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Respect for People: Lean Management through a Sustainable HRM Lens – A Literature Review

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Abstract:

Research Question: This study examines how the Respect for People (RFP) is conceptualized and operationalized in Lean Management literature, and what a Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) perspective reveals about its boundaries. **Motivation:** RFP is one of the two foundational pillars of Lean Management, yet its meaning and organizational manifestations remain less clearly specified than those of continuous improvement. **Idea:** This study uses SHRM as a complementary analytical lens to examine where RFP is well developed, where its manifestations become weaker, and where its conceptual boundaries may lie. **Data:** A systematic review of 29 peer-reviewed articles identified through Scopus and Web of Science. **Tools:** The review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines. **Findings:** RFP is most extensively developed where people-oriented practices directly support process improvement or organizational performance, while corresponding practices that extend beyond immediate process needs toward broader or longer-term employee interests remain less developed. Four levels of RFP institutional depth are identified: declarative, relational, operationalized, and institutional. **Contribution:** The study reframes RFP in terms of its boundaries and depth of organizational embeddedness, using Sustainable HRM to distinguish between forms of respect tied to immediate process needs and those requiring broader, more durable obligations toward employees.

Keywords: lean management, respect for people, sustainable HRM, systematic literature review

JEL Classification: M14, M11, M12, M19

1. Introduction

At the heart of Lean Management lie two complementary pillars: Continuous Improvement (CI) and Respect for People (RFP), formally articulated in The Toyota Way 2001. While CI emphasizes kaizen, challenge, and continuous problem solving, RFP is grounded in respect for the individual and teamwork and emphasizes trust, employee development, and collective contribution (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2001; Liker, 2004; Liker & Hoseus, 2008).

However, while the technical side of lean is relatively well specified, the meaning and operationalization of RFP remain less consistent.

When the human dimension is separated from lean's technical dimension, lean may become reduced to waste elimination and efficiency improvement, contributing to work intensification, resistance, and negative employee outcomes — the phenomenon often described as “lean and mean” (Emiliani, 2006; Mehri, 2006; Cullinane et al., 2014; Huo, Boxall, & Cheung, 2022). The issue, therefore, is not whether people matter in lean, but what exactly RFP encompasses and how far the principle extends.

Sustainable human resource management (sustainable HRM) provides a useful complementary perspective for addressing this question. Sustainable HRM extends the traditional performance-oriented view of

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HRM by emphasizing the long-term preservation, regeneration, and development of human resources, as well as the social consequences of HR practices (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2014, 2022). Its relevance to lean lies not in replacing RFP or judging lean against an external ideal, but in providing concepts for examining whether people centered practices support employees only insofar as they improve current organizational performance or also contribute to their longer-term well-being, development, and sustainability.

Among existing sustainable HRM frameworks, Stankeviciute and Savaneviciene (2018) provide a particularly useful basis for this comparison by identifying eleven characteristics of sustainable HRM: long-term orientation, care of employees, care of the environment, profitability, employee participation and social dialogue, employee development, external partnership, flexibility, compliance beyond legal requirements, employee cooperation, and fairness and equality. The framework does not define RFP, nor do we assume that all eleven characteristics constitute part of it. Rather, it provides a broader conceptual space for identifying where RFP and sustainable HRM overlap and where important boundaries become visible.

Against this background, this study systematically reviews the literature on Respect for People in Lean Management and examines it through the lens of sustainable HRM. The study asks:

How is Respect for People conceptualized and operationalized in the lean management literature, and what does a sustainable HRM perspective reveal about its boundaries?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Lean management and its dual-pillar foundation

Lean Management, derived from the Toyota Production System (TPS), is a system of principles and practices aimed at creating customer value while systematically identifying and eliminating waste (Ohno, 1988; Liker, 2004). Far from being a simple set of tools for cost reduction, Lean is a long-term organizational system in which process improvement is closely intertwined with the development of people (Liker & Hoseus, 2008).

At the core of this philosophy is a dual-pillar structure formally articulated in *The Toyota Way 2001: Continuous Improvement (CI) and Respect for People (RFP)* (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2001; Liker, 2004). The two pillars represent complementary dimensions of the Lean system:

- Continuous Improvement provides the improvement-oriented logic of Lean, emphasizing continuous challenge, kaizen, genchi genbutsu, and systematic problem solving (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2001; Liker, 2004).
- Respect for People provides the people centered foundation, emphasizing respect, teamwork, mutual trust, and the development and contribution of people (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2001; Liker & Hoseus, 2008).

The two pillars are therefore conceptually dependent: continuous improvement depends on employees who are capable and willing to identify and solve problems, while people development is embedded in the structured routines through which Lean is practiced (Bortolotti et al., 2015; Magnani et al., 2019). However, while the Continuous Improvement pillar has been extensively codified into standard operational practices, the interpretation and enactment of the Respect for People pillar remain far less unified. Consequently, understanding how Lean functions in practice requires a closer examination of how this second pillar (RFP) is conceptualized and operationalized across the literature.

2.2 Respect for people and its operationalization

Despite its fundamental position alongside Continuous Improvement, Respect for People (RFP) has not been consistently defined or conceptualized in the lean literature, with different authors approaching the principle from distinct perspectives (Cardon & Bribiescas, 2015), resulting in a varied body of research.

In early foundational literature, Liker (2004) and Liker and Hoseus (2008) conceptualized RFP primarily through Toyota's internal culture and managerial systems. They conceptualize RFP not as passive politeness, but as a combination of high performance expectations, continuous capability development, mutual trust, and employment stability. In their view, RFP is enacted when managers act as coaches, empower workers

to stop the production line via Andon systems, and engage employees in team-based problem solving rather than treating them as passive executioners of standardized work.

