



Ethical Leadership and Its Implication on Decision-Making in Organizations: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Leadership is fundamentally about influence, and the conduct of leaders has significant impacts on organizations and society. Ethical leadership involves leading through ethical values, decision-making, and relationships. This literature review examines the current context and understanding of ethical leadership. The purpose is to provide an overview of ethical leadership theories and components, discuss ethical leadership's role in influencing organizational decision-making, and highlight distinguishing characteristics of ethical leaders. Despite increased attention, ethical crises persist across sectors, pointing to a need for greater comprehension of dynamics shaping leader behavior. Lack of shared ethical leadership definitions also contributes to inconsistencies. This review helps consolidate insights from existing scholarship to advance conceptual clarity. Key frameworks like virtue ethics and social learning theory are reviewed. Ethical leadership is defined in terms of being both moral persons and moral managers – personally exhibiting ethical conduct, and promoting ethics in followers. Decision-making represents a vital arena for ethical leaders to shape culture and model principled choices. The review outlines ethical decision-making processes drawing on literature which points to four key phases: recognizing moral issues, making ethical analyses to judge situational morality, forming moral intentions, and ethical action. Traits that set ethical leaders apart encompass integrity, justice, accountability, care for people, and concern for social impacts. But contexts mediate perceptions of ethical leadership. This literature analysis reveals gaps in understanding leaders' ethical development and competencies that help translate moral awareness into consistent, values-based behavior - especially amid complex, high-stakes decisions. Further research would strengthen scholarship on dynamics that cultivate principled leadership. Therefore, ethical leadership remains critical for organizational trust, sustainability and societal wellbeing.

Keywords: *Ethical, Leadership, Decision-Making, Organizations*

1.0 Introduction

There have been discussions in recent years not only about the importance of a leader's ethical behavior in making decisions but also about the impact that ethics can have on the decision-making process itself (Arar & Saiti, 2022). Winston (2007) suggests that there is an indication of a crisis or potential crisis in ethical leadership and decision-making in nearly every field of professional life, both within organizations and throughout society. According to Winston (2007), some of the most notable examples of ethical misconduct have involved large businesses with accusations such as misappropriation of corporate assets, falsification of financial results, and aggressive and unlawful marketing practices. Many ethical concerns have focused on ethical leadership and ethical decision-making in businesses, particularly in light of high-profile corporate scandals (Lawton & Páez, 2015). A person's leadership style is a set of observable characteristics formed from their fundamental beliefs, values, and decision-making patterns over time (Pinelli et al., 2018). While ethical leadership may seem enigmatic and even intangible to many scholars and business leaders, it is a crucial concept that demands attention and understanding in the new millennium (Millar & Poole, 2011; p.2). Ethical leadership is about how leaders behave in various situations, their moral stance on issues, the decisions they make, and how they are perceived in terms of morality. It is more about the individual and what they exhibit to others, whether in the workplace or society. One concern is that while people readily adhere to high moral standards and conduct in their personal lives, this often does not translate to their professional lives, where the pressure to meet goals and generate revenue can take precedence, and values may be compromised.

Knowing how leaders make ethical decisions, as well as the factors that influence ethical decision-making and ethical behavior choices, becomes crucial given the negative consequences of poor ethical decisions (Selart & Johansen, 2011). Researchers have attempted to define ethical leadership from a normative perspective, focusing on the behavioral characteristics of ethical leaders (Brown & Treviño, 2006). A widely accepted definition across the literature (Shakeel et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018; Lawton & Páez, 2015) is offered by Brown et al. (2005): "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making." To inspire others to follow, ethical leadership requires a foundation of personal behavior considered morally proper in decision-making and interpersonal relationships (Lawton & Páez, 2015). Therefore, according to Cincala and Baumgartner (2019), ethical leaders make decisions and conduct their daily activities guided by their moral values. In simpler terms, these leaders consistently act ethically.

According to Alshammari et al. (2015), the complex interplay of challenges facing leadership research provided the backdrop for the development of ethical leadership. They observe that defining leadership and the rise of globalization spurred the advancement of ethical leadership beyond traditional paradigms. Since ethical leadership rests on the concepts of ethics and morality, which are highly context-dependent and subjective, different socio-economic and cultural groups have distinct perceptions of it (Frew et al., 2014). Krisharyuli et al. (2020) argue that ethical leadership plays a beneficial role in organizations by ensuring integrity and consistency in leaders' values and conduct. Ethical leadership is intimately connected to one's principles and ideals (Arar & Saiti, 2022). Mihelic et al. (2010) describe it as the ability to influence followers to willingly achieve goals set by the leader. They begin by defining ethics as a philosophical concept stemming

