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Conflict of Interest

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Developing a Framework for Ethical Leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

There is extensive knowledge about ethical leadership in various contexts and large organizations in Zimbabwe. However, there is a notable lack of research on ethical leadership in the SME environment. This qualitative study aimed to develop an ethical leadership framework for Zimbabwe's SME context based on the viewpoint of employees and leaders. Purposive sampling was used to identify 15 employees and leaders in five SMEs in the manufacturing sector in Harare, Zimbabwe. Data were collected using interviews to understand the critical characteristics, styles, and consequences of ethical leadership in SMEs. Thematic analysis was used to analyze interview data. Results reveal that the five critical characteristics that constitute ethical leadership for SMEs in Zimbabwe are incorruptibility, fairness, exemplarity, respectfulness, and sustainability. The study found that the primary styles of leadership employed by ethical leaders in SMEs in Zimbabwe are authentic leadership and servant leadership. The consequences of ethical leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe include its benefits to the leadership, followers, and organization. The study proposes an ethical leadership framework for adoption by SMEs in Zimbabwe, enabling them to survive and succeed in a competitive environment.

Keywords: *Authentic leadership, ethical leadership, ethics, leadership, servant leadership, and SMEs*

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Introduction

In small and medium enterprises (SMEs), there is a growing challenge of establishing and maintaining business ethics as a critical factor for success in many countries, including Zimbabwe. Ethical leadership is pivotal in SMEs' volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) context as it captures the essence of virtuous, responsible, and morally sound leadership practices for business survival. The current study seeks to develop an ethical leadership framework for leaders in the SMEs. Since the economic sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe by the Western world, SMEs have been at the heart of the economy, making immense contributions through employment and paying taxes. It is salient to underscore that SMEs in Zimbabwe tend to have a short life cycle, and those that survive have an under-par performance. This trend has been historically attributed to many factors. One of these factors is the need for robust ethical leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe. A study by Rambe & Ndofirepi (2017) found that SMEs in the retailing sector are unethical in their business practices as they engage in nepotism and corruption. Manuere and Majoni (2016) argue that leaders in SMEs should set the tone for being ethical by being transparent and fair in their conduct.

SMEs are the linchpin of the Zimbabwean economy (Njanike, 2019). Majukwa, Fan, and Dwyer (2020) identify numerous ethical malpractices in the SME sector in Zimbabwe. These unethical malpractices include corruption, abuse of power, and nepotism. According to Kajongwe, Chinyena, Mahavira, and Mambo (2020), these unethical practices have led SMEs to need to perform better. Hence, there is a need to develop an ethical leadership framework to guide leaders in being ethical and improving business performance. Ethical and responsible leadership is crucial for enterprise growth and survival in a competitive environment (Musabayana et al., 2022). Long-term responsibilities, balancing immediate needs with organizational interests, and contributing to business sustainability by understanding the repercussions of decisions and actions are some of the key issues emphasized by ethical leadership. In an organization like an SME, ethical leadership enhances performance by fostering innovation, strengthening relationships, and attracting top talent. Integrity, transparency, empathy, and social responsibility are essential for ethical leadership in shaping the organizational culture, promoting employee engagement, and upholding ethical standards. Ethical leaders set positive examples for other leaders and institutions in fostering a responsible and ethical business culture, addressing ethical challenges like environmental concerns and social justice issues, and promoting sustainable, equitable, and responsible practices. Manuere (2016) categorizes SMEs' objectives into three distinct broad categories, namely: (1) to grow, (2) to be competitive, and (3) to perform.

Karedza et al. (2014) show that a lack of productivity and competitiveness is a ramification of unethical leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe. Bure and Tenengeh (2019) support the notion that a lack of ethical leadership poses a threat to the business sustainability of these micro businesses. Leadership that engages corrupt suppliers of raw materials will result in the SME producing goods of low standards, which can frustrate customers, resulting in a decline in market share. Majukwa et al. (2020) identify several malpractices in SMEs in Zimbabwe, including excessive nepotism, corruption, favoritism, and failure to abide by company policies. Kajongwe et al. (2020) found much corporate abuse by the leadership of SMEs. The owners of SMEs who constitute the leadership of these firms abuse their powers and engage in nepotism and corruption (Manuere, 2016). However, this is counterproductive, leading to a performance decline. Ethical leadership is an antecedent of work motivation and performance (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Shafique et al. (2020) establish that ethical leadership leads to creativity and innovativeness. Sarwar et al. (2020) submit that engagement and positive work culture are ethical leadership's byproducts.

Existing ethical leadership studies and frameworks have focused on various contexts while excluding SMEs (Kuenzi et al., 2020). For instance, Lawton and Páez (2015) developed an ethical leadership framework based on empirical literature from educational institutions worldwide. Additionally, the ethical leadership framework by Singh & Rathore (2014) targets universities and research organizations in India, whereas Tuana's (2014) framework focuses on educational leaders globally. SME contexts differ in their operations and their specific needs for treatment (Manuere, 2016). This view is supported by Karedza et al. (2014), who state that SMEs require frameworks to guide their operations. Although it is noteworthy that existing ethical leadership frameworks have been devised from the leaders' perspectives, the employees' views remain absent. This study presents an opportunity to develop an ethical leadership framework through the lens of employees as followers, which is significant because it allows general employees to provide input on the qualities of an ethical leader.

