

# Exploring Ethical Leadership in Malaysian Corporate Organization

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## ABSTRACT

Leadership and ethics are interrelated, in an organization ethics comes from the top and it is followed by its followers. The code of ethics that guides the organization in its policies and decision making that may affect the output of the business. Therefore, leaders with ethics play important roles in any profit-making organization. This study seeks to explore the ethical leadership in local corporate organizations.

**KEYWORDS** - Ethical Leadership, Leaders, Ethics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is about relationship that exist between stakeholders as well as leaders, which may vary in distinct contexts. Whereas leadership ethics means the attributes or code of conducts that certain leaders would comply to achieve certain shared goals within the organization.

Leadership contexts can be associated from social movements to corporate and national leaders. Leadership learned through many ways. The most common is learning through experience. Knowledge through experience considered the most valuable as one will experience crucial in a crisis. A cat, after experiencing a hot stove, will be reluctant to sit on one again, but it will also avoid sitting on a cold stove, Mark Twain once stated.

Leadership in an organization can be shared by few leaders. Depending on a situation, leaders are required by the shareholders. Achieving goals requires power and authority, at least this is what common man will assume. However, in today's globalization, power and authority is no longer considered as tool to command and control the group to achieve the goals. According to former Division Head of Sime Darby, Thinaharan said under today's control, command as well as hierarchical approaches merely do not longer functioning. He further explained, it is not just a matter of commanding and controlling, it involves ethics and attributes by example to attract your followers to do what you want. Running a large scale organization by using power of commanding alone is not practical. A smart leader is someone who is able to convince the followers to do it with willingness.

Ethics are defined as principals and attributes that define right or wrong way of doing things. Ethics in leadership is defined as process of influencing followers or team members through principals and the right attributes that embraced as what defined as right things to do.

Leadership encompasses both a procedural aspect and a distinctive trait. In its procedural form, leadership entails the application of non-coercive influence, while as a characteristic, it refers to the collection of qualities ascribed to an individual who is seen as effectively employing influence (Moorhead & Griffin, 1998).

In any organization, it is crucial to recognize that some individuals may exhibit leadership qualities while others may not. Leadership is not solely tied to organizational conflict but often associated with the unique abilities of figures, which includes Napoleon, Gandhi, George Washington, or Lenin. These individuals illustrate that there are numerous occasions when the decisions as well as involvement of a single significant person hold great importance. They possess exceptional qualities that enable them to discern what needs to be done, when, as well as how.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Susan M Heathfield, one of the Human Resource Expert said, leaders recognize that in order to truly lead, they must draw in individuals who will willingly follow them. This understanding of the necessity to attract followers

has been a fundamental aspect of leadership. Central to comprehending leadership is the concept of followership, as individuals must have trust in the leader's chosen path to be willing followers. To establish this level of trust, leaders must effectively convey the overarching direction, desired outcomes, as well as agreed-upon strategies necessary to achieve those results.

There are many ethical dilemmas encountered in today's business world. Many unethical and illegal business practices have been in the rising numbers in the world. However, in large scale corporate organizations the leaders are undoubtedly received their appropriate training and degree before becoming the leader for an organization. However, what is lacking in today's leadership are ethics which leads to failure of an organization including deep impact on its stakeholders as well as society's stability entirely (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003).

There are many successful large scale corporate organizations in Malaysia. In order to be the largest and reputable organization there is a need of leader with certain ethics that leads to success and failure. This paper further explains the ethics acquired by leaders in one of the largest corporate organization in Malaysia. Despite known as one of the largest organization in Malaysia, there are some division within the organization face some changes due to changes of the core business and top management's decision making to maintain the business. The changes could be retrenchments, selling business units and change of ownership. In this situation leaders forced to undergo or face different shareholders which might be local or international. When it comes to international ownership, how a leader handles the followers, what are the attributes that a leader should possess in order to maintain the outcomes of the organization and understanding within the followers.