Empirical studies have attempted to break down RFP into more specific, measurable dimensions. Coetzee et al. (2019) investigated the applicability of the RFP principles in the South African context using a phenomenological qualitative approach and applied thematic analysis. Their findings organised RFP-related themes into three broad areas: individual development, group development, and organisational development, encompassing factors such as employee input, motivation, development and training, communication, teamwork, employee relationships, job security, and aligned commitment. In their later work, Coetzee, van der Merwe, and van Dyk (2025) expanded this conceptualization to demonstrate that RFP operationalization is highly context-sensitive, showing that in specific employment environments, explicit job security and aligned organizational commitment become core operational components of RFP alongside standard lean practices.

Other scholars have operationalized RFP through leadership behaviours and employee psychological states. Emiliani (2006) operationalized RFP through executive leadership routines, arguing that genuine RFP requires leaders to eliminate behaviours that create fear, stress, or waste in employees' daily work. Ljungblom and Lennerfors (2021) examined RFP through the lens of craftsmanship, arguing that respect should be understood in relation to workers' knowledge, skills, and ability to exercise professional judgment rather than merely as interpersonal courtesy. Demirkesen, Sadikoglu, and Jayamanne (2021), for example, linked RFP and other lean implementation elements to employees' psychological safety in lean construction, illustrating how RFP can also be examined through employees' psychological experiences of the work environment.

Tomašević et al. (2024) further demonstrated the breadth of RFP research through a systematic review and thematic analysis of the literature, highlighting the diverse ways in which the principle has been interpreted and studied.

Collectively, these works demonstrate that while the literature offers rich evidence on how respect can be expressed in lean settings, authors perceive and operationalize RFP in fundamentally different ways: as a managerial philosophy (Liker & Hoseus, 2008), a set of leadership behaviours (Emiliani, 2006), a collection of employee centered practices (Coetzee et al., 2019), or a set of psychological conditions such as trust and safety (Demirkesen et al., 2021). The literature thus presents a fragmented picture where "respect" is operationalized through various combinations of practices, behaviours, and outcomes depending on the perspective of the researchers.

2.3 Sustainable human resource management

Alongside the debate about the human side of Lean, the field of human resource management develops the concept of Sustainable HRM as a response to the limitations of strategic HRM, which treats people primarily as a resource serving organizational performance and efficiency (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2014). Sustainable HRM is defined as an approach that seeks to balance economic, social, and ecological goals while supporting the long term preservation, regeneration, and renewal of human resources (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2022). The literature has consequently developed along multiple theoretical streams, reflecting the multidimensional and evolving nature of the field (Macke & Genari, 2019). The following paragraphs sketch the main theoretical streams that have shaped the field.

Ehnert (2009), in her seminal study, introduces paradox theory as an analytical frame for sustainable HRM, pointing to the inherent tensions between short-term exploitation and long-term reproduction of human resources. The core of her model is the idea that sustainable HRM does not eliminate these tensions; it makes them visible and manages them. In this context, she emphasizes the need to preserve and regenerate employees' physical, intellectual, and emotional capacities over time, arguing that organizations frequently overlook the self-induced side effects of their HR practices.

Kramar (2014) argues that sustainable HRM is a qualitatively new approach, the "next step" after strategic HRM because it integrates social and ecological goals with economic ones. In a later study, Kramar (2022) identifies six defining features of sustainable HRM, including simultaneous commitment to economic, social, human, and ecological outcomes; long-term orientation; and accountability to a broader set of stakeholders.

Building on the logic of The Triple Bottom line framework, originally developed for corporate sustainability (Elkington, 1997), De Prins et al. (2014) proposed the ROC model, structured around Respect, Openness,

and Continuity. The model emphasizes respect for employees as key stakeholders, openness through dialogue and participation, and continuity through the long-term development and preservation of organizational and human capabilities, thereby linking organizational performance with broader social sustainability objectives.

From the individual's standpoint, the concept of sustainable careers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015; De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020) connects SHRM to career development across time. A sustainable career is defined as a sequence of career experiences that unfold across various life and social contexts, with an active involvement of the individual and meaningful work. The central indicators are health, happiness (the subjective experience of success), and productivity, three dimensions that condition each other, and whose deterioration signals that the current work environment is no longer sustainable.

Synthesising these earlier streams, Stankeviciute and Savaneviciene (2018) identify eleven characteristics that distinguish sustainable HRM from mainstream HRM: (1) long-term orientation identifying future human-resource needs and abandoning the "hire and fire" logic; (2) care of employees health and safety management, work-life balance; (3) care of the environment evaluating performance against ecological criteria and encouraging eco-careers; (4) profitability for example, profit-sharing programmes; (5) employee participation and social dialogue; (6) employee development, job rotation, varied training, transfer of experience, focus on future skills and employability; (7) external partnership cooperation with the education system and other stakeholders; (8) flexibility, flexible working arrangements and rotation; (9) compliance beyond legal obligations; (10) employee cooperation; and (11) fairness and equality, which together cover teamwork, good manager – employee relations, and encouragement of diversity.

These eleven characteristics can be read as the operational distillate of the theoretical streams just described. Long-term orientation, care of employees, and development reflect Ehnert's logic of reproduction and the ROC principles. Participation and fairness correspond to Kramar's stakeholder orientation. Flexibility and development are recognisable in the model of sustainable careers. Care of the environment and profitability are the operational expressions of triple bottom line (TBL) logic in HRM.