While SMEs are touted as the key to the Zimbabwean economy, they fail to perform and survive partly due to unethical leadership practices such as corruption and nepotism (Njanike, 2019). There is a variety of existing ethical leadership frameworks by scholars, such as Lawton & Páez (2015), who focused on educational institutions worldwide; Tuana (2014), who focused on educational leaders; and Singh & Rathore (2014), who focused on universities and research organizations. These are some of the scholars who have addressed other contexts while skirting the SMEs. Furthermore, limited ethical leadership frameworks focused on the Zimbabwean context. For example, Singh & Rathore's (2014) ethical leadership framework focuses on India.

Given this research gap, leaders in SMEs in Zimbabwe need a context-specific ethical leadership framework to guide their social influence and interactions towards future direction, alignment, and commitment to organizational success (Musabayana et al., 2022). Many existing ethical leadership frameworks have been developed in Western countries with cultures different from Zimbabwe's, such as Northouse (2018), Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), and Kajongwe et al. (2020). Notably, Zimbabwe has a collectivist and power-distance culture, which can also influence the characteristics and components of the ethical leadership framework (Majukwa et al., 2020). This qualitative study aims to focus on employees' perspectives to address the gap in ethical leadership frameworks within the context of SMEs in Zimbabwe. It is essential for researchers to develop an ethical leadership framework that owner-managers and leaders can utilize to guide followers and stakeholders in Zimbabwean SMEs. The main goal of this study is to develop a tailored ethical leadership framework for SMEs in Zimbabwe. To achieve this goal, the study will answer the following three questions:

1. What are the critical characteristics of ethical leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe?
2. What ethical leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe uses the main leadership styles?
3. What are the consequences of ethical leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe?

Literature Review

As this study focuses on ethical leadership, a literature review is prudent to examine its origin, meaning, characteristics, and theoretical framework.

Theoretical Underpinning

Kant's Theory of Ethics

The current study utilized Kant's theory of ethics. Kantian ethics remains a significant and influential theory in moral philosophy (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). It offers a crucial perspective on the significance of moral integrity and the inherent value of individuals despite challenges such as rigidity and potential conflicts between duties. Kantian ethics is a key theory in moral philosophy that focuses on duty, moral principles, and respecting individuals (Saha et al., 2020). It provides a structured and principled approach to ethics based on the idea that certain actions are morally obligatory or prohibited, regardless of their outcomes. According to the theory, an ethical act could become a universal law. In addition, the theory asserts that one should treat others with humanity, as people are an end in themselves and never merely a means. Various researchers have applied the theory to the concept of ethical leadership over the years, and it remains a useful framework (Northouse, 2018). In the current study, ethical leadership's characteristics, style, and consequences are vital in informing the components of an ethical leadership framework.

Origin & Meaning of Ethical Leadership

The historical development of leadership ethics can be traced back to the 7th century BCE, when Thales and Pythagoras began to explore ethical questions about the human soul and body. After this era, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle attempted to develop virtue ethics in the 5th century BCE (Lim, 2024). Aristotle was the first to develop a comprehensive ethical theory that emphasizes happiness. In the 1st century, they witnessed the age of Christian ethics, where Christian theology was generally the accepted ethical framework (Saha et al., 2020). Fast forward to the 17th century, known as the Enlightenment Age, when Kant introduced deontological ethics and Locke developed ethics from the social contract. Utilitarianism and virtue ethics were not introduced until the 19th century. In the contemporary world, ethics have evolved into three distinct types: applied ethics, feminist ethics, and postmodern ethics (Zaim et al., 2021). Ethical leadership falls under applied ethics, which means leaders must apply ethical principles.

The term ethical leadership is a combination of ethics and leadership. It is essential to explain the two terms before explaining ethical leadership. There is no consensus on ethics, which is defined in various ways. According to Dey et al. (2020), ethics are moral principles that guide human conduct.

On the other hand, Ko et al. (2018) view ethics as a set of standards for determining whether a human action is right or wrong. Both explanations are complementary and categorize ethics as a moral compass of human action. Having defined ethics is critical to defining leadership. Scholars define leadership from various angles, and this paper focuses on three angles: influence, process, and goal achievement. According to John C Maxwell, leadership is about influencing others, generally known as followers. On the other hand, Bernard Bass views leadership as a process of interaction with followers. Finally, Peter Drucker views leadership as mobilizing followers to achieve goals. In this investigation, these three distinct definitions are viewed as complimentary, and they are therefore combined. Therefore, leadership is a process of influencing others to achieve set goals. It is essential to define ethical leadership having defined ethics and leadership.

Scholars define ethical leadership in different ways. According to Njanike (2019), ethical leadership is the display of normatively appropriate conduct through one's actions and interpersonal relationships and encouraging such conduct to followers through decision-making, two-way communication, and reinforcement. On the other hand, Northouse (2018) expresses that ethical leadership is a process that involves influencing a group of individuals to achieve a common goal while adhering to ethical values and principles. Furthermore, Goswami et al. (2021) express that ethical leadership is "the practice of being honest and virtuous in any role that requires leadership." On the

other hand, Musabayana et al. (2022) submit that ethical leadership is "the practice of being honest and virtuous in any role that requires leadership." Table 1 below shows different definitions of ethical leadership. Amongst these definitions, there are some similarities and differences. For example, Northouse (2018), Ciulla (2004), and Johnson (2012) view ethical leadership as a practice of influencing others. Another similarity emanates from Brown et al. (2005) and Kouzes and Posner (2002), who all view ethical leadership as standard behaviors and practices. Furthermore, Northouse (2018) and Johnson (2012) converge by defining ethical leadership in terms of ethical standards and values. However, there are some divergences in the definitions of ethical leadership. For example, Brown et al. (2005) focus on communication, while Yukl's (2013) definition focuses on individual virtues, and Northouse (2018) views ethical leadership as a process.