This study seeks to provide further understanding on the leader's ethics and behaviour towards changes within the organization's stakeholders.

**Research Questions**

This study is to further explore the ethics acquired by leaders in certain situations: -

1. What are the perceptions of leaders in acquiring ethical leadership and values in an organization?
2. What are leadership ethics and values acquired by leaders in order to be follower's leader?

**A. Leadership Ethics**

Although there are many recurring studies has been and presently written about ethics and leadership, suggesting what leaders should do in normative or philosophical perspective way. There is a growing demand for a more predictive as well as descriptive approach within the realm of social science to investigate the core notion of ethical leadership.

Numerous authors endeavor to define ethical leadership. According to Frank (2002), ethical leadership finds its visible expression in transformational leadership. Research exploring the ethical aspect of leadership has predominantly been integrated into the realms of charismatic as well as transformational leadership, as noted by Bass and Avolio (2000).

While various definitions have been formulated, authors generally concur that ethical leadership centers on guiding followers towards making morally sound decisions. Ethical leadership involves recognizing your fundamental values and displaying the bravery to uphold them across all aspects of your life, with the ultimate goal of serving the greater good.

**B. Leadership Values**

Table 1 Chronological Introduction of Values-Based Leadership Theories Stemming from Debates among Researchers, Leaders, and Practitioners Regarding the Necessity of Inner Ethical Qualities in Leaders (Initial Appearances)

Theories	Author
Servant Leadership	Greenleaf, 1977; Patterson, 2003; Parolini, Patterson, & Winston, 2009
Connective leadership	Lipman-Blumen, 1996
Self-sacrificial leadership	Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999
Authentic Transformational	Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999
Complex leadership	Regine & Lewin, 2000; Knowles, 2001, 2002; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001
Contextual leadership	Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002
Shared leadership	Pearce & Conger, 2003

Spiritual Leadership	Fry, 2003
Authentic leadership	Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans & May, 2004; Luthans, & May, 2004; Avolio, Luthans, F., & Walumbwa, F., 2004; Avolio & Gardner, 2005
Ethical leadership	Brown, Trevino & Harrison, 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Kalshoven, Hartog, & Hoogh, 2011.

Table 2 Chronological Origins of Values-Based Leadership Research Shaped by Leadership Literature (Initial Appearances)

Study	Research, Findings & Relevance
Burns (1978)	The concepts pertaining to transformational as well as transactional leadership were introduced by Burns. Burns is acknowledged as the pioneer of these theories. He delineated transactional leaders as individuals who guide others in return for a valuable exchange. Burns drew a distinction between transformational as well as transactional leadership, highlighting that transformational leaders aim to connect with the moral values of their followers and motivate them to rejuvenate and reshape their organizations.
Bass (1985)	The concepts of transformational as well as transactional leadership were established. Bass provided clear definitions for the fundamental leadership concepts of transformational as well as transactional leadership. Bass elucidated the ways in which a leader can impact the motivation as well as performance of individual followers.
Bennis & Nanus,	Charismatic Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). According to Bennis and Nanus, the presence of charismatic CEOs does not serve as a reliable predictor of an organization's success. Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini emphasized that charisma may have both adverse as well as favorable effects on followers, pointing out that charismatic CEOs do not demonstrate a greater inclination to prevent unfavorable financial results.
Bass (1990)	The Influence of Transactional Leadership. Bass contended that transactional leadership might lead to subpar performance, as individuals tend to operate at the bare minimum, striving to maximize their rewards for any subsequent effort exerted.
Bass & Avolio	The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was created by Bass and Avolio to assess leaders' expressions of laissez-faire, transformational, as well as transactional behaviors. This instrument stands as one of the widely utilized tools for evaluating transformational leadership.
Avolio, Waldman &	The four I's with regard to transformational leadership. Here, Avolio, Waldman, and Yamrino (1991) introduced the notion of the four I's with regard to transformational leadership, consisting of intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, as well as idealized influence.
Bass & Avolio (1994)	Fostering Transformational Leadership and Enhancing Organizational Efficiency. Bass and Avolio delineated strategies for nurturing transformational leaders as well as enhancing organizational efficiency. They introduced the concept of the complete spectrum of leadership, which encompasses transformational as well as transactional elements applicable to various aspects of management, leadership, and organizational advancement. The researchers stressed that leaders who employ a blend of these behaviors can enhance not only their personal effectiveness but also that of the organization.
Lowe, Kroeck, & Siva	Transformational Leadership and Employee Motivation. The analysis encompassed an extensive array of research studies,

