


## Business Leadership in Public Social Service Organizations: Implementing and Sustaining Social Innovations

**Janina ČIŽIKIENĖ** (corresponding author, [janina.cizikiene@ktu.lt](mailto:janina.cizikiene@ktu.lt)),  PhD in Management, Faculty of Social Science, Arts and Humanities, Kaunas University of Technology, Kaunas, Lithuania; Social Wellbeing Department at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Vilniaus Kolegija, Higher Education Institution, Vilnius, Lithuania

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**Abstract:** *Business leadership is increasingly central to debates on organizational sustainability and innovation governance within public social service systems facing complex accountability and resource pressures. Despite the growing body of research on social innovation and leadership, business leadership remains insufficiently conceptualized in terms of how leadership practices become institutionalized in everyday organizational routines during the sustainment of social innovations, particularly in emotionally intensive public service environments. The purpose of this study is to examine how managers initiate, implement, and embed social innovations and to identify the leadership mechanisms that enable their long-term institutionalization. Empirical data were collected in September 2025 in Lithuania through semi-structured interviews with 7 managers (n=7) of public social service organizations; all participants had more than 5 years of managerial experience and direct responsibility for innovation processes. The study employed semi-structured interviews and qualitative thematic analysis, with manual coding and systematic cross-case comparison across seven cases (n=7). All seven managers (7/7) emphasized articulating vision and sustaining meaning-making as the primary mechanisms through which business leadership connects innovation initiatives to professional identity and organizational direction. Six managers (6/7) identified employee empowerment and the deliberate cultivation of a learning culture as key mechanisms transforming innovation from episodic change into routinized practice. Five managers (5/7) highlighted interorganizational collaboration and adaptive process restructuring as decisive conditions preventing innovation fragmentation and supporting long-term integration. These findings reconceptualize business leadership in public governance contexts as a relational and integrative practice that operates across cognitive, structural, and collaborative domains, thereby extending current leadership and innovation sustainability theory.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The social services sector has been operating in an increasingly complex environment over the past few decades. The needs of service users are increasingly multi-dimensional and dynamic, encompassing issues such as mental health, addictions, domestic violence, child welfare, disability, homelessness, and social isolation.

In such situations, the traditional logic of social service provision, where each institution addresses problems strictly within its own competence, often leads to disruptions in support, a lack of coordination, or delayed responses to ongoing situations. Social service organizations experience these challenges particularly acutely, as their activities focus on the complex life situations of individuals and aim to achieve autonomy, social integration, safety, and well-being (Dziegielewski, 2013; Čižikienė, 2020).

Additional complexity in the social services sector arises from the fact that service outcomes depend not only on formally established rules, service models, or regulatory frameworks, but also on how these are applied in specific service delivery situations.

In practice, social service professionals continuously make decisions by balancing organizational requirements, professional standards, the diversity of service users' needs, and available resources; therefore, everyday practice is characterized by high uncertainty and a situational nature of decision-making (Moffatt, 2019). Research indicates that these everyday professional practices significantly shape service quality and the results achieved, regardless of formally defined policy goals (Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015).

Due to these sector-specific characteristics, it is particularly important to analyze how social service organizations can renew themselves and improve service quality while simultaneously ensuring service continuity, adherence to ethical principles, and the implementation of professional standards.

In this context, social innovations in the field of social services most often manifest not through technological solutions but through newly organized social work practices and changes in service delivery. Such changes include restructuring service delivery formats, integrating and coordinating services to

ensure more coherent support, strengthening interorganizational coordination, and deliberately involving service users in service planning and implementation.

This specificity of social innovations indicates that the primary focus is on how work is organized, how interaction between institutions is created, and how relationships with service users are shaped.

These processes are conceptually grounded in coproduction theory, which argues that the value of public services emerges through joint activity with service users and other community actors (Osborne et al., 2016). Subsequent studies further emphasize the role of families and broader stakeholder networks in co-creation processes (Masterson et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2024).

From a coproduction perspective, service users are viewed as active participants: they can contribute to identifying needs, aligning goals, selecting solutions, and implementing services.

Consequently, service outcomes depend on how professional resources and competencies are aligned with service users' experiences, priorities, motivation, and everyday efforts.

In the field of social services, this assumption is particularly significant, as the desired changes most often take place in individuals' everyday environments.

Therefore, service effectiveness cannot be assessed solely in terms of compliance with rules or the execution of procedures; it also depends on whether service users are provided with real opportunities to engage and whether organizations create conditions for meaningful collaboration.

From this perspective, social innovations can be understood as changes that not only reorganize service delivery processes, but also transform the logic of interaction between organizations, professionals, and service users – from a one-directional “service provision” model toward joint problem-solving and shared responsibility for outcomes (Osborne et al., 2016).

In the field of social services, innovations are often implemented not within the boundaries of individual organizations, but through interinstitutional and cross-sectoral interaction encompassing social services, healthcare, education, employment,

housing, and other related systems. For this reason, innovation implementation takes on the character of interorganizational change, which requires clear coordination mechanisms, role distribution, and trust-based collaborative relationships ([Provan & Kenis, 2008](#); [Hughes & Wearing, 2013](#)).

Research emphasizes that governance and coordination arrangements are crucial in determining whether interorganizational innovations become functioning practices or remain fragmented initiatives ([Cristofoli et al., 2017](#); [Dingelstad et al., 2025](#)).

Studies on integrated care and cross-sectoral collaboration show that the greatest challenges in implementing innovations arise at the interfaces between organizations.

These challenges are mostly related to differing accountability regimes, uneven funding mechanisms, the maintenance of professional boundaries, restrictions on information exchange, and incompatibilities between organizational cultures ([Auschra, 2018](#); [Aunger et al., 2021](#)).

[Dickinson and Sullivan \(2014\)](#) emphasize that these barriers reflect bigger differences in institutional logics and divergent understandings of responsibility, risk, and service objectives ([Dickinson & Sullivan, 2014](#)).

On the other hand, research on the diffusion of innovations in service organizations consistently shows that even empirically grounded or effective solutions do not become established automatically.

