CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHICAL AND UNETHICAL LEADERSHIP: EXPLORATORY FINDINGS FROM POST-SOVIET KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the perceptions of ethical and unethical leadership within Kazakhstani business organizations, aiming to discern how individuals in Kazakhstan conceptualize and enact ethical and unethical leadership. Employing a qualitative research paradigm with a constructivist perspective, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 23 participants Kazakhstan. Inductive, grounded theory methods of analysis were utilized to analyze the interview data. The study identified nine characteristics of ethical leadership perceived by participants, along with five characteristics of unethical leadership. While the sample size and geographic focus of the study limit the generalizability of findings, the findings provide valuable contributions to understanding ethical leadership in non-Western contexts, offering implications for leadership development and organizational practices within Kazakhstan. This study fills a gap in the literature regarding the perception and practice of ethical leadership in Kazakhstan, shedding light on cultural nuances and ethical values that shape leadership behaviors in the region.

Keywords: ethical leadership; Central Asia; qualitative; grounded theory; leadership perceptions

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, extensive research has explored various leadership styles, particularly examining their ethical dimensions (Lemoine et al., 2019). Several leadership approaches have been recognized for promoting ethical behavior, such as authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2004), transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), and spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003). The emphasis on ethical leadership has gained prominence due to its explicit focus on promoting ethical behaviors within organizational and societal settings (Brown et al., 2005; Moore et al., 2019), reflecting a consensus among researchers and practitioners regarding its importance (Den Hartog, 2015).

However, research on ethical leadership in non-Western contexts remains relatively limited, often relying on quantitative methodologies and rooted in Western ethical leadership paradigms (Ardichvili et al., 2012; Resick et al., 2006; Resick et al., 2011). Additionally, studies in non-Western contexts frequently adopt survey instruments originally developed and validated in Western contexts, as evidenced by Conrad's investigation of ethical leadership in Kazakhstan (Conrad, 2013a, 2013b). This narrow research focus poses challenges as perceptions of ethical leadership can be influenced by cultural values held by both employees and leaders (Conrad, 2013a), necessitating qualitative exploration of how individuals perceive and interpret ethical

leadership, particularly in understudied contexts like Kazakhstan. Given this context, the primary aim of this study is to explore how individuals in Kazakhstan's business sector conceptualize ethical leadership within Kazakhstani business organizations.

Kazakhstan presents a unique opportunity to enhance our understanding of ethical leadership for two main reasons: (1) it stands as one of the world's largest emerging economies, with significant growth in its business sector following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, leading to a substantial increase in the workforce population (Conrad, 2013a); and (2) existing research on leadership ethics has predominantly focused on Western and high-population contexts, with limited empirical inquiry in developing countries such as Kazakhstan (Ardichvili et al., 2012; Resick et al., 2006). Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by providing insights into ethical leadership perceptions specific to the Kazakhstani business landscape. Therefore, the primary research question was: What constitutes ethical leadership according to individuals in Kazakhstani business organizations? To explore this, the study is structured around the following sub-questions: 1. How do individuals in Kazakhstani business settings articulate the development of their personal ethical framework? 2. How do these individuals describe ethical leadership practices? 3. How do they describe unethical leadership practices?

It is crucial to highlight that this study focuses on the perceptions of ethical leadership among individuals employed within the private business sector in Kazakhstan, with data collection conducted exclusively in businesses situated in the capital city of Astana. This limits the generalizability of the findings. The selection of Astana as the geographical area for the study is guided by two primary considerations. Firstly, despite Almaty potentially exceeding Astana in size and cultural significance, Astana's rapid growth since its establishment in 1998 and its status as the country's administrative capital make it noteworthy. Secondly, Astana's emergence as a trendsetter within Kazakhstan signifies a shift in influence and trends within the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical discussions aiming to define ethical leadership have predominantly relied on Western ethical philosophies (House et al., 2004; Resick et al., 2011; Toor & Ofori, 2009). This preference is partly due to the term "ethic" originating from the Western (Greek) word "ethos," signifying "character." Consequently, Western ethical frameworks have been applied to assess ethical leadership in various contexts (Ciulla, 2012). Recent studies have emphasized the need for incorporating non-Western perspectives to understand ethical leadership more comprehensively (e.g., Udin, 2024; Martin et al., 2009). However, limited efforts have been made to uncover culturally specific understandings of ethical leadership (Wang et al., 2005), especially within the context of Kazakhstan, which remains underexplored.

