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## **Ethical Leadership and Employee Engagement in Nigeria Public Administration amid Global Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

Ethical leadership and employee engagement are essential for effective public administration, particularly in Nigeria, amidst the challenges of globalisation. This study investigates their relationship within Nigeria's public sector against globalisation. This study explores how ethical leadership influences employee engagement in Nigeria's public administration and assesses its implications for organisational effectiveness and sustainable development. This study adopts the secondary data analysis approach, which relies on existing literature and theoretical frameworks to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement. The paper employed a secondary data analysis approach, leveraging existing literature from scholarly articles, reports, and electronic databases like Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. This paper emphasises the importance of ethical leadership and employee engagement for organisational success. Ethical leaders, embodying values like fairness, honesty, and transparency, create a trusting environment that encourages open communication, collaboration, and empowerment among employees. This boosts engagement and productivity. Engaged employees reinforce ethical leadership practices, reducing turnover and absenteeism, cost savings, and organisational stability. The paper recommends that organisations invest in ethical leadership development and foster employee engagement to reduce turnover and absenteeism, thereby ensuring cost savings and stability. The paper concludes that organisations must prioritise ethical leadership and employee engagement as critical drivers of organisational success. By doing so, they can reduce turnover and absenteeism and ensure cost savings.

**Keywords:** Employee engagement, Ethical leadership, Global challenges, Nigeria, Public administration.

### **Introduction**

Amidst the complexities of Nigeria's public administration, riddled with global challenges ranging from pervasive corruption to inadequate funding, the nexus between ethical leadership and employee engagement emerges as a beacon of transformative potential. This paper seeks to explore this intricate relationship within the unique context of Nigeria's public sector, evaluating how ethical leadership influences employee engagement and its consequential impact on organisational effectiveness and sustainable development. Nigeria public service faces multifaceted obstacles that undermine its public trust and impede equitable resource allocation and service delivery. Ethical leadership, characterised by its dedication to transparency, accountability, and the common good, offers promise as a catalyst for change. By nurturing an

environment of trust and integrity, ethical leadership has the potential to ignite heightened employee engagement, fostering motivation, empowerment, and dedication among public servants.

The urgency of addressing these challenges is underscored by Nigeria's standing in the Corruption Perception Index, where it ranks low, reflecting widespread perceptions of corruption within its public sector (Sarwar, Ishaq, Amin & Ahmed, 2020). Furthermore, inadequate funding exacerbates these issues, constraining the public administration's capacity to invest in critical infrastructure and deliver quality services to its populace (Oni, Abasili, Dele-Dada & Osarumwense, 2022). Despite various governmental initiatives, the Nigerian Civil Service continues to grapple with inefficiencies, highlighting the imperative for ethical leadership and employee engagement strategies. Drawing from the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which elucidates the reciprocal relationship between organisational support factors and employee commitment, this paper aims to unravel the intricate dynamics shaping employee engagement within Nigeria's public administration.

The SET framework, rooted in the works of sociologists such as George Homans and Peter Blau, proposes that the bond between an employee and their organisation hinges on a mutual exchange of resources and benefits (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Within Nigerian public administration, SET provides insights into how leaders' perceived support and treatment of public servants influence their attitudes and behaviours. Suppose public servants perceive their leaders as providing adequate resources, professional development opportunities, and a conducive work environment. In that case, they may feel compelled to reciprocate by demonstrating higher engagement, commitment, and loyalty to the organisation (Mansor Farah Ahlami, Mat Jusoh Yusri Huzaimi, Hashim Mimi Zazira, Muhammad Norrini, Nur Siti, & Omar Zahirah 2023). Conversely, if public servants perceive a lack of support or unfair treatment from their leaders, they may be disinclined to exert their best efforts.

