Chapter 16

Ethical Leadership ⑂

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Abstract

The concept of ethical leadership plays a significant role in organizations, both from a managerial and moral perspective. When examining the historical development of leadership within strategic and social contexts, it becomes evident that leadership extends far beyond mere direction or the exercise of authority. Ethical leadership refers to an approach in which leaders align their decision-making, communication practices, behaviors, and efforts to shape organizational climate with ethical principles. In this regard, ethical leaders emphasize fundamental values such as honesty, trust, justice, and responsibility, thereby contributing not only to the personal development of employees but also to the overall success of their organizations. Within the scope of this study, the notions of leadership, ethics, ethical leadership, and the dimensions of ethical leadership are discussed in detail.

1. Introduction

Leadership is recognized as a concept that dates back to the very origins of human history and has maintained its significance throughout all periods of social life. Across historical processes, leadership has served as an essential element for the survival of communities, the maintenance of social order, and the achievement of common goals. In the modern era, however, the notion of leadership has expanded beyond the establishment of authority to encompass the motivation of employees, the encouragement of innovation, and the enhancement of institutional performance.

On the other hand, the concept of ethics, as a fundamental philosophical discipline that enables individuals to distinguish between right and wrong behaviors, carries significant importance both at the individual and institutional levels. Ethical principles function as guiding norms within a broad spectrum, ranging from decision-making processes to ordinary

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behaviors exhibited in daily life. In this context, the concept of ethical leadership emerges as an approach that integrates the traditional roles of leadership with moral responsibility, fostering the internalization of ethical values within organizational culture.

The growing importance of the concept of ethical leadership is largely shaped by the adverse consequences resulting from ethical violations frequently encountered in today's business world. The adoption of ethical behavior by leaders not only contributes to the preservation of organizational reputation but also plays a critical role in fostering an environment of trust among employees. Within the scope of this study, the fundamental aspects of leadership and ethics are examined, and the phenomenon of ethical leadership along with its dimensions is addressed in detail.

2. The Concept of Leadership

The origins of the concept of leadership can be traced back to the very beginnings of human history. Early human communities, in their struggle for survival, were compelled to organize in order to withstand the challenges of nature and to maintain order within their groups. One of the most fundamental requirements of such organization was the presence of a leader capable of guiding individuals toward shared goals and mobilizing them into collective action. As inherently social beings, humans have lived in communities throughout history, and within these communities, the function of leadership emerged as a natural necessity (Çiçeklioğlu, 2022). Leadership has thus remained a central element in human history, enabling individuals to act collectively, simplifying decision-making during times of crisis, and ensuring the sustainability of social order (Bass, 1990).

In a scientific context, the foundations of leadership research can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century. Particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, extensive studies on the phenomenon of leadership emerged within the fields of sociology, psychology, and business administration. During this period, the concept of leadership began to attract significant attention not only from academic circles but also from practitioners. The growing interest in leadership stemmed largely from its multidimensional and complex nature. Accordingly, the literature has produced numerous definitions of leadership. Although a universal and commonly accepted definition of leadership has not yet been established, these studies have provided valuable contributions to the understanding of its diverse dimensions (Stogdill, 1974).

Over time, efforts to establish a common understanding of leadership have intensified, leading to the emergence of definitions that gained recognition

both in academic circles and in practice. In this context, leadership has been described as "the process of influencing employees to achieve goals shared by the majority of organizational members" (Gediklioğlu, 2015). This perspective does not reduce leadership merely to personal traits or the exercise of authority; rather, it emphasizes leadership as an interactional and goal-oriented process. Leadership is thus regarded as a dynamic phenomenon that shapes the attitudes, behaviors, and motivations of group members in alignment with organizational objectives. Accordingly, leadership is acknowledged as a multidimensional construct that is grounded in individual qualities while also encompassing significant social dimensions (Bolden, 2011). Moreover, in today's rapidly changing and increasingly complex business environment, the role of leadership has become even more critical. Leadership not only fulfills the functions of guidance and control but also assumes broader responsibilities, such as fostering innovation, empowering employees, and ensuring sustainable performance (Avolio & Bass, 2004).

3. The Concept of Ethics

The term *ethics* originates from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning character or habit. It is widely acknowledged that ethics was first examined systematically by Aristotle, through which it gained recognition as a distinct philosophical discipline. Often referred to as moral philosophy, ethics seeks to guide individuals toward proper conduct by evaluating the distinction between good and evil within a moral framework. In this regard, ethics emerges as an approach that examines human behavior from a moral standpoint and identifies which attitudes and actions can be considered virtuous (Kaplan, 2009; Pieper, 2002). Ethics also appears as a system of values that determines how individuals should interact within social life and which actions ought to be regarded as morally right. At both individual and institutional levels, it functions as a framework that questions the conformity of choices and behaviors to established standards (Conaway & Fernandez, 2000).