Kazakhstani Context

Kazakhstan, the ninth-largest country by land size, was part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), with a currently estimated population of 20 million. Ethnically, the population comprises 63.1% Kazakhs, 23.7% Russians, and other ethnic groups each making up less than 3% (Population Census, 2009). Historically, Kazakhs were nomadic, with Kazakh clans relying on livestock and residing in portable yurts (Levi, 2007). However, during the Soviet era, Russian colonization eroded traditional Kazakh culture. Soviet policies introduced settlements, mandated education, established healthcare facilities, and enforced the use of the Russian language, leading to a notable decline in traditional practices (Michaels, 2007). The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of this era (Sahadeo & Zanca, 2007). In the more than 30 years since gaining independence, Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the most developed Central Asian countries (Sahadeo & Zanca, 2007). Throughout the Soviet era, leadership in the government was characterized as autocratic, transactional, Machiavellian, and situational (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2010; Puffer & McCarthy, 2011), contrasting sharply with Western democratic and transformational leadership styles (McCarthy et al., 2010). However, young leaders in the region have adopted leadership approaches aligning more closely with Western

paradigms, emphasizing democracy, transformation, compassion, and ethicality (McCarthy et al., 2010; Puffer & McCarthy, 2011).

To understand Kazakh cultural values, especially in leadership, insights from the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research project are invaluable (House et al., 2004). This extensive study revealed several significant aspects of Kazakhstan's cultural values. Kazakhstan's performance orientation ranks in the bottom ten percent, indicating a preference for character over actions and limited emphasis on innovation (Javidan, 2004). Future orientation is in the bottom one-fourth, suggesting less emphasis on planning (Ashkanasy et al., 2004). Gender egalitarianism is high, reflecting greater gender equality (Emrich et al., 2004), while assertiveness is also notable (Den Hartog, 2004). Institutional collectivism values lag behind actual practice, and in-group collectivism is moderate (Gelfand et al., 2004). Power distance, while moderate in practice, desires greater distance, and humane orientation is middle-ranking (Dorfman et al., 2004; Kabasakal & Bodur, 2004). Uncertainty avoidance is average for both practice and value (de Luque & Javidan, 2004), providing context for understanding ethical leadership perceptions and behaviors in Kazakhstan.

Studies of Ethical Leadership

The exploration of ethical leadership has undergone considerable evolution, initially focusing on leaders' ethical decision-making processes (Treviño, 1986). Treviño (1986) identified two key influencers: individual characteristics and contextual factors. Ciulla (1995) made significant contributions by delving into the ethical dimensions of leadership, highlighting the scarcity of ethical discussions within leadership literature. Various definitions of ethical leadership have emerged, with some emphasizing leaders' personal character and others focusing on their actions (Knapp, 2007). Kouzes and Posner (2011) stressed moral leadership as adherence to principles rather than authoritarian compliance. A widely cited definition emphasizes normatively appropriate conduct demonstrated through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, and communication, reinforcing ethical behavior among followers (Brown et al., 2005). Ciulla (2005) expanded on this, identifying three dimensions: intent, relationship, and outcome, reflecting a leader's personal ethics, relational behaviors, and leadership actions.

