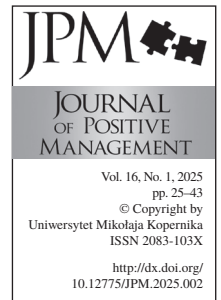


# POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS IN POLISH ECO-ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A QUALITATIVE STUDY THROUGH THE LENS OF POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article explores the internal drivers of eco-entrepreneurial success in Poland through the lens of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS). It aims to fill the research gap concerning how eco-entrepreneurs not only overcome market barriers but also generate innovation and positive social and environmental impact by mobilizing values, resilience, and authentic leadership.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study employs a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with 40 purposively selected Polish eco-entrepreneurs from diverse sectors. Thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive coding approach, with interpretation grounded in the POS framework.

**Findings:** Results indicate that eco-entrepreneurs integrate personal ecological values into business models, driving generativity and innovation. High organizational resilience enables adaptation to crises, while authentic, value-driven leadership fosters trust and engagement. Building positive relationships with customers and partners further strengthens social capital and organizational effectiveness. These internal dynamics are central to sustaining eco-enterprises in challenging environments.

**Implications/limitations:** The findings suggest practical steps for managers: support positive deviance, foster resilience and authentic leadership, and build value-driven cultures. Limitations include a qualitative, cross-sectional design and focus on Poland. Future studies should apply mixed methods, explore other contexts, and assess long-term effects of POS strategies.

**Originality/value:** This study applies the POS framework to Polish eco-entrepreneurship, offering original insights into how ecological values, authentic leadership, and relational capital drive innovation and resilience. It broadens POS theory by contextualizing it in an emerging economy and reframes sustainable entrepreneurship as a value-driven, capability-based process.

**Keywords:** eco-entrepreneurship, Positive Organizational Scholarship, generativity, resilience, positive leadership, sustainability, Poland

**Paper type:** Research Paper

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, eco-entrepreneurship in Poland has evolved rapidly, increasingly aligning economic aims with the imperative of sustainable development (Mazur et al., 2024). Despite the sector's growing relevance, much of the existing literature continues to emphasize external barriers, such as regulatory constraints, high production costs, customer perspective, and limited scalability, while offering limited insight into internal drivers and enabling organizational dynamics (Angowski & Sagan, 2023; Burzyńska et al., 2018; Grębosz-Krawczyk et al., 2021; Śliwińska et al., 2025). Moreover, the psychological and organizational mechanisms that allow entrepreneurs to transform adversity into opportunities for innovation and growth remain underexplored (Burzyńska et al., 2018; Grębosz-Krawczyk et al., 2021). The prevailing narrative adopts a predominantly deficit-based lens, emphasizing constraints, such as low consumer awareness or scarce funding, while largely overlooking internal strengths like resilience, value-driven innovation, or authentic leadership (Becker, 2024).

In contrast, Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) offers a strengths-based approach that deepens our connection to the natural environment and promotes a more meaningful, compassionate, and sustainable future. Integrating this framework into sustainability research provides a holistic lens, linking human flourishing with ecological systems and advancing a vision of transformative change, one that moves beyond harm reduction toward the regeneration of both social and natural systems (Hoffman & Haigh, 2011). This positive orientation not only shapes how individuals relate to sustainability, but also plays a crucial role in the entrepreneurial domain, influencing and being reinforced by work engagement and perceptions of success. Entrepreneurs who maintain an optimistic mindset tend to view their businesses as successful, which in turn strengthens their personal resources and deepens their engagement (Laguna & Razmus, 2019).