- Hersey, Blanchard offering corroborative evidence concerning the proposition that transformational leadership augments employee motivation as well as performance. Adaptive Leadership. Hence, Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (1996) emphasized the significance of business leaders and managers possessing the capacity to adjust to evolving circumstances as well as choosing leadership approaches that align with the requirements of both the organization and their employees. Silverthorne and Wang (2001) introduced the concept of Leadership Behavior Flexibility (LBF) as well as contended that a leader's experience or the frequency of their exposure to leadership roles contributes to their degree of behavioral adaptability. The research also observed that leaders exhibiting behavioral flexibility are more inclined to lead organizations with favorable organizational outcomes.
- Conger & Kanungo (1998) Efficacy of Charismatic Leadership. The scholars delineated that charismatic leader demonstrated higher effectiveness compared to their non-charismatic counterparts.
- Yukl (1999) Transformational and Charismatic Leadership. The study highlighted that charismatic as well as transformational leadership are frequently thought of as interchangeable, even though they exhibit numerous distinctions. Yukl contends that these constructs are separate but share some common aspects. The research lends support to the idea that transformational leadership can yield positive outcomes as well as enhance both organizational and leader effectiveness. However, there isn't the same level of empirical evidence supporting charismatic leadership's contribution to improved organizational outcomes.
- Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) The Moral, Ethical, and Genuine Aspects of Transformational Leadership. It is reiterated that for leadership to genuinely be transformational, it must also encompass moral, ethical, as well as authentic dimensions. The concept of "pseudo-transformational" as well as the negative aspects of transformational leadership are defined, particularly for leaders who display transformational behaviors but lack authenticity, morality, and ethics in their leadership approach.
- Carless, Wearing & Mann (2000) The Global Transformational Leadership (GTL) Scale. Moreover, Carless, Wearing, and Mann characterized a transformational leader as someone who: (a) articulates a vision, (b) nurtures the growth of their staff, (c) offers assistance, (d) delegates authority to their team, (e) fosters innovation, (f) sets a leading example, as well as (g) exudes charisma. Additionally, these researchers created, assessed, as well as confirmed the reliability of a concise assessment tool for transformational leadership, known as the GTL.
- Osborn, Hunt & Jauch (2002) The Significance of the Context or Organizational Environment in Determining Leadership Effectiveness. On the other hand, Osborn et al. underscored the critical role played by the situation or the organizational context pertaining to leadership theory. Hence, this research realigned the focus of leadership studies as well as posited that effective leadership doesn't solely hinge on how leaders guide their subordinates but also on the cumulative impact of a leader as they navigate within the organizational framework.
- Avolio, Gardner, Walumba, Luthans & May Genuine Leadership. Furthermore, these scholars recognized the significance of authentic leadership. They delineated that for transformational leaders to genuinely make a positive impact on individuals, organizations, as well as society at large, they must possess inner qualities that transcend beyond mere charisma and

