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How Ethical Leadership Is Practiced in Public Bureaucracy: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This study explores how ethical leadership is practiced and experienced by senior bureaucratic leaders in Indonesian public institutions. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis involving eight experienced leaders from central and regional government organizations. The findings reveal three interrelated dimensions of ethical leadership: exemplary behavior, moral courage in high-risk decision-making, and relational justice toward subordinates, particularly in regulatory gray areas. These results suggest that ethical leadership is enacted as a contextually grounded and reflective moral practice, extending beyond formal compliance. The study highlights the relevance of integrating moral reasoning into leadership development while providing an experience-based perspective on ethical leadership in public administration.

KEYWORDS

ethical leadership, public bureaucracy, phenomenology, moral reflection.

Introduction

Ethical leadership in the public sector serves as a strategic foundation that determines institutional legitimacy and the level of public trust in state institutions. In the context of modern governance, ethical leadership is no longer understood merely as a personal moral attribute but as a managerial mechanism that shapes organizational behavior, decision-making quality, and institutional stability (Downe et al., 2016; Zahari et al., 2024). Research published in *Public Administration Review* indicates that ethical outcomes in public organizations are more heavily influenced by leadership quality than by the mere presence of formal rules (Downe et al., 2016).

Public bureaucracy operates under simultaneous pressures of regulatory compliance, public accountability, and political intervention. In such conditions, bureaucratic leaders are expected not only to be administratively effective but also to uphold moral standards in strategic decision-making (Moon & Christensen, 2022). Studies in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* emphasize that ethical leadership plays a critical role in shaping organizational climate, reducing discrimination, and reinforcing collective commitment in the public sector (Moon & Christensen, 2022).

Recent literature also links ethical leadership to employee psychological well-being and organizational stability. (Saleem et al., 2024) in *Acta Psychologica* found that leaders' ethical behavior significantly contributes to employee well-being through emotional regulation mechanisms. Similarly, (Zahari et al., 2024) in the *Journal of Open Innovation* assert that ethical culture and integrity-based leadership support governance sustainability within ESG frameworks in the public sector.

At the same time, leadership in bureaucratic environments faces challenges related to authenticity and complex structural pressures. (Ahmad et al., 2023) in the *Journal of General Management* demonstrate that authentic leadership in bureaucratic structures influences organizational trust and internal alignment. However, these studies are still

dominated by quantitative and perception-based approaches. Studies in developing country contexts also highlight the importance of bureaucratic integrity and accountability (Mendy, 2023; Wahyuni, I, F, & Husain, 2021). Research in Indonesia shows that bureaucratic culture and leadership communication significantly affect ethical practices in public organizations (Tistasari, 2023). Yet, these studies primarily focus on structural aspects rather than the subjective experiences of leaders confronting ethical dilemmas.

Other research demonstrates the relationship between bureaucratic leadership and public service motivation (Lesmana et al., 2022), as well as the connection between ethical leadership and employee performance through leader-member exchange mechanisms (Oladimeji et al., 2022). Systematic literature reviews also confirm that ethical leadership has broad impacts on public and military organizations (King et al., 2024), although the approaches used remain largely descriptive and normative.

Globally, governance issues and weaknesses in public policy are often linked to leadership failures in interpreting and consistently applying ethical principles (Khodayari-Zarnaq et al., 2024). Research on work culture and bureaucratic ethics shows that internalization of ethical values does not automatically occur through formal regulations (Novita et al., 2026; Permata, G. F., & Susanto, 2022).

Although previous research has advanced understanding of ethical leadership and its organizational outcomes, most studies focus primarily on measurable indicators such as organizational justice (Incekara et al., 2024) or public service motivation (Schuster et al., 2022) and rely heavily on quantitative, perception-based, or descriptive approaches. These studies frequently conceptualize ethics as compliance with formal rules or procedural standards (Satia, 2024), underexploring the reflective and lived experiences of leaders navigating political pressures, structural constraints, and moral ambiguities. A more systematic synthesis of existing qualitative research indicates that while some studies have examined ethical leadership behaviors, few have captured the subjective interpretations and moral reasoning of leaders confronting ambiguous or high-stakes situations, particularly in multi-level public-sector contexts (Yet, Downe et al., 2016; Tistasari, 2023). This gap highlights the need for qualitative, phenomenological approaches capable of revealing internal dynamics, moral struggles, and the lived experiences of bureaucratic leaders. Accordingly, this study employs a phenomenological design to explore how senior bureaucratic leaders interpret moral dilemmas, exercise reflective judgment, maintain integrity under structural pressures, and cultivate organizational cultures oriented toward justice and accountability, thereby offering insights beyond compliance-driven and perception-based frameworks.

This study addresses limitations in existing research on ethical leadership in public organizations, which has largely emphasized quantitative, perception-based, and compliance-oriented approaches while giving limited attention to leaders' lived experiences. Empirically, the study provides evidence on how senior bureaucratic leaders interpret and navigate ethical dilemmas across central and regional institutions. Theoretically, it offers a perspective of ethical leadership as a reflective and contextually grounded moral practice that extends beyond rule-based and perception-driven models. Practically, the findings inform leadership development efforts by highlighting the role of moral reasoning in supporting ethical decision-making and strengthening institutional accountability.

