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A. Michael Conrad  
*Kimep University*

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# ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN KAZAKHSTAN: An Exploratory Study

*This study measured ethical leadership perceptions utilizing a new corporate culture scale in a Central Asian country. Ethical leadership ratings from 103 Kazakhstani employees were used to determine how they perceived their managers in terms of being moral people and moral managers. Results indicate that managers are perceived as relatively weaker moral managers as compared to moral persons. Holding employees accountable for their actions is the lowest rated aspect of the moral manager. Definitions of moral persons and moral managers in Kazakhstan vary somewhat from an American culture-oriented ethical leadership model. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.*



A. MICHAEL CONRAD  
KIMEP UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT  
ALMATY, KAZAKHSTAN

## Introduction

Recent research has demonstrated the benefits of ethical leadership for both organizations and managers. For example, ethical leadership has positive effects on job satisfaction and absenteeism (Tanner, Brugger, van Schie, & Lebherz, 2010). Ethical leadership is positively related to an organization's ethical climate which leads to less employee misconduct (Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010). Also, core job characteristics (task significance, autonomy), job effort, and organizational citizenship behavior were found to be positively related to ethical leadership (Piccolo, Greenbaum, Den Hartog, & Folger, 2010). Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, and Kuenzi (2012) found that less unit unethical behavior and less relationship conflict are associated with ethical leadership. Furthermore, higher ethical leadership ratings are associated with organizational attractiveness – intentions to pursue employment with an organization (Strobel, Tumasjan, & Welp, 2010). Finally, ethical leadership is associated with manager promotability to senior leadership positions (Rubin, Dierdorff, & Brown, 2010). Thus, ethical leadership is one of the foundations of effective management and organization success in any country, but this is especially true in countries such as Kazakhstan that have higher levels of corruption. The very survival of the firm could depend on managers' ethical leadership (or lack of) in countries where certain unethical behaviors (e.g., cheating) are the societal norm.

## Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and

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decision making” (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). As depicted in Figure 1, this definition implies that a manager should be a *moral person* (e.g., honest, fair) and a *moral manager* – regularly conveying the ethics message to employees via deeds and words (Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). A critical element of being a

Figure 1



Source: Treviño, L.K., Hartman, L.P. & Brown, M. 2000. Moral person and moral manager: How executives develop a reputation for ethical leadership. *California Management Review*, 42(4), p.131.

moral manager is holding people accountable for their actions and not “looking the other way” when employees do wrong. Also essential to moral management is acting as a role model – behaving ethically so that employees learn by example. Kaptein (2011) found that there was less unethical employee behavior when management and supervisors were perceived to be ethical role models. However, if a country’s (or organization’s) culture tolerates – or even rewards – ethical anti-mentors, people will learn that the way to “get ahead” is to behave unethically:

*Employees certainly listen to what their leaders say, and they watch their leaders and colleagues even more carefully. Employees feel psychologically emboldened or pressured to emulate the bad behavior they see in leaders and others who “get away with it” (Fryer, 2007, p. 54).*

Although there are some common ethical leadership themes across cultures (e.g., integrity), there are significant differences between countries in what ethical leadership means to people. For example, “deception and dishonesty” were more frequently associated with unethical leadership by American respondents than by

Chinese respondents, while “consideration and respect” were more frequently associated with ethical leadership by Chinese respondents than by Irish respondents (Resick et al., 2011). Thus, researchers should be careful about generalizing about ethical leadership, even among countries that share part of a common history – such as Eastern Europe. For example, Kazakhstan, a Central Asian country, is included in the same culture cluster as Poland and Albania in the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior (GLOBE) Research Program (House et al., 1999) – a cultural classification which was accepted unquestioned in a cross-cultural study of ethical leadership (Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006). Although Kazakhstan is a post-Soviet country, it has its own unique cultural features (e.g., tribal heritage) which would likely affect perceptions of ethical leadership.

