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Ethical leadership and accountability in reducing maladministration in South African Public Sector organisations: A systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the interplay between ethical leadership, accountability, and maladministration in public organisations, focusing on how moral leadership principles can strengthen governance effectiveness. Using a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol, the research analysed twenty peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 across multiple databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and ProQuest. The thematic synthesis revealed that ethical leadership anchored in integrity, fairness, and empathy serves as a behavioural and institutional driver of accountability, reducing the prevalence of maladministration and corruption in the public sector. The findings indicated that accountability operates as a mediating mechanism linking ethical conduct to governance performance through oversight systems, ethical work climates, and transparent decision-making structures. The results also highlighted that ethical leaders foster trust, legitimacy, and responsible behaviour, creating cultures that deter misconduct and encourage compliance. Moreover, institutional frameworks such as independent audits, ethics training, and participatory governance were identified as critical enablers of sustained accountability. The study concludes that ethical leadership must transcend individual morality and become institutionalised within governance systems to achieve lasting reform. Recommendations include embedding ethics into leadership development, strengthening accountability frameworks, promoting citizen oversight, and leveraging technology for transparency. Overall, the study affirms that ethical leadership and accountability are interdependent pillars for combating maladministration and restoring public confidence in government institutions.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Accountability, Maladministration, Public Organisations, Governance, Transparency, Integrity.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of ethical leadership in connection with public organizations and the discussion of good governance has undoubtedly gained popularity within the last few years. Ethical leadership implies leadership which occurs through certain values related to the benefit of the public, including integrity, honesty, and responsibility.[1] Public administration is characterized by many leaders who work with

[1] Ahmed-Nor Mohamed Abdi, Mohamed Bile Hashi, and Khawaja Fawad Latif, "Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Performance: Mediating Role of Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Politics and Moderator of Social Capital," *Cogent Business & Management* 11, no. 1 (2024): 2386722.

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public money, and that is why such an issue as ethics becomes critical when defining policy development as well as the process of implementation. One example of the governance problem that may occur in connection with unethical leadership involves inefficient governance, inappropriate decision-making processes, and corruption resulting in the misuse of funds.[2] An increasing number of researchers are starting to think about ethical leadership as a culture within an organization rather than a characteristic of a single person.[3] The prevalence of ethical scandals within government institutions has intensified the quest for mechanisms of moral leadership as a means of improving public sector efficiency and trust. Thus, ethical leadership serves as a behavioural and institutional mechanism of protection against the loss of accountability in governance systems.

The African continent continues to experience maladministration; however, African governments and policymakers have tried to reform maladministration by improving public sector efficiency.[4] Many public sector officials become corrupt and have little or no accountability, which decreases service delivery.[5] In some cases in South Africa, after carrying out audits, it has been discovered that there is unethical leadership leading to an ethical vacuum, therefore leading to poor controls with regard to procurement, finance, and regulations.[6] Orders of public service funds (PSF) given to public service officers in Kenya and Uganda have been invalidated; this shows that abuse of PSF orders by public service officers is a common phenomenon and reflects unethical leadership and its implications.[7] From these examples, one can conclude that, to avoid maladministration, there should be principled public leadership. Public sector leaders set the ethical tone, and public sector leaders have shown that ethical leadership is the main catalyst for transforming public administration. Public administration can only transform if there is ethical leadership.

Accountability and its link with ethical leadership are first established in how ethical leadership encourages people within an organization to behave in a manner that shows accountability and transparency. The demand for accountability means that ethical leaders should provide the necessary moral justification for how public leaders justify their actions and decisions and their use of public resources.[8] Lack of accountability results in inequality and unethical behavior such as favoritism and corruption.[9] Leaders who possess ethical moral character foster an environment where transparency is promoted, avenues for power arbitrage are minimized, and equity is enhanced in administrative actions.[10] Furthermore, ethical leadership promotes teamwork, improves staff morale, and creates an organization's culture that is resistant to corruption. It becomes easier to identify and correct gaps in governance when accountability and ethical standards in leadership align. Therefore, when control systems are absent and the environment is politically very sensitive, the role of ethical leadership is fundamental to bringing about long-lasting transformation in the public sector.

Across the globe, ethical leadership in public management is vital to guaranteeing sustainability and sound governance. UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 is one of the many documents globally and indicates the need for strong and accountable institutions to be able to succeed in the country.[11] The

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[2] C. Ngoepe-Ntsoane and W Webb, "Ethical Leadership and Maladministration in the South African Public Service," *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 9, no. 1 (2021): 1–11.

[3] Petronella Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation," *South African Journal of Business Management* 55, no. 1 (2024): 4272.

[4] Goonasagree Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa," *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147-4478)* 13, no. 7 (2024): 445–56.

[5] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."

[6] B. Msiza, "Ethical Governance and Maladministration in South African Municipalities: Policy Implications for Reform ," *African Journal of Governance and Development* 14, no. 1 (2025): 87–101.

[7] Ngatuny Kinyamal and Dennis Juma, "Ethical Leadership Practices and Service Delivery of Public Institutions in Narok County, Kenya," *Human Resource and Leadership Journal* 10, no. 4 (2025): 56–73; S Mucunguzi, J Nakayiza, and P Tumusiime, "Citizen-Led Accountability in Uganda's Public Administration: A Pathway to Ethical Governance," *Journal of African Public Administration and Management* 16, no. 2 (2025): 44–61.

[8] Christopher Neil Makanga et al., "Accountability in Public Sector Organizations: Does Ethical Work Climate Matter?," *IIM Ranchi Journal of Management Studies* 5, no. 1 (2026): 46–61.

[9] P.V.C Okoye, "Public Accountability and Ethical Responsibility in Nigeria's Civil Service: Evaluating Institutional Mechanisms ," *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research* 17, no. 1 (2025): 24–39.

[10] Eric Yeboah-Asiamah, "A Culture of Accountability through Ethical Leadership Drives Citizenship Behavior in Ghana's Traditional System of Leadership," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership* 18, no. 2 (2025): 16.

[11] Diana Al-Fayez et al., "Building Blocks of Good Governance: Fostering an Ethical Work Climate in Public Sector Organizations,"

Public Administration theory of Resimić predicts the role of ethical leadership and public stewardship in mentoring others. "Ubuntu" is a way of life in Africa that stresses collective leadership with emotional intelligence and ethics.[12] Therefore, ethical leadership governance focuses institutions on their true purposes. Within the public sector, ethics safeguard public sector accountability, restore public trust, and deliver public services to citizens.

Based on this background, the study seeks to answer this question: How does ethical leadership improve accountability to reduce maladministration in public organisations?

Sub-Research Questions

1. What are the key characteristics of ethical leadership that influence accountability in public organisations?
2. How does accountability mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and maladministration reduction?
3. What strategies can be recommended to strengthen ethical leadership and accountability frameworks to prevent maladministration in public organisations?

Significance of the Study

This research adds to the analysis of public sector ethics by demonstrating how ethical leadership fosters the deepening of accountability and the mitigation of administrative evils in public sector organisations. This research assists policymakers, public managers, and institutions responsible for the training of leaders in the integration of ethics in the daily governance of public organisations. The research highlights the interrelation of ethical behaviour and accountability of institutions and, consequently, posits ethical leadership as a key instrument of public governance (not only as a virtue) to sustain public administration. The research is of particular importance in situations where trust in the public sector is eroded by corruption and administrative incapacity because it demonstrates how ethical governance restores trust through administrative justice, transparency and responsible governance. Further, it demonstrates the necessity to sustain a culture of integrity, which modifies the ethical behaviour of personnel and enhances adherence to the principles of ethical behaviour. This research helps public sector managers and oversight institutions to build models that incorporate ethics in the selection, training, and assessment of leadership performance. It also contributes to the analysis of leadership ethics, accountability frameworks, and governance in developing countries. The study aims to promote an evidence base of good governance by showing that public leadership credibility, effectiveness, and trust are an ethical requirement of the institution, and not merely a personal virtue of the office holder.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical leadership has emerged as a concern due to the growing problem of mismanagement and corruption within public administration. Naidoo argues that public sector steering crises occur due to a lack of Integrity, Transparency, and Fairness (ITF).[13] According to recent studies, the reason why good governance results can be achieved is by having moral leadership to ensure that public value is used.[14] Ethical leadership leads to creating a culture in organisations that allows people to behave in certain ways, and accountability systems that eliminate any possibility that an organisation may turn out to be unethical. Public organisations have come to realise that, due to ethical leadership, governance is a very important factor in providing good services and, therefore, achieving the satisfaction of citizens.[15] Public management failure represents the mismatch between what policies require and what people do; hence, it is necessary for some scholars to examine how ethical leadership affects accountability and reduces unethical practices.