To achieve this, the study deliberately moves beyond conventional approaches that predominantly conceptualize ethical leadership through measurable behavioral indicators, compliance frameworks, and employee perception scales.

Instead, it foregrounds the subjective moral consciousness of leaders as they navigate bureaucratic gray areas. By capturing cross-institutional lived experiences across multiple levels of government, the research offers a contextual and virtue-based understanding of ethical leadership, positioning it as a reflective and existential practice rather than merely an observable behavioral construct.

The Nature and Dimensions of Ethical Leadership in Public Administration

Ethical leadership in the public sector is defined as the embodiment of appropriate normative behavior through personal actions and human relationships (Purdianto, 2025). This role requires a leader to not only be a reliable administrative manager, but also to be a moral compass for the organization through two-way communication that emphasizes the values of integrity. The main focus of this dimension is how a leader is able to influence the behavior of subordinates to be in line with the universal ethical standards that apply in government institutions (King, 2023).

The existence of ethical leadership is crucial in building public trust in the credibility of the bureaucracy. Ethical leaders are considered as agents who are able to minimize maladministration practices by promoting transparency and accountability at every level of decision-making. The strength of this leadership lies in the consistency between the values spoken and the concrete actions shown in the complex daily operations of the bureaucracy (Reddick et al., 2025).

Ethical leadership in the public sector refers to the enactment of normative values through personal conduct and relational influence, where leaders function not only as administrative managers but also as moral agents guiding organizational behavior (Purdianto, 2025)(King, 2023). Rather than being limited to formal compliance, ethical leadership plays a central role in shaping organizational culture by embedding integrity, accountability, and transparency into bureaucratic practices (Reddick et al., 2025). Its effectiveness depends on the consistency between espoused values and actual behavior, as well as the extent to which ethical norms are internalized within the organization, enabling employees to act responsibly and report misconduct without fear (Dobel, 2018). In this way, ethical leadership operates both as an individual and institutional mechanism that reinforces legitimacy and strengthens public trust in government institutions.

Public Bureaucratic Dynamics and Structural Integrity Challenges

The public bureaucracy is often seen as a rigid hierarchical structure with highly dominant formal procedures. This environment presents its own challenges to ethical leadership practices, especially when conflicts arise between structural loyalty and moral integrity. Leaders are often faced with a dilemma between following the instructions of their superiors that are political in nature or defending the principle of justice that is the right of the wider community (Novita et al., 2026).

The challenge of integrity in the bureaucracy is also influenced by organizational culture that may have been rooted in unethical practices in the past. Efforts to change the collective mindset require strong examples from the leadership to show that professionalism cannot be separated from ethical standards (Nuradhawati & Rahmandika, 2025). Without synchronization between formal rules and real practices, ethics policies will only become administrative symbols with no functional meaning that have an impact on improving services.

The integration of ethical values in the bureaucratic structure requires effective feedback mechanisms to ensure each policy is properly executed. Structural obstacles such as convoluted bureaucracy are often loopholes for hidden ethical violations (Purdianto, 2025). Therefore, adaptive leadership

and situational intelligence are needed to navigate these obstacles without having to sacrifice the dignity and authority of public institutions in the eyes of the world.

Phenomenological Approach in Understanding the Moral Experience of Leaders

The phenomenological approach provides space for researchers to explore the deepest side of the lived experience of bureaucratic leaders subjectively (Rademaker et al., 2025). This method is very relevant to uncover the essence of ethical leadership practices that cannot be captured only through statistical figures or formal questionnaires. Phenomenology helps map how bureaucratic actors interpret every moral choice they make in the midst of high job pressure (Lailatal Maghfiroh & Bisifa, 2025).

The use of qualitative inquiry with a phenomenological lens aims to understand the internal world of leaders, including their motives, hopes, and inner struggles. The knowledge generated from this approach is descriptive and in-depth, providing a real picture of the ethical realities that are often "gray" in field practice. Researchers can explore how a bureaucrat's life history and personal value background shape his ethical leadership style when leading public institutions (Shakeel et al., 2020).

The results of this phenomenological study are expected to contribute to the development of a more humanistic and context-based theory of leadership. By understanding the phenomenon of ethical leadership from the perspective of the perpetrators directly, human resource development policies in the bureaucracy can be designed more on target. This approach ultimately proves that the success of a bureaucracy is not only determined by a precise cognitive system, but also by the depth of ethical awareness of its movers (Satia, 2024).

Methods

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, specifically interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology, to examine the lived experiences of senior bureaucratic leaders in practicing ethical leadership (Koç & Fidan, 2020; Suryani & Gaol, 2025). The interpretive phenomenological framework was selected to explore not only observable behaviors but also the meaning-making processes through which leaders navigate ethical dilemmas within complex bureaucratic environments. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, this approach acknowledges the researcher's interpretive role while maintaining reflexivity and transparency regarding preconceptions, rather than attempting complete epoché. Reflexivity was systematically applied through field notes, analytical memos, and iterative reflection to minimize bias while capturing nuanced moral reasoning.