Ethical leadership can be examined from different perspectives. Treviño et al. (2000) explored how leaders establish reputations for ethical leadership, emphasizing the importance of being perceived as both moral individuals and managers. Brown et al. (2005) highlighted the role of social learning theory in organizational ethical leadership, suggesting that ethical behavior is learned, modeled, and imitated. A third approach focuses on leaders' virtues shaping their actions and decisions (Kilburg, 2012). Riggio et al. (2010) defined ethical leaders as those upholding virtues affirmed by Aristotle and Aquinas, emphasizing prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice. Integrity, characterized by trust and consistency, is considered a crucial virtue for executive leaders (Davis, 2010).

Recent research underscores the myriad benefits of ethical leadership, beyond ethical conduct, including organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, proactive engagement, organizational commitment, compassion, corporate social responsibility, and counterproductive work behavior. However, understanding of ethical leadership's practice and its impact in non-Western contexts remains limited. Differences in cultural values may influence the importance assigned to specific virtues in leadership, posing challenges for cross-cultural applications (Ciulla, 2012; House et al., 2004). In Kazakhstan, it is crucial to explore which virtues are deemed essential for business leaders and how these virtues translate into actions within organizational settings. Bedi et al. (2016) found geographic location to be a moderating factor in the relationship between ethical leadership and follower outcomes, highlighting the need for research across diverse geographic contexts, including Kazakhstan, to gain comprehensive insights into these variations.

Non-Western Studies of Ethical Leadership

Culture significantly influences perceptions of ethical leadership, emphasizing the need to understand cultural norms before evaluating ethical practices (Karmasin, 2002). This is particularly relevant in non-Western settings, where research on ethical leadership is less prevalent compared to Western contexts (Kim et

al., 2015). While categorizing cultures as strictly "Western" or "Eastern" may oversimplify and rely on stereotypes, these are often used to outline general trends (e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Carlin & Strong, 1995; Ciulla, 2012; Resick et al., 2011). Western cultures typically prioritize rule-based control of society, while Eastern cultures perceive ethical predispositions as inherent and unchangeable aspects of human nature (Adler, 2008). In an increasingly globalized world where cultural boundaries are constantly crossed, understanding cultural differences, especially in research on leadership practices and ethics, has become crucial (Resick et al., 2006). However, studies like that of Resick et al. (2006), covering the Eastern European bloc including Kazakhstan, have faced challenges in generalizability due to significant disparities in value preferences between Kazakhstanis and Eastern Europeans (Conrad, 2013b). Additionally, cultural dimensions measured in projects like the GLOBE study were based on Western understandings (House et al., 2004), potentially limiting their applicability to non-Western cultures.

Examining the landscape across diverse contexts, Resick et al. (2011) identified character as a universally recognized theme for ethical leadership across six societies with most participants considering character pivotal for ethical leadership. Research has shown the positive effects of ethical leadership in various non-Western settings. For example, ethical leadership has been associated with increased job satisfaction in Singapore (Toor & Ofori, 2009) and China (Tu, Lu, & Yu, 2017) as well as a greater willingness of followers to take initiative in the South Korea (Kihyun, 2016). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, ethical leadership correlated with higher productivity, increased assistance to coworkers, reduced unethical behavior, and better fulfillment of the organization's mission (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016). In China, ethical leadership has been linked to higher levels of team creativity within organizations (Tu et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY
Research Paradigm and Approach

To explore the culturally contingent nature of ethical leadership, I adopted a qualitative research approach aligned with a constructivist viewpoint. According to this perspective, reality is subjective and shaped by social constructs, allowing for a flexible and inductive examination of the subject (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Acknowledging the necessity for a nuanced comprehension of ethical leadership, a qualitative research method was preferred over large-scale quantitative surveys (Guthey & Jackson, 2011). This qualitative investigation was considered appropriate for an exploratory analysis aimed at elucidating characteristics of ethical leadership from a Kazakhstani standpoint. Such an approach is particularly relevant given the scarcity of research into emic (Kazakhstani) perspectives of ethical leadership in non-Western environments like Kazakhstan.