This gap invites a critical question: how do entrepreneurs operating under uncertainty and competitive pressure not only persist, but also innovate and deliver positive environmental and social impact? (Greco & De Jong, 2017). Addressing this question is the central aim of the present article, which introduces POS as a conceptual framework for exploring the internal enablers of eco-entrepreneurial success. Rooted in positive psychology and organizational behavior, POS offers a comprehensive perspective for understanding how internal resources, such as psychological capital, purpose-driven leadership, or organizational culture, contribute to sustainable innovation, particularly in adverse conditions. Entrepreneurial success in such contexts often hinges on the ability to develop dynamic capabilities, foster a constructive and empowering organizational climate, and embed sustainability into core business strategy. By applying the POS lens, this study seeks to illuminate the internal processes that underpin long-term innovation and value creation in Polish eco-enterprises. Scholars argue

that further empirical case studies applying the POS framework to sustainable entrepreneurship are needed, as they may yield deeper insights and offer concrete guidance for organizations striving to embed sustainability into their strategic and operational practices (Exter, 2013; Hoffman & Haigh, 2011). Specifically, the article applies four core pillars of POS (Cameron & Dutton, 2003) to analyze how eco-entrepreneurs thrive in adverse conditions:

- Generativity – the capacity to act with the future in mind, linking environmental values with innovation and long-term commitment to sustainability (Afridi et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2024);
- Resilience – the ability to adapt to market disruptions and maintain momentum through social support and green innovation (Li et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2024);
- Positive Leadership – the role of authentic, transformational, or servant leadership in aligning values, inspiring commitment, and fostering cohesion (Verma & Kumar, 2022);
- Positive Relationships – the development of social capital through engagement, collaboration, and education of stakeholders. Human flourishing is deeply interconnected with the natural environment, where individuals and organizations gain value and innovation through their relationships both with nature and with one another, forming an integrated system that addresses the complex and diverse challenges of sustainability (Shrivastava & Cooperrider, 1999).

By focusing on these internal dimensions, the study contributes to a more balanced understanding of eco-entrepreneurship. Rather than reiterating external constraints, it reveals how positive organizational dynamics enable entrepreneurs to overcome obstacles and lead sustainable transformation. Accordingly, the central research question guiding this inquiry is: What internal mechanisms and organizational resources empower Polish eco-entrepreneurs to foster innovation and generate positive social and environmental impact amid uncertainty and competitive pressure?

## 2. Positive Organizational Scholarship

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) focuses on amplifying human strengths, fostering resilience, and nurturing individual and collective potential – factors that contribute to enhanced organizational effectiveness (Dutton et al., 2008; Cameron, 2021). In contrast to traditional organizational research, which predominantly addresses challenges, deficiencies, and dysfunctions, POS emphasizes affirmative dynamics such as excellence, human flourishing, thriving at work, and organizational virtuousness (Cameron & Caza, 2004). It highlights the generative potential within individuals and groups. A key concept within POS is positive deviance, which refers to the identification and application of uncommon

but successful behaviors or practices that lead individuals and organizations to attain outstanding results (Mroz & Quinn, 2009). Equally important are positive sense-making processes, emotional experiences, and interpersonal relationships, which collectively support a workplace climate conducive to well-being and performance. POS underscores the role of meaningful work as a key driver of employee motivation and effectiveness. When individuals experience deep involvement, sustained focus, and high levels of enthusiasm in their work, core components of work engagement, it contributes to a range of beneficial outcomes, including both task-related and discretionary performance, increased client satisfaction, and greater creativity (Rothbard & Patil, 2011; Redelinguys, 2021). Central to this framework is the notion of positive leadership, characterized by the ability to generate positive energy, nurture psychological resilience, and inspire exceptional levels of performance across teams and organizations (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011). Research indicates that both optimism and high resilience contribute to the development of positive leadership, which in turn enhances employee well-being, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness (Zbierowski & Góra, 2014).

