

Ethical Leadership as a Catalyst for Sustainable Development

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<p><i>This article explores ethical leadership and sustainable development. According to it, sustainable development requires leaders who are honest, accountable, fair, and responsible in governance and decision-making. Ethical leadership is conceptualized as leadership grounded in moral values that guide behavior, influence followers positively, and promote the common good. Sustainable development addresses economic, social, and environmental requirements without jeopardising future generations' ability to meet their own. The paper uses literature rather than real data to be conceptual and descriptive. Good governance, economic stability, social justice, and environmental protection are enhanced by ethical leadership. It also examines Transformational Leadership Theory, Stakeholder Leadership Theory, and Servant Leadership Theory to explain leadership ethics and sustainable development. The study found that ethical leadership builds institutions, decreases corruption, promotes accountability, and boosts public trust in governance. It also reveals that ethical leaders encourage inclusive policies, competent resource management, and long-term growth. Many societies struggle with ethical leadership due to corruption, poor institutions, poverty, political instability, and moral decay. The report finds that ethical leadership is crucial for sustainable development because it offers the moral framework for long-term social growth. It suggests ethical education, institutional strengthening, accountability systems, and active citizen participation for ethical leadership and sustainable development.</i></p> <p>Key words: Ethical Leadership, Catalyst, Sustainable Development.</p>
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Introduction

Leadership is a key factor in the growth and survival of societies, institutions, and nations (Udofia, 2020). Societies that experience peace, justice, and development often benefit from leaders who demonstrate honesty, accountability, and concern for public welfare. In contrast, poor leadership marked by corruption and injustice contributes to underdevelopment. Leadership therefore involves influencing people toward common goals through ethical and responsible conduct.

Sustainable development refers to meeting present needs without compromising future generations. It requires a balance between economic growth, social wellbeing, and environmental protection. This balance cannot be achieved where corruption, abuse of power, and inequality exist. Ethical leadership promotes integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability, which are essential for

sustainable development. According to Northouse (2019), ethical leadership builds trust and cooperation, while Brown and Treviño (2006) emphasize its role in shaping moral behavior and responsible decision-making.

In many developing countries, including Nigeria, unethical leadership practices such as corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement have contributed to poverty, insecurity, and weak infrastructure. Ethical leadership is therefore essential for proper resource management, good governance, and public trust. Ciulla (2004) notes that leadership without ethics ultimately destroys institutions and societal confidence.

Ethical leadership also supports economic sustainability by encouraging transparency, fairness, and responsible resource use. In organizations, it improves performance,

trust, and corporate responsibility. Socially, it promotes justice, inclusion, and respect for human rights, while reducing inequality and conflict. Burns (1978) highlights that ethical leaders inspire collective values over personal interest.

Environmentally, ethical leaders support conservation, sustainable energy use, and responsible development to protect future generations. Across education, healthcare, religion, and governance, ethical leadership strengthens discipline, professionalism, and service delivery (Scholl et al., 2023).

Despite its importance, many societies face ethical leadership crises characterized by corruption, abuse of power, and weak accountability. This study therefore examines ethical leadership as a catalyst for sustainable development, emphasizing that long-term societal progress depends on morally responsible leadership alongside policies and resources.

Conceptual Clarifications

Leadership is widely recognized as essential for the survival and development of societies, institutions, and organizations (Mitra, 2020). It refers to the process of influencing, guiding, and motivating people toward achieving shared goals. Leadership is not simply about holding authority but about responsibility, vision, moral conduct, and the ability to inspire trust and cooperation. As Northouse (2019) explains, leadership is a process of influencing others to achieve common objectives, while Yukl (2013) emphasizes effective direction and coordination of collective action.

Leadership exists in political, educational, religious, and organizational contexts, where it shapes decision-making and development outcomes. Effective leaders demonstrate honesty, fairness, accountability, and empathy (Olanrewaju & Okorie, 2019). Because leadership decisions affect human lives and societal progress, ethical responsibility is essential. Burns (1978) argues that true leadership elevates both leaders and followers morally and socially.