Data Collection

Data was collected using a purposeful and stratified sampling method involving 23 participants situated in Kazakhstan's capital who were recruited through personal and professional networks. The sampling approach was stratified, including participants from three distinct groups: eleven executives, seven middle managers, and five lower-level employees. This method allowed for the exploration of potential differences and similarities in perceptions of ethical leadership among these subgroups (Creswell, 2013). The sampling procedure focused on selecting individuals capable of providing detailed and insightful information relevant to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, snowball sampling was utilized, with certain participants facilitating access to others who might have been challenging to reach directly (Creswell, 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, accompanied by a comprehensive cover letter outlining the purpose, researcher's role, voluntary participation, and data privacy assurances, safeguarding participant rights and well-being (Webster et al., 2014).

Criteria for participant selection included: 1) individuals born in Kazakhstan, 2) presently employed by a Kazakhstani-based firm, and 3) occupying their current positions for at least one year. Data saturation was attained after twenty interviews, signifying that no new information was emerging. To further confirm data saturation, three additional interviews were conducted before concluding data collection. Data were gathered through face-to-face, semi-

structured interviews, which were recorded. The interview approach embraced a constructivist perspective, encouraging participants to openly share their thoughts. The researcher utilized additional probing questions to elicit thorough responses, aligning with the qualitative nature of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews was analyzed inductively using grounded theory methods, following Charmaz's (2014) approach. Initially, each interview was transcribed from audio recordings to create textual data. NVivo software facilitated the analysis, employing inductive grounded theory techniques of coding and theme construction, generating insights addressing the research questions (Charmaz, 2014). The process, although described linearly, was recursive and iterative. During coding, I created memos to capture thoughts, reflections, and emerging insights, aiding the analysis (Saldaña, 2009). These memos were crucial for documenting observations, fostering reflection, and promoting researcher reflexivity, ensuring a deeper understanding of their perspectives' potential impact on the data. Constant comparative analysis was integral, involving continuous comparisons between data segments to identify similarities and differences, refining emerging themes and patterns (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

FINDINGS

Characteristics of Ethical Leadership

The first significant theme that emerged pertains to the characteristics associated with ethical leadership in Kazakhstani businesses, as illustrated in Table 1. These attributes can be classified into three overarching categories, namely: internal workplace attributes, external work-related attributes, and the personal values embodied by the leader.

The first category encompasses three primary attributes that encapsulate how ethical leadership manifests within the workplace. These attributes delineate how a leader manifests ethical leadership within the organizational context. Initially, a total of 17 attributes were identified; however, during data analysis, they were consolidated into higher-order abstract concepts, specifically: creating a culture of care, valuing employees, and demonstrating personal values in the workplace. The second category encompasses attributes associated with ethical leadership within the respective industry and the broader public domain. These attributes expound upon how an ethical leader demonstrates ethical leadership externally, both in interactions with other organizations and in public contexts (e.g., media engagements). The third category encompasses the personal values of an ethical leader, which are exhibited consistently whether at work or in personal life. These characteristics describe an individual who is perceived as ethical, irrespective of their employment or hierarchical position.

Table 1: Representative Comments for Characteristics of Ethical Leadership

Internal to the Workplace	
Characteristic	**Representative Comments**
Creating a culture of care	Here, he has to be caring. It's more than just a formal appointment. Good bosses here are always caring. They always have to show some signs of caring about their employees. When I started my business, I wanted my workers to have good conditions to work. They will go to work with a smile. They will wake up and go to work without being nervous. They will understand that they love their work. If something ever happens, we give them some money or provide help. . . [We] have these yearly payments for [vacation]. Now, we're doing this for each child—we give some money and presents.
Valuing employees	We don't want to always change our employees. We teach them everything and they are learning. We would like they would be our partners, not just employees.