In this study of ethical leadership, it is pivotal to understand the meaning and context of SME. Scholars define SMEs in diverse ways within and across different countries. A small to medium enterprise in Zimbabwe has at most one hundred workers (Manuere, 2016). On the other hand, Kajongwe et al. (2020) define SMEs as organizations with annual sales turnover within US\$ 830,000. These exemplify definitions of SMEs, which use only one dimension. Notably, there is an official multi-dimensional definition of SME by the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises, and Zimbabwe Revenue Authority. In Zimbabwe, SMEs are classified by the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority as businesses that employ 5-40 people with annual turnover and assets from as low as \$50,000 to \$2 million. The SME Association of Zimbabwe defines small enterprises as those with less than \$240,000 or assets less than \$100,000 and medium enterprises as those with a turnover and assets above the thresholds for small enterprises but less than \$1 million each. Hence, there needs to be more debate about what SMEs are. The development of SMEs was a result of two political milestones in Zimbabwe. The first cause of SMEs was the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Program by the government of Zimbabwe in the early 1990s (Manuere, 2016). The land reform program in the early 2000s led investors to leave the country, resulting in high unemployment rates and forcing many Zimbabweans to venture into SMEs (Musabayana et al., 2022).

Characteristics of Ethical Leadership

Various researchers have investigated the characteristics of ethical leadership. Some investigators have come up with similar findings, while most researchers have diverged findings. For example, Sharma et al. (2019) show Northouse's (2007) ethical leadership characteristics: respect for others, service to others, building community, honesty, and justice. However, building a community is ethical and relates to political aspects of leadership because it is characteristic of building a community and serving

others. The identified characteristics of building community may manifest in business through corporate social responsibility. Building community as a characteristic of ethical leadership fits very well in the political landscape where one is elected into political office and is expected to build the community and respect those who voted them to office. However, honesty is universal and fits into the business landscape. On the other hand, Eisenbeiss (2012) developed five characteristics of ethical leadership. These are humane orientation, justice orientation, responsibility orientation, sustainability orientation, and moderation orientation. Eisenbeiss (2012) introduces three characteristics: responsibility orientation, sustainability orientation, and moderation orientation. Humane orientation covers four dimensions of Northouse (2007): respect for others, service to others, building community, and honesty, while justice is retained. By moderation orientation, Eisenbeiss (2012) stresses that ethical leaders take moderate actions and decisions.

Leadership Style in Ethical Leadership

Northouse (2018) defines leadership style as a manner and approach leaders use to guide and influence their followers. On the other hand, Walumbwa et al. (2012) explain leadership style as leadership attitude and preferred way of communicating with their followers. Therefore, leadership style is a preferred way of interacting with followers by the leadership. There has been a debate about leadership styles that suit ethical leadership among academics and researchers. Brown et al. (2005) found that transformational leadership is highly aligned with ethical leadership. They posit that a transformational leader in pursuit of change is committed to the moral well-being of followers. Their study also showed a positive correlation between ethical and transformational leadership, including dimensions of ethics such as integrity and fairness. However, Liden et al. (2008) show that servant leadership is the leadership style that is closely associated with ethical leadership. According to their study, servant leadership, by nature, emphasizes empathy, stewardship, and community building. This treatment of servants first prioritizes the followers' well-being. By demonstrating servant leadership, leaders strengthen the organization's ethical culture (Liden et al., 2008).

Consequences of Ethical Leadership

Research has shown various consequences of ethical leadership in organizations. Eisenbeiss et al. (2015) found that ethical leadership can lead to sustainable competitive advantage. According to them, having ethical leadership places the organization at a strategic advantage. Stakeholders will trust the leadership, making it a valuable strategic asset in attaining a competitive advantage. On the other hand, Walumbwa et al. (2012) found employee engagement to be a significant consequence of ethical leadership. Their research shows that ethical leadership results in trust and psychological safety

for employees, making employees committed to the organization and being proactive. On the other hand, Mayer et al. (2009) found a reduction in unethical behavior as a consequence of ethical leadership. Their research shows that ethical leadership sets the standards and tone for other employees, reducing unethical leadership in the organization. Detert et al. (2007) agree with Mayer et al. (2009) and categorize this consequence as lowering counterproductive work behavior. Detert et al. (2007) state that ethical leadership brings fairness and integrity, lowering employee counterproductive behavior. Schaubroeck et al. (2011) assert that a positive ethical climate results from ethical leadership. According to their study, consistent and principled leadership promotes organizational ethical behavior. Furthermore, Schaubroeck et al. (2011) explain that ethical leadership strengthens culture. According to Al Halbusi et al. (2021), the divergences among researchers on the consequences of ethical research encourage further exploration of the subject.