Public Administration and Development 44, no. 5 (December 6, 2024): 383–96, https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.2054.

[12] A. Sipondo, "Ubuntu Ethical Leadership in the African Public Sector: Conceptual Proposals," *International Journal of Public Leadership* 21, no. 1 (2025): 33–49.

[13] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."

[14] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."

[15] T. Nzimakwe and R. Utete, "The Value of Ethical Leadership in Improving Service Delivery amongst Senior Managers," *De Gestao Social E Ambiental*, 1981.

Concept of Ethical Leadership in Public Organisations

Ethical leadership influences followers to have integrity, fairness, and accountability in their decisions, setting that tone.[16] It is centered around the leaders' moral conduct, setting the tone for the ethical climate within the organisation. In public administration, ethical leaders exhibit role modeling by demonstrating integrity, fairness, and justice in service delivery.[17] They foster and promote transparency in decision-making and encourage accountability for their actions among the employees. In the public sector, ethical leadership is complementary as it pairs public administration values with managerial practices.[18] Leaders who have ethical values build trust while motivating people to work towards the public good. It is in contrast to ethical awareness that causes the organisation to suffer moral collapse. Kinyamal and Juma found that ethical leadership practices in Kenyan public institutions strengthen employees' sense of responsibility, thereby improving accountability and reducing the risk of maladministration.[19] It is thus evident that ethical leadership within organisations is not ceremonial, as it brings forth tangible results, where accountability and responsibility are maintained within the organisation.

Accountability as a Mechanism for Ethical Governance

Accountability is a key element of ethical governance because it requires executives and staff to justify their actions and decisions.[20] In the public sector, accountability comprises horizontal mechanisms, which include parliamentary control and auditing, and vertical mechanisms, which include citizen surveillance and transparency. The role of accountability mechanisms in ensuring that there are minimal cases of maladministration, in addition to safeguarding the interests of the general public by deterring and revealing such actions, is well recognized.[21] According to Al-Fayez et al., ethical climate improves the level of accountability through establishing a system of value-based culture that promotes ethical decision-making.[22] Such ethical leaders will improve accountability mechanisms through practicing ethics, responsible communication, and appropriate use of power. In the absence of such factors, accountability mechanisms can serve as an ornament.

As demonstrated by recent studies, there should be accountability at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels if it is to achieve its intended effect. According to Nzimakwe and Utete, in the case of South Africa, accountability mechanisms are non-functional due to a lack of leadership commitment and politicization of monitoring mechanisms.[23] Similarly, Okoye explains that in Nigeria, public administration claims transparency, accountability, and responsibility, but bureaucratic inefficiency results from the inability of leaders to take accountability.[24] Ethical leadership is the anchor that enables these accountability systems to be maintained, as leaders, through their honesty and responsibility, give legitimacy to these oversight institutions and, thus, bring about organizational compliance. This is why ethical leadership and accountability do not operate in a vacuum, as both are fundamental to optimum governance. The literature indicates that effective accountability systems exist in the spaces where ethical leadership is present as a cultural aspect of the organization.

Understanding Maladministration in the Public Sector

Maladministration is characterized by conduct not only unbefitting of a public administrator in terms of dishonesty, disloyalty, fraud, and betrayal of trust, but also an administrator's conduct which is unbefitting of any agent of the principal, either in loyalty, obedience, or the faithful performance of the

[16] Abdi, Hashi, and Latif, "Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Performance: Mediating Role of Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Politics and Moderator of Social Capital."
[17] N. Salman, N.A Rahim, and S Fisal, "Leadership Ethics and Organisational Integrity: Implications for Public Sector Management," *International Journal of Ethics and Systems* 40, no. 2 (2024): 204–21.
[18] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."
[19] Kinyamal and Juma, "Ethical Leadership Practices and Service Delivery of Public Institutions in Narok County, Kenya."
[20] Makanga et al., "Accountability in Public Sector Organizations: Does Ethical Work Climate Matter?"
[21] Bright Muronda and Gerrit van der Waldt, "A Good Governance Framework for State Institutions: The Case of the Government of Zimbabwe," *Administratio Publica* 31, no. 4 (2023): 117–42.
[22] Al-Fayez et al., "Building Blocks of Good Governance: Fostering an Ethical Work Climate in Public Sector Organizations."
[23] Nzimakwe and Utete, "The Value of Ethical Leadership in Improving Service Delivery amongst Senior Managers."
[24] Okoye, "Public Accountability and Ethical Responsibility in Nigeria's Civil Service: Evaluating Institutional Mechanisms ."

duty of service to the principal.[25] This includes dishonesty, betrayal of trust, disloyalty, and fraud. Maladministration is the most common cause of disillusionment and institutional failure of public entities on the African continent.[26] Given the persistence of such issues, it is simply not enough to say that structural adjustments will fix the ethical turmoil of a system. Until integrity in leadership is addressed, it will not be possible to mitigate the ethical dilemmas. Resimić observes that in highly corrupt contexts, there exists a paradox in which the administrative system corrupts itself by not having any form of ethical code.[27] This is possible because of the lack of accountability systems or the failure of such systems due to them being undermined (i.e, corruption). This suggests that ethical leadership is the most important piece in solving systemic maladministration.

Several scholars argue that there exists a connection between poor administration and lack of ethics and poor leader commitment.[28] When leaders have their individual interests in mind and not the service of the people, then they create conditions of organizational delinquency. Conversely, when leaders practice ethics, they build organizational cultures that promote compliance, congruence, and control.[29] Moreover, leaders who practice ethics create conducive atmospheres where reporting unethical acts and protecting whistleblowers is promoted.[30] These measures counter public administrative failure and reinstate public trust. Nevertheless, there are scholars who point out that ethical leadership is devoid of practical effectiveness in the absence of supportive institutional frameworks, including autonomous auditing, functioning disciplinary systems, and civic activism.[31] Hence, there is an inclination to emphasize a dual reality where the control of administrative decay is the convergence of individual integrity and institutional accountability.

The Interrelationship between Ethical Leadership, Accountability, and Maladministration

Several studies point to the connection between ethical leadership, accountability, and the lowering of maladministration.[32] Workers function in an ethical climate, and transparent choices by moral leaders create workplaces where employees understand the ethics of their actions and the results of their actions. With ethical leadership, accountability continues to foster ethical behaviour and appropriate, timely corrective action when ethical breaches occur.[33] According to Lasthuizen, moral leadership is the "moral infrastructure" within which the other systems of accountability function, and in turn, such accountability is the infrastructure which constrains ethical actions.[34] With ethical leadership as an ideal, accountability, as the other element, is bound to be punitive and authoritarian.

Different sources of data have supported this viewpoint. In Kenya, for example, Kinyamal and Juma observe that ethical leadership fosters accountability, which in turn enhances public service delivery.[35] Nzimakwe and Utete note the same phenomenon in South Africa, where senior public sector managers' ethical behaviour positively influenced service delivery.[36] Makanga et al. further point out that work ethical climates, especially those that foster leadership accountability, drive employees and

[25] Lebohang Moji, Norman T. Nhede, and Tyanai Masiya, "Factors Impeding the Implementation of Oversight Mechanisms in South African Municipalities," *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* 3 (December 13, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4102/jolgri.v3i0.94.