In line with this, another complementary research question is: How do authentic leadership and value congruence influence team engagement and effectiveness within Polish eco-enterprises? This question explores the interpersonal and motivational dynamics underpinning organizational performance and sustainability. The Positive Organizational Scholarship framework offers a lens that extends beyond conventional analyses of barriers and challenges. It enables a deeper understanding of how green entrepreneurs cultivate psychological and organizational resilience (Paul et al., 2019); how they generate innovation and develop novel business models grounded in meaning and values (Shree & Kiran, 2025); foster relationships and communities (DeRue & Workman, 2012; Spreitzer, 2018); and promote prosocial and pro-environmental trends in business (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2011). This analytical perspective captures not only *what* eco-entrepreneurs do, but also *why* and *how* their actions contribute to enduring, constructive change, both at the individual level (in the form of enhanced well-being, purpose, and resilience) and at the organizational level (through innovation, relational capital, and broader social impact). Building on this, an additional research question guiding this study is: How do eco-entrepreneurs build organizational resilience in the face of crises and uncertainty? This question focuses on a critical internal mechanism enabling Polish eco-enterprises to sustain innovation and generate positive social and environmental outcomes despite challenging conditions.

The choice of POS as the analytical framework is deliberate, as it highlights generative processes underpinning entrepreneurial action in sustainability contexts. Rather than emphasizing deficits, POS draws attention to affirmative dynamics

that empower individuals and organizations to flourish amid complexity – making it particularly apt for studying green entrepreneurship, where values, purpose, and community are central to opportunity recognition and pursuit.

### **3. Leading Green: How Innovation, Leadership, and Positive Deviance Shape Sustainable Entrepreneurship**

While organisational green performance has traditionally focused on recycling, reducing, and reusing, emerging research highlights the critical role of employee initiative and creativity in driving deeper, innovation-led sustainability (Glińska-Noweś & Glinka, 2024), an effort that is significantly influenced and enabled by visionary and supportive leadership fostering a culture of environmental stewardship (Robertson & Barling, 2013). Leaders who cultivate ethical conduct, foster positive emotional climates, and create a sense of purpose in the workplace are well-positioned to advance sustainable strategies and achieve exceptional outcomes (Wooten & Cameron, 2009). However, the traditional approach also remains relevant; it turns out that companies engaging in a wide range of resource efficiency initiatives, such as saving water and energy or minimizing waste, are significantly more likely to offer green products and services. This indicates a strong link between a firm's commitment to sustainability and its decision to pursue green entrepreneurship (Vasilescu et al., 2023). In this context, positive deviations, atypical but successful behaviors that challenge prevailing norms, represent a powerful source of innovation and transformation, especially under conditions of uncertainty and adversity. Organizations that intentionally pursue unconventional paths, such as launching environmentally friendly products despite market resistance or regulatory barriers, exhibit not only strategic foresight but also the capacity to lead systemic change. These pioneers often redefine industry standards and catalyze broader shifts toward more responsible and future-oriented business practices (Laskowska, 2018). A study based on Indian industrial sectors concludes that a structured, phased approach, consisting of comparison, competition, and collaboration, can effectively support SMEs and startups in becoming key partners in circular economy ecosystems. Moreover, applying POS principles helps these firms manage change positively, build collaborative cultures, and increase their contribution to circular transitions, especially in developing economies (Quttainah et al., 2025).

Green innovation, covering environmentally beneficial improvements to processes, products, and systems, has been shown to yield both ecological and financial benefits (Shuwaikh et al., 2023). For example, a study on German HDAX companies shows that implementing green solutions has a positive impact on their financial performance. This is primarily because green innovations lead to greater resource efficiency and enhance corporate reputation, which in turn boosts financial results. The authors emphasize that it is possible to achieve

