Ethical Leadership and Employee Performance in the Public Sector: The Mediating Effects of Motivation and Satisfaction

KAZEEM ADEBAYO OLADIMEJI\(^1\); ABDULRAZAQ KAYODE ABDULKAREEM\(^2\)

ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of ethical leadership on employee performance in the public sector, using employee motivation and employee satisfaction as mediators. This study is designed quantitatively, and data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed among federal civil servants across five Ministries in Nigeria. A conceptual model was designed based on seven hypotheses and tested and analyzed using PLS-SEM technique. Findings revealed that all hypotheses were significant based on p<0.001. More importantly, ethical leadership positively and significantly influence employee motivation and satisfaction. Also, employee motivation and satisfaction mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance. These findings implied that the importance of leaders' moral behavior and their relationship with subordinates in the workplace is important through motivating them to work, as well as imbibing the workplace ethics and culture. The study concludes that promoting workplace ethics becomes a crucial ingredient in stimulating individual performance, which translates to overall organizational performance and better service delivery to the citizens.

Keywords: Motivation; Satisfaction; Ethical Leadership; Employee Performance; Public Sector

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menguji pengaruh kepemimpinan etis terhadap kinerja karyawan di sektor publik, dengan menggunakan motivasi karyawan dan kepuasan karyawan sebagai mediator. Studi ini dirancang secara kuantitatif, dan data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur yang didistribusikan di antara pegawai negeri federal di lima Kementerian di Nigeria. Model konseptual dirancang berdasarkan tujuh hipotesis dan diuji serta dianalisis menggunakan teknik PLS-SEM. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa semua hipotesis signifikan berdasarkan p<0.001. Lebih penting lagi, kepemimpinan etis berpengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap motivasi dan kepuasan karyawan. Selain itu motivasi dan kepuasan karyawan memediiasi hubungan antara kepemimpinan etis dan kinerja karyawan. Temuan penelitian ini menjelaskan bahwa pentingnya perilaku moral pemimpin dan hubungan mereka dengan bawahan di tempat kerja adalah penting melalui memotivasi mereka untuk bekerja,

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Employee job motivation and satisfaction are key components and primary indications of employee wellbeing derived from a person’s general job appraisal (Ahmad et al., 2012; Yukl et al., 2019). It is often thought to be influenced by the leading concerns in the organization as organizational goals cannot be achieved without linking leaders’ ethical behavior and their relationship with employee motivation and work satisfaction (Samad et al., 2021; Tu et al., 2017). Researchers have examined and developed approaches to integrate organizational objectives and the individual employee subjective motivation and satisfaction to provide common values for both sides.

Although leadership as a concept has been researched in many circumstances and its relationship with the workplace environment, ethical leadership as a morality angle of leadership is still under-researched, especially in developing countries and Nigeria in particular (Ogunfowora, 2014). Human capital gives an organization a competitive advantage because of its uniqueness; as a result, it is one of the resources that help it achieve its objective. Several elements determine human resource value in organizational success. Some of these factors are linked to certain factors which must propel them, such as individual motive, quality of work, work environment, leadership qualities, rewards and recognition, work satisfaction and needs for achievements (Dunay et al., 2021; Munawaroh et al., 2013).

Employees in an organization, especially in the public sector, are the engine of service delivery, built from the state bureaucracy to enforce the rule of law, ensure transparency, promote democracy, and ensure citizens satisfaction in delivering services
to different stakeholders. The global world demands that intellectual capital and human capacity assists organizations to achieve their objectives. Therefore, with the emergence of globalization, competition for organizations has reached a higher level, whereby organizations invest in motivating to retain their best hands. At the same time, to obtain a competitive advantage, many government agencies are expected to focus on their staff to make employee motivated, which is important in the determinant of their satisfaction and performance (Ali & Anwar, 2021; da Cruz Carvalho et al., 2020).

Usually, leadership qualities should encourage or discourage employees in performing their duties. However, one of the basic problems in many organizations, especially in developing countries, like Nigeria, is encouraging people to work, amid superior officers and government officials corrupt practices, low wages, and poor conditions of service. Therefore, the alternative open to employees to choose from in an organization determines whether the ethical qualities of a leader will become a critical factor that causes certain behaviors for employees to be effective.