2.4 The convergence of lean management and sustainable HRM

Looking at the RFP and SHRM side by side reveals a striking conceptual convergence, one that the literature has not yet systematically used. The RFP principle of lean management, with its insistence on individual dignity and joint problem-solving, corresponds directly to sustainable HRM characteristics such as care of employees, participation and fairness. From this overlap follows the starting assumption of this paper: sustainable HRM offers the conceptual vocabulary that the lean management literature lacks for turning RFP from normative slogans into operational research and practice categories. Put differently, while lean management asks the right question "how do we respect people and not waste their potential?" sustainable HRM provides the framework for a systemic answer through specific HR practices, sustainable-career indicators, and mechanisms of human-resource reproduction. The research problem of this paper sits exactly at this intersection.

The convergence between lean management and sustainable HRM can be described in a narrative form, but this approach quickly becomes fragmented when several theoretical streams and several lean concepts are considered at once. For that reason, Table 1 presents a synthetic map that systematically links the eleven characteristics of sustainable HRM, as defined by Stankeviciute and Savaneviciene (2018), to the dominant theoretical streams from which they derive, and to the corresponding lean management concepts, first and foremost the RFP principle.

Table 1: Sustainable HRM characteristics in relation to SHRM theoretical streams and lean management concepts

SHRM characteristic (Stankeviciute & Savaneviciene, 2018)	Key aspects	Dominant SHRM theoretical stream	Corresponding lean management concept
Long-term orientation	Identifying future HR needs; abandoning "hire and fire" logic	Reproduction of human resources (Ehnert, 2009; Ehnert et al., 2014); paradox perspective	RFP Continuity dimension; waste of unutilized human potential
Care of employees	Health and safety management; work–life balance	Sustainable careers perspective (De Vos et al., 2020); employee well-being perspective (Mariappanadar, 2012); paradox perspective (Ehnert, 2009)	RFP respect for the individual; "lean and mean" critique
Care of the environment	Evaluating performance against ecological criteria; encouraging eco-careers	Triple Bottom Line applied to HRM (Schaltegger et al., 2012; Elkington, 1997) Green HRM perspective (Renwick et al., 2013)	Lean & Green literature; ecological dimension of waste elimination
Profitability	Profit-sharing programmes; sharing value with employees	TBL economic dimension (Elkington, 1997); sustainable performance (Kramar, 2022)	CI value generation; gainsharing practices
Employee participation and social dialogue	Various forms and levels of participation in decision-making	Kramar (2014, 2022); De Prins Openness dimension	teamwork, ; kaizen circles; genchi genbutsu; waste of unutilized human potential
Employee development	Job rotation; training; transfer of experience; focus on future skills and employability	Sustainable careers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015); capability reproduction	waste of unutilized human potential - engaging knowledge and creativity;
External partnership	Cooperation with the education system; partnership with stakeholders	Stakeholder approach in SHRM (Kramar, 2022; Ehnert et al., 2014)	Lean supply chain and partner relations; lean in education
Flexibility	Flexible working arrangements; job rotation	Sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020); (Kramar, 2022), paradox perspective (Ehnert, 2009)	Multi-skilling in lean teams and job rotation
Compliance beyond legal obligations	Employee participation beyond statutory requirements; teamwork; encouraging diversity and respect	ROC model - Respect (De Prins et al., 2014), Kramar (2022) ethical dimension	Respect as the ethical core of TPS
Employee cooperation;	Teamwork; collaborative work systems; manager–employee relations	High-involvement perspective (Boxall and Macky, 2009)	Teamwork as a sub-pillar of RFP
Fairness and equality	Procedural fairness; effort–reward equity; diversity,	Ethical HRM Greenwood (2002) ROC model - Respect (De Prins et al., 2014), Kramar ethical dimension	Respect for the individual

The table serves two purposes. First, it makes explicit the theoretical foundation of the analytical framework adopted here, and shows that SHRM is not an arbitrarily chosen lens but a coherent system of concepts that corresponds directly to the human dimension of lean. Second, it reveals the areas where this correspondence is weak or underexplored; for example, the ecological dimension of HR in the lean management context, external partnership, and compliance beyond legal obligations, already hinting at the gaps that the systematic review will later confirm and elaborate empirically.

3. Methodology

The review was conducted in line with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), with a qualitative, interpretative orientation appropriate for management reviews (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). The search was conducted using Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus, on 12 February 2026. Search string

“lean” AND “respect for people” were applied to title, abstract, and keywords. Broader formulations (with additional terms such as HRM or employee well-being) were tested but yielded a large volume of irrelevant results due to the multiple meanings of the term “lean,” so the narrower, more precise, string was adopted.

The original protocol was planned to include only empirical peer-reviewed journal articles and to focus solely on HRM practices. During screening, however, it became clear that the number of such papers was too small, so conceptual papers and peer-reviewed case studies were also included. This revision can also be treated as a finding. It confirms that RFP is underrepresented in research compared to the CI dimension. The selection process is shown in Figure 1.

