

Entrepreneurial leadership in Polish small and medium-sized enterprises through appreciative inquiry: Evidence from qualitative interviews

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this article is to identify and understand the strengths-based mechanisms through which entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial leadership in post-transition economies. We know that entrepreneurship research in post-transition economies often diagnoses barriers and deficits. However, we know far less about the strengths-based mechanisms through which entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial leadership. In, this study, we explored entrepreneurial leadership in Polish small and medium enterprises through an appreciative inquiry lens, focusing on enabling experiences, resources, and aspirations.

Research Design & Methods: We conducted eighteen semi-structured appreciative inquiry interviews with entrepreneurs (owners and owner-managers) from three Polish regions and three sectors (services, trade, and technology). We transcribed and analysed interviews (June-July 2025) using a hybrid thematic analysis (deductive-inductive) supported by NVivo, with attention to the discovery and dream phases of the appreciative inquiry cycle.

Findings: We identified five interconnected mechanisms of entrepreneurial leadership: (1) resilience-as-learning after failure and crisis; (2) a gradual shift towards greater community legitimacy of entrepreneurship, although not uniformly across sectors; (3) relational leadership built through networks that often compensate for uneven formal institutional support; (4) proactive, place-based institutional co-creation with local stakeholders; and (5) future orientation towards innovation and sustainability, which is most visible in large-city and technology contexts.

Implications & Recommendations: For educators and support organisations, appreciative inquiry offers a practical way to cultivate reflective, opportunity-oriented leadership competences. For local and national policymakers, the results indicate that strengthening peer networks and creating accessible, place-sensitive support infrastructures can amplify existing entrepreneurial strengths.

Contribution & Value Added: The study advances entrepreneurial leadership scholarship by proposing a micro-meso-macro framework that links psychological resources, social capital, and institutional co-creation in a post-transition context. Methodologically, it demonstrates how appreciative Inquiry complements deficit-oriented entrepreneurship research by making visible the generative narratives and practices through which entrepreneurs sustain and develop their ventures.

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INTRODUCTION

Poland's post-1989 transition created a dynamic entrepreneurial landscape, but entrepreneurial opportunities and leadership practices remain uneven across regions, sectors, and settlement types. Existing research documents institutional frictions, socio-cultural ambivalence towards entrepreneur-

ship, and the continuing fear of failure in Poland. However, the dominant analytical emphasis remains deficit-oriented. Consequently, we still have an incomplete understanding of the enabling mechanisms through which Polish entrepreneurs sustain opportunity-oriented leadership in everyday practice. To address this gap, we applied appreciative inquiry as a strengths-based theoretical lens and qualitative interviewing strategy. Rather than evaluating appreciative inquiry as an organisational intervention, we used it to elicit entrepreneurs' narratives of peak experiences, resources, and aspirations, thereby complementing problem-centred accounts with evidence on what works, for whom, and under what local conditions. The objective of the study was twofold: (1) to identify the strengths-based mechanisms that constitute entrepreneurial leadership in Polish small and medium enterprises; and (2) to specify how these mechanisms are embedded in, and sometimes reshape, local institutional and community contexts in a post-transition economy. We addressed the following general research question (GRQ): What factors, attitudes, and positive experiences shape entrepreneurial leadership in Polish enterprises when analysed through an appreciative inquiry lens?

To operationalise the GRQ, we examined five interrelated dimensions: (RQ1) resilience and positive attitudes; (RQ2) changing social perceptions of entrepreneurship; (RQ3) social networks and cooperation; (RQ4) adaptation to, and co-creation of, institutional and regional conditions; and (RQ5) orientation towards innovation and sustainability. Based on eighteen interviews with entrepreneurs from three regions and three sectors, the article contributes (a) a contextualised account of entrepreneurial leadership in Poland, (b) a micro-meso-macro framework linking psychological resources, social capital, and institutional co-creation, and (c) practical implications for entrepreneurship education and place-sensitive policy design.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows: the next section reviews the literature and develops the analytical framing, followed by the methodology, results and discussion, conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurial Leadership in Poland: Empirical Context and Analytical Themes