Table 1: Continued

	That they would be part of [Company]. . .We would like them to feel that they fulfill their life also in this company by learning, by doing what they would like to do.
	Now I understand that you should speak with the [employees]. You should sometimes do something for them. If they need, for example, money immediately, lend them this money. It's what they need most.
Demonstrating personal values	He should not misuse some information or knowledge or anything he has that puts him in a better situation. And he will not use this information to harm anyone. Not in the physical sense, but emotional especially at work.
	You are responsible for all the people you're leading. Be it commander, be it political officer, you are taking care of these people. They look up to you. Your decisions shape their future. Your mistakes lead to failures, and so on. Here, it's more like a father figure, a patriarch. It's not a formal responsibility. It's like the overall responsibility, the whole responsibility. That is why in many, many of these nomadic cultures, they would call their chieftain, "Father."
	If they propose something, they do it. Even if it's not documented. For example, no signature, no agreement, etcetera. But, if they promise, they do it. If they promise that they will increase their salary in one year, or if they will have more contracts, they do it.

External to the Workplace

Characteristic	Representative Comments
Concern for the organization's reputation	Our leaders created our code of ethics. The first thing written is the reputation of the company. The first thing is the reputation of the company because every worker here represents [Company]. Our company constantly tries to show up in the news in positive ways.
	Sometimes, other companies come to us and ask, "Do you know this company?" We say, "Yes," and they ask, "How was their job?" We say, "Good, but sometimes this or that may happen."
Prioritize relationship over contract in B2B partnerships	We sign a contract, but we also have a verbal agreement. My boss looks at what kind of person you are and if you will follow your words or not. A contract is something we sign, but it's on the shelf, and you never touch it. Everything [All agreements] is from calls and your relationship with him.
	You start with a verbal agreement. And, if that doesn't work, then you pull the contract off the shelf and go to that.
Respect competitors	For me, if you want to win, you should be ethical. My partners like me because I never said bad things about my competition. I only talk about my advantage.
	We are always trying to find a consensus between our goals and our competitors' goals. We have some kind of power, and they have some kind of power, so sometimes we try to find a consensus to work together.

Personal Values

Characteristic	Representative Comments
Clear boundaries	You have to make a stop-list, for yourself. I will never do this kind of business, I will never work with these people, I will never provide this kind of service, because it doesn't fit with my mission and my values.
	They will try to make the right decisions. But, you know, there are so many moments when you think it's not right but at the same time, you think maybe it is. But, in any case, in any situation, ethical leaders should stay true to who they are.
	I worked for one company for about a year, and I just couldn't accept the practices that they were doing. It was nothing crucial, but overall, I didn't like it, so I left.

Table 1: Continued

Ethical at work and at home	A leader's personal life is part of his image and reputation. It doesn't matter if he's at work or he's at home. It just shows his personality, and it means that he is this type of person. A leader creates the values of this company. Because doesn't mean what you said, people will look at what you did, first of all. And your principles and values can be seen clearly in your actions at home or at work. Things like your patience, your core values, matter a lot. Your honesty. If you don't have those in your personal life, you cannot project them in your professional life.
Desire self-development	I promised myself that I will be better than I was yesterday. I earned an MBA because I wanted to understand the whole nature of business, and I realized that this program could help me. I own the company, but I also stood as a cashier there for two weeks just to know how the process works.

Although these three categories suggest discrete and distinct characteristics for each category, there is a considerable degree of overlap among them. For instance, the attribute of honesty may influence how a leader interacts with employees, engages with other businesses, and conducts themselves in their personal lives. Consequently, the categories employed in this study should not be regarded as isolated and independent categories disconnected from one another; instead, they exhibit substantial interconnectedness and interdependence. This underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of ethical leadership in Kazakhstani businesses (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024; Dinh et al., 2014).

Characteristics of Unethical Leadership

The second main theme that emerged revolves around the depiction of unethical leadership within Kazakhstani businesses. The data revealed five salient characteristics associated with unethical leadership, which are detailed in Table 2. While these five characteristics relate to unethical leadership, it is important to note that they can co-occur and interact in complex ways, contributing to the overall perception of unethical leadership behavior. Understanding these attributes is important not only for comprehending ethical leadership but also for identifying and addressing instances of unethical leadership within Kazakhstani businesses.