The adoption and implementation of innovations depend on how organizations and employees perceive the innovation's relative advantage, its compatibility with existing values and work practices, the complexity of its implementation, opportunities for trialability, and the observability of results ([Wisdom et al., 2014](#); [Nilsen & Bernhardsson, 2019](#)). Scholarly studies emphasize that these factors are particularly important in human service organizations, where changes directly affect professional identity and everyday work practices ([Rycroft-Malone et al., 2016](#); [Langley et al., 2018](#)).

In the social services sector, the issue of outcome impact is particularly salient, as the effects of innovations often manifest through intermediate process-related changes, such as improved service

continuity or increased accessibility, which are difficult to measure quickly and unambiguously ([Urmanavičienė, 2019](#)).

For this reason, the legitimacy and long-term sustainability of innovations require not only the idea of a new practice itself, but also organizational and institutional conditions that enable the innovation to be integrated into everyday activities and sustained through managerial decisions, resource allocation, and formal work routines ([Audretsch et al., 2022](#)). It is precisely in this context that the role of leadership becomes evident.

In social service organizations, innovation implementation takes place under conditions of constant tension, where new practices compete with demands for service continuity, heavy workloads, professional norms, and limited resources.

Research shows that successful innovation implementation requires a supportive implementation climate, in which employees perceive the new practice as a priority and are backed by resources, managerial attention, and recognition ([Čižikienė, 2020](#); [Aarons & Ehrhart, 2022](#)).

Such an environment can be shaped by leadership, which, in the implementation literature, is defined as purposeful behavior aimed at removing implementation barriers, empowering employees, and sustaining change over time ([Berzin et al., 2015](#)).

Taking into account the complexity of social innovation implementation discussed in this article, leadership in this study is defined as a set of leadership activities encompassing the shaping of the direction and meaning of change and its consistent communication, employee empowerment and the creation of a learning-supportive environment, the mobilization of collaboration with partners, and the adaptation of organizational procedures and decisions to support innovation implementation.

This perspective allows leadership to be understood not only in terms of individual managerial traits or formal positions, but also in relation to how leadership functions are distributed within organizations and across interorganizational interactions, where supporting innovation becomes a matter of shared responsibility.

In this study, the term "business leadership" is used in a cross-sectoral sense and refers to leadership

practices oriented toward strategic management, accountability, sustainability, and performance coordination. It does not imply a private-sector setting but denotes leadership logics applicable to public and social service organizations operating under managerial and governance constraints.

Moreover, the implementation of social innovations is not limited to the initial adoption phase. Their long-term value depends on sustainability, that is, on whether the innovation is integrated into everyday work routines, supported by a stable resource base, and allowed to adapt while preserving its core principles (Dearing & Cox, 2018).

In the social services sector, this dimension is particularly significant, as without institutionalization, innovative initiatives often remain temporary, project-based efforts and fail to become a long-term norm of professional practice.

Despite the growing body of research on social innovation and leadership, existing studies predominantly focus on formal models, managerial tools, and success factors, often treating leadership as a structural or instrumental variable.

Much less attention has been paid to how leadership operates as an everyday, context-dependent, and emotionally embedded practice within social service organizations.

There is limited empirical knowledge about how leaders support the translation of emerging innovative ideas into sustained organizational routines under conditions of professional complexity, resource constraints, and moral responsibility.

This study addresses this gap by examining leadership not as a formal position, but as a set of relational and sensemaking practices through which social innovations are enacted, stabilized, and sustained in everyday organizational life.

This article aims to reveal how managers of social service organizations initiate, support, and institutionalize social innovations, and to identify the main challenges in their implementation and sustainability. To achieve this aim, the following objectives are set:

1. To analyze the theoretical foundations of social innovation implementation in the social services sector, emphasizing the specific characteristics of the sector.

2. To reveal leadership practices that create conditions for social innovations to become part of everyday activities, including factors shaping a supportive implementation environment.

3. To identify the barriers to the implementation and sustainability of social innovations in organizations related to regulatory inertia, limited resources, employee fatigue, resistance to change, and the ambiguity of impact assessment criteria.

The stated aim and formulated objectives allow social innovations in social service organizations to be analyzed not as isolated changes but as processes occurring within specific organizational and interorganizational contexts.

This approach provides a basis for systematically examining the role of leadership across the innovation, implementation, and sustainability stages, while considering sector-specific characteristics and practical challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Aspects of Social Innovation Implementation in the Social Services System: The Role of Leadership

In the social services sector, social innovations most often manifest not as technological solutions, but as transformations in the organization of social services and social work practices, aimed at better responding to the complex and evolving needs of service users (Čižikienė, 2020; Moffatt, 2019).

Such innovations often arise from the practical need to individualize social services, ensure service continuity, and improve accessibility, especially when service provision involves multiple organizations or sectors. The scientific literature emphasizes that the success of social innovations in the social services field depends not only on the solution's content but also on the organizational and institutional conditions for their implementation (Eurich & Langer, 2016; Schröer, 2021).

Research shows that new practices often face tension between the need for innovation and the realities of everyday work, high workloads, and limited resources, making their implementation

reliant on deliberate organizational support ([Rycroft-Malone et al., 2016](#); [Nilsen & Bernhardsson, 2019](#)).

A key aspect of social innovation implementation is a user-centered approach, emphasizing that the value of public services is created through the active interaction of professionals, service users, and other stakeholders ([Osborne et al., 2016](#); [Masterson et al., 2022](#)). In the field of social services, this means that innovations become effective when service users are given real opportunities to participate in service planning and delivery, and when organizations maintain trust-based relationships ([Lee et al., 2024](#)).

Furthermore, social innovations are often implemented within interorganizational and cross-sectoral networks, where it is necessary to align the goals, operational logics, and accountability mechanisms of different organizations ([Auschra, 2018](#); [Cristofoli et al., 2017](#)).

Research indicates that innovation implementation is most often constrained not by a lack of ideas but by structural and institutional incompatibilities, such as fragmented funding models, the maintenance of professional boundaries, and restrictions on information exchange ([Aunger et al., 2021](#); [Dingelstad et al., 2025](#)).

The embedding of innovations within organizations also depends on how they are perceived at the employee level. Research emphasizes that the adoption of innovations is influenced by their compatibility with professional values, daily work practices, and the organization's mission ([Schröer, 2021](#); [Aarons & Ehrhart, 2022](#)).

