about sector, geography, organisational size, and the disruptions each leader navigated.

Dependability, the qualitative analogue of reliability, refers to the consistency of the research process across time and conditions. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a full audit trail of the analytic process: coding sheets for each respondent, reflexive memos at each major decision point, a record of instrument development and pilot revisions, and documentation of decisions about theme boundaries. This audit trail is preserved in the project workspace and could be reviewed by an external auditor.

Confirmability, the qualitative analogue of objectivity, refers to the extent to which the findings are rooted in the data rather than in the researcher's preconceptions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive practice throughout the study. The researcher explicitly engaged with her own

assumptions, motivations, and relational proximity to participants in the reflexive memos, seeking to distinguish between interpretations that arose from the data and interpretations that may have been imported from her prior frameworks. The positionality statement in Chapter I is the public face of this reflexive practice.

Reflexivity is understood in this study not as a corrective applied at the end of the research process but as a continuous practice woven through it. Berger (2015) argues that the researcher's subjectivity is not a contaminant to be controlled but a resource to be used critically: by making their own position, assumptions, and evolving interpretations visible, researchers enable readers to assess the interpretive lens and to account for it in their own reading of the findings. The reflexive memos maintained throughout this study implement this principle.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical framework of the British Academy of Management (BAM) and with the requirements of SSBM Geneva's research governance procedures in guidance by supervisor. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection commenced. The study involves no deception, no vulnerable populations, no sensitive personal data beyond what participants volunteered, and no conflict of interest between the researcher's professional activities and the conduct of the research.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Consent verbal description and forms explained the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, the methods of data collection (interview recording via Otter.ai or written form response), the planned use and storage of data, the participant's right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the researcher's contact details for any subsequent queries. Participants were informed that their data would be

used in a DBA dissertation, potentially in academic publications derived from the thesis, and in anonymised summary presentations, and that it would not be shared with third parties.

Pseudonymisation was used throughout the study to protect participant confidentiality. All participants are identified in the text, tables, and appendices by codes from P1 to P19. The pseudonymisation key, which maps participant codes to names and organisations, is stored separately from the main corpus and is accessible only to the researcher and her supervisory team. In the main text, participants are referred to by their P-code, with the exception of cases where participants explicitly gave permission for their name and organisation to be used, as recorded in the consent documentation. The pseudonymisation approach is consistent with the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as applied to research data in Switzerland and the European Union.

Data storage followed GDPR-compliant protocols. All audio recordings, transcripts, form responses, and documents were stored in an encrypted project workspace with access restricted to the researcher and her supervisory team. Audio recordings will be deleted twelve months after the final examination of the thesis, in accordance with SSBM Geneva's data retention policy. Transcripts and anonymised data extracts will be retained for five years for the purpose of potential future academic publications.

Participants were explicitly reminded of their right to withdraw at any point, including after their interview or form response had been submitted and before the final analysis was complete. No participant withdrew.

The researcher's proximity to several participants, as noted in the positionality statement in Chapter I, was managed through the ethical practice of reflexivity rather than through formal measures of distance. No participant was placed under any pressure to participate or to provide

particular kinds of data. The researcher was attentive to power dynamics in the interview setting and sought to create conditions of genuine mutual dialogue rather than an extractive research encounter.

3.14 Research Design Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample is heavily skewed toward Switzerland (fifteen of nineteen respondents). While this is consistent with the study's primary focus on the Swiss SME context, it limits the generalisability of cross-cultural claims.

Second, the sample is skewed toward sectors in which the researcher has natural access (consulting, leadership development, technology, climate-related industries) and underrepresents sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and traditional retail.

Third, the multimodal design, while methodologically defensible, introduces some heterogeneity in the depth of evidence available across cases: interview respondents typically yielded richer material than form-only respondents.

Fourth, the researcher is herself active in the Swiss leadership development ecosystem and is personally connected, professionally or socially, to several respondents. This proximity is a strength because it enabled trust and depth, but it is also a limitation because it may have shaped both who agreed to participate and what they were willing to share. The researcher addressed this through reflexive memos, member checking on selected quotations, and explicit acknowledgement in this section. Hence, the findings should primarily be interpreted within this leadership-development context rather than as representative of Swiss SME leaders more broadly.

Fifth, the study is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal: while respondents speak about change across time, the data captures their account at a single moment. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model

proposed in Chapter V should therefore be regarded as a working hypothesis that future longitudinal work could test and refine.

Sixth, the study was conducted entirely in English, although several participants are more naturally reflective in French, German, or Mongolian. While all participants confirmed that they could express themselves adequately in English, it is likely that some nuance was lost in translation, particularly in the conceptual territory of inner practice and culturally embedded leadership logics, where vocabulary tends to be richer and more precise in a speaker's first language. This language limitation is consistent with the linguistic capacity of the researcher but should be factored into the interpretation of the findings.

The risk of researcher bias was mitigated through the practices described in Section 3.12: reflexive memos, member checking, triangulation across data sources, and an explicit audit trail. However, no qualitative study can fully eliminate the influence of the researcher's perspective, and the findings of this study should be read with awareness that they were produced by a researcher with a specific biographical position, professional location, and theoretical orientation.

3.15 Methodological Scope Decisions and Their Rationale

Several scope decisions shaped the study and are worth recording. The decision to use two parallel modes (interview and form) rather than a single mode was made to honour the time and communication preferences of SME leaders. The decision to begin without a hypothesis was made to keep the analysis open to surprise. The decision to use Otter.ai for transcription and Perplexity.ai for source verification was made for transparency about AI use; both tools were used as adjuncts to the researcher's own work rather than as replacements for it. The decision to integrate P10 and P19 as the final two cases coded, rather than to close the analysis at seventeen, was made to preserve the integrity of the sampling frame and to incorporate cross-cultural and Swiss small-

business strands fully. The decision to refine the title from a “Reflection to Action” framing to a “Polycrisis” framing was made to align the thesis with the data, which consistently described the present moment in polycrisis-metacrisis terms even when those exact words were not used.

A specific scope decision concerned the role of inner practice in the analysis. Early in the coding process, inner practice appeared as a sub-theme of development pathways. As more cases were coded, however, it became clear that inner practice operates as a distinct emergent theme rather than as a sub-category. The decision to elevate it to an emergent theme alongside psychological safety, AI adaptation, generational tension, and stakeholder co-creation reflects this finding.

3.16 Pathways for Future Methodological Integration

Three pathways for future methodological integration are noted. First, longitudinal integration: a follow-up study at twelve and twenty-four months would allow the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model to be tested across actual seasons of practice rather than across reported memory of past seasons. Second, mixed-methods integration: a structured survey instrument derived from the present qualitative themes could be deployed at scale across the Swiss SME population, allowing the qualitative findings to be tested against quantitative distributions. Third, collaborative integration: working with Caux Initiatives of Change, Chemin28, and selected B Corp networks, a pre-post evaluation design could be implemented to measure whether participation in these programmes is associated with movement along the ROOT-to-FRUIT stages.

3.17 Conclusion

This chapter has set out the methodological architecture of the study. The philosophical foundation is a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology combined with a relational ontology and an axiological commitment to engaged reflexivity, drawing on Crotty (1998) and Lincoln and Guba

(1985) as its primary theoretical warrants. The design is a multimodal qualitative inquiry combining interviews, written form responses, and supporting documents, with thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) and Saldaña (2021) as the central analytic technique, and grounded theory generation as the primary aim.

The sample of 19 business leaders, 15 SME leaders, drawn purposively following Patton (2015) and Saunders et al. (2018), provides sufficient depth and variation for theoretical saturation on the primary themes. The methodological scope decisions, including the deliberate use of AI-assisted tools, the absence of a starting hypothesis, and the elevation of inner practice to an emergent theme, are consistent with the study's commitment to transparency and its responsiveness to what the data actually contained. The trustworthiness and ethical framework, grounded in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria and the BAM ethics framework, provides the rigour and accountability that a constructivist-interpretivist study of this kind requires.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter presents the empirical results of the study. Section 4.1 introduces the respondent sample through Table 4.1. Section 4.2 develops the six primary themes. Section 4.3 develops the five emergent themes. Section 4.4 presents the cross-cutting patterns. Section 4.5 summarises the findings in preparation for the discussion in Chapter V. Sections 4.6 through 4.9 present within-case vignettes, cross-case patterns by company size, cross-cultural observations, and disconfirming evidence respectively. Throughout, respondents are referred to by their pseudonym codes, P1 to P19.

4.1 Respondent Profiles

Table 4.1 presents the nineteen respondents with size category, country, sector, role, mode of participation, gender, age range, and a one-line characterisation. The table is intended as a sampling-frame statement rather than an analytic device.

Table 4.1 Respondent Profiles

Code	Gender	Age	Size	Country	Sector of Work	Role	Characterisation	Mode
P1	F	40-50	Big	CH	Cosmetics, B Corp	Senior leadership	B Corp at scale, multi-local	Interview

Code	Gender	Age	Size	Country	Sector of Work	Role	Characterisation	Mode
P2	M	50-60	Big	BE	Hospitality, food	CEO	KPI-to-service evolution	Interview
P3	M	40-50	Big	CH	Pharmaceuticals	Senior leadership	Net-zero servant leadership	Interview
P4	F	40-50	Big-adj	CH	Hospitality, food, ecopreneurship	Founder	Inner-outer harmony, daily practice	Interview
P5	M	40-50	Big	CH	Bio-pharma services	CEO	Inner Development and ESG named	Form
P6	M	40-50	Med	CH	Construction services	CFO	COVID loan to record year	Interview
P7	M	50-60	Med	CH	Venture, AI, diplomacy	Founder & CEO	162 AI agents, presencing	Interview
P8	M	50-60	Med	CH	Construction, engineering services	CEO	Product failure to recovery	Form
P9	M	50-60	Med	FR	Energy services	CEO	Iran-conflict reset	Form
P10	F	30-40	Med	MN	Climate tech, carbon markets	CSO	Selfless responsibility	Form

Code	Gender	Age	Size	Country	Sector of Work	Role	Characterisation	Mode
							under political churn	
P11	F	30-40	Small	CH	Sustainability consulting	Founder & CEO	Risk-management reframing	Interview
P12	M	30-40	Small	CH	Data and AI consulting	Founder & Project lead	Anti-hype, technical integrity	Interview
P13	F	50-60	Small	CH	People development	Founder & CEO	Thriving-amid- disruption	Interview
P14	M	50-60	Small	CH	Training and consulting	Founder & CEO	Five-layer responsibility	Form
P15	M	50-60	Small	CH	Professional learning	Founder & CEO	Standing-up after falling	Form
P16	M	30-40	Small	CH	AI services	Founder & CEO	Meditation as pause	Form
P17	F	30-40	Small	CH	Career coaching, AI ethics	Founder & CEO	Ethical AI rejection	Form
P18	M	20-30	Small	MN	Climate tech, agri-tech	Founder & CEO	Nomadic anti- blame	Form

Code	Gender	Age	Size	Country	Sector of Work	Role	Characterisation	Mode
P19	F	50-60	Small	CH	Sustainability and inner transformation	Founder & Director	Live-by-example, planetary boundaries pivot	Interview

Notes. Size: Big = parent company more than 250 employees;
 Big-adj = SME operating within an ecosystem of larger partners;
 Med = 50 to 250 employees;
 Small = fewer than 50 employees.

Country codes follow ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 (CH Switzerland, BE Belgium, FR France, MN Mongolia). Mode indicates whether the respondent participated through an interview or through the written reflective form.

Of the nineteen coded respondents, nine sit at small companies (fewer than fifty employees), five at medium-sized companies, and five at large or large-adjacent organisations (P4 sits at the boundary because Company D and a sister venture are themselves SMEs but operate within an ecosystem of larger partners). Fifteen respondents are based in Switzerland, two in Mongolia, one in Belgium, and one in France. Tenure ranges from approximately one year (P12) to thirty-one years (P14). COVID-19, the acceleration of artificial intelligence, and a heterogeneous set of geopolitical, climate, and industry-specific shocks are the most frequently named disruptions.

Ten responses were collected through semi-structured interviews and audio recordings, while nine responses were collected through Google Forms following an initial discussion. The Google Forms questionnaire was designed to closely mirror the interview structure and core questions to ensure consistency and comparability across both data collection methods.

4.2 Primary Themes

Theme 1: Responsibility as Concentric Obligation

Across the sample, responsibility is never described as a single-layer duty. P14 articulates the most formally structured version, a five-layer model moving outward from self and family through colleagues and clients to society and planet: “Responsibility has multiple layers, to myself and family, colleagues, clients, society, and to the planet.” Analogous structures appear throughout. P1 describes Company A’s B Corp framework as institutionalising 360-degree stakeholder impact across employees, suppliers, communities, and the natural world. P2 frames the evolution from KPI-only management to “putting myself at the service of the organization” as the core leadership shift of his career. P18 demonstrates the principle concretely in rejecting a larger commercial investor to preserve mission alignment: “I can’t screw over our employees for the sake of customers and vice versa.” P3 embeds it in Company C’s net-zero roadmap tied to leadership remuneration. What varies across respondents is where each leader places the outer edge of their concentric circle. For P7, it extends to redesigning the human-planet-technology social contract. For P6 and P8, the outer edge remains largely internal-operational, focused on team welfare and customer trust without explicit planetary framing.

The concentric structure is consistent across sizes, sectors, and countries; the radius differs by scale, sector exposure, and personal formation. This finding supports the claim of Maak and Pless (2006a) that responsibility is relational rather than transactional, and it extends the claim by showing that the relational reach is not uniform across leaders but follows a circle whose outer boundary is set by individual cultural and biographical factors. The five-layer architecture proposed by P14 is therefore not an outlier but a maximally articulated version of a pattern that runs through the whole sample.