Participants were eight senior bureaucratic leaders purposively selected based on three inclusion criteria: (1) holding strategic managerial or structural positions with decision-making authority, (2) having at least ten years of bureaucratic experience, and (3) being recognized for professional integrity both formally and socially. Participants were drawn from three central government ministries, one national public service agency, and four regional government offices across multiple provinces to ensure institutional and geographical diversity. The number of participants was justified using phenomenological data saturation, whereby interviews continued until no new significant themes regarding ethical leadership emerged.

The primary instrument of this study is the researcher as a human instrument, conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews to elicit rich narrative data. Supporting tools included field notes to record non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and researcher reflections, as well as digital

voice recordings for accurate transcription. Documents such as organizational reports and procedural guidelines were analyzed to triangulate participants' accounts and enhance contextual validity (Koç & Fidan, 2020).

The research procedure followed a systematic sequence: pre-field preparations involved obtaining ethical approvals and establishing trust (rapport) with participants; data collection was conducted through repeated interviews exploring ethical decision-making and dilemmas; phenomenological reduction was then applied to identify significant statements, perform thematic clustering, and construct textural and structural descriptions; finally, findings were validated through member checking to ensure accurate representation of participants' lived experiences, before being synthesized into a comprehensive report (Koç & Fidan, 2020). This approach ensures methodological rigor, internal consistency, and alignment with the interpretive phenomenological tradition.

To maintain coherence with the phenomenological design, data analysis focused on identifying meaning structures and the essence of lived experience rather than quantifying themes. Thematic clustering was used solely as an interpretive strategy to organize significant statements, not to generate statistical generalizations. This approach emphasizes depth, context, and the interrelation of meanings, ensuring that the findings reflect participants' experiential realities and the interpretive nature of phenomenological inquiry.

Result and Discussion

Participant Overview

The research data were obtained from in-depth interviews with eight key informants occupying strategic positions across central and regional bureaucracies. Participants were selected based on their tenure, decision-making authority, and recognized integrity, ensuring that the data reflect rich, practice-based experiences of ethical leadership across diverse bureaucratic contexts. The informants included middle- to high-level officials responsible for managing resources, policy implementation, and public services, representing three central ministries, one national public service agency, and four regional governments. This structural and institutional variation provides a comprehensive view of how ethical leadership is enacted across different organizational environments.

To complement the interviews, secondary documents including codes of ethics, personnel regulations, and internal supervision reports were used to contextualize and support participants' narratives, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of ethical decision-making in bureaucratic practice.

Data analysis followed a phenomenological approach, emphasizing the essence of participants' lived experiences rather than counting occurrences of statements or themes. Significant statements were identified and clustered to reveal core meanings, illustrating how ethical leadership is expressed through exemplary behavior, moral courage, relational justice, and reflective moral awareness. This approach highlights the depth and richness of the ethical reasoning and actions of bureaucratic leaders, focusing on the qualitative structure of meaning rather than numeric frequency, thus maintaining coherence with the phenomenological design of the study.

Table 1 demonstrates that the research informants occupy strategic managerial positions with substantial professional experience, ranging from 14 to 22 years, across both central and regional bureaucratic levels. All participants hold decision-making authority, positioning them directly within contexts where ethical dilemmas frequently arise. The institutional composition reflects deliberate variation. At the central level, informants represent three ministries and one national agency, while at the regional level they come from provincial, district, and municipal governments. This institutional diversity ensures

Table 1. Research Informant Profile

Informant Code	Position	Tenure	Bureaucratic Level	Institutional Type
P1	Head of Division	18 years	Central	Ministry
P2	Director	20 years	Central	Ministry
P3	Secretary of Agency	22 years	Central	National Agency
P4	Head of Sub-Directorate	15 years	Central	Ministry
P5	Head of Public Service Unit	20 years	Regional	Provincial Government
P6	Regional Department Head	17 years	Regional	Provincial Government
P7	Head of Bureau	14 years	Regional	District Government
P8	Technical Director	16 years	Regional	Municipal Government

Table 2. Horizontalization of Significant Statements

Informant Code	Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings
P1	<i>"Sometimes the rules don't give a fair answer, so I have to go back to my conscience."</i>	Ethics as personal moral reflection beyond procedural compliance
P2	<i>"Refusing a deposit is hard, but if it is accepted, the impact will be long."</i>	Moral courage in resisting external pressure
P3	<i>"Subordinates see what we do, not what we say."</i>	Exemplary conduct as the core of ethical leadership
P4	<i>"Ethics is about consistency, even if no one is watching."</i>	Integrity as internal moral commitment
P5	<i>"If the government is fair, the government will be honest with the people."</i>	Ethical leadership shapes organizational justice and trust
P6	<i>"Sometimes political interests try to influence decisions, but we must protect institutional integrity."</i>	Ethical leadership requires boundary-setting against political intervention
P7	<i>"I prefer to delay a decision rather than approve something ethically doubtful."</i>	Prudence and ethical deliberation in ambiguous situations
P8	<i>"Transparency prevents suspicion and protects both the leader and the institution."</i>	Transparency as preventive ethical practice

that ethical leadership practices are examined across different administrative layers, regulatory environments, and political dynamics.