Table 2: Representative Comments for Characteristics of Unethical Leadership

Characteristic	Representative Comments
Engagement in corruption	We can see a lot of examples of corruption in Kazakhstan. If he is doing corruption, he's an unethical leader.
	I didn't trust the owners of the company anymore because they were cheating on taxes. At the same time, they were breaking little laws sometimes. It was nothing that crucial, but overall, I didn't like it, so I left.
	Especially the higher the levels go, the more it happens. For a very regular person, she will go and rob the bank, and, I don't know, probably she will be caught. But the higher the level goes, the more these people know that they can get away with this. It's completely unethical in business.
Inconsiderate behavior	An unethical leader doesn't respect others' time. He can call like at 2 A.M., 4 A.M. and disturb you. This work is not compensated, but there's a compensation from your manager, like in terms of having good points in front of him. You're just showing him that you are really a responsible guy.
	When an employee has a problem and they come to a Kazakh boss, the boss starts to yell at them like, "You're so stupid. You even cannot solve this problem."
	My boss, he's one of the well-known people in his city and Kazakhstan, and he has luxury clothes, cars, apartments, etc. But, I had, for two months, late salary. I think that it's unethical

	because it demotivates people.
Failure to uphold commitments	I think the main one is when the person will tell you one thing and do another thing. . . Very unethical. Again, it's keeping your word. If you say you will pay me and you don't pay me, then you're not keeping your word.
	If you say that you will pay this, and after the work [is finished] and you pay fifty, or thirty, or even ten percent less, then I think it's unethical.
	When you bring material to them. They pay you a prepayment, about 15%. And after you bring the material, and they don't pay you for like six months, eight months, two years. This happens a lot.
Unethical egoism	They think more about themselves and their profit rather than employees and employees' well-being or like anything else. . . They will be only thinking about themselves. The leaders are trying to look out for their own benefit and their own place in the company, so they will do whatever helps them stay in the company or move up.
	If a leader thinks from the perspective of win-lose, then it's not ethical. But, if it's from the perspective of win-win, then both of them will win.
	In Kazakhstan, [the word] boss means the person who has a lot of power, who uses this power, and sometimes abuses this power for their own benefit, of course. I don't like it.
Unclear expectations	In a Kazakhstani company, if you want a promotion, there is not a clear system. You need to talk to your boss. I think you get more promotions and more rewards, rather than just working hard expecting a promotion. You have to talk about yourself and sell yourself.
	I believe I lost a promotion to a male colleague. He had very good connections, from some good families, rich families, and so on. The process was not transparent.
	Sometimes, the boss will give you a task and deadline. You do the task, but he gets mad because you didn't do it the way he wanted, even though he never told you what he wanted.

The participants in the study conveyed a spectrum of unethical behaviors, ranging from severe transgressions, such as direct involvement in corrupt practices, to less severe but still negative behaviors, such as maintaining unclear expectations. Remarkably, a generational divide emerged in the participants' perspectives: younger participants often described older leaders as exhibiting unethical leadership behaviors, while older participants frequently regarded these behaviors as a necessary means to achieve their objectives.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how Kazakhstanis in business understand and describe the concept of ethical leadership. Since the concept of ethical leadership has variform universality across cultures (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024), it is important to understand how it is currently understood in the Kazakhstani cultural context. These findings revealed nine characteristics of ethical leadership that emerged as significant, and five characteristics of unethical leadership that were significant.