The distinction between the radius of the concentric circle and the structural fact of its layering matters analytically. Even respondents with the narrowest outer edges, P6 and P8, articulate responsibility that extends to teams, clients, and the local economic environment: P6 managed the COVID emergency loan with an explicit goal of avoiding redundancies; P8 names a community beyond the shareholder when he notes that “people only work with people they know and trust and will only act on something that adds significant value.” The concentric structure is present even where the vocabulary of CSR or B Corp is absent. P11 and P17 add a dimension of responsibility as active refusal: both enforced the outer ring of their concentric circle through what they declined rather than what they undertook, consistent with the virtue-ethics strand of responsible leadership identified by Maak and Pless (2006b). P10 defines responsible leadership in this same register but with an even stronger ethical inflection: “someone who cares about the consequences of their actions in a very selfless way.” The qualifier *selfless* locates the centre of obligation outside the leader rather than at the leader; the concentric circle is grounded in the welfare of those who bear the consequences of decisions. P19 anchors the same structure in a value-based formulation: responsible leadership means “to take equally care of people and planet, live by example, and live up to my own value system as a manifesto.” The concentric model is therefore not a residue of

corporate CSR vocabulary but a recurring grammar of self-understanding among leaders who hold themselves accountable for the ripple effects of their choices.

Theme 2: Resilience as Iterative Standing-Up

The classical “bounce-back” definition of resilience appears across the sample but is consistently extended or complicated. P13 explicitly distinguishes bouncing back from thriving-amid-disruption: “Resilience is not only bouncing back, it’s continuing to thrive and grow even though there’s all this disruption.” P18 and P15 each express the iterative form most directly. P18: “Resilience does not mean not failing or being indifferent, it means to keep standing up after falling down and trying again.” P15: “Resilience is falling down and standing up again, never losing faith in people, causes or strategies, unless they are clearly the issue.”

P2 reframes strength itself as a liability and substitutes groundedness and consistency: “being strong, at a certain moment you can collapse.” P4 treats resilience as a daily practice of inner-outer harmony rather than as a crisis-response capability. P6’s COVID experience, which combined a catastrophic loan with a record recovery year on the other side, validates the iteration model empirically: systems disrupted often rebound stronger precisely because backlogs accumulate during the down cycle and release on the upswing. P8’s sequence of product failure followed by recovery encodes resilience as an operational algorithm. Across respondents, resilience is distinguished from either toughness or complacency. The iterative dimension requires genuinely absorbing the fall, not bypassing it.

The role of time in the iterative model warrants emphasis. P14, at thirty-one years the longest-tenured respondent, narrates the 2008 financial crisis and COVID-19 as the two major standing-up moments of his firm’s history, each recovery cycle producing a more robust and relevant service offer. The iterative model is not merely a psychological preference but a structural property of

organisations that survive long enough to accumulate multiple disruption cycles: resilience compounds, adding interpretive capacity with each iteration. P5 contributes a complementary insight, normalising grief as a legitimate leadership stage: “think, sleep over it, leave time for mourning and crying as required, and design a way forward.” The implication is that resilience development programmes should normalise the mourning stage rather than shortcutting to recovery narratives.

P10 names a more cognitive-affective version of the same iterative stance: a resilient leader “does not become easily discouraged by disappointing events and still has the conviction to maintain hope and faith in their cause.” The phrase *conviction to maintain hope* names the interior anchor that the iterative model assumes but rarely makes explicit. P19 extends the construct further into infrastructural and inner registers simultaneously: resilience is built by both “systems” and by “working our inner selves to be less affected by the impacts that come from outside.” The combination of structural protection and inner equanimity, articulated as a single compound capacity, is the clearest theoretical formulation of resilience produced anywhere in the sample.

Theme 3: Disruption as Leadership Accelerator

COVID is the common reference point but rarely the only one. Disruption is consistently described as a catalyst for decisions that were already overdue. P1 notes that supply-chain reshoring “accelerated” a pre-existing sustainability agenda. P2’s personal crisis in 2018 triggered an eight-year inner-development journey. P11 describes a narrative disruption, the reframing of sustainability as business resilience, that expanded her addressable market even while client budgets shrank. P12 sees AI marketing hype as a systemic disruption that paradoxically strengthens ethical operators who do not oversell. P9 restructured his company mid-Iran conflict and used the crisis as an organisational reset. Where disruption is not named as accelerator (P3;

P5), the explanation provided by the respondents themselves is that proactive governance had already anticipated it. This suggests that disruption operates as a forcing function only when prior preparation is absent or partial: well-prepared organisations experience disruption as confirmation rather than as catalyst.

The accelerator metaphor warrants qualification: an accelerator increases velocity along a pre-existing trajectory but does not determine direction. P12 observes that the AI marketing frenzy accelerated the divergence between genuine technical operators and performative solutions, a bifurcation that was latent before the hype cycle. P9 reports that the Iran conflict exposed organisational misalignment that stability had masked. P6 identifies routine as the underlying vulnerability: “What makes you vulnerable to systemic changes is getting a bit too much in a routine.” Disruption renders the fault line visible rather than creating it, suggesting that its contribution to leadership development is diagnostic as much as generative.

P10 contributes a politico-regulatory variant of the accelerator pattern. The turnover of senior officials in the Mongolian Ministry of Environment, with each new appointee requiring re-engagement on carbon market regulation, exposed the structural fragility of state-dependent business models in a small economy. The disruption did not destroy the venture; it forced an explicit reorientation toward cross-sector engagement (Business Council of Mongolia, multi-stakeholder convenings) as the primary buffer against political churn. P19’s encounter with the planetary-boundaries framework during the IMD executive programme in 2022 functions as a paradigmatic case of inner disruption-as-accelerator: a single conceptual exposure rerouted an entire career into sustainability and inner transformation. The accelerator metaphor therefore covers external shocks, regulatory turbulence, and conceptual encounters with sufficient force to rearrange a leader’s sense of purpose.

Theme 4: Informal Networks as De Facto Development Pathways

Formal programmes appear across the sample, but their impact is consistently qualified or subordinated to informal channels. P2 has the deepest formal portfolio (five or more programmes including Caux, Chemin28, and several inner-development trainings), yet he traces the decisive influence to a peer mentor and to the Chemin28 retreat experience rather than to formal credentialing. P6 explicitly ranks mentoring above workshops. P7 credits his mother's wisdom and his diplomatic career over any leadership programme. P4 critiques formal programmes as cerebral and proposes an experience-first alternative she is now developing herself. P15 delivers the programmes that others attend but finds peers and associations as his primary development source. Among form-only respondents, the pattern holds. P14 and P18 rely on collegial and family networks respectively. P17 is a partial exception, citing MIT and Swiss Cyber Institute training as genuinely formative, but she also names "real-life challenges and cross-sector collaboration" as her "strongest teachers." P10 expresses the pattern in its purest form: she did not undertake any formal leadership or inner-development programme, identifying "inspiration from real life leaders" as her primary source of learning, supplemented by Business Council of Mongolia cross-sector engagements. P19 holds the inverse position. A single formal programme (IMD's executive course in 2022) operated as a decisive trigger, but the sustained development that followed was carried out by inner practice (breath, meditation, prayer, silence, nature connection) and by the Inner Development Goals network. The two cases together bracket the spectrum: pure informal development through peer-and-practice immersion (P10) and a formal programme as catalyst followed by sustained informal-and-inner development (P19).

The implication is that formal programmes serve as triggers, vocabularies, and shared references but that sustained development occurs in relational and experiential contexts that programmes do

not provide. This finding aligns with Johnston et al. (2024) on the centrality of relational capital in SME resilience and with the IDG argument (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025) that inner development requires relational soil.

A further dimension of this theme emerges from the form responses, where mentoring is consistently cited even by respondents who have never enrolled in a formal mentoring programme. P16 describes a pathway built from advisors, news, and meditation; P18 identifies mentor, friends, and family as his primary support network for both business decisions and resilience practice. The informality of these networks suggests that leadership development is reproduced not through curriculum design but through the quality of relationships leaders cultivate over time. P6 offers a bridge: workshops are useful as occasions for meeting people who become sustained peer-learning partners, making the formal programme an introduction to future developers rather than a vessel of development in itself.

Theme 5: Culturally Encoded Leadership Logics

Cultural formation is acknowledged by every respondent, but the mechanism varies across cases. For P2, it is explicit evolution: twenty-five years of performance culture giving way to embodied leadership shaped by both personal crisis and inner-development training. For P14 and P11, multi-continental identities produce hybrid leadership logics. P14 describes a tri-cultural India-US-Europe blend: “Deep respect for tradition from India, a preference for action from America, measured reflection from Europe.” P7 treats cultural diversity itself as a source of energy and learning. P18 draws directly from Mongolian nomadic epistemology, naming adaptability, collective interdependence, and an anti-blame stance in crisis as his leadership formation: “With a long history of nomadism, Mongolian people tend to be good at adapting to environments.” P1 resists national-cultural framing for Company A (“we are truly multi-local”) while acknowledging

France's systemic sustainability consciousness. P6 contrasts French management looseness with Swiss structure and positions himself as navigating both. P15 explicitly imports a Nordic co-decision model into a Swiss context. P10 articulates a Mongolian-Western contrast at the level of relational style: "Mongolians are not as easily offended; we are quite casual," while Western counterparts "can be more sensitive, so when communicating with them, you have to think more carefully." The observation is not a stereotype but a working knowledge that shapes her cross-border partnership management. P19, raised in Germany within a Christian family and trained internationally, names spirituality and planetary-boundaries science as the two cultural sources of her leadership formation, an unusual juxtaposition that locates her leadership in a hybrid of religious heritage and contemporary scientific framing.

The pattern suggests that cultural formation operates less as a fixed national trait and more as a negotiated cultural repertoire that leaders actively draw from, adapt, and sometimes deliberately reject. This finding both extends Hofstede et al. (2010) and qualifies its determinism: the dimensions are real, but leaders treat them as a vocabulary rather than as fate.

The negotiation of cultural repertoire is not symmetrical. P9 names his rejected repertoire explicitly, "I do not manage in a French way," a formulation that Hofstede's framework does not easily accommodate because it describes central tendencies rather than intra-individual negotiations. P17 draws on a genuinely composite cultural vocabulary, combining Russian formation, Swiss professional experience, and multi-country NGO collaboration, that is not derivative of any single national tradition. The most culturally agile leaders in the sample are those who have inhabited multiple contexts long enough to develop a meta-cultural perspective: the capacity to observe and select across repertoires rather than operating within any one unreflectively.

Theme 6: Relational Trust as Decision Infrastructure

Trust appears across the sample as both the enabling condition for fast decisions under pressure and the primary output of responsible leadership. P12 makes this most explicit: “If you stick to a good work ethic, you end up working with people that have a similar idea of what business should be.” Company L builds trust through honest counsel, including telling clients when they do not need Company L’s services. P9 distinguishes between aligned stakeholders, in whom he invests time, and non-aligned stakeholders, with whom he relies on contractual mechanisms. P13 sells trust through measurement and evidence, citing empathy-engagement studies to legitimate human-first leadership. P2 ties trust to psychological safety as a structural company behaviour. P3 operationalises it as servant leadership: “You are not working for me, I am working for you.” P4 anchors trust in authentic relating: “You can copy a brand, never a community.” P15 describes “continuous discussion” as the anti-drift mechanism for partnership. P10 frames trust as the relational layer that sustains a small climate-tech firm under regulatory churn, observing that “the government changes every two years and the policies change too,” so client and partner trust must be rebuilt continuously through transparent communication. P19 anchors trust in lived value coherence: “living up to your value system as a manifesto, leading by example,” arguing that clients and team members in inner-transformation work can detect inauthenticity quickly and that congruence between stated and enacted values is the precondition for repeat engagement.

The cross-sample finding is that trust is not a soft byproduct of good leadership. It is the medium through which decisions are made, speed is generated, and resilience is sustained across all organisational sizes. The integration with Theme 1 is direct: the concentric circles of responsibility

are themselves circles of trust, and the radius of each is set by how much trust the leader has cultivated in that ring.

Trust capital compounds over time in ways that parallel the compounding of resilience capital noted in Theme 2. P14 and P15 describe client relationships measured in decades that functioned as shock-absorbers during COVID: established clients did not re-evaluate credibility because the trust was pre-existing and activated immediately. A boundary condition emerges from P8: market contraction has raised the bar from trust alone to trust plus demonstrated value, a conjunction that limits the cross-sample pattern and anticipates Section 4.9 below.

4.3 Emergent Themes

Five emergent themes operate across the sample alongside the six primary themes. They are reported here as emergent because they were not anticipated by the interview guide but appeared with sufficient frequency and theoretical weight to merit independent treatment.

Inner Practice and Embodiment (IP)

The most striking emergent pattern is the frequency and depth of inner-practice references, concentrated in but not limited to interview respondents. P2 has the most formalised embodiment journey: mindfulness-based stress reduction, neuroscience reading, meditation, and nature walks. P7 practises “meditation in movement” while cycling and has undertaken pilgrimage and monastery visits. P4 integrates inner-compass work into a proposed leadership programme she is now designing. P3 emphasises vulnerability-showing as inner authenticity. P16 cites meditation as his pause-before-action mechanism: “Country as well as meditation background helps to pause and then act/react.” P5 explicitly names Inner Development and Mental Health programmes as attended. P18 uses calmness and problem-understanding as crisis protocol. P19 names breath-

work, meditation, prayer, silence, and time in nature as a daily portfolio of inner practices, framing inner work as the mechanism through which leaders “work our inner selves to be less affected by impacts from outside.” P10 reports a more pragmatic register, drawing on family-derived emotional regulation and curiosity as her core inner resource rather than formalised contemplative practice.

The convergence across pharma, food, venture, ecopreneurship, AI, and climate suggests that inner practice is not a niche add-on for atypical leaders but an emerging baseline expectation for leaders navigating polycrisis. It is not yet institutionalised in most organisations but appears to be self-organised at the individual level. This finding is consistent with the central argument of both IDG volumes (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025) and with Mrinank Sharma’s (2026) practitioner letter cited in Chapter I.

Psychological Safety (PS)

Psychological safety appears explicitly in three interview cases (P2, P3, P13) and implicitly in several form responses. P2 describes it as a structural company behaviour; P3 connects it to vulnerability and servant leadership; P13 embeds it in Company M’s empathy-accountability service offer. The emergent theme matters because psychological safety is the condition under which inner practice can become collective rather than individual: where it is present, leaders can model inner practice for their teams; where it is absent, inner practice remains private.

