THE POWER OF CULTURE – THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN THE MINISTRY OF WATER AND IRRIGATION IN JORDAN

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of organizational culture on ethical leadership and employee performance within the Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Jordan. The research uses a qualitative methodology comprising semi-structured interviews and direct observation to examine how core cultural values such as integrity, accountability, and collaboration influence leadership behaviors and operational outcomes. Findings reveal that the Ministry's culture significantly promotes ethical decision-making and fosters employee motivation; yet hierarchical rigidity poses challenges to creativity and inclusivity. The

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study highlights the interplay between cultural values, ethical leadership, and performance, emphasizing the need for structural reforms to align operational practices with cultural ideals.

Keywords: Organizational culture, Ethical leadership, Employee performance, Public sector

Discipline: Cultural Antrophology

Absztrakt

A KULTÚRA EREJE – A SZERVEZETI KULTÚRA HATÁSA AZ ETIKUS VEZETÉSRE ÉS A MUNKAVÁLLALÓI TELJESÍTMÉNYRE JORDÁNIA VÍZÜGYI ÉS ÖNTÖZÉSI MINISZTÉRIU-MÁBAN

Ez a tanulmány a szervezeti kultúra hatását vizsgálja az etikus vezetésre és a munkavállalói teljesítményre Jordánia Vízügyi és Öntözési Minisztériumában. A kutatás kvalitatív módszertant alkalmaz, amely félig strukturált interjúkból és közvetlen megfigyelésekből áll, hogy feltárja, hogyan befolyásolják az alapvető kulturális értékek – például az integritás, az elszámoltathatóság és az együttműködés – a vezetői magatartást és a működési eredményeket. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a minisztérium kultúrája jelentősen elősegíti az etikus döntéshozatalt és növeli a munkavállalók motivációját. Ugyanakkor a hierarchikus merevség kihívásokat jelent a kreativitás és az inkluzivitás szempontjából. A tanulmány rávilágít a kulturális értékek, az etikus vezetés és a teljesítmény közötti kölcsönhatásra, hangsúlyozva a strukturális reformok szükségességét annak érdekében, hogy a működési gyakorlatok összhangba kerüljenek a kulturális ideálokkal.

Kulcsszavak: szervezeti kultúra, etikus vezetés, munkavállalói teljesítmény, közszféra

Discipline: Cultural Antrophology

Ethical leadership in public sector institutions is critical for fostering a culture of ethics, transparency, and accountability. Leaders in these institutions are entrusted with public resources and services, making their ethical responsibility two-fold: they must manage resources effectively while maintaining the public's trust through fair and transparent actions. Ethical leadership has been shown to shape not only individual employee behavior but also the overall ethical climate of an organization. For example, Brown and Treviño (2006) explain that ethical leaders model integrity and fairness, which helps create a work environment where employees feel empowered to uphold these values, even when facing ethical dilemmas. Such an environment is particularly valuable in public sector settings, where the stakes involve direct impacts on citizens' well-being (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Resick et al., 2006).

The Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Jordan plays a pivotal role in managing the country's water resources—a critical mission given Jordan's chronic water scarcity. Ranked as one of the world's most water-poor nations, Jordan faces extreme pressures on its water supplies for domestic, agricultural, and industrial needs, which are further compounded by population growth, climate change, and limited natural resources (UNICEF, 2021). The Ministry is tasked with overseeing water conservation efforts, implementing policies for equitable water distribution, and managing resources in a way that balances immediate needs with long-term sustain-

ability. Given the sensitivity of this role and the public reliance on water services, the Ministry must cultivate a culture that promotes ethical leadership at every level, ensuring that employees not only comply with guidelines but are motivated by a genuine sense of responsibility to the public they serve (Jordan Ministry of Water and Irrigation, 2020).