Therefore, implementing social innovations in social service organizations require not only formal decisions but also leadership capable of creating a supportive environment for implementation.

The significance of social innovations is thus reflected in their sustainability. Empirical evidence suggests that the sustainability of innovations depends on their institutionalization into daily organizational routines and on maintaining core components while allowing adaptation ([Dearing & Cox, 2018](#)). Related work also indicates that innovations persist when they are supported by a stable resource base and embedded into everyday practices rather than remaining project-based initiatives ([Baker & Mehmood, 2015](#)).

In the social services sector, this is particularly important, as without institutionalization, innovative initiatives often remain temporary, project-based efforts and fail to become long-term norms of professional practice.

In summary, the implementation of social innovations in the social services sector should be understood as an organizational and interorganizational change, whose success depends not only on the solution's content but also on the conditions of implementation.

The scholarly literature highlights that innovations require organizational support, compatibility with professional values and social work practices, the involvement of service users in service delivery processes, and effective cross-sectoral collaboration.

The integration of these dimensions is particularly important in the social services sector, as the impact of innovations often manifests through intermediate process-related changes.

At the same time, sustainability is constrained by resource limitations, institutional incompatibilities, and employee fatigue. This situation underscores the need to analyze how organizations practically create and sustain conditions for social innovations: how priorities are set, resources allocated, employee engagement mobilized, learning and adaptation ensured, and collaborative relationships with partners established and maintained.

In this way, theoretical analysis naturally leads to the issue of leadership, as it is leadership decisions and actions that most often link the initiation of innovations, the shaping of a supportive implementation environment, and their long-term sustainability within organizational routines.

Research on social innovations consistently emphasizes that the emergence of innovations and their long-term embedding within organizations are conceptually distinct processes, requiring different organizational and leadership capabilities ([De Vries et al., 2016](#); [Schröer, 2021](#)).

While innovative solutions in the social services sector often arise from practical problems, professional experience, and the tensions of daily work, institutionalizing them requires routinization, legitimation within professional norms, and the

alignment of roles and resources so that the innovation becomes a repeatable organizational practice ([Čížikienė, 2024](#)).

In this sense, leadership is best understood as an ongoing practice that connects initial innovation work with institutionalization by fostering shared meaning, coordinating collective effort, and sustaining supportive conditions for everyday implementation.

In this process, leadership becomes a central link connecting the idea of innovation with its practical implementation and long-term sustainability.

In social service organizations, leadership in the context of innovations primarily manifests as the ability to align the initiation of change with requirements for service continuity and accountability.

Empirical research shows that the implementation of innovations in these organizations is often constrained by structural conditions (strict regulations, limited resources, rigid professional norms, and high accountability standards), which orient organizations toward stability and increase risk aversion ([De Vries et al., 2016](#); [Cristofoli et al., 2017](#)).

Consequently, leadership in social service organizations assumes a mediating function: managers must reconcile the need for innovation with service continuity and professional security, ensuring that new practices are not perceived as a threat to service users or to employees' professional identity ([Čížikienė, 2020](#)).

Contemporary research on innovation implementation allows changes occurring in social service organizations to be understood as a process whose success depends not only on the content of the implemented practice, but also on the conditions under which it is carried out.

[Damschroder et al. \(2009\)](#) proposed the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) to integrate different approaches used in implementation studies into a single analytical framework ([Damschroder et al., 2009](#)). CFIR provides a structured scheme for identifying the key factors influencing the embedding of a new practice within an organization.

The model distinguishes several interrelated dimensions: the compatibility of the innovation with

existing work practices, the organization's internal capacity (including resources, communication, and organizational culture), external implementation conditions (such as regulations, funding, and partnerships), and the implementation process itself, which includes planning, training, support, and feedback ([Damschroder et al., 2009](#); [Nilsen & Bernhardsson, 2019](#)).

This analytical perspective highlights the strategic role of leaders, as managerial decisions determine how the innovation is legitimized within the organization, which resources are allocated, how internal rules and responsibilities are adapted, and how practical and professional challenges arising during implementation are addressed, ensuring that the new practice can become feasibly integrated into daily operations ([Čížikienė, 2020](#)).

One of the most important mechanisms through which leadership influences the implementation of social innovations is the shaping of the implementation climate.

Research shows that employees' perceptions of whether an innovation is considered a genuine priority within the organization, and whether it is supported with resources and recognition, are directly linked to its use in daily practice ([Aarons et al., 2015](#); [Sklar et al., 2024](#)).

Leaders shape this perception through everyday decisions, including employee selection and onboarding practices, the organization of training, workload allocation, performance evaluation criteria, and signals of recognition.

In social service organizations, where employees work under high workloads and constant time pressures, these signals determine whether an innovation becomes an integral part of daily work or remains an additional, difficult-to-implement initiative ([Collins, 2017](#); [Maddock, 2024](#)).

The importance of leadership is particularly evident in the process of sense-making, as a new practice becomes part of daily work only when members of the organization develop a shared understanding, clearly recognizing what is changing, why it is being done, and how the new practice differs from previous approaches ([May et al., 2016](#)).

In the social services sector, this process is especially sensitive, as innovations often touch on

professional values, relationships with service users, and decision-making logic.

Leaders act as intermediaries between the idea of the innovation and professional practice, helping employees connect the new practice with the organization's mission and the values of social work (Čižikienė, 2024).

However, understanding the meaning of innovation is insufficient if the structural conditions for implementation are not established. Researchers Rycroft-Malone et al. (2016) emphasize that innovations do not become embedded in organizations that lack a learning infrastructure, consistent coaching, feedback mechanisms, and opportunities for reflective practice (Aarons & Ehrhart, 2022).

In social service organizations, leadership during the implementation of innovations often manifests in concrete organizational decisions regarding work organization and resource allocation. Managerial decisions on allocating time and space for training, case discussions, team reflections, and partner coordination create practical conditions for the consistent application of new practices.

These conditions determine whether an innovation becomes standardized and sustained in daily operations or remains fragmented and dependent on individual employees' personal engagement (Čižikienė, 2024).

An important dimension of leadership is managing organizational readiness for change. Scholars emphasize that the successful implementation of innovations depends on collective commitment to change and a shared belief among organizational members that the organization can carry out this change (Powell et al., 2019).