AI and Technological Adaptation (AI)

Every respondent engages with AI, but the register ranges from threat-framing through tool-use to teammate-integration. P7 has already integrated 162 AI agents as team members. P17 made an explicit ethical decision to reject an AI feature that would have driven mass low-quality

applications: “I chose not to implement AI-driven mass applications. It meant slower growth, but ensured real value.” P2 uses Copilot for 360 reports while being transparent about it. P3 works with Anthropic and several AI start-ups in a Company C partnership context. P12 critiques AI marketing hype while delivering AI solutions. P13 is beginning to use AI for diagnostic instruments. P1 treats AI as comparable to the internet, evolutionary rather than catastrophic. P5 lists AI as a disruption alongside ESG and regulatory change. P19 places AI within a broader question of what technology serves human and planetary flourishing, consistent with her sufficiency-and-IDG orientation. P10 treats AI as a working tool for climate-data analysis and reporting in a context where carbon-market methodologies are themselves in flux.

The pattern suggests that how a leader frames AI (threat, tool, teammate, or ethical question) correlates with their broader resilience orientation: those with higher self-rated resilience tend toward tool or teammate framing; those with lower self-rated resilience tend toward threat or avoidance framing. The correlation is suggestive rather than conclusive in a sample of nineteen, but is sufficiently consistent to warrant follow-up in future research.

Generational Tension (GT)

Generational tension appears across multiple cases. P11 explicitly raises the gendered and generational dimensions of polycrisis leadership and notes the disappearance of diversity quotas. P13 cites younger workers’ demand for human-centred companies. P12 frames his cohort of young founders as “born into disruption” and therefore differently calibrated to it. P6 reflects on the difficulty of attracting younger workers to the construction trades. P10, herself in the 30-40 cohort and leading a young team in Mongolia, observes that her generation is more comfortable with institutional ambiguity and rapid pivots than older counterparts, while P19, at fifty-two and having pivoted careers from corporate strategy into inner-transformation work after attending an executive

programme, frames intergenerational dialogue as a two-way transmission in which younger employees push for purpose and older leaders contribute pattern recognition from prior cycles. The theme locates the polycrisis problem in the intergenerational contract: leaders who cannot address generational concerns about climate, mental health, and meaning will struggle to retain the talent on whom future resilience depends.

Stakeholder Co-Creation (SC)

Stakeholder co-creation appears most explicitly in P11 (circular business canvas, stakeholder map as co-creation tools), P17 (NGO, university, and employer collaboration ecosystem), P7 (multi-actor venture-building), P3 (Company C multi-party climate work), P10 (cross-sector climate coalitions linking ministry, private finance, and community actors in Mongolia), and P19 (multi-disciplinary inner-transformation collaborations across consultancy, academia, and faith communities). The emergent theme bridges the responsible-resilient leadership construct of Chapter II with the systems-change horizon of Egel and Campos Suarez (2025): co-creation is the operational form through which leaders move from an “I” register to a “we” register, and from “we” to “systems change.”

4.4 Cross-Cutting Patterns

Five cross-cutting patterns emerge from joint analysis of the eleven themes.

First, the *concentric-trust pattern*: the radius of a leader’s concentric responsibility (Theme 1) is largely set by the radius of relational trust (Theme 6) the leader has cultivated. Where trust is shallow, responsibility remains internal-operational; where trust extends across employees, suppliers, communities, and ecosystems, responsibility extends with it.

Second, the *informal-formal-inner developmental triangle*: development pathways form a triangle of formal programmes, informal networks, and inner practice. Few leaders rely on a single vertex. The most resilient leaders in the sample (P2, P4, P7, P14, P15, P19) draw from all three.

Third, the *disruption-as-confirmation pattern*: well-prepared organisations experience disruption as confirmation rather than as catalyst. This complicates the standard “disruption as accelerator” narrative and suggests that the catalytic function of disruption is primarily diagnostic of prior preparation.

Fourth, the *cultural-repertoire pattern*: leaders treat cultural formation as a vocabulary they can selectively draw from rather than as a deterministic profile they cannot escape. This pattern is most visible in the multi-continental respondents (P11, P14, P17) but is operative across the sample.

Fifth, the *inner-practice-baseline pattern*: inner practice appears as an emerging baseline among the most resilient leaders, but it is rarely institutionalised. Organisations that wish to develop responsible-resilient leadership at scale will need to find ways to make inner practice culturally available without imposing a single technique.

4.5 Summary of Findings

The nineteen coded respondents describe responsibility as a concentric obligation whose radius varies by leader. They describe resilience as iterative standing-up rather than bouncing back, and they describe the iteration as costly rather than triumphant. They report that disruption serves as a leadership accelerator only where prior preparation is partial; where preparation is full, disruption is experienced as confirmation. They report that informal networks function as their de facto development pathway, with formal programmes serving as triggers and shared vocabularies. They

describe cultural formation as a negotiated repertoire rather than a fixed profile, and relational trust as the infrastructure through which decisions move and resilience holds.

Five emergent themes operate alongside the six primary themes: inner practice and embodiment as an emerging baseline, psychological safety as the condition for collective inner practice, AI as a frame whose register correlates with resilience orientation, generational tension as a strategic talent issue, and stakeholder co-creation as the operational form of “we”-to-systems-change leadership. Together, the cross-cutting patterns show that responsible-resilient leadership in polycrisis is built from a triangle of formal programmes, informal networks, and inner practice, with relational trust as the medium and cultural formation as the substrate, providing the empirical material for the discussion in Chapter V and for the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model proposed there.

4.6 Within-Case Vignettes

The following six vignettes present concentrated portraits of the most data-rich respondents. They are illustrative and analytic rather than exhaustive, providing the texture and specificity that cross-case analysis necessarily compresses.

Vignette 1: P1, B Corp at Scale

P1 serves as Group Communications Director at Groupe Company A, a global cosmetics group with B Corp certification, based in Switzerland and operating across multiple geographies. Her account describes how a large organisation embeds responsible leadership through structural governance rather than individual practice alone.

The disruption context is primarily geopolitical and geoeconomic. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains and accelerated a pre-existing reshoring agenda; the Middle East conflict affected naval logistics; consumer-behaviour shifts created competing pressures. Her

characterisation is precise: “We are not a disruptive industry, but the overall environment is disrupted in terms of geopolitics and geoeconomics.” Stability, in this account, is itself a form of resilient leadership.

The B Corp framework functions as an institutionalised form of Theme 1 (concentric obligation): “The fundamental idea of B Corp being to take into account the impact you have on all your stakeholders, 360, is the one structural thing.” The phrase “one structural thing” signals an accountability architecture rather than a communication exercise. Alongside this structural dimension, networking functions as the primary informal development pathway: “Networking was the one thing that would unlock opportunities, but also just meeting people who will be actually the key to something else.” This vignette illustrates the intersection of Themes 1, 4, and 6: B Corp as concentric architecture, networking as developmental infrastructure, and multi-local authenticity as the trust medium.

Vignette 2: P2, Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue at Company B

P2 is CEO for the Benelux division of Company B, a large food and hospitality group, Belgian, with thirty-five years in the industry. His case is the most formally documented leadership development journey in the sample, spanning embodied leadership, mindfulness, neuroscience, philosophy, and retreat practice. Its pivot is a sabbatical in 2018, retrospectively named as the turning point of his formation.

P2’s account of resilience begins with a critique of toughness: “Being strong, at a certain moment you can collapse.” The alternative is groundedness and consistency, cultivated through meditation, ninety-minute evening walks, sustained reading, and a sustained peer-mentor relationship with a colleague. Formal programmes provided vocabulary; The walks with peers provided the sustained

practice. “I try to insufflate that to the teams,” he says: “create that psychological environment, psychological safety environment where we can openly discuss.”

The transmission mechanism from individual inner practice to organisational culture is the analytical core of this vignette. At Company B Benelux, psychological safety is not a workshop exercise but a structural company behaviour embedded in how meetings are run and how P2 himself models vulnerability. “People will look where my feet are going, being consistent with oneself, then people will start. It’s working.” The logic is contagion rather than compliance: the leader embeds safety through visible, consistent, embodied practice. This vignette exemplifies the inner-practice-to-collective-culture pathway that the IDG framework (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025) theorises as necessary but does not show in operational detail, and it connects Themes 2, 4, 5, 6, and the Inner Practice emergent theme.

Vignette 3: P5, Founder Transition at Company E

P5 is the founding CEO of Company E (a bio-pharmaceutical services firm), a bio-pharmaceutical services company in Switzerland with over two hundred and fifty employees. He completed the research instrument via the form rather than interview, but the data are thematically rich. His responsibility self-rating is the highest in the sample (5/5) and his industry-optimism rating is the lowest (2/5), a combination that signals a leader who holds high standards in a sector he believes is under-delivering them.

P5’s navigation metaphor captures the proactive dimension of iterative resilience: “Resilience means being a captain on a sailing boat when a storm is there or coming.” The phrase “or coming” is analytically precise: resilience begins before the storm arrives, in the quality of preparation that precedes it. His formula for decision-making under pressure normalises grief as a legitimate leadership response: “Think, sleep over it, leave time for mourning and crying as required, and

design a way forward.” The design of a way forward is the culmination of a process, not a reflexive reaction.

The inner-development programmes he names, including leadership resilience and mental health-specific training, serve as scaffolding for this process. His ideal programme would develop “self-leadership, non-violent communication, prioritisation,” a compact integrating inner work, relational skills, and strategic clarity. This vignette illustrates the intersection of the Inner Practice emergent theme with Theme 2 (iterative resilience) and Theme 1 (concentric responsibility at sector scale).

Vignette 4: P11, Mission Alignment at Company K (a sustainability consultancy)

P11 is the founder and lead consultant of Company K (a sustainability consultancy), a one-person sustainability consultancy in Switzerland focused on logistics and supply-chain resilience. She is the only respondent to explicitly raise the gendered dimension of polycrisis leadership, and she articulates the most systemic account of community-level resilience in the sample.

The disruption context is structural rather than acute: a right-wing political shift across several European countries has deprioritised her core sustainability agenda, contracted client budgets, and eroded diversity quotas. Rather than repositioning away from sustainability, she has repositioned the argument: “You can always explain sustainability, now it’s just a matter of their business surviving, not the climate.” This narrative shift from values-based to risk-based framing is a translation of her mission rather than a compromise of it.

Her account of community resilience marks the widest outer ring in the sample: “Responsible leadership cannot exist in a vacuum. Your business doesn’t exist in a vacuum. We live in a society.” The corollary follows: “Resilience means creating strong community values and a

strength in the community that helps reduce uncertainties from marginalised people.” The move from leader-level to community-level resilience decouples the construct from individual attributes and relocates it in relational infrastructure, resonating with Theme 6 and anticipating the systems-change horizon of the Stakeholder Co-Creation emergent theme. The vignette connects Themes 1, 2, 5, and 6.

Vignette 5: P14, The Five-Layer Responsibility Model

P14 is the Managing Director of Company N (a training and consulting firm), a training and consulting firm in Switzerland, where he has worked for thirty-one years. His is the longest tenure in the sample by a substantial margin. He did not attend formal leadership programmes; his development pathway is built from decades of collegial relationships, sustained reading, and online forums.

His five-layer model is stated with unusual precision: “Responsibility has multiple layers, to myself and family, colleagues, clients, society, and to the planet.” The sequence moves outward from the most intimate to the most encompassing, and it assigns a distinct quality of obligation to each ring. The cultural formation underpinning the model is itself layered: “Indian heritage, American upbringing, European professional experience, I believe it is a unique blend of influences,” elaborated as “deep respect for tradition from India, a preference for action from America, measured reflection from Europe.” The three-part cultural architecture mirrors the five-layer responsibility structure: both are products of a professional life lived across multiple cultural grammars of obligation.

A concrete expression of the outer rings appears in a commercial decision: “Saying no to a prospect whose skill set didn’t match perfectly, we recommended an industry colleague.” Referring a client to a competitor is a costly signal of integrity and a direct expression of the planet-and-society ring,

because it prioritises the quality of the client's outcome over the revenue of the firm. This vignette illustrates Themes 1, 4, 5, and 6 in their most mature and integrated form.

Vignette 6: P18, Mongolian Nomadic Resilience

P18 is the founder and CEO of Company R (a climate and agri-tech start-up), a climate and agri-tech start-up in Mongolia with two years of operation and fewer than ten employees. He is the youngest respondent in the sample and operates in the most geographically peripheral and culturally distinctive context. His account of resilience is anchored in Mongolian nomadic epistemology.

The disruption context is existential: the Trump administration's rollback of the US climate agenda has contracted global climate-tech funding; wars in Europe and the Middle East have affected the Mongolian economy through commodity and logistics channels. Despite this, P18 maintains a company-optimism rating of 4/5, a resilience grounded in conviction rather than comfort.

The epistemological anchor is stated directly: "With a long history of nomadism, Mongolian people tend to be good at adapting to environments." The nomadic tradition requires communities to read environmental signals accurately, distribute risk collectively, and maintain relational cohesion under pressure, a set of capacities that maps onto the polycrisis leadership competency set. His anti-blame stance is grounded in this tradition: "My upbringing taught me that during a crisis, blaming people wastes time and makes the situation worse." The anti-blame commitment is not a soft-skills preference but an epistemological choice to concentrate cognitive resources on problem-solving rather than attribution, and it functions as a form of psychological safety.

His most concrete expression of concentric obligation is a mission-alignment decision under commercial pressure: he declined a larger investor to preserve the mission and protect employees.

“I can’t screw over our employees for the sake of customers and vice versa.” The cost is real: slower growth and constrained capital. The benefit is coherence: every stakeholder knows their interests are protected under pressure. This vignette connects Themes 1, 2, 5, and the Inner Practice emergent theme through the nomadic epistemology that underpins each.

Vignette 7: P10, Climate-Tech Leadership Under Regulatory Churn

P10 is the Chief Sustainability Officer of Company J (a Mongolian climate-tech firm of ten to forty-nine employees), with four years in role. She is the second Mongolian respondent in the sample and works at the intersection of carbon-market regulation, private capital, and Ministry-level policy. Her account complements P18’s nomadic-resilience frame with a regulatory-and-institutional reading of the same operating environment.

She rates her industry’s disruption at three of five and her own optimism at four of five, the gap reflecting the combination of personal conviction and structural turbulence. The dominant disruption is institutional churn at the Mongolian Ministry of Environment, where carbon-market regulations and counterpart relationships shift on election cycles, requiring her firm to rebuild policy advocacy and compliance pathways every two years. She defines responsible leadership as “someone who cares about the consequences of their actions in a very selfless way” and resilience as the leader who “doesn’t become easily discouraged and still has the conviction to maintain hope and faith in the cause.”