Ethical leadership emphasizes integrity, fairness, accountability, and respect for human dignity. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) define it as demonstrating normatively appropriate conduct and promoting such behavior among followers. Ethical leaders act with transparency, keep commitments, and ensure fairness in decision-making. Ciulla (2004) further stresses that leadership without ethics becomes destructive.

Sustainable development refers to meeting present needs without compromising future generations, balancing economic, social, and environmental goals (Emina, 2021). It includes economic growth, social inclusion, and

environmental protection (Sachs, 2015). However, corruption, inequality, and poor governance often hinder its achievement.

Ethical leadership is therefore central to sustainable development because it promotes accountability, justice, and responsible resource management. Ethical leaders strengthen institutions, reduce corruption, and build public trust. They also promote social welfare, inclusion, and equal opportunity while supporting environmental conservation. Through these actions, ethical leadership ensures that development is inclusive, responsible, and long-term.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for understanding how ethical leadership influences sustainable development. They explain the relationships between leadership behavior, organizational outcomes, and societal progress. In this study, three key theories; Transformational Leadership Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Servant Leadership Theory are used to explain how ethical leadership promotes sustainable development through morality, responsibility, and collective wellbeing.

Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass, explains how leaders inspire followers to achieve higher moral and performance standards. Transformational leaders motivate change by promoting vision, integrity, and collective responsibility. They encourage individuals to move beyond self-interest toward societal goals. Bass and Riggio (2006) note that such leaders build trust through ethical behavior and concern for followers. This theory supports sustainable development because it emphasizes long-term change, innovation, and moral influence. Transformational leaders challenge corruption and weak systems while promoting ethical reforms that strengthen institutions and societal development (Modise, 2025a).

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), argues that leaders must consider the interests of all stakeholders, including communities, employees, governments, and future generations. Ethical leadership within this framework ensures fairness, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. It discourages corruption and exploitation while promoting social and environmental responsibility. By balancing diverse interests, stakeholder-oriented leadership supports sustainable development through equity, participation, and long-term planning.

Servant Leadership Theory, developed by Greenleaf (1970), emphasizes leadership as service to others. Servant leaders prioritize the welfare, growth, and dignity of followers above personal gain. They demonstrate empathy, humility, and stewardship. Spears (2010) highlights

listening, foresight, and community-building as key traits. This theory supports sustainable development by promoting social justice, environmental stewardship, and responsible resource management.

Collectively, these theories show that ethical leadership is central to sustainable development. They emphasize morality, service, accountability, and inclusiveness as essential leadership values. Together, they explain that sustainable development depends not only on economic policies but on ethical leaders who prioritize human dignity, justice, and long-term societal wellbeing.

Ethical Leadership and Sustainable Development

Ethical leadership plays a central role in promoting sustainable development across societies, organizations, and institutions. Sustainable development depends on leadership that is responsible, transparent, accountable, and committed to the wellbeing of both present and future generations. Since leaders influence resource allocation, policy direction, and institutional behavior, their ethical orientation significantly determines development outcomes. Where leadership is ethical, development becomes inclusive and stable; where it is unethical, societies face corruption, inequality, and environmental degradation (Streimikiene et al., 2019).

A key contribution of ethical leadership is the promotion of good governance. Good governance involves transparency, accountability, and participation in managing public resources. Ethical leaders treat leadership as a public trust and ensure that decisions are made in the interest of society. This builds public confidence and strengthens institutions (Northouse, 2019). Ethical leadership also reduces corruption, which remains a major barrier to sustainable development. By rejecting bribery, nepotism, and misuse of power, ethical leaders ensure that resources are used for collective benefit rather than personal gain (Ciulla, 2004).