both environmental sustainability and financial success simultaneously (Farza et al., 2021). However, implementation often faces barriers, particularly in firms without prior environmental orientation, due to the need for new resources and capabilities (Ociepa-Kubicka & Pachura, 2017). Green entrepreneurs often face challenges such as lack of funding, limited market demand, and regulatory barriers. To address these obstacles, they can engage in strategic partnerships and cross-sector collaborations, which provide access to essential technologies, resources, and market insights (Calza et al., 2017; Weis & Nikolić, 2024). Integrating sustainability into core business models becomes more than regulatory compliance – it is a driver of resilience, innovation, and competitive advantage (Zedlmayer, 2023; von Rosing et al., 2025). Entrepreneurial leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering green innovation by cultivating a learning culture and supporting sustainability-focused transformation (Ali et al., 2023). The impact of such leadership is further moderated by environmental dynamism: in volatile settings, adaptive and visionary leaders can better drive innovation, while in stable contexts, the influence may be less pronounced (Asad et al., 2024; Ibarra-Cisneros et al., 2024). Sustainable leadership emphasizes the need to align economic, social, and environmental objectives within an organization, ensuring that these goals are balanced and integrated into the company's overall strategy. Research conducted by Al-Janabi et al. (2024) highlights the significant impact of entrepreneurial leadership styles, proactive, visionary, and servant leadership, on organizational sustainability. The integration of green marketing strategies, combined with strong leadership commitment, is essential for maintaining a competitive edge and achieving sustained success in green markets. By leveraging these strategies, eco-entrepreneurs can navigate the complexities of the green economy, drive innovation, and position themselves as leaders in sustainable business practices (Eyadat et al., 2024). Their findings suggest that leaders who prioritize environmental stewardship not only set a clear direction for sustainability but also inspire their teams to adopt green practices, creating a culture of sustainability within the organization.

In summary, integrating positive deviations, green innovation, and entrepreneurial leadership into organizations not only fosters sustainability but also drives long-term growth and resilience. By adopting unconventional approaches, cultivating a supportive organizational culture, and forming strategic partnerships, eco-entrepreneurs can overcome challenges and set new industry standards, ultimately contributing to a broader transition toward sustainable business practices.

#### 4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design involving 40 Polish entrepreneurs operating within the eco-entrepreneurship sector. Participants were purposively selected based on their active management of businesses with



a clearly defined pro-environmental profile and strong commitment to sustainable development initiatives. The sample included a diverse range of industries such as biodegradable accessories, digital advertising, educational services, clothing, and green technologies. The selection process combined targeted online searches using keywords related to ecology, sustainability, and green entrepreneurship with identification of companies actively promoting ecological products and sustainable branding through their websites and social media. Additional sources included industry reports, sustainability rankings, and case collections describing environmentally responsible firms. This multi-faceted approach enabled the identification of a varied group of green enterprises engaged in sustainable practices across different sectors. While the purposive sampling strategy, partly relying on online visibility and sustainability rankings, may have introduced some bias toward more prominently promoted eco-entrepreneurs, the sample nevertheless offers rich, relevant, and diverse insights. Participants represented a broad spectrum of industries, company sizes, and stages of development, which enhances the credibility and transferability of the findings within the studied context. Thus, despite inherent limitations, the sample is appropriate for addressing the qualitative exploratory aims of this study.

The analysis of the empirical material was conducted using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Atlas.ti was used for coding. Systematic coding involved the concurrent process of data collection and coding, whereby interviews were coded simultaneously as the research progressed. An inductive coding approach was applied, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, categories, and themes. The POS framework guided both the formulation of interview questions and the interpretation of findings. Key themes such as resilience, positive deviance, meaningful work, and generativity were used as sensitizing concepts, allowing the analysis to remain grounded in participants' narratives while linking them to theoretical constructs. Particular attention was given to phenomena such as generativity, resilience, authentic leadership, positive deviance, and the development of relational capital. The entire research process adhered to the principles of ethical scientific inquiry. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, granted anonymity, and given the option to withdraw at any stage.

This methodological design enabled an in-depth analysis of eco-entrepreneurs' experiences and facilitated the identification of key mechanisms of positive organizing within the context of pro-environmental business practices in Poland.