After the collapse of communism in 1989, Poland embarked on a major transformation towards a market economy (Smuniewski *et al.*, 2021). In the course of this change, there was a marked increase in entrepreneurial activity and people began to take advantage of new market opportunities in the developing capitalist system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2010). Existing research indicates that social values and systemic factors have significantly shaped the development of entrepreneurship in Poland, while also contributing to regional and demographic differences in entrepreneurial behaviour (Rogalska, 2018; Zarębski *et al.*, 2022). Poland's transition to a market economy opened space for widespread small-firm entrepreneurship. Still, regional disparities and institutional frictions continue to shape the contemporary entrepreneurial ecosystem. Large urban centres are characterised by high activity, also in the area of emerging innovations, while smaller cities lag behind due to limited capital, weaker access to knowledge networks and less developed infrastructure (Rogalska, 2018; Sułkowski & Ulatowska, 2025). Studies of Polish entrepreneurship point to uneven local development conditions, cautious social perceptions of private business ownership, and persistent administrative and regulatory burdens that can discourage opportunity exploitation (Rogalska, 2018; Godlewska & Morawska, 2020; OECD, 2025; Żuk & Żuk, 2021). Such deficit-oriented diagnoses are indispensable, but they can understate the enabling resources through which entrepreneurs lead, learn, and create value in everyday practice. Therefore, in this article, we organise the literature around five mechanisms of entrepreneurial leadership that correspond to our research questions and that one can investigate productively through a strengths-based lens.

Psychological resilience and failure learning are central to entrepreneurial leadership (RQ1). Research on Polish entrepreneurs indicates that responses to failure are often characterised by renewed opportunity seeking and confidence, even when prior initiatives collapse (Wójcik & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2020). During the COVID-19 shock, micro- and small-entrepreneurs also mobilised resilience as a behavioural capacity to adapt, improvise, and continue operating under uncertainty (Pyrkosz-Pacyna *et al.*, 2021). More broadly, positive psychological resources (*e.g.*, optimism

and resilience) can strengthen entrepreneurial creativity and innovation (Li *et al.*, 2022), thereby shaping how leaders frame risk and motivate others.

Socio-cultural legitimacy is another relevant mechanism (RQ2). While attitudes towards entrepreneurship in Poland have gradually improved since the early transition period, research suggests a continuing 'cultural lag' whereby entrepreneurs may be recognised economically but still evaluated ambivalently in social terms (Osowska, 2019; PARP, 2022; Wójcik & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2020; Żuk & Żuk, 2021). These perceptions matter for entrepreneurial leadership because legitimacy affects the willingness of families, employees, partners, and local communities to support entrepreneurial initiatives.

Entrepreneurial leadership is also enacted relationally through social capital (RQ3). Internal social capital within firms (trust, reciprocity, shared norms) and external networks (peers, partners, mentors, investors) provide access to resources, market opportunities, and emotional support (Markowska-Przybyła, 2022; Ziemiański, 2018). In Poland, where formal support infrastructures may be uneven, relational ties can compensate for institutional gaps and facilitate cooperation and resource sharing (Żukowska, 2025; Zygmunt, 2025).

Institutional context and place-based support further shape entrepreneurial leadership (RQ4). Entrepreneurship tends to flourish when regulatory and policy environments are enabling, and bureaucracy and policy instability can constrain it (Audretsch *et al.*, 2021). In Poland, local governments can act as institutional entrepreneurs by fostering public-private partnerships, incubators, and collaborative initiatives, although such engagement varies across localities (Derlukiewicz *et al.*, 2021; Xing *et al.*, 2018; Godlewska & Morawska, 2020). This highlights the relevance of entrepreneurial leaders not only as firm-level decision-makers but also as actors who may co-create local ecosystems.

Finally, innovation and sustainability orientation increasingly enter entrepreneurial leadership agendas (RQ5). Entrepreneurial strategies in peripheral regions depend on multi-dimensional innovation capacities and local resource configurations (Zarebski *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, socio-cultural factors can shape how entrepreneurs interpret climate and sustainability agendas, producing both engagement and scepticism (Żuk & Żuk, 2021). Thus, understanding when entrepreneurs integrate innovation and sustainability into leadership practices therefore requires attention to sectoral and local context.