[26] M. Thabayapelo, " Maladministration and Ethics in African Local Governance: Lessons from Public Service Failures," *African Journal of Public Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2025): 77–93.

[27] J. Resimić, "Integrity Systems and Ethical Accountability in Transitional Governance: A European-African Policy Dialogue," *Public Integrity* 27, no. 1 (2025): 1–18.

[28] Msiza, "Ethical Governance and Maladministration in South African Municipalities: Policy Implications for Reform ."

[29] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."

[30] Muronda and van der Waldt, "A Good Governance Framework for State Institutions: The Case of the Government of Zimbabwe."

[31] Mucunguzi, Nakayiza, and Tumusiime, "Citizen-Led Accountability in Uganda's Public Administration: A Pathway to Ethical Governance."

[32] Abdi, Hashi, and Latif, "Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Performance: Mediating Role of Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Politics and Moderator of Social Capital."

[33] Yeboah-Asiamah, "A Culture of Accountability through Ethical Leadership Drives Citizenship Behavior in Ghana's Traditional System of Leadership."

[34] K. Lasthuizen, "Ethical Leadership and Integrity Management: Developing Moral Competence in Public Institutions," *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 91, no. 2 (2025): 341–59.

[35] Kinyamal and Juma, "Ethical Leadership Practices and Service Delivery of Public Institutions in Narok County, Kenya."

[36] Nzimakwe and Utete, "The Value of Ethical Leadership in Improving Service Delivery amongst Senior Managers."

reduce opportunities for corruption.[37] However, such support for accountability might lose its worth when leaders wield it discriminatorily or for political gain. The literature indicates that ethical leadership and accountability can be mutually inclusive and create an environment in which moral leadership and supervision eliminate the possibility of administrative corruption. This environment would guarantee more than mere compliance, but an internalization of such ethical values within the public sector.

The African Perspective on Ethical Leadership

In contrast to Western systems of governance, the ethical leadership practiced in Africa draws inspiration from the unique characteristics of its culture, society, and politics. For instance, an African scholar, Sipondo, highlights the Ubuntu philosophy of ethics and morals, where the main focus is on benevolence and collectivism as well as social and leadership roles.[38] In public administration, the Ubuntu philosophy of ethics highlights what is ethical and good while opposing what is selfish and corrupt. Another African scholar, Okoye, observes that African public administration can combine traditional ethical systems with administrative systems.[39] In the African context, therefore, ethical leadership goes beyond just adherence to regulations and policies. It also entails a moral obligation to the people. Although comprehensive and ethical public administration is part of the objectives of African public administration and African democracies, the integration of ethical leadership in African bureaucracies is hindered and affected by the social and political realities of the continent.[40] Weak accountability, pervasive influence of patronage networks, and limited infrastructural, financial and human capacity contribute to the situation.[41] Naidoo suggests that it is necessary to train and examine leadership within the ethical dimension to mitigate the challenges at hand.[42] In line with the findings presented by Yeboah-Asiamah, the phenomenon of civic engagement has often gone unnoticed yet has become one of the most significant tools that can help deal with the problem of an ethical vacuum in democratic states of Africa.[43] In the example provided by Mucunguzi et al. regarding Uganda, participatory monitoring and community civic control contribute to accountability in the leadership process.[44] Therefore, it can be concluded that ethical leadership requires community involvement and cultural adaptation.

Challenges in Promoting Ethical Leadership and Accountability

However, political participation is one of the many problems that arise regarding ethical leadership and accountability. Professional dependency and politicization of the decision-making process are other challenges on the list.[45] The politically appointed leaders would be forced to act against the public good to advance the interests of their party, resulting in ethical and survival challenges for the bureaucracy.[46] Poor leadership could be blamed on poor ethics training.[47] In addition, failure to address any unethical practices means compromising accountability.[48]

Lack of proper control from the administration side and the corruptive environment prevailing within the community are some of the other reasons for maladministration.[49] It is suggested that institutions adopt ethical principles as part of their governance process by constantly reviewing and monitoring the processes involved.[50] The mentoring system, ethics control system, and employment

[37] Makanga et al., "Accountability in Public Sector Organizations: Does Ethical Work Climate Matter?"
[38] Sipondo, "Ubuntu Ethical Leadership in the African Public Sector: Conceptual Proposals."
[39] Okoye, "Public Accountability and Ethical Responsibility in Nigeria's Civil Service: Evaluating Institutional Mechanisms."
[40] Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "The Challenges of Building Developmental States in Africa," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, no. 23 (2014): 1-36.
[41] Thabayapelo, " Maladministration and Ethics in African Local Governance: Lessons from Public Service Failures."
[42] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."
[43] Yeboah-Asiamah, "A Culture of Accountability through Ethical Leadership Drives Citizenship Behavior in Ghana's Traditional System of Leadership."
[44] Mucunguzi, Nakayiza, and Tumusiime, "Citizen-Led Accountability in Uganda's Public Administration: A Pathway to Ethical Governance."
[45] Msiza, "Ethical Governance and Maladministration in South African Municipalities: Policy Implications for Reform ."
[46] Resimić, "Integrity Systems and Ethical Accountability in Transitional Governance: A European-African Policy Dialogue."
[47] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."
[48] Muronda and van der Waldt, "A Good Governance Framework for State Institutions: The Case of the Government of Zimbabwe."
[49] Al-Fayez et al., "Building Blocks of Good Governance: Fostering an Ethical Work Climate in Public Sector Organizations."
[50] Abdi, Hashi, and Latif, "Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Performance: Mediating Role of Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Politics and Moderator of Social Capital."

system are regarded as means that can be adopted to bring about ethical leadership development. To address these issues, leadership ethics, institutional adjustments, and the activism of a citizenry must be combined.[51] The literature notes the dilemma of ethical leadership: that without adequate structures being put into place, ethical leadership simply will not work, and the more an environment is infused with corruption, the more ethical leaders will fail.

Literature Review Gaps and Future Research Directions

The information presented reinforces previous ambiguity within the literature around ethical leadership that promotes accountability and decreases administrative wrongdoing. However, the literature is scarce (if present) in various geographical areas, including Africa. Correctly, many studies cite the dominance and provide little explanation for the analytical deficiency related to the impact of ethical leadership on governance outcomes.[52] Naidoo and Lasthuizen recognize a positive correlation and an increase in the operationalization of ethical leadership.[53] Unfortunately, the literature is qualitatively thin on the range of behaviours and outcomes on accountability and service delivery within para-public administration. A literature review presented in the 2002 OECD report on ethics training examines the gaps succinctly. For many scholars, the limitations of the cultural dimension to the ethical leadership foundation are also acknowledged. Sipondo and Yeboah Asiamah discuss the Ubuntu and communal ethics framework with little empirical depth on positive relational governance and the associated values of traditions.[54] Most studies focus on leadership and, particularly, the ministerial level. For Moji, Nhede and Masiya, the local sphere of government is where the challenges of administrative fraud are most visible and concerning.[55] To close the presented gap, it is essential to bring together theory and practice on the intersectionality of ethical leadership and accountability to demonstrate their institutionalization. In summary, the literature provides a solid theoretical foundation for this research, while also highlighting the need for specific contextual evidence to guide public sector reform.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This systematic literature review is grounded in three complementary perspectives: Ethical Leadership Theory, Accountability Theory and Good Governance Theory. These perspectives provide an integrated basis for explaining how ethical leadership can reduce maladministration in South African public sector organisations through stronger accountability systems and governance practices. Ethical Leadership Theory explains the moral and behavioural role of leaders in shaping organisational conduct, especially through integrity, fairness, transparency and concern for the public interest. Brown, Treviño and Harrison define ethical leadership as the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate conduct through personal action, communication, reinforcement and decision-making.[56] In terms of the public sector, the idea of ethical leadership is highly significant due to the effect of leadership behavior on the interpretation of rules, public resources management, and ethics-related risks. For instance, as Abdi et al. indicate, the link between ethical leadership and high levels of public sector performance is grounded in the decrease of opportunism and trust-building in organizations.[57] In addition, Jonck argues, responsible leadership in the public sector must be associated with public value creation, accountability, and responsibility.[58] The issue of maladministration in the South African public sector due to, for