from the Greek word "ethos," meaning character or custom, which serves as the foundation of ethical leadership. According to Mihelic et al., an individual's or group's behavior regarding right and wrong might be guided by a code of ethics, comprising a set of values and moral principles. Bubble (2012; as cited in Alshammari et al., 2015) further defines ethical leadership as influencing employees through ideals, concepts, and convictions that significantly align with recognized organizational conduct standards. As a result of their moral character, ethical leaders are often viewed as moral role models who care about society at large and as impartial and ethical decision-makers in businesses (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Moral leaders set examples of moral behavior for followers to identify with and imitate in order to be regarded as ethical leaders and have an impact on ethics-related outcomes (Brown et al., 2005). Because ethical leaders are trustworthy and live out their words, this makes them credible to their followers (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Zulham et al. (2022) suggest ethical leaders serve rather than aspire to be imitated, seeking to develop others' potential rather than showcase their own abilities. This kind of leadership does not depend on status, so anyone can practice it. Van Wart (as cited in Shakeel et al., 2019; Maina, 2022) provides a conceptualization of ethical leadership by classifying it into component leadership styles, including moral management, genuine and upbeat leadership, leadership prioritizing societal responsibility, professionally-grounded leadership, and transformational leadership. These categories of character, duty and greatest good are seen as crucial for successful leadership (Shakeel et al., 2019). Ethical leadership has been conceptualized in a variety of ways throughout ethics studies and the literature that has emerged in response to it, all to draw attention to the centrality of ethics for leaders in all fields (Shakeel et al., 2019). One limitation seen in definitions of ethical leadership, however, is that there is no one common understanding thus utilizing the ideas of Van Wart (2014), proposed a more inclusive concept of ethical leadership that took into account certain essential features:

Ethical leadership is the implicit and explicit pursuit of desired ethical behavior for self and followers through efforts governed by rules and principles that advocate learning motivation, healthy optimism, and clarity of purpose to uphold the values of empowerment, service to others, concern for human rights, change for betterment and fulfilling duties towards society, future generations, environment, and its sustainability (Shakeel et al., 2018, p. 9).

This definition encompasses both the intrinsic and extrinsic components of ethical leadership and goes beyond looking at ethical leadership from the perspective of the moral individual and moral manager. The definitions of ethical leadership provided have some common themes, including the morality or personal behaviors of a leader, and their ability to motivate their followers to pursue agreed objectives. This suggests that an ethical leader has two key responsibilities: acting morally and managing morally. While the responsibility of a moral manager relates to the actions taken by the leader to instill such ethical ideals in followers, the function of a moral person refers to the ethical principles of the leader themselves (Shakeel et al., 2019; Brown & Treviño, 2006). Moral managers according to Brown and Treviño (2006) make ethics an integral component of their leadership agenda by expressing values and ethical messages, role-modelling ethical conduct, and employing incentives and discipline to hold subordinates accountable for ethical behavior. As moral persons, ethical leaders according to Yasir and Mohamad (2016) exhibit justice, authenticity, and integrity; they promote ethical consciousness, and they are reverential of others. As moral managers, ethical leaders hold juniors accountable for adhering to rules and regulations;

they develop ethical obligations; and they make decisions that are in the best interests of the organization's employees (Yasir & Mohamad, 2016). Frew et al. (2014) in a study on ethical leader perceptions found that the perception of ethical leaders was that they were reliable, honest, and trustworthy people. Loyalty and transparency were also mentioned as traits or actions of ethical leaders.

1.1 Ethical Leadership Theories

A large number of ethical leadership theories place a strong emphasis on the impact that leaders have on their followers when it comes to the moral context of the organization (Krisharyuli et al., 2020). Northouse (2016) asserts that ethical theories can be divided into two major categories: theories about leaders' behavior and theories about leaders' character. When these ethical ideas are applied to leadership, they speak to both the acts and character of the leaders. There are two distinct schools of thought when it comes to the ethics of leadership: those that focus on the repercussions of leaders' activities, and those that focus on the duties or regulations surrounding leaders' actions (Northouse, 2016; p.333).

1.2 Virtue Theory Ethical Leadership

A virtues-based paradigm has been proposed for analyzing and assessing ethical leadership. This approach, as described by Millar and Poole (2011), differentiates between transactional and transformational styles of influence, while also emphasizing the fundamental virtues that contribute to character building. Leaders with transactional styles view their subordinates as tools to execute decisions, while transformational leaders see them as independent individuals (Millar & Poole, 2011). The development of a leader's character is crucial for ethical leadership. Mendonca (2001; as referenced by Millar & Poole, 2011) outlines four fundamental virtues identified by Plato: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Prudence involves carefully evaluating a situation or issue in light of appropriate standards before making a decision. According to Millar and Poole (2011), a leader who exercises prudence will not avoid accountability for unethical conduct. Hegarty and Moccia (2017) further emphasize that a prudent leader considers the consequences of decisions on all stakeholders while seeking desired outcomes with minimal negative impacts. Justice requires a leader to consistently provide followers with their due rewards. This extends beyond legal obligations, encompassing everything others might need to fulfill their duties and assert their basic rights (Millar & Poole, 2011). Fortitude, also known as the courage to take significant risks for a worthy ideal, is the third virtue. Perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity are key aspects of fortitude. Temperance is the final virtue, and it involves discerning the difference between excess and what is acceptable and necessary (Mendonca, 2001:269f; as cited by Millar & Poole, 2011; pp.138-139). While these virtues are individual qualities, they can be manifested in organizational practices that provide context and shape them in accordance with the organization's overall goals (Lawton & Páez, 2015).