Appreciative Inquiry as a Strengths-based Lens in Entrepreneurship Research

The concept of appreciative inquiry originated in the 1980s in the United States, and posits that instead of analysing what is working wrong in an organisation, it makes sense to focus on what is working well, and build on that to further develop the organisation (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). The concept of appreciative inquiry emphasises that every organisation or social system has hidden forces that, when uncovered, can trigger breakthrough change. Rather than focusing on a detailed analysis of failures and their sources, appreciative inquiry supports stakeholders in a collective insight into what works best, identifying opportunities, strengths and successes (Bushe, 2013). This creates positive energy and a collective commitment to move forward based on existing strengths (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider *et al.*, 2008).

Appreciative Inquiry emerged as an alternative to problem-centred organisational diagnosis, proposing that one can mobilise change and learning by systematically exploring what works well and why (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider *et al.*, 2008). Rather than treating failures as the sole or primary analytical entry point, appreciative inquiry emphasises strengths, peak experiences, and development potential as resources for understanding and shaping social systems.

Appreciative inquiry is grounded in social constructivism, which conceptualises organisational reality as produced and reproduced through language and interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bushe, 2011). Therefore, as an inquiry strategy, appreciative inquiry lies on generative questions that invite participants to articulate values, successful practices, and desired futures (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

Appreciative inquiry perspective aligns with broader streams of positive organisational scholarship that study enabling conditions such as resilience, virtuousness, and high-quality relationships (Cameron *et al.*, 2003; Cameron & Caza, 2004). For entrepreneurship research, this alignment is theoretically consequential, because entrepreneurship is inherently opportunity-oriented, yet empirical studies often privilege barriers, deficits, and failure (Woodfield *et al.*, 2017).

Researches have used appreciative inquiry both as a research tool and as a change methodology (Michael, 2005; Reed, 2007). A common critique is that a purely 'positive' orientation may underplay structural problems or silence negative experiences (Grant & Humphries, 2006). To address this concern, strengths-based inquiry can treat difficulties as part of the narrative context while analysing how entrepreneurs cope, learn, and mobilise resources- an approach particularly relevant in post-transition settings where constraints and opportunities coexist.

In the Polish context, an appreciative inquiry lens is suitable for two reasons. Firstly, it complements existing Polish entrepreneurship research by making visible the micro-level resources (mindsets and learning), meso-level resources (networks and legitimacy), and macro-level resources (institutional co-creation) that enable entrepreneurial leadership. Second, by combining the discovery and dream phases, appreciative inquiry- informed interviews can elicit both retrospective accounts of successful practices and prospective visions of ecosystem development, which are directly relevant for education and policy design. The next section details how we operationalised appreciative inquiry in the research design.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We adopted a qualitative design informed by appreciative inquiry to explore the enabling mechanisms of entrepreneurial leadership in Polish small and medium enterprises. We used appreciative inquiry as an inquiry strategy to elicit narratives of strengths, achievements, resources, and aspirations, while allowing challenges to surface as contextual elements discussed in relation to coping and learning.

In this study, we treated appreciative inquiry not only as a sensitising perspective but as a qualitative research methodology that structures the entire research process, in line with its classic conceptualisation as a philosophy of change and an approach oriented towards uncovering an organisation's 'positive core' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Accordingly, we designed and conducted the in-depth interviews in the spirit of appreciative inquiry, using generative, strengths-based questions.

We chose qualitative interviewing because entrepreneurial leadership is embedded in meaning-making, relationships, and context, which are difficult to capture through purely variable-based measurement. To avoid treating appreciative Inquiry as a 'positivity filter,' we used appreciative prompts to open narratives and then employed follow-up questions that explored how entrepreneurs dealt with constraints, crises, and institutional barriers.

We conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs (owners and owner-managers) representing the service, trade, and technology sectors. Interviews took place in June-July 2025 and we conducted them in the hybrid format: eight interviews were conducted face-to-face and ten online via MS Teams, depending on respondents' preferences and availability.