Existing Ethical Leadership Frameworks

The question of the key constitutive elements of an ethical leadership framework for SMEs in Zimbabwe demands a clear understanding of existing models and frameworks of ethical leadership. Various researchers, such as Staratt (2004), Northouse (2018), and Rest (1986), have addressed different dimensions in their ethical leadership frameworks. Their focuses and principles towards ethical leadership diverge from what others explored. Table 1 shows different ethical leadership frameworks, revealing their focus and guiding principles.

Table 1: Different Ethical Frameworks

Researcher(s)	Ethical Focus	Ethical Principles
Staratt (2004)	Stresses on the relational and transformative side of ethical leadership.	<i>Responsibility, authenticity, transcendence, and presence.</i>
Northouse (2018)	Integrates ethical leadership into leadership practices.	<i>Purpose, values, integrity, and trust.</i>
Rest (1986)	Emphasizes psychological processes of ethical decision-making.	<i>Moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character.</i>
Brown et al. (2005).	It shows the importance of behavior and ethics in ethical leadership.	<i>Role modelling, two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.</i>
Kanungo and Mendonca (1996)	Follower centred.	<i>Altruism, integrity, role modelling, and empowerment.</i>

Table 1 shows that ethical leadership frameworks address and focus on different ethical aspects and processes. For example, Rest (1986) addresses the psychological processes in ethical decision-making for leaders, while Starrat (2004) focuses on ethical leadership's relational and transformative aspects. However, these frameworks have focused on contexts other than SMEs. Furthermore, some ethical frameworks are outdated (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996; Rest, 1986), and the business environment has changed, so they need to be updated accordingly.

Research Methodology

The qualitative study allowed for adaptation and flexibility in the research process to understand characteristics, consequences, and styles relevant and supportive of ethical leadership from the subjective experiences of employees and leaders in SMEs (Nicmanis, 2024). Qualitative research was essential in understanding the ethical leadership framework from the viewpoint of leaders and employees in SMEs in Zimbabwe. According to qualitative research, rich insights can be generated from conversing with research participants (Heredia et al., 2024).

Research Paradigm

The investigation adopted an interpretive paradigm. According to interpretivism, the world is subjective, and the researcher needs to interact closely with research participants to understand subjective reality (Dougherty & Fins, 2024). The experiences of leaders and employees in the SME sector are unique and critical to understanding and formulating a context-specific framework of ethical leadership for SMEs in Zimbabwe. An interpretive paradigm helps get multiple perspectives of reality from research participants.

Population and Sampling

This study's target population was 200 employees and leaders in SMEs in Harare CBD. The study used purposive sampling to select fifteen participants from five SME firms in the manufacturing sector in Harare CBD. Purposive sampling is when the investigator chooses only members of the population with valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation to participate in the study (William, 2024). Only those employees and leaders who had been with the SME for more than one year participated in this study as they have adequate experience to comment on ethical leadership in SMEs. By using inclusion criteria, only some employees or leaders had a chance to participate in the study. The investigation did not have a predetermined number of interview participants. The data saturation was used to determine when to stop interviews. Data saturation is when interviews no longer give new data or viewpoints (Nicmanis, 2024). For this study, data saturation was used during the 15th interview. As such, this was the

end of interviews with research participants. Ten participants were employees, whereas five were leaders in SMEs. Eight of the participants were women, and seven were men. The study thus captured diverse views about ethical leadership from the viewpoint of different leaders and employees in SMEs.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. The study used an interview guide to guide interviews and data collection, focusing on the critical characteristics, styles, and consequences of ethical leadership in SMEs. Semi-structured interviews allowed the investigator to generate in-depth information on the style, characteristics, and consequences of ethical leadership in the SME context. The investigator obtained consent from the three SMEs, and the fifteen participants signed consent forms to participate in the study. The participants were audio-recorded during interviews after getting informed consent to ensure accurate capture of the interviews. This allowed the researcher to focus on interviewing rather than typing during the interviews.

Four dimensions of data trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were used to achieve research quality. First, credibility is the extent to which the research results are congruent and consistent with reality (Bang, 2024). In this study, credibility was pursued through the researcher capturing different views of participants, as well as concrete details and thick descriptions that are traceable to participants. Member checks allowed the participants to see their transcripts and confirm that the findings reflected what they expressed during interviews. During interviews, the researcher made follow-up questions to ensure accurate capture and clarity of a participant's views. Second, confirmability is concerned with following the process—including data collection and analysis (Ahmed, 2024). In pursuit of confirmability, the study has shown the findings through detailed descriptions and quotes from research participants and how they expressed their views. Themes are derived from data and capture participants' views, which are depicted through direct quotations used in reporting results.

Third, dependability is the extent to which the study can be repeated in the same context and achieve similar results (Bang, 2024). An audit trail showing how the study was done is critical for dependability. All methodological issues were recorded so readers could easily follow through and repeat the study. Lastly, transferability is the degree to which the study findings can be transferred to other similar contexts (Ahmed, 2024). The study provided a detailed description of the context in which the research was performed and how this shaped the findings so that readers can easily transfer findings to any similar context.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Thematic analysis is used in qualitative studies to identify emerging patterns from interviews and develop categories and themes. This was made possible using NVivo version 14.0. Thematic analysis was done in four stages. The first stage was to familiarise myself with the data by re-reading it. The second stage involved the generation of codes by highlighting phrases that indicate characteristics, leadership styles, or consequences of ethical leadership, and these became labels. The third stage was about searching for themes. Themes in data relating to styles, characteristics, and consequences of ethical leadership were identified and divided into sub-themes for clarity. The final stage involved reviewing themes by combining similar themes and splitting themes into sub-themes.