1.3 Social Learning Theory

According to Khan and Devin (2018), ethical leadership is based on the Social Learning Theory (Bandura & McClelland, 1977), which underscores the role of modelling and strengthening behavior through rewards and reprimands. The social learning theory, which contends that people pick up skills through emulation, modelling, and motivation, was taken into account by Brown et al. (2005) while analyzing ethical leadership. Leadership involves and influencing others,

according to Yukl, 2002. A social learning approach to ethical leadership advocates that leaders impact the ethical behavior of their followers through modelling. Modelling encompasses an extensive array of cognitive matching processes, such as learned behavior, imitation, and recognition (Brown et al., 2005). Bandura (1986; as cited in Brown et al., 2005) asserts that practically everything that can be learned by subjective experience can be used to teach personal experience, which is achieved by seeing other people's conduct and its effects. According to Brown et al. (2005), role modelling helps workers comprehend the demands, benefits, and outcomes of their behaviors. First because of their designated function, their standing and performance within the business, and their ability to influence others' behavior and results, leaders are an important and prospective source of such modelling (Brown et al., 2005).

1.4 Ethical Leadership in Influencing Decision-Making in Organizations

One of the most important competencies required of leaders is the ability to make decisions. Followers look to their leaders for direction and guidance often and the leader must be able to lead the followers toward a common goal. Peters et al. (2000; cited by Vitale & Cull, 2018) described decision-making as "a selection between two or more possibilities or solutions." (p. 144). According to Boatright (2007), the process of making decisions in a commercial setting needs to involve the synthesis of three perspectives: the financial, the regulatory, and the moral. According to Boatright (2007), a choice taken inside an organization should not be dependent on a trade-off between the three points of view but rather be morally justifiable and meet the reasonable requirements of economic performance and legal obligations. According to Northouse (2016), the decisions that leaders make and the actions they take in a particular situation are influenced and guided by personal ethics. According to Northouse (2016), ethical considerations are either explicit or implicit in all decision-making situations. Additionally, Northouse notes that with respect to leadership, ethics has to do with a leader's actions and the kind of person they are and also has to do with the moral character of leaders and their virtue (p.330). Because they hold legal authority, have control over resources, and are responsible for making significant decisions regarding employees, leaders are in a particularly advantageous position to dispense justice (Brown et al., 2005). Moral dilemmas are dealt with in ethical decision-making: A moral dilemma arises whenever an individual's free actions may harm or benefit others (Jones, 1991, p. 367; as cited in Selart & Johansen, 2011).

According to Arar and Saiti (2022), there are four steps involved in making an ethical decision, based on appropriate literature (Arar, 2017; Arar et al., 2016; Jones, 1991; Rest,1986) namely; First, is the *recognition of a moral dilemma*, which is influenced by an individual's emotional state, secondly, the *ethical assessment*. An essential element in the decision-making process, according to Arar and Saiti (2022) is determining the morality of the situation. There are two types of ethical assessment: the teleological one, which examines the outcomes of a moral state, and the ethical one, which examines the morality of the current circumstance on which the action would be based and is directly tied to the character. The moral assessment of a situation is significantly influenced by an individual's moral compass for fairness (Arar & Saiti, 2022). Thirdly, the *moral intention*. The goal of an individual to develop their behavior is strongly connected to their feelings as well as their experience (May & Pauli, 2002; as cited by Arar & Saiti, 2022). *Ethical behavior*, which is the outcome of values, is the final phase, and according to the framework, values provide the basis for all decisions. According to Tamunomiebi and Orianzi (2019), moral leaders should

prioritize moral principles and justice in decision-making, take the external influence of their decisions into account, and make it plain to their staff how their actions at work support the organization's strategic goals. When making decisions, ethical leaders consider morality. Additionally, they are more likely to respect rules, regulations, and practices that promote ethical behavior (Mayer et al., 2010; as cited by Yasir & Mohamad, 2016).