Empirical research shows that in social service organizations, this readiness is often hindered by employee burnout, high turnover, and constant operation under crisis conditions, which limit the capacity to plan and systematically implement new practices (Dearing & Cox, 2018).

In such circumstances, leadership is associated with the ability to maintain operational stability, clearly define change priorities, and reduce uncertainty during the implementation of innovation (Skovgaard & Nielsen, 2023).

Moreover, the implementation of social innovations is inevitably associated with uncertainty and the risk of errors, making psychological safety a necessary condition for open problem discussion, acknowledgment of mistakes, and continuous improvement (Ryman & Roach, 2024).

Leaders' ability to engage employees from different professions and foster open dialogue directly contributes to the adaptation of innovations and the improvement of their quality (Aarons & Ehrhart, 2022).

Such leadership allows innovations to be adjusted and refined rather than abandoned when initial implementation challenges arise. The role of leadership is particularly significant in the sustainment phase of social innovations.

Lin et al. (2017) emphasize that innovations persist when they are integrated into organizational routines, supported by a stable resource base, and can be adapted without losing their core operational principles (Mousavi et al., 2018).

At this stage, leadership involves not only managing internal processes but also the ability to operate in the external environment, maintaining partnerships, negotiating resources, and ensuring the continuity of innovations under changing conditions (Torfing, 2019).

In summary, leadership in social service organizations is a critical factor that enables social innovations to transition from ideas to long-term practice. Leaders' decisions and actions shape meaning, create a supportive implementation climate, strengthen organizational capacity, sustain learning, and ensure the durability of innovations.

In this way, leadership becomes the connecting link between the goals of social innovations and the real, day-to-day quality of services experienced in practice.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study is based on a qualitative research strategy, chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences, meaning-making processes, and action logics of managers of social service organizations in the initiation, support, and

institutionalization of social innovations ([Fortune et al., 2013](#)).

In this study, social innovations are understood as complex, contextual, and socially constructed processes, the analysis of which requires a deep insight into participants' interpretations, decision-making motives, and the organizational context.

Given the aim of the study and the limited number of previous empirical studies examining leadership in social innovations within social service organizations, an interpretive research design was selected ([Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013](#)).

This design allows not only the description of the phenomenon under study, but also the analysis of how managers of social service organizations perceive their role, what meanings they attribute to the creation of innovations, and how they construct and sustain innovative organizational processes.

The interpretive approach provides the conditions for revealing the multi-layered reality of social innovation implementation, considering structural, cultural, and institutional environmental factors.

### Research Method and Data Collection

The empirical study was conducted using the semi-structured interview method, which was selected as the most appropriate approach to balance a clear research focus with the flexibility to respond to participants' experiences, reasoning, and reflections ([Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021](#)).

The interview method enabled the collection of rich, contextual data on managers' perspectives on the development of social innovations, their leadership roles, decision-making logics, and the challenges encountered in practice.

In total, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers of seven different social service organizations. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants, all informants were assigned codes (L\_1, L\_2, L\_3, L\_4, L\_5, L\_6, L\_7). These codes are used when presenting quotations and interpreting empirical data.

The interview guide was developed based on an analysis of scholarly literature and focused on the following areas: the initiation of social innovations and underlying motivations; the support and

implementation of innovations within the organization; institutionalization processes; collaboration practices and stakeholder involvement; barriers and risks encountered in practice; and factors ensuring the sustainability of innovations.

Data collection was conducted in accordance with research ethics principles: participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and data protection was ensured.

The semi-structured interview guide included the following key questions:

- How were social innovations initiated in your organization?
- What role did business leadership play in introducing these innovations?
- How were employees involved in the implementation process?
- What organizational changes were required to institutionalize innovations?
- What barriers emerged during implementation?
- How is the sustainability of innovations ensured over time?
- How does interorganizational collaboration influence innovation success?

### Research Participants

Research participants were selected using a purposive (criterion-based) sampling method, which allows for the inclusion of the most information-rich participants who are directly related to the phenomenon under study ([Faulkner & Faulkner, 2018](#)).

The study included seven managers of social service organizations (L\_1 - L\_7) who met the following criteria:

1. They have held a managerial position within their organization for at least five years.
2. They have experience in initiating, implementing, or sustaining social innovation solutions in social services.

To ensure data anonymity, each manager is identified in the study solely by an assigned code (L\_1 - L\_7), and the names of organizations and other identifying characteristics (e.g., specific geographic location or detailed job titles) are not disclosed in the presentation of the findings.

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## RESULTS

### Creating a Vision for Social Innovations and Giving Meaning to Change in the Organization – the Role of Leadership

The study demonstrates that, within social service organizations, leadership is principally expressed through the creation, maintenance, and ongoing reinforcement of the meaning of change, rather than through the formal preparation of strategic documents or administrative oversight.

Leaders serve as mediators of meaning, linking the organization's strategic objectives with employees' daily practices and professional identity.

In the context of social services, characterized by emotional labor, high responsibility, and constant interaction with vulnerable service users, innovations are not perceived as neutral technical solutions.

They are evaluated in terms of professional values, ethical principles, and moral commitment to the individual.

Therefore, a leader's ability to clearly and consistently communicate the purpose of change becomes a crucial condition, enabling employees to accept the uncertainty and emotional risk associated with new practices.

"The leader must constantly remind us why we are doing this. If an employee does not see the connection with the person they are helping, no innovation will work, because it will simply become just another additional task" (L\_2).

"Innovation is not just a new method or project. It is a solution that must have a clear answer – how it will actually improve the service recipient's life and the employee's daily work" (L\_3).

"If the leaders themselves cannot clearly explain where the organization is heading and why we are changing now, employees remain in a state of uncertainty and begin to resist even good changes" (L\_7).

The analysis of the study suggests that the creation of vision and the meaning of change in social service organizations serves not only a strategic function but also an emotional stabilizing role.

In the participants' accounts, vision is often associated with the ability to "maintain direction"

amid constant changes, reforms, and external pressures.

A leader's capacity to consistently articulate why the organization is changing and where it is heading provides employees with a sense of security, allowing them to experience uncertainty as a manageable process rather than a threat.