## 5. Results

The following section presents an analysis of entrepreneurs' experiences through four core dimensions: generativity, resilience, positive leadership, and positive relationships. This structure allows for a nuanced exploration of the internal

	Industry	Entrepreneur age
1.	Circular economy solutions	43 years
2.	Food industry	68 years
3.	Nature-based solutions for biodiversity	37 years
4.	Fashion	37 years
5.	Eco-friendly household products	29 years
6.	Eco-friendly household products	26 years
7.	Circular economy solutions	45 years
8.	Circular economy solutions	42 years
9.	Baby products industry	36 years
10.	Eco-friendly household products	34 years
11.	Eco-friendly household products	45 years
12.	Eco-friendly household products	40 years
13.	Technology	56 years
14.	Circular economy solutions	43 years
15.	Eco-friendly household products	38 years
16.	Cleaning products industry	37 years
17.	Cosmetics industry	35 years
18.	Chemical manufacturing industry	45 years
19.	Cosmetics industry	53 years
20.	Professional Services	42 years
21.	Professional Services	38 years
22.	Food industry	34 years
23.	Professional Services	44 years
24.	Cleaning products industry	45 years
25.	Manufacturing	51 years
26.	Professional Services	39 years
27.	Circular economy solutions	33 years
28.	Technology	37 years
29.	Manufacturing	49 years
30.	Circular economy solutions	45 years
31.	Chemical manufacturing industry	55 years
32.	Professional Services	38 years
33.	Clean Technology	43 years
34.	Professional Services	34 years
35.	Professional Services	43 years
36.	Professional Services	39 years
37.	Food industry	38 years
38.	Circular economy solutions	55 years
39.	Manufacturing	50 years
40.	Clean Technology	51 years

**Table 1.** Background information of the individuals interviewed

Source: Own elaboration.



mechanisms and values that drive eco-entrepreneurial practices in the context of sustainability.

### 5.1. Generativity

Generativity was one of the themes analyzed in the respondents' statements. Attention was given to those excerpts in which the development of new products and services was attributed to environmental values. One entrepreneur explicitly stated that simply offering environmentally neutral products was not sufficient for him. He aimed to further reduce his environmental impact, which led to the idea of allowing customers to return packaging. To achieve this, a comprehensive returns system was developed to enable the reuse of bottles:

*"The idea of circularity of a closed circuit started to get into my head, that is, that even though these products are natural or ecological, so what, if all the packaging, plastic or cardboard, is more harmful to the environment than this delicate product. [...] We added this phrase of these bottles." [E3]*

Another company was driven by the realization of the significant negative environmental impact of coffee production. Moreover, when making coffee from coffee grounds, only a portion of the beans' potential is utilized, with the rest being discarded as waste. This awareness led the entrepreneurs to seek solutions for better managing this raw material.

*"We assumed, when we created the startup, that coffee grounds do not deserve such an end because, first of all, coffee production itself is very emission-intensive. [...] We will see what can be done with these grounds and at first we came up with the idea of making coffee briquettes from them." [E10]*

Generativity, understood as the creative transformation of environmental values into new products, services, and business models, is tangibly reflected in the practices of Polish eco-entrepreneurs. Their actions illustrate how deeply embedded ecological values can become a driving force for innovation and sustainable market differentiation.

### 5.2. Resilience

Another area that emerged from the analysis was resilience, i.e., the strategies eco-enterprises use to cope with market disruptions and external challenges.

*"Entering the market at this time is very, very risky, we have it somewhere in the back of our minds... That there is some fear that, well, there is inflation, a general geopolitical economic crisis. We have a huge crisis that is not stopping for now. [...] at the same time, already somewhere on two tracks, at the same time, we were trying to qualify for the 'startup challenge', which we succeeded in doing." [E3]*

Eco-entrepreneurs face many challenges. Global economic crises, which discourage people from investing in eco-friendly products even more. The

pandemic, which has generally introduced great uncertainty and fluctuations in the market. The war in Ukraine also had a major impact about Polish entrepreneurs. Despite this, the entrepreneur was looking for various sources of financing and ideas for various types of solutions to be able to function.

*“Well, that’s another challenge, apart from the climatic ones somewhere, now the pandemic for example for us has caused that this also indirectly affects the depth of the pocket of the average Pole, now the war in Ukraine, i.e., the socio-political situation with imported products also has an impact that somewhere it translates into having to choose more expensive methods of transport.” [E23]*

Entrepreneurs continually seek strategies that enable them to withstand periods of crisis. Often, these learning processes occur amidst the crisis itself; however, the adaptation is effective enough to ensure business continuity. One such strategy involves diversifying the product portfolio.