The characteristics of ethical leadership that emerged from the data generally align with universally endorsed characteristics of integrity, altruism, encouraging, and collective motivation (Resick et al., 2006). However, these findings also highlight specific cultural elements unique to the Kazakhstani context, which are not extensively covered in Western-centric studies. For instance, the patriarchal and collectivist values used to describe Kazakhstani leadership practices differ from the individualistic and rule-based approaches prevalent in Western models (Martin et al., 2009). In non-Western contexts, ethical leadership has often been associated with communal values and collective well-being. Studies from China (Tu et al., 2019) and Singapore (Toor & Ofori, 2009) emphasize the role of ethical leaders in fostering team cohesion and collective success, which is also reflected in the Kazakhstani context where leaders are expected to create a culture of care and prioritize relationships over contracts. Furthermore, the emphasis on personal values and consistency in

both professional and personal life aligns with findings from research in South Korea (Kihyun, 2016) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016), where ethical leadership is seen as integral to personal integrity and public trust.

On the other hand, characteristics of unethical leadership, such as engagement in corruption and inconsiderate behavior, align with universally condemned traits found in various contexts, as highlighted by Brown and Mitchell (2010). However, the specific forms these behaviors take, such as the influence of hierarchical structures and the misuse of power for personal gain, underscore the cultural and systemic factors unique to Kazakhstan. By comparing these findings with existing literature, it becomes evident that while there are universal principles of ethical leadership, their manifestations and interpretations are deeply influenced by cultural contexts. This underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in studying and practicing ethical leadership.

While the study's findings are insightful, the limited sample size and geographic focus on Astana constrain the generalizability of the results. Future research should consider including a more diverse sample from various regions of Kazakhstan to enhance the applicability of the findings. Such research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership across different cultural and regional contexts within Kazakhstan.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the data, there are several implications for ethical leadership theory. The study underscores the importance of considering cultural context in understanding ethical leadership. It contributes to the literature by providing insights into how ethical leadership is perceived and practiced within the Kazakhstani cultural context, highlighting the variances that exist across different cultural settings. Second, by identifying characteristics of ethical and unethical leadership that align with both universally endorsed traits and culturally specific behaviors, the study enriches theoretical discussions on the universality of ethical leadership. It emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding that acknowledges both universal principles and culture-specific nuances

(variform universality) in ethical leadership research. And third, the findings offer valuable insights for cross-cultural leadership studies, demonstrating the importance of considering cultural factors when examining leadership behaviors. Researchers can build upon these insights to explore how cultural variations influence leadership practices and outcomes across diverse cultural contexts.

There are also several implications for practice. Organizations operating in Kazakhstan can integrate the identified characteristics of ethical leadership into their leadership development programs. By emphasizing traits such as integrity, altruism, and encouragement, organizations can nurture ethical leadership behaviors among their leaders. Second, understanding the characteristics of unethical leadership identified in the study can help organizations identify and address toxic leadership behaviors within their ranks. Organizations can implement measures to promote a positive organizational culture that discourages immoral and destructive leadership practices. Third, providing training and education for employees on ethical leadership can contribute to building a culture of accountability and integrity within the workplace. Employees can be equipped with the knowledge and skills to recognize and respond appropriately to both ethical and unethical leadership behaviors. Lastly, organizations can incorporate assessments of ethical leadership qualities into their recruitment and selection processes. By prioritizing candidates who exhibit traits aligned with ethical leadership, organizations can ensure the cultivation of an ethical leadership culture from the outset.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has shed light on the understanding and description of ethical leadership within the understudied Kazakhstani context. By identifying significant characteristics of both ethical and unethical leadership, the study provides insights for organizations operating in Kazakhstan and contributes to theoretical discussions on ethical leadership in diverse cultural settings. The findings underscore the importance of considering cultural nuances in leadership research and highlight the variances that exist across different cultural contexts. Moving forward, organizations can

leverage these insights to cultivate ethical leadership behaviors, promote positive organizational cultures, and enhance employee well-being and productivity. Additionally, the study calls for further research to explore the relationships between cultural values and leader behaviors, with implications for cross-cultural leadership studies and the development of culturally sensitive leadership practices. Overall, this study serves to advance current understandings of ethical leadership within the Kazakhstani context and its implications for organizational effectiveness and societal well-being.

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