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The Value of Ethical Leadership (Is) in Its Context

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1. Introduction

Ethical leadership has become an essential pillar in the discourse of business management and administrative sciences. As organisations increasingly recognise the value of ethical conduct, understanding the mechanisms through which ethical leadership can be cultivated and its effects maximised has gained prominence. In the current literature on organisational leadership, the complex, multidimensional, and cultural environment in which leaders operate is often neglected. And yet, the same environment sets important ramifications and generates ‘VUCA world’ challenges for how leadership is enacted and how leader performance is perceived and evaluated (cf. Fairhurst, 2009; Hartley, 2018; Liu, 2017).

Although the importance of organisational context holds for all kinds of leaders and leadership, cultural context—in terms of the commonly accepted moral values and norms, beliefs, and practices within society (Hofstede, 1980; cf. Dickson et al., 2003; Kirkman et al., 2017)—is particularly relevant for the study and practice of values-based ethical leadership in the political and public domains (Giacolone & Jurkiewicz, 2017; Lasthuizen et al., 2019), as well as in international (business) settings (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2014; Hopkins & Scott, 2016; Resick et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2022). For a deeper understanding of ethical leadership, it is of crucial importance to analyse how values, culture, and place shape ethical leadership, and vice versa, and whether cross-cultural concordances exist. Furthermore, understanding these cultural contexts could help improve the ways we interpret, define, and research ethical leadership (cf. Eisenbeiß, 2012).

Better understanding ethical leadership in context has the potential to shed light on some of the conundrums in current scholarship and practice. For example, studies highlighting the unintended and paradoxical effects of ethical leadership (Stouten et al., 2013)—that it enables rule-breaking behaviour for instance (Ahmed & Ishfaq Khan, 2024), or as Santiago-Torner et al.’s article in this Special Issue shows, how it can lead to the emotional exhaustion of employees—may point to important contextual influences that require further scrutiny (Detert et al., 2007). The fact that understandings and expectations of ethical leadership vary (Heres, 2014; Vivier, 2013) may also be explained by the plurality of cultural norms and values circulating in an organisation, sector, community, and/or wider society (Heres & Lasthuizen, 2012). This is discussed to some extent in research exploring how various societal values, cultural norms, and religious principles shape perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ leader behaviours and leadership roles (Chou, 2024; Eryanto et al., 2022; Keating et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2009; Resick et al., 2011).

Country-level and cross-cultural studies give insight into potential convergences and divergences in the meanings and importance attributed to different ethical leader-



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ship characteristics and practices (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2014), and how these manifest in organisational settings. A study in Indonesia highlights how corruption within the political–economic environment can undermine ethical leadership efforts to establish organisational integrity in the public sector, emphasising the importance of ethical leadership support on the political level and executive leadership autonomy within the organisation in overcoming these challenges (Van Eeden Jones & Lasthuizen, 2018). Cultural and religious traditions may offer exemplars of moral leadership for managers to emulate (Chou, 2024), and cultural norms also intersect with institutional arrangements to influence how managers perceive ethics (Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018). Martin et al. (2009) similarly highlight how cultural norms and value systems influence how ethical leadership is embedded within an organisational system, with variations especially apparent between more individualist contexts (such as the US) and more collectivist contexts (such as Germany). Ethical leadership practices are thus situated (and arguably socially constructed) within a social setting characterised by shared cultural beliefs around what is ‘right’ and ‘responsible’ behaviour, as well as within organisational systems and processes intended to enable and realise those beliefs.

Studies examining ethical leadership at the organisational level and through the lens of leader–follower relations provide further important groundwork in examining the alignment of ethical leadership to context (Heres, 2014; Van den Akker et al., 2009). Ethical role-modelling, for instance, has been found to better contribute to addressing issues such as harassment and bullying—as matters of organisational culture and interpersonal relations—than rule-enforcement (Lasthuizen, 2008). Also, Ukeni’s study in this Special Issue emphasises the significance of role modelling as a way to reduce work place harassment in African organisations.

