

## THE ROLE OF ETHICAL CLIMATE AS A MEDIATOR IN THE LINK BETWEEN ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE BEHAVIOR

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### KEYWORDS

### ABSTRACT

Organisational behaviour, mediation, ethical leadership, employee conduct, and ethical atmosphere

The research examines the relationship between ethical leadership and employee behavior, focusing on how an ethical climate mediates this connection. Ethical leadership, which promotes integrity, transparency, and accountability, is known to positively influence employee conduct. However, the study suggests that this effect is strengthened when an ethical climate exists within the organization. An ethical climate fosters a work environment where moral behavior is encouraged and valued, creating a culture of trust and accountability that aligns with organizational values. Using data from employees across various industries, the study found that the ethical climate significantly mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and positive employee behaviors. When employees perceive their workplace as ethical, the positive effects of ethical leadership are amplified, leading to increased integrity, trust, and commitment. The research highlights that organizations should focus on both cultivating ethical leaders and creating an ethical climate to maximize the benefits of ethical leadership and foster better employee behavior.

### Introduction

Ethical leadership plays an essential role in contemporary organizations by shaping employee behavior, fostering a culture of integrity, and promoting trust. Ethical leaders serve as role models, demonstrating values such as honesty, fairness, and accountability, which influence employees' decisions and actions. These leaders guide their teams toward principled decision-making, establish clear ethical standards, and create an organizational environment where ethical behavior is encouraged and rewarded. While the positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee behavior is well-established, the specific mechanisms underlying this relationship

remain underexplored. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the mediating role of an ethical atmosphere in linking ethical leadership with employee behavior, offering a deeper understanding of how ethical leadership translates into tangible outcomes in the workplace. The study conducted by Valentine, Godkin, and Fleischman (2024) focuses on the hotel and leisure sector in Nigeria, examining how ethical leadership and a supportive ethical work environment influence employee job satisfaction. The hospitality and entertainment industries are characterized by fast-paced, dynamic work environments where employee engagement is crucial, given the high turnover rates and fluctuating employee morale typical of these sectors. The authors argue that in such industries, ethical leadership and a strong ethical atmosphere are vital for enhancing job satisfaction, which, in turn, leads to better workforce productivity and retention. Ethical leadership, defined by qualities such as justice, honesty, transparency, and a genuine concern for employee well-being, is crucial in cultivating a respectful and supportive work environment. In industries where customer service and interpersonal relationships are key, such ethical leadership creates a workplace that fosters mutual respect, which is essential for overall business success. Using a quantitative research methodology, the authors gathered data from employees in various hotel and entertainment firms across Nigeria. The study examined various forms of ethical leadership, including transformational and transactional leadership, alongside key components of the work environment such as ethical atmosphere, job security, and fairness. Structured questionnaires were used to assess employees' perceptions of ethical leadership, the ethical environment in their workplace, and their overall job satisfaction. The data was then analyzed to explore the relationships between these variables and the impact they had on employee satisfaction levels. The findings of the study reveal that ethical leadership plays a significant role in improving job satisfaction among employees. Leaders who demonstrate ethical conduct—characterized by transparency in decision-making, fairness in treatment, and a commitment to justice—are seen as more trustworthy and are likely to foster a positive workplace environment. This, in turn, leads to higher employee morale, better job satisfaction, and increased engagement. Additionally, the study emphasizes that the presence of an ethical work environment, which includes fair employment practices, job security, and a moral atmosphere, is a critical factor in enhancing employee satisfaction. However, the study also suggests that ethical leadership alone may not be sufficient to improve job satisfaction if the overall work environment remains negative or unethical. It is essential for organizations to synchronize leadership behavior with broader organizational principles to create a unified ethical atmosphere. This alignment is necessary to establish a cohesive work environment where employees feel valued, secure, and motivated. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of an integrated approach, where both ethical leadership and a supportive ethical work environment work in tandem to improve job satisfaction. By cultivating leaders who prioritize fairness, transparency, and employee welfare, and by ensuring that the organizational atmosphere aligns with these values, businesses can foster an environment that not only attracts and retains talent but also promotes long-term employee satisfaction and organizational success. For companies in the hospitality and leisure sectors—and other industries with similar challenges—this research provides valuable insights into the critical role of ethical leadership and the work environment in driving positive employee outcomes.

