LEADERSHIP AND BUSINESS ETHICS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Ethical leadership has emerged as a fundamental determinant of corporate governance and sustainable organizational practices, necessitating a deeper examination of its strategic dimensions. This paper explores the intersection of leadership and business ethics, proposing a conceptual framework for responsible management. Despite the extensive scholarship on ethical leadership, a critical gap persists in understanding the extent to which strategic leadership incorporates ethical considerations into decision-making processes. By identifying and analyzing various leadership styles within an ethical framework, this study elucidates both the convergences and divergences across these approaches. Through a synthesis of theoretical perspectives, this paper advances a structured approach to embedding ethics within leadership paradigms. The findings contribute to the academic discourse by offering a strategic framework that integrates ethical leadership with corporate governance and long-term organizational performance. Additionally, this study provides practical insights for business leaders seeking to cultivate ethical organizational cultures while maintaining competitive advantage. By bridging theoretical constructs with managerial applications, this research enhances both scholarly inquiry and business practice.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Business Ethics, Normative Ethics, Leadership Philosophy, Ethical Governance, Moral Leadership, Leadership Styles, Leadership Models, Organizational Ethics, Responsible Management, Ethical Decision-Making, Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Virtue Ethics

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics in the organizational context has become a major concern among leading business ethics specialists to question a company's ability to perceive its social existence and to ethically judge the impact of its actions (Bureau & Buttin, 2013). In the last decade, a series of "unethical" events have shaken up the business world across a range of sectors. The Kerviel affair, in the banking sector, is an example (Eisenbeiss, 2012). As is the case of Arlette Ricci, the heiress of the Nina Ricci fashion house, who was sentenced to a three-year suspended prison sentence for having concealed millions from the French tax authorities ("Nina Ricci heir", 2015). Another example is the Audi scandal that broke out in September 2015 after the U.S. Environmental Agency accused VW of equipping 11 million of its diesel cars, including some 600,000 in the U.S., with software capable of distorting the results of emissions tests (Eisenbeiss, 2012). Finally, leader companies such as Apple or Amazon were at the heart of the "Luxleaks" scandal, revealed in November 2014, accused of having used highly questionable tax practices via Luxembourg (Bowers, 2014).

In order to prevent such deviant practices, organizations should take responsibility and increase their efforts to demonstrate ethical governance and promote ethical practices throughout the organizational hierarchy (Mayer et al., 2009). Knowing when and why individuals engage in unethical behavior is important, given the costly and destructive consequences for individuals, organizations, and society (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007). "Unethical behavior" is defined as behavior that falls outside of generally accepted norms of moral behavior such as cheating, lying, or stealing (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007; Treviño et al., 2003). A definition that is similar to Jones' (1991) definition of unethical behavior as "a practice that is illegal or morally unacceptable to a community" (p. 367).

The multitude of studies that exist on issues related to unethical behavior in organizations provides an overview of the topic. Vardi and Weitz (2003) focus on misbehavior in the organization; Tyler and Blader (2005) on rule-breaking; Neill et al. (2005) on noncompliance with norms of good conduct; Hollinger and Clark (1982) on workplace deviance; Analoui (1995) on sabotage; Mangione and Quinn (1975) on counterproductivity; and Ashforth and Anand (2003) on corruption. A salient feature of unethical behavior is that it is malicious behavior whereby fundamental interests are at stake (Velasquez, 2003).

Consistent with current organizational issues, much of the research on ethics has focused on ethical leadership as an essential component of organizational success. From this perspective, researchers have been particularly interested in the effects of ethical leadership on employees' organizational citizenship behavior. Drawing on social learning theory, they have attempted to explain how ethical leaders serve as role models to disseminate ethical and just behaviors to their employees, subsequently enabling their subordinates to replicate these exemplary behaviors in their day-to-day actions (Yaffe & Kark, 2011). As the term suggests, the ethical leader pays more attention to ethical issues in leadership. According to Ciulla (1995), a good leader is not only characterized by effectiveness but also by ethics. In addition, Yukl and Gardner (2019) suggested that the uncertainty and immorality in the business environment contribute to a huge increase in the number of scientific studies that address ethical leadership and its consequences in the workplace.