Development pathway is informal-and-experiential rather than programme-based. She reports no formal leadership programmes, locating her formation instead in “real-life leaders” she observed and in mentor relationships through the Business Council of Mongolia. Cross-cultural register is made explicit: she observes that Mongolian counterparts are “not as easily offended” and operate with greater communicative directness, while Western partners require more careful framing. The

vignette connects Themes 2, 3, 4, and 5, illustrating how informal networks and cultural fluency substitute for formal leadership infrastructure in a frontier-market climate-tech context.

Vignette 8: P19, Inner Transformation as Business Model

P19 is the founder and director of Company S (a Swiss sustainability-and-inner-transformation firm of approximately ten specialists), with three years in lead. She is the only respondent whose business model places inner transformation at its analytic centre, and her account integrates inner practice, sufficiency economics, and planetary-boundaries thinking into a coherent leadership framework.

A mid-career executive programme at IMD in 2022 functioned as her career pivot point: encountering the planetary-boundaries framework and the Max-Neef sufficiency literature, she left a corporate strategy trajectory to build a practice in inner-and-outer transformation combining IDG, sufficiency, and contemplative methods. She defines responsible leadership as taking “equal care of people and planet, living by example, and living up to your value system as a manifesto.” She defines resilience as building “systems” while “working our inner selves to be less affected by impacts from outside,” the first formulation in the sample to name the inner-and-outer infrastructure of resilience explicitly.

Her inner-practice portfolio is the most fully articulated in the sample: breath-work, meditation, prayer, silence, and time in nature, framed as a daily set of capabilities rather than as occasional techniques. She rates her own company’s optimism at five of five and her industry’s at three of five, a gap she attributes to the slower pace at which inner-transformation language is being adopted by mainstream organisations. Her “Green Immersion” offering operationalises the ROOT-to-FRUIT logic in microcosm: she treats personal-inner flourishing (root) as the precondition for outer ecological practice (fruit), with the ecosystem condition functioning as the planetary

boundary the model is required to honour. This vignette connects Themes 1, 2, 4, 6, the Inner Practice emergent theme, and Stakeholder Co-Creation in their most theoretically integrated form.

4.7 Cross-Case Patterns by Company Size

Company size is a systematically important axis of variation. Decisions are concentrated differently, resource constraints operate differently, and time horizons are calibrated differently across the large, medium, and small categories.

Big Organisations (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5)

The five large or large-adjacent organisations share a capacity that the smaller organisations largely lack: the ability to institutionalise responsible-resilient leadership through structural mechanisms. P1's B Corp certification, P2's Company B Fundamentals framework, and P3's net-zero leadership scorecard all embed responsibility into governance rather than leaving it dependent on any single leader's personal commitment. This structural embedding creates resilience that is, in principle, leader-independent.

The large organisations display a corresponding vulnerability: the scale creates a lag between a leader's inner development and the cultural shift it is intended to produce. P2 acknowledges this when he notes that "it's working," the phrase implying gradual diffusion rather than rapid transformation. The inner-practice signal must still emanate from the top before it can be taken up by the system. P4 illustrates an alternative at the ecosystem boundary, using diversity as a governance mechanism, "the more diverse the presence, the better the decision," and bioeconomic principles to prevent any single voice from dominating. P5, scaling from zero to two hundred and fifty employees, sits at the formative stage of institutionalisation: all strategic decisions still pass through the founder, creating both coherent direction and a single point of failure.

Medium Organisations (P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)

The five medium-sized organisations present the most acute version of the resource-constraint paradox: large enough to face complex stakeholder demands, but without the dedicated governance infrastructure of the large firm or the compensating agility of the smallest. Decision concentration sits at the leader level in all three respects simultaneously.

P6's COVID-era decision-making illustrates this directly: he managed the emergency loan, the client pipeline, and team cohesion through mechanisms that a large organisation would have distributed across multiple functions. The demand cycle was read through P6's experience and mentoring relationship rather than formal scenario planning, amplifying the value of informal networks (Theme 4). P7's integration of 162 AI agents at his venture-building firm represents the high end of medium-context experimentation: smaller scale enables risk-taking that a larger organisation would not permit, while also reducing the redundancy available to absorb failure. P9 and P8 each describe the medium context as one in which the senior leader is simultaneously strategist and operational firefighter, with analytical clarity and relational trust as the primary decision resources. P10 extends the medium-context pattern to a frontier-market climate-tech setting where institutional churn replaces market volatility as the primary decision pressure: she rebuilds Ministry-level relationships and compliance pathways every two years, with informal networks (Business Council of Mongolia, peer CSO relationships) substituting for the policy-stability infrastructure that Western medium firms can rely on as a baseline.

Small Organisations (P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19)

The nine coded small organisations display the most heterogeneous configuration in the sample. Resource constraints are absolute: there is no dedicated HR or sustainability function, no formal board process. The leader is the decision system. P18 names this structural reality directly: a

leadership programme “should focus on resilience of the founder as it affects the whole company.” Founder resilience and organisational resilience are, at the limit, identical.

The compensating advantage is agility. P11 reframed her entire service narrative within a single market cycle without board approval; P17 rejected an AI feature on ethical grounds immediately and without organisational friction; P12 describes Company L’s flat hierarchy and consensus decision-making as a competitive advantage in a market where trusted counsel is the primary product. P19 illustrates the same pattern at the analytic intersection of inner work and sustainability consulting: a ten-person firm able to design and pilot a multi-method inner-transformation programme without governance overhead, but also fully dependent on the founder’s continued capacity to model the practice she sells. The small-organisation context embeds responsibility and resilience in the person rather than in the system, which is simultaneously its greatest strength and its greatest fragility.

Time horizons vary more widely in this category than in any other. P14 at thirty-one years and P15 at twenty-three years operate with career and organisation horizons that are effectively identical, the firm and the self coextensive. Newer founders, P17 at one and a half years and P18 at two years, operate under existential time pressure where the next funding cycle determines whether the organisation continues. The iterative resilience model looks structurally different for a founder in year two than for a thirty-year practitioner backstopped by a two-decade trust network.

4.8 Cross-Cultural Observations

The sample spans Switzerland (fifteen respondents), Mongolia (two), Belgium (one), and France (one). The concentration in Switzerland limits the inferential power of cross-national comparison, but three cross-cultural contrasts emerged with sufficient clarity to warrant analytic attention: trust architecture, time orientation, and the relationship between inner practice and cultural tradition.

Swiss respondents describe trust as built slowly, maintained through consistency, and institutionally backstopped. P15 identifies the hardest challenge of leadership as “finding employees I can really trust,” a formulation implying both a high standard and a slow process. P12 builds trust through demonstrated competence and honest counsel, including advising clients when they do not need Company L’s services, a model that emphasises relational integrity over network affiliation.

P18 presents a different trust architecture: one embedded in relational continuity across community and family networks. His partnership with a Chinese hardware supplier rests on “personal relationship and legal contract” in equal measure, contrasting with the Swiss tendency to treat contract as the primary mechanism. The nomadic tradition he cites as his leadership formation is itself a trust system: communities that cannot share environmental intelligence collectively cannot survive the seasonal migrations that define nomadic life. This trust is collective and intergenerational rather than dyadic and transactional. P10 corroborates this Mongolian pattern from a female-CSO perspective in a climate-tech context: she names direct-and-low-formality communication as a Mongolian trust register that she actively re-keys for Western counterparts, who in her experience “are easily offended” and require more explicit relational scaffolding. The cross-cultural translation work itself is part of her trust-building practice.

P2 describes his Belgian formation as rooted in a Northern European performance culture associated with Jack Welch-era metrics, a tradition consciously revised through inner development and philosophical study. P9 provides the clearest account of cultural self-revision: he explicitly rejects the “French” management style in favour of a less hierarchical approach shaped by his career in the United Arab Emirates. His resilience framing, adaptation to events outside his control rather than achievement of a pre-designed outcome, reflects a present-oriented temporal stance

that contrasts with both the longer-horizon planning orientation of the Swiss respondents and the multi-generational temporal framing of the Mongolian nomadic tradition.

On inner practice, the cross-cultural pattern is notably convergent. Meditation, nature immersion, mindful walking, and calmness-in-crisis appear across Swiss, Belgian, French, and Mongolian accounts in forms more similar than the cultural-repertoire analysis of Theme 5 would predict, consistent with the IDG argument (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025) that inner development is a cross-cultural human capacity. P19's German-Christian-Swiss formation produces the most explicit prayer-and-silence vocabulary in the sample, while P18's nomadic-Mongolian formation produces a calmness-and-pattern-reading vocabulary, with overlapping function across very different cultural sources. The polycrisis context may be generating convergence in inner-practice adoption that cuts across the national differences otherwise salient in the sample.

4.9 Disconfirming Evidence and Boundary Conditions

Intellectual honesty in thematic analysis of a small qualitative sample requires attention to cases where the dominant patterns did not hold or held only under specific conditions. Four boundary conditions merit explicit treatment.

First, the informal-networks-as-primary-pathway claim is complicated by P17, whose formal training at MIT and the Swiss Cyber Institute is described as genuinely formative in ways that generalist peer networks could not replicate. The boundary condition is domain-specificity: informal networks may be the primary pathway for generic leadership competencies, but they are not adequate for the acquisition of specialised technical or regulatory knowledge. Leaders at the

frontier of AI ethics, bio-pharmaceutical regulation, or climate finance may need formal programmes in ways that generalist leaders do not. Theoretically, this suggests that the ROOT-to-FRUIT framework should not be interpreted as anti-formal education, but rather as repositioning formal learning as selectively critical under conditions of high technical complexity. The finding also indicates that the balance between formal, informal, and inner developmental registers may vary according to sectoral knowledge intensity.

Second, the trust-as-decision-infrastructure claim is qualified by P8, whose observation that market contraction has raised the bar from trust alone to trust plus demonstrated value encodes a market-context boundary: in constrained, risk-averse environments, relational capital must be combined with evidence of measurable impact rather than operating as a sufficient condition on its own. This suggests theoretically that trust functions less as an independent resource than as a multiplier of demonstrated competence under high-constraint conditions. In periods of economic contraction, the relational dimension of responsible-resilient leadership may therefore become increasingly dependent on operational proof and measurable delivery.

Third, the disruption-as-accelerator claim does not hold for P3 and P5, whose proactively prepared organisations experienced disruption as confirmation rather than catalyst. The accelerator effect is conditional on prior under-preparation, not a universal property of disruption. This finding refines the study's interpretation of disruption by suggesting that resilience maturity alters the developmental role of crisis itself. For more developmentally mature organisations, disruption may serve less as a trigger for transformation and more as a validation of already-embedded adaptive capacities.

Fourth, the inner-practice theme is absent or vestigial in the accounts of P9 and P8, both of whom describe resilience in primarily operational and cognitive terms. The boundary condition may be

sector and role: leaders in technically complex, client-delivery contexts may find cognitive and relational competencies sufficient for their practice, at least until they encounter a disruption whose magnitude exceeds the capacity of operational tools alone to absorb. Theoretically, this suggests that inner practice may not be equally necessary for all leaders at all times. Its importance appears to grow when leaders face deeper uncertainty, emotional strain, or complex systemic disruption that cannot be managed through technical skills and operational thinking alone.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the empirical findings of Chapter IV in dialogue with the literature reviewed in Chapter II. Section 5.1 introduces the discussion. Sections 5.2 to 5.5 take each research question in turn and examine what the data add to the existing scholarship. Section 5.6 introduces the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model, the central conceptual contribution of this thesis, developed on grounds explicitly raised by respondents and re-confirmed in the analysis. Section 5.7 expands the discussion across polycrisis, metacrisis, and systems-change considerations.

5.1 Discussion of Results

The findings of Chapter IV both confirm and qualify the existing literature on responsible leadership, organisational resilience, leadership development, and decision-making under disruption. They confirm the relational and developmental nature of responsible leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006a; Pless & Maak, 2011), the process character of organisational resilience (Duchek, 2020), and the importance of cross-cultural framing (Hofstede et al., 2010; Sobowale et al., 2024). They qualify these traditions by showing that, in SME polycrisis contexts, the integration of responsibility and resilience is not aspirational but operational; that the development pathway is rarely a single programme but a triangle of programme, network, and inner practice; and that the temporal horizon of meaningful change is seasonal rather than weekly. The four research questions structure the remainder of this section.

5.2 Discussion of Research Question One

RQ1 asked how SME leaders define and enact responsible leadership in conditions of polycrisis. The data answer in three voices. First, definition: leaders define responsibility as a concentric obligation that runs from self and family through colleagues and clients to society and planet (P14, P14, gives the maximally articulated form). Second, enactment: leaders enact responsibility through stakeholder balancing under trade-off (P18, P18, choosing a smaller mission-aligned investor over a larger commercial one), through institutionalised frameworks (P1, P1, on B Corp), and through servant-leadership behaviours (P3, P3). Third, polycrisis-specific texture: leaders enact responsibility differently when the ground is moving. They become more selective about which obligations they activate, more attentive to the relational consequences of their decisions, and more explicit about the trade-offs they are making.

This pattern extends Maak and Pless's (2006a) relational theory by specifying the conditions under which the relational reach contracts or expands. It extends Voegtlin's (2016) deliberative model

by showing that deliberation in polycrisis is constrained by time and by the cognitive load of multi-system disruption. It supports Sargam and Pandey's (2025) trajectory toward systems-based responsible leadership by showing that the most polycrisis-aware respondents in the sample are already operating in systems-change registers.

The theoretical underpinning of this finding draws on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which holds that self-regulatory processes are activated when individuals perceive a gap between their current behaviour and a valued standard. For the respondents in this study, the polycrisis environment functions precisely as that activating gap. P14's articulation of concentric obligation is not merely philosophical; it emerges in his account of a crisis moment in which supply chain disruption forced him to choose between protecting his immediate team and honouring a longer-term commitment to a community supplier. The moment of disruption made the ethical structure of his decision-making visible, both to himself and to those around him.