## The context of the study

Team dynamics refer to the intricate web of interactions, relationships, and social processes among team members that significantly impact the overall functionality and effectiveness of a team. In higher education, these dynamics are crucial as teams often consist of cross-functional groups that engage in a variety of tasks, such as curriculum development, research, administrative duties, and strategic planning. Effective team dynamics foster an environment where collaboration, trust, and open communication thrive, allowing team members to work together efficiently toward common goals. When the relationships between team members are positive, and they feel supported by their peers and leaders, their ability to address complex challenges and achieve collective objectives is greatly enhanced. For teams in higher education, particularly research teams, success hinges on several key factors: clearly defined roles, specific goals, and shared accountability. These elements ensure that each member knows their responsibilities, understands the team's objectives, and feels a sense of ownership in the team's success. In research teams, for instance, a well-structured approach with clear milestones helps maintain focus, ensuring that members work cohesively toward achieving research targets and producing high-quality results. When team members comprehend their roles and responsibilities, they can contribute more effectively, making the team more likely to succeed in its endeavors. Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping these dynamics, as the leadership style influences the overall tone and functioning of the team. Leaders who exhibit transparency, inclusivity, and supportiveness foster a culture of respect and motivation within the team. This creates an environment where team members feel valued, leading to higher morale, greater engagement, and increased productivity. Additionally, leaders who encourage participation and provide regular feedback help maintain strong communication and resolve conflicts before they become detrimental to team cohesion.

Another vital component that enhances team dynamics in higher education settings is the presence of conflict resolution mechanisms and structured feedback channels. Conflict, if not addressed in a timely and constructive manner, can disrupt team cohesion and hinder progress. By establishing clear processes for resolving disagreements and providing constructive feedback, teams can navigate challenges more effectively and maintain focus on their shared goals. Teams with strong dynamics exhibit increased adaptability, enabling them to manage institutional changes such as modifications in academic programs, the integration of new technologies, or shifts in strategic direction. This adaptability is particularly crucial in higher education, where external pressures and institutional changes frequently demand collective action and prompt adjustment. External environmental factors also play a significant role in shaping the dynamics within higher education institutions. These factors include economic conditions, government policies, technological advancements, and societal expectations—elements that affect institutions but are outside of their direct control. For example, economic shifts can impact the funding models of higher education institutions, influencing tuition rates, financial aid provisions, and the availability of research grants. In times of economic downturn, institutions often face reduced funding from government sources and private donations, which can prompt them to seek alternative revenue streams, such as increased tuition or the commercialization of research. These financial constraints may alter institutional priorities, placing pressure on budgets and

shifting focus toward cost-saving measures or more financially sustainable initiatives. Government policies and regulations also significantly influence higher education institutions. These institutions must adhere to a complex web of accreditation standards, financial regulations, and public accountability measures. Legislative changes, such as those that emphasize student outcomes or introduce new requirements for diversity and inclusion, force institutions to reassess and adapt their strategies. For instance, changes in education policy may lead to a heightened focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs, while also driving initiatives aimed at increasing student diversity and fostering more inclusive academic environments. These policy changes often require institutions to reallocate resources, revise curricula, or implement new pedagogical approaches in response to societal expectations and legislative mandates. Additionally, shifts in government funding, whether through reduced public subsidies or new funding models, can create pressures on educational institutions, forcing them to become more resourceful and innovative in their approaches to teaching, research, and administration. The success of teams in higher education is deeply influenced by the quality of their internal dynamics and the broader external environment in which they operate. Effective teams are characterized by clear roles, defined goals, supportive leadership, and open communication, which foster collaboration and enhance productivity. Moreover, external factors such as economic conditions, government policies, and societal trends significantly shape institutional priorities and strategies. Institutions that are able to effectively manage both internal team dynamics and external pressures are better positioned to adapt to changes and maintain long-term success in an ever-evolving educational landscape.