They may even engage in counterproductive behaviours (Arham Ahmad Fadhly, Boucher Carlene & Muenjohn Nuttahwuth 2013). This underscores the pivotal role of ethical leadership in fostering positive employee-organisation relationships within the Nigerian public administration. When public leaders exhibit behaviours perceived as fair, transparent, and supportive, they cultivate a sense of trust and obligation among their subordinates, enhancing organisational performance and service delivery (Sarwar et al., 2020). Furthermore, by synthesising existing literature and empirical evidence, this paper offers practical recommendations to foster ethical leadership and enhance employee engagement within the public sector. Beyond theoretical contemplation, this paper urges stakeholders to embrace ethical leadership as a foundational principle in realising Nigeria's vision of a transparent, accountable, and service-oriented public administration. In doing so, this inquiry contributes to the ongoing dialogue on enhancing public service delivery. It acknowledges the critical significance of ethical leadership in reforming organisational ethos and advancing sustainable development initiatives.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **The Concept of Ethical Leadership**

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping employee engagement within organisations. Supportive and inspiring leaders foster a sense of value and motivation among employees by prioritising open communication, providing constructive feedback, and empowering their teams (Mansor et al., 2023). Effective leadership inspires team performance, ensures organisational goal attainment, and cultivates a positive work environment, enhancing employee motivation and satisfaction (Mansor et al., 2023). Conversely, poor leadership can adversely affect employee engagement, retention, and profitability (Mansor et al., 2023). Different leadership styles may yield varying impacts on organisational performance (Akpaprep John Yaw, Jengrep Enock & Mongre Alisa Afusah 2019). As defined by Brown Michael and Linda Treviño. 2006. & Brown, Michael Linda Treviño, & David Harrison. 2005). Ethical leadership is characterised by demonstrating morally appropriate behaviour through personal actions and interpersonal relationships while promoting such behaviour among followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.

Rooted in social learning theory (Bandura Albert 1986), ethical leadership suggests that individuals learn ethical conduct by observing role models, such as leaders, within organisations (Brown et al., 2005). In the context of Nigerian public administration, ethical leadership is crucial as it can foster a culture of ethical conduct among subordinates, leading to increased trust in governmental institutions and improved public service delivery (Oni et al., 2022). Leaders serve as exemplars, setting the tone for engagement across the organisation. When leaders actively demonstrate commitment to employee well-being, maintain open lines of communication, and recognise achievements, they cultivate a positive work atmosphere conducive to engagement. Ethical leaders, characterised by trustworthiness, respect for all individuals, fairness, and responsible execution of duties, can positively influence organisational culture and employee behavior (Treviño et al., 2006).

## **The Concept of Employee engagement**

Employee engagement is recognised as vital for organisational success and competitive advantage in today's business landscape (Gede Dawit Udessa & Huluka Admassu Tesso 2024). It occurs when individuals are fully invested, and enthusiastic about their work (Adnan Nosheen, Omar Khalid Bhatti & Baykal Elif 2022). Achieving a state of engagement involves a commitment to work and active involvement in discretionary efforts, ultimately driving organisational goals and seeking opportunities for innovation (Adnan et al., 2022). Various factors influence employee engagement, including workplace culture, organisational communication, managerial styles, trust, respect, and leadership (Stewart Greg, Courtright Stephen and Manz Charles 2019). An engaged employee is cognisant of the business context and collaborates with colleagues to enhance performance for the organisation's benefit (Hui Li, Qun Wang, Nazir Sajjad, Mengyu Zhao, Asadullah Muhammad Ali, & Khadim Sahar 2021).

Improving employee engagement positively impacts job performance and organisational profitability. Career development opportunities are crucial in fostering employee

engagement (Fuller LaJuan Perronoski 2021). When employees feel supported in their career growth, they become more engaged and motivated, leading to increased loyalty and commitment to organisational goals. Over the past decades, extensive research has explored the dynamics of employee engagement and its consequences for organisational outcomes (Udessa et al., 2024). In the Nigerian public administration context, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides insights into how leaders' perceived support and treatment of public servants influence their attitudes and behaviours (Mansor et al., 2023). SET highlights the importance of ethical leadership in fostering positive employee-organisation relationships. Ethical leadership positively influences leader-member exchange, employee productivity, and organisational performance (Opara Oguchialu 2014).