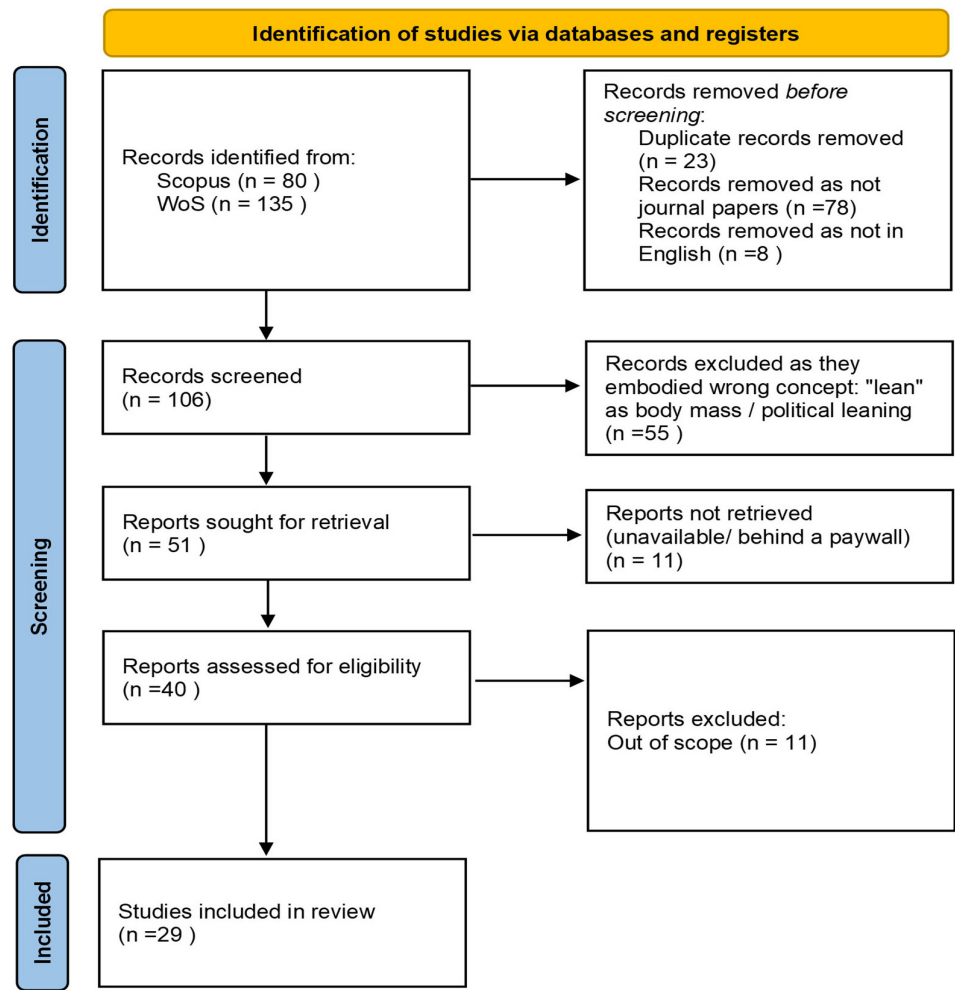


Figure 1: Research protocol adopted from (Page et al., 2021)

From a total of 215 records (Scopus n = 80; WoS n = 135), after duplicates and non journal items were removed, 106 papers were screened. Fifty-five were excluded for the wrong conceptual domain (mostly “lean body mass,” “lean startup,” and “political leaning” literature), 11 because the full text was unavailable, and 11 as outside the thematic frame of the study. The final corpus comprises 29 papers. Synthesis was carried out in two steps. The first applied descriptive analysis to the corpus. The second applied deductive coding against the eleven characteristics of sustainable HRM (Stankeviciute & Savaneviciene, 2018), shown in Table 1.

Prior to coding, the two researchers jointly established criteria for interpreting and assigning evidence to each of the three coding categories. These criteria were agreed upon before the individual analysis to ensure a consistent interpretation of the framework across the corpus. In particular, the researchers agreed that a dimension would be coded as Direct (D) when it was explicitly addressed in the paper and supported by a concrete description of relevant practices, outcomes, mechanisms, principles, or organizational approaches. Indirect (I) was assigned when the underlying principle or concern associated with a dimension was evident through related concepts, practices, or outcomes, but the dimension itself was not explicitly articulated or sufficiently elaborated. Absent (/) was assigned when no substantive evidence corresponding to the dimension could be identified in the paper.

The 29 papers were then divided equally between the two researchers, with each researcher conducting a detailed analysis and coding of their assigned papers. Following this initial independent coding, the researchers cross-checked the coding by reviewing each other's assigned papers. During this second stage, comments and observations were recorded where the interpretation or coding of a particular passage differed from the initial assessment. Discrepancies occurred in 48 of the 319 (11x29) (approximately 15%) paper-by-dimension coding decisions. Rather than resolving these differences through an additional independent coding procedure, the researchers discussed each discrepancy and jointly reviewed the relevant passages in the respective papers against the previously established coding criteria. All discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus, resulting in a final agreed coding of the corpus.

The framework of Stankeviciute and Savaneviciene (2018) was selected over alternatives such as Ehnert's (2009) ROC principles or Kramar's (2014, 2022) six features because it operationalises the abstract commitments of these earlier streams into eleven discrete, observable characteristics suitable for deductive coding. Where ROC offers three high-level principles and Kramar's framework remains at the level of defining features, Stankeviciute and Savaneviciene translate them into practice-level categories that can be matched against the empirical and conceptual material reported in lean-RFP studies.

4. Results

4.1 Coverage of SHRM dimensions across the corpus

Figure 2 reveals a clear asymmetry in the coverage of SHRM dimensions in the lean literature. Three dimensions (employee development, employee participation and social dialogue, and employee cooperation) make up the core of the lean management discourse on people and appear in more than two-thirds of the corpus, most often as a central theme. These three practically overlap with what lean management literature describes as the People and Partners layer of the 4P (philosophy, people and partners, process, problem solving) model, suggesting that the lean management literature is reasonably consistent in operationalising RFP, but in its narrower, internal reading.