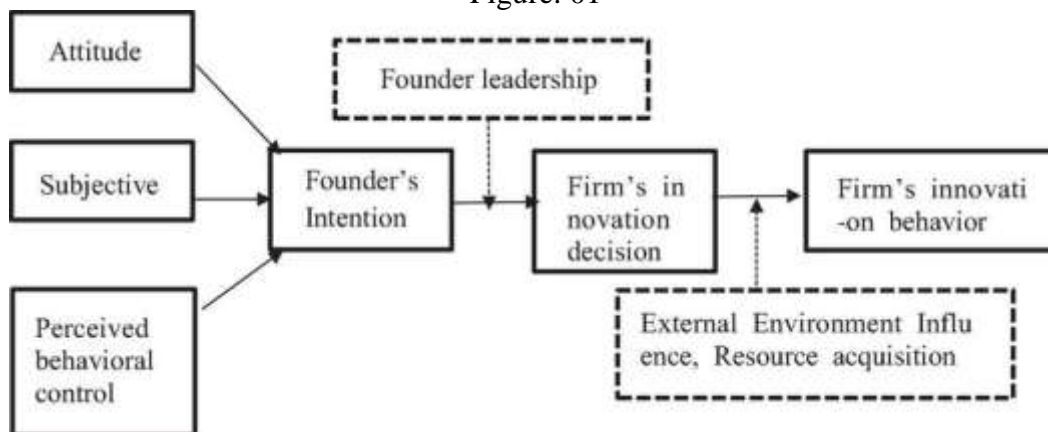
### **Theoretical Framework**

According to social learning theory, people pick up behaviours from watching and copying their leaders. This suggests that moral leadership may encourage moral behaviour among employees. The theory of organisational climate clarifies how employees' attitudes and behaviours are influenced by their workplace, including an ethical atmosphere. Together, these concepts offer a thorough framework for understanding how moral leadership can create moral cultures, which in turn affect employee conduct. Research on ethical leadership has demonstrated its importance in promoting organisational outcomes, such as work performance, organisational commitment, and employee satisfaction. The idea of an ethical workplace culture has drawn attention as a crucial factor influencing employee behaviour. By examining how an ethical environment mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee behaviour, the study builds on previous research and offers a more sophisticated understanding of this relationship. According to Ghasemy (2024), leadership is crucial for fostering sustainable behaviours and attitudes at educational institutions, which are at the centre of the expanding global emphasis on sustainability. Higher education institutions' capacity to carry out their missions and overcome difficult obstacles is shaped by the interaction of organisational elements, personnel traits, team dynamics, and external environmental factors. Institutions may build resilient, inclusive, and adaptable environments that satisfy the changing needs of society and higher education by carefully addressing these factors. Data analytics, digital resources, and online learning have all become more popular as a result of technological breakthroughs that have changed the face of education. Adopting new technology can help institutions provide flexible learning options to accommodate a range of student demands, improve operational efficiency, and improve learning experiences. However, as staff and students demand more digital solutions, schools that adopt technology slowly risk losing ground to competitors. Lastly, public perception and institutional

priorities are influenced by societal expectations. Many institutions have adopted policies that reflect these ideals, such as encouraging diversity in employment or providing green campus programs, in response to growing demands for social responsibility, sustainability, and inclusivity. Proactively addressing societal expectations helps institutions attract students, faculty, and partnerships while strengthening community links and improving their reputation. According to social learning theory, individuals tend to acquire behaviors by observing and imitating the actions of those in positions of authority, such as leaders. This theory suggests that ethical leadership, by modeling moral behavior, can have a profound influence on employees, encouraging them to adopt similar ethical practices. The concept of organizational climate further enhances this understanding by explaining how the attitudes and behaviors of employees are shaped by the environment in which they work, including its ethical atmosphere. Together, these concepts offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how moral leadership can foster ethical cultures within organizations. Such cultures, in turn, influence the behavior of employees, promoting an environment where ethical conduct is valued and reinforced. Research on ethical leadership has consistently demonstrated its importance in driving positive organizational outcomes, such as improved work performance, higher organizational commitment, and increased employee satisfaction. The development of an ethical workplace culture is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in shaping employee behavior. As organizations prioritize creating environments that uphold ethical standards, they not only improve their internal dynamics but also contribute to the broader societal good. By examining how an ethical environment mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee behavior, recent studies have advanced our understanding of how these two factors interact to create a moral organizational culture. This approach adds depth to previous research, offering a more nuanced perspective on how ethical leadership contributes to sustainable and positive organizational outcomes. Building on these ideas, Ghasemy (2024) argues that leadership plays a key role in fostering sustainable behaviors and attitudes, particularly within educational institutions. As higher education becomes increasingly central to global efforts toward sustainability, institutions face mounting pressure to align their practices with broader societal goals. The capacity of these institutions to meet their missions and tackle complex challenges depends on the interaction between various organizational elements, such as personnel characteristics, team dynamics, and external environmental influences. By addressing these factors thoughtfully, educational institutions can build environments that are resilient, inclusive, and adaptable, allowing them to meet the evolving needs of both students and society at large. This approach not only enhances institutional effectiveness but also contributes to the broader societal good by shaping future generations of leaders and thinkers. In recent years, technological advancements have reshaped the landscape of higher education, making data analytics, digital resources, and online learning integral components of the educational experience. The integration of new technology offers numerous benefits, such as providing flexible learning options that can accommodate a diverse range of student needs, improving operational efficiency, and enhancing the overall learning experience. Institutions that embrace technology are better equipped to meet the demands of modern students and remain competitive in an increasingly digital world. However, institutions that are slow to adopt these innovations risk falling behind, as staff and students increasingly demand more digital solutions. This shift in educational delivery models underscores the importance of staying at the forefront of technological trends to ensure that institutions remain relevant and capable of offering high-quality educational experiences. Beyond technological changes, higher education institutions