[51] Mathew Kimanzi and Peter Rakgalakane, "Promotion of Ethical Leadership Behaviour Practices in Public Secondary Schools: A South African Perspective," *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 7, no. 2 (2025): 1–13.
[52] Makanga et al., "Accountability in Public Sector Organizations: Does Ethical Work Climate Matter?"
[53] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa"; K. Lasthuizen, I. van Eeden Jones, and E. Vivier, "The Value of Ethical Leadership (Is) in Its Context," *Administrative Sciences* 15, no. 3 (2025): 112. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15030112.
[54] Sipondo, "Ubuntu Ethical Leadership in the African Public Sector: Conceptual Proposals"; Yeboah-Asiamah, "A Culture of Accountability through Ethical Leadership Drives Citizenship Behavior in Ghana's Traditional System of Leadership."
[55] Moji, Nhede, and Masiya, "Factors Impeding the Implementation of Oversight Mechanisms in South African Municipalities."
[56] Michael E. Brown, Linda K. Treviño, and David A. Harrison, "Ethical Leadership: A Social Learning Perspective for Construct Development and Testing," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 97, no. 2 (July 2005): 117–34, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002.
[57] Abdi, Hashi, and Latif, "Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Performance: Mediating Role of Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Politics and Moderator of Social Capital."
[58] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."

example, lack of proper controls, purchasing processes, politics, and ineffective consequences management makes ethical leadership a governance asset rather than a characteristic.

Furthermore, Accountability Theory takes the idea a step further by explaining the impact that ethical leadership has on developing the idea of answerability, responsibility, and administrative control. This involves a duty of public officials to explain their actions and face consequences in case they fail to fulfill certain obligations that pertain to ethics, law, or performance.[59] The theory is related to the present research since, for ethical leadership to act as an antidote for maladministration, there should be mechanisms to ensure that unethical behavior is detected, reported, and punished. According to Makanga et al., the creation of an effective work environment ensures increased accountability among workers because they feel the need to assume responsibility in case organizational norms discourage such behavior.[60] Similarly, Ngoepe-Ntsoane and Webb state that anti-corruption measures in South Africa could be ineffective because of low ethical leadership qualities. Accountability Theory therefore positions accountability as the mediating mechanism between ethical leadership and the reduction of maladministration.[61] Ethical leaders set the moral direction, but accountability systems convert that direction into practical controls such as reporting procedures, internal audits, performance monitoring, whistleblower protection, disciplinary processes and public scrutiny. The theory also exposes a critical limitation: accountability structures may become symbolic where oversight bodies lack independence, where sanctions are applied selectively, or where political loyalty overrides administrative integrity. For this reason, accountability is most effective when it is both ethical and institutional.

Good Governance Theory situates ethical leadership and accountability within the wider institutional architecture of public administration. Good governance is associated with transparency, rule of law, responsiveness, participation, efficiency, equity and accountability. The theory can be considered consistent with Section 195 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, where public administration should be characterized by democratic principles of governance. The researchers Muronda and Van der Waldt argue that good governance models should be applied in public institutions due to the reconciliation of public power with value creation, participation of the population, and institutional accountability.[62] According to Naidoo, the theory of ethical leadership is linked to governance, including stricter procedures for procurement of goods, increased organizational accountability, anti-corruption mechanisms, and professionalism in the context of governance.[63] Good Governance Theory proves to be particularly useful for the current investigation because it prevents the problem of maladministration from being defined only through ethical misconduct of individuals. Maladministration is also a structural problem that emerges where governance systems are weak, oversight is ineffective and institutional culture tolerates unethical conduct.

The theory therefore provides the institutional foundation for understanding why ethical leadership and accountability must operate together. Ethical leadership provides direction, accountability provides control, and good governance creates the system within which both can be sustained.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model guiding this systematic literature review. The model conceptualises ethical leadership as the primary leadership construct, accountability as the mediating governance mechanism, and reduced maladministration as the intended public administration outcome. Ethical leadership is reflected through integrity, fairness, transparency, empathy, role modelling and commitment to the public interest. Accountability is reflected through answerability, internal controls, oversight, performance reporting, citizen scrutiny, disciplinary enforcement and transparent decision-making. A decrease in maladministration can be observed in fewer instances of improper decision-making, lower chances of corruption, greater compliance, effective service delivery, and higher levels of public trust. Good governance is a facilitating factor for improving the connection between ethical

[59] Mark Bovens, "Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework," *European Law Journal* 13, no. 4 (July 7, 2007): 447–68, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0386.2007.00378.x.
[60] Makanga et al., "Accountability in Public Sector Organizations: Does Ethical Work Climate Matter?"
[61] Ngoepe-Ntsoane and Webb, "Ethical Leadership and Maladministration in the South African Public Service."
[62] Muronda and van der Waldt, "A Good Governance Framework for State Institutions: The Case of the Government of Zimbabwe."
[63] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."

leadership and accountability. Some examples of this type of environment include adherence to the rule of law, organizational independence, civic involvement, professionalism, e-transparency, and ethicality.

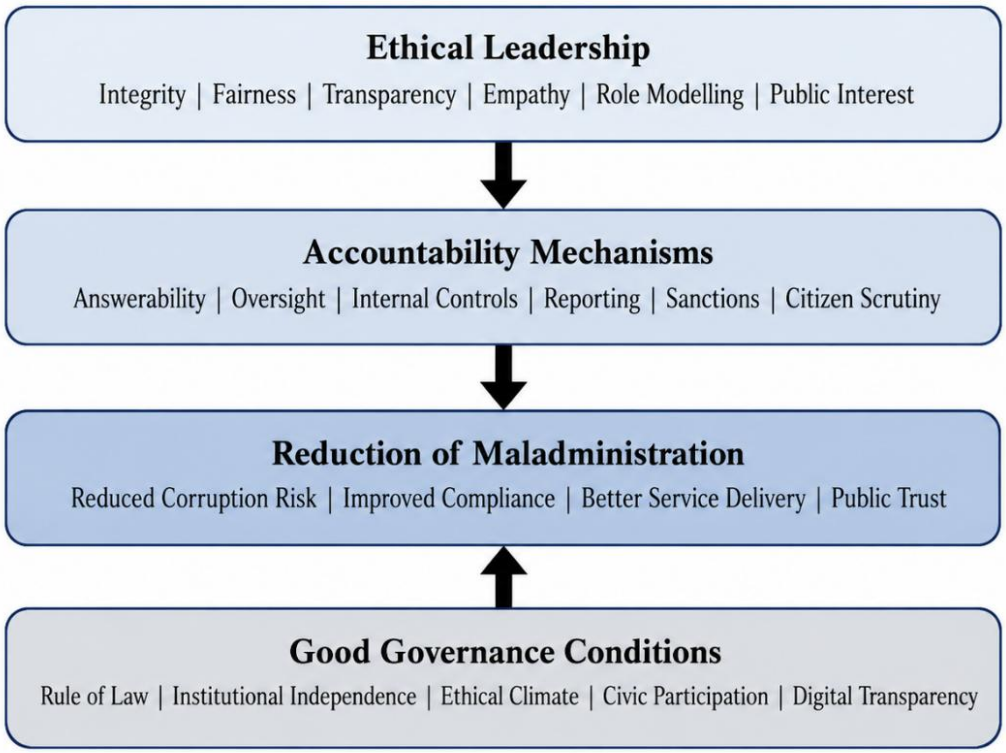


Figure 1: Conceptual model linking ethical leadership, accountability and maladministration reduction in South African public sector organisations

The conceptual model strengthens the theoretical logic of the study by showing that ethical leadership does not reduce maladministration through moral influence alone. Its effect depends on whether moral conduct is institutionalised through accountability mechanisms and reinforced by good governance conditions. This issue is especially significant in South African public sector institutions, which already have guidelines and measures put in place against corruption, but where lack of execution has been undermining the effectiveness of such measures. According to Nzimakwe and Utete, ethical leadership from the senior executives within organizations can enhance service delivery.[64] However, the model also recognises that ethical leadership may be constrained where organisational culture normalises non-compliance or where accountability processes are politically compromised. This makes the framework analytically useful for a systematic literature review because it links the study's three core concepts in a clear sequence: ethical leadership shapes conduct, accountability regulates conduct, and good governance sustains conduct. The framework therefore supports the study's central position that reducing maladministration requires more than ethical leaders; it requires public organisations to embed ethics into institutional systems, oversight practices and everyday administrative decision-making.