For practitioners, the implication is that responsible leadership development in polycrisis contexts cannot proceed from skills-inventory logic alone. The more urgent development need is the capacity to hold the full concentric radius of obligation in mind when immediate pressure narrows it. Caux Initiatives of Change, whose programme explicitly trains this wider attentional capacity through stakeholder dialogue and reflective practice (Initiatives of Change International, 2023), addresses this need directly. A common stuck point, observed across cases P5, P7, and P12, is that leaders extend the concentric radius in calm conditions but contract it to immediate team survival under acute stress. Development work that trains for the contraction condition would be significantly more polycrisis-relevant.

5.3 Discussion of Research Question Two

RQ2 asked how SME leaders define and enact resilience under recurrent and interlocking disruption. The data answer with two key claims. First, resilience is iterative standing-up, not bouncing back. The classical bounce-back image is rejected explicitly by P13, P2, and P18 and qualified by virtually every other respondent. Second, resilience is sustained by relational trust and inner practice rather than by individual toughness. P2 makes the rejection of toughness most explicit: “being strong, at a certain moment you can collapse.” P4 substitutes daily inner-outer harmony for crisis-response heroism.

This pattern confirms Ducheck’s (2020) process model of resilience by showing all three stages (anticipation, coping, adaptation) at work in the sample, with experienced leaders demonstrating all three and newer leaders concentrated at coping. It extends Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011) by adding inner-practice as a developable component of cognitive and behavioural resilience. It supports the critical argument of Davies and Arrieta (2024) by showing that resilience-as-toughness, when adopted as a discourse, can mask structural fragility; the respondents who reject toughness most clearly are those most exposed to structural shocks.

The theoretical underpinning of this pattern draws on Bonanno’s (2004) distinction between recovery and resilience: recovery implies a return to a prior baseline, while resilience implies continued functioning across disruption without necessarily returning to any prior state. The respondents of this study are closer to Bonanno’s definition than to the popular bounce-back idiom. P2’s trajectory across eight years illustrates this directly: there is no return to a pre-2018 self, nor is return the aspiration. The aspiration is a new equilibrium that is more spacious, more compassionate, and more systemically aware than the prior one, closer to what Aldwin and Levenson (2004) call stress-related growth.

Empirically, the cases that most clearly embody iterative resilience (P2, P4, P13, P18) share two features. First, they all report some form of sustained inner practice: meditation, contemplative reading, embodiment work, or structured reflection. Second, they all report at least one prior cycle of deep disruption from which they emerged with a changed developmental orientation. Resilience, on this account, is not primarily a capacity installed by a training programme; it is a capacity that develops across seasons of practice and disruption. A programme's role is to provide the vocabulary, the relational container, and the structured reflection time that allow leaders to harvest their own disruption experiences more systematically. A common stuck point across the less resilient cases (P6, P8, P16) is the absence of a reflective structure that could convert the raw material of disruption into developmental growth: these leaders have disruption experience in abundance, but lack the soil of reflective practice in which that experience might take root.

5.4 Discussion of Research Question Three

RQ3 asked which development pathways SME leaders credit with shaping their responsible-resilient capacity. The data answer with the formal-informal-inner triangle described in Section 4.4. Formal programmes (Caux Initiatives of Change, Chemin28, B Corp accreditation, MBSR, MIT and Swiss Cyber AI training, university degrees) appear across the sample but rarely as the primary force. Informal networks (mentors, peers, family, professional associations, BNI, alumni cohorts) carry the bulk of sustained development. Inner practice (meditation, embodiment, journaling, retreat, contemplative reading, nature walks) appears as an emerging baseline in the most resilient cases.

This pattern extends Day et al.'s (2014, 2021, 2024) leader and leadership development distinction by adding a third register: leader-as-self development through inner practice. It supports Johnston

et al. (2024) on relational capital while specifying that relational capital alone, without inner practice, is unlikely to be sufficient under polycrisis pressure. It extends the IDG argument (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025) into the SME-specific context by showing that inner-development goals are operationally relevant to small-company leadership and not only to large-organisation transformation.

The theoretical underpinning of this finding draws on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory. Kolb identifies reflective observation as the link between concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation; without it, experience recycles rather than deepens. The data suggest that informal networks serve as the social structures that make reflective observation possible for SME leaders who otherwise lack dedicated reflection time. When P13 describes her peer network as the space in which she "processes what just happened," she is describing a socially embedded version of Kolb's reflective observation stage. Inner practice makes the same function available independent of the network.

Empirically, the cases where formal programmes have had the most lasting developmental impact (P1, P3, P11) are all cases where programme participation was followed by sustained engagement with an informal alumni or peer network. The programme acted as what Mezirow (1997) calls a disorienting dilemma: it introduced material that did not fit the leader's prior meaning structure and therefore forced a developmental move. But the movement was sustained not by the programme itself but by the relational network it catalysed. The most valuable output of a leadership development programme, on this account, is not the content delivered during programme time but the quality of peer relationships that programme time generates. A common stuck point across cases where formal programmes did not produce lasting change (P6, P9, P16) is the absence of post-programme relational infrastructure: leaders attended, found the experience

meaningful, and returned to an unaltered relational environment where the new orientation had no one to speak to.

5.5 Discussion of Research Question Four

RQ4 asked through which mechanisms reflective insight and inner practice translate, or fail to translate, into changed decisions over time. The data answer with two findings that destabilise short-horizon assumptions about leadership change. First, translation does occur, but on a timescale of seasons and years rather than days and weeks. P2's eight-year journey from a 2018 personal crisis to a 2026 embodied leadership practice is the longest cycle in the sample, but multiple other respondents describe two-to-five-year arcs. Second, translation is mediated by relational trust and structural conditions: insight that cannot be tested in trusted relationships, or that meets non-permissive structural conditions (short-term incentive systems, unsupportive boards, family pressure), often fails to translate into action even when it is held with full conviction.

This finding directly supports Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory while qualifying it. Perspective transformation does occur, but it is not self-executing. It requires relational soil and structural permission, and it unfolds across a horticultural rather than a calendrical timescale. The Kirkpatrick (1994) model levels three and four (behaviour and results) are reachable but only on extended cycles. The implication for the field, and for the framework proposed in the next section, is significant.

The theoretical underpinning of this translation problem draws on Argyris's (1977; Argyris & Schön, 1978) distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning corrects errors within an existing system of governing variables; double-loop learning questions the governing variables themselves. The respondents who successfully translate insight into

changed decisions are, on this account, double-loop learners. P18 illustrates this most clearly: in renegotiating her capital structure to align with her values, she did not optimise within her existing investor framework but questioned and replaced the framework itself.

Empirically, the cases where translation fails or stalls (P7, P9, P15) are cases where structural conditions constrain double-loop learning. In P7's case, an inherited family business governance structure provides insufficient permission for the changes the leader's reflective practice is generating. In P9's case, a professional services partnership model creates strong peer pressure toward conformity. In P15's case, a short-term cash flow crisis interrupted translation at the moment of greatest reflective readiness. These cases underscore the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model's Track stage, which requires leaders to attend explicitly to the structural conditions that permit or constrain the translation of insight into action. A common stuck point is the assumption that structural conditions are fixed rather than developable: leaders who have not tested whether governance or financing structures are negotiable may prematurely accept those structures as translation barriers.

5.6 The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model

This section proposes the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model as the central conceptual contribution of this thesis. The model is data-driven. Multiple respondents explicitly resisted the implication that meaningful change in leadership behaviour can be observed on a weekly timescale. They described horizons of seasons, years, and even decades. A short-horizon idiom would have privileged the framing over the data. The framework reflects the data instead.

The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model is named horticulturally to honour the slow, layered, seasonal character of leadership development that the respondents describe. It is a developmental cycle of eight stages, four below the soil-line (root work) and four above (fruit work).

Below the soil:

1. **Reflect.** The leader pauses, often under disruption, and asks what is actually happening. Reflect is interior and slow. It is the work that Mezirow (1997) calls a “disorienting dilemma” but extended into a sustained practice.
2. **Orient.** The leader locates herself within the broader systems she inhabits. Orient is the work of polycrisis-aware sensemaking. It draws on Snowden and Boone (2007), Weick (1995), and the IDG “thinking” dimension (IDG Foundation, 2021).
3. **Observe.** The leader watches her own patterns, the organisation’s patterns, and the wider systemic patterns. Observe is the work of Theory U presencing (Scharmer, 2018) and of contemplative attention. Without it, reflection can become rumination and orientation can become abstraction.
4. **Translate.** The leader translates what she has reflected, oriented, and observed into a working hypothesis about what to do next. Translate is the bridge between root and fruit.

Above the soil:

5. **Refine.** The leader tests the working hypothesis in low-stakes settings, in conversation, in pilot decisions, in small experiments. Refine is the experimental cycle of Kolb (1984) but slowed to match the systems being tested.
6. **Unite.** The leader brings others into the working hypothesis. Unite is the move from “I” to “we” that Egel and Campos Suarez (2025) describe in the first IDG volume. It requires psychological safety (the emergent theme from Chapter IV).

7. **Integrate.** The leader integrates the refined hypothesis into structural decisions: hiring, capital allocation, partnership choices, governance. Integrate is the move from “we” to systems change that the second IDG volume describes (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025).
8. **Track.** The leader tracks outcomes across seasons. Track replaces the Kirkpatrick level-four results question with a longer time horizon and a wider stakeholder lens. It includes both quantitative outcome data (where available) and qualitative trust and well-being data (where the quantitative is silent).

The cycle is not strictly linear. Leaders return to Reflect when Track surfaces new disorientation. They return to Observe when Unite encounters resistance. The model is a cycle of cycles, layered like the soil it borrows its metaphor from.

The eight stages are intentionally differentiated rather than collapsed into broader categories because the empirical data suggest that each stage performs a distinct developmental function. While some stages appear adjacent conceptually, respondents described them differently in practice.

- “Reflect” concerns the inward recognition that disruption or misalignment exists.
- “Observe” concerns sustained attentiveness to patterns across self, organisation, and system over time.
- “Orient” locates the leader within broader systemic conditions.
- “Translate” converts that understanding into a provisional course of action.
- “Refine” concerns experimentation at a small scale
- “Integrate” concerns embedding learning into structural organisational decisions.

Reducing these stages into broader composite categories would simplify the framework but weaken its analytical precision by obscuring the different developmental movements leaders repeatedly described across the data. The distinction between stages is therefore not merely conceptual but empirically grounded in the temporal, relational, and structural differences evident in the respondents' accounts.

The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model is operationalised as a self-assessment tool in Appendix E. The tool consists of forty items, five for each stage, scored on a five-point scale. Aggregate scores across the four root stages and the four fruit stages provide a profile that the leader can return to seasonally. The tool is not designed for external grading; it is designed for reflective self-orientation. It is offered freely to programme designers, including Caux Initiatives of Change, Chemin28, and B Corp networks, for adaptation and use.

The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model differs from short-horizon weekly change models in three respects. First, time horizon: ROOT-to-FRUIT operates across seasons, not weeks. Second, structural ambition: ROOT-to-FRUIT explicitly includes the move from individual to collective to systems change. Third, register: ROOT-to-FRUIT is horticultural and IDG-aligned, not industrial. These three differences are not stylistic; they reflect what the data say about how change actually happens for SME leaders in polycrisis.

Comparing ROOT-to-FRUIT to Existing Frameworks

The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model does not emerge in a theoretical vacuum. It stands in explicit conversation with several established change and leadership development frameworks, and its distinctiveness is best understood by contrast. This section locates ROOT-to-FRUIT in relation to

five frameworks: Kotter's (1996) 8-step model, Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze model, Theory U (Scharmer, 2018), ADKAR and Argyris's double-loop learning (1977).

Kotter's (1996) 8-step model for leading change assumes a relatively stable organisational context with a discrete change initiative at its centre, designed to drive that initiative through a hierarchical organisation in a bounded time period. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model shares Kotter's concern with collective mobilisation (the Unite stage) and with embedding change structurally (the Integrate stage), but differs in two respects. First, it does not begin with urgency but with Reflection: the movement inward precedes and conditions the movement outward. Second, it does not assume a change initiative as its organising unit but an individual leader's developmental journey, allowing that journey to take seasons rather than months. For the SME leaders in this study, Kotter's model would be recognisable but insufficient: the most important changes they describe are not initiatives with defined end-states but orientations that deepen gradually across years of practice.

Lewin's (1947) unfreeze-change-refreeze model offers a more psychological grounding than Kotter, recognising that existing patterns must first become unstable before new patterns can take hold. The ROOT-to-FRUIT root stages (Reflect, Orient, Observe) are structurally analogous to Lewin's unfreeze phase. However, ROOT-to-FRUIT departs from Lewin in a critical respect: it does not have a refreeze stage. The Track stage, which occupies the position in the cycle where refreeze would sit, explicitly reopens rather than closes the cycle. After harvest comes not a permanent consolidation but winter, then new growth, then a new cycle. The respondents in this study do not describe arriving at a stable end state; they describe entering a new cycle of Reflection with expanded capacity. For leaders in polycrisis, refreezing is not a developmental aspiration; it is a structural vulnerability.

Theory U (Scharmer, 2018) is the framework most closely aligned with the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model, and the alignment is not accidental. The root stages of ROOT-to-FRUIT draw explicitly on Scharmer's presencing concept: the capacity to sense and actuate from emerging future rather than from downloaded past. The Observe stage in particular is the operational expression of Scharmer's U-point. Where ROOT-to-FRUIT extends Theory U is in its explicit horticultural metaphor, its SME-specific grounding, and its above-the-soil stages. Theory U's framework, while rich in its phenomenology of the descending journey, is less concrete in specifying the experimental, collective, and structural moves that are needed to bring insight into sustained organisational practice. The Refine, Unite, Integrate, and Track stages of ROOT-to-FRUIT are, in part, an attempt to populate Theory U's re-ascending arc with the specific developmental moves that the empirical data of this study identify as most consequential for SME leaders.

The ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006) addresses organisational change through five elements: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. ROOT-to-FRUIT shares ADKAR's concern with reinforcement (the Track stage) and with knowledge and ability (the Refine stage). However, ADKAR addresses the individual as a recipient of organisational change rather than as a generator of developmental insight. ROOT-to-FRUIT addresses the leader as the agent who is simultaneously developing herself and shaping the conditions within which others can develop. This distinction is not trivial in the SME context, where the leader and the organisation are often in a relation of mutual constitution rather than managed separation.