must also respond to shifting societal expectations. Public perception and institutional priorities are heavily influenced by the growing demand for social responsibility, sustainability, and inclusivity. In response, many institutions have implemented policies that promote these values, such as initiatives to encourage diversity in hiring practices, the introduction of green campus programs, and the establishment of sustainability-focused curricula. By proactively addressing societal expectations, institutions not only enhance their reputation but also attract students, faculty, and partnerships that share these values. Furthermore, responding to societal demands strengthens ties with the broader community, fosters collaboration with industry partners, and helps build a reputation for being socially responsible. Ultimately, this alignment with societal values enables institutions to thrive in a rapidly changing world, ensuring they continue to play a vital role in shaping future leaders and contributing to the collective well-being of society. By aligning ethical leadership with broader organizational goals and addressing the dynamic external factors influencing higher education, institutions can create environments that promote positive behaviors, adapt to emerging challenges, and remain competitive in an increasingly complex world. Whether it's through embracing technology, fostering inclusivity, or aligning with societal expectations, the actions of educational institutions today will have lasting impacts on their ability to shape tomorrow's leaders and meet the evolving needs of society.

Figure: 01



Source: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-extension-of-the-theory-of-planned-behavior\\_fig2\\_358595335](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-extension-of-the-theory-of-planned-behavior_fig2_358595335)

### Literature review

The importance of ethical leadership in academic contexts was highlighted by Zhang et al.'s (2023) investigation into how graduate students' views of academic misconduct were impacted by their supervisors' ethical leadership. Supervisors play a critical role in helping students develop their ethical standards in the face of growing concerns about academic dishonesty and misconduct in graduate school. The study is relevant because graduate students are increasingly expected to publish and perform well, which may result in unethical behaviours including plagiarism, data falsification, and other forms of academic misconduct. Valentine, Godkin, and Fleischman (2024) showed that improving employee job satisfaction in Nigerian hotel and leisure businesses requires ethical leadership and ethical workplaces. The study's findings, which emphasise the need of moral leadership and encouraging employment practices to enhance employee well-being and, therefore, organisational performance, are particularly relevant for managers and industry leaders. The authors urge more research to examine the long-term impacts of these traits on a range of employee outcomes, such as productivity and turnover. The

likelihood of student misconduct may be significantly decreased by supervisors who foster an ethical atmosphere in educational institutions. This study adds to the body of knowledge on moral leadership in higher education and provides useful guidance for organisations looking to promote academic integrity and reduce misconduct in graduate programs.

### **Research Objectives**

- To investigate the connection between moral leadership and worker conduct.
- To investigate how the ethical milieu influences the link between ethical leadership and employee behaviour.
- To provide organisations practical advice on how to create moral environments that promote moral behaviour.