Zhu, May, and Avolio (2004);	transformational leadership attributes. The qualities of authentic leadership were explicitly defined as well as highlighted as a crucial characteristic of 21st-century leaders.
Yukl (2008b)	Brown, Ethical Leadership. Here, these researchers emphasized the significance of ethical leadership, asserting that ethical leaders demonstrate greater effectiveness. They pointed out that the key distinguishing factor between ethical leaders as well as authentic or transformational leaders is their proactive commitment to fostering ethical behavior among their followers.
Yukl, 2008a; Mumford, 2010;	Leader conduct and its impact on followers exhibit variability. It's acknowledged that both leaders aim to inspire others to attain shared objectives, but the manner in which leaders behave as well as the resulting influence on their followers differ between each leadership style.
	The leadership literature contains a range of contrasting as well as varied outcomes. Critics of leadership literature have challenged it by asserting that it has presented inconsistent as well as divergent findings concerning the definition of leadership and the factors contributing to a leader's effectiveness (Yukl, 2008a; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010; Mumford, 2010; Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, & Johnson, 2011). For instance, Hernandez et al. contended that one of the challenges stems from the numerous as well as diverse interpretations of leadership. Several studies focus on the leader's contribution, while others concentrate on the followers, while others still underscore the significance of the context or situation.

**C. Leadership Ethics**

Table 3 Foundational Ethical Leadership Literature – Chronological order depending on the first occurrence.

Study	Research, Findings, and Relevance
Bandura (1977); Bandura (1986)	The social learning theory offers insights into the precursors as well as consequences of ethical leadership. Note that ethical leaders serve as a wellspring of direction while having an impact on their followers, primarily because their appeal and trustworthiness as role models inspire followers to aspire to their behavior. Ethical leaders exhibit qualities such as nurturing, empathy, trustworthiness, as well as equitable treatment of others, which garner favorable recognition and consequently attract followers to them.
Kirkpatrick & Locke (1991);	The way ethical characteristics in leaders are perceived is indicative of their perceived effectiveness as leaders. The perception of a leader's truthfulness, integrity, as well as reliability is closely tied to how effective they are seen as being.
Treviño, Hartman & Brown (2000);	Individual Traits and Ethical Leadership. This study unveiled that ethical leader possessed qualities such as honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, principled decision-making, including ethical conduct in both their professional as well as personal domains. This was categorized as the moral character aspect of ethical leadership.
Treviño, Hartman & Brown	Moral Manager. Here, this study emphasized that a leader's endeavor to shape the ethical conduct of their followers, referred to as being a moral manager, constitutes a significant facet of ethical leadership.
Weaver, Treviño, & Agle (2005)	The Significance of Ethical Role Models. The research highlighted the importance of leaders possessing ethical role models to aid in their development as ethical leaders.
Dirks & Ferrin (2002)	Efficient Leadership and Cognitive Trust. Note that leaders who establish cognitive trust with their employees by demonstrating

- Brown, Treviño & Harrison (2005) professionalism, reliability, as well as genuine concern for their team members are appraised as more proficient leaders.
- Definition and Validation of Ethical Leadership. In this research, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) was put forth as the theoretical framework for elucidating the concept of ethical leadership. Through the investigation of seven comprehensive studies, the scholars both defined as well as substantiated the concept of ethical leadership. They discovered that ethical leadership is associated with behaviors reflecting consideration, trust in the leader, honesty, socialized charismatic leadership (this is measured via the idealized influence dimension with regard to transformational leadership), equitable interactions, as well as instances of abusive supervision, yet it is not entirely encompassed by any of these factors. Furthermore, their research demonstrated that ethical leadership could predict outcomes like the perceived effectiveness of leaders, commitment among followers and job satisfaction, as well as their willingness to report issues to management.
- Brown, Treviño, & Harrison (2005) Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS). Therefore, Brown, Treviño, and Harrison designed a ten-item instrument aimed at gauging perceptions with regard to ethical leadership. The ELS underwent validation through a comprehensive examination of various research studies to affirm the distinct dimensions of this construct. Moreover, the researchers determined that ethical leadership by supervisors displayed a positive correlation with, but remained empirically separate from, leader honesty, equitable interaction, leader consideration, as well as the idealized influence component of transformational leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).
- Brown & Treviño (2006) Identified Parallels and Distinctions Among Ethical Leadership and Related Theories. Furthermore, Brown and Treviño contended that ethical leaders, akin to transformational as well as authentic leaders, are motivated by a selfless desire to genuinely care for and exhibit concern for individuals. They are regarded as individuals of integrity who consistently make ethical choices as well as serve as role models for others. As per Brown and Treviño, the defining feature setting ethical leaders apart is their proactive dedication to fostering ethical conduct among their followers, distinguishing them from transformational as well as authentic leaders. The study also observed that transformational, spiritual, authentic, as well as ethical leadership theories share numerous common characteristics, including an ethical element, while also identifying distinctions among them.
- De Hoogh & Den Hartog (2008) The Importance of Ethical Conduct within Organizations. De Hoogh and Den Hartog emphasized the significance of ethical behavior for organizations as well as underscored that ethical lapses by leaders can result in costly repercussions for the organization. The researchers recommended that organizations should exercise caution when appointing managers, giving preference to individuals who exhibit integrity while consistently engage in ethical conduct, and avoid those who prioritize self-interest or exploit others. Moreover, De Hoogh and Den Hartog concluded that when leadership is perceived as ethical, upper-level management is also seen as more effective, while subordinates express heightened optimism regarding the organization's future potential.