*“I think the idea came about because of this pandemic, where our turnover dropped completely. These sales have completely stopped. People now have no idea how to think about reusable bags, plastic and so on. [...] We tried to cope with it somehow. We decided that we need to expand this assortment a little bit, we need to go out to customers, so that they don’t have to shop in several stores, but to make our offer attractive.” [E27]*

The interviewed eco-entrepreneurs demonstrate a high degree of resilience by effectively adapting to unpredictable changes, resourcefully mobilizing their own capabilities, actively seeking external support, and continuously learning to navigate uncertainty. These behaviors exemplify the core of resilience in eco-entrepreneurship, highlighting how adaptability, self-reliance, and openness to learning become vital tools for sustaining environmentally driven ventures in dynamic and often volatile market conditions.

### **5.3. Positive leadership**

All interview participants articulated a sense of purpose in their entrepreneurial activities that extended beyond the pursuit of profit. Notably, none of the interviewee described their business endeavors as driven solely by financial gain; rather, they consistently emphasized broader values such as environmental stewardship, social impact, and personal fulfillment as central to their motivations for founding and developing their enterprises.

A company involved in processing coffee grounds indicates that what sustains the entire organization is a huge belief in the sense of what they do. Being true to values, not giving up, but striving to implement dream solutions drives the entire team, which knows that it can trust a leader who is an entrepreneur.

*“Where do you get the strength for all this? Because there is so much uncertainty. There is so much uncertainty, isn’t there? [...] Very much. I think we*

*believe in the project. We believe that it makes sense. We believe that if, as it were, we break through this, then somewhere it will pay off for us too.” [E33]*

As the entrepreneurs convince, all the company’s activities are of the same quality as the products sold. This is certainly a conscious action that they take care of so that it is seen by customers.

*“I think that I feel satisfaction and pride in selling these products and not others, and although sometimes I encounter people who say it’s strange that some paints are available for such money, despite everything, that we are a company aware of what we sell... we try to make everything consistent and top-shelf.” [E19]*

The owner of a company selling natural squeezed juices made from local products not only promoted his company values but built relationships with customers based on trust and authenticity.

*“– What I do is for people who have problems with morphology, cancer problems. Of course, they don’t cure cancer, but they do make the morphology better. [...]*

*– So I understand correctly that in addition to business, such a business sphere, there is also such a mission, so that it means something?*

*– Of course.*

*– I think I know how to get along with customers. I knew how to listen to them. [...] I had to talk to them. [...] A lot of people came who were lonely. I had to talk to them. [...] So even if someone came in during a conversation, that person was waiting, I arranged for the next one.” [E1]*

Additionally, through his products he inspired people to change and take care of themselves and their health. In the case of an entrepreneur selling seeds, an important element was education and building consumer awareness of the product:

*“Flowers can also help to increase diversity in rural areas, so these urban-rural activities are a beginning to go further. To change the awareness of consumers in certain things and then they also influence farmers to grow their vegetables in a specific way, for example by using flower strips to support and protect the crops that take place there.” [E15]*

Among the interviewees, positive leadership was reflected in the consistent alignment between personal values and organizational actions, the cultivation of trust-based and authentic relationships, and the ability to inspire others toward positive change. Additionally, it involved imbuing work and business with a deeper sense of purpose that transcended mere profit generation.

#### **5.4. Positive Relationships**

The last area analyzed was building positive relationships with clients, partners, team, and other stakeholders. An entrepreneur involved in the sale

of meadow seeds and promoting the topic talked about how he builds local communities:

*“Promoting this idea of meadows involves some kind of social activity, because this whole idea and everything we do brings together very nice people who have a lot of empathy and really care about the fate of the planet.”* [E15]

For an entrepreneur selling juices, contacts and relationships with customers are the foundation. And as it turned out from the conversation, the reason was not at all the desire to increase sales, but the relative curiosity of people and the desire to build authentic relationships with them.