Different studies in the past have examined the concept of leadership and its effect on employees’ motivation and satisfaction, especially in the private sector. The dimensions of leadership have been majorly from the transactional and transformational approaches, as they affect employee’s motivation, satisfaction, and performance (Naile & Selesho, 2014; Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). However, recently the attention of researchers is beginning to turn to the concept of ethical behavior of leaders in public organizations and how they affect employees’ performance (Shakeel et al., 2019). Therefore, the significance of this study emanates from the fact that in developing countries like Nigeria, some public sector leaders have been accused and convicted of unethical workplace behaviors such as corruption, sexual harassments and nepotism. Empirically, studies on ethical leadership as a panacea for organizational performance in Nigeria have mostly been from the private sector angle (Eluwole et al., 2022;
ONIKU et al., 2022; UGU & Tantua, 2021), where ethical leadership has correlations with organizational commitments and employee retentions. However, only a few studies examined influence of ethical leadership in the public sector domain, such as the studies of Adeshipo and Harrison (2018), which explores ethical leadership and skills within the Nigerian public sector, alongside attendant challenges to ethical leadership. It, therefore, raises the question of to what extent does the ethical behavior of leaders affect the performance of the employees in the public sector? This is important because, leaders, especially in the public sectors are the custodians of funds, workplace schedules and mentorship, therefore, the consequences for promoting unethical behavior could result in trust deficit in public institutions (Hassan et al., 2014).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY (SET)

The theory applied for this study is the Social Exchange Theory (SET). It was initially propounded for studies in the psychology and sociology, later applied to management (Cortez & Johnston, 2020; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). SET in a working environment is a theory founded on the assumption that the organization’s encouragement factors drive the relationship between employees and their organization. Employees in an organization expect certain things to be given by their employers to guarantee their commitment and fulfilment towards their jobs and the organizations (Gervasi et al., 2021). Employees decide to use their skills and energy to achieve the organizations’ goals. Hence, the need for the employers to exchange a favourable working environment and resources to achieve the organization’s goals.

Sometimes, the value exchange between the employers and the employees is often guided by the cost and benefits attached, which in this regard, could be tangible or intangible (Cortez & Johnston, 2020; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Therefore,
employees often weigh the positives and the negatives of joining and remaining in an organization based on the decision from the benefit-cost analysis (Kemp et al., 2021). In this study, we draw a causal model based on SET (Figure 1) that assumes that employees with better organizational factors like ethical leadership will create an enabling organization that influences employees’ motivation and satisfaction and leads to overall performance.

Ethical Leadership, Motivation, Satisfaction and Performance: The Nexus

Based on the principle of reciprocity, which is entrenched in the social exchange theory, ethical leadership is placed as the moral trait of public sector organization leaders (Mitonga-Monga, 2020). Ethical leaders are bound to generate positive energy and outcomes for the employees because they perceive them to be fair, just and trustworthy. Therefore, employees who believe their leaders are fair tend to be motivated and satisfied (Fan et al., 2021).

Leaders who tend to be ethically upright to support their subordinates command followership. Ethical leaders show a strong commitment to the organization ethical codes, standards, goals and principles; therefore, they motivate other employees to do the same (Treviño & Brown, 2005). They become mentors, command respect and trustworthiness, and are more likely to increase their organizations’ image (Yasin, 2021). Ethical leaders that are strong exhibit dedication to the long-term success of their organizations by prioritizing the trust of their long-term stakeholders by adhering to high ethical principles. They also foster trusting situations where subordinates are more inclined to adopt comparable committed behavioral patterns (Vasudevan & Aslan, 2022). Therefore, ethical leaders set the foundation for role modelling and emulative processes that lead to subordinate emulation of their ethical leaders’ committed examples (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Mayer et al., 2009; Vasudevan & Aslan, 2022).