Research Ethics

Research ethics is the application of morals and ethical principles during an investigation (Ahmed, 2024). Before conducting the study, each of the five SMEs sought and granted permission to conduct research. The next stage was to get informed consent from participants. All participants in this study signed the consent form highlighting the study's aim and benefits. The researcher informed each participant that participation was voluntary and that there was freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, participants were also informed about confidentiality and anonymity in this study, and that study results will not be traced to the actual SME participants' identity by the readers.

Results

The five themes identified in this study reveal the characteristics; two themes depict the ethical leadership style, and three emerged from this research.

Themes Depicting Characteristics of Ethical Leadership

Theme 1: Goes by the Book Incorruptible

The major theme that emerged in terms of characteristics of ethical leadership is incorruptible. Participants III, V, and VII emphasized that ethical leadership is incorruptible. An ethical leader does not engage in corruption, whether voluntary or involuntary. This theme was divided into three: incorruptible, courageous, and rule-abiding. In being incorruptible, ethical leadership should be rule-abiding and courageous. By following ethical rules, leaders follow national laws, company policies, and procedures. These are some of the key extracts about this theme.

Participant III (Who was an employee)

"I believe ethical leadership is about being incorruptible and resisting temptations to use shortcuts in your conduct in and out the organization."

Participant V (Who was an employee)

"We once worked with Mr. X; he was a man of honor and was well-respected because of his distaste for corruption, nepotism, and shortcuts..... The man was incorruptible, if I may say so."

Participant VII (Who was in leadership)

"When I think of a key characteristic of ethical leadership, I think of our previous Managing Director. He was a man of courage and did everything by the book. He was not afraid to stand up for what was right, and if a customer, a supplier, or an employee wanted to take shortcuts, he would refer the person to the right procedure.....He is the only managing director who has not joined this organization with his relatives. I think that is why he did not last here."

Theme 2: Creature of the Law-Fairness

The other theme that emerged in the characteristics of ethical leadership is fairness. Participants I and X emphasized the need for ethical leadership to be fair in its decisions and conduct. This theme was divided into two sub-themes: merit-based and pragmatist. The investigation found that ethical leadership prioritizes being unbiased but merit-based and not politically polarised but a pragmatist. These are some of the extracts from participants of this theme:

Participant I (Who was an employee)

"Let me use Mrs X as an example; she is just fair. When doing work, she means real business. She does not care whether you are related or not; she does not have favorites among employees. Ethical leadership is about being fair."

Participant X (Who was in leadership)

"The best response to your question is in terms of what I consider to be characteristics of unethical leadership...you see, this country is toxic. People are divided by their tribes, families, and politics. In employing people, you see people preferring their relatives, tribespeople, and people who belong to the same political party. This is also done when tenders are awarded to suppliers and even when employees are promoted. Ethical leadership is merit-based and considers merits in all decisions. Furthermore, the leader should be pragmatic and not biased towards their political party. This has destroyed our firms; every decision will be politically motivated. We need more pragmatists rather than politically compromised or polarised leadership."

Theme 3: Do as I do, not as I say- Exemplary

In addition, the study found that ethical leadership is exemplary. All participants supported this theme of being exemplary. The theme was divided into two sub-themes: behavior and performance. According to the study, ethical leadership is associated with effective and efficient work performance. For example,

Participant II (Who was an employee)

"The word ethical leadership reminds me of my boss; he does not come to work late, prepares well before meetings, and does not forget his work commitments. I aim to emulate his behavior. Other leaders we once had come to work as they pleased, and at times, they came drunk.... I would not want them to be an example even to my kids."

Theme 4: Ethical leadership respects young and old- Respect

This study also revealed that respect is another key characteristic of ethical leadership. This theme was divided into two sub-themes: humane and tolerant. Participants II and XV emphasized the need for ethical leadership to be respectful. These are some of the extracts from the interviews about this theme:

Participant II (Who was an employee)

"When interacting with people, you must consider their interests and put their needs first. The people we deal with, whether our employees, customers, or suppliers, have families to feed....This also includes not treating them in a way that denigrates their character....They are people, not animals, after all. We also need to learn to embrace the divergent views of others because they are also interested in the growth of our firm. Putting our heads together will transform our enterprise."

Participant XV (Who was in leadership)

"Leadership involves working with employees from diverse backgrounds. Ethical leadership is about being human and patient when dealing with subordinates."

Theme 5: Ethical leadership thinks about the future- Sustainable

The final characteristic of ethical leadership emerging from this research is being sustainable. Participants VI and X emphasized that leaders should always consider tomorrow. This was explained by Participants VI and X as follows:

Participant VI (Who was an employee)

"To me, an ethical leader thinks about how to be sustainable; whatever decisions and actions they take should be in the best interests of the organization and its survival. The leadership should not always look at squandering all of the firm's resources; they should

always think about the future.....They should also consider future generations and not engage in questionable activities such as deforestation, over-fishing, and over-mining; this compromises the country's future."

Participant X (Who was in leadership)

"Leadership should put the interest of the company ahead of own interests. The first thing is about survival. How do we keep our company sustainable? These are key questions that the ethical leadership needs to answer in their conduct."

Themes Depicting the Leadership Style of Ethical Leadership

Two themes emerged in this research question: authentic leadership and servant leadership.