### **Research objectives**

The purpose of the study is to investigate how graduate students' attitudes and behaviour towards academic dishonesty are influenced by their supervisors' moral leadership. In this context, promoting justice, transparency, accountability, and moral conduct are traits of ethical leadership. The authors want to find out whether supervisors who model moral conduct and judgement may lessen students' propensity to engage in or support academic dishonesty.

### **Research Methodology**

The researchers polled graduate students from many Chinese universities using a quantitative technique. A number of criteria, including fairness, honesty, the demonstration of moral conduct, and the dissemination of moral values, were used to assess ethical leadership. Characteristics including academic discipline, year of study, and prior exposure to research ethics training were also taken into consideration.

### **Analysis, findings and Results**

the need of encouraging moral leadership in educational establishments in order to combat academic dishonesty. In order to make ethical leadership a requirement for graduate school, the study urges colleges to place a strong emphasis on ethics education for instructors, especially those in supervisory roles. It is imperative that supervisors get training on how to make moral decisions and cultivate an honest culture among their research teams. According to the study, educational institutions must strengthen their policies pertaining to academic integrity and provide students clear guidance and support networks to deal with moral quandaries. the substantial impact that supervisors' moral guidance has on graduate students' opinions on academic dishonesty.

Table 1 Mean Ranking

| Factors                        | Mean   | Std. Deviation | Mean Rank |
|--------------------------------|--------|----------------|-----------|
| Leadership Factors             | 4.09   | 1.765          | 4.67      |
| Team dynamics                  | 4.65   | 0.654          | 3.54      |
| Organizational Factors         | 3.42   | 0.675          | 2.76      |
| Employee Characteristics       | 3.10   | 0.876          | 2.90      |
| External Environmental Factors | 3.68   | 0.821          | 3.13      |
| Ethical Climate Strength       | 3.2.96 | 1.187          | 3.86      |

The mechanisms that facilitate this relationship are not well understood, despite the fact that moral leadership is recognised as a stimulant for moral employee behaviour. Not much research has been done on how the organisational environment affects this relationship. Organisations may struggle to implement effective leadership strategies that encourage moral behaviour among staff members if these mediating factors are not well understood. A key tactic for achieving sustainability in higher education institutions is servant leadership, which is characterised by its focus on assisting others and giving workers' and stakeholders' wellbeing first priority. According to the author, servant leaders are ideal for guiding organisations towards sustainable practices because of their people-centric approach and ethical orientation. Sustainability in higher education include environmental considerations, the development of moral learning environments, conscientious research practices, and the guidance of upcoming scholars who prioritise sustainability. The study mainly looks at scholars who specialise in science, highlighting their potential to advance sustainability in higher education. These scholars, who often spearhead studies in environmental science, technology, and innovation, are seen as important players in the development of practices and policies that align with the goals of global sustainability. The author argues that they are well equipped for leadership roles in sustainability projects because of their moral behaviour and cognitive skills, which include critical thinking, problem-solving, and foresight. Ghasemy interviewed academics and administrators at universities using a qualitative technique. The study looked at the application of servant leadership concepts in various contexts as well as the contribution of moral conduct and the intellectual prowess of scientists to sustainability. According to the findings, servant leadership fosters inclusiveness, cooperative decision-making, and a long-term perspective—all of which are essential for incorporating sustainability in educational settings. Additionally, researchers who uphold high ethical standards are more likely to engage in scholarly and instructional endeavours that emphasise social responsibility and resource sustainability. The study also looks at how establishing servant leadership in higher education may affect policy. According to the study, leadership development programs that prioritise moral behaviour and conceptual skills should be supported by higher education policy, particularly for scholars in scientific fields. These regulations should encourage a shift away from traditional hierarchical leadership structures and towards servant leadership models that prioritise sustainability. In order to address complex sustainability issues, the study emphasises the need of institutional frameworks that support moral research practices and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. The study clarifies the moral behaviour and intellectual abilities of scholars with scientific training, offering crucial information on how universities should support global sustainability projects. In order to achieve long-term sustainability goals, the article's policy recommendations emphasise the need of developing leaders, fostering moral academic environments, and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration.