Ethical leadership, as established, is the act of leaders knowing what is right and wrong and abiding by what is right. Moral
leaders are built on the model of mental inspiration where the leader mediates the interplay between the performance, expectation, motivation and relationships with the employees. Chi et al. (2012) share the conceptualization that the intermediate influence of ethical leadership in improving efficiency portends a variable of moral identity. According to Tu et al. (2017), leaders in the public sector are required to set leading examples on issues of trust and integrity that determines the public sector’s activities. They ensure that their actions are not detrimental to society’s values but rather enhance the utility of human needs.

Giessner and Van Quaquebeke (2010) also pointed out that through ethical leadership, business and activities in the public sector have succeeded in investing in more expanding and hybrid public policy initiatives allowing a high productivity index. While this is expected to foster moral development among the followers, it also enhances efficiency in productivity. It can be concluded that ethical leaders create the right environment and the necessary condition for a culture of success, transparency, and accountability.

In essence, ethical leaders in the public sector are expected to exhibit moral behavior to inspire their followers to engage in what is right, good, and just. This approach helps in elevating the followers’ moral awareness, leading to a highly motivated workforce, a high rate of job satisfaction, and increased effectiveness in the delivery of services. Different studies have found relationships between ethical leadership characteristics and employees’ satisfaction and motivation (CANSOY et al., 2021; Danish et al., 2020; Ouakouak et al., 2020; Qing et al., 2020; Shareef & Atan, 2018; Yilmaz et al., 2020). Therefore, we hypothesize thus:
a) Ethical leadership influences employee performance in the public sector
b) Ethical leadership influences employee motivation in the public sector
c) Ethical leadership influences employee satisfaction in the public sector
d) Employee motivation influences employee performance in the public sector

e) Employee satisfaction influences employee performance in the public sector

f) Employee motivation mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance

g) Employee satisfaction mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance

![Research Model](image)

**Figure 1 Research Model**

**RESEARCH METHOD**

We examined the influence of ethical leadership on employee motivation, satisfaction and performance. The staff of Federal Civil Service in Nigeria were sampled across five selected ministries with emphasis on middle and higher cadre officers through a simple random sampling technique. We estimated the minimum the sample size with a predictive power of 0.95; we used the G*power software (Alzahrani et al., 2019). The minimum required sample size was 105 based on two predictors and an effect size of 0.15, significant at \( p < 0.05 \). However, we distributed 400 copies of questionnaires, and 223 were returned and useful for further analysis.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first
section consists of closed-ended questions, which includes the biodata of the respondents. The second section consists of the questions regarding the researched topic. A seven-point Likert scale agreement scale was designed for the study. The respondents’ anonymity was guaranteed. There are no identifying questions in the questionnaire that could be used to identify the respondents. Also, the respondents were allowed to withdraw their participation at any time. The results were first entered into a statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) for initial data coding and preliminary analysis. Then, the screened data were transferred into SmartPLS for PLS-SEM analysis. The measurement and structural models were analyzed accordingly.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents showed that there are more male than female. Also, majority of the respondents have bachelor’s degree as their highest qualification, and a considerable number with post graduate certificate. Majority of the respondents were middle level officers and a considerable percentage form the higher cadre officers. More so, the majority of the respondents have spent between 11-20 years in the public service.

More so, we checked for the common method bias, the result as shown in Table 1 showed that all the Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) values are below the 3.3 thresholds (Kock, 2017); therefore, our instrument has no common method bias.

Measures

We assessed employee motivation with a scale of five items developed by (Sjöberg & Lind, 1994). Performance is measured using Podsakoff and MacKenzie (1989) measurement items. Satisfaction was measured using Barsky et al. (2004) and ethical leadership’s measurement is based on an adapted five items from Brown et al. (2005) instrument.

RESULTS

MEASUREMENT MODEL

We evaluated the measurement model based on the assess-
ment of the loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR). The indicator loadings were greater than 0.708, and the Composite Reliability was greater than 0.5. Similarly, the Average Variance Extracted was also above 0.5. Therefore, the reliability and convergent validity of the model are confirmed, as shown in Table 1. More so, we applied the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) to assess the discriminant validity. The result, as shown in Table 2, indicates that the HTMT values are lower than 0.85 thresholds; therefore, the discriminant validity can be confirmed.