To the best of the author’s knowledge, this study is the first to measure ethical leadership attitudes in Kazakhstan. Since little is still known about what ethical leadership means to people in different countries, this investigation contributes to the literature by giving initial insight into the Kazakhstani mentality concerning ethical leadership in the workplace. Furthermore, the applicability of an American culture-oriented model of ethical leadership (moral person and moral manager) to Kazakhstan is also explored in this study.

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

The sample was composed of 103 full-time employees from two international companies – 67 from a bank and 36 from a fast-moving-consumer-goods company (FMCG). The sample was 68% (n = 70) female and 32% (n = 33) male. Data was sought from a total of 91 bank employees (74% response rate) and from 52 FMCG employees (69% response rate). An employee was defined as a person who did not have any subordinates.

### ***Procedure***

In both the bank and the FMCG, the human resource director first sent an e-mail to all employees (and their managers) introducing the study and requesting voluntary employee participation in an ethical leadership survey. Each employee then received an envelope containing the anonymous survey and was asked to return it during a 10-day time period to the human resources department. The two-questionnaire survey was coded so that responses from the same person could be analyzed.

### ***Measures***

All items were measured on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Employees responded to the 10-item Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) (Brown et al., 2005), which was utilized because most items measure aspects of the moral person and moral manager. Furthermore, the ELS has been successfully used in different foreign countries (Kalshoven & Boon, 2012; Shin, 2012; Strobel, Tumasjan, & Welpe, 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2011). Employees also responded to the Corporate Culture Ethical Leadership Scale (CCELS), a 20-item instrument developed by the author based on a previous qualitative study of perceived ethical leadership (Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003). The CCELS was developed for three

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reasons. First, the scale measures an organization’s ethical leadership “corporate culture” because the questions refer to managers “in general” and not to an employee’s direct boss. Second, the CCELS questions are more explicit and detailed than the ELS items – to counter the criticism that many of the ELS items are abstract and expect respondents to be relatively competent about what characterizes ethical leadership (Tanner et al., 2010). Third, the CCELS includes a question which taps one of the most common unethical leadership themes across cultures: the misuse of power (Resick et al., 2011) which partially addresses the ELS limitation of not including some relevant aspects of ethical leadership (Yukl, Mahsud, Hassan, & Prussia, 2011). Employees responded to both the ELS and CCELS in the Russian language. Both questionnaires were back-translated to ensure accuracy of translation.

## Results

Table 1 shows the CCELS items in the order of their average scores. Note that the ratings are the lowest for holding people accountable – rewarding ethical behavior and punishing unethical behavior. Role modeling is also among the lowest rated items. Alternatively, items such as personal morality, trustworthiness, and concern for people are among the highest rated items.

**Table 1: Corporate Culture Ethical Leadership Scale**

ITEM	MOST SUPERVISORS AND MANAGERS IN THIS ORGANIZATION:	MEAN
1	Are concerned about profit and the company’s financial success.	4.30
2	Have good personal moral behavior — they never behave in shameful ways at work and off-the-job.	4.15
3	Are concerned about the long-term, not just the short-term.	4.13
4	Can be trusted — they have integrity and can be relied upon to fulfill their responsibilities.	3.93
5	Promote or set ethical standards and expectations about appropriate and inappropriate employee conduct at work.	3.87
6	Treat all of their employees well.	3.87
7	Care about and respect all of their employees.	3.86
8	Are honest — they tell the truth and do not act in corrupt ways.	3.83
9	Are concerned about <i>how</i> business goals are achieved, not just the end results.	3.81
10	“Do the right thing” — they try to be fair when making decisions.	3.80
11	Are open communicators and good listeners — they say what they think and people feel comfortable talking with them (even about “bad news”).	3.79
12	Use their power wisely — they use power to help most people and not just to benefit themselves and/or their “close people.”	3.72
13	Are concerned about relevant stakeholders — including customers, suppliers, the community, etc.	3.70