Theme 1: Authentic leadership is the foundation of ethical leadership

The main leadership style participants believe resonates with ethical leadership is authentic leadership. Participants VII and X expressed that authentic leadership is closely aligned with ethical leadership. Participant VII, one of the leaders in an SME firm, expressed the following:

Participant VII (Who was in leadership)

"The first step to being ethical is using an authentic leadership style.In my personal experience, I have to be true to myself and know my strengths. For example, I am good with relating with customers...my strength is marketing, and I have to use that to benefit the organization. The second phase is being bold, honest, and professional. We must be responsible and accountable to our employees and other stakeholders for every decision. I think there is a thin line between authentic leadership and ethical leadership. I think all ethical leaders are authentic leaders."

Participant X (Who was an employee)

"Authentic leadership is key in implementing ethical leadership. You have to know your strengths and weaknesses in terms of upholding ethics. Again, know your followers' strengths and weaknesses.... This will make you effective in implementing ethical leadership."

Theme 2: Ethical Leadership is about serving others

The other leadership style that aligns with ethical leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe is servant leadership. Participants III and XV subscribed to the view that servant leadership style is critical in ethical leadership. Participant III, an employee in one of the SMEs investigated, stated this:

Participant III (Who was an employee)

"Ethical leadership is about being a servant. ... My superior in our firm, I consider him one of the ethical leaders. He is humble. He always thinks about others. He takes time to listen to divergent views and heed what others say. I remember a situation where we failed to meet our target as a firm; he was not engaged in that. He wanted to know what went wrong, but he was very empathetic. He always seeks to improve everyone's skills and experiences so we can be better people. He is an ethical leader because he displays a servant leadership style."

Participant XV (Who was in leadership)

"As an ethical leader, I must be prepared to serve others. I should listen to the concerns of employees and give them adequate attention. By so doing, the employees will also be ethical."

Themes on Consequences of Ethical Leadership

Three themes emerged from this research, revealing that the consequences of ethical leadership include benefits at the personal, follower, and organizational levels.

Theme 1: Leadership benefits from ethical leadership

Participants I and X showed that ethical leadership has personal benefits to the leadership itself. This theme was divided into two subthemes: enhanced reputation and improved decision-making. Participant X, an employee in an SME, explained the sub-theme of enhanced reputation in the following terms:

Participant I (who was an employee)

"I will use an example of our CEO; she is honest, transparent, and reliable. This has made her credible and well-trusted by employees, company owners, and other stakeholders. She has earned this over the years by being reliable and taking responsibility. Another attribute is that she respects everyone, making him reputable. My job becomes easier when employees see that I am being fair and honest. They easily adhere to my instructions, and coordinating them becomes effortless."

Participant II (Who was an employee)

On the other hand, Participant II, who was part of the leadership in one of the SMEs, explained this in terms of improved decision-making.

"One way to enhance your decision-making is to be ethical. An ethical leader must listen to everyone, including the lowest employees. These employees are on the ground; I must admit they are better informed than we are. Incorporating their views has improved my decisions."

Theme 2: A tool for making followers better

Three sub-themes emerged for followers: empowerment, a better work environment, and personal growth. Ethical leadership empowers followers, fosters a better workplace, and promotes personal growth.

Participant V, who was an employee at one of the SMEs, stated this:

In our organization, the leadership practices ethical leadership; by doing so, we have a voice. For most of the decisions, we are consulted by the leadership. This also empowers us to have a degree of control over the policies and direction of the organization.

Participant VI (Who was in leadership)

On the other hand, Participant VI, an employee at one of the SMEs, explained this in terms of a better workplace. "Ethical leadership is honest and empathetic. This reduces workplace stress. The environment itself becomes less toxic. Ideally, ethical leadership is fair in an environment with equal opportunities. There is no room for favoritism based on political affiliation or the fact that you belong to a certain tribe to which the leadership belongs."

Participant X (Who was in leadership)

In addition, Participant X, an employee at one of the SMEs, stated this on growth.

"Let me give an example of our organization. You see, the leadership is concerned about us because they are ethical. Last time, they paid for me to do a secretarial course because I lacked some attributes. If it were another leadership position, I would be replaced. Now I am happy I have that certificate and will use it."

Theme 3: A case of a competitive organization

Participant V (Who was an employee)

Regarding organization, three sub-themes emerged: risk reduction, ethical culture, and performance. Ethical leadership enhances the organization through risk reduction, ethical culture, and performance. Participant V, who was an employee at one of the SMEs, explained the following:

"Our leadership is honest and transparent, which has made the organization avoid illegal activities that could stop its operations or incur penalties. I am saying that risk can be managed through ethical leadership."

Participant X (Who was in leadership)

On the other hand, Participant X, a leader of one of the SMEs, stated the following on ethical culture.

"An ethical organization starts with me at the top; if I am fair, transparent, and honest, everyone emulates that. As leaders, we set the tone, and the others will follow. Ethical leadership, therefore, cemented our organizational culture."

Participant I (Who was an employee)

-Furthermore, Participant I, an employee at one of the SMEs, stated the following on performance.

"Mr.....is virtuous and ethical, so as subordinates, we are enthused by his actions, and we end up giving the best for the organization as a payback to him."

Drawing from the findings in this qualitative study, Figure 1 shows the critical constitutive components of ethical leadership according to leaders and employees of SMEs in Zimbabwe.