Table 2 shows the connection between moral leadership and worker conduct. The Friedman Ranking

|                 | N   | Chi-Square | df | Sig.  |
|-----------------|-----|------------|----|-------|
| Friedman result | 100 | 117.051    | 5  | 0.000 |

The outcome of the Friedman test shows that there is a substantial difference in mean rank. 117.051 is the calculated Chi-Square value with five degrees of freedom. These components may be divided into environmental, organisational, and human categories that affect employee behaviour, ethical climate, and leadership dynamics: The structural, cultural, and procedural components that characterise an institution and impact its capacity to accomplish objectives are referred to as organisational factors. Internal policies, resource distribution, institutional purpose, and governance models are important organisational elements in higher education. The speed and agility of decision-making, which are critical for institutions dealing with rapid changes in financing sources, student demographics, and technology, are influenced by the efficacy of governance, including centralised vs decentralised arrangements. Strong administrative cores in centralised organisations may speed up the adoption of new regulations, but they may not provide the flexibility that decentralised models have in responding to departmental demands locally. Another important organisational component that represents common values, attitudes, and practices among employees, instructors, and administrators is institutional culture. An atmosphere where staff members feel encouraged to experiment and contribute is fostered by a strong culture of academic independence, honesty, and inclusion. This is especially important for student-centered institutions. Conflicts and low morale, however, might result from a mismatch between institutional objectives and cultural norms. For instance, academic personnel may oppose changes that are driven by financial constraints and move towards revenue-generating activities because they believe they are not in line with educational values. Allocating resources is another organisational component that affects how successful an institution is. Budgetary restrictions affect program financing, personnel, and infrastructure at higher education institutions. Strong resource allocation plans that give priority to important areas, such as student support services and faculty development, put institutions in a better position to satisfy operational and academic needs. Additionally, effective resource management promotes organisational agility, allowing organisations to react swiftly to opportunities or difficulties.

## **Discussion**

Individual talents, motivations, beliefs, and attitudes of employees all have a significant impact on how well an organisation performs. The intellectual atmosphere of higher education is enhanced by the many backgrounds and specialities that professors and staff bring to the table. In today's quickly evolving educational environment, traits like flexibility, dedication to academic integrity, and receptivity to lifelong learning are especially beneficial. Faculty members' feeling of job stability, chances for professional development, and alignment with the institution's goal all have an impact on their degree of involvement and dedication. Faculty members who are actively involved in the institution's objectives are more likely to support research projects, assist students, and establish curricula. Furthermore, research ability and academic experience improve an institution's reputation and draw both funds and students. Because they assist teachers and

maintain efficient institutional operations, staff members' technical and administrative abilities are equally important. Institutions of higher learning that make continuous investments in staff and faculty training have a more competent workforce that can adapt to changing operational and academic needs. Employee behaviour is also influenced by recognition and incentive programs, which encourage staff and faculty to perform well and uphold the institution's ideals. Additionally, encouraging inclusion and diversity in the workforce improves the institution's flexibility since different teams provide a range of viewpoints that boost creativity and problem-solving.

### **Theoretical and practical significance**

It gives businesses insight into how fostering an ethical environment may enhance the impact of moral leadership and lead to greater moral behaviour from employees. These findings might direct organisational strategies intended to promote moral behaviour as well as leadership development programs. Supervisors who exhibited high ethical standards created a learning environment that upheld moral principles, which decreased the likelihood that students would act unethically. Graduate students who had moral leaders were more likely to report suspected misconduct and participate in conversations about moral dilemmas. According to the study, moral leadership has a direct impact on students' opinions and creates an ethical environment in research groups, both of which are critical in determining how students behave.

### **Conclusion:**

An important mediating component in the complex relationship between ethical leadership and employee conduct is the ethical environment. The way that an ethical environment affects this relationship depends on a number of factors, including employee characteristics, team dynamics, organisational culture, leadership style, and outside influences. To effectively use ethical leadership in promoting ethical conduct, organisations must have a strong, constant, and open ethical environment at all levels. Final Evaluation The findings of this research suggest that the relationship between ethical leadership and employee conduct is significantly mediated by an ethical culture. Establishing ethical cultures and supporting ethical leadership should be top priorities for organisations looking to inspire moral behaviour among their employees. By using this strategy, companies may create an environment that encourages moral behaviour, which will improve employee wellbeing and organisational performance. By offering fresh perspectives on the elements that encourage moral behaviour at work, this research adds to the body of knowledge already available on organisational behaviour and leadership.

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