Organizational culture is a powerful driver of ethical leadership, and in turn, ethical leadership significantly impacts employee performance. An effective ethical culture within the Ministry can guide employees in ethical decision-making, enhance their commitment to public service, and boost overall job satisfaction and effectiveness. In contrast, a culture that fails to reinforce ethical standards may lead to lower morale, inconsistencies in service delivery, and diminished public trust. Thus, understanding the Ministry's culture – and its influence on ethical leadership and employee performance – offers valuable insights into how public sector institutions can improve both their internal operations and their public impact (Grojean et al., 2004).

Furthermore, employee performance is closely linked to their perceptions of organizational justice and support. When employees feel that their organization upholds ethical standards, they are more likely to report high levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and productivity. For example, research by Schminke et al. (2005) indicates that an organization's commitment to ethical practices can positively impact employee morale, reducing turnover and enhancing the quality of work. In the context of the Ministry, a strong culture that promotes ethical leadership could empower employees to voice concerns, innovate in problem-solving, and remain motivated in their roles, knowing that their efforts contribute to a mission of public significance (Schminke et al., 2005).

With this in mind, the study examines how organizational culture impacts ethical leadership directly and how it impact employee performance in a strategic public service institution, the Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Jordan. The study aims to go beyond specific organizational contexts to analyze how public sector organizations can use structural constraints and opportunities embedded in organizational culture to effectively serve their goals while building credible and valid public trust concerning the organization's performance.

The relationship between organizational culture and ethical leadership in the light of previous research

The interplay between organizational culture and ethical leadership has garnered significant attention in organizational studies due to its profound impact on employee behavior, organizational performance, and societal perceptions (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Schein, 2010). Ethical leadership, characterized by fairness, integrity, and accountability, plays a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing the values and norms of an organization's culture (Yukl et al., 2013). Similarly, a strong ethical culture provides a conducive environment for ethical leadership to thrive, fostering trust and shared values among employees (Kaptein, 2011). Previous research highlights the bidirectional relationship between these constructs, where ethical leadership acts as a catalyst for cultivating an ethical organizational culture, while the culture itself serves as a foundation for supporting and sustaining ethical leadership practices (Grojean et al., 2004). Understanding this dynamic is essential for addressing contemporary challenges in organizational ethics and achieving sustainable success. Scholars have identified unique challenges faced by ethical leaders in the public sector, such as navigating bureaucratic constraints, managing competing stakeholder interests, and addressing ethical dilemmas in resource allocation (Lawton & Páez, 2015).

The Impact of Organizational Culture on Ethical Leadership

Organizational culture represents the shared values, beliefs, and norms that guide behavior within an organization (Schein, 2010). A strong ethical culture is characterized by practices and policies that promote integrity, accountability, and ethical decision-making. According to Kaptein (2011), such a culture reduces the likelihood of unethical behavior and fosters a sense of moral responsibility among employees. Research has shown that an ethical culture serves as a framework that supports ethical leadership by embedding ethics into the organization's structural and social systems (Grojean et al., 2004).

In the context of public sector organizations, culture plays a vital role in influencing how leaders and employees respond to ethical dilemmas. Grojean et al. (2004) emphasize that ethical leadership is closely tied to organizational culture, as the latter establishes the norms and expectations for ethical conduct. A culture that prioritizes transparency, accountability, and integrity provides a fertile ground for ethical leadership to flourish.

In hierarchical organizations, like many government ministries, culture often reflects formal structures and processes. While this can ensure consistency and adherence to regulations, it may also create barriers to open communication and innovation (Hood, 2001).

The Importance of Ethical Leadership in Public Sectors

Ethical leaders are defined as individuals who demonstrate normatively appropriate conduct through their actions and promote such conduct among their followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Their role is particularly critical in the public sector, where decisions often have far-reaching implications for societal well-being. Research highlights that ethical leadership fosters trust, reduces workplace misconduct, and promotes fairness, contributing to both individual and organizational success (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). In the public sector, ethical leadership also mitigates corruption risks and reinforces good governance principles (Kolthoff et al., 2010).