Table 1 Summary of the Measurement Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>VIF</th>
<th>KMO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>ETL1</td>
<td>0.825</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ETL2</td>
<td>0.858</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ETL3</td>
<td>0.774</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ETL4</td>
<td>0.772</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ETL5</td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Motivation</td>
<td>EMO1</td>
<td>0.960</td>
<td>0.958</td>
<td>0.973</td>
<td>0.923</td>
<td>2.838</td>
<td>0.926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EMO2</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EMO3</td>
<td>0.966</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Performance</td>
<td>EPO1</td>
<td>0.977</td>
<td>0.988</td>
<td>0.992</td>
<td>0.969</td>
<td>2822</td>
<td>0.830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EPO2</td>
<td>0.988</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EPO3</td>
<td>0.995</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EPO4</td>
<td>0.979</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Satisfaction</td>
<td>EPS1</td>
<td>0.926</td>
<td>0.951</td>
<td>0.965</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td>2.025</td>
<td>0.844</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EPS2</td>
<td>0.967</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EPS3</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EPS4</td>
<td>0.965</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ Computation, 2021

Table 2 Discriminant Validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Performance</td>
<td>0.762</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Motivation</td>
<td>0.766</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.546</td>
<td>0.703</td>
<td>0.669</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1= Ethical Leadership 2= Employee Performance 3= Employee Motivation 4 = Employee Satisfaction

STRUCTURAL MODEL

For the structural model, we account for the path-coefficients, effect sizes, coefficient of determination, confidence intervals,
and t-statistics for all paths using a subsample of 5000 bootstrapping as shown in Table 3 and Figure 2. All hypotheses can be confirmed as ethical leadership has a positive and significant relationship with employee motivation; therefore, hypothesis H1 is confirmed. Also, hypothesis H2 and H3 can be confirmed as ethical leadership has a positive and significant relationship with employee motivation and satisfaction. More so, the influence of employee motivation and satisfaction is significant with employee performance; therefore, Hypotheses H4 and H5 can be also confirmed. We also confirmed the positive and significant relationship of the mediating effect of motivation on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance; therefore, Hypothesis H6 is confirmed. Also, the result confirmed the positive and significant mediating effect of employee satisfaction on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance; therefore, Hypothesis H7 is confirmed.

### Table 3 Result of the Structural Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
<th>T-Value</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
<th>5.00%</th>
<th>95.00%</th>
<th>F²</th>
<th>VIF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EL -&gt; Perf</td>
<td>0.362</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>10.059</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>0.518</td>
<td>0.207</td>
<td>2.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL -&gt; MOT</td>
<td>0.716</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>25.725</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.554</td>
<td>0.823</td>
<td>0.792</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL -&gt; SAT</td>
<td>0.538</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>14.654</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.360</td>
<td>0.697</td>
<td>0.463</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOT -&gt; Perf</td>
<td>0.302</td>
<td>0.134</td>
<td>6.875</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>0.534</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>2.600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT -&gt; Perf</td>
<td>0.296</td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td>8.313</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.162</td>
<td>0.543</td>
<td>0.191</td>
<td>1.836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL-&gt;MOT-&gt; Perf</td>
<td>0.216</td>
<td>0.106</td>
<td>6.645</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL-&gt;SAT-&gt; Perf</td>
<td>0.159</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>5.988</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ Computation, 2021

Correspondingly, we examined the effect sizes of the relationships using the Cohen (1988) guideline ($F^2$ e" 0.35 = Substantial effect size; 0.15 = Medium effect size and 0.02 = Small effect size). The $F^2$ results showed that there are large effect sizes in the H2 and H3 relationships, while H1, H4 and H5 have medium effect sizes. The coefficient of determination ($R^2$) can also be confirmed as ethical leadership explains 51% and 29% ($R^2 =$
0.513 and 0.289) variance total for employee motivation and employee satisfaction, respectively. Also, ethical leadership, employee motivation and satisfaction explain 70% ($R^2 = 0.696$) variance total for employee performance.