We used purposeful maximum-variation sampling to capture heterogeneity across (a) sectors, (b) regions (Śląskie, Małopolskie, Mazowieckie), and (c) settlement size. We included the three settlement-size categories (small, medium and large cities) to probe whether leadership narratives vary across different local ecosystems. The study does not aim at statistical representativeness but at analytic generalisation through rich, context-sensitive evidence.

We based the respondents selection on the following criteria:

1. Position: holding a managerial position (both as a formally employed director and as an owner-founder acting as a director) or a managerial position in the company selected for the study.
2. Sector: employment/ownership/co-ownership in one of the three selected sectors: services, trade, technology.
3. Tenure: at least one year of experience in the current firm and managerial role.
4. Location: firm located in a small city (less than 20 000 inhabitants), a medium-sized city (20 000-100 000), or a large city (100 000 and more inhabitants) (Statistics Poland, 2010, p. 1).

The interview guide was exploratory and strengths-based. Each interview started with appreciative prompts (Discovery), for example: 'Tell us about a moment when you felt most engaged and proud as an entrepreneur.' We then invited respondents to describe enabling relationships, resources, and practices, and to articulate desired futures (Dream) for their firms and local business environments.

This design leverages appreciative inquiry not only to collect data but also to stimulate reflection about successful practices and transferable lessons. In line with methodological guidance on appreciative interviewing, the protocol balances open, generative questions with probes that clarify concrete actions, contextual conditions, and the meaning respondents attribute to their experiences (Michael, 2005).

We informed all participants about the study purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. We recorded the interviews only after obtaining informed consent. Moreover, we anonymised transcripts by assigning respondent codes (R1-R18) and removing identifying details. Because appreciative interviewing may amplify ‘success narratives,’ we remained reflexive about our own research interests in positive organisational change. During interviews and analysis, we actively attended to boundary conditions, counterexamples, and references to difficulties, treating them as analytically relevant when they informed coping strategies or revealed ecosystem constraints.

We transcribed, stylistically edited, and translated interviews into English. Translation focused on semantic equivalence, and we checked all quotations included in the manuscript against the original transcripts to preserve meaning.

We applied a hybrid thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) supported by NVivo. Firstly, we developed a deductive coding frame from the entrepreneurial leadership and appreciative inquiry literatures (*e.g.*, resilience, legitimacy, networks, institutional co-creation, innovation orientation). Secondly, inductive coding captured emergent patterns and context-specific expressions of these concepts. We iteratively clustered codes into candidate themes, reviewed against the full dataset, and refined until we achieved a coherent thematic structure.

To enhance credibility and transparency, we maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and analytic memos that documented how interpretations were derived from the data. In the results section, we present verbatim quotations as illustrative evidence and provide short thematic summaries to distinguish empirical description from interpretation. We presented the general research question and five specific research questions in the Introduction; they guided both the interview protocol and the analytical categorisation of findings. Although the interviews were strengths-oriented, difficult topics were not excluded. When participants raised challenges (*e.g.*, bureaucracy, crises, market shocks), follow-up questions explored how they responded, what resources they mobilised, and what they learned. This approach allows one to analyse strengths in relation to constraints rather than in isolation. Interview duration ranged from 55 to 130 minutes (mean approximately 90 minutes), producing approximately 27 hours of recorded material.

Given the qualitative design, we do not claim statistical representativeness; instead, we offer the findings as analytically generalisable mechanisms that can inform theory building and hypothesis generation for future quantitative research. By combining an appreciative lens with systematic thematic analysis, the study captures not only the obstacles Polish entrepreneurs face but also the resources and practices through which they sustain entrepreneurial leadership. This complements problem-centred research by providing evidence on enabling mechanisms that can be strengthened through education, support programmes, and local policy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

This section reports five empirically grounded mechanisms of entrepreneurial leadership that emerged from the interviews. To improve analytical clarity, we (a) defined each mechanism as it appeared in participants’ narratives, (b) provide illustrative quotations, and (c) end each subsection with a short thematic summary. We develop interpretation and links to prior literature in the Discussion section.