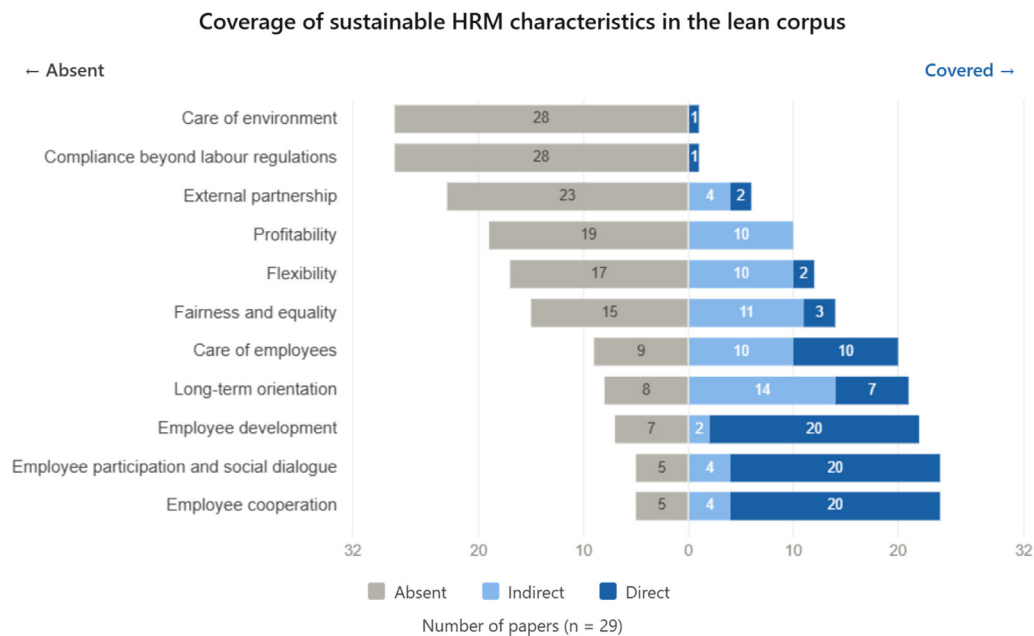


Figure 2: Coverage of sustainable HRM dimensions in the lean management literature

By contrast, the care of the environment, external partnership, and compliance beyond legal obligations are almost absent. What these dimensions share is that they shift the focus outside the organisation: toward the ecological context, toward stakeholders, toward ethical obligations that go beyond statutory regulation. In other words, the lean management literature talks about people, but mostly as employees of a given organisation rather than as members of a broader social and ecological system which is precisely the shift that SHRM is trying to make.

4.2 Thematic review by dimensions

Long-term orientation is present across the corpus, but mostly in a sense different from the SHRM one. Studies anchored in Liker's Toyota Way framing portray long-term thinking as the first of four "Ps" the philosophical foundation of lean management, in which managerial decisions are taken on a long-term basis even at the expense of short-term financial goals (Clark et al., 2013; Coetzee, van der Merwe, & van Dyk, 2016; Flug et al., 2022; Vanichchinchai, 2023). Latent semantic analysis of Toyota corporate documents identifies "long-term trust and respect" as a core semantic theme Marksberry's (2011) distinguishing Toyota from their counterparts. The dimension also surfaces in the rejection of "hire and fire": Benkarim and Imbeau (2022) show that job security is one of seven core HRM practices for lean management commitment, while Sim and Chiang (2012) document that the converse performance gains will not be sustained if employees fear that increased productivity will eliminate their jobs. The South African RFP studies (Coetzee, Jonker, et al., 2019; Coetzee, van der Merwe, & van Dyk, 2025; Coetzee, van Dyk, & van der Merwe, 2019) name job security as an explicit RFP theme. Yet the dimension is only indirectly present in its SHRM sense: the long-term orientation discussed in this body of literature is oriented toward lean management implementation as a multi-year cultural transformation, rather than toward a long-term, strategic orientation toward human resources, identifying the availability of future labour, anticipating future skill needs, and planning workforce pipelines accordingly.

Care of employees appears across the corpus in three concentric layers. Physical safety and ergonomics receive the most concrete treatment: occupational health and safety is positioned as a lean management HRM practice (Benkarim & Imbeau, 2022; Gao & Low, 2015), and ergonomic cell design is detailed by Hunter (2008). Demirkesen et al. (2021) introduce psychological safety as the missing causal link between lean management and safety outcomes, finding that most US construction workers hesitate to speak up even on lean management projects. A third layer of work-life balance and well-being is treated more sparingly but is visible in Anderson et al. (2019). Sim and Chiang (2012) and Jayamaha et al. (2014) document the broad "lean becomes mean" pattern when this dimension is neglected.

Employee participation is densely supported and treated as essential rather than optional. Empowerment is the dominant operational concept (Hunter, 2008; Ljungblom & Lennerfors, 2021; Marksberry, 2011), with formal mechanisms including gemba walks, A3 thinking, and suggestion systems (Anderson et al., 2019; Flug et al., 2022; Lenis-Freire, 2023). Tensions surface where psychological safety is absent (Demirkesen et al., 2021), or where management fails to follow through on issues raised by employees (Sim & Chiang, 2012). Collective forms of social dialogue – works councils, collective bargaining over lean appear only at the periphery, mainly in the South African and Toyota historical accounts.