The range of positions from director-level roles to bureau and department heads enables the exploration of ethical practice both in policy formulation and in frontline public service implementation. Such structural variation strengthens the credibility of the findings by allowing cross-context comparison of moral reasoning patterns and leadership responses to ethical pressure. Moreover, the participants' long tenure suggests accumulated exposure to complex governance situations, political negotiation, and organizational challenges. This depth of experience provides a reflective foundation for articulating ethical leadership not merely as procedural compliance, but as a contextualized moral practice shaped by institutional realities. Taken together, the variation in bureaucratic level, institutional type, and administrative setting enhances the study's transferability and supports the robustness of its phenomenological interpretation.

Emergent Themes of Ethical Leadership

The analysis of ethical leadership in public bureaucracy, guided by phenomenological principles, reveals the lived meaning and essential structure of leaders' moral practices as experienced in their everyday decision-making contexts. Through the processes of horizontalization, clustering, and interpretive reflection on significant statements from all eight informants, ethical leadership emerges not as a procedural construct, but as a deeply internalized and contextually enacted moral practice. This practice is expressed through three interrelated dimensions: exemplary behavior, moral courage, and relational justice.

Exemplary behavior constitutes a foundational dimension of ethical leadership, reflected in the alignment between personal values and observable actions. Informants describe leadership as a form of moral visibility, where subordinates interpret ethical standards through what leaders do rather than what they formally communicate. As expressed by one

participant, *"Subordinates see what we do, not what we say"* (P3), emphasizing that consistency, fairness, and transparency are not only individual virtues but also relational signals that shape organizational norms. Ethical leadership, in this sense, functions as a lived example that establishes credibility and guides collective conduct within bureaucratic settings.

Moral courage emerges as an essential dimension in situations where leaders confront ethical dilemmas characterized by regulatory ambiguity, political pressure, or competing institutional interests. Informants consistently frame such situations as moments requiring reflective judgment beyond formal rules. One participant noted, *"Sometimes the rules don't give a fair answer, so I have to go back to my conscience"* (P1), illustrating that ethical decision-making often involves an internal deliberation grounded in integrity and responsibility. Another informant emphasized resistance to external influence, stating that decisions must prioritize institutional integrity despite potential consequences. These accounts indicate that moral courage is not merely reactive, but constitutes an active commitment to uphold ethical principles in complex and uncertain environments.

Relational justice represents the social dimension of ethical leadership, emphasizing how leaders engage with subordinates in ways that foster trust, openness, and fairness. Informants describe ethical leadership as a process that creates psychological safety, enabling employees to express concerns and participate in maintaining organizational integrity. Transparency and consistency are perceived as mechanisms that prevent suspicion and reinforce mutual accountability. In this context, ethical leadership extends beyond individual morality to shape relational dynamics, influencing how ethical values are internalized and reproduced within the organization.

These dimensions are not discrete, but mutually constitutive. Exemplary behavior without moral courage risks becoming symbolic, while moral courage without relational justice may undermine organizational cohesion. Together, they form a reflective and integrated pattern of ethical practice, embedded in the lived realities of bureaucratic life. Ethical

Table 3. Phenomenological-Thematic Clustering of Ethical Leadership

Theme	Subtheme	Interpretative Meaning
Exemplary Leadership	Consistency between words and actions	Leaders function as primary moral role models within the organization
	Compliance with rules without positional privilege	Ethical leadership is demonstrated through fairness and equality of standards
Moral Courage	Resisting political or external pressure	Ethical decisions are upheld despite structural and career-related risks
	Making unpopular but principled decisions	Integrity is prioritized over personal comfort or political safety
Relational Justice	Fair treatment of subordinates	Ethics is practiced as substantive organizational justice
	Protection of employees from undue pressure	Leaders act as moral guardians within institutional structures
Reflective Moral Awareness	Conscience-driven responsibility toward the public	Ethical leadership originates from internalized moral consciousness and public accountability

Table 4. Comparison of Ethical Dilemmas and Leadership Responses

Types of Ethical Dilemmas	Leader's Response	Basis of Consideration (Ethical Values)
Conflict of Interest	Resisting external intervention	Public integrity and justice
Political Pressure	Independent decision-making	Moral responsibility
Regulatory Ambiguity	Using conscience	Ethics of Virtue
Unfair Treatment of Subordinates	Defending employees	Relational justice
Career Risks	Stay consistent on values	Long-term ethical commitment

leadership is thus experienced as a continuous negotiation between personal values, institutional constraints, and public responsibility.