14	Do what they say they will do — their actions match their words.	3.70
15	Are concerned about how their decisions/actions will be judged by others (inside and outside the organization).	3.68
16	Create values (e.g., mutual trust) and manage by these values on a regular basis.	3.61
17	Are “role models” for other people — they serve as good examples of how leaders should act.	3.58
18	Are concerned about the “greater good” (especially about the organization and society).	3.55
19	Reprimand or punish unethical employee behavior.	3.39
20	Recognize or reward ethical employee behavior.	3.37

As shown in Table 2, similar ratings were found with the ELS — punishing unethical behavior, role modeling, and communicating about ethics and values are the three lowest rated items while personal morality, trustworthiness, and “do the right thing” are the top rated items.

**Table 2: Ethical Leadership Scale**

ITEM	MY DIRECT SUPERVISOR/MANAGER:	MEAN
1	Conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner.	4.11
2	Can be trusted.	3.97
3	Asks “what is the right thing to do?” when making decisions.	3.95
4	Listens to what employees have to say.	3.94
5	Has the best interest of employees in mind.	3.84
6	Defines success not just by results but also the way that they are obtained.	3.81
7	Makes fair and balanced decisions.	3.80
8	Discusses business ethics or values with employees.	3.76
9	Sets an example of how to do the things the right way in terms of ethics.	3.75
10	Disciplines employees who violate ethical standards.	3.45

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables are shown in Table 3. The CCELS correlated with the ELS, but only at a moderate level. The alpha coefficients for all the scales are acceptable except for the CCELS moral manager dimension. In order to investigate the extent to which managers in general (CCELS) and direct supervisors and managers (ELS) were perceived as moral persons and moral managers, aggregate means of specific CCELS items and ELS items, based on exploratory factor analyses, were calculated.



**Table 3: Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliabilities**

VARIABLE	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CCELS	3.78	0.51	(.93)					
2. ELS	3.84	0.65	.54**	(.89)				
3. CCELS MP	3.85	0.60	.93**	.43**	(.87)			
4. CCELS MM	3.50	0.64	.58**	.39**	.43**	(.54)		
5. ELS MP	3.86	0.80	.45**	.92**	.38**	.26**	(.87)	
6. ELS MM	3.82	0.65	.50**	.80**	.37**	.49**	.52**	(.72)

Note: MP (moral person) and MM (moral manager) are aggregate means. Cronbach's alphas are reported on the diagonal in parentheses.

\*\*p<.01

An exploratory factor analysis of the eleven CCELS items utilized to measure the moral person and the moral manager is displayed in Table 4. The first factor contains items which pertain mostly to the moral person dimension (as conceptualized by Treviño et al., 2000), except for the role modeling item. The second factor, which still may be labeled moral manager, includes the action-oriented items of punishing unethical behavior and managing with values. Items with loadings below .6 were deleted. An exploratory factor analysis of the ELS items used to measure the moral person and moral manager also found two dimensions, but “do the right thing” and personal morality were seen as part of being a moral manager, while role modeling again was seen as part of being a moral person. This finding is not entirely consistent with the ELS moral manager scale proposed by Mayer et al. (2012), which includes the following items: role modeling, “do the right thing,” punishing unethical behavior, communicating about ethics and values, and defining success by results and the way they are obtained.

**Table 4: Exploratory Factor Analysis (CCELS)**

		COMPONENT	
		Moral Person	Moral Manager
Item 2	Good Moral Behavior	<b>.603</b>	.093
Item 4	Can Be Trusted	<b>.787</b>	.210
Item 6	Treat Employees Well	<b>.690</b>	.299
Item 8	Honest	<b>.767</b>	.130
Item 10	“Do The Right Thing”	<b>.721</b>	.170
Item 11	Communicator and Listener	<b>.742</b>	.162
Item 17	Role Model	<b>.752</b>	.231
Item 16	Create/Manage Values	.368	<b>.670</b>
Item 19	Punish Unethical Behavior	-.061	<b>.871</b>
Item 18	“Greater Good” Concern	.569	.465
Item 20	Reward Ethical Behavior	.439	.531
<b>EIGEN VALUE</b>		<b>5.18</b>	<b>1.14</b>
<b>% OF VARIANCE</b>		<b>47.04</b>	<b>10.35</b>

Note: Factor loadings greater than .6 are in bold face.