**DISCUSSION**

This study sets out to investigate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance while examining the mediating influence of employee motivation and satisfaction, using the social exchange theory. The results confirm the findings of previous studies. From the result generated, ethical leadership influences employee motivation, satisfaction and performance in the public service. These findings theoretically imply that individuals perceive ethical leadership as important because ethical leaders often give meaning to work, implant moral standards, and underline the impact of tasks on achieving individual and organizational goals. More so, subordinates under ethical leaders perceive their work to be more meaningful, significant, and challenging, which significantly increases their motivation for the work. The findings of this study also corroborate with the finding of Ouakouak et al. (2020); Shareef and Atan (2018).

Moreover, employee motivation and satisfaction mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee perfor-
mance. The finding implies that leaders can influence how their followers feel about their jobs (Yukl et al., 2019). Leaders who uphold high ethical standards demonstrates it through personal behavior and expressing moral ideals (Marquardt et al., 2021). It can, therefore, be established that ethical leadership influences followers’ happiness. Due to their reputation, honesty, and concern for employee well-being, ethical leaders provide their followers with feedback mechanisms and improve their job autonomy and task significance. These values and characteristics are capable of increasing the attractiveness of their personalities. Therefore, ethical line managers often encourage and motivate subordinates; therefore, those who receive higher respect, support, and attention from their leaders, feel more obligated to reciprocate good attitudes such as job satisfaction and motivation.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

In a developing country like Nigeria, this study has further contributed to the ongoing debate on ethical leadership and its implication in the public sector. Studies on ethical leadership is growing but in a slow pace, especially in the public sector (Shakeel et al., 2019) and from a developing country perspective. This study has therefore, further improved on the concept of ethical leadership by examining its implications on the employee performance within the public sector frame.

The outcome of the study suggested that the concept of ethical leadership has major effects on the motivation, satisfaction and performance of public sector employees in Nigeria. The leader’s proactive efforts to influence followers’ ethical and moral behavior are represented by the component and measurement of ethical leadership. Ethical leaders make ethics an explicit element of their leadership agenda by publicly expressing ethics and values, role modelling ethical behavior, and employing the reward system (rewards and punishment) to hold followers accountable for ethical behavior. Therefore, such explicit actions attract
followers’ attention making ethics their own leadership core values too.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Ethical leaders are expected to provide good governance through which the systems and the strategies of authority, compliance, and supervision standards are maintained with responsibility, transparency, and accountability. Leaders in organizations develop strategic plans and help to influence employees as an effective requirement for satisfaction and organizational performance (Benevene et al., 2018). Organizational goals and targets are expected to prepare leaders to give a road map for employees to follow and execute. Similarly, leaders are expected to provide room for employees to thrive, typically playing a key role in creating a motivation system through different means such as positive workplace culture, rewards, and recognitions. Therefore, leadership has a positive impact on making employees motivated and satisfied with their job (Tu et al., 2017).

Ethical leadership, in particular, ought to be stressed in organizations daily activities to set ethical standards for their staff. Different studies have shown that ethical leadership produces needed results, especially in the areas of employee personal performance and positive work mindsets. More so, ethical management from leaders will enhance the morality of employees, help them motivate and get satisfied in the workplace, thereby increasing employee retention. Therefore, in employee management in public organizations, the importance of ethical leadership should be highlighted.

Human resource departments in government institutions, in particular, must provide proper training in ethical leadership, assist in the consolidation of ethical management practices, foster an ethically oriented philosophy, and, most importantly, avoid unethical practices. These are essential for promoting ethical leadership in organizations. In addition, the role of moral self-conduct in daily operations is critical. Line managers, supervisors,
and employees must retain a high level of moral awareness and incorporate it into their self-cognition. Organizations that employ moral and ethical management abilities are more likely to apply ethical principles in various scenarios and prevent scandals. To improve supervisors’ and employees’ moral awareness and determine their moral self-concept, more ethical training and communications and more avenues to report immoral circumstances within the organization should be provided.

REFERENCES