*“I still have customers who started with me, who come every day. Am I involved in the lives of my clients? Of course, of course. Clients came thirty years ago. Mothers came with children, their heads would reach the table. Such three-year-old lads. The mother would drink juice, the son would look at it, or maybe he would get some very diluted juice. And now I’m walking down the street and ‘Good morning! You haven’t changed at all!’ The man is looking at me, I don’t know what’s going on. ‘You don’t remember me, because I came with my mother, and I would reach the table with my head.’ And now a boy two meters tall.”* [E1]

The entrepreneur in question can be regarded as a pioneer of contemporary sustainable business practices. As early as 30 years ago, he remained steadfast in his environmental values, operating a company grounded in ecological responsibility. His business model emphasized traditional juice extraction methods, the use of reusable packaging, and sourcing exclusively from local producers, while deliberately avoiding involvement in transportation. His approach reflected a deep respect for the resources of the Earth, long before such values became mainstream in the business world.

For another entrepreneur, maintaining positive relationships with family is of utmost importance, their opinions hold such weight that, beyond business considerations, he constantly keeps in mind what decisions will bring happiness to his loved ones.

*“And since I love my daughter very much, her opinion is important to me and where is that ecological course as if it were also important to me, not because I do business there, but because I want it to be ecological, but business is important.”* [E6]

These relationships can be cultivated in various forms by entrepreneurs, encompassing connections with stakeholders and clients, as well as close personal ties, such as those with family members.

The excerpts above illustrate how eco-entrepreneurs cultivate long-term relationships grounded in trust with their customers, foster mutual support within their teams, build communities united by shared values, and engage in inter-organizational collaborations aimed at achieving common sustainability goals.

## 6. Discussion

This study offers valuable insights into the functioning of Polish eco-enterprises through the theoretical lens of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS), which emphasizes the strengths, virtues, and generative dynamics within organizations that foster exceptional performance and positive change (Cameron & Dutton, 2003). By applying POS to the context of eco-entrepreneurship in Poland, the research extends the theory's geographical and cultural scope, revealing how internal positive dynamics operate in conditions of economic volatility, limited institutional support, and evolving consumer awareness.

The study contributes to theory by demonstrating that eco-entrepreneurial success is not solely a function of market adaptation or regulatory compliance, but is fundamentally rooted in the alignment of ecological values, authentic leadership, and trust-based stakeholder relationships. Polish eco-entrepreneurs actively embed personal ecological values into their business models, resulting in generative innovation that combines profitability with environmental responsibility. Many of these ventures were founded to align business activity with sustainability goals, enabling a deliberate deviation from conventional market logic centered on scale and efficiency. Instead, these entrepreneurs prioritize long-term impact, quality, and authenticity, characteristics that embody the principle of positive deviance (Laskowska, 2018).

Despite operating across diverse sectors, including biodegradable accessories, green tech, educational services, or upcycled fashion, these businesses are united by a deep commitment to sustainability. Their actions reflect the POS concept of generativity, where pro-environmental values drive continuous innovation and meaningful contributions to society. High organizational resilience also emerged as a critical success factor, particularly visible during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Entrepreneurs showed a capacity to adapt under pressure by drawing on internal values and mission-driven focus, which aligns with POS insights into the role of resilience in sustaining performance through adversity.

Authentic leadership plays a central role in this process. Interviewees described how traits such as optimism, transparency, and stress resilience enabled them to build trust and engage effectively with clients, employees, and community stakeholders. These findings echo research by Zbierowski and Góra (2014), which highlights the impact of positive leadership on well-being and organizational effectiveness.

In addition, the cultivation of relational capital, strong interpersonal networks and community trust, supports the long-term viability of these enterprises. While systemic challenges such as high production costs, low ecological awareness, and bureaucratic burdens persist, many entrepreneurs rely on values-driven motivation and collaborative efforts to overcome them. They often engage in educational initiatives, zero-waste fairs, or awareness campaigns to accelerate consumer

cultural shifts, illustrating how small eco-enterprises can act as catalysts for broader change.