A paired-comparison *t*-test indicated that the aggregate means of the CCELS 7-item moral person dimension and the 2-item moral manager dimension were significantly different,  $t(102) = 5.34, p < .001$ . A paired comparison *t*-test between the aggregate means of the ELS five-item moral person dimension (trustworthiness, concern for people, being open, objective/fair, and role modeling) and the four-item moral manager dimension (“do the right thing”), personal morality, punishing unethical behavior, and communicating about ethics/values) was not significant.

## Discussion

The results provide some evidence that Kazakhstani managers are perceived as relatively weaker moral managers when compared to moral persons. From a Kazakhstani perspective, being a moral manager may be a role which is somewhat discouraged because managers might feel quite uncomfortable about rewarding people for whistle-blowing and talking about ethics with others (who are likely to be very cynical about such discussions in a work culture where there is generally low trust). According to Brown (personal communication, December 9, 2011), the finding that managers are seen as weaker moral managers would not be unexpected for a variety of reasons (e.g., a boss believes that moral management is not necessary because his employees are already good people). Based on the ethical leadership matrix developed by Treviño and Brown (2004), Kazakhstani managers tend to be “ethically silent leaders” who are more concerned about financial results than holding people accountable for their (un)ethical behavior. The lower ratings given to disciplining employees for unethical behavior and rewarding employees for ethical behavior suggests that Kazakhstani managers are not very able and/or willing to hold employees accountable for their behavior, despite the presence of a code of conduct and compliance training in both the bank and the FMCG.

When viewed in terms of the “global moral compass” for business leaders (Thompson, 2010), managers in Kazakhstan tend to be moral persons in the sense that they personally follow their company’s *moral code* of conduct, but they need to improve their *moral performance* when it comes to encouraging others to be ethical. “Effective moral performance involves preparing for defining moments by developing an intentional strategy for recognizing and managing them when they occur (Thompson, 2010, p. 27). In short, Kazakhstani managers need to be much more proactive in promoting ethics in the workplace.

Also, how moral persons and moral managers are defined may vary with the culture of a country. The results indicate that setting a good example for others (role model) is seen as part of being a moral person – and not integral to being a moral manager – in Kazakhstan. With respect to the Kazakhstani work culture, the organizational context may play a key role in determining who is seen as a role model. Although the manager is traditionally seen as the potential role model for employees, peers may also be influential role models for individuals’ (un)ethical behavior (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). Anecdotal evidence from Kazakhstani workplaces suggest that peers strongly affect ethics-related behavior, such as avoidance of “whistle-blowing” and the tactical use



of information (to benefit certain “close people”). Furthermore, managerial role models must be credible in terms of their moral behavior (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Again, anecdotal evidence suggests that Kazakhstani managers often do not “walk the talk” – which may cause employees to be cynical about their managers’ ethical attitudes and behavior.

Results of ethical leadership studies in other countries have also shown that the composition of moral persons and moral managers is different. A study in China found that the decision-making aspects of ethical leadership were not viewed as a component of a moral person (Zheng, Zhu, Yu, Zhang X., & Zhang L., 2011). Zheng et al. found that ethical decision-making style is actually separate from the moral person and the moral manager. A Spanish study indicated that rewarding ethical behavior and sanctioning unethical behavior were not seen as part of being a moral manager (Ruiz, P., Ruiz, C. & Martínez, 2011). Thus, the American culture-oriented ethical leadership model conceptualized by Treviño et al. (2000) may need to be adapted to more accurately describe ethical leadership in different countries.