METHODOLOGY

Search Strategy

Guided by Page et. al., the review adhered to PRISMA 2020 standards to ensure an open and replicable procedure.[65] The search engines used are Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, PubMed/MEDLINE, ProQuest (Dissertations & Theses Global was excluded), and EBSCOhost (Business Source Complete and Academic Search Premier). To increase coverage of outputs from public administration, Google

[64] Nzimakwe and Utete, "The Value of Ethical Leadership in Improving Service Delivery amongst Senior Managers."
[65] Matthew J Page et al., "The PRISMA 2020 Statement: An Updated Guideline for Reporting Systematic Reviews," *BMJ*, March 29, 2021, n71, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71.

Scholar was employed for tracking forward citations and searching for grey literature; however, only peer-reviewed documents were accepted at the selection stage. The time frame was from January 1, 2020, to October 31, 2025, to meet the goals of the study for relevant and recent evidence. The initial search process was completed between October 20, 2025, and October 25, 2025, whereas the second one was conducted on November 5, 2025, including any other related studies that might have been indexed in the last few days of October. Additional sources were identified by reviewing the references cited within the identified literature. All searches were completed in English, and their findings were recorded in a spreadsheet to avoid duplication of sources. The whole procedure was documented using PRISMA rules and techniques in flow reporting to account for the figures and actions taken.[66]

Search Terms

The search strings included some Controlled Vocabulary (if applicable) as well as free-text keywords. For PubMed, MeSH terms included "Leadership", "Ethics", "Organizational Culture," and "Accountability" along with the text words 'ethical leadership, public sector, maladministration, public sector corruption, public sector service delivery, good governance.' A central Boolean structure common across databases was: ("ethical leadership" OR "responsible leadership" OR "values based leadership") AND ("public sector" OR "public administration" OR government OR "state institutions")
AND (accountability OR transparency OR "integrity systems" OR "anti-corruption" OR maladministration) AND (governance OR "service delivery")
Specific proximity and field tags were used across databases that were useful, for instance, in Scopus: TITLE-ABS-KEY (ethical W/3 leadership) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (public W/3 sector). The results were limited by filters to 2020-2025 and to the English language. The searches were not limited by geography in order to include Public Organizations, African and Global evidence.

Inclusion Criteria

To be eligible, studies had to be: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles or peer-reviewed reviews, (b) involve public organisations (national, provincial/state, or local government public agencies, public mandated SOEs), (c) involve any of the following: Ethical leadership, accountability, maladministration (integrity failures, corruption-related administrative issues, service-delivery risk), or good governance in public administration, and (d) contain empirical work or, if integrative, contain conceptual reviews which had accountability or its implications in focus. Publications had to be in the English language and were to be published between 01 January 2020 and 31 October 2025. In addition, conceptual papers were included in which the relationships of ethical leadership, accountability, or reduction of maladministration were clearly articulated.

Exclusion Criteria

Records were excluded if they: (a) were not peer-reviewed (opinion papers, editorials, brief commentaries, newsletters, a good number of grey literature), (b) involve private-sector leadership only, without public-sector relevance, (c) dwelt on clinical/medical ethics without relevance to governance in an organisation, (d) did not have rich methodological detail, or did not give any findings or theory in the realm of accountability or maladministration, (e) were on the outside of the 2020–2025 window, or (f) not in English. For consistency in the quality of evidence, we also excluded, at the full-text stage, conference abstracts not accompanied by full peer-reviewed papers, book chapters, theses, and policy briefs.

Study Selection Process (PRISMA)

References were duplicated by exporting them to a master sheet. Titles and abstracts were screened for potential eligibility and then screened for duplicates. After the screening, title and abstract review was followed by a full-text review. Disagreements were discussed and settled by a third reviewer. 1,238 total records were identified, 312 of which were duplicates, leaving 926 to review. 812 were excluded in a

[66] Page et al., "The PRISMA 2020 Statement: An Updated Guideline for Reporting Systematic Reviews."

title and abstract review for not being relevant material. 114 full-text records were reviewed, and of these, 94 were excluded due to a non-relevant primary focus (28; private sector), non-peer-reviewed 22, lack of reasonable linkage to an accountability/misadministration purpose 27, and others due to time constraints or language barriers 17. 20 studies remained that qualified under all of the evaluative criteria and were then synthesized for the final section of the report. Data that were synthesized across studies included setting, design, sample, ethical-leadership construct, accountability mechanisms, outcomes of maladministration, key findings, limitations, etc. The PRISMA 2020 documentation and reporting checklist was used to ensure that transparency, accountability, and replicability were demonstrated in the completion of all review steps.

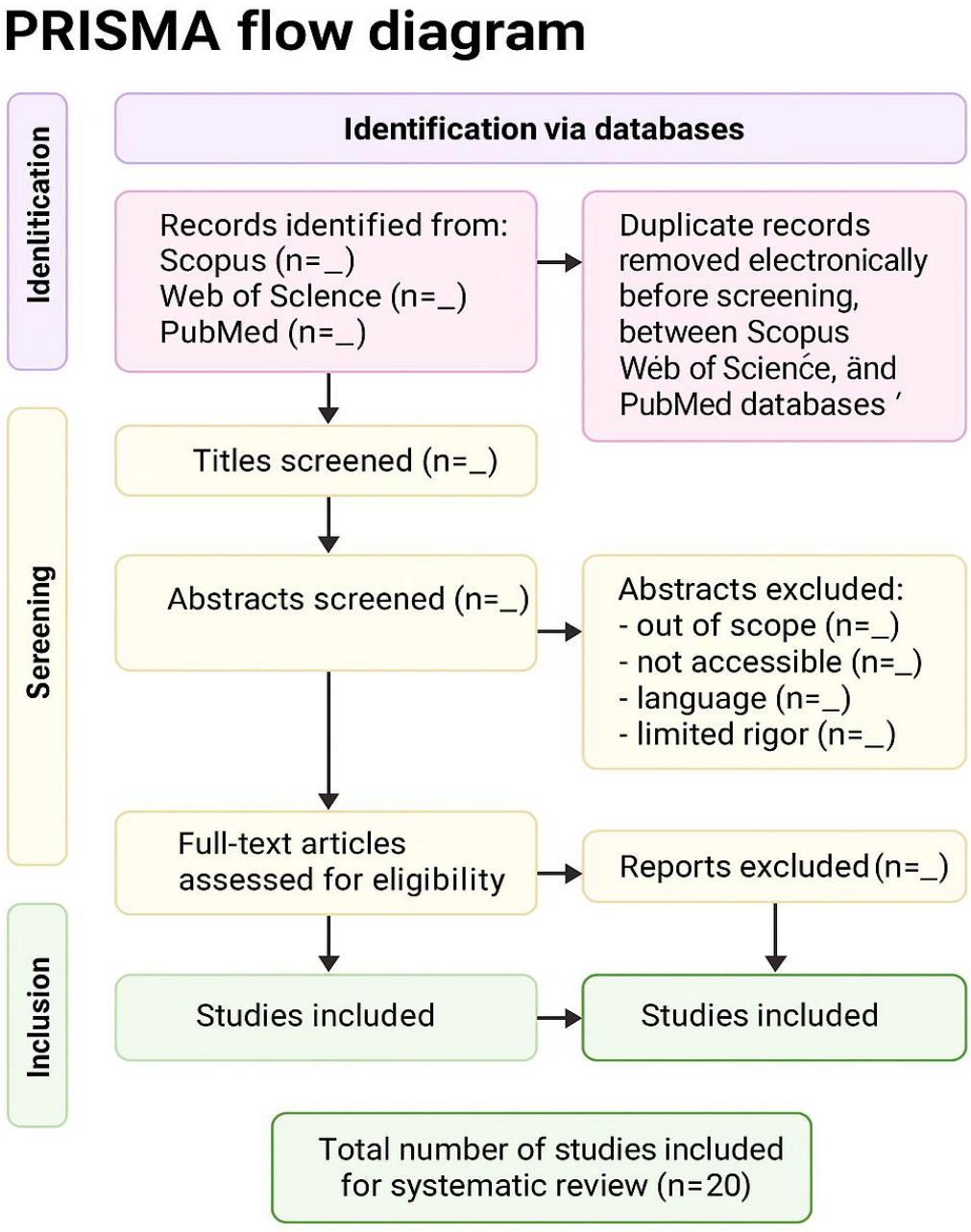


Figure 1: Prisma Flow Diagram

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Characteristics of Ethical Leadership that Influence Accountability