Resilience-as-learning: Reframing Failure and Sustaining Entrepreneurial Action

One of the dominant themes was the role of a positive attitude in dealing with the risks that accompany entrepreneurship. Many participants told stories of difficult moments, such as business failures or economic crises (including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic), which they overcame by focusing on solutions and trusting their own skills. Rather than focusing on mistakes, they

highlighted the lessons they had learned in difficult situations and the new opportunities they had discovered as a result.

Entrepreneurs frequently narrated setbacks (*e.g.*, failure of an early venture, the COVID-19 shock, or market crises) as experiences that strengthened their capacity to lead. Across interviews, respondents described resilience less as an 'enduring hardship' and more as learning-oriented reframing followed by renewed action. For example, one entrepreneur from the retail industry recounted how the failure of the first company he was involved in setting up did not discourage him, but became an experience from which he learned in subsequent professional activities. He put it this way: 'This failure provided me with a treasure trove of knowledge from which I drew for many years (...). This experience allowed me to build another business that had a stronger foundation (...). I already felt more mentally resilient to failure' (R1). Similarly, another respondent emphasised deliberate learning from setbacks: 'I tried not to give up and to learn from each failure, I tried to turn it into something valuable for me as a person managing a team and building the reputation of the company' (R7).

Participants in the interviews often described failures as 'turning points,' 'breakthrough moments' or 'turnarounds,' indicating a belief that any failure can become an impetus for innovation and personal and entrepreneurial development. Participants linked this resilience-as-learning mechanism to leadership practice: by normalising failure as part of entrepreneurship, they reported greater readiness to take calculated risks and to encourage experimentation. An entrepreneur from the retail industry pointed out: 'Failure is intrinsic to entrepreneurial activity and should be assumed at the very beginning (...); then it will not have a paralysing and demotivating effect (...), but on the contrary- it will enhance effectiveness, innovation and a sense of agency' (R2).

Thematic summary: resilience appears as a leadership resource when one reframes setbacks into actionable learning that sustains agency and experimentation.

Legitimacy Shift: Changing Social Perceptions and Community Embeddedness

Another theme was the perceived transformation of the social climate for entrepreneurship in Poland and the growing support from local communities and city dwellers. Many participants noted that the perception of entrepreneurship by their immediate environment (family, friends, business partners) has improved significantly over the last 10-15 years. In the past, family discouraged risky ventures characterised by a high level of professional and financial uncertainty, preferring rather stable employment, mainly in companies that were stable and well established in the market.

A second mechanism concerns the perceived shift in the entrepreneurship's social legitimacy. Many respondents contrasted earlier scepticism, often voiced by family members who preferred stable employment- with a more supportive climate in recent years. Respondents narrated legitimacy in concrete terms: trust, repeat patronage, and community recognition that reinforced entrepreneurs' motivation to lead locally embedded firms.

Entrepreneurs from small cities (less than 20 000 inhabitants) emphasised that the local community supports their companies by using their offer. In small cities, entrepreneurs particularly emphasised community trust as a resource that stabilises demand and legitimises the firm's presence. One respondent from the service industry described this as follows: 'the townspeople have a lot of trust in the brand that I have managed to create, develop, and maintain. They often use my services, even though competition in the market is already quite high. The trust closest to the community is a big reason for me to be happy' (R8). Another entrepreneur in the same sector from a medium-sized city (20-100 000 inhabitants) indicated that: 'the inhabitants of the city and its surroundings are the vast majority of my customers' (R10).

Simultaneously, legitimacy was not universal. Several respondents reported that novel or non-standard ventures initially triggered distrust or were treated as 'unrealistic,' especially when they departed from familiar industry templates. A technology entrepreneur described early scepticism towards an appreciative inquiry related tool: 'The companies we worked with (...) were quite dismissive (...), were thought to be the result of personal fascination rather than market needs' (R5). Another respondent described how an unconventional initiative in a service outlet produced surprise before it was gradually accepted (R15).

Thematic summary: a legitimacy shift is visible in everyday support and trust, yet boundary conditions persist for unusual and innovation-driven initiatives.