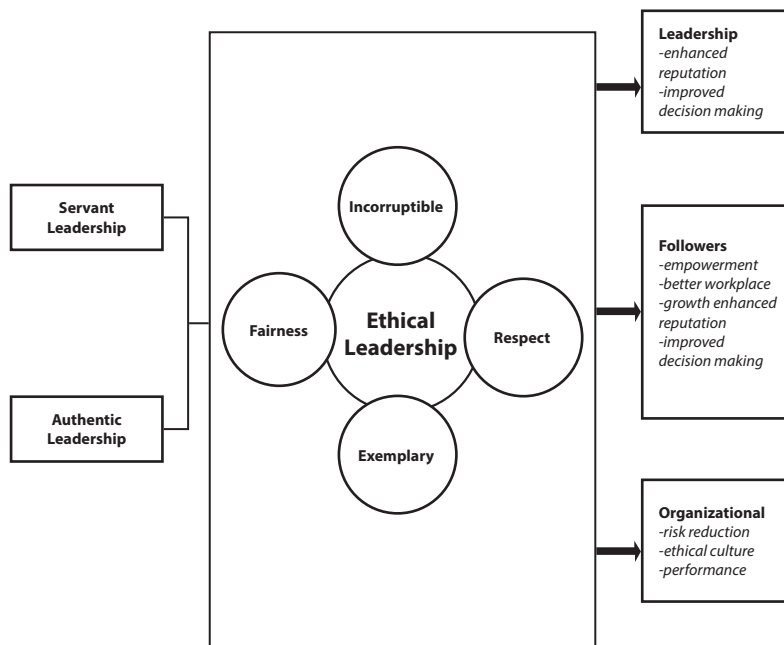


Figure 1: Ethical Leadership Framework

Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion

In this study, participants are clear that ethical leadership is about serving others, developing others to be better, being humble, always thinking about others, and listening to divergent views. The servant leadership style changes the focus of social influence by emphasizing the ideal of service in the leader-follower relationship. This is explained by the seminal work of Greenleaf (1970), which states that a servant leader listens to others, is committed to the growth of people, and is empathetic, which is what was explained by participants. In addition, according to Greenleaf (1970), servant leadership should build communities, and this study adds that ethical leadership is sustainable, which resonates with Greenleaf's (1970) assumptions. Servant leadership, as a holistic approach, engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual), which empowers followers and helps them grow into what they are capable of becoming. The assertion that ethical leadership is a tool for making followers better resonates with servant leadership, which seeks, first and foremost, to develop followers based on leaders' altruistic and ethical orientations. Servant leadership more explicitly incorporates stewardship as an essential element of effective leadership, bringing into focus the long-term perspective and value of embracing all stakeholders. Servant leaders are proactive models for ethical conduct and moral individuals who make fair and balanced decisions. They also frequently communicate with their followers about ethics, set clear ethical standards, and use rewards and punishments to ensure they are followed.

Authentic leadership acknowledges the importance of being authentic in interactions with others. The leadership style evident in SMEs in Zimbabwe reflects the significance of fair, transparent, and honest leadership aspects. These resonate with an authentic leadership style emphasizing transparency, genuineness, and honesty. Authentic leaders are true to themselves and the principles that guide them. Authentic leaders in SMEs inspire trust and loyalty in their employees by being consistent, self-aware, and positive. This finding is also evident in the seminal work of George (2003), which states that authentic leadership tends to be ethical. Authentic leadership is of high integrity and exhibits high professionalism. Dey et al. (2020) also express that authentic leadership is open, and at its core are ethical values, which are the foundation of ethical leadership. They also focus on long-term organizational goals, creating a positive work environment and the success of their people. Authentic leaders are ethical, trustworthy, fair, and principled decision-makers who behave ethically and care about people and the broader society. Ethical leadership in SMEs in Zimbabwe calls for a shift from self-serving leadership to more authentic relationships and people-centered models of influence

in the leader-follower relationship. Integrating authentic and servant leadership in the proposed framework is salient, especially since ethical leadership emphasizes the need to care for people and be honest and trustworthy but offers little attention to authenticity and providing direction for serving followers.

The framework of ethical leadership in SMEs requires authentic and servant leadership styles, as well as characteristics of being fair, incorruptible, exemplary, and respectful of others, which interact to shape the social influence of an ethical leader. The key components of ethical leadership in SMEs must include fairness, respect, and being incorruptible and exemplary. This framework is action-based. Once the leaders display and reinforce fairness, respect, incorruptibility, and exemplary actions and decision-making processes, they will likely benefit themselves, their followers, and the SME. The major theme that emerged in terms of characteristics of ethical leadership is incorruptible. Participants III, V, and VII emphasized that ethical leadership is incorruptible. An ethical leader does not engage in corruption, whether voluntary or involuntary. This theme was divided into three: incorruptible, courageous, and rule-abiding. In being incorruptible, ethical leadership should be rule-abiding and courageous. By following ethical rules, leaders follow national laws, company policies, and procedures. This finding of incorruptibility was explained by Kamungo and Mendonca (1996), who emphasize integrity. However, this study adds the dimension of being courageous by standing for what is right against authorities and key customers. Furthermore, this study also adds that ethical leadership is rule-abiding. However, there is a risk of being rigid. Participants dismissed this as they clarified that it is better to be rigid than to have the business closed due to a leader who cut corners. The characteristic of fairness in ethical leadership is also explained by Kamungo and Mendonca (1996) that ethical leadership is fair. However, this study adds that fairness should be pragmatic and merit-based. Exemplary is also emphasized by Kamungo & Mendonca (1996) that ethical leadership should be exemplary. However, Kamungo & Mendonca (1996) explain this as being role models, while this study stresses good behavior and being a good performer so that employees can also copy the conduct and be effective. Ciulla's (2004) framework also shows that respect is key to ethical leadership. On the other hand, Lin et al. (2020) emphasize altruism. However, the two frameworks ignore the concept of ethical leadership being tolerant, which is shown in this study. Brown et al. (2005) framework covers this finding, focusing on ethical decision-making. However, the components of ethical decision-making do not include sustainability, which is key and emerges from this study.