The horizontalization process illustrates that ethical leadership is experienced as a reflective moral process grounded in personal awareness rather than mere compliance with formal regulations (see Table 2). Informants consistently describe ethical dilemmas as emerging in situations where existing rules are insufficient to address issues of fairness or contextual appropriateness. In these circumstances, ethical judgment is constructed through an internal dialogue shaped by conscience, integrity, and responsibility.

Across participants, ethical leadership is understood as an internalized commitment that guides decision-making in uncertain and often contested environments. Leaders emphasize that bureaucratic practice frequently involves navigating regulatory gray areas, where technical procedures alone cannot resolve moral complexity. As such, ethical leadership becomes a situational and reflective practice, requiring continuous interpretation of values in relation to institutional realities. Further interpretation highlights the relational implications of ethical leadership. Participants describe how consistent ethical conduct contributes to the development of trust within the organization, enabling more open communication and encouraging accountability. Leaders' actions are perceived as setting implicit boundaries for acceptable behavior, thereby shaping an organizational culture oriented toward integrity.

The synthesis of these meanings converges into the three interconnected dimensions identified earlier: exemplary behavior, moral courage, and relational justice, which together constitute the essential structure of ethical leadership in public bureaucracy. These dimensions are expressed consistently across different institutional contexts, indicating that ethical leadership operates as a lived and contextualized moral practice rather than an abstract normative ideal.

The thematic clustering presented in Table 3 illustrates that ethical leadership in public bureaucracy is constituted through an integration of interconnected meaning structures, rather than discrete or quantifiable categories. The identified themes: exemplary leadership, moral courage, relational justice, and reflective moral awareness represent essential dimensions of lived experience that collectively shape how

ethical leadership is understood and enacted by participants.

Exemplary leadership and moral courage are expressed as visible and situational manifestations of ethical commitment, particularly in contexts involving uncertainty, pressure, or institutional constraints. However, their significance lies not in their recurrence, but in how they are experienced as morally consequential actions that define leadership integrity. Relational justice complements these dimensions by emphasizing the social and interactional context in which ethical leadership is practiced, highlighting how fairness, protection, and trust are cultivated within organizational relationships.

Reflective moral awareness underpins all dimensions, representing the internalized ethical consciousness through which leaders interpret situations, evaluate consequences, and align their actions with broader public responsibility. Rather than functioning as separate elements, these themes are mutually constitutive, forming a coherent and reflective pattern of ethical practice. This interconnected structure demonstrates that ethical leadership is not reducible to observable behaviors alone, but is grounded in the continuous interplay between personal values, relational dynamics, and institutional contexts.

A comparison table of ethical dilemmas and solutions makes clear how moral values are used practically in the face of bureaucratic challenges (see Table 4). Each type of dilemma is responded to through decisions based on integrity, justice, and public responsibility, rather than mere procedural compliance. This description confirms that ethical leadership serves as a balancing mechanism between structural pressures and human values, while also showing how bureaucratic leaders navigate the ethical gray space by using moral principles as the basis for decision-making.

The meaning of ethical leadership in the public bureaucracy is understood as a reflective process that involves consideration of values, consequences, and the public interest. The data shows that leaders do not always rely on regulatory texts, but rather on ethical judgments shaped by experience, integrity, and awareness of social responsibility. Ethical practices evolved in response to the complexity of bureaucratic situations that formal rules could not fully anticipate.

The pattern of ethical leadership practices also shows a close relationship between the attitude of the leader and the behavior of subordinates. The informant emphasized "If the

leadership is firm and fair, subordinates usually take part in maintaining their attitude". This narrative explains that ethical leadership works through social mechanisms in the form of imitation and internalization of values, thus forming an organizational culture with more integrity.

Data explanatory evidence shows that ethical leadership practices are not instantaneous, but are built gradually through consistency of action. The inconsistency of the leadership in a single decision can damage the moral legitimacy that has been built before. These findings confirm that the sustainability of ethical practices is highly dependent on the stability of values and the firmness of the character of bureaucratic leaders.

The relationship between data shows that example, moral courage, and relational justice reinforce each other in forming a wholesome ethical leadership practice. Exemplary without moral courage has the potential to be symbolic, while courage without relational justice can trigger organizational resistance. Data shows that the effectiveness of ethical leadership arises when all three dimensions are present simultaneously in the actions of the leader.

The relationship between ethical leadership practices and the organizational climate is evident in informant narratives of trust and openness. An ethically led work environment encourages employees to express critical opinions and report irregularities without fear. This relationship shows that ethical leadership serves as a psychological foundation for healthy bureaucratic governance.

The interconnectedness of the data also indicates that ethical leadership practices contribute to the stability of the organization in the long run. Decisions made based on ethical considerations strengthen institutional legitimacy and public trust. This finding confirms that ethics is not an additional variable in bureaucracy, but a core element that connects leadership, organizational culture, and the quality of public services.