In public sector settings, the influence of ethical leadership extends beyond compliance with rules and regulations. Leaders in this domain face unique challenges, such as balancing competing stakeholder needs, managing limited resources, and maintaining public trust. Ethical leadership has been linked to increased employee engagement, reduced unethical behaviors, and enhanced organizational citizenship behaviors (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). By fostering an ethical climate, leaders can ensure that employees uphold the organization's values, leading to better performance and alignment with institutional goals.

The Impact of Ethical Leadership on Employee Performance

The relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance has been widely studied, with evidence showing a positive correlation between the two. Ethical leadership fosters an environment where employees feel valued, motivated, and committed to their work, which in turn enhances their performance. Walumbwa et al. (2011) found that ethical leadership promotes psychological safety and trust, enabling employees to take initiative without fear of negative repercussions. In public sector institutions, this dynamic is particularly important, as employees' actions directly impact the quality and equity of services provided to the public.

Moreover, ethical leadership influences employee attitudes and behaviors through its impact on perceived organizational support and justice. Employees who perceive their leaders as ethical are more likely to report higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and engagement (see: Mayer et al., 2012). These outcomes are critical for

public sector institutions, where high employee performance is necessary to address complex societal challenges effectively.

Challenges to Ethical Leadership
in Public Sector Organizations

Implementing ethical leadership in public sector institutions faces significant challenges despite its benefits. Bureaucratic structures, hierarchical decision-making processes, and resource constraints can hinder leaders' ability to act ethically or promote ethical behavior among employees. Hood (2001) highlights that bureaucratic cultures often prioritize compliance and risk aversion over innovation and ethical considerations, limiting leaders' flexibility in addressing complex ethical dilemmas.

In addition, cultural factors specific to a region or organization can shape the practice of ethical leadership. For instance, in Jordan, societal norms emphasizing respect for authority and seniority may reinforce hierarchical decision-making while discouraging open dialogue and bottom-up communication (Hofstede, 1984). Moreover, limited resources and political pressures can further complicate ethical decision-making, as leaders must balance competing demands while maintaining transparency and fairness (Kolthoff et al., 2010).

Methodological Background
of Organizational Culture
and Ethical Leadership Research

In order to investigate the impact of organizational culture on ethical leadership and, through this, on employee performance, it is appropriate to use qualitative research tools. According to Cooper and Schindler (2014), applying qualitative methodologies provides in-depth details on the participants' perspectives of the target topic and permits investigation into the significance of the participants' experience.

The methodology of this study involved interviews with relevant stakeholders including leaders, managers, and employees to gather insights into the ministry's practices and cultural dynamics. The criteria for selecting the research organization included the need to sample an organization where traditional and national values play a significant role in the work, but at the same time, the organizational framework should not be too rigid. This is the reason a Jordanian public organization that is important to the governance system was selected as the data collection organization.

The Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Jordan plays a vital role in managing the country's water resources, a critical task of Jordan's status as one of the most water-scarce nations globally (Al-Ansari, 2013). The ministry's culture is deeply influenced by the societal values of Jordan, including collectivism, respect for authority, and an ethical emphasis rooted in Islamic principles (see: Alshawabkeh, 2024). These cultural traits shape how leadership is perceived and enacted within the organization, making it a compelling case for examining the interplay between culture, ethical leadership, and employee performance.

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews, designed to capture participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the Ministry's culture, ethical leadership, and its impact on employee performance. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing for in-depth exploration of key themes while providing participants the freedom to elaborate on their responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The study employed a semi-structured interview guide that systematically addressed three core variables: cultural dimensions, ethical leadership, and employee performance. Cultural dimensions were explored through organizational norms, ethical climate, and the influence of collectivism and hierarchical structures (Hofstede, 2001). Ethical leadership was measured by assessing behavioral

integrity, fairness, transparency, and the role-modeling of ethical conduct (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Employee performance was examined through task effectiveness, engagement, motivation, and adaptability.

To ensure scientific rigor and validity, the study employed purposive sampling with clearly defined criteria for participant selection. Interviewees were required to have at least five years of experience at the Ministry of Water and Irrigation to ensure familiarity with its culture and operations. Both managers and employees were included to capture diverse perspectives on the relationship between leadership practices and employee performance across organizational levels.