Moreover, ethical leadership mediates the relationship between employee trust, engagement, and leadership integrity (Engelbrecht Amos, Heine Gardielle, & Mahembe Bright 2017; Wijsekera Achini Tharanga & Fernando Lalitha 2023). These studies contribute to understanding how ethical leadership influences employee engagement and highlight the importance of fostering ethical leadership practices in promoting a positive work environment and enhancing organisational performance within public administration contexts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper examines the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement in Nigeria's public administration sector, considering contemporary global problems. To comprehensively explore this phenomenon and enhance our comprehension of the intricate dynamics and consequences of moral leadership and employee engagement on Nigeria's public administration's performance and service delivery, we employed a secondary data analysis approach, utilising the existing literature. This paper relied on journal articles, conference proceedings, and academic papers published from 2019 to 2024 as primary data sources obtained from electronic databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and ResearchGate, utilising appropriate keywords. The search parameters were meticulously crafted to concentrate on studies about public administration, specifically in Nigeria, emphasising employee engagement, ethical leadership, and global issues.

The data obtained were evaluated based on their applicability to current global issues and their pertinence to the subject matter. Particular emphasis was placed on studies focused only on Nigeria's public administration sector. Moreover, research undertaken in other developing countries with similar contextual factors also provided a broader perspective. Studies that satisfied the inclusion requirements featured a variety of research methodologies, processes, and theoretical frameworks, which contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The thematic analysis was used for data analysis, which provided a more thorough understanding of the relationship between ethical leadership, employee engagement, and organisational performance in the Nigerian public administration environment.

### **Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Employee Engagement**



Ethical leadership and employee engagement are crucial for organisational effectiveness, particularly in enhancing productivity and performance. Engaged employees, under the guidance of ethical leaders, exhibit heightened levels of productivity, efficiency, and innovation, thereby contributing to improved performance and a competitive advantage for the organisation (Adnan et al., 2022). Studies consistently show a positive and significant correlation between ethical leadership and employee engagement (Junaidi Junaidi, 2023). Ethical leadership serves as the cornerstone for fostering engagement. Leaders who embody fairness, honesty, and transparency create a work environment characterised by trust and respect (Villirilli Guilia 2021). This conducive environment promotes employee engagement through various vital mechanisms. Ethical leaders establish an environment conducive to open communication and collaboration, earning employees' trust and facilitating the expression of ideas and concerns, promoting engagement and a sense of belonging.

Additionally, ethical leaders empower employees by granting them autonomy and decision-making authority, fostering a sense of ownership, and increasing their engagement in their work (Ganesh Kailash. 2023). Moreover, employee engagement serves to reinforce ethical leadership. A highly engaged workforce, driven by motivation and commitment to the organisation's success, can further enhance ethical leadership practices. Ethical leadership, characterised by fairness, honesty, and transparency, is the foundation for employee engagement. It builds trust, empowers employees, aligns work with a greater purpose, and sets ethical behaviour standards (Malik, Mahmood, Sarwar, Obaid, Memon & Khaskheli, 2023). They create an environment where employees feel valued, motivated, and empowered to contribute their best work. Ethical leadership, coupled with employees' engagement, also contributes to Reduced Turnover and Absenteeism.

A culture of ethical leadership and employee engagement instils a sense of value, respect, and empowerment among employees, leading to decreased turnover rates and absenteeism, thus promoting stability and continuity within the workforce (Al Halbusi, Williams, Ramayah, Aldieri & Vinci, 2021). Ethical leadership fosters open communication and collaboration, allowing engaged employees to contribute diverse perspectives and valuable insights during decision-making. This results in more well-rounded and ethical choices that benefit the organisation long-term (Rane Nitin Liladhar, Achari Anand & Choudhary Saurabh 2023). Overall, a positive work environment characterised by ethical leadership and employee engagement is attractive for top talent, enabling organisations to attract and retain the best individuals and solidify their competitive advantage.