As part of the main phenomenological findings, this study examines the experience of a regional public service unit leader who faced external pressure in administrative decision-making. This case represents an ethical dilemma characterized by the absence of clear procedural guidelines and its direct implications for service fairness. Analytically, the case is integrated with the three core dimensions identified in this study: it reflects exemplary behavior in maintaining integrity under pressure, demonstrates moral courage in making high-risk decisions, and illustrates relational justice in ensuring equitable treatment of the community. This integration shows how ethical leadership is enacted in practice, particularly when leaders must navigate tensions between formal compliance and moral responsibility for the public interest.

The context of the case shows that there is intervention from outside parties who have political and personal interests in determining service policies. Unit leaders face the risk of vertical conflict with their structural superiors if they refuse such interventions. This experience illustrates the reality of a public bureaucracy that is full of interests outside of the purpose of the ministry.

The leader's response to the situation is based on the principles of transparency and personal accountability. One of the informant's statements stated *"I am aware that this decision could have an impact on my position, but if I give in, justice for the people who are sacrificed" will be done.* This narrative asserts that the practice of ethical leadership in this case is rooted in an awareness of moral responsibility that goes beyond the interests of the position.

The main significance of this case study shows that ethical leadership is practiced as a conscious act in the face of personal and structural risks. Leaders interpret ethics as a commitment to substantive justice values, not just procedural

compliance. Ethical decisions are made based on considerations of the long-term impact on public trust and institutional legitimacy.

The data also revealed that moral courage in this case study did not arise spontaneously, but was shaped by long experiences and repeated reflections on values. Leaders view ethical dilemmas as a test of integrity, not as an administrative obstacle. This view reinforces the understanding that ethical leadership practices are the result of a deep internalization of values.

Further explanation shows that the ethical actions of leaders produce symbolic effects for the organization. The decisions taken serve as a moral message to subordinates regarding the non-negotiable boundaries in the public bureaucracy. This practice shows that ethical leadership functions as a mechanism of implicit value learning in organizations.

The relationship between the case study and the general findings shows the consistency of previously identified patterns of ethical leadership practices. Example, moral courage, and orientation to public justice re-emerged as key elements in case study decision-making. The repetition of this pattern reinforces the validity of the overall research findings.

The relationship of data also indicates that ethical leadership practices are contextual but have universal principles. Although case studies take place at the level of regional bureaucracy, the values underlying ethical decisions are relevant to the experience of informants at the central level. This relationship shows that ethical leadership crosses structural and hierarchical boundaries of bureaucracy.

The data synthesis confirms that ethical leadership in the public bureaucracy serves as a link between the leader's personal values and the organization's institutional goals. Case studies show how individual ethical decisions contribute to strengthening organizational culture and public trust. The relationship of these findings places ethical leadership as a strategic element in bureaucratic reform oriented towards integrity and public service.

The findings indicate that ethical leadership in public bureaucracy is enacted as a practice grounded in everyday managerial action, rather than merely as a normative administrative expectation. Across central and regional contexts, ethical leadership is expressed through exemplary conduct, moral courage, and consistency of values in decision-making, as reflected in participants' accounts. Informants emphasized that leadership behavior particularly visible actions such as fairness, transparency, and integrity plays a decisive role in shaping subordinate responses and organizational norms. This interpretation is consistent with evidence in public administration literature, which highlights that leadership behavior often exerts a stronger influence on ethical outcomes than formal codes alone (Downe et al., 2016); (Frista Iin Wahyuni et al., 2024). In this sense, the study extends existing ethical leadership frameworks by showing that ethical leadership operates not only as moral modeling, but also as a relational process through which trust and normative clarity are constructed in practice, particularly within hierarchical bureaucratic settings.

The findings also suggest that consistent ethical conduct contributes to the development of organizational trust and credibility, as reflected in participants' emphasis on integrity, fairness, and transparency in decision-making. Informants described how such practices reduce internal resistance, strengthen confidence among subordinates, and support institutional stability in complex bureaucratic environments. These observations resonate with prior studies highlighting the role of ethical culture in sustaining organizational performance and legitimacy (Zahari et al., 2024). However, rather than positioning ethical leadership solely within abstract strategic management frameworks, the present study demonstrates

empirically how trust and credibility are constructed through everyday leadership practices, indicating that their strategic value emerges from lived organizational experience rather than from formally defined resources.

The study also confirms that ethical practice most visibly emerges in bureaucratic gray areas where regulations provide incomplete guidance. Leaders rely on reflective moral reasoning when facing political pressure or conflicting interests. This observation is consistent with (Moon & Christensen, 2022), who demonstrate that ethical leadership moderates internal organizational dynamics and strengthens collective responsibility beyond rule compliance. Similarly, (Elapan et al., 2025) argue that governance failures often stem from weak ethical judgment rather than from regulatory absence, highlighting the strategic role of leader discretion.

From an organizational behavior and HRM standpoint, the findings reveal that ethical leadership contributes directly to a justice-oriented psychological climate. Fair and consistent decision-making enhances subordinate trust and psychological safety. Empirical evidence supports this relationship: (Saleem et al., 2024) found that ethical leadership improves employee well-being through emotional regulation processes, while (Schuster et al., 2022) demonstrate that ethical climates stimulate public service motivation and employee voice behavior. These mechanisms show that ethical leadership influences human capital stability and engagement, reinforcing its managerial significance (Wahyuni, 2023).