Employee development is treated both as content (training, on-the-job learning, multi-skilling, rotation) and as method (coaching, mentoring, sensei, kata). Benkarim and Imbeau (2022) frame training as one of seven core lean HRM practices; Jayamaha et al. (2014) argue, following Rother (2010), that coaching kata is the primary driver enabling improvement and Ljungblom and Lennerfors (2021) reframe development philosophically as the cultivation of craftsmanship (takumi). Coetzee, van der Merwe, and van Dyk (2025) state that lean implementation should begin with the people value stream, not the product value stream, a position echoed in Coetzee, van Dyk, and van der Merwe (2019).

Employee cooperation (as teamwork) is one of the two formal sub-pillars of RFP in the Toyota Way framework, alongside respect itself (Jayamaha et al., 2014; Vanichchinchai, 2023; Wilson et al., 2018). The corpus emphasises trust as the binding ingredient (Coetzee, van Dyk, & van der Merwe, 2019; Marksberry, 2011; Swartling & Poksinska, 2013), and teamwork and respectful manager-employee relationships are treated as enabling conditions for lean improvement, and in some models as mechanisms or mediators, rather than as mere downstream outcomes (Ljungblom, 2012; Martens, 2022).

Fairness and equality is robustly evidenced in its procedural and distributive forms. Benkarim and Imbeau (2022) treat fairness as a core lean HRM practice, while Sim and Chiang (2012) develop the effort-reward equity argument. Diversity is not developed, only indirectly present and "respect" functions across the corpus as the umbrella concept integrating fairness, dignity, and equal voice.

Flexibility is well-developed as functional flexibility (multi-skilling and rotation) (Gao & Low, 2015; Hunter, 2008; Rashidian et al., 2024) but flexible working arrangements in the schedule sense (flexitime, remote work, job-sharing) are essentially absent. On a different note, Vanichchinchai (2023) warns that excessive respect and compromise can blunt kaizen and productivity, so respect has to be applied constructively rather than indulgently.

Profitability via formal share programmes is similarly thin. LeMahieu et al. (2017) note Toyota's seniority-and-profitability pay structure, and recognition and bonuses are extensively discussed (Coetzee, van Dyk, & van der Merwe, 2019; Gao & Low, 2015), but structural financial participation in firm performance equity, gainsharing is not theorised.

Compliance beyond labour regulations is implicit rather than named. The South African RFP studies argue that lean needs aligned buy-in among management, unions, and employees, with shared vision and cooperation (Coetzee, Jonker, et al., 2019; Coetzee, van der Merwe, & van Dyk, 2025). LeMahieu et al. (2017) note the post-WWII Toyota–union compromises lifetime employment and graded pay as a foundational pact exceeding legal minima, and Gao and Low (2015) document Chinese construction firms established local training centres and migrant-worker schools, though the latter are inconsistently implemented and not purely voluntary.

Care of the environment is essentially absent as an HRM concern. Where the natural environment surfaces, it is treated as an emergent outcome of waste reduction rather than as a target of employee evaluation, eco-career trajectories, or environmental rewards. The lean-RFP and green-lean streams remain disconnected in the corpus.

External partnership is asymmetrical. Supplier and value-chain partnerships are extensively theorised (Jayamaha et al., 2014; Magnani et al., 2024; Vanichchinchai, 2023), but partnerships with the education system and broader community are much thinner. LeMahieu et al. (2017) provide the strongest education-system evidence through a school district partnered with a local school for Lean–Six Sigma training, and healthcare studies position patients and families as co-participants in process design (Anderson et al., 2019; Deans & Wade, 2011).

5. Discussion

The thematic analysis reveals an uneven pattern in how people-related issues are treated in the lean-RFP literature. However, interpreting this pattern merely as uneven coverage of Sustainable HRM dimensions would be misleading, since Sustainable HRM is broader than RFP by definition. A more significant pattern emerges within the dimensions that are represented. With multiple dimensions, one part of the content is well developed, while the other is almost completely absent (Table 2).

Table 2: Coverage across dimensions

Dimension	Covered	Weakly covered or not covered
Long-term orientation	Multi-year lean transformation	Future workforce and skill needs
Participation and social dialogue	Empowerment, kaizen, gemba, A3	Trade unions, works councils, collective bargaining
Flexibility	Job rotation, multi-skilling	Working-time flexibility
Profitability	Recognition and bonuses	Gainsharing, employee ownership
Employee development	Skills required by the organization	Broader, transferable employability
External partnership	Suppliers and the value chain	Education system and community
Fairness and equality	Procedural fairness, effort–reward equity	Diversity as an institutional commitment
Care of employees	Physical safety and ergonomics	Work–life balance and well-being

The pattern does not appear random. The well covered practices generally have a direct role in the production or improvement processes: employee development increases the ability to solve problems, participation enables the use of their ideas, and rotation increases functional flexibility. In contrast, practices whose benefits are less directly tied to immediate process improvement or organizational performance, or practices that involve or extend beyond the immediate needs of the process are significantly less developed. This is particularly clear with flexibility: functional flexibility through job rotation and multi-skilling is well developed (Gao & Low, 2015; Hunter, 2008; Rashidian et al., 2024), while employee-oriented flexible working arrangements are almost absent. A similar pattern exists with rewards: recognition and bonuses are present, but structural

sharing of value through gainsharing or employee ownership remains under-theorized. The same applies to participation. Employee participation is densely supported and treated as essential rather than optional. But, collective forms of social dialogue, works councils, collective bargaining, appear only at the periphery.