The fact that certain leadership practices align better with certain organisational challenges underscores the importance of reading and responding to context, as well as distinguishing varied types of ethical challenges within and across organisational contexts. This seems especially pertinent given the evidence, including from the articles of Aslam et al. and Kapardis and Spandou published in this Special Issue, that ethical and unethical leadership impacts employee wellbeing and behaviours, and ultimately, organisational performance and sustainable development (e.g., Hassan et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2005). At the same time, various aspects of organisational context, including the existence of a code of ethics and systems of reward and sanctions, have been found to enable or constrain ethical leadership (Heres & Lasthuizen, 2012), yet more research is needed beyond corporate models, including at the entrepreneurial and social enterprise level (Pasricha et al., 2018). The studies by Mamabolo et al. and Argyropoulou and Lintzerakou included in this Special Issue respond to this call. In the political and public domain, perceptions of organisational politics also influence the relationship between ethical leadership and organisational performance (Abdi et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2021; Kacmar et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, how ethical leadership intersects with different governance models, political environments, and decision-making contexts remains under-researched (Heres et al., 2017). Van Ginkel-Kempenaar and Kerkhoff’s article in this Special Issue addresses this knowledge gap by researching the Dutch context and the impact that public perceptions of political leadership in the wake of integrity scandals may have on political system integrity.

Furthermore, there is a need to better understand how highly volatile contexts or changing contextual dynamics may influence ethical leadership (Qu et al., 2024; Allal-Chérif et al., 2021). According to Qu et al. (2024), uncertain contexts can exacerbate anxiety and in doing so, undermine the practice of ethical leadership. Such contexts are likely to

bring further complexity to the following question: what constitutes an effective ethical leader or ethical leadership practice?

In this regard, studies that explore ethical leadership being socially constructed bring attention to the dynamic interactions between practices and organisational systems (cf. [Carroll et al., 2008](#); [Uhl-Bien, 2006](#)). Scholars taking this approach understand leadership as inherently involving contextual values and practices within dynamic non-linear interactions, rather than a set of universally defined traits and behaviours ([Uhl-Bien, 2006](#)). Such approaches therefore steer away from attempting to universalise or predict ethical leadership in a decontextualised way, and rather seek to understand how ethical leadership is constructed and contested historically, culturally, and politically ([Eisenbeiß, 2012](#); [Knights & O’Leary, 2006](#); [Liu, 2017](#)). From this perspective, research on ethical leadership in context could seek to identify the appropriate skills and capacities for navigating complex and uncertain systems in moral value-driven ways, whether that involves the political savvy ([Hartley et al., 2019](#)) needed to navigate organisational politics or the skill of practising and cultivating systems thinking ([Naeem & Syed, 2024](#)).

2. Ethical Leadership in Its Cultural Context

The articles in this Special Issue on “Improving Ethical Leadership in Its Cultural Context: New Challenges and Prospects” contribute to more context-sensitive and context-oriented understandings of ethical leadership and relate to the overarching theme of this Special Issue—the exploration of ethical leadership and its multifaceted impacts across different contexts. Together, the studies deepen our understanding of how ethical leadership is interpreted, shaped, and practised in contextually diverse settings. What can we learn from these studies about improving ethical leadership in its context, and what are the challenges and prospects for the future? We discuss the seven articles that fall into three thematic categories, each exploring a unique setting of ethical leadership: (1) how context shapes ethical leadership; (2) how ethical leadership shapes wellbeing in organisational contexts, and (3) how ethical leadership shapes organisational contexts.

(1) How context shapes ethical leadership

In their article “Contextual Factors and their Impact on Ethical Leadership in Educational Settings”, Eleftheria Argyropoulou and Elissavet Elisabeth Lintzerakou introduce a renewed typology of factors affecting ethics in education, redefining leadership relationships within educational settings. They highlight the crucial role of contextual factors, including values, religion, and democracy, in shaping ethical leadership within educational environments. Emphasising a humanistic perspective, they argue that schools should cultivate values that guide ethical decision-making and foster leadership development within educational institutions. For their proposed typology, they emphasise the influence of cross-national differentiation, philosophical traditions, and socio-political contexts.

Similarly, in their article “SMEs’ Perspective on How Ethical Leadership Supports Community Engagement in Buyer–Supplier Power Asymmetric Relationships”, Anastacia Mamabolo, Kerrin Myres, and Gideon Pogrand argue that ethical leadership within entrepreneurial contexts enables South African small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to engage with their communities even amid power imbalances with larger corporations. They examine how ethical leadership practices support their SMEs’ communities, emphasising the resilience of ethical leadership beyond organisational boundaries.

The article “Individual Wrong or Systemic Failure? Moral Judgements About the Integrity of Politicians in the Wake of Dutch Integrity Scandals” by Willianne van Ginkel-Kempenaar and Toon Kerkhoff examines political ethical leadership within the context of recent Dutch integrity scandals. It explores whether and how public perceptions and moral judgments of political integrity are linked to systemic (dis)satisfaction with government

and politics, focusing on politicians' personal integrity, professional role integrity, and these factors' impact on political system integrity. The study underscores the importance of addressing systemic governance issues and varying moral judgments to improve political accountability and ethical leadership practices.