Moreover, the findings resonate with studies linking ethical leadership to organizational trust and public legitimacy. (Dobel, 2018) show that authentic and ethical leadership strengthens internal alignment and institutional credibility. Similarly, (Mendy, 2023) emphasizes the centrality of accountability and ethical governance in developing country bureaucracies, while (Wahyuni, I, F. & Husain, 2021) demonstrate that bureaucratic integrity significantly influences public service quality. These studies reinforce the present research's argument that ethical leadership is embedded in governance effectiveness rather than isolated moral rhetoric.

A distinguishing contribution of this study lies in its phenomenological approach, which uncovers how leaders interpret ethical dilemmas in lived managerial practice. While dominant survey-based studies on ethical leadership typically capture generalized patterns through predefined constructs such as organizational justice scales, ethical climate indices, or code-of-conduct adherence these approaches tend to emphasize measurable perceptions and behavioral outcomes. In contrast, the phenomenological method employed in this study reveals dimensions of ethical leadership that are often inaccessible through survey instruments, particularly the interpretive processes, internal moral deliberations, and context-sensitive judgments that shape decision-making in ambiguous situations. The findings demonstrate that ethical decisions frequently occur outside formalized structures, where leaders must navigate competing values, political pressures, and institutional constraints in real time. This approach makes visible how ethical leadership is experienced as a situated and reflective practice, rather than as a set of stable traits or compliance indicators. By capturing these lived and interpretive dimensions, the study offers a deeper understanding of ethical leadership as a dynamic process of meaning-making, thereby complementing and extending insights generated by quantitative research traditions. (King et al., 2024), in their systematic review, highlight the dominance of survey-based approaches in ethical leadership research, indicating a need for qualitative insights into experiential processes. This study responds to that gap by exploring reflective judgment and

moral courage under structural pressure.

The findings indicate that the behavior of senior leaders plays a central role in shaping how ethical values are understood and enacted within bureaucratic settings. Participants described how leaders' consistency in upholding ethical standards influenced subordinates' attitudes and responses, particularly in situations involving uncertainty. This suggests that ethical conduct is often learned through observation rather than formal rules, reflecting a form of social learning in organizational practice. This interpretation is consistent with prior research showing that leadership behavior can influence employee performance and ethical commitment in public institutions (Oladimeji et al., 2022), although the present study emphasizes how such processes are experienced in specific institutional contexts.

From an Institutional Theory perspective, ethical leadership can be interpreted as a mechanism for maintaining organizational legitimacy under external political and societal pressures. Institutional environments impose normative expectations, yet leaders must translate these expectations into practice. The findings suggest that leaders act as institutional carriers of ethical norms, mediating between structural constraints and organizational values. This supports the argument that leadership discretion plays a central role in sustaining institutional stability.

Practically, the implications extend to HRM and governance systems. Ethical leadership should be embedded within leadership development frameworks through scenario-based ethical simulations, reflective forums, and integrity-based performance evaluation. (Zahari et al., 2024) argue that ethical culture requires systemic reinforcement to sustain organizational performance. Likewise, (Novita et al., 2026) emphasize that bureaucratic integrity must be institutionalized rather than treated as individual virtue. Therefore, ethical leadership development must be integrated into strategic human capital management rather than addressed solely through compliance training.

The hierarchical culture of public bureaucracy further explains why exemplary behavior emerges as a dominant theme. As (Tistasari, 2023) show, bureaucratic culture and leadership communication significantly influence ethical practice in regional governance. When leader actions consistently align with declared values, organizational members experience normative clarity and increased trust. This dynamic reduces governance risk and strengthens long-term institutional resilience.

From a strategic management perspective, the findings suggest that ethical leadership is associated with governance outcomes through patterns observed in participants' experiences. Informants described how exemplary behavior and consistency between words and actions contributed to greater trust and credibility among subordinates, which supported perceptions of institutional legitimacy. Similarly, moral courage in navigating political pressure and regulatory ambiguity was reflected in efforts to maintain integrity and avoid decisions that could harm organizational reputation. The practice of relational justice, particularly fair treatment and protection of employees, was also linked by participants to stronger engagement and willingness to contribute to organizational goals. These findings indicate that the influence of ethical leadership on governance outcomes such as trust, legitimacy, and employee commitment is grounded in everyday leadership practices. In this context, trust appears to function as an important organizational resource that can facilitate coordination and support policy implementation, although its effects remain closely tied to specific institutional settings.