Despite extensive research on ethical leadership, a significant gap remains in understanding how different leadership styles interact within an ethical framework to shape responsible management practices. While transformational and participative leadership approaches also incorporate ethical considerations, they differ in their mechanisms and outcomes (Huang et al., 2021). By identifying and analyzing various leadership styles within an ethical framework, this study highlights both the convergences and divergences across these styles, offering a strategic perspective on responsible management.

This paper starts by presenting the perception of leadership in the workplace, which can indeed sometimes be very difficult to perceive. Secondly, a normative interpretation of this concept is presented, followed by a summary of the definitions of ethical leadership in order to measure the evolution of the concept and understand its theoretical basis. Finally, ethical leadership is compared to the different leadership styles that belong to the same leadership approach. This provides an overview of the foundations of ethical leadership, and the convergences and divergences with other leadership styles.

This research makes a significant contribution to the literature on ethical leadership through a systemic model that integrates theoretical and practice dimensions for responsible management. Earlier studies have examined ethical leadership through normative and virtue approaches, but in contrast, this article expands the discussion through integration with corporate governance and strategic decision processes. Drawing on significant works (Brown et al., 2005; Eisenbeiss, 2012; Kaptein, 2019), it extends them through an examination of how ethical leadership forms both employee behavior and long-term organizational survival. In addition, it addresses a critical gap in existing literature through a comparison between ethical leadership and similar approaches such as authentic, servant, and responsible leadership, and explains both their convergences and divergences. For practice, the work puts forward actionable information about infusing ethics into practice, such that ethical concerns become not mere moral requirements but assets for long-term success in business.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 present the theoretical framework of ethics and leadership, Section 3 outlines the differences of the ethical leadership versus leadership styles following an ethical approach, Section 4 presents the theories essential to understanding the impact of ethical leadership, and Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. ETHICS AND LEADERSHIP: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Leadership perception: A real challenge for organizations

When perceived as leaders, managers are more likely to have positive evaluations, constructive relationships with subordinates, and access to more resources (Lord & Maher, 1991). According to Epitropaki and Martin (2004) when subordinates perceive their managers as leaders, they exhibit high organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and higher levels of job well-being as well as a greater willingness to engage in behaviors beneficial to the organization. All of this leads to higher overall organizational performance (De Luque et al., 2008).

How are leaders perceived within companies? Is leadership perceived within the company? Previous research has conceptualized that leadership perception is based on subordinates' sensory processes and that the activation of leadership perception is determined by subordinates' interpretations of their managers' behaviors and outcomes (Lord & Maher, 1991). Lord et al. (1984) assert that subordinates have pre-existing conceptions through which they form their perceptions of leadership. When a manager interacts with subordinates, perceptions of leadership are activated through the encoding and retrieval of relevant leader-related information which subordinates use as a basis for categorizing individuals as leader or non-leader

(Shondrick et al., 2010). If the traits of a prototypical leader strongly match a subordinate's expectations, the manager is likely to be classified as a leader by that collaborator. For example, intelligent and extroverted managers tend to be perceived as leaders because these personal attributes represent prototypical leadership (Antonakis, 2009; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

However, because collaborators' subjective evaluations construct perceptions of leadership, these could change across collaborators and contexts (Foti et al., 2012; Hanges et al., 2000). Such a relevant social context is one that provides strong social ties between leaders and their collaborators. For subordinates, informal social relationships with their leader can serve as a reference to perceive leadership within the organization (Balkundi et al., 2011). For Lord and Maher (1991) leadership generally involves face-to-face contact with subordinates, either individually or in small groups. At this level, perceptions of leadership are highly dependent on these processes.

DeRue and Ashford (2010) build on this idea by proposing that frequent leader-subordinate interactions provide more opportunities to observe leadership attributes, but also foster and solidify the leader's identity. This means that through social interactions, an individual can claim his/her leadership role by displaying behaviors such as being present as a trusted person and an advice giver, after which subordinates confer a leader identity by accepting his/her recommendations and words. Over time, the leader's identity is internalized and recognized by subordinates, which promotes subordinates' perceptions of leadership (Chui & Man, 2018).