Sub-theme 1.1 Integrity and Transparency in Decision-Making

The analysis showed that honesty and fairness continued to appear as main features of ethical leadership in the reviewed documents. The documents showed that when public servants maintain honesty, there is full disclosure and no avoidance of conflicts of interest; there is much greater effectiveness of accountability. Integrity was not simply presented as a moral slogan but as an operational value describing how one rationalizes and narrates his/her decisions. Transparency, in turn, was defined as the availability of information and unencumbered communication, both within and across the boundary of the organisation. Trust that the organisation is internally and externally fair and open will eliminate many of the organisation's internal conflicts. Further data patterns indicated that leaders who had a preference for openness were the ones who also allowed their staff a safe environment to challenge questions and report deviations, thereby reducing the incidence of maladministration.

These results support the idea described in the publications about ethical leadership and integrity. For instance, Abdi, Hashi and Latif showed that trust and opportunity-based withdrawal increase, and so does organisational performance with honest leadership.[67] Compliance and commitment inspired by leadership transparency have also been documented in Kinyamal and Juma in some Kenyan public organisations.[68] Furthermore, Muronda remarked that the accountability of organisations is increased by the legitimacy of organisational governance, as enhanced by the clear procedures of decision-making.[69] This closeness of the studies with the data validates that the intention of accountability is in ethical leadership, and the processes are clear. However, the literature is also clear that transparency is a weak, floating type and lacks structure. Naidoo has noted that ethical leadership is present, but accountability will be weaker as institutional monitoring is also weak.[70] In line with the same point, Resimić highlighted the fact that when it comes to political corruption, this can tend to affect the lack of transparency and governance systems that have high corruption.[71] This comparison indicates that ethical integrity varies widely in the context of the data under analysis. Therefore, it may be important to understand that ethics in organizational structures should not depend only on personal integrity.

Sub-theme 1.2 Fairness, Justice and Role Modelling

The secondary data indicated the foundational role that fairness and justice play in maintaining ethical accountability within the public sector. Leaders who equitably allocate resources, apply rules uniformly, and approach employees with the same degree of respect and fairness are the ones who were recognised as sponsors of ethical self-discipline the most. Fairness was shown to alleviate issues of bias and increase confidence in systems. Procedural justice was distinguished as fairness in the processes, and distributive justice as fairness in the outcomes of resource allocation. Participants in multiple studies under review also mentioned role modelling as a practical avenue through which fairness is made visible. When senior managers demonstrate ethical behaviour, they increase the likelihood that employees will self-internalise the accountability norms and, as a result, the likelihood of maladministration.

As a matter of fact, this paper also takes into account various academic publications that treat justice as one of the crucial aspects of ethical leadership. Therefore, according to Nzimakwe and Utete, justice not only enhanced institutional trust but also helped to improve the service delivery processes for senior managers.[72] In addition, ethical modeling on the job, as proposed by Jonck, ensures another critical advantage for organizations, that is, the fact that ethical modeling makes an organization's leader more authoritative and accountable.[73] Finally, Makanga et al. claim that justice creates an ethical climate

[67] Abdi, Hashi, and Latif, "Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Performance: Mediating Role of Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Politics and Moderator of Social Capital."
[68] Kinyamal and Juma, "Ethical Leadership Practices and Service Delivery of Public Institutions in Narok County, Kenya."
[69] Muronda and van der Waldt, "A Good Governance Framework for State Institutions: The Case of the Government of Zimbabwe."
[70] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."
[71] Resimić, "Integrity Systems and Ethical Accountability in Transitional Governance: A European-African Policy Dialogue."
[72] Nzimakwe and Utete, "The Value of Ethical Leadership in Improving Service Delivery amongst Senior Managers."
[73] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."

where whistleblowing is prevalent.[74] Therefore, it follows that fairness is not just a value but a behavioural cue that should be embraced within the accountability framework in the public service. However, the literature is also aware of the disconnect between the ideals of fairness and reality. Okoye pointed out that in most bureaucratic systems, fairness will, however, be a casualty due to political loyalty and patronage systems.[75] Msiza added that weak and inconsistent punitive measures will do little to preserve moral authority and are an invitation to maladministration.[76] The analysed data reflect these weaknesses, whereby fairness is distorted, and credibility is lost when leaders choose to apply ethical rules discretionarily. Thus, while fairness and justice have been accepted as critical hallmarks of ethical leadership, the development of ethical governance frameworks, in partnership alignment with fairness, has to be incorporated to realize their effective potential.

Sub-theme 1.3 Empathy and People-Centred Leadership

Secondary data showed that empathy and people-centred leadership impact accountability by deeply humanising governance. These leaders forge deeper trust and cooperation by personally interacting with employees and citizens. Empathic leaders ensured an environment where people could freely speak out, prevented fears of retaliation, and inspired workers to raise their concerns. People-oriented ethics reinforced the point that accountability is not about procedure but rather relationships. Appealing to people's emotions and knowing their needs ensured that authorities gained credibility and accessibility.

This links directly with the concept of Ubuntu that African-centered scholarship engages with. Sipondo calls Ubuntu leadership an ethic of care and shared humanity and says that it is because of this that public leaders show humility and compassion.[77] Yeboah-Asiamah also says that empathy is the reason for the public trust and accountability culture, and from this, the public system works.[78] Al-Fayez et al. add that empathy also helps develop ethical work climates. This explains the emotional and moral sides of accountability.[79] Other authors also point out that empathy works with some clear administrative lines for it to be effective. While Jonck argues that soft standards may cause leniency,[80] Naidoo argues that the people-centred leadership lens should be balanced with firmness and that institutional discipline is essential.[81] The findings at hand are in support of this complex of ideas that inclusive empathy works with accountability. Basically, empathy means that ethical leadership is no longer just following rules but creating a human-centred approach, which means ethical leadership is collaborative and offers more exercise in responsibility.

Theme 2: Accountability as a Mediating Mechanism Between Ethical Leadership and Maladministration Reduction

Sub-theme 2.1 Institutional Accountability Systems

The data analysis illustrates the degree to which accountability systems serve as mediating variables between ethical leadership and the absence of maladaptive administration. The reviewed literature recognised the presence of formal systems, including but not limited to audit and reporting systems, as well as integrity frameworks, as constitutive of a moral leader and organisational discipline. The data showed that when these systems were well integrated, leaders were able to demonstrate transparency, and the followers exercised greater compliance with ethical behaviour. Institutions that conducted periodic financial audits and established systems reviewed governance breaches and revealed better ethical climates. The findings also showed that the systems of accountability operated optimally in the presence of moral leadership, as such moral leadership inspired the followers to take the oversight

[74] Makanga et al., "Accountability in Public Sector Organizations: Does Ethical Work Climate Matter?"
[75] Okoye, "Public Accountability and Ethical Responsibility in Nigeria's Civil Service: Evaluating Institutional Mechanisms."
[76] Msiza, "Ethical Governance and Maladministration in South African Municipalities: Policy Implications for Reform ."
[77] Sipondo, "Ubuntu Ethical Leadership in the African Public Sector: Conceptual Proposals."
[78] Yeboah-Asiamah, "A Culture of Accountability through Ethical Leadership Drives Citizenship Behavior in Ghana's Traditional System of Leadership."
[79] Al-Fayez et al., "Building Blocks of Good Governance: Fostering an Ethical Work Climate in Public Sector Organizations."
[80] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."
[81] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."

frameworks seriously. Without ethical leadership, even within systems configured to be relational, the ordered systems were ineffective in mitigating administrative negligence.