The unique contribution of this study lies in integrating personal ecological values, leadership authenticity, and social capital into a cohesive model of sustainable organizational effectiveness. By focusing on generativity, resilience, and positive relationships, the research deepens the POS framework and demonstrates its explanatory power in the eco-entrepreneurship domain. It shifts the perspective from external constraints to internal capabilities, highlighting that the success of green enterprises depends not only on policy support but also, and perhaps more importantly, on strengthening internal dynamics such as authentic leadership, trust-based collaboration, and a shared commitment to long-term environmental responsibility.

Ultimately, this perspective positions eco-entrepreneurs not as passive market responders but as proactive agents of social and environmental transformation. Their ability to foster internal alignment and purpose-driven innovation underscores the value of POS as a lens for understanding and supporting sustainable entrepreneurship, especially in emerging economies.

## **7. Practical implications for eco-entrepreneurs and managers**

While the theoretical framework of POS provides a strong foundation, the study also identifies several practical strategies that address the specific challenges faced by eco-entrepreneurs. Below are context-specific recommendations derived from the empirical findings:

- Building on Strengths and Positive Deviances – organizations should actively identify and reinforce unusual but effective practices (positive deviations) developed by employees or teams. Such actions can become a catalyst for change. Some interviewees introduced innovative practices such as waste-free logistics or customer-involved co-design workshops, which emerged organically within their teams.
- Strengthening the resilience and optimism of leaders – it seems important for leaders and entrepreneurs to have high mental resilience, authenticity and a positive attitude. Many respondents perceived crises as a stimulus for innovation, showing determination and calmness in pursuing long-term goals, flexibly adapting to new market conditions, and seeking alternative solutions despite adversity. This resilient approach was closely linked to a sense of optimism, which stemmed from a strong sense of purpose and mission in their entrepreneurial activities.
- Creating an organizational culture based on values and the meaning of work – respondents reported that incorporating ecological values into onboarding processes, internal communication, and performance evaluation fostered a sense of shared purpose. This approach strengthened

employee engagement and helped attract value-aligned partners and customers.

- Systemic support and cooperation – several companies benefited from involvement in local sustainability networks, circular economy clusters, or partnerships with NGOs or research centers. Such collaborations offered access to resources, legitimacy, and learning opportunities that individual firms could not achieve alone.

These practices are universal in nature and can be adopted by managers across various industries who seek to develop their organizations in line with the principles of sustainability and positive leadership.

## 8. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Polish eco-entrepreneurs successfully integrate personal values, innovation, and sustainability into their business models, using the mechanisms described by Positive Organizational Scholarship. The key drivers of their success are generativity, resilience, authentic leadership, and the ability to build positive relationships with stakeholders. These internal resources enable eco-entrepreneurs to overcome market barriers, inspire change, and create lasting social and environmental impact. The research confirms that POS is a valuable framework for understanding and supporting sustainable entrepreneurship. Future studies should further explore the long-term effects of POS-based strategies and expand comparative analyses to other cultural contexts.

## 9. Limitations of the study

The study was based on a purposive sample of 40 eco-entrepreneurs from Poland, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other countries, particularly those with different regulatory or cultural contexts. In addition, a study based on qualitative data does not allow for verification of correlations between leadership traits and financial results.

The study was cross-sectional, which makes it difficult to assess the long-term effectiveness of POS-based strategies. For example, it would be interesting to check to what extent value generativity translates into the durability of the company after 5 years. In future research, it would be worthwhile to compare eco-enterprises from Poland with companies from Scandinavian countries or Southeast Asia in terms of differences in POS implementation (e.g., the role of social capital in building resilience). Additionally, it would be worth conducting a longitudinal study to track the development paths of companies over a 10-year period, checking how the implementation of POS principles affects the functioning of companies.



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