This pattern also helps to clarify the problem of the term respect itself. The concept of “respect” can be viewed as an umbrella construct. A closer reading of the corpus shows that the term respect in the lean-RFP literature functions as a broad concept that takes in fairness, dignity, equality, recognition, voice, trust, and even safety at work.

Such breadth allows for different forms of attitudes towards the employees to be called respect, even though they differ significantly in how deeply embedded they are in the organization. The finding can therefore be more precisely expressed as follows: The lean-RFP literature tends to develop forms of respect most extensively where those forms also contribute directly to process improvement or organizational performance.

The boundary therefore does not simply lie between Sustainable HRM dimensions that are present and absent. It appears within dimensions themselves, between forms of RFP closely aligned with immediate process requirements and forms that require broader or longer-term obligations toward employees.

The near absence of environmental concerns is not interpreted here as a deficiency of RFP. Sustainable HRM is broader than the RFP construct, and not every characteristic of Sustainable HRM should necessarily be incorporated into Respect for People. The analytical value of the comparison lies instead in distinguishing dimensions that reveal underdeveloped forms of RFP from dimensions that may simply fall outside its conceptual boundaries.

Employee cooperation is absent from Table 2 for the opposite reason: teamwork and trust are formalised as an RFP sub-pillar and consistently treated as enabling conditions for improvement, so the dimension shows no comparable internal split.

Compliance beyond labour regulations is also omitted, since it is implicit throughout the corpus rather than internally divided: commitments exceeding legal minima appear only as features of individual cases, never as a named practice.

5.1 Four levels of RFP institutional depth

The three-point scale used in the coding indicates whether a theme is present in literature, but does not distinguish the ways RFP exists in the organization. Based on the review, four forms of RFP can be distinguished. The levels differ in the degree to which RFP is embedded in organizational structures rather than dependent on statements or individual managerial behaviour. The levels are:

- Level I: Declarative. Respect exists as a formal value or statement, without corresponding practices. Sim and Chiang (2012), for example, document a plant where all hourly employees disagree with the statement that the company sees them as its most important asset.
- Level II: Relational. Respect exists through the behaviour of managers and interpersonal relationships: dignity, trust, recognition, psychological safety and individual voice (Demirkesen et al., 2021; Marksberry, 2011; Swartling & Poksinska, 2013). This is one of the most developed parts of the RFP literature, but it remains dependent on specific people and can disappear with a change in leadership or under the pressure of results.
- Level III: Operationalized. Respect is embedded in repeatable organizational routines: coaching, kata, mentoring, rotation, multi-skilling and systematic capability development (Benkarim & Imbeau, 2022; Jayamaha et al., 2014; Ljungblom & Lennerfors, 2021; Rother, 2010). Employees benefit from these practices, but their existence also directly supports the lean process through greater flexibility, knowledge and the ability to improve.
- Level IV: Institutional. Respect is embedded in more permanent obligations and structures: employment security, collective dialogue, structural participation in value creation and responsibility that goes beyond the immediate needs of the processes. This level is significantly less developed in the corpus and appears most often where it is supported by wider institutional circumstances, such as in the Toyota-union arrangements (LeMahieu et al., 2017) and certain South African and Chinese contexts.

These levels are not necessarily stages that the organization must pass through in order. They indicate the different depth of embeddedness of respect: from statements, through behaviours and routines, to structures that make it less dependent on individual managerial decisions.

Existing approaches to Lean maturity have predominantly focused on the progression and broader integration of Lean practices and capabilities as organizations advance in their Lean implementation (Maa-souman & Demirli, 2015; Netland & Ferdows, 2016; Bento & Tontini, 2018). The present framework shifts attention to the second Lean management pillar and asks how deeply Respect for People itself becomes embedded.

5.2 The role of SHRM

In this model, SHRM is not a standard against which Lean Management is judged, but a conceptual vocabulary for parts of the RFP that are less well articulated in the lean literature. Lean management already develops dignity, listening, trust, employee involvement, problem-solving and capability development in detail. The limit becomes visible when respect extends beyond what directly supports the process: individual employee voice does not automatically imply collective voice; the development of skills needed by the organization does not imply responsibility for long-term employability; recognition and bonuses do not imply structural sharing of value.

Here, Sustainable HRM provides additional conceptual content through long-term reproduction of human resources (Ehnert, 2009), stakeholder responsibility (Kramar, 2014, 2022), sustainable careers and social dialogue. Therefore, the existing argument remains important. SHRM is not an add-on to lean management meant to “humanise” its technical core. It is a protective frame that keeps the lean management from sliding into its own opposite. The literature already shows the consequences of separating the technical and human side of lean management: work intensification, loss of job security, burnout, resistance and lack of psychological safety (Sim & Chiang, 2012; Demirkesen et al., 2021; Vanichchinchai, 2023). The SHRM therefore does not replace the RFP, but provides the language and mechanisms through which it can become more permanent.

5.3 Why does the border appear?

One possible explanation stems from Ehnert’s (2009) tension between short-term exploitation and long-term reproduction of human resources. Practices from level II and III often directly benefit the organization: participation produces ideas, multi-skilling flexibility, coaching ability to solve problems. The boundary becomes particularly visible when the interest of the employee is no longer fully aligned with the short-term interest of the process e.g., with employment security, collective bargaining or structural sharing of value.

An additional problem is measurement. Lean management measures operational waste and process performance very precisely, while costs that are transferred to employees, their families or the wider community generally do not appear in lean management indicators (Mariappanadar, 2012). What is not represented in the measurement system may consequently receive less attention in improvement decisions.