Argyris's (1977) double-loop learning framework, introduced above in the discussion of RQ4, occupies a particularly important reference point for ROOT-to-FRUIT. Argyris distinguishes between single-loop learning, which corrects action within existing governing variables, and double-loop learning, which questions the governing variables themselves. The root stages of

ROOT-to-FRUIT are, in essence, a structured practice of double-loop learning: they ask the leader not only what to do differently but what assumptions, values, and mental models are generating the actions that currently need to be reconsidered. The Translate stage is the moment at which double-loop insight becomes a working hypothesis for changed action. A distinctive contribution of ROOT-to-FRUIT relative to Argyris's original formulation is its attention to the relational and structural conditions that determine whether double-loop learning is possible in any given organisational context: the Unite and Integrate stages make explicit the collective and structural work that Argyris identifies as necessary but does not operationalise in the same level of stage-by-stage detail.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes five distinct theoretical contributions to the scholarship on responsible leadership, organisational resilience, leadership development, and polycrisis response.

The first and most substantial contribution is the integration of responsible leadership and organisational resilience into a single, empirically grounded construct: responsible-resilient leadership. Prior scholarship has tended to treat these as adjacent but distinct streams. Maak and Pless (2006a), Pless and Maak (2011), and Voegtlin (2016) develop the responsible leadership tradition with substantial richness but limited attention to resilience as a developmental dimension. Duchek (2020), Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011), and Davies and Arrieta (2024) develop the resilience tradition with precision but limited attention to the values and stakeholder orientation that this study's respondents place at the centre of their resilience practices. The integration proposed here is not merely conceptual: it is empirically grounded in nineteen cases of leaders who experience the two capacities as unified in practice. Their most resilient moments are also their most

responsible moments; their most responsible decisions are also the ones that most reliably sustain their organisational and personal resilience across disruption.

The second contribution is the temporal respecification of leadership development. The dominant frameworks in the leadership development literature, including Kirkpatrick (1994), Kotter (1996), and most programme-evaluation models, assume a change cycle measured in weeks or months. This study's data specify a seasonal cycle: the translation of reflective insight into changed structural decisions takes, on average, two to five years in the present sample, with P2's case extending to eight years. This is not a pathological finding; it is a developmental one. The horticultural metaphor of ROOT-to-FRUIT is a direct theoretical expression of this respecification. It replaces the industrial calendar of management change models with the natural calendar of growth, dormancy, and regeneration. This respecification has practical implications, discussed in Chapter VI, for how programme designers and funders should conceptualise the evaluation horizon for leadership development interventions.

The third contribution is the identification of inner practice as a foundational tier of responsible-resilient leadership development. While contemplative approaches to leadership have been discussed in the management literature (Gelles, 2022; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Scharmer, 2018), and while the IDG tradition explicitly advocates inner development (Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025), the present study is among the first to provide empirical evidence from an SME context that inner practice functions not as an optional enrichment but as a structural correlate of resilience under polycrisis. The leaders in this study who demonstrate the highest resilience across the most severe disruptions are, without exception, leaders who report some form of sustained inner practice. This correlation does not establish causation, but it is substantively significant and suggests that future

leadership development frameworks should position inner practice as a baseline requirement rather than as an advanced elective.

A further theoretical contribution emerging from this finding is the introduction of a three-register model of leadership development consisting of **formal-informal-inner developmental triangle model**. Existing leadership development literature, including Day et al. (2014; 2021), primarily distinguishes between formal and informal developmental mechanisms, such as structured programmes, mentoring, stretch assignments, and experiential learning. The findings of this study suggest that these two registers alone are insufficient for explaining leadership resilience and developmental continuity under polycrisis conditions. The present study therefore advances this literature by identifying *inner practice* as a distinct third developmental register rather than as a subdimension of informal learning. Across the sample, sustained reflective, contemplative, spiritual, or meaning-making practices emerged not merely as personal preferences but as structural supports enabling leaders to metabolise uncertainty, sustain ethical orientation, and translate reflection into action across long developmental horizons. Conceptually, this extends the dominant formal–informal model into a formal–informal–inner developmental triangle, which constitutes a distinct theoretical contribution of the ROOT-to-FRUIT framework.

The fourth contribution is the polycrisis-specific contextualisation of leadership development. The concept of polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024; Homer-Dixon et al., 2022) has entered the policy literature but remains undertheorised in the management and leadership development scholarship. This study contributes an empirical account of how polycrisis reshapes the conditions, timescales, and relational requirements of leadership development in the SME context specifically. It shows that polycrisis is not merely a more severe version of normal disruption; it is a qualitatively different condition that requires qualitatively different developmental responses. In particular, it

shows that polycrisis intensifies the demand for inner practice, shortens the tolerance for extractive leadership, and lengthens the translation cycle from insight to changed action. These findings suggest that the polycrisis frame should become a standard contextual variable in future leadership development research.

The fifth contribution is the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model itself as a field-usable conceptual tool. ROOT-to-FRUIT is operationalised as a forty-item self-assessment instrument (Appendix E), offered freely to practitioner organisations (Caux Initiatives of Change, Chemin28, B Corp networks) that serve the population from which the study's respondents are drawn. The model embodies the action-research and knowledge-co-creation values that the DBA tradition endorses: it is a theoretical contribution that is simultaneously a practical tool, offered not as a closed artefact but as a working hypothesis available for field testing, adaptation, and empirical validation.

Methodological Reflections

The multimodal qualitative design of this study combined semi-structured interviews, long-form written responses, and supporting organisational documents across nineteen leaders. This section reflects on what this combination of methods revealed that a survey-based design could not, and on what it could not fully resolve.

The most significant methodological contribution of the multimodal design is its capacity to hold ambivalence. Survey instruments, even richly designed Likert-scale or vignette instruments, require respondents to locate themselves on a defined scale. The multimodal design of this study allowed respondents to hold contradictions in the same answer: to say simultaneously that they are responsible and that they regularly fail to live up to their own standards of responsibility; that they

are resilient and that they are exhausted; that their development programmes have been transformative and that they cannot say exactly what was transformed. These ambivalences are not noise in the data; they are the signal. They are what polycrisis looks like from the inside, and they are not recoverable from aggregated survey responses.

The long-form written responses, in particular, offered a register of reflection that the interview format could not fully replicate. Several respondents (P5, P11, P14) wrote with a candour and a structural complexity in their written responses that exceeded what they offered in the spoken interview. This is consistent with the finding that for some leaders, writing itself is an inner-practice medium: the act of sustained written reflection activates a different kind of sensemaking than spoken conversation. The methodological implication is that future qualitative studies in this domain should consider offering multiple response modes as a structural feature of the design rather than as an accommodation for scheduling difficulties.

The supporting organisational documents (B Corp impact reports, company manifestos, strategic planning documents, and web-published mission statements) contributed a triangulation function that interview and written data alone could not provide. Several respondents described organisational values and stakeholder commitments in terms that were substantiated, qualified, or occasionally complicantly nuanced by the documentary evidence. The comparison between P1's spoken account of B Corp certification and the public impact report of the relevant organisation revealed a gap between the aspiration language of the interview and the more cautious quantitative language of the report. This gap is itself a datum: it is evidence of the aspiration-implementation tension that RQ4 addresses and that the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model's Integrate and Track stages are specifically designed to illuminate.

A survey-based design would have missed the temporal texture of the data entirely. The capacity to follow a respondent's narrative across an eight-year arc (P2, P2), or to hear the layered hesitation with which a leader describes a decision she still regrets (P15), depends on the extended, relationship-building character of the qualitative interview. It also depends on the researcher's capacity to tolerate silence, to ask slow follow-up questions, and to allow the respondent to arrive at her own formulation rather than being offered a menu of options. These are methodological choices that carry epistemological commitments: they locate the researcher not as a neutral instrument of data extraction but as a participant in a knowledge-generating relationship. The implications of this positioning are discussed in the next section on researcher positionality, which is taken up again in the limitations discussion in Chapter VI.

5.7 Expanded Discussion: Polycrisis, Metacrisis, and the Systems-Change Horizon

The polycrisis-metacrisis frame introduced in Chapter I deserves extended treatment in light of the empirical findings. Polycrisis names the synchronous failure of multiple systems (Lawrence et al., 2024; Homer-Dixon et al., 2022). Metacrisis adds the inner and cultural dimension: the crisis of attention, sensemaking, and meaning that polycrisis produces inside the people who must respond (Schmachtenberger, 2023). The empirical finding that inner practice operates as an emerging baseline among the most resilient leaders supports the metacrisis frame directly. Leaders who have developed a stable inner ground are better able to respond to outer instability. Leaders who have not have to either borrow stability from external authority structures (which polycrisis is itself eroding) or to cope through avoidance.

Mrinank Sharma's resignation letter, cited in Chapter I, serves as an illustrative example of similar concerns emerging publicly beyond the present study. Sharma left a leading AI laboratory in 2026 to take up the metacrisis directly, citing David J. Temple's (2024) *First Principles and First Values*

and the poetry of Mary Oliver, Rilke, and William Stafford as touchstones (Sharma, 2026). The letter illustrates how concerns around inner stability, meaning, and ethical orientation are increasingly entering public-business leadership discourse alongside the more personal reflections described by respondents in this study.

The systems-change horizon is uneven across the sample, as noted in Chapter II Section 2.5 and Chapter IV. It appears most clearly in the leaders whose business models are themselves systems-change interventions (P1 Company A B Corp, P3 Company C sustainability, P5 Company E (a bio-pharmaceutical services firm), P11 Company K (a sustainability consultancy), P17 Company Q, P18 Company R (a climate and agri-tech start-up)). It appears more partially in leaders whose business models are internally focused. The implication is that the move from responsible-resilient leadership to systems-change leadership is not automatic. It requires both inner readiness (the IDG move from “I” to “we” to systems) and outer business-model alignment (the operational pathway through which systems-change ambition can be expressed). The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model’s later stages (Unite, Integrate, Track) are the operational specification of how this move can be supported.

A final consideration concerns the practical implication of the polycrisis-metacrisis-systems-change framework for leadership development design. If the data of this study are taken seriously, then leadership development that operates only on programme-attendance and skills-acquisition logic will be insufficient under polycrisis conditions. Leadership development for polycrisis requires programmes that build inner practice, networks that hold the practice across time, and structural conditions that reward the slow translation from reflection to action. The Caux and Chemin28 programmes are oriented in this direction, but they remain niche. Mainstreaming them, and adapting them for SME constraints, is the practical horizon of this thesis.

CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Summary

This thesis investigated how business leaders, especially SME leaders, navigate responsible and resilient decision-making in conditions of polycrisis. It used a multimodal qualitative design combining semi-structured interviews of 35 to 60 minutes (average 45 minutes), long-form written form responses, and supporting organisational documents across nineteen leaders working primarily in Switzerland and adjacent contexts. The study began with no prior hypothesis. Coding was performed inductively across the verbatim record, supported by Otter.ai for transcription and Perplexity.ai for identification of research gaps and source verification. All written and thematic decisions were made by hand.

Six primary themes emerged:

1. Responsibility appears as a concentric obligation whose radius varies by leader, sector, and cultural formation.
2. Resilience is iterative standing-up rather than bouncing back.
3. Disruption operates as a leadership accelerator only where prior preparation is partial.
4. Informal networks function as the de facto development pathway for SME leaders, with formal programmes acting as triggers and shared vocabulary.
5. Cultural formation is treated by leaders as a negotiated repertoire rather than as a fixed profile.
6. Relational trust serves as the medium through which decisions move and resilience holds.

Five emergent themes operate across the sample:

1. Inner practice appears as an emerging baseline among the most resilient leaders.
2. Psychological safety is the condition under which inner practice can become collective rather than individual.
3. AI is engaged across the sample, with framing registers correlating with broader resilience orientation.
4. Generational tension surfaces as a strategic talent issue.
5. Stakeholder co-creation is the operational form through which leaders move from “I” to “we” and from “we” to systems change.

The study proposes the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model as its central conceptual contribution. The model is grounded in a finding raised explicitly by respondents: meaningful change in leadership behaviour does not occur on a weekly timescale. ROOT-to-FRUIT describes leadership development as a horticultural cycle of eight stages, four below the soil (Reflect, Orient, Observe, Translate) and four above (Refine, Unite, Integrate, Track). The model is operationalised as a self-assessment tool in Appendix E.

The following paragraphs elaborate each major finding in turn. The first finding, concentric responsibility, emerges most fully in P14's account of obligation as running from self through family, colleagues, clients, and society to planet. Across the sample, leaders describe responsibility as something they own rather than something conferred by role or regulation. Under polycrisis conditions, this ownership orientation becomes more visible, not less: when trade-offs between obligations become acute, leaders who have internalised a concentric model make those trade-offs with greater transparency than those who define responsibility instrumentally. P18's decision to accept a smaller mission-aligned investor over a larger commercial one is the clearest enactment of this pattern in the data.

The second finding, iterative resilience, challenges the bounce-back metaphor at its root. P2, P13, and P18 reject it explicitly.

The more accurate metaphor across the sample is of a plant that, after being bent by wind, does not return to its prior geometry but grows on at a new angle that is stronger over time. Each cycle of disruption, processed through reflective practice and relational support, yields not merely restored but enlarged capacity. Disruption, on this account, is not something to be minimised but something to be metabolised.

The third finding, the formal-informal-inner development triangle, extends the leadership development literature by adding inner practice as a structural tier alongside formal programme and informal network. The most resilient leaders have cultivated all three: the formal tier (Leadership trainings, Chemin28, B Corp, MBSR) provides vocabulary and initial disorientation; the informal tier (peer networks, mentors, alumni cohorts) sustains developmental impulse across time; the inner tier (meditation, embodiment, journaling, retreat) provides the solo reflective infrastructure that makes the other two more generative.

The fourth finding, the seasonal timescale of translation, directly shapes the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model. The data are consistent: translation of reflective insight into changed structural decisions takes years, not weeks. The shortest cycles are approximately eighteen months (P5, P17); the longest is eight years (P2). Evaluation frameworks that expect behaviour change within a programme cycle are measuring the wrong variable. The appropriate horizon is seasonal, with inner-practice and relational-soil indicators available at six to twelve months as leading indicators of later structural change.