### **Future Research**

More ethical leadership research needs to be done in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries to refine the CCELS, to better understand the meaning of the moral person and moral manager, and to investigate the consequences of ethical leadership (or lack of) for organizations. Research should measure ethical leadership in various countries on different continents to look at the similarities and differences between how the moral person and the moral manager are defined. Research should also focus on whether it is more relevant to measure ethical leadership for managers in general (CCELS) or for direct supervisors – which will ultimately be determined by the impact of the ethical leadership source on employee attitudes, behavior, and performance. Finally, an effort needs to be made to evaluate the validity of the growing number of ethical leadership questionnaires which have been developed over the past few years in different countries.

### **Practical Implications**

Organizations should conduct on-going training for managers in the primary elements of moral management – ethical role modeling, holding employees accountable for (un)ethical behavior, and communicating with employees about ethics. Also, companies should hold managers themselves accountable for their moral management behavior in the performance management system.

But, managers in some countries might find it more difficult to hold employees accountable for their (un)ethical behavior. For example, in those cultures where business and personal relationships are closely intertwined, a manager may be very reluctant to reprimand his friend for an ethical mistake. In contrast, American managers, who usually compartmentalize their feelings, would probably not hesitate to discipline a long-term employee for ethical misconduct. That’s why American and other Western expatriate executives might have to adjust their expectations about promoting ethical leadership in countries like Kazakhstan.

The importance of ethical role modeling cannot be underestimated in more corrupt countries, especially at the higher levels of management. Because ethical leadership has been shown to cascade down the organization (Mayer et al., 2009), it is imperative that upper-level executives set a good example for managers and employees. Executives will “stand out” even more as ethical role models if their level of cognitive moral development (CMD) is higher than the CMD of subordinates (Jordan, Brown, Treviño, & Finkelstein, 2011). This role modeling by moral executives is needed to counteract the common belief among employees (in more corrupt countries) that executives will try to enrich themselves at every opportunity. Unless executives set good examples for others, moral management training will not be accepted by cynical managers and supervisors.

Why is it necessary to have moral managers (as well as moral persons)? Until moral management becomes an integral part of the organization’s culture, a code of ethics will remain mostly a “foreign” document – especially for employees of international companies in more corrupt countries. Employees will not internalize the meaning of the code of ethics and will likely see it as a list of ethical rules that must be complied with.

### Limitations

There are four major limitations of this study. First, the CCELS is a new instrument which needs to be refined and validated. For example, there are two questions that pertain to a manager’s concern for employees. A future version of the questionnaire will exclude the question, “caring about and respecting all employees,” and will instead include a question very relevant to the moral manager: “communicating with employees about ethical issues.” Second, the sample is relatively small and represents only two industries. A larger sample including several industries will allow the results to be generalized more to the Kazakhstani work culture. Third, the results cannot be generalized outside of Kazakhstan because of the unique aspects of the country culture (e.g., combination of Soviet and tribal heritage). Generalizing the results to other countries in Central Asia should be done with caution. Finally, as an exploratory study, this research measures only ethical leadership perceptions and does not investigate any antecedents or consequences of ethical leadership in Kazakhstan, such as the relationship between ethical leadership and moral attentiveness or the relationship between ethical leadership and employee motivation.

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### About the Author

**Dr. Michael Conrad, Ph.D.** is an Associate Professor of Management at the Bang College of Business at KIMEP University in Almaty, Kazakhstan where he has been based for the past six years. He is an organizational psychologist who has taught business ethics courses for over twenty years in the United States and other countries. His current research is focused on ethical leadership in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Dr. Conrad is also a very experienced management consultant who has conducted training in the United States and other countries for companies such as Nestle, InterContinental Hotels, Citi, and Pernod Ricard. He can be contacted through the Department of Management, Bang College of Business, 2 Abai Avenue, Almaty, 050010, Kazakhstan.  
E-mail: [conrad@kimep.kz](mailto:conrad@kimep.kz).