1.5 Ethical Leaders and Decision-Making

According to Khan and Javed (2018), ethical leadership is characterized by the following traits: justice, honesty, reliability, articulation of ethical norms, decision-making based on principles, award administration based on merit, kindness, and compassion. Northouse (2016) lists five principles that, when put into practice, are thought to foster the emergence of moral leadership. These values—respect, service, justice, honesty, and community—provide a basis for the growth of effective ethical leadership, even though they are not all-inclusive. Hegarty and Moccia (2017) outline the key components that can be used across all sectors to promote ethical leadership. These principles should serve as a moral compass for leaders and serve as the foundation of any code of ethics, but in many cases, as Hegarty and Moccia (2017) note, codes of ethics fail to reflect reality because they fail to recognize that doing the right thing can be challenging under certain circumstances. Hegarty and Moccia (2017) list the following traits as examples of what it means to be ethical: gratitude, humility, justice, mercy and compassion, wisdom and objectivity, generosity and honour, and tenacity. Resick et al. (2006; as cited by Tamunomiebi and Orianzi, 2019) highlighted six important characteristics of ethical leadership, including integrity and character ethical awareness, society or people orientation, motivation, encouragement, empowerment, and ethical accountability management. In addition, the nine qualities of an ethical leader highlighted by O'Connell and Bligh (2009) in their synthesis of previous studies are highlighted by Tamunomiebi and Orianzi (2019). These are: (1) Applies an ethical framework; (2) makes ethical decisions. (3) Thinks about how actions will affect the long term, (4) cares about followers' well-being when making decisions, and (5) treats people justly, (5) acts ethically or sets an example of ethical conduct; (6) conveys the value of ethics; (7) knows oneself and the people they work with; (8) requires people to account for their own ethical behavior; and (9) provides training and assistance for workers on moral conduct at work.

Eisenbeiss (2012; cited by Perry (2018) employs a hybrid approach to ethical leadership as well and outlines four perspectives (focuses or approaches) that comprise ethical leadership: (1) compassionate orientation: treating people with respect and as ends in themselves rather than as tools to an end; (2) a commitment to justice: leaders take impartial choices without favoritism; (3) a commitment to accountability and sustainability: taking into account long-term implications on society and the environment; (4) A temperance orientation: Moderate leaders avoid extremes and self-indulgence in their positions of authority (795–797). In chapter six and verse eight of the Old Testament book of Micah, the Prophet says, 'He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord want of you except to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?' This verse emphasizes some fundamental characteristics of ethical leaders, such as doing justice, showing love and mercy or compassion to others, and walking in humility. According to Kaptein et al. (2005; as cited by Yasir & Mohamad, 2016), ethical leaders can favorably impact followers by assessing the outcomes of their activities. They also suggested surveying followers show the overall ethical state of a company, while also noting that surveys can shed light on the traits of

moral leadership and show the scope and potential effects of unethical behavior in businesses (Yasir & Mohamad, 2016). According to Yukl et al. (2013) for leaders to be productive, they need to exhibit ethical leadership behaviors in addition to task-oriented, relation-oriented, and change-oriented leadership behaviors. People often imitate the actions of persons in positions of authority and status, as Bazerman (2020) notes. Thus, it is reasonable to anticipate that employees in companies with ethical leaders will act more ethically.

1.6 Conclusion

This literature review has provided an overview of the current context and understanding of ethical leadership, informed by existing research. Ethical leadership, rooted in ethics and morality, involves influencing followers through values, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships. Definitions emphasize the dual role of ethical leaders as both moral persons and moral managers, embodying ethical conduct themselves and promoting it in followers. Key ethical leadership theories include virtue ethics, which focuses on core virtues like prudence, justice, courage, and temperance that ethical leaders should embody, and social learning theory, which highlights modeling and reinforcement of ethical conduct. Research shows that ethical leaders significantly shape the ethical climate and culture of organizations through their moral example, communication, decision-making, and accountability systems. When it comes to ethical decision-making, literature outlines the processes and factors leaders consider, including recognizing moral issues, weighing consequences, duties, and character, forming moral intentions, and engaging in ethical behavior and actions. Ethical leaders make principle-based decisions considering the impacts on stakeholders. Traits like integrity, humility, justice, wisdom, accountability, care for people, and sustainability characterize ethical leaders. Principles of respect, service, honesty, and community building also underpin ethical leadership. However, contexts can shape perceptions of ethical leadership, and upholding ethical conduct consistently remains challenging, especially when facing conflicting priorities and pressures. Codes of ethics provide guidance but may not capture the nuances of diverse situations. Further research would contribute to understanding ethical competencies for organizational leadership and decision-making. Therefore, ethical leadership plays a vital role in organizations and society, with wide-ranging impacts on culture, climate, follower behavior, and public trust. In a time of ethical crises across sectors, understanding and supporting the development of ethical leaders is increasingly important. This review has synthesized key insights on this emerging field and pointed to areas for further exploration through empirical study.

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