Ethical leadership further promotes democratic participation and inclusion. By encouraging citizens' involvement in decision-making, ethical leaders strengthen social trust and shared ownership of development policies. This inclusiveness enhances political stability and social cohesion (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025). In economic development, ethical leadership supports sustainable growth by encouraging accountability, reducing waste, and ensuring fair distribution of resources. Freeman (1984) notes that stakeholder-oriented leadership creates long-term value by balancing the interests of all societal groups.

In organizations, ethical leadership promotes corporate social responsibility, fair labor practices, and environmental protection (Kim & Thapa, 2018). Such practices improve productivity, employee motivation, and public trust. Ethical organizations contribute positively to

community development while avoiding exploitative or harmful practices. Similarly, ethical leaders ensure effective resource management by prioritizing infrastructure, education, healthcare, and welfare over personal enrichment (Islam et al., 2025).

Socially, ethical leadership promotes justice, equality, and respect for human dignity. It reduces discrimination and encourages peace and inclusion in diverse societies. Ethical leaders support policies that improve education, healthcare, and living standards, thereby enhancing human development (Anthony & Dada, 2022). They also foster unity and peaceful coexistence, which are essential for sustainable development.

Environmental sustainability is another critical area influenced by ethical leadership. Ethical leaders promote conservation, responsible resource use, and environmental protection. They enforce environmental laws and discourage harmful practices such as pollution, deforestation, and illegal exploitation of resources. By balancing economic growth with environmental protection, ethical leadership ensures long-term ecological stability (Sachs, 2015).

Ethical leadership also strengthens organizational culture by promoting integrity, professionalism, and accountability. It encourages long-term planning and innovation, ensuring that development decisions benefit both present and future generations. Furthermore, ethical leaders shape moral values within society, promoting honesty, responsibility, and discipline (Dion, 2020).

Despite these contributions, many societies still experience leadership challenges such as corruption and weak institutions. This underscores the necessity of ethical leadership as a foundation for sustainable development. Ultimately, ethical leadership remains essential for building just, stable, and sustainable societies.

Challenges to Ethical Leadership in Sustainable Development

Despite ethical leadership's role in sustainable development, many communities and organisations confront substantial obstacles to ethical practices and long-term success. These issues weaken institutions, lower public trust, increase corruption, and hinder leaders' ability to achieve social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Political, economic, social, and cultural issues weaken integrity, accountability, and responsibility, which ethical leaders need. Unethical leadership makes sustainable development impossible.

Corruption hinders ethical leadership. Corrupt people use public office, authority, or resources for personal benefit. Bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, favouritism, and power

abuse are included. Corruption damages institutions and denies development resources to the needy (Williams-Elegbe, 2018). Leaders in many developing countries steal infrastructure, education, healthcare, and social welfare monies for personal gain. This increases poverty, unemployment, inequality, and public discontent. Leader corruption undermines public trust and investment, stifling economic growth. When corruption is normalised and accountability is weak, ethical leadership is difficult.

Weak institutions also threaten ethical leadership and sustainable development. Justice, transparency, and accountability are demanded from the judiciary, anti-corruption agencies, educational systems, and public service organisations. However, weak or politically influenced institutions allow unethical leaders to act without punishment (Mitchell et al., 2023). Ineffective institutions cannot enforce laws or protect public interests. This promotes impunity and lowers public trust in government. Strong institutions supporting fairness, accountability, and responsible leadership are essential for sustainable development.

Lack of leadership responsibility is another issue. Accountability demands leaders to own their actions and decisions. Leaders are rarely punished for wrongdoing, corruption, or abuse of position in many societies. Political power, tribalism, and favouritism shield corrupt leaders. Leaders can abuse authority and public resources without consequences. This hurts democracy and sustainable development. Effective and appreciated openness and accountability foster ethical leadership.

Economic inequality and poverty hamper ethical leadership and sustainable development. In poor civilisations, many people may do immoral things to survive. Economic hardship can lead to bribery, fraud, election malpractice, and exploitation. Economic inequality increases social tensions and leadership system distrust (Burciu et al., 2020). When citizens struggle economically, leaders who focus on personal wealth lose moral legitimacy. Leaders must prioritise economic fairness and social wellbeing over self-interest for sustainable development.