The alignment between ethical leadership and employee engagement carries significant implications for sustainable development. Ethical leadership fosters a culture of integrity and responsibility within the organisation, driving ethical business practices and prioritising environmental stewardship and social impact (Dalmia, 2023). Through promoting transparency, fairness, and accountability, ethical leaders motivate employees to adopt sustainable behaviours and make decisions that benefit society and the environment (Dalmia, 2023). Moreover, employee engagement acts as a catalyst for innovation, with engaged employees more likely to contribute creative solutions to environmental challenges. This culture of innovation stimulates

the development of sustainable technologies and practices, reinforcing the organisation's commitment to sustainability (Prud'homme van Reine, 2013). Furthermore, ethical leadership places a premium on employee well-being by fostering a supportive work environment, cultivating long-term employee engagement and contributing to the organisation's sustainable growth.

By investing in the welfare of its employees and promoting ethical conduct, the organisation not only achieves short-term success but also establishes the foundation for enduring sustainability and responsible business practices (Islam Talat, Khatoon Areela, Cheema Amna Umer & Ashraf Yasir 2023).

## **Discussion**

The relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement is critical to organisational effectiveness, which is pivotal in enhancing productivity, performance, and overall success. Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated a positive and significant correlation between ethical leadership and employee engagement (Junaidi, 2023). By embodying values such as fairness, honesty, and transparency, ethical leaders create an environment of trust and respect, fostering employee engagement (Villirilli, 2021). This conducive atmosphere promotes open communication, collaboration, and empowerment, which is vital for enhancing employee engagement (Ganesh, 2023). Furthermore, the reciprocal nature of this relationship is noteworthy. A highly engaged workforce, driven by motivation and commitment to the organisation's goals, can further reinforce ethical leadership practices (Malik et al., 2022). Ethical leaders, in turn, nurture a culture where employees feel valued, motivated, and empowered to contribute their best work, thus perpetuating a cycle of ethical behaviour and engagement.

Moreover, the impact of ethical leadership and employee engagement extends beyond productivity metrics. Research indicates that organisations characterised by ethical leadership and high employee engagement experience reduced turnover and absenteeism (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). This stability within the workforce saves costs associated with recruitment and training and fosters continuity and consistency in organisational operations. Additionally, the collaboration and decision-making processes facilitated by ethical leadership and employee engagement lead to more ethical choices that benefit the organisation long-term (Rane et al., 2023). Furthermore, the alignment between ethical leadership and employee engagement holds significant implications for sustainable development. Ethical leaders cultivate a culture of integrity and responsibility within the organisation, driving ethical business practices and prioritising environmental stewardship and social impact (Dalmia, 2023).

Ethical leaders promote transparency, fairness, and accountability by inspiring employees to adopt sustainable behaviours and make decisions that benefit society and the environment. On the other hand, employee engagement acts as a catalyst for innovation, with engaged employees more likely to contribute creative solutions to environmental challenges (Prud'homme, 2013). This culture of innovation fosters the development of sustainable technologies and practices, reinforcing the organisation's commitment to sustainability. Moreover, ethical leadership's

emphasis on employee well-being contributes to sustainable growth by fostering a supportive work environment that cultivates long-term employee engagement (Islam, Talat et al., 2023). By investing in the welfare of its employees and promoting ethical conduct, organisations achieve short-term success and establish the foundation for enduring sustainability and responsible business practices. In essence, the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement is symbiotic, with each reinforcing the other to drive organisational effectiveness, reduce turnover, foster innovation, and promote sustainable development.

By prioritising these aspects, organisations can achieve short-term goals and lay the groundwork for long-term success and societal impact. The implications these findings underscore the critical importance of the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement for organisational effectiveness and overall success. This relationship is pivotal in enhancing productivity and performance and fostering a positive work environment. Firstly, numerous studies consistently show a positive correlation between ethical leadership and employee engagement. Ethical leaders foster trust and respect by exemplifying values like fairness, honesty, and transparency. This environment encourages open communication, collaboration, and empowerment among employees, which is crucial for enhancing employee engagement. As a result, employees are motivated to contribute their best work, perpetuating a cycle of ethical behaviour and engagement. Furthermore, this relationship has tangible benefits beyond productivity metrics.