Participants were selected based on their ability to articulate the influence of organizational culture on leadership and performance, and their willingness to engage in semi-structured interviews. The final sample comprised 15 participants, including eight managers and seven employees from various departments such as water policy, operations, resource planning, and project implementation, ensuring a balanced and comprehensive representation of the ministry's organizational dynamics.

The interviews were conducted in the Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Jordan between September and December 2024 in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and encourage candid responses. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Follow-up questions were asked as needed to probe deeper into participants' responses and clarify key points. Every interview was taped and then transcribed for analysis and the database was stored and processed following the GDPR rules.

The audio recordings of the interviews were translated into English and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher read through the transcripts and observation notes multiple times to gain an overall understanding of the data. Then, The text segments were coded based on recurring themes, ideas, or keywords (e.g., "ethical decision-making," "employee empowerment," "leadership styles"). Finally, Codes were grouped into broader themes aligned with the research objectives, such as "impact of culture on ethical behavior"

Research Results

Organizational Culture Description. The organizationnal culture of the Ministry of Water and Irrigation is integral to its operations, reflecting a dual structure of rigidity and flexibility. The hierarchical framework ensures stability and accountability, essential for managing critical water resources in Jordan's resource-scarce context.

Explicit rules, such as adherence to procedural compliance, and implicit norms, including deference to authority figures reinforce this culture. As one participant noted, *"Our structure ensures that every decision is carefully reviewed and aligns with our mission"* (Interview 1). While this rigidity promotes transparency and trust, it also limits employee creativity and adaptability, as described by another participant: *"While the structure helps us know what's expected, it sometimes feels like there's little room for creativity."* (Interview 5).

Ethical leadership emerges as a key factor in reconciling these tensions. Leaders who model transparency and accountability create an environment where innovation can thrive within a structured framework. For example, during observed meetings, some leaders actively solicited employee input, fostering collaboration while maintaining clear decision-making protocols. This duality aligns with Schein's (2010) assertion that culture can constrain and enable behavior simultaneously. The analysis reveals that ethical leadership not only upholds the integrity of rigid systems but also introduces mechanisms for flexibility, such as

participative decision-making and empowerment. This balance is critical for addressing the Ministry's mission while adapting to dynamic challenges, highlighting the transformative potential of ethical leadership in shaping an effective organizational culture.

Core Values and Behaviors

The interplay between values, organizational culture, ethics, and performance is a complex and dynamic relationship that profoundly influences the functioning of institutions. Values act as the foundational principles guiding individual and collective behavior, organizational culture provides the framework within which these values are expressed, ethics ensures that these values are operationalized in decision-making and actions, and performance reflects the tangible outcomes of this alignment. Analyzing this interrelationship highlights both the synergies and tensions that arise in an organizational context. Questions such as *"What values and behaviors are emphasized most strongly in the Ministry?"* were used to probe participants' views on how core values like transparency, accountability, and fairness are practiced and perceived across the hierarchy.

In the case of the Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Jordan, core values such as transparency, accountability, and collaboration emerge as essential to ethical leadership. These values are not only explicitly promoted by leadership but also form the basis for fostering trust and integrity within the organization. Transparency, for example, is viewed as a means of building accountability and ensuring public trust, especially in managing Jordan's scarce water resources. One senior manager stated, *"Our culture is built around providing clear and accurate information because the public deserves to know how we're managing this scarce resource"* (Interview No. 7). However, some participants noted inconsistencies in the application of these values, particularly regarding accountability at senior levels. A mid-level manager remarked, *"We are constantly reminded of the importance of accountability, but sometimes I feel it's more heavily enforced at the lower levels."* (Interview No. 6).

The emphasis on accountability reflects the Ministry's mission to ensure ethical and transparent water management. However, discrepancies in value application suggest a need for stronger alignment between stated values and practice, consistent with findings by Grojean et al. (2004) on organizational climate and leadership.