The concept of ethics is defined as a philosophical discipline that examines, from a moral perspective, the fundamental rules, values, and notions of good and evil or right and wrong that emerge in every aspect of life and play a crucial role in individuals' personal and social development. Ethics, which increasingly gains significance in everyday life, represents the entirety of norms adopted in scientific studies and social interactions, guiding behaviors that align with these established standards (Kırlıoğlu & Akyel, 2003). Generally defined as moral philosophy, the concept of ethics seeks to explain human behaviors and actions by analyzing the values that shape interpersonal relationships, the moral dimensions of cultural heritage,

and the foundations of right and wrong conduct (İşgüden & Çabuk, 2006; Şahin, 2024).

4. The Concept of Ethical Leadership

Leaders assume the responsibility of guiding and mobilizing employees to implement the policies and achieve the objectives established by their organizations. In this process, they are often required to make various decisions depending on differing circumstances. However, the implementation of these decisions can produce significant social consequences for employees, organizations, and society at large. In this context, ethical violations within organizations highlight the critical importance of the ethical dimension of leadership. Consequently, researchers have increasingly focused on examining the ethical aspects of leadership and the outcomes that arise from this dimension (Ekmekçioğlu, 2019).

Demonstrating ethical leadership behaviors is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. Leaders must possess strong willpower and courage to exhibit such behaviors effectively. Adhering to ethical principles often requires resisting pressures from the surrounding environment or from upper management. Unethical situations encountered in the workplace are frequently concealed by managerial levels, thereby creating additional pressures on leaders. Under such circumstances, ethical leaders are expected to maintain a resolute, courageous, and fearless stance without retreating. Conversely, when some managers resort to unethical behaviors, it not only undermines their personal reputation but also adversely affects the credibility and standing of the organization (Stouten, van Dijke, & Cremer, 2012).

Ethical leaders are managers who consistently keep shared organizational values, ways of working, and ethical standards at the forefront of daily operations and actively support them. One of the distinguishing features of such leaders is their ability to delegate responsibility to employees and encourage them to embrace these responsibilities. An ethical leader evaluates both their own behaviors and those of their employees within the framework of ethical principles. They exemplify honesty through their own actions and expect the same standard from their employees. In decision-making processes, they adhere to guiding principles and demonstrate an exemplary approach by valuing employees' opinions. All decisions they make are grounded in ethical values, and their leadership is built upon these foundations (Altıntaş, 2023). These leaders reinforce rules and standards with ethical norms, taking courageous and decisive steps to generate solutions when challenges arise. Moreover, they create an environment of

trust that strengthens employees' positive behaviors and dedicate time and resources to support their professional growth (Sezgül, 2010). By fostering the internalization of ethical principles among employees, ethical leaders contribute to the prevention of negative behaviors and help shape workplace attitudes in a positive direction (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenz, 2012).

Ethical leaders, in their decision-making processes, consider not only the achievement of predetermined objectives but also the potential ethical implications of their decisions. When a potential outcome reveals an ethical concern, they revisit the decision and adopt a more appropriate approach (Bennis, 1995; Özdemirkol, 2025). At the core of ethical leadership lies the elimination of behaviors and practices deemed inappropriate or unethical. In this context, leaders play a crucial role in resolving emerging issues Ethical leaders hold a decisive position in establishing ethical standards within organizations, promoting and rewarding ethical behavior, and ensuring that unethical actions are subject to appropriate sanctions. Supporting employees' ethical conduct and preventing unethical behavior directly contribute to the cultivation of an ethical climate within the organization (Yıldız & Demirtaş, 2022).

4.1. The Importance of Ethical Leadership

Among the various types of leadership, ethical leadership holds a particularly significant position and has emerged as a prominent concept in the social sciences literature. Its importance is underscored in contemporary contexts, where managers may at times prioritize personal interests over organizational objectives, highlighting the necessity and critical role of ethical leadership (Demirtaş, 2015). Research indicates that the concept of ethical leadership is grounded in several fundamental characteristics. Foremost among these is that ethical leaders are honest, reliable, and possess strong moral character. Secondly, ethical leadership represents a perspective that is focused on both people and society (Northouse, 2016). Third, ethical leaders are required to develop a strong ethical awareness, which involves understanding the values of employees and showing them the respect they deserve. A fourth characteristic is their ability to motivate others. Ethical leaders prioritize the interests of their followers over their own personal gains. Fifth, they are encouraging and empowering, fostering an environment in which employees can develop themselves while providing support and motivation (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005). Sixth, ethical leaders play a crucial role in managing ethical responsibility. Within this scope, they establish rules to ensure adherence to ethical principles, encourage employees

to comply with these standards, and, when necessary, implement rewards or sanctions. Through these practices, adherence to ethical rules within the organization can become a normative and institutionalized expectation (Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006).