Based on the above readings, it is evident that accountability will play a key role in defining ethical behavior among leaders. According to Makanga et al., the element of accountability may be guaranteed by fostering an ethical working environment through evaluation.[82] Besides, according to Muronda, the element of control plays an important role in identifying any misconduct. Naidoo added that the systems of ethical accountability are most effective in workplaces where the leaders demonstrate moral strength and autonomy, thereby providing support for the governance structures.[83] The convergence of the provided documentation and the data shows that the systems of formal accountability make ethical ideals visible through particular actions. However, the documentation has also shown some gaps, which the data have partially corroborated. Resimić described such environments where there is systemic corruption, accountability systems are bypassed, and there is a systematic deficit of available resources.[84] Okoye also shares this concern, stating that political and bureaucratic inertia is a possible weakness regarding compliance.[85] The documents and the data confirm each other to such an extent that it is clear that, although institutional accountability ought to enhance ethical leadership, its practical applicability is highly dependent on political context and also the capability of the institution. In conclusion, ethically guided leadership and the formal system within accountability can minimise maladministration and, depending on the system's flexibility, can become sustainable.

Sub-theme 2.2 Ethical Climate and Organisational Culture

The analysis of the data demonstrated that ethical climate serves as the cultural bridge that mediates how ethical leadership transforms into accountability. Reviewing the evidence showed a recurring pattern; institutions that had stronger ethical cultural compliance demonstrated lower levels of misconduct and had stronger ethical cultures. The data demonstrated that ethical leadership influenced the internal values, norms, and attitudes that sustain the transparency and fairness of the surroundings, anchored by more than compliance. Employees showed greater moral responsibility and were more inclined to counter unethical behaviour. On the contrary, institutions operating with weak ethical cultures relied on external enforcement mechanisms, which did not sustain behavioural change.

These results confirm the findings of previous research that views ethical climate as a pivotal mediator between the junction of leadership and outcomes of governance. Al-Fayez et al. showed that an ethical workplace setting improves an individual's sense of accountability as a result of the collective moral setting vis-à-vis the workplace.[86] In the same way, Naidoo stated that in an environment where ethical culture is largely absent, the use of accountability mechanisms such as audits and disciplinary committees is ineffective since employees view these mechanisms as mere formalities (i.e. procedural) and are not aimed at addressing ethical values) thus making the process futile.[87] In general, the existing literature indicates that institutionalisation of ethical culture is the primary means through which moral accountability is incorporated into the day-to-day administrative activities. This finding reflects the results of previous analysis, which showed that ethical climate, as an attribute, is persistent even in the face of leadership changes. Despite this, some authors contend that the process of developing ethical cultural values is both time- and resource-intensive, coupled with stability in leadership. Jonck reported that concluded ethical reform processes were ineffective when leadership changes result in non-alignment of values.[88] Kinyamal and Juma, through observation, also noted that building an ethical culture is a gradual process and is dependent on the participation of both junior and senior managers.[89] These results are consistent with the information presented in this analysis, as it shows that ethical leadership acts as the catalyst for the moral approach; therefore, culture needs to be strengthened to

[82] Makanga et al., "Accountability in Public Sector Organizations: Does Ethical Work Climate Matter?"
[83] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."
[84] Resimić, "Integrity Systems and Ethical Accountability in Transitional Governance: A European-African Policy Dialogue."
[85] Okoye, "Public Accountability and Ethical Responsibility in Nigeria's Civil Service: Evaluating Institutional Mechanisms ."
[86] Al-Fayez et al., "Building Blocks of Good Governance: Fostering an Ethical Work Climate in Public Sector Organizations."
[87] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."
[88] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."
[89] Kinyamal and Juma, "Ethical Leadership Practices and Service Delivery of Public Institutions in Narok County, Kenya."

ensure continued accountability. Therefore, organisational culture is the unnoticeable framework that allows ethical leadership to achieve lasting decreases in maladaptive behaviour instead of temporary changes in compliance.

Theme 3: Strategies to Strengthen Ethical Leadership and Accountability Frameworks

Sub-theme 3.1 Leadership Development and Ethics Training

The analysis of the provided data highlighted that leadership development accompanied by ongoing training in ethics has been the most popular of the available public organisational ethical accountability-promoting strategies. The examined outcomes revealed that the majority of public entities, even the previously reluctant ones, have come to view training as an activity that goes beyond compliance and contributes to the development of leaders' moral behaviour and ethical action alignment. The documented patterns indicated that the greater the number of institutions that integrated structured ethics training and mentoring frameworks, the greater the levels of integrity, transparency, and accountability demonstrated by the officials. The data also showed that the most effective training interventions were those that incorporated practical exercises, peer review activities, and coaching, rather than a single session of the dissemination of policy documents. The institutions that provided frequent training were also the ones that had fewer staff disciplinary problems and higher staff satisfaction. This points to the conclusion that leadership training, particularly in ethics, should be practical and ongoing to influence the accountability behaviour of the leaders significantly.

The statement given above can be supported by literature already available. According to Nzimakwe and Utete, public administrators start recognising the importance of ethics and their need to behave in an ethical manner because of being involved in formal ethics programs.[90] As Jonck argued, to promote value-based leadership, ethics should also be included as a criterion within performance management frameworks.[91] Naidoo also discussed the significance of mentorship programmes in fostering moral resilience and strengthening senior public leaders' norms of accountability.[92] These studies are correlated with the data provided that training helps improve the ability to face ethical challenges with integrity and confidence. With the breadth of evidence, it is impossible to ignore that building leadership capacity is a prerequisite for ethical governance. Much of the literature corroborates the data findings and also provides alternative considerations. Muronda noted that concerns have been raised about fragmentation collapsing public organisations' training by classifying it as superficial and lacking in strategy and continuity.[93] Disjointed ethics programs were also cautioned against by Resimić, who said that they ought to be pertinent to the environment and the culture within the environment if they are to bring about behavioral changes on a sustainable basis.[94] These studies show that without systematic enforcement, training alone is not enough, and hence it is from this body of literature that we get the importance of incorporating ethics into mandatory training of leaders.

Sub-theme 3.2 Policy Reforms and Governance Frameworks

According to the analysis of the data collected, there was agreement on the need for reforms in policies and frameworks to ensure that the organisation has ethical leadership and accountability. The evidence gathered indicated that where there are mechanisms of accountability and independence, then the integrity violations in public sector organisations would be fewer. Additionally, where there are codes of conduct in place, digital transparency, and anti-corruption units, then integrity would be better upheld. It also emerged that reforms must go beyond policies to the practical, such as whistleblower protections and consequences for violations. The analysis revealed that in governance, reforms of an ethical nature were most likely to succeed when leaders demonstrated compliance and when the institutional structures were free of political meddling.

[90] Nzimakwe and Utete, "The Value of Ethical Leadership in Improving Service Delivery amongst Senior Managers."
[91] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."
[92] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."
[93] Muronda and van der Waldt, "A Good Governance Framework for State Institutions: The Case of the Government of Zimbabwe."
[94] Resimić, "Integrity Systems and Ethical Accountability in Transitional Governance: A European-African Policy Dialogue."