The fifth finding, the role of relational trust and structural conditions in enabling or blocking translation, completes the account. Insight held in relational isolation, or meeting non-permissive structural conditions (inherited governance, short-term incentive systems, unsupportive boards), tends not to translate into changed decisions even where the leader holds it with conviction.

6.2 Implications

Theoretical Implications

The thesis contributes three theoretical moves.

First, it integrates responsible leadership and resilience scholarship into a single construct, responsible-resilient leadership, defined as the capacity to make values-guided decisions that maintain stakeholder trust and enable organisational adaptation during polycrisis, drawing on relational resources, cultural formation, developmental experiences, and sustained inner practice.

Second, it locates this construct in the polycrisis-metacrisis frame, showing that responsible-resilient leadership is not just relational but inner-relational: the work begins in attention and meaning before it reaches stakeholders.

Third, it proposes the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model as a slow-cycle alternative to the implicitly fast-cycle change models that dominate the leadership development literature. The horticultural register is not stylistic; it is data-driven.

The thesis also contributes a small but consequential theoretical extension to the IDG tradition. Egel and Campos Suarez (2025) argue across both volumes that inner development moves from “I” to “we” and from “we” to systems change. The empirical data of this study suggest that the move is rarely complete. Most respondents are well underway in the “I” register. A subset have reached the “we” register through stakeholder co-creation. A smaller subset are operating in the systems-change register, and they tend to be leaders whose business models are themselves systems-change interventions. The implication is that the IDG sequence is not automatic; it requires both inner readiness and outer business-model alignment. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model’s later stages are designed to support exactly this combination.

A further theoretical contribution concerns the relationship between cultural formation and leadership development. Hofstede et al. (2010) treat cultural formation as a set of relatively stable national or organisational value dimensions. Even if the companies are based in said countries, the respondents of this study treat their cultural formation as a developmental resource they actively

curate, drawing selectively on Mongolian heritage (P18), Swiss civic tradition (P1, P4, P12), South Asian relational ethics (P14), and African communal philosophy (P11) as living frameworks they negotiate with rather than receive passively. Cultural repertoire, in polycrisis conditions, is itself a resilience resource: leaders with wider cultural repertoires have more developmental options when any single register becomes inadequate.

A fourth theoretical contribution addresses AI adoption and responsible-resilient leadership. Leaders who frame AI as an efficiency instrument tend toward single-loop adoption: using AI to do familiar things faster. Leaders who frame AI as a sensemaking and reflective partner tend toward double-loop adoption: using AI to surface new questions and challenge assumptions. This distinction extends the emerging literature on human-AI collaboration in leadership by specifying the conditions under which AI adoption is developmental rather than merely instrumental.

A fifth theoretical contribution extends Edmondson's (1999) psychological safety concept into the inner-practice register. Several respondents (P2, P4, P11) describe a period of development in which they were not psychologically safe enough, in this inner sense, to enter the Reflect stage fully. Development work that builds inner psychological safety, alongside the interpersonal kind, is therefore a precondition for the root-stage work that responsible-resilient leadership development requires.

Practical Implications

The thesis offers three practical implications, addressed to three distinct audiences: SME founders and leaders, leadership development providers, and policymakers.

For SME founders and leaders, the central practical implication is that the most consequential investment in responsible-resilient leadership development is not the most visible one. Programme

attendance is important, but it is insufficient. The data consistently show that the leaders with the most durable responsible-resilient capacity have made sustained investment in two less visible areas: inner practice and relational infrastructure. For inner practice, the minimum viable investment, based on the data, is a daily practice of twenty to thirty minutes that includes some combination of contemplative reflection, embodied movement, or structured writing. For relational infrastructure, the minimum viable investment is a peer group of three to five leaders who meet regularly, share a common development vocabulary, and hold each other accountable across seasons rather than across a single programme cycle. The ROOT-to-FRUIT self-assessment tool in Appendix E is offered as a season-by-season instrument for self-orientation. Leaders can complete it once, return to it three to four months later, and use the gap analysis to plan their next development moves. The tool is not designed for external grading; it is designed for self-reflection.

For programme designers, including Caux Initiatives of Change, Chemin28 and the Inner Development Goals community, the data of this study suggest three design moves. Build relational soil, not just programmatic content. Sustain participants across seasons, not just across a programme cycle. Accept that the most decisive development happens in the informal-network and inner-practice channels that programmes do not control directly; the programme's role is to catalyse and to provide the shared vocabulary that informal channels then operate on. A concrete implication for Caux Initiatives of Change and Chemin28 specifically is that programme alumni engagement structures, currently in place in a light-touch form, may be the most underdeveloped and highest-leverage component of the overall development ecosystem. The data suggest that alumni who maintain peer-group connections after a programme continue to develop along the ROOT-to-FRUIT cycle; alumni who do not tend to plateau within twelve to eighteen months of programme completion. A relatively modest investment in alumni peer-group facilitation,

structured around the ROOT-to-FRUIT stages, could significantly extend the true developmental “return of investment” of programme participation.

For policy actors, the data of this study suggest that the structural conditions surrounding SMEs (short-term incentive systems, governance models that reward extraction over stewardship, financing structures that penalise long horizons) are themselves leadership-development variables. Policy that lengthens the horizon of SME decision-making is policy that strengthens responsible-resilient leadership. This implication is developed in detail in Section 6.Y, but its theoretical grounding belongs here: the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model identifies the structural conditions that permit or block translation of insight into action as a named and trackable variable. Policy that addresses those structural conditions is not merely economic policy; it is developmental policy with a direct bearing on the quality of responsible leadership in the SME sector.

Professional Implications

For the researcher’s own professional practice, the thesis has three implications. The researcher will present and hopefully integrate the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model into her work with the Swiss-based leadership development ecosystem, including Caux Initiatives of Change and Chemin²⁸. In any case, she will integrate the learnings and outcomes in her consultancy services and future career. She will follow-up with the full nineteen-case sample and incorporate the temporal dimension into the next iteration of the analysis. She encourages practitioners in her network to extend the longitudinal of the study across seasons, allowing the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model to be tested across actual seasons of practice rather than across reported memory.

6.3 Recommendations for Leadership Development Practice

The following recommendations are addressed to leadership development providers, programme designers, funders, and evaluation practitioners. They are grounded in the empirical findings of this study and in the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model's developmental architecture.

Recommendation 1: Adopt a seasonal evaluation framework.

Funders and evaluators should replace weekly or monthly outcome cycles with seasonal frameworks spanning a year to even as long as five years. Evaluation designs that measure only within-programme or twelve-month outcomes will underestimate the impact of responsible-resilient leadership development programmes and incentivise designs oriented toward short-term behavioural signals. A seasonal framework should include inner-practice and relational-soil indicators at six to twelve months as leading indicators of later structural change.

Recommendation 2: Build and resource post-programme alumni peer networks.

Caux Initiatives of Change, Chemin28networks, and IDG-aligned programmes should invest explicitly in post-programme peer network infrastructure. This investment should include: designated facilitation capacity for alumni peer groups structured around the ROOT-to-FRUIT stages; a shared digital space for asynchronous exchange between peer group meetings; and a seasonal re-entry opportunity (a half-day retreat or extended workshop) for alumni who wish to revisit and deepen their ROOT-to-FRUIT self-assessment. The investment required is modest relative to the programme investment it protects and extends.

Recommendation 3: Integrate inner-practice pedagogy into core programme design. Inner-practice pedagogy should be introduced as a structural component of the programme arc, not as elective enrichment. Minimum requirements include: daily guided reflection or contemplative practice during residential time; introduction to at least one portable solo practice (meditation,

journaling, embodied movement, nature-based reflection); and explicit framing of inner practice as a professional development discipline rather than a personal wellness preference.

Recommendation 4: Design explicitly for the contraction condition.

Programme content that addresses responsible-resilient leadership only in calm conditions prepares leaders for the environment they are in during the programme rather than for the environment they will be in when tested. Programmes should include deliberate case-based and experiential work that simulates the conditions under which responsible leadership capacities are most likely to contract: acute financial pressure, stakeholder conflict, governance dysfunction, and reputational risk. The most polycrisis-relevant learning often occurs not in the expansion exercises but in the contraction simulations.

Recommendation 5: Develop a ROOT-to-FRUIT facilitator certification pathway.

A facilitator certification pathway, designed collaboratively with partner organisations would standardise the quality of facilitation, build a network of trained practitioners, and generate a community of practice that can contribute to the model's empirical validation over time.

Recommendation 6: Address generational leadership transitions as a development priority. The generational tension that emerged as a fifth emergent theme represents a structural development gap. Existing programmes are predominantly oriented toward current leaders; very few are oriented toward the successor generation in an SME-specific context. A programme strand focused on responsible-resilient capacity in leaders in the first five years of a leadership role would address this gap directly.

Recommendation 7: Create a publicly accessible ROOT-to-FRUIT self-assessment repository.

The researcher will develop a publicly accessible free downloadable digital repository of ROOT-to-FRUIT resources, including the forty-item self-assessment tool, facilitation guides in multiple

languages (initially English), and anonymised developmental case studies drawn from the research data with participant consent.

6.4 Recommendations for SME Policy

The following recommendations are addressed to policymakers at national and supranational levels, with particular reference to the Swiss SME policy context, the European Union's SME Strategy framework (European Commission, 2020), and the emerging Mongolian SME development agenda (National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2023). They are grounded in the finding that structural conditions are themselves leadership-development variables.

Recommendation 1: Extend the eligible development horizon for SME leadership development subsidies.

Current SME training subsidy schemes in Switzerland (CTI, KTI legacy schemes, cantonal workforce development funds) and at EU level (European Social Fund Plus) are predominantly calibrated for skills training with short payback horizons. The evidence of this study suggests that responsible-resilient leadership development requires a minimum two-to-five-year horizon to yield measurable structural change at the organisational level. Policy should create a dedicated subsidy category for long-horizon leadership development investments in SMEs, with evaluation criteria calibrated to seasonal rather than annual outcome cycles.

Recommendation 2: Reform short-term incentive structures in SME financing.

The short-term incentive systems embedded in standard SME debt and equity financing structures, including covenant structures that penalise declining short-term performance even where long-term stewardship is being served, are identified in this study as structural translation barriers for responsible-resilient leaders. Policymakers and development finance institutions (including the Swiss Development Finance Institution, SIFEM, and EU development banks) should review the

covenant and reporting structures of SME financing instruments for unintended short-termism, and pilot longer-horizon structures that reward stewardship alongside financial returns.

Recommendation 3: Integrate responsible-resilient leadership development into SME resilience policy frameworks.

The polycrisis environment documented in this study suggests that SME resilience cannot be addressed through purely financial or operational instruments. The leaders in this study identify relational trust, inner practice, and values clarity as resilience factors that are as consequential as balance sheet strength. National SME resilience strategies (Switzerland's Unternehmensresilienz initiatives, the EU SME Relief Package frameworks) should integrate leadership development components that address these non-financial resilience factors, alongside the financial and operational components currently dominant.

6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Seven recommendations for future research follow from this study.

First, longitudinal extension. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model proposes an eight-stage cycle that operates across seasons. A longitudinal study with annual or semi-annual data points across two to five years would allow the model to be tested rather than assumed.

Second, mixed-methods scale-out. A structured survey instrument derived from the qualitative themes of this study could be deployed at scale across the Swiss SME population, allowing the qualitative findings to be tested against quantitative distributions and the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model to be evaluated for psychometric properties (which is a weakness and limitation of this study and the ways of thinking + personality testing can be integrated for better evaluation).

Third, programme-evaluation integration. Working with Caux Initiatives of Change, Chemin28, business networks, and the IDG community, a pre-post evaluation design could be refined and implemented to measure whether participation in these programmes is associated with movement along the ROOT-to-FRUIT stages over twelve to twenty-four months.

Fourth, sectoral expansion. The current sample under-represents manufacturing, agriculture, and traditional retail. Future studies should oversample these sectors to test whether the ROOT-to-FRUIT pattern generalises beyond consulting, technology, and leadership development industries.

Fifth, cross-cultural deepening. The Swiss skew of the present sample limits cross-cultural inference. Future studies should deliberately oversample non-Swiss SME leaders, particularly in regions where polycrisis exposure is more acute (Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Central and South America).

Sixth, a comparative study of responsible-resilient leadership across SME and large-enterprise contexts would test the specificity of the SME polycrisis findings, either confirming that the SME context generates distinctive developmental dynamics or identifying large-enterprise contexts with similar dynamics and thereby refining the theoretical scope conditions of the ROOT-to-FRUIT Model.

Seventh, an interdisciplinary study integrating physiological data alongside qualitative self-report would extend the study's claims about inner practice. Physiological markers of stress regulation and attentional stability (cortisol, heart rate variability, resting EEG) would provide a complementary evidence layer and advance the scientific credibility of inner practice as a leadership development variable in mainstream management scholarship.

6.6 Concluding Reflections

This study set out to understand how business leaders, especially SME leaders navigate responsible and resilient decision-making in conditions of polycrisis and systemic disruption. What it found, across nineteen lives and multiple modes of data, is that the question contains its own answer: navigating responsibly and resiliently is inseparable from cultivating the inner ground from which navigation is possible. Polycrisis does not primarily test technical competence or strategic sophistication; it tests the capacity to remain oriented, values-anchored, and relationally present under conditions designed to disorient, extract, and isolate. The leaders in this study who navigate best are those who have, over years and seasons, invested most deliberately in the inner and relational soil from which that orientation grows. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model is an attempt to name that investment process in a register that honours both its depth and its “slowness”.

The polycrisis and metacrisis frame also asks something of the research itself. A study that ends with a neat framework and a confident set of recommendations risks understating the severity of the context it is describing. The metacrisis, as Schmachtenberger (2023) frames it, is not only a crisis of systems but a crisis of sensemaking: the tools we use to understand our situation are themselves implicated in producing it. The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model does not claim to be exempt from this implication. It is a working hypothesis generated from a small, geographically concentrated, and culturally specific sample in one particular season of global disruption. It will need to be tested, challenged, and revised across many seasons and many contexts before its claims can be held with the kind of confidence that policy and practice deserve. The researcher offers it in precisely that spirit: not as a final answer but as a seed, planted in the knowledge that useful things often take longer to emerge than the planter anticipates.