This is particularly significant in the social services sector, where employees face client crises, emotional burdens, and morally challenging decisions daily.

In such circumstances, innovations may be perceived as an additional factor of instability. The vision created by the leader becomes a kind of "anchor," helping employees connect short-term difficulties with a meaningful long-term purpose.

"When employees know that the change has a clear direction, they find it easier to accept temporary chaos" (L\_5).

"Vision helps to persevere when results are not yet visible, and a great deal of effort is required" (L\_7).

The analysis indicates that vision creation within the context of social innovation functions as a mechanism for managing emotional labor, mitigating employee resistance and fatigue.

In this setting, leadership is characterized not by exerting pressure or control, but by providing meaning to complex, challenging, or temporarily unpopular innovations. By clearly articulating organizational direction and acknowledging challenges, leaders normalize transitional tensions and support the maintenance of internal stability.

"Employees need to feel that the leader genuinely believes in what they are doing and is not afraid to admit when something doesn't work. This gives them the courage to move forward together" (L\_6).

In summary, in social service organizations, a vision serves not only as a strategic guide but also as a psychological resource that supports employee motivation, helps maintain professional identity, and creates conditions for the long-term sustainability of social innovations.

In this way, leadership in the process of implementing innovations emerges as a combination of meaning-making, emotional stabilization, and ensuring purposeful organizational movement (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Leadership Expression in Creating Vision and Meaning of Change in the Context of Social Innovations**

Main theme	Subthemes	Aspects of leadership expression	Empirical indicators
Creating vision and meaning of change	Communicating the meaning of change	Mediating meaning between strategy and practice	Change linked to client well-being (L_2, L_6, L_7)
	Value-based justification of innovations	Moral grounding of innovations	Innovations evaluated through professional values (L_1, L_2, L_5)
	Vision as a strategic direction guide	Reducing uncertainty	Lack of clear direction associated with resistance (L_7, L_4)
	Vision as a source of emotional security	Ensuring emotional stability	Vision helps perceive the perspective of change (L_3, L_4, L_6)
	Leader authenticity	Building trust and followership	Leader's belief in change promotes employee engagement (L_1, L_3, L_6, L_7)

Source: Created by the author based on thematic coding of interview data.

Analyzing the structure presented in Table 1, it is evident that creating a vision and a sense of change in the context of social innovation encompasses not only the formulation of a strategic direction but also the establishment of emotional and value-based anchors within the organization.

The subthemes reveal that leadership in this process is expressed as consistent mediation of meaning, enabling employees to connect organizational goals with daily professional practices and client well-being.

The identified empirical indicators show that vision serves as an important mechanism for reducing uncertainty, particularly under conditions of continuous change and reforms.

A leader's ability to clearly articulate direction and maintain consistency helps employees navigate temporary instability and supports their engagement in innovation processes. Thus, vision creation emerges as a multidimensional leadership practice that combines strategic thinking, emotional stabilization, and value-based organizational alignment, creating the conditions for the adoption of social innovations and their long-term sustainability.

### **Empowering Employees and Strengthening a Learning Culture: Leadership as the Creation of Shared Responsibility**

The study demonstrates that the implementation of social innovations in social service organizations is intrinsically linked to employee empowerment and the consistent cultivation of a learning culture.

Participants emphasized that innovations are not realized solely through formal decisions or administrative directives; rather, they are established when employees actively participate in problem identification, solution development, and reflective processes.

In this context, leadership is manifested through the distribution of power and responsibility, as well as the recognition of employees' professional expertise.

In social service organizations, employees are closest to the daily realities of service recipients, making them the first to notice ineffective practices, service gaps, or changing needs.

The leader's role becomes that of a facilitator, creating conditions that transform employee

experience into organizational learning and innovative solutions.

“The problems originate in employees’ minds because they are closest to the person. My job is to help bring those problems to the surface and search for solutions together” (L\_5).

“If an employee doesn’t feel that their opinion matters, they just do what they are told, and no innovation emerges” (L\_3).

“A leader cannot know everything. You need to trust the team and allow it to grow” (L\_7).

The study found that employee empowerment is closely linked to strengthening a learning culture. Participants emphasized the importance of continuous training, supervision, reflective meetings, and peer-to-peer learning.

Learning is understood not as a one-off activity for “upskilling” but as an ongoing process that helps employees adapt to changing social challenges and reduces professional burnout.

“Without learning, innovations do not survive. If a person doesn’t feel they are growing, they get tired and start resisting change” (L\_2).

“Supervisions help a lot because employees can safely talk about what isn’t working” (L\_1).

“For us, learning is a way not only to improve but also to retain people within the organization” (L\_4).

Leaders emphasized that innovations require risk-taking and experimentation, so employees must feel safe to make mistakes and reflect on their experiences without fear of punishment. The leader’s ability to normalize mistakes as part of the learning process becomes an important prerequisite for the sustainability of innovations.

“If you punish a mistake, next time the employee simply won’t suggest anything” (L\_3).

“It’s important to say that not everything will succeed immediately, and that’s normal” (L\_6).

In summary, employee empowerment and the strengthening of a learning culture in the context of social innovations form the basis for distributed leadership.

Here, the leader acts as a process moderator and learning architect, creating conditions for employees to become active co-creators of innovations rather than passive implementers of decisions (Table 2).

Such leadership practices increase employee engagement, strengthen organizational resilience, and provide the foundation for the long-term institutionalization of innovations.

**Table 2. Expression of Employee Empowerment and Learning Culture in Implementing Social Innovations**

Main theme	Subthemes	Aspects of leadership expressions	Empirical indicators
Employee empowerment and learning culture	Involving employees in decision-making	Creating shared responsibility	Employees’ experience recognized as a source of innovation (L_3, L_4, L_7)
	Trust-based delegation	Strengthening autonomy	Leader avoids autocratic decisions (L_5, L_7)
	Continuous learning	Supporting organizational learning	Training, supervisions, reflection (L_1, L_4, L_6)
	Mistakes as a learning resource	Strengthening psychological safety	Mistakes accepted as part of the process (L_5, L_7)
	Supporting professional growth	Maintaining employee motivation	Supporting learning and preventing burnout (L_1, L_7)

Source: Created by the author based on thematic coding of interview data.