Impact on Daily Work Practices

The impact of organizational culture on daily work practices is crucial in understanding how employees interact with their environment, make decisions, and achieve performance goals. Daily work practices are the tangible manifestations of the organization's values, norms, and leadership styles, influencing efficiency, innovation, and employee satisfaction.

Questions such as *"How do you think the Ministry's culture impacts daily work practices?"* are critical for examining the interplay between organizational culture, employee behavior, and performance outcomes.

Daily work practices reflect how well employees internalize the organization's mission and values. A culture emphasizing ethical leadership ensures employees prioritize integrity, fairness, and accountability in their daily tasks, an employee stated, *"The focus on transparency helps us to keep each other accountable"* (Interview No. 10). Clear communication of expectations, decisions, and goals fosters trust and ensures that everyone understands their role in achieving organizational objectives. This transparency also creates an environment where employees feel more confident raising concerns or providing constructive feedback, as they know their voices will be heard and valued. This alignment enhances coherence across teams

and strengthens the organization's ability to meet strategic objectives (Schein, 2010).

At the same time, the hierarchical structure of the organization can sometimes create bottlenecks, as decisions require approval from multiple layers of management *"Sometimes, even a small decision requires approval from multiple levels, which slows everything down."* (Interview No.3). However, the shared values of integrity and accountability help mitigate these challenges by ensuring that employees remain committed to high ethical standards in their work.

The culture's influence on daily work practices significantly affects employee empowerment. When employees feel valued and their contributions acknowledged, they are more likely to take ownership of their roles Employees expressed pride in contributing to the Ministry's mission of addressing water scarcity in Jordan *"The sense of public responsibility drives us to work with a purpose"* (Interview No.12) . Conversely, cultures that overly emphasize control and compliance may reduce engagement, decreasing morale and performance (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Empowerment in daily practices encourages proactive problem-solving and continuous improvement.

The Ministry's cultural diversity also plays an essential role in shaping daily practices. With employees from various cultural backgrounds, there are often different approaches to communication, teamwork, and problem-solving *"It's bringing varied perspectives and fostering creativity"* (Interview No. 5). While this diversity can sometimes result in misunderstandings, it also enriches collaboration by bringing in varied perspectives. Leaders who emphasize cultural sensitivity and inclusivity are particularly effective in fostering a supportive and productive environment (Northouse, 2018).

Discussion of the results

The findings of this study highlight how the organizational culture of the Ministry of Water and Irrigation significantly shapes ethical leadership and employee performance. Core values such as integrity, accountability, and collaboration were identified as drivers of ethical decision-making and leadership behaviors. These cultural elements foster trust, transparency, and a sense of shared purpose among employees, reinforcing their commitment to organizational goals. However, inconsistencies in the application of these values across hierarchical levels, particularly in translating senior leaders' ethics into operational practices, were observed. These findings align with Hofstede's (2001) power distance theory, which suggests that rigid hierarchies can inhibit the effective diffusion of cultural values throughout an organization.

Despite these cultural strengths, the Ministry's hierarchical structure poses challenges, particularly in fostering creativity and inclusivity. Bureaucratic rigidity was noted as a barrier to bottom-up innovation and decision-making, limiting opportunities for employees to contribute to problem-solving and strategic initiatives. These observations align with public sector research that critiques hierarchical systems for stifling organizational agility and adaptability (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Denison, 1990). Addressing these challenges requires structural reforms, such as empowering middle managers, encouraging employee feedback, and decentralizing decision-making. By aligning cultural values with operational practices, the Ministry can enhance its capacity to lead ethically, motivate employees, and achieve its mission of sustainable water management in Jordan's resource-constrained context.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the organizational culture of the Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Jordan plays a pivotal role in shaping ethical leadership and influencing employee performance. By embedding values such as integrity,

accountability, and collaboration into its culture, the Ministry fosters an environment where ethical decision-making and transparent leadership can thrive. These cultural strengths encourage employee motivation, engagement, and alignment with organizational goals. However, structural and procedural challenges, including the rigidity of the hierarchical system, hinder the full realization of these benefits, particularly in promoting creativity and inclusivity.

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