Political instability also hinders ethical leadership. Frequent political confrontations, violence, electoral crises, and insecurity hinder sustainable growth. Political instability damages institutions, inhibits investment, and upsets society and business. In unstable cultures, leaders may prioritise power over ethics and development. Peace, stability, and democracy are essential for ethical leadership. Politically unstable societies struggle to achieve long-term development plans and sustainable policies (Rashid & Rashid, 2024).

Moral and cultural deterioration undermines ethical leadership in many societies. Leadership systems lose morality as dishonesty, materialism, greed, and selfishness become more accepted. Some societies worship riches and power without considering its source. Such attitudes promote unethical behaviour and devalue integrity and accountability. Social values and morality shape ethical leadership. Leadership crises increase when families, schools, religious institutions, and communities disregard ethics (Astrachan et al., 2020).

Poor leadership and ethical education are further issues. Many executives lack moral and leadership training. Leadership requires character, discipline, and accountability as well as technical skills. Leaders without ethical education and value orientation may lack moral standards for good administration and management. Thus, schools foster ethics and leadership. Globalisation and excessive competitiveness have also led to unethical behaviour in some organisations and communities. Leaders and organisations may ignore ethics under pressure for profit, political success, or economic gain. For profit, some organisations exploit, pollute, evade taxes, and mistreat workers. Such acts may serve short-term goals but harm long-term development and society. Leadership ethics balances achievement, accountability, and human wellbeing. Corruption, weak institutions, lack of accountability, poverty, political instability, moral decay, and inadequate ethical education all threaten ethical leadership and sustainable development. These issues degrade government, worsen social and economic issues, and erode leadership trust. Governments, institutions, organisations, and citizens must collaborate to solve these problems. Sustainable development requires ethical leadership because society cannot evolve without integrity, fairness, accountability, and responsible governance.

Strategies for Promoting Ethical Leadership for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development requires ethical leadership in societies and organisations. Corruption, misuse of authority, unfairness, and lack of accountability continue to harm development initiatives, therefore responsible leadership and moral government are needed. Collective efforts by governments, educational institutions, religious organisations, civil society groups, and citizens can improve ethical leadership. Leadership integrity, justice, and devotion to the common good are crucial to sustainable development (Nikolova, 2021).

Ethical education and value reorientation promote ethical leadership. Schools should instill honesty, accountability, discipline, fairness, and responsibility early on. Ethics, good governance, and social responsibility should be taught

in leadership programs. Ethical education shows how corruption, injustice, and power abuse affect society. Families, schools, and religion also shape future leaders' morality. Responsible leadership is simpler when societies regularly promote ethics (De Roeck & Farooq, 2018).

Another way to promote ethical leadership and sustainable development is to strengthen institutions and the rule of law. Strong institutions promote social justice, accountability, and transparency. The judiciary, anti-corruption authorities, electoral bodies, and public service organisations should work impartially and without political intervention. Laws should be enforced equally regardless of social or political power. Because of penalties, leaders are less likely to act unethically in powerful organisations. Thus, strong institutions foster ethical leadership.

Ethical leadership requires transparency and accountability. Governments and organisations should promote open decision-making and financial management. Public and organisational leaders should routinely report resource consumption. Transparency cuts corruption and boosts leadership trust. Accountability ensures leaders take responsibility for their actions and decisions. Citizens and institutions can question and demand explanations from leaders, strengthening ethical leadership (Bowman & West, 2021).

Promoting good governance and democracy is another key strategy. Societies where citizens can freely engage in government and express their ideas foster ethical leadership. Encourage democratic values including fairness, justice, equality, and human rights. Politicians should involve citizens and stakeholders in policymaking and development. Participation fosters leadership-follower trust and mutual accountability. Good governance also guarantees society benefits from responsible public resource management.