The study's data indicates that a learning culture also serves as a mechanism for strengthening psychological safety.

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that employee empowerment and the strengthening of a learning culture in the context of social innovations form the foundation for distributed leadership.

The subthemes show that leadership in this context is expressed not through centralized decision-making, but through trust-based sharing of responsibility and recognition of employees' experience as a valuable source of knowledge.

Empirical indicators reveal that a learning culture functions not only as a tool for enhancing professional competencies but also as a mechanism for psychological safety, enabling employees to experiment, reflect, and learn from mistakes.

This is particularly important in social service organizations, where the emotional workload and constant uncertainty can inhibit innovative behavior.

In summary, employee empowerment and the cultivation of a learning culture create conditions for innovations to become a collective rather than individual process, thereby strengthening organizational resilience and the capacity to adapt to changing social needs.

### **Development of Interorganizational and Intersectoral Collaboration: Leadership as a Process of Mediation and Coordination**

During the study, it was found that implementing social innovations in social service organizations is inseparable from interorganizational and intersectoral cooperation.

The study participants emphasized that the social problems faced by service users are often complex and extend beyond the boundaries of a single organization or sector.

For this reason, social innovations cannot be developed in isolation – they require coordinated efforts among different institutions, professions, and sectors. Leadership, as revealed in the interviews with managers, manifests in this context the ability to initiate, sustain, and structure collaborative relationships, align diverse interests, and ensure a shared direction.

A leader is perceived not only as the head of their own organization, but also as a participant in a broader service ecosystem who assumes responsibility for a collective social outcome.

“Social problems are never confined to the framework of a single institution. If everyone works separately, a person simply gets lost between systems” (L\_3). “One is not a warrior alone in the field, this saying fits perfectly here.

Without partners, we would not be able to provide the kind of service a family need” (L\_7). “A manager's role is to connect different institutions, even if it requires a great deal of additional time and effort” (L\_1).

The analysis of the study revealed that fostering collaboration is not a self-evident or automatic process. The participants emphasized that interorganizational relationships often face challenges arising from differing organizational cultures, procedures, boundaries of responsibility, and sometimes even competing interests.

In this context, leadership manifests as a practice of mediation and coordination, requiring diplomatic skills, patience, and the long-term building of trust.

“Collaboration is not just an agreement on paper. It is a long process before people begin to trust one another” (L\_4).

“Sometimes you have to act as a mediator between different institutions that perceive the problem very differently” (L\_2).

“If a manager does not personally invest in relationships, no partnership will last long” (L\_7).

The study data also showed that intersectoral collaboration is an important condition for the sustainability of social innovations.

Managers emphasized that collaboration enables the sharing of resources, competencies, and responsibility, thereby reducing the organizational burden and increasing the impact of innovations.

In this way, social innovations become not isolated initiatives, but integrated solutions oriented toward the long-term well-being of service users.

“When we work together, we can offer not fragmented but holistic support to a person” (L\_6).

“Partnerships allow us not only to expand services but also to maintain their quality” (L\_5).

In summary, leadership in implementing social innovations within the context of interorganizational and intersectoral collaboration manifests as a connecting-and-coordinating practice.

The manager acts as a “bridge” between different systems, helping to overcome institutional boundaries and creating conditions for joint learning and the diffusion of innovations (Table 3).

**Table 3. Aspects of Developing Interorganizational and Intersectoral Collaboration in Implementing Social Innovations**

Main theme	Subthemes	Aspects of leadership expression	Empirical indicators
Interorganizational and intersectoral collaboration	Recognition of shared problems	Creating shared responsibility	Social problems are perceived as complex (L_1, L_5, L_6, L_7)
	Initiating partnerships	Developing networks	Coordinating different organizational logics (L_1, L_5, L_6, L_7)
	Mediating between organizations	Resolving conflicts and aligning interests	Sharing specialists, knowledge, services (L_2, L_3, L_4, L_7)
	Sharing resources and competencies	Strengthening innovation sustainability	Pooling professional expertise and service resources (L_3, L_6, L_7)
	Building long-term trust	Stabilizing collaboration	Relationships are maintained continuously, not just project-based (L_2, L_4, L_7)

Source: Created by the author based on thematic coding of interview data.

The analysis presented in Table 3 shows that interorganizational and intersectoral collaboration is a crucial condition for implementing social innovations and requires specific leadership skills.

This form of leadership strengthens mutual trust between organizations, increases the scale of social innovations, and creates preconditions for their long-term impact.

The subthemes reveal that leadership in this context manifests as a connecting and coordinating practice that enables the alignment of interests across different organizations, professions, and sectors.

Empirical indicators suggest that fostering collaboration is not an automatic process but requires consistent trust-building, mediation, and long-term relationship maintenance.

The manager’s role thus becomes critically important in avoiding fragmented solutions and ensuring holistic support for service users.

Accordingly, interorganizational collaboration emerges as a sphere of leadership expression, where the sustainability of innovations depends on the ability to transcend institutional boundaries and create shared spaces of responsibility and learning.

### **Renewal of Service Delivery and Work Organization Processes: Leadership as a Facilitator of Conditions Conducive to Innovation**

The study found that implementing social innovations in social service organizations is not limited to initiating new ideas or services but also requires systematic adaptation of organizational processes, structures, and daily activities.

Participants emphasized that innovations become sustainable only when they are integrated into the organization’s routine and do not depend on individual enthusiasts or temporary project-based solutions. In this context, leadership manifests as the ability to create organizational conditions that allow

innovations to become a permanent part of operations. In social service organizations, where high workloads, limited resources, and strict regulations often prevail, innovations risk remaining fragmented. Managers emphasized that without a deliberate review of processes, such as work organization, communication, decision-making, and the distribution of responsibilities, meaningful innovations fail to become established over time.

“If an innovation does not become part of daily work, it simply disappears. Everything cannot rely on a single person” (L\_1).

“It was necessary to clearly structure the processes, because otherwise people revert to old habits” (L\_4). “An innovation must integrate and fit into everyday activities, rather than being just additional work” (L\_6).

The analysis revealed that the adaptation of organizational processes is closely linked to a manager’s ability to view the organization as a dynamic system.