The practical implications of these findings extend beyond regulatory reinforcement and are grounded in the empirical patterns identified in this study. First, the prominence of reflective moral awareness, particularly in how leaders

interpret ethical dilemmas beyond formal rules, indicates the need for structured ethical reflection forums where leaders can deliberate real-case situations and strengthen moral reasoning capacity. Second, the emergence of moral courage in contexts of political pressure and regulatory ambiguity supports the integration of scenario-based ethical simulations in leadership development programs, enabling leaders to practice decision-making under conditions of risk and uncertainty. Third, the importance of exemplary behavior, especially consistency between words and actions, suggests that performance evaluation systems should incorporate qualitative assessments of integrity, fairness, and value consistency, as these elements were identified by participants as key determinants of leadership credibility. Fourth, the centrality of relational justice, reflected in fair treatment and protection of subordinates, highlights the necessity of strengthening whistleblowing protection mechanisms and organizational safeguards to maintain psychological safety and encourage ethical voice. Taken together, these measures position ethical leadership not merely as an individual moral attribute, but as a systemically supported governance practice embedded within organizational routines and human resource management systems.

The findings also highlight the contextual dynamics shaping ethical leadership in public bureaucracy. Political pressure, structural interests, and regulatory ambiguity create ethical gray areas in which formal rules provide incomplete guidance. Under such conditions, leaders rely on personal moral judgment to bridge institutional gaps (Adnan et al., 2022). Long tenure and accumulated experience contribute to the development of mature ethical reflection, as leaders internalize lessons from past failures, conflicts, and dilemmas. This process reflects experiential moral learning, where ethical competence evolves through continuous engagement with complex decision-making environments (Basu et al., 2022). Furthermore, hierarchical bureaucratic culture amplifies the importance of exemplary conduct. Subordinates observe and internalize leader behavior more than written regulations, making consistency between words and actions the dominant mechanism through which ethical norms are institutionalized; (Ellapan et al., 2025; Fitri Hayani et al., 2024).

Future research should broaden the empirical scope by examining ethical leadership across diverse bureaucratic levels and public service sectors. Comparative cross-national studies may clarify how institutional contexts influence ethical enactment, while longitudinal designs could capture how moral judgment evolves across political cycles and administrative reforms. Integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches would enable triangulation between lived ethical experiences and measurable organizational outcomes, strengthening theoretical generalization.

In conclusion, this study shows that ethical leadership in public organizations is enacted through three interconnected dimensions: exemplary behavior, moral courage, and relational justice. These dimensions' shape how leaders maintain integrity, respond to pressure, and ensure fair treatment within bureaucratic contexts. The findings indicate that ethical leadership extends beyond formal compliance and is reflected in everyday practices that influence trust, accountability, and organizational functioning. This interpretation is consistent with prior studies suggesting that leadership behavior plays a key role in shaping ethical outcomes within public institutions ((Downe et al., 2016)(Moon & Christensen, 2022).

From a strategic management standpoint, ethical leadership contributes to sustainable governance by reinforcing institutional trust and long-term legitimacy. Trust functions as a non-financial strategic asset that reduces coordination costs and increases implementation

effectiveness. As highlighted by (Zahari et al., 2024), ethical culture embedded within leadership practice enhances organizational sustainability and governance resilience. Therefore, ethical leadership should be conceptualized as an intangible strategic resource that strengthens bureaucratic reform capacity and mitigates reputational and governance risks.

By moving beyond compliance-based interpretations, this research advances a managerial understanding of ethics as a core driver of sustainable public sector performance. The shift from a control-oriented paradigm toward a character-embedded leadership model provides a more adaptive and resilient pathway for bureaucratic reform one capable of producing institutions that are not only efficient, but also legitimate, trusted, and strategically sustainable.

Conclusion

This study answers the research question by showing that ethical leadership in public bureaucracy is enacted as a situated and reflective practice, in which leaders interpret and respond to ethical dilemmas that are not fully regulated by formal procedures. The findings demonstrate that ethical leadership is experienced through three interrelated dimensions exemplary behavior, moral courage, and relational justice which operate as practical mechanisms through which leaders navigate ambiguity, maintain integrity, and build trust within hierarchical organizational contexts.

In terms of theoretical positioning, these dimensions do not constitute an entirely new framework, but rather represent a contextual reinterpretation and empirical extension of existing ethical leadership constructs within bureaucratic environments. The study contributes by shifting the emphasis from compliance-based and trait-oriented perspectives toward an understanding of ethical leadership as a lived, interpretive, and relational process, grounded in everyday decision-making practices. Methodologically, the phenomenological approach enables the identification of internal moral deliberation, contextual judgment, and meaning-making processes that are often not captured in dominant survey-based studies.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the number of informants is limited and drawn from a specific bureaucratic setting, which may constrain the transferability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not capture the evolution of ethical leadership practices over time. These limitations indicate that the findings should be interpreted as contextually grounded insights rather than broadly generalizable claims.

Future research can extend this study by examining how the identified dimensions of ethical leadership evolve across different institutional settings and over time. Longitudinal and cross-sectoral studies would be particularly valuable to explore the stability and variation of exemplary behavior, moral courage, and relational justice in diverse governance contexts. In addition, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches may help to further validate and refine these dimensions while preserving the depth of lived experience identified in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed significantly to the development of this research. The first author was responsible for conceptualizing the study, designing the research framework, conducting data collection, and performing data analysis. The co-authors contributed to refining the research design, validating the findings, and providing critical revisions to the manuscript. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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