(2) How ethical leadership shapes wellbeing in organisational contexts

In her article "A Systematic Review of Ethical Leadership as a Panacea for Combating Sexual Harassment in Africa", Ijeoma Gloria Ukeni explores the potential of ethical leadership as a transformative solution to reduce workplace harassment in African organisations. Ukeni argues that ethical leadership can foster an inclusive, respectful organisational climate by addressing systemic challenges like gender imbalance, power misuse, and ineffective policy enforcement. Drawing on social learning theory, the study emphasises the importance of ethical role models in creating harassment-free and inclusive environments, tackling patriarchal organisational structures, and fostering employee wellbeing.

Expanding on this idea, another interesting study on employee wellbeing and organisational dynamics is by Carlos Santiago-Torner, Mònica González-Carrasco, and Rafael Alberto Miranda Ayala. In their paper "Ethical Leadership and Emotional Exhaustion: The Impact of Moral Intensity and Affective Commitment", they analyse how ethical leadership and affective commitment influence emotional exhaustion in the Colombian electric sector. For example, when a leader's ethical expectations are difficult to meet, affective commitment can lead to significant emotional ambiguity in followers, intensifying role stress and increasing the likelihood of emotional exhaustion. The authors highlight the importance of a principled workplace environment that promotes stability and self-regulation, ultimately enhancing overall employee wellbeing.

(3) How ethical leadership shapes organisational contexts

In their article "Navigating Toward a Gender-Balanced Culture in Leadership Roles in Higher Tertiary Institutions (HTIs)", Maria Krambia Kapardis and George Spanoudis investigate gender disparities in academic leadership. They critique HTIs in Cyprus for perpetuating gender inequities after establishing that the higher tertiary institutions are highly gendered environments, with systemic barriers limiting women's participation in leadership roles. Kapardis and Spandoudis underscore the need for ethical leadership in universities, highlighting how transparent governance and inclusive decision-making can improve institutional trust and ethical compliance. To address these challenges, they propose pathways towards more ethical and diverse leadership cultures, including more inclusive policies and mentoring to promote gender balance, complemented by and also enabling ethical leadership across the institution.

Building on the discussion of ethical leadership in organisational contexts, in their paper "The Mediating Role of Attitudes towards Performing Well between Ethical Leadership, Technological Innovation, and Innovative Performance", Hassan Danial Aslam, Sorinel Căpuşneanu, Tasawar Javed, Ileana-Sorina Rakos, and Cristian-Marian Barbu explore how ethical leadership and technological innovation drive performance in Malaysian SMEs. They highlight the importance of integrity, trust, and accountability while addressing systemic challenges to foster sustainable development. Their study demonstrates how attitudes toward performance mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and innovation, influencing business practices and broader organisational outcomes.

3. Insights and Future Research: New Challenges and Prospects

This Special Issue compiles a diverse set of studies that delve into how ethical leadership influences organisational behaviour and performance, fosters innovation, enhances employee wellbeing and morale, and addresses critical ethical issues such as political

integrity, gender inequality, and workplace harassment, while taking into account the varying contextual, cultural, and institutional factors that shape these outcomes. The studies included here demonstrate that tailored approaches to ethical leadership are necessary and that contextual sensitivity is essential for addressing localised challenges. Across diverse fields in different countries, the research emphasises the need for ethical leaders who can navigate complex environments. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on ethical leadership, reinforcing its significance as a dynamic and context-sensitive practice essential for addressing contemporary global challenges.

Of course, scope remains for the field to continue contextualising the evidence base of ethical leadership and for further conceptual development. More integrative approaches that explore intersections and interactions between ethical leaders (traits, behaviours, and skills) and organisational, cultural, and institutional contexts offer a fruitful path in this direction (e.g., [Naeem & Syed, 2024](#)). More cross-theorising and research with other leadership approaches, especially more relational, collaborative, and systemic approaches ([Ferry et al., 2024](#); [Ospina et al., 2020](#); [Painter-Morland, 2008](#)), have the potential to deepen our understanding of the complexities at play in these interactions. Examples in this direction go further than just considering how context influences ethical leadership, and vice versa, by considering these relations dynamically and as part of complex adaptive systems ([Comfort & Resodihardjo, 2013](#); [Uhl-Bien, 2006](#)). This seems pertinent given the current major societal challenges we face, which require systemic transformations to respond to crises that exceed what a single organisation or sector can tackle alone. Future research could further explore the ethical leadership capacities required to navigate such complex systems and global challenges. Importantly, “unethical leadership in its cultural context” and its role in activating new turbulences and uncertainties in our interconnected world can also no longer be overlooked and, unfortunately, is becoming an increasingly urgent area for further scientific research and understanding.

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