Managers emphasized that implementing social innovations often requires reviewing established procedures, reducing excessive control, and providing employees with greater operational flexibility. In this process, leadership is expressed not through strict regulation but through the ability to balance structure and flexibility.

“We had to change not only the services but also how we work, how we communicate, and how we solve problems” (L\_7).

“Sometimes the biggest obstacle to innovation is old procedures that no longer reflect reality” (L\_3).

The study participants also emphasized that adapting organizational processes requires time and consistency. The institutionalization of innovations is seen as a long-term process, in which the manager’s persistence and ability to maintain the chosen direction are crucial, even under pressure to revert to “tried-and-true” practices.

“Changes do not happen quickly. A manager’s job is not to be intimidated when there is initial chaos” (L\_6). “It takes a great deal of patience for new practices to become the norm” (L\_5).

In summary, the adaptation of organizational processes in the context of social innovation reveals leadership as a structural, long-term process.

Here, the manager acts as a “change architect”, who not only initiates innovations but also creates conditions for them to become embedded in the organization’s daily operations.

Such leadership enables social innovations to become sustainable, reduces their reliance on individual efforts, and strengthens the organization’s capacity to adapt to changing social challenges (Table 4).

**Table 4. Renewal of Service Delivery and Work Organization Processes in the Implementation of Social Innovations**

Main theme	Subtheme	Aspects of leadership expression	Empirical indicators
Adaptation of organizational processes	Integration of innovations into daily activities	Ensuring innovation sustainability	Innovations become part of work practices (L_1, L_4, L_6, L_7)
	Review of processes and procedures	Increasing flexibility	Excessive procedures are eliminated (L_1, L_5, L_6)
	Distribution of responsibilities	Delegating and ensuring shared accountability	Initiative and decision-making are distributed among employees and teams (L_2, L_4, L_7).
	Balancing structure and flexibility	Ensuring a balance between boundaries and autonomy	Processes are defined, but flexibility is allowed in how they are applied in practice (L_1, L_5, L_6, L_7)
	Consistent support for change	Institutionalizing social innovations	Social innovations are integrated into formal operational procedures, responsibilities are assigned, and their ongoing application is ensured (L_1, L_3, L_4, L_6, L_7)

Source: Created by the author based on thematic coding of interview data.

In summary, the study's results indicate that implementing social innovations in social service organizations is inseparable from the deliberate and consistent renewal of organizational processes.

In this context, innovations are perceived not as isolated or temporary solutions, but as changes that require integration into the organization's daily operations, social work practices, and decision-making processes.

This integration allows innovations to become sustainable and long-lasting, rather than dependent on individual initiatives or short-term projects.

Data from Table 4 reveal that creating conditions conducive to innovations involves several interconnected processes: integrating innovations into daily activities, reviewing processes and procedures, distributing responsibilities, balancing structure and flexibility, and consistently supporting change. Each of these dimensions demonstrates that leadership is expressed through specific managerial decisions and actions aimed at strengthening the organization's adaptive capacity.

In this context, leadership involves ensuring the sustainability of innovations, increasing flexibility, delegating responsibilities, maintaining a balance between autonomy and clearly defined boundaries, and institutionalizing social innovations.

Empirical indicators show that innovations become part of work practices, excessive procedures are eliminated, decision-making is distributed across the team, and social innovations are embedded in formal operational procedures and maintained over the long term.

Therefore, the renewal of service delivery and work-organization processes is complex, in which leadership serves as a structural and supportive force. Such leadership enables social innovations to emerge and ensures their integration into the organization's daily operations, enhancing its resilience, flexibility, and capacity to respond to evolving social challenges.

## DISCUSSION

This study advances research on business leadership in public social service organizations by shifting the analytical focus from formal leadership structures to everyday leadership practices.

Rather than treating leadership as an abstract success factor in innovation processes, the findings reveal leadership as a mediating and relational activity that connects strategic direction, professional identity, collaboration, and structural adaptation.

This practice-based perspective addresses a gap in literature: leadership is often acknowledged as important but insufficiently examined in how it operates in daily organizational life.

The findings extend the sensemaking framework developed by [Langley et al. \(2018\)](#) by demonstrating that, within social service organizations, sensemaking is inseparable from ethical commitment and emotional labor.

While existing research emphasizes collective interpretation during strategic change, the present study highlights how leaders translate innovation into morally legitimate action.

In value-driven environments, innovations gain acceptance not primarily through formal authority but through their alignment with professional norms and service users' well-being.

This situates business leadership within a moral and relational field that is less visible in studies focused on corporate or administrative reform contexts. The study also refines implementation leadership research ([Aarons & Ehrhart, 2022](#)) by showing that implementation climate is actively constructed rather than passively perceived.

Leadership practices such as trust-based delegation, normalization of mistakes, and structured reflection operate as mechanisms through which employees reinterpret innovation from an external requirement into an internally owned process.

This contributes to implementation literature by emphasizing the formative role of leadership in shaping organizational readiness, rather than assuming readiness as a precondition.

In relation to network governance scholarship ([Provan & Kenis, 2008](#); [Cristofoli et al., 2017](#)), the findings foreground the micro-practices that sustain interorganizational collaboration.

While governance models describe structural configurations of networks, this study illustrates how leaders perform bridging work that stabilizes collaboration across institutional boundaries. The

emphasis on mediation, relationship maintenance, and alignment of divergent logics expands network governance theory by incorporating everyday leadership dynamics. The research further contributes to debates on sustainability and institutionalization ([Dearing & Cox, 2018](#)) by conceptualizing institutionalization not as a final procedural stage but as an ongoing adaptive practice. In the social services sector, sustainability depends on leaders' ability to recalibrate routines, redistribute responsibilities, and balance structure with flexibility under changing regulatory and resource conditions.

This interpretation moves beyond linear diffusion models and underscores the iterative nature of leadership in sustaining innovation.

Finally, the study challenges technocratic interpretations of social innovation that privilege formal frameworks and sequential implementation stages ([Nilsen & Bernhardsson, 2019](#)). The findings demonstrate that in emotionally intensive service environments, innovation processes are embedded in moral reasoning, relational trust, and professional meaning-making.