All of these qualities hold critical significance for both organizations and their employees. Ethical leadership contributes to the achievement of organizational goals by enhancing employee performance. Moreover, it exerts a substantial influence on the development of employees' commitment and loyalty to their organizations (Kamal, Samdani, & Yameen, 2018). The ethical maturity of leaders encompasses multidimensional competencies such as values, moral reasoning, empathy, and a sense of responsibility. Leaders who possess these qualities actively work to prevent ethical issues within the organization, reduce the occurrence of ethical violations, and ensure the continuity of an ethical culture. Consequently, organizations led by managers with well-developed ethical leadership characteristics not only achieve higher institutional success but also foster a sustainable climate of trust among employees (Yaman, 2010).The concept of ethical leadership is recognized as a leadership style that integrates managerial, strategic, and moral roles within the complex and dynamic structure of modern organizations. Such leaders not only guide the behavior of organizational members but also contribute to shaping the organizational culture based on ethical values. This approach enhances employee job satisfaction and overall organizational performance, laying the essential foundation for achieving long-term success (Brown et al., 2005).

4.2. Dimensions of Ethical Leadership

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept of ethical leadership, it is essential to examine and articulate its underlying dimensions. Research indicates that ethical leadership fundamentally comprises four main dimensions. These dimensions are classified as ethical decision-making, ethical communication, ethical behavior, and the cultivation of an ethical organizational climate.

4.2.1. Communicative Ethics

The concept of communicative ethics refers to the ethical principles that must be adhered to by professionals operating within the field of communication. This includes not only news agencies, newspapers, radio and television organizations, and online journalism, but also individuals producing non-news content for these platforms, professionals in advertising, and public relations specialists The 1970s witnessed a diversification and

rapid development of mass communication tools, which, in turn, accelerated research in the field of communication ethics. During this period, issues such as media responsibility, media performance, and the public interest began to occupy a central position within communicative ethics. Mass communicators, who collect information and produce news, were regarded as actors who must operate with heightened caution and a strong sense of responsibility, as their content could directly influence audiences (Uzun, 2007).

In the context of leadership, the concept of communicative ethics plays a crucial role in assessing the scope of leaders' wrongful or self-interested actions. Furthermore, this dimension significantly contributes to determining the extent to which leaders treat their employees fairly and whether employees are subjected to any form of judgment or bias due to their individual differences.

4.2.2. Ethical Decision-Making

Individuals' perspectives and attitudes toward others with whom they communicate influence the decisions they make regarding those individuals and, consequently, their resulting behaviors. In every interaction, people transmit emotional signals, which have a significant impact on those around them. Research indicates that even in the absence of verbal communication, the emotions and moods of individuals present in the same environment can affect one another (Goleman, 2017). Emotions represent one of the most powerful resources in decision-making processes. Consequently, during decision-making, emotions serve as a fundamental reference point for choices regarding oneself, others, and the surrounding social and physical environment. Furthermore, because emotions are closely linked to personal values, desires, motivational sources, and self-regulatory mechanisms, they play a crucial role in shaping an individual's decision-making style (Pfeiffer, 2001).

Any decision made by an individual can vary depending on the person or situation involved. Therefore, rather than claiming that all decisions are inherently correct, it is more appropriate to evaluate decisions within the framework of ethical principles. Decisions grounded in ethical values enable the decision-maker to guide their actions more effectively and responsibly. When evaluated ethically, decisions provide a framework for shaping behavior and relationships, helping individuals determine what should or should not be done. In essence, making ethical decisions is fundamentally an effort to achieve a good and correct outcome. Ethics comprises the principles,

values, and standards that define what is right and good. Consequently, the ethical conduct of managers and the ethical quality of their decisions hold significant importance for organizational functioning as well as for fostering trust and commitment among employees (Karayaman, 2020).