This may also help explain the cultural transmission of RFP. The RFP concept was born in a specific Japanese institutional setting, the postwar union compromise, lifetime employment, seniority-based pay, enterprise unions, and consensus decision-making.

Some elements that this model would classify at the institutional level may therefore never have to be explicitly incorporated into the Lean management doctrine, because they already existed in the environment in which the system developed. When Lean was transferred to other countries, the tools, principles and routines could travel, but the institutional environment did not. This may explain why the meaning and effects of RFP differ across contexts, as shown by studies from South Africa, China, Thailand and Malaysia (Coetzee et al., 2019, 2025; Gao & Low, 2015; Vanichchinchai, 2023; Ngadiman et al., 2019).

5.4 Implications

The practical implication is that the RFP should be operationalized the same way continuous improvement is. It must have concrete practices, routines and a way of assessment. If it exists only declaratively, respect can remain a slogan. If it exists only relationally, it depends on the specific manager. Routines make it more stable, but the review shows that they are most developed when they simultaneously serve the process.

Therefore, the question is no longer only whether the organization respects people, but where and in what way this respect is embedded in the organizational system. In this sense, Sustainable HRM does not soften Lean management, it strengthens it by providing a vocabulary for making Respect for People more durable and consistent with Lean management’s own stated principles.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Respect for People (RFP) is conceptualized and operationalized in Lean Management and used Sustainable HRM as a complementary lens for identifying its boundaries. The review shows that RFP is well developed around employee involvement, teamwork, trust, capability development, problem-solving, and other practices closely connected to Lean processes. However, consistent boundaries appear within these dimensions: forms of respect that also directly support process improvement or organizational performance are more extensively developed, while those involving broader or longer-term obligations toward employees remain less articulated.

Building on this pattern, the study proposes four levels of RFP institutional depth: declarative, relational, operationalized, and institutional. The distinction shifts attention from whether respect is formally acknowledged toward how deeply it is embedded in managerial behaviour, repeatable organizational routines, and more durable structures and obligations. From a process-oriented perspective, this reframes RFP from an abstract organizational value into a question of how respect is enacted and sustained through everyday organizational processes. Respect becomes more durable when it is translated from declarations and interpersonal behaviour into repeatable practices, responsibilities, and structures.

The contribution of Sustainable HRM is therefore not to provide a more comprehensive checklist against which Lean Management should be judged. Rather, it provides conceptual language for identifying where RFP becomes less developed as it moves beyond immediate process requirements toward long-term employability, collective voice, employee-oriented flexibility, and more enduring organizational obligations. In this respect, the study differs from existing review streams concerned with Lean sustainability, Lean HRM, the human side of Lean, and previous reviews of RFP itself. Its contribution lies not simply in mapping which Sustainable HRM dimensions are present or absent, but in using Sustainable HRM to reinterpret the boundaries, depth, and contextual dependence of RFP. This is particularly relevant because Lean Management originated within a specific Japanese historical and institutional environment, whereas contemporary organizations operate across increasingly diverse employment systems, stakeholder relationships, and organizational boundaries.

The findings consequently point to institutional context as an important part of understanding RFP. Some forms of employment protection, collective participation, and long-term employment relationships may have been supported by the environment in which the Toyota Production System developed and therefore did not need to be fully articulated within Lean doctrine itself. When Lean practices and principles are transferred across contexts, these surrounding institutional arrangements do not necessarily travel with them. RFP may therefore take different forms depending on the employment relations, cultural expectations, and institutional protections present in the receiving context.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Most importantly, the search strategy deliberately focused on studies explicitly using the terms “lean” and “respect for people.” While this ensured a conceptually focused corpus, it may have excluded relevant research addressing employee involvement, well-being, psychological safety, empowerment, Lean HRM, participation, or other human and social aspects of Lean Management without explicitly adopting RFP terminology. The composition of the final corpus may therefore privilege studies in which RFP is already recognized as an explicit concept and may underestimate the extent to which related people-oriented practices are examined elsewhere in the Lean literature. The review was also limited to Scopus and Web of Science and resulted in a relatively small final corpus of 29 papers. In addition, the deductive use of the eleven Sustainable HRM characteristics shaped which dimensions became visible in the analysis. Although the coding procedure included predefined criteria, cross-checking, and consensus resolution between two researchers, the classification of evidence as direct, indirect, or absent retained an interpretative element.

These limitations also provide a basis for a more specific future research agenda. Future studies should examine how the meaning and institutional depth of RFP vary across cultural and employment contexts; whether more deeply embedded forms of RFP reduce work intensification and improve employee well-being during Lean transformations; how labour relations and collective employee voice influence the adoption and sustainability of Lean practices; whether Sustainable HRM principles can prevent RFP from being subordinated to narrow efficiency objectives; and how Lean transformations affect stakeholders beyond the immediate workforce, including families, communities, and other external actors. Research should also test whether the four proposed levels of RFP institutional depth are empirically distinguishable and whether movement toward more institutionalized forms of respect produces more durable employee and operational outcomes. Future research should also aim at creating RFP maturity model.

Overall, the study shifts the question from whether Lean Management contains a human dimension to a more precise set of questions: how far does Respect for People extend, through which organizational processes is it enacted, and how deeply is it embedded in the organizational system?

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

The authors used AI-based tools (Claude, ChatGPT and Grammarly) to assist with language editing, grammar checking, and improving the clarity of the writing as English is not their first language.

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