By situating business leadership within this context, the research broadens its conceptual scope beyond private-sector management logics and reinforces its relevance within public governance settings. Taken together, the discussion positions business leadership in public social service organizations as a multidimensional, integrative practice that operates across cognitive, relational, and structural domains. This theoretical reframing provides a foundation for future conceptual and comparative research.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how managers of public social service organizations initiate, implement, and institutionalize social innovations under conditions of professional complexity, resource constraints, and interorganizational dependency.

The empirical findings demonstrate that the sustainability of social innovations is not determined solely by the intrinsic quality of the innovative solution itself, but by the specific leadership practices through which innovations are embedded into

everyday organizational routines and stabilized over time.

The analysis across seven cases ( $n = 7$ ) revealed a consistent and analytically coherent pattern: the articulation of vision and sustained meaning-making constitute the primary mechanisms through which social innovations become aligned with professional values and long-term organizational direction.

In all seven cases, managers emphasized that innovation initiatives gain legitimacy only when leaders continuously connect change to service users' well-being, ethical responsibility, and the organization's mission.

Vision thus functions not as a static strategic statement, but as an ongoing interpretive practice that reduces uncertainty, mitigates resistance, and stabilizes employees' commitment during transitional periods.

In emotionally intensive public service environments, this meaning-oriented leadership was described as a necessary condition for preventing innovation from being perceived as an additional administrative burden detached from professional identity. The findings further indicate that employee empowerment and the deliberate cultivation of a continuous learning culture represent structural conditions for innovation institutionalization.

In six cases (6/7), managers stressed that innovations fail to persist when employees remain passive implementers of managerial decisions. Sustainability emerges when responsibility is distributed, experiential knowledge is recognized as a legitimate source of organizational learning, and reflective practices such as supervision, peer consultation, and structured team discussions are institutionalized.

Continuous learning was described not merely as professional development, but as a mechanism that strengthens psychological safety, enables experimentation, and prevents innovation fatigue.

Without such learning infrastructures, innovations tend to remain temporary initiatives dependent on individual enthusiasm rather than collectively owned practices.

Interorganizational and intersectoral collaboration was identified in five cases (5/7) as a decisive factor in ensuring that social innovations

extend beyond organizational boundaries and become integrated responses to complex social problems. Managers emphasized that sustainability requires ongoing mediation between institutional logics, negotiation of responsibilities, and long-term trust-building with partner organizations.

Leadership in this domain operates as a bridging practice that aligns diverse interests and prevents fragmentation of services. The findings demonstrate that in the absence of coordinated collaboration, innovations risk remaining isolated and project-based rather than systemically embedded within service ecosystems.

The study also shows that the institutionalization of social innovations depends on deliberate structural adaptation within organizations. Innovations become sustainable only when integrated into formal procedures, clearly assigned responsibilities, resource allocation mechanisms, and daily work processes. Managers described the need to revise outdated routines, reduce excessive procedural rigidity, and balance structure with operational flexibility.

Leadership in this context functions as a process of organizational recalibration, ensuring that innovation does not rely on individual actors but becomes routinized and operationally supported. Sustainability was consistently associated with the alignment of innovation goals, decision-making practices, accountability requirements, and organizational governance arrangements.

Taken together, the empirical findings indicate that business leadership in public social service organizations operates simultaneously across cognitive, relational, and structural dimensions. Leadership connects strategic direction with professional identity, distributes responsibility across teams, sustains learning infrastructures, coordinates interorganizational networks, and adapts internal processes to embed innovation into routine practice.

Social innovations become durable not through linear implementation stages, but through iterative leadership practices that continuously align meaning, relationships, and structures under changing institutional conditions.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a qualitative interpretive research design and a purposive sample of seven managers within Lithuanian public social service organizations, which does not allow for statistical generalization. However, in line with the methodological logic of qualitative inquiry, the contribution of the study lies in analytical depth and contextual richness derived from systematically compared managerial accounts.

The findings reflect managers' perspectives and do not incorporate the experiences of frontline employees or service users, which may provide additional insights into innovation sustainability from other vantage points. Furthermore, institutional and governance conditions specific to the Lithuanian context may shape the observed leadership patterns. Nevertheless, the detailed description of the study context, sampling strategy, analytical procedures, and thematic development enhances the transparency of interpretation and allows consideration of theoretical transferability to functionally similar public service environments characterized by accountability pressures, professional autonomy, and cross-sectoral interdependence.

Future research could extend this work by conducting comparative cross-national studies to examine how business leadership practices vary across different governance systems and regulatory regimes. Multi-actor research designs incorporating employees, service users, and partner organizations could provide a more comprehensive understanding of innovation sustainability as a relational and collective process.

Longitudinal studies would allow examination of how leadership practices evolve across different stages of institutionalization and under shifting political, financial, and organizational conditions.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide a foundation for developing competency frameworks and targeted leadership development programs tailored to public and social service organizations, where innovation sustainability depends on ethical alignment, distributed responsibility, interorganizational coordination, and adaptive structural governance.

In sum, this study clarifies the concrete mechanisms through which business leadership contributes to the long-term institutionalization of social innovations in public social service organizations. It demonstrates that sustainable innovation is inseparable from sustained sensemaking, relational coordination, continuous organizational learning, and structural embedding within everyday professional practice.

#### Author Contributions

Conceptualisation: J. Č.; data curation: J. Č.; formal analysis: J. Č.; funding acquisition: J. Č.; investigation: J. Č.; methodology: J. Č.; project administration: J. Č.; resources: J. Č.; software: J. Č.; supervision: J. Č.; validation: J. Č.; visualisation: J. Č.; writing – original draft: J. Č.; writing – review & editing: J. Č.

#### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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#### Statement on the Use of AI Tools

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited manner for language editing and stylistic improvement of the manuscript. The AI tools were not used for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, or generation of original scientific content. All conceptual, analytical, and empirical aspects of the study were developed and verified by the author.

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#### Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality restrictions. In accordance with the decision No. M6-2025-16 of the Research Ethics Committee of Kaunas University of Technology, interview recordings were deleted after

transcription, and the code table linking participants to identifiers was permanently destroyed after the preparatory analysis stage. Given the small sample size and the specific organizational context, even anonymized transcripts may pose a risk of indirect identification. Anonymized excerpts supporting the findings are included within the article.

#### Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all research participants involved in providing data or insights.

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