Ethical leadership and sustainable development require responsible corporate practices. Business leaders and organisations should protect employees, consumers, communities, and the environment with ethical standards. Corporate social responsibility should promote education, healthcare, the environment, and community development (Lysiak et al., 2021). Organisational reputation and social and economic sustainability benefit from ethical business practices. Responsible companies are more likely to succeed and gain trust.

Citizens also help promote ethical leadership. Society should fight corruption, vote responsibly, and hold officials accountable. Media and civil society groups can expose unethical governance and organisational management and encourage transparency. Citizens should prefer honest, ethical, and public-spirited leaders above those who use

ethnic, religious, or financial power. Leaders and followers must work together for sustainable growth.

Additionally, mentorship and leadership development programs can encourage ethical leadership. Experienced, moral leaders should mentor younger generations and promote ethical leadership. Leadership training should include character, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility as well as technical capabilities. Training future leaders in service, humility, and accountability strengthens ethical leadership (Modise, 2025b).

Finally, ethical leadership requires ethical education, strong institutions, transparency, accountability, good governance, responsible corporate practices, public participation, and leadership development. These tactics foster integrity, justice, and responsibility in society and organisations. Leaders and citizens must encourage ethics and responsible governance to ensure sustainable development. Long-term social, economic, and environmental success requires ethical leadership.

Conclusion

Ethical leadership remains one of the most important foundations for sustainable development in modern societies and organizations. The study has shown that leadership is not only about authority and decision-making but also about moral responsibility, accountability, fairness, and service to humanity. Sustainable development depends greatly on leaders who are committed to honesty, transparency, justice, and responsible management of resources. Ethical leadership promotes trust, strengthens institutions, encourages good governance, and creates an environment where social, economic, and environmental progress can flourish.

The discussion also revealed that ethical leadership contributes significantly to sustainable development through good governance, economic responsibility, social justice, and environmental protection. Ethical leaders promote accountability and transparency in governance and organizational management, thereby reducing corruption and misuse of resources. They encourage fair policies that improve education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and social welfare. Ethical leadership also supports environmental sustainability by encouraging responsible use and conservation of natural resources for present and future generations.

However, the study further identified several challenges affecting ethical leadership and sustainable development, including corruption, weak institutions, lack of accountability, poverty, political instability, and moral decline. These challenges continue to undermine development efforts and weaken public trust in leadership systems. The persistence of unethical practices in many

societies demonstrates the need for stronger ethical standards and responsible leadership at all levels of society.

The paper therefore emphasized that promoting ethical leadership requires collective efforts from governments, institutions, organizations, families, religious bodies, and citizens. Ethical education, strong institutions, accountability systems, responsible governance, and value reorientation are necessary for building societies where integrity and justice are respected. Sustainable development cannot be achieved where corruption, selfishness, and abuse of power dominate leadership structures.

In conclusion, ethical leadership serves as a catalyst for sustainable development because it provides the moral foundation needed for lasting societal progress. Societies and organizations that embrace ethical leadership are more likely to experience peace, stability, economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Ethical leadership is therefore not only desirable but necessary for achieving meaningful and long-term development.

Recommendations

1. Governments and public institutions should strengthen accountability and transparency systems in order to reduce corruption and promote responsible governance. This can be achieved through effective anti-corruption agencies, independent judicial systems, and proper monitoring of public resources.
2. Educational institutions should incorporate ethics and leadership studies into their curricula to help develop morally responsible future leaders. Ethical education should emphasize integrity, honesty, discipline, and social responsibility from an early stage.
3. Organizations and business leaders should adopt ethical management practices and corporate social responsibility programs that support employees, communities, and environmental sustainability. Ethical business practices contribute to long-term organizational growth and societal development.
4. Citizens, religious institutions, and civil society organizations should actively promote ethical values and hold leaders accountable for their actions. Public support should be given to leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and commitment to public welfare rather than selfish interests.

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