Copeland (2009)	Ethical Leadership and Leader Efficacy. Presented initial indications suggesting that ethical leadership, when compared to transformational as well as authentic leadership, might emerge as a more robust predictor of leader effectiveness.
Kalshoven, Hartog & Hoogh (2011)	Ethical Leadership at Work (ELW) Assessment. Kalshoven et al. (2011) introduced a multidimensional measurement tool designed to offer deeper insights into the precursors as well as outcomes associated with leaders who exhibit ethical conduct. The study by Kalshoven et al. established positive connections between leader effectiveness and ethical leadership by demonstrating a significant influence of ethical leadership behaviors on employee satisfaction, commitment, as well as leader and follower effectiveness. Note that the ELW encompasses seven distinct ethical leader behaviors: integrity, fairness, people orientation, ethical guidance, role clarification, power sharing, as well as concern for sustainability. These ELW behaviors were found to account for variances in trust, organizational citizenship behaviors, as well as leader and follower effectiveness, surpassing the explanatory capacity of the ELS, which is a one-dimensional (1D) measure. Specifically, the power-sharing as well as fairness dimensions assessed by the ELW were predictive of higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviors among followers.
Copeland (2013)	A Comprehensive Model Incorporating Leader, Follower Preferences, and Situational Factors. This research investigated a comprehensive multivariate model for forecasting leader effectiveness. It encompassed an evaluation of the influence with regard to ethical leadership on a leader's effectiveness while examined how various related variables might moderate the relationship between a leader's ethical conduct as well as their effectiveness. These moderating factors encompassed the preferences with expectations of employees for ethical leadership as well as the perceived ethical climate within an organization. The research focused on leaders within the accounting profession. Hence, the findings supported the evidence that leaders who demonstrate both transformational as well as ethical qualities tend to be more effective, with each of these behaviors making additional contributions towards comprehending including predicting a leader's effectiveness.

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### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### D. Research Design

In this study, qualitative method was used to explore the leadership ethics in a local corporate organization. Qualitative method was used to further understand the actual leaders perception on ethical leadership and how will ethics effect the outcome of an organization. By using qualitative method we will be able to understand in depth the rich and thick descriptions and complex phenomenon of how actual leaders will apply leadership ethics in decision making in order to achieve goals in an organization. Qualitative method will also exposed researchers with actual events and experience by respondents. Qualitative method also will be able reduce bias and error as it is more systematic and rigorous.

#### E. Sampling

In this research, 15 leaders from top management of the particular local corporate organization were randomly chosen according to stability and word by mouth.

Out of 15, 5 respondents have given green light for interview session.

These respondents are in senior positions and likely to have great knowledge and experience in running large scale of employees in an organization.