Network Bricolage: Cooperation, Trust, and Relational Leadership

Interviewees also frequently raised the issue of the networking and relationships's role, considered as an important organisational resource. Interview participants treated this aspect multidimensionally, going beyond mere support. In the interviews, they emphasised that systems of social relations influence the development of their companies and provides support for them in crisis situations. A third mechanism is network bricolage: entrepreneurs actively assembling relational resources (peer ties, partnerships, employee relations) to solve problems, access markets, and sustain leadership under uncertainty. Networking was not described as 'optional' but as a core capability that substitutes for scarce resources and accelerates learning.

Respondents emphasised that cooperation and peer support were crucial during crises. One entrepreneur recalled: 'The professional contacts I was able to acquire helped me to get my business out during the COVID-19 pandemic (...) without mutual cooperation and help, many of the businesses would not have survived' (R3). Networks also enabled internationalisation and strategic partnerships: 'Thanks to my network of foreign contacts, I was able to attract several important customers from neighbouring countries' (R4). Respondents framed local cooperation as both efficiency and community building: 'Cooperation with local companies is very important (...) It saves time (...) but also builds relationships, organises joint events, builds community' (R17). Only three respondents reported consistent institutional support for networking and cooperation. By contrast, several expressed that institutions are 'detached from reality' or overly focused on formalities (R2; R9). The qualitative data obtained suggest that social networks compensate for institutional deficiencies in Poland. Relational leadership was also visible inside firms: entrepreneurs repeatedly highlighted that interpersonal relationships and trust 'build the company' (R7) and that 'we work with people, not companies' (R11).

Thematic summary: networks function as a multi-purpose leadership resource, supporting survival, growth, trust-building, and cooperation, particularly where formal support infrastructures are perceived as weak or uneven.

Institutional Co-creation: Place-based Leadership and Uneven Formal Support

The interviews also revealed how regional and local factors influence entrepreneurial leadership, particularly the ability to adapt to change. This is clearly visible in the form of a difference in perspectives between entrepreneurs from large (100 000 or more inhabitants) and small cities (less than 20 000 inhabitants).

A fourth mechanism concerns how entrepreneurs interpret and engage with their local institutional and regional environments. Respondents often contrasted leadership demands in large cities (speed, flexibility, competitive intensity) with those in small towns (embeddedness, proximity, long-term trust).

Entrepreneurs from large cities emphasised agility and anticipatory adaptation: 'In a big city, everything happens faster. The market, customer expectations, competition. As a company, we have to be flexible and ready for constant change' (R2); 'Change is constancy. This is the definition of 21st-century entrepreneurship. Change is inevitable and an agile leader must be able to react before the competition overtakes them' (R5).

In small cities, leaders more often stressed relational proximity: 'I don't chase every novelty. Here it is more important to be close to people, to know their needs and to act honestly' (R7).

Some large-city respondents described local government initiatives (*e.g.*, innovation competitions, entrepreneurship events) as sources of recognition that strengthen leadership confidence and visibility. However, entrepreneurs outside large cities more often described limited access to such initiatives and instead reported bottom-up engagement with local authorities.

Respondents narrated this bottom-up engagement as a form of institutional co-creation: entrepreneurs proposing solutions, building partnerships, and seeking to improve the local ecosystem. As one respondent stated: 'We act bottom-up and consciously (...) if we don't activate, nothing will change' (R3). Another entrepreneur similarly noted: 'Instead of complaining, we started to look for partners in the office and propose concrete solutions' (R11).

Thematic summary: entrepreneurial leadership in Poland includes not only firm-level action but also place-based efforts to adapt to, and sometimes reshape, local institutional conditions.

Innovation and Sustainability Orientation: Future Visions With Sectoral and Local Boundaries

A fifth mechanism concerns future orientation towards innovation and sustainability. Many respondents, especially technology entrepreneurs and those operating in large cities, reported that leadership increasingly requires aligning competitiveness with responsible production and long-term societal value. For example: 'Customers (...) are increasingly asking not only about the price, but also whether the product is manufactured in a responsible manner' (R18); 'Sustainable development is now an obligation (...) but also an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage' (R5); 'We invest in innovations that make business sense and environmental sense' (R12).