One of the fundamental characteristics of ethical leadership is ensuring that decisions made are morally sound. Leaders who can clearly distinguish between right and wrong become trusted figures within their environment, thereby exerting a meaningful influence on others. When it is believed that a leader's decisions are guided by ethical principles, they contribute to the development of values such as honesty, commitment, and trust, which in turn strengthens employee loyalty (Torun & Çelik, 2024). This underscores the critical role that decisions made by ethical leaders play in fostering employees' attachment to their organizations. Ethical leaders are expected to subject their decision-making processes to a four-stage ethical analysis before implementation. In the first stage, the potential consequences of the decisions are evaluated. The second stage involves reviewing the alignment of decisions with laws and regulations. In the third stage, the compatibility of decisions with societal values and norms is assessed. Finally, ethical leaders must consult their conscience as a guiding framework when making their final decisions (Caruso & Salovey, 2007).

4.2.3. Ethical Climate

The concept of ethical climate constitutes one of the determining factors of behavior within organizations and enterprises, encompassing both ethical principles and ethical conduct. The extent to which employees demonstrate the expected attitudes and behaviors within an organization reflects the degree to which the ethical climate is recognized and internalized. In structures where an ethical climate is embraced, these principles are continuously valued and safeguarded. Consequently, in organizations with a strong ethical climate, conflicts and problems among employees are less likely to arise, and any issues that do occur tend to be resolved more swiftly. The presence of a well-established ethical climate facilitates the resolution of disagreements within the organization, promoting a more harmonious and cooperative work environment (Şahin & Dündar, 2011; Torun, 2023).

In this context, an organization's ability to compete with other institutions is strategically significant. This capability is generally associated with employees possessing an innovative mindset. The capacity of employees to engage in innovative behaviors, in turn, largely depends on the extent to which a strong ethical climate is embraced within the organization.

Organizations that adopt and maintain a climate grounded in ethical values are therefore better positioned to achieve a competitive advantage (Akkoç, 2012).

4.2.4. Behavioral Ethics

The concept of behavioral ethics can be defined as a set of rules that assist individuals in distinguishing between right and wrong actions within their professional and social interactions. Individuals who act in accordance with ethical principles are perceived as trustworthy members of their environment. This perception of trust contributes significantly to their success in both social relationships and professional settings (Brown et al., 2005).

The concept of behavioral ethics is regarded as a crucial factor in ensuring that individuals live in a secure and harmonious environment. When employees or individuals fail to adhere to ethical standards, unethical behaviors may emerge, potentially leading to various negative consequences within organizations. In such contexts, unethical attitudes such as threats and gossip may become prevalent. The approach of behavioral ethics aims to support and enhance positive behaviors among employees and individuals, while simultaneously mitigating negative actions. Accordingly, within organizations, the concept of behavioral ethics encourages employees to refrain from unethical conduct and promotes attitudes and behaviors grounded in ethical values (Tonus & Oruç, 2012).

5. Conclusion

The concept of ethical leadership has emerged as a significant consideration not only for the managerial functions of contemporary organizations but also for their social responsibility and long-term sustainability. Leaders who prioritize ethical values foster trust among employees by embracing fairness and transparency in decision-making processes, thereby creating a foundation for healthy and enduring organizational relationships. In this context, ethical leadership plays a decisive role in shaping a positive organizational climate and enhancing employees' motivation, commitment, and performance levels. By integrating ethical principles into managerial practices, organizations can achieve both operational effectiveness and a culture of integrity that supports sustainable success.

When evaluating the dimensions of ethical leadership discussed in this study namely communicative ethics, ethics in decision-making, ethical climate, and behavioral ethics it becomes evident that this concept exerts a multifaceted influence within organizations. Ethical leaders are not merely

managerial figures who remind employees of ethical rules; they embody these values through their own behaviors and serve as role models for those around them. Consequently, the presence of ethical leadership facilitates the reduction of unethical behaviors and promotes the internalization of ethical conduct as a normative standard within the organizational culture.

One of the most significant contributions of ethical leadership to organizations is the enhancement of employees' sense of belonging and the strengthening of trust in the institution. When employees recognize that their leaders are committed to ethical values, they tend to align their own behaviors accordingly, experience higher job satisfaction, and develop a stronger commitment to organizational goals. Moreover, the concept of ethical leadership also plays a critical role in an organization's external relationships, contributing to the preservation of corporate reputation, the enhancement of societal trust, and the achievement of long term success.

In conclusion, the concept of ethical leadership represents a holistic approach that generates significant benefits at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. In the modern world, the sustainability of institutions, the well being of employees, and the trust established with society largely depend on the widespread adoption of leadership practices grounded in ethical values. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that ethical leadership is examined in depth within the academic field, further developed in practice, and integrated as a fundamental component of organizational culture.

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