The most enduring conviction that this study has generated is modest and large simultaneously. Responsible, resilient leadership is possible under polycrisis conditions. It is not common, and it

does not arrive without sustained investment in the soil. But the nineteen people whose voices and written words fill the pages of this thesis are evidence that it is real: that leaders can, across seasons of disruption, become more responsible rather than less, more resilient rather than brittle, more oriented toward the long-term flourishing of people and planet rather than toward the shorter cycles that crisis and exhaustion encourage. That evidence, as much as any model or recommendation, is the thesis's most important finding.

6.7 Conclusion

This thesis began with a naive but puzzling observation of the system of today, driven by deep curiosity to understand and listen: leaders across organizations are operating in a leadership context for which the traditional management literature was not designed. Polycrisis is not a temporary disturbance; it is the new operating environment. Metacrisis is its inner companion. The leaders interviewed and surveyed for this study are responding to that environment with intelligence, humility, and exhaustion. They are responsible, in the layered sense; they are resilient, in the iterative sense; they are developing themselves through programmes, networks, and inner practice in roughly equal measure; and they are doing all of this in a temporal register that is closer to that of a gardener than that of a manager.

The ROOT-to-FRUIT Model is offered in their idiom. It treats meaningful change as something that takes seasons, that depends on soil as much as on sunlight, that requires both inner work and outer experiment, and that can be tracked but not forced. It is a working hypothesis rather than a closed framework.

The most personal observation, returning to the dedication of this thesis, is that the research has been undertaken in a season of new life and considerable systemic uncertainty. The conviction that emerged, slowly and across the work, is that responsible-resilient leadership is itself a form of stewardship across generations. We are not optimising for the next quarter or season. We are tending the soil for those who come next.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY LETTER

Dear (name of leader),

(Personal text)

You are warmly invited to contribute to a doctoral research study being conducted at the Swiss School of Business and Management Geneva. Its purpose is to understand how business leaders and especially decision-makers of small and medium-sized enterprises in Switzerland and adjacent contexts hold responsibility and resilience together in everyday decision-making during a time of interlocking systemic disruptions.

You may contribute in one of two ways. The first is a confidential semi-structured interview of 35 to 60 minutes, conducted in person or by video, recorded with your consent and transcribed. The second is a written form, accessible by direct google forms link, that mirrors the interview guide and accepts free-text responses of any length. Both modes are equivalent for the purpose of the study, and you are welcome to choose whichever suits your time and communication preferences.

Your participation is voluntary and confidential. You may withdraw at any time. Quotations will be attributed only with your written permission. Findings will be shared with you after defense.

I sincerely look forward to hearing from you. Thank you in advance for your kind consideration.

Best,

Khulan

APPENDIX B: DEDICATED WEBPAGE FOR STUDY

A dedicated study page was hosted at the researcher's professional website during the data-collection: <https://www.bookkhulan.com/articles/leading-responsibly-in-times-of-disruption-your-experience-matters>

The page set out the research purpose, the two participation modes, the consent and confidentiality terms, and a direct link to the form-response instrument. The page also provided contact details for the researcher and for the SSBM Geneva research office.

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Within the Google form submitted, it is explicitly written at the very beginning in section 1 descriptor: *“By filling this form, you agree to participate and use confidential information for academic purpose. Data will be collected primarily through semi-structured interviews conducted online through this form or in person, depending on participant availability and location.”*

Within the in-person and online interviews conducted, participants are explicitly asked by the

interviewer/researcher for verbal consent before recording on the use of content upkeeping the confidentiality of name of person and company name.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide is structured in seven sections. Each section opens with a broad question and includes follow-up prompts that the interviewer may deploy depending on the respondent's flow. Not all questions could be asked during the semi-structured interviews as the researcher followed the flow of the respondent for added depth.

Section A: Demographics and Context

1. Could you briefly introduce your age, sector of work, size of company, and your role?
2. How long have you been in this role and at this company?
3. What country or countries do you primarily operate in?

Section B: Responsible Leadership

1. What does responsible leadership mean to you in your current role?
2. Can you give me a recent example of a difficult decision in which responsibility was a central consideration?
3. How do you think your understanding of responsibility has evolved over the last five years?

Section C: Resilience

1. What does resilience mean to you in your current role?
2. Can you give me an example of a recent disruption you and your team navigated, and how you got through it?
3. Has your understanding of resilience changed in recent years?

Section D: Disruption Experience

1. On a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), how disruptive/disrupted do you find your current business environment?
2. In the last years, what kinds of systemic disruptions have most affected your business? (For example: 2008 financial crisis, COVID-19, supply-chain shocks, AI and digitalisation, sustainability/ESG and regulatory changes, geopolitical or economic instability.)
3. Leadership during disruption: Can you describe one situation where one of these disruptions forced you to change how you lead or how decisions were made in your company?

Section E: Development Pathways

1. Participation in programmes or initiatives supporting leadership: Have you taken part in any leadership, resilience or inner-development programmes ? (For example: CAUX or similar dialogue programmes, executive leadership or governance courses, resilience or mental-fitness trainings, Inner Development Goals-inspired programmes) Which programmes or initiatives did you participate in, and roughly when?
2. Ad-hoc multi-stakeholder engagement: During recent disruptions, did you engage with any cross-sector or multi-stakeholder settings (for example chambers of commerce, sector

associations, NGO or government platforms, community coalitions)? Which multi-stakeholder / cross-sector settings did you engage in, and why?

3. Impact of leadership/resilience programmes: Thinking about the disruptions you mentioned earlier, in what ways (if at all) did the leadership or resilience programmes you attended influence how you responded as a business leader?
4. Impact of multi-stakeholder or cross-sector engagement: And in what ways (if at all) did your participation in multi-stakeholder or cross-sector initiatives (for example networks, associations, joint projects) influence how you responded as a leader during these disruptions?
5. What was difficult to apply/implement from these programmes? (Could you really/concretely apply it as a Business Leader?)
6. Looking back, which of these pathways do you credit with the most lasting influence?

Section F: Cultural Context

1. How would you describe the cultural background that has shaped your leadership?
2. Do you find yourself drawing on more than one cultural reference point in your work?
3. How does the Swiss context (or the relevant national context) influence what you can and cannot do as a leader?
4. How would you describe your relationships with your key stakeholders (for example employees, customers, suppliers, community, public authorities)? Are they mainly contractual, partnership-oriented, or more personal/long-term? Please give a brief example.

Section G: Reflection to Action (asked where relevant)

1. When you have a genuine insight about how you should lead differently, how does it actually translate into action?
2. What helps the translation? What gets in the way?
3. On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very strongly), how optimistic are you that your organization/your industry can turn disruptions into opportunities in the coming years?
4. Future capabilities: Looking to the next few years, what kinds of capabilities do you think leaders in your context will need to lead responsibly and resiliently through systemic disruptions?
5. Ideal support or programme: If you could design a short, realistic support or programme specifically for leaders like you, what would you include? What would it look like?

Anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX E: ROOT-to-FRUIT MODEL ASSESSMENT TOOL

The ROOT-to-FRUIT Assessment Tool operationalises the eight-stage model presented in Chapter V. It is a forty-item self-assessment instrument designed for seasonal use by SME leaders, programme designers, and consulting practitioners. It is not designed for external grading. It is offered as an aid to self-orientation across the slow cycles of leadership development that the present study has documented.

Each item is scored on a five-point scale, where 1 means “this is not part of my current practice,” 3 means “this is intermittent in my current practice,” and 5 means “this is a regular and stable feature of my current practice.” Aggregate scores are calculated for each of the eight stages and, separately, for the four root stages and the four fruit stages.

Root Stages (Below the Soil)

Stage 1: Reflect

1. I take regular, deliberate time to reflect on what is happening in my organisation and in the wider systems around it.
2. When I encounter a disorienting event, I treat it as material for reflection rather than only as a problem to solve.
3. I am willing to sit with uncomfortable observations about myself and my leadership before acting on them.
4. I distinguish reflection from rumination and know when each is happening.

5. I write or speak my reflections somewhere they can be returned to.

Stage 2: Orient

1. I can articulate the polycrisis or systemic conditions in which my organisation is operating.
2. I locate my organisation within these conditions rather than treating them as abstract.
3. I make use of frames such as Cynefin, Theory U, or the Inner Development Goals to orient my thinking.
4. I can name the most relevant adjacent systems (industry, regulatory, ecological, social, cultural) without difficulty.
5. I distinguish between conditions I can influence and conditions I must accept and adapt to.

Stage 3: Observe

1. I have a regular practice of observing my own patterns under pressure.
2. I observe organisational patterns in a way that is descriptive rather than judgmental.
3. I receive observations from trusted others without immediate defence.
4. I have, or am developing, a contemplative practice (meditation, embodiment, journaling, nature walks, prayer, or equivalent) that supports observation.
5. I distinguish observation from analysis and know when each is needed.

Stage 4: Translate

1. I translate reflection and observation into working hypotheses about what to do next.
2. I treat these hypotheses as testable rather than as conclusions.

3. I can articulate the smallest credible experiment that would test a current hypothesis.
4. I distinguish between hypotheses that need more reflection and hypotheses that are ready for refinement.
5. I record translations so I can return to them across seasons.

Fruit Stages (Above the Soil)

Stage 5: Refine

1. I run small experiments to test my current working hypotheses before committing to them at scale.
2. I solicit feedback from people whose judgement I trust on these experiments.
3. I am willing to modify or abandon a hypothesis when the experiment does not support it.
4. I refine across iterations rather than expecting a single test to be conclusive.
5. I keep refinement light enough that it does not become its own form of avoidance.

Stage 6: Unite

1. I bring others into my working hypotheses rather than holding them privately.
2. I create conditions of psychological safety in which others can challenge, modify, or co-author the hypotheses.
3. I move from “I” to “we” intentionally rather than waiting for it to happen by itself.
4. I work across functions, levels, and stakeholder boundaries when uniting around a hypothesis.

5. I recognise that uniting is the primary work of moving from individual insight to collective action.

Stage 7: Integrate

1. I integrate refined and united hypotheses into structural decisions: hiring, budgeting, partnerships, governance.
2. I align incentive structures with the responsible-resilient direction I am setting.
3. I make integration visible in the organisation's documents, dashboards, and routines.
4. I treat integration as a move from "we" to systems change, not just internal alignment.
5. I am realistic about the time integration takes and protect it from short-term pressure.

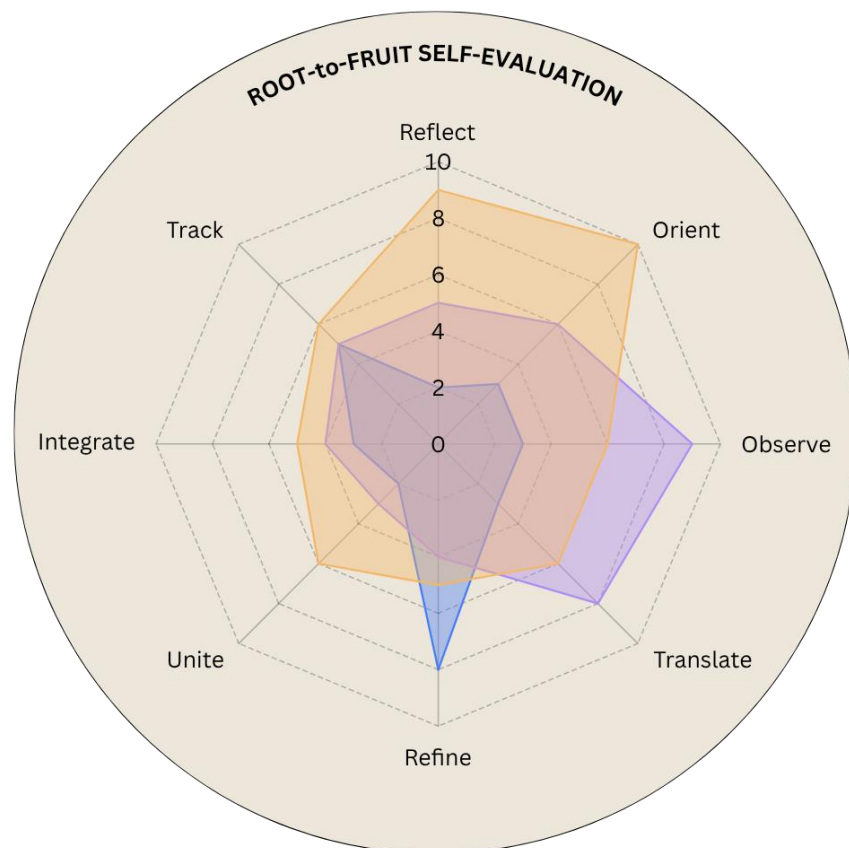
Stage 8: Track

1. I track outcomes of integrated decisions across seasons, not just across quarters.
2. I include qualitative trust and well-being data alongside quantitative outcome data.
3. I return to Reflect when Track surfaces new disorientation rather than treating tracking as the end of the cycle.
4. I share tracking findings with the people who contributed to the original Refine and Unite work.
5. I recognise tracking as part of stewardship across generations rather than only as accountability for the current period.

Scoring Approach

Aggregate scores are calculated as follows. For each stage, sum the five item scores (range 5 to 25) and divide by five (range 1 to 5). For the root profile, average the four root-stage scores. For the fruit profile, average the four fruit-stage scores. A leader who is significantly higher on roots than on fruits is in a phase of inner work that has not yet translated into structural action; a leader who is significantly higher on fruits than on roots may be acting from insufficient reflection. A balanced profile, sustained across two or more seasonal completions of the tool, suggests an integrated practice consistent with the responsible-resilient leadership construct of this thesis.

Example:



Application Protocol

The tool is intended for completion at three to four month intervals, each “season”. Leaders are encouraged to complete it alone, to reflect on the results before discussing them, and to share the results selectively with trusted peers, mentors, or coaches. Programme designers may use the tool as a pre-post evaluation instrument across a programme cycle, with the explicit understanding that meaningful movement is more likely across two or more cycles than within a single cycle. Consulting practitioners may use the tool as a structured input to leadership development conversations.

The tool is offered freely for non-commercial use. Citation of this thesis is requested where the tool is adopted in research, programme design, or consulting practice. The author welcomes correspondence about the tool’s application and revisions for future iterations of the model.