#### **F. Ethical Measure**

Respondents were asked verbally and upon agreement, they were given an official email and consent letter to set appointment according to preferred time and date.

Location was also a concern as mostly are from top management and it is indeed a location nearer to the office. The most important consent was said out loud on the respondent preference on answering the question according to comfort level and they are allowed to quit at any point of interview. The respondents were also informed on the audio tape recording during the interview. Sample of consent letter in appendix (attachment).

#### **G. Interview Protocol**

Interview was conducted mostly in the office and one in restaurant golf club. The interview was recorded. The interview last about 45 minutes the least and the longest about 2 hours. The questions were open ended and in the beginning, questions asked are basic such as background and routine activities done.

The questions start with 'tell me about your daily routine activity', this question is to ensure there is complex or difficult question to answer.

#### **H. Data Collection**

Data for this research was gathered via interview sessions. Data was collected, transcribed and analysed accordingly. The analysis was done comparing the interviews with couple of respondents. The sets of questions prepared based on the following topic: -

1. Experience & Behavioural Questions
2. Opinion & Values Questions
3. Feelings Question
4. Knowledge Questions/Actual Facts about a situation
5. Behavioural Question
6. History Knowledge Question

#### **I. Data Analysis**

The data collected analysed according to the topic given above. Answers given were asked to verify as the respondents might not satisfied with the first answers. The transcribed audio was read through and listened twice in order to clearly understand the message on the data. The tentative code were noted on the similarities and differences and then classified under categories.

The analysis based on the coding shows results of leadership with ethics is important and no matter in any culture the core ingredient is to capture the followers with ethical leadership to accomplish the mutual interest of shareholders as well as stakeholders in any organization.

### **4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

The interview results shows that each respondents have different sets of characteristics of leadership ethics in order to accomplish desired goal required by the shareholders. The respondents show positive values towards the stakeholders in an organization. They believe anywhere you go, you will meet with different sets of stakeholders with the similar intention on why they want to work in any organization. Each and everyone work to take care of their own needs, given the right sets of package will not be sufficient to get the stake holders focus to do it according to the leaders. They will give all out if they were given both the package and the trust which will ensure the longevity and the commitment in what and for whom they work for. The leaders is the one will be able to make the path clear for them to be able to understand and be interested to work with passion rather work with force.

The leaders in the particular corporate organization chose to be the 'follower's leader' rather than leader with no followers. They believe an organization's failure or success relies on the leaders with wisdom or without.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

Defining leadership as either negative or positive can be challenging. Leadership manifests in various forms, while prior research demonstrates that people have diverse perceptions of it. Nevertheless, a common perspective among many researchers asserts that leadership undeniably holds the power to exert influence as well as effect change in both individual lives and organizations. Hence, there is no dispute that the concept of leadership plays a pivotal role in society.



Leadership emerges when there are more than two individuals present, and it typically develops over an extended period. With the presence of a leader, other individuals tend to follow the leader's directives to accomplish specific objectives. Broadly speaking, leadership can be categorized into two main types: transformative as well as transactional. However, numerous leadership styles or types exist due to the diversity of individual perspectives. To be classified as an ethical leader, most researchers emphasize the importance of the leader possessing a positive as well as sound mindset. A well-developed mindset can enhance the leader's charisma skills as well as enhance their capacity to influence others to comply with their commands or orders.

Becoming an ethical leader is increasingly favored by society because it exerts a positive as well as desirable influence on organizations. For instance, within a business organization, an ethical leader enhances trust among peers as well as contributes to the organization's long-term success. This fosters higher confidence among followers as well as steers the organization toward stability in the market or the broader economy. Consequently, leaders in multinational organizations are now actively acquiring as well as implementing ethical leadership skills for this very reason. It has the potential to elevate employee productivity, boost trust levels, and, significantly, enhance profits through increased employee loyalty. In the context of any multinational organization, there is a demand for leaders who can generate profits in an ethical manner, fulfilling the expectations of stakeholders as well as upholding the company's image.

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