The aforementioned literature provides evidence for the significance of the institutional reform aimed at promoting accountability. Specifically, with regard to governance reform, according to Muronda, ethical accountability can be promoted through reform associated with policymaking; this can take place within the sphere of independent auditing, performance appraisal, and transparency of the individual relationship.[95] Another study by Resimić introduced an innovative initiative in which accountability was to be achieved through technology-enabled approaches such as monitoring, automation, and reporting openly to avoid any possibility of committing fraud.[96] Furthermore, Zahari et al. suggest that public institutions that secure their ethical accountability and self-regulation based on meeting ESG and sustainability criteria can ensure their ethical accountability.[97] It must also be noted that institutional reform makes institutions very strict concerning maladministration and implements a zero-tolerance policy towards maladministration. However, there are certain drawbacks associated with policy gaps and a lack of policy enforcement and implementation due to non-existent ownership and leadership, as mentioned by other scholars. In particular, Naidoo states that the mentioned governance framework cannot function without being enforced and politically captured.[98] These insights point to the need for reforms paired with ethical leadership and constant monitoring. Therefore, the data support that governance reform is not to create rules but to realign the institutional framework to ethical accountability and integrity.

Discussion Summary

The findings indicate that ethical leadership reduces maladministration in South African public sector organisations, but this relationship is not automatic or sufficient on its own. Ethical leadership becomes meaningful when integrity, fairness, transparency and empathy are translated into visible administrative practices that shape how officials use authority, allocate resources and account for decisions. According to Abdi, Hashi and Latif, the notion of ethical leadership would make public service more efficient insofar as it would help counteract opportunities and instill organisational trust.[99] In the same vein, Jonck argues that any discourse on responsible leadership in the public sphere must consider ideas about public value, stakeholder responsibility and accountability.[100] But in the case of South Africa, it is clear that ethical leadership should not be understood solely in terms of the personal values of the leaders, since maladministration persists in the context of poor controls, politicisation and poor consequence management. Here comes the significance of Naidoo's context-specific view of ethical leadership in terms of the practice of good governance in areas such as procurement integrity, internal controls, whistle-blowing and professional conduct.[101] Its value lies in its capacity to create an institutional climate in which accountability is expected, misconduct is questioned, and public officials are guided by the public interest rather than personal, factional or political benefit.

Nevertheless, it seems that the key to using the concept of ethical leadership in order to avoid maladministration lies in the accountability aspect, although existing research proves that the effectiveness of any accountability programs is significantly reduced when the programs work at the procedural level. According to Muronda and Van der Waldt, the concept of good governance implies the need to properly arrange the promotion of transparency, responsiveness, citizen participation, and accountability.[102] In addition, Makanga et al. demonstrate that the promotion of accountability in workplaces occurs by making employees accountable because of the lack of an unethical atmosphere in the organisation.[103] The significance of the above argumentation is related to the following: the problem of maladministration in public organisations consists not only of unethical behavior but also of

[95] Muronda and van der Waldt, "A Good Governance Framework for State Institutions: The Case of the Government of Zimbabwe."
[96] Resimić, "Integrity Systems and Ethical Accountability in Transitional Governance: A European-African Policy Dialogue."
[97] A.R. Zahari et al., "Governance and Sustainability Accountability: Integrating ESG Ethics into Public Institutions," *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 37, no. 6 (2024): 951–70.
[98] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."
[99] Abdi, Hashi, and Latif, "Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Performance: Mediating Role of Corporate Social Responsibility and Organizational Politics and Moderator of Social Capital."
[100] Jonck, "Responsible Leadership in the Public Sector: A Sector-Specific Interpretation."
[101] Naidoo, "Promoting Ethical Leadership and Good Governance: Response to Public Sector Corruption in South Africa."
[102] Muronda and van der Waldt, "A Good Governance Framework for State Institutions: The Case of the Government of Zimbabwe."
[103] Makanga et al., "Accountability in Public Sector Organizations: Does Ethical Work Climate Matter?"

inefficient mechanisms of problem reporting and administration. In this regard, the contribution of Ngoepe-Ntsoane and Webb is crucial since their study shows the positive effect of ethical leadership on dysfunctional anti-corruption policies in South African public institutions. Still, one should remember the negative aspects of the idealistic perception of ethical leadership.[104] Ethical leaders may encourage integrity, but they require enforceable accountability frameworks, independent oversight, transparent decision-making and active civic scrutiny to sustain ethical governance. In this sense, reducing maladministration depends on the alignment between moral leadership, organisational culture and institutional accountability. Public sector organisations are therefore more likely to restore public trust and improve service delivery when ethical conduct is embedded into everyday governance systems rather than treated as an optional leadership virtue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations are proposed to strengthen ethical leadership and accountability in public organisations:

1. **Institutionalise Ethics Education:**
   Public agencies must integrate ethics and accountability into leadership training courses. The provision of mentoring and professional development, together with case studies, will contribute to instilling ethical considerations.
2. **Strengthen Accountability Frameworks:**
   Such independent bodies, which include the audit committee, the office of the ombudsman, and anti-corruption bodies, should receive sufficient administrative and financial backing from the governments. Mandatory transparent reporting and performance-based accountability measures must be instituted in all government agencies.
3. **Promote Ethical Organisational Culture:**
   Ethical considerations should be incorporated within public organisations not only in terms of ethics as their values but also through ethical practices such as incentive programs. It is important that leaders display high morals and inspire confidence within their followers.
4. **Leverage Technology for Transparency:**
   It is very important to encourage the adoption of digital technology such as data portals, e-governance tools, and whistle-blowing applications since it will help make information flow more transparent and traceable and hence can help detect corruption early on.
5. **Encourage Civic Engagement and Co-Governance:**
   The citizens must have the opportunity to take part in the evaluation process of budgets and services' performance audits, and other forms of public participation. The citizens need legislative provisions to protect their rights to access information and protect whistleblowers.
6. **Embed Ethics in Policy Reform:**
   Future governance reforms should prioritise ethical values alongside administrative efficiency. Accountability laws must clearly define standards of conduct, conflict-of-interest procedures, and disciplinary actions to prevent political interference.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the interplay between ethical leadership, accountability, and maladministration within public organisations. The results indicated that integrity and accountability, fairness and empathy are not simply personal characteristics that are preferred, but are also institutional values. Various recommendations have been made in relation to the discussion. In conclusion, the study underscores that the sustainability of ethical governance lies in the deliberate alignment between moral leadership, institutional accountability, and citizen participation. Ethical leadership should no longer be viewed as an individual's personal quality; rather, it should be regarded as a societal requirement – an ideal principle upon which all activities in the public domain can rest. Where there is integrity in leadership,

[104] Ngoepe-Ntsoane and Webb, "Ethical Leadership and Maladministration in the South African Public Service."

where there is transparency in the system, and where citizens participate actively, maladministration becomes impossible, and a new era of public service is ushered in.

Recommendations for Future Studies

In the study, ethical leadership and accountability were shown to prevent maladministration, but there is still room for learning. Future studies will try to incorporate both ethical behavior and accountability in public administration through the eyes of the people in the public sector. This will give an understanding of the incorporation of ethics into daily public administration operations. This study has predominantly concentrated on Africa and the developing world. Greater analytical attention in the advanced developed world will potentially reveal alternative relationships between institutional accountability and the ethical climate. This will, in turn, permit cross-country analytical frameworks which demonstrate the impact of socio-political arrangements and public expectations on the intersection of ethical leadership and public governance.

Further studies could examine the potential of AI, blockchain, and tools of e-governance in either strengthening or complicating accountability. Research could examine how 'digital transparency' tools enhance or hinder ethical paradoxes concerning compliance and data privacy or the automation of decision-making. Another research opportunity could be in the form of distinct sectors, such as education, healthcare, and local governments, examining how ethical leadership functions differently. These distinct sectors would shed light on the contextual ethical challenges of leadership, as service delivery operates in different ecosystems. To determine whether ethics training, civic engagement, and governance reforms cumulatively contribute to the mitigation of maladministration, œlongitudinal studies are essential. These studies would determine whether ethical interventions can trigger sustained transformation or whether such changes regress after the departure of a leader. Future studies can explain the synergy of ethical leadership, accountability, and institutional design aimed at fostering public governance integrity.

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