Retail entrepreneurs additionally described innovation as a response to globalised consumer expectations: 'Customers travel around the world (...) they expect to be able to buy such goods in [our city] as well' (R17). Another respondent observed that competitive reference points are increasingly European or global rather than local (R6). Importantly, respondents did not frame innovation only in financial terms: one entrepreneur highlighted combining modern solutions with 'real benefits for people' (R1).

Boundary conditions were also visible. Service-sector entrepreneurs in small towns rarely articulated leadership in sustainability or innovation terms, instead prioritising liquidity and local trust.

Thematic summary: innovation and sustainability are salient leadership themes in technology-intensive and metropolitan contexts, but they are less central in small-town service settings where immediate market stability dominates.

Discussion

This section interprets the five mechanisms in relation to existing entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial leadership research, and it discusses boundary conditions and alternative interpretations. We structured the discussion along a micro-meso-macro logic: psychological resources (micro), relational and community resources (meso), and institutional co-creation (macro).

Micro-level: resilience-as-learning. The resilience narratives from our interviews are consistent with research showing that Polish entrepreneurs often respond to failure by renewing opportunity search rather than withdrawing (Wójcik & Ciszewska-Mlinarič, 2020). Our contribution is to specify the mechanism through which this occurs in leadership practice: entrepreneurs reframed setbacks into actionable lessons and used this reframing to normalise experimentation for themselves and their teams. Simultaneously, the appreciative framing may foreground 'successful coping' and under-represent experiences where failure leads to exit; this is addressed as a limitation and motivates comparative and longitudinal research (Pyrkosz-Pacyna *et al.*, 2021).

Meso-level: legitimacy and social capital. The findings add nuance to accounts of Poland's changing entrepreneurial culture by showing how people experience legitimacy in concrete everyday interactions, customer trust, peer recognition, and family support, while distrust persists for unconventional initiatives. This duality aligns with studies that note both improving perceptions and continued socio-cultural ambivalence (Osowska, 2019; Żuk & Żuk, 2021). Network bricolage further illustrates how entrepreneurs assemble relational resources to compensate for uneven formal support structures, echoing evidence on the importance of social capital in Polish enterprises (Markowska-Przybyła, 2022; Żukowska, 2025).

Macro-level: institutional context and co-creation. Our results resonate with work portraying local government as an institutional entrepreneur that can foster regional entrepreneurship through collaboration and place-based initiatives (Xing *et al.*, 2018; Derlukiewicz *et al.*, 2021). We extend this literature by showing that entrepreneurs also act as ecosystem co-creators: especially outside metropolitan areas, they described bottom-up engagement with authorities and partners to improve local conditions. This suggests that entrepreneurial leadership in post-transition contexts may include a civic dimension, leading beyond the firm by shaping enabling environments (Godlewska & Morawska, 2020).

The interviews indicate that sustainability and innovation increasingly inform leadership narratives in technology-intensive and large-city contexts, consistent with research on innovation capacity and

socio-cultural interpretations of climate-related agendas (Zarębski *et al.*, 2022; Żuk & Żuk, 2021). However, these themes were less salient among small-town service entrepreneurs, for whom immediate liquidity and community trust dominated. This boundary condition cautions against universalising 'innovation-driven' narratives and highlights the need for place-sensitive entrepreneurship support.

At this point, it is appropriate to introduce a methodological reflection on the relevance of applying the appreciative inquiry approach in the present study. The literature notes that a strong focus on positive aspects of organisational functioning may risk underrepresenting structural constraints or negative experiences of social actors (Grant & Humphries, 2006). However, we did not employ appreciative inquiry to deny or obscure difficulties, but rather as a way of entering participants' narratives. Challenges such as bureaucracy, market crises, or institutional uncertainty emerged spontaneously in respondents' accounts, and the analysis focused on how entrepreneurs mobilised available resources to cope with these challenges and sustain leadership capacity. This perspective complements deficit-oriented entrepreneurship research, which tends to concentrate primarily on barriers and failures (Woodfield *et al.*, 2017). By adopting an appreciative lens, we made visible generative leadership practices, such as reframing setbacks, building relationships, and engaging in institutional co-creation- that are often less apparent in problem-centred approaches, yet can be strengthened through education, support programmes, and public policy.