The results of the current study are precise in that the benefits of ethical leadership are evident at multiple levels, namely the leader, follower, and organization. Thus,

ethical leadership has personal-level benefits (e.g., enhanced reputation and improved decision-making). At the followers' level, ethical leadership empowers and creates a positive and better working environment and a reputation for enhanced growth and decision-making. This finding is corroborated by Bachmann (2017), who demonstrates that ethical leadership is a tool that can make leadership effective. Saha et al. (2020) explain that ethical leadership is a strategy for the personal development of leadership. Banks et al. (2021) also note that ethical leadership benefits the leadership itself. At the organizational level, the benefits of ethical leadership include risk reduction, ethical culture, and desirable performance. Saha et al. (2020) agree that ethical leadership is a strategy for the personal development of leadership. Banks et al. (2021) also note that ethical leadership benefits the leadership, followers, and organization. This finding is similar to the view of Einsenbeiss et al. (2015), who state that ethical leadership can be a source of competitive advantage. Banks et al. (2021) posit that ethical leadership is a source of competitive advantage. In other words, ethical leadership is a strategic asset that can make the business competitive (Einsenbeiss et al., 2015). However, it is surprising that this study did not reveal any aspects of the dark side of ethical leadership. It is essential for researchers not to be naïve and ignore the negative consequences of ethical leadership as an exacting process of sustaining high ethical standards, ensuring careful practice and enforcement of all rules, and meeting leaders' lofty expectations, all of which can consume time and energy but also be perceived by employees as overly demanding or an obstacle to job performance. The question of how organizations manage the stress that comes from the leader and the job to fully realize the potential of ethical leadership is critical for effective, ethical leadership in SMEs. This finding is corroborated by Bachmann (2017), who demonstrates that ethical leadership is a tool that can make leadership effective. Saha et al. (2020) explain that ethical leadership is a strategy for the personal development of leadership. Banks et al. (2021) also note that ethical leadership benefits the leadership itself. Ethical leadership as a tool that can make leadership effective in SMEs must integrate the elements of serving others authentically. Alshammari et al. (2015) also explored the effects of ethical leadership and found it beneficial to employees. Their study found that employees are comfortable and enthused by ethical leadership, which is also what this investigation found.

Conclusion

The main objective of this qualitative study was to develop an ethical leadership framework for SMEs. The investigation concludes that ethical leadership's key characteristics are fairness, respect, incorruptibility, and exemplary. The study also concludes that authentic leadership and servant leadership styles align with ethical leadership, and ethical leadership positively affects the leadership, followers, and organization. This study has three managerial implications.

First, to succeed as ethical leaders, SME leaders should exhibit fairness, respect, incorruptibility, and exemplary characteristics in their conduct and decision-making. Second, this study calls for SME leaders to integrate authentic and servant leadership styles in their people-oriented leadership practices, as these align with ethical leadership. Therefore, leaders striving to achieve ethical leadership should adopt either or both styles.

Lastly, SME leaders must realize that ethical leadership has multi-level benefits or consequences at the leadership, follower, and organization levels. SMEs should adopt ethical leadership as a strategy that is mindful of these three levels and how they influence performance and survival by building, enhancing, and sustaining an ethical culture and organizational environment.

Limitations and Future Research

There are two fundamental limitations of the current qualitative study. First, the study has only focused on the views of leaders and employees from manufacturing SMEs in Zimbabwe. There is a need to explore ethical leadership in other types of SMEs beyond the manufacturing sector and the Public Service Commission, which is marred with unethical tendencies. Second, the study was limited to SMEs in Harare CBD. Other similar studies can be conducted in different cities, such as Bulawayo. While the study unearthed servant leadership and authentic leadership as conducive leadership styles for ethical leadership and components of the ethical leadership framework, it has yet to reveal the contextual factors that shape and reinforce ethical leadership styles and characteristics in SMEs. Given the proposed framework of ethical leadership in SMEs, there is a need for a follow-up quantitative study that tests the relationships between these two leadership styles and ethical leadership. The framework proposed in this study is insightful for business development practitioners and entrepreneurship trainers seeking to design programs that build ethical leadership among leaders and owner-managers of SMEs in Zimbabwe.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What are the critical characteristics that ethical leadership should exhibit? Support your answer.
2. Explain unethical practices that do not align with ethical leadership. Support your answer.
3. Which type of ethical leadership that I have explained to you is most suitable for you? Support your answer.
4. What are the positive consequences of ethical leadership to your firm?
5. What are the positive consequences of ethical leadership to your firm?

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