Organisations characterised by ethical leadership and high employee engagement experience reduced turnover and absenteeism, resulting in cost savings associated with recruitment and training and ensuring continuity in organisational operations. Also, collaboration and decision-making processes facilitated by ethical leadership and employee engagement lead to more ethical choices that benefit the organisation in the long term. Moreover, the alignment between ethical leadership and employee engagement holds significant implications for sustainable development. Ethical leaders drive ethical business practices, prioritise environmental stewardship, and promote organisational transparency, fairness, and accountability. Employee engagement catalyses innovation, with engaged employees more likely to contribute creative solutions to environmental challenges, thereby fostering the development of sustainable technologies and practices. Also, ethical leadership's emphasis on employee well-being contributes to sustainable growth by fostering a supportive work environment that cultivates long-term employee engagement.

By investing in the welfare of employees and promoting ethical conduct, organisations achieve short-term success and lay the foundation for enduring sustainability and responsible business practices. The symbiotic relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement drives organisational effectiveness, reduces turnover, fosters innovation, and promotes sustainable development. Prioritising these aspects enables organisations to achieve short-term goals while laying the groundwork for long-term success and societal impact.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examines the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement within Nigeria's public sector amidst global challenges. It also explores how ethical leadership influences employee engagement in Nigeria's public administration and assesses its implications for organisational effectiveness and sustainable development. The findings highlight the critical role of ethical leadership in enhancing productivity, performance, and overall success within organisations. Numerous studies consistently demonstrate a positive correlation between ethical leadership and employee engagement, where ethical leaders foster trust and respect by exemplifying values such as fairness, honesty, and transparency. This conducive atmosphere promotes open communication, collaboration, and empowerment among employees, which is crucial for enhancing employee engagement and perpetuating a cycle of ethical behaviour and engagement. Furthermore, the reciprocal nature of this relationship is evident, as a highly engaged workforce reinforces ethical leadership practices.

Organisations characterised by ethical leadership and high employee engagement experience reduced turnover and absenteeism, resulting in cost savings and ensuring continuity in operations. Additionally, collaboration and decision-making processes facilitated by ethical leadership and employee engagement lead to more ethical choices that benefit the organisation in the long term. Moreover, the alignment between ethical leadership and employee engagement holds significant implications for sustainable development. Ethical leaders drive ethical business practices, prioritise environmental stewardship, and promote organisational transparency, fairness, and accountability. Employee engagement catalyses innovation, fostering the development of sustainable technologies and practices. Furthermore, ethical leadership's emphasis on employee well-being contributes to sustainable growth by fostering a supportive work environment that cultivates long-term employee engagement.

Based on the findings highlighted in this paper, the following recommendations emerge for organisations to leverage the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement:

- a. Human Resource Departments should take the responsibility to invest in leadership development programs aimed at cultivating ethical leadership traits. These programs should include comprehensive training modules covering integrity, transparency, and accountability. Equipping leaders with these essential skills can foster a culture of trust and respect within the organisation.
- b. The Management Teams should empower employees by granting them autonomy and decision-making authority. Establishing avenues for employees to contribute ideas, voice concerns, and actively participate in decision-making processes is crucial. The management teams can achieve this through regular team meetings, suggestion boxes, or dedicated feedback sessions.
- c. Organisational leadership should proactively establish open communication channels and foster transparency across all levels. Leaders should communicate clearly and honestly, ensuring employees are informed about organisational goals, challenges, and decision-

making processes. The organisational leaders can achieve this through regular email updates, newsletters, or town hall meetings.

- d. Human Resources managers and Management Teams should take the lead in recognising and rewarding ethical behaviour and high levels of engagement among employees. They should establish recognition programs, which could include verbal praise during team meetings, bonuses, or opportunities for career advancement.

By implementing these recommendations with clear responsibilities assigned to relevant stakeholders, organisations can create a work environment characterised by ethical leadership, high levels of employee engagement, and a commitment to sustainable practices. Ultimately, this fosters organisational success, resilience, and long-term viability in an increasingly complex and competitive global landscape.

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