Commonly, scholars define entrepreneurial leadership as the capacity to influence others to manage resources strategically and to pursue opportunities under uncertainty (Renko *et al.*, 2015). Our findings suggest that, in Poland, this influence is enacted through a configuration of (a) personal psychological resources, (b) relational leadership and community embeddedness, and (c) engagement with local institutions. This micro-meso-macro configuration helps explain why 'the same' entrepreneurial leadership behaviours can have different effects depending on local legitimacy and institutional support.

The study's contribution is consolidated in three areas. Theoretical: we articulated entrepreneurial leadership in a post-transition economy as an interplay of resilience-as-learning, legitimacy, network bricolage, and institutional co-creation. Methodological: we demonstrated how appreciative-inquiry-informed interviewing elicits generative evidence that complements barrier-focused diagnostics. Practical and policy-related: we identified actionable levers for entrepreneurship education and for local ecosystem design, particularly the cultivation of peer networks, recognition practices, and accessible collaboration platforms.

Managerial and educational implications include: (1) treating failure narratives as structured learning resources in entrepreneurial training; (2) intentionally cultivating 'high-quality connections' in teams and inter-firm collaborations; and (3) using appreciative debriefs and future-oriented reflection to sustain opportunity recognition. Policy implications include: (1) supporting local peer-network infrastructure (mentoring circles, sectoral meet-ups, inter-municipal clusters); (2) designing transparent, low-bureaucracy entry points to local support programmes; and (3) recognising entrepreneurs as partners in place-based development rather than only as recipients of regulation.

CONCLUSIONS

By using an appreciative inquiry lens to examine entrepreneurial leadership in Polish businesses, this study has demonstrated the value of a strength-based approach to understanding and promoting entrepreneurship. Our research offers an alternative narrative to the prevalent discussion of barriers and gaps by emphasising the positive dimensions of entrepreneurial experience.

The appreciative lens does not disregard the difficulties of Polish entrepreneurship. Rather, it reinterprets them to show how challenges can spur development when addressed creatively and with appropriate support. This study advances a more nuanced theoretical understanding of entrepreneurship in post-transition economies for the scholarly community.

Using an appreciative inquiry lens, we identified five interconnected mechanisms of entrepreneurial leadership in Polish enterprises: resilience-as-learning, legitimacy shift and community embeddedness, network bricolage, institutional co-creation, and future orientation towards innovation and sustainability. Together, these mechanisms portray entrepreneurial leadership in Poland as a micro-

meso-macro configuration in which personal psychological resources enable relational leadership, and relational resources enable engagement with local institutions.

For entrepreneurship education and development programmes, the findings suggest designing curricula and mentoring formats that treat failure narratives as learning assets, cultivate reflective opportunity recognition, and intentionally strengthen entrepreneurs' relational capabilities. For policymakers, the study highlights the value of place-sensitive support: investing in peer-network infrastructure, lowering barriers to local support programmes, and treating entrepreneurs as co-creators of local development initiatives.

The study was qualitative and based on a purposeful, non-representative sample of eighteen interviews. Thus, we should interpret the results as analytically generalisable mechanisms rather than population estimates. As we conducted the interviews through a strengths-based protocol and translated them into English, some 'negativity' or linguistic nuance may be under-represented despite our attention to counterexamples and semantic equivalence. Rather than offering frequency claims, the study contributes analytically by clarifying leadership mechanisms and their boundary conditions, which are appropriate outputs of exploratory qualitative research.

Three directions appear particularly promising: (1) comparative studies across post-transition economies to assess which mechanisms are context-specific versus transferable; (2) longitudinal research that follows entrepreneurs across crises to observe how resilience and legitimacy evolve; and (3) mixed-method designs that combine qualitative mechanisms with quantitative measurement (e.g., survey operationalisations of resilience, social capital, and institutional support), enabling hypothesis testing and policy evaluation.

In sum, we may understand Polish entrepreneurial leadership not only through the challenges entrepreneurs face but also through the strengths and relational practices that sustain opportunity-oriented action. Appreciative Inquiry offers a rigorous way to access these generative dimensions and to inform interventions aimed at entrepreneurial learning, cooperation, and ecosystem development.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

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