2.2. Ethical leadership and its theoretical basis

2.2.1. Ethics and leadership style

The ethical dimension of leadership is gaining momentum and importance, both among the general public and researchers. This interest originates, in part, from financial (Lawton & Páez, 2015) and ethical scandals in the banking and oil industries (Eisenbeiss, 2012) that have involved "unethical" behavior by senior executives in high-profile organizations, generating reactions in both the academic and professional communities.

In light of these developments, organizations should take responsibility and increase their efforts to demonstrate ethical governance and promote ethical practices throughout the organizational hierarchy (Mayer et al., 2009). Researchers are, therefore, increasingly interested in the very important role of ethical leadership in the organizational setting (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Brown & Mitchell 2010; Treviño et al., 2003).

The most widely recognized leadership approaches identified in the social sciences are complementary (Brown et al., 2005; Resick et al., 2006; Ciulla, 1995; Gini, 1997; Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996; Northouse, (2018). The precursor of this concept was Barnard (2005) who explored the leader in more complex situations of moral dilemmas, where leaders had to make choices between what is good or bad and justify their choice to their staff. Leaders were consequently represented as those who had to make decisions and then justify them

and make them approvable and acceptable to others (Bass, 2008). Subsequently, Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) considered ethical leaders as individuals who engage in beneficial virtuous behaviors and avoid actions that could harm others. Similarly, Ciulla (1995) saw that respect for the rights and dignity of others is an essential characteristic of ethical leadership.

Building on the power aspect of leadership, Gini (1997) emphasized that ethical leaders use their power in socially responsible ways. Adhering to the work of Aristotle, Northouse (2018) suggested five principles of ethical leadership, as follows: ethical leaders must respect others, serve others, be concerned with justice, honesty, and build a responsible community.

It is also essential to highlight multidimensional approaches that are generally a continuation of the work of Brown et al. (2005) refining the concept of ethical leadership by specifying its sub-dimensions. For example, Kalshoven et al. (2011) identified elements that they termed "sub-dimensions", namely: fairness, integrity, orientation of individuals, clarification of roles within the organization, ethical support as well as power sharing. In addition, the work of Resick et al. (2006) used similar sub-dimensions to assess ethical leadership, such as character, integrity, altruism, motivation, encouragement and empowerment.

Researchers have however paid little attention to the moral components of ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2012). The existing literature has not yet provided a thorough discussion of the moral components of ethical leadership. Thus, further research on this topic seems necessary in order to focus on the morality of the ethical leader and explain the differences observed in the moral behavior of subordinates (van Gils et al., 2015).

2.2.2. Character, personality and attitudes associated with the ethical leader

There are different ways of portraying the personality or character of ethical leaders. Petit and Saint-Michel (2018) identified some essential characteristics of being an ethical leader, such as the development of cognitive morality which refers to a leader's ability to distinguish right from wrong (Kohlberg, 1984). According to Petit and Saint-Michel (2018), leaders who have been able to develop a cognitive morality are more likely to exhibit ethical behavior, that is, to be honest, virtuous, and have integrity.

2.2.3. Honesty leveraging ethical leadership

According to Brown et al. (2005), much research often links perceived leadership effectiveness with leader honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness. These characteristics are considered important elements that make up the idealized influence of a transformational leader (Avolio, 1999). Based on character traits, Howell and Avolio (1992) found that honesty was only one of many characteristics that differentiate ethical leaders from non-ethical leaders. Furthermore, ethical leaders are known for their integrity and treat their employees fairly and impartially, which helps promote employees' perception of leaders' honesty (Bedi et al., 2016).

Indeed, researchers have shown that honesty and fairness are critical to a role model's credibility and attractiveness and are significant predictors of ethical leadership (Avolio, 1999; Brown et al., 2005) In addition, Treviňo et al. (2000) reported that characteristics such as honesty and trustworthiness represent the leverage of the moral aspect of the individual. They also found that ethical leadership required a "moral manager", an aspect that involved a number of visible behaviors that did not only stem from the leader's personal traits.

2.2.4. The virtues of an ethical leader

The concept of virtue in the sense of Aristotle has been prominent in the discussion of leadership ethics (Sarros & Cooper, 2006). Oakley and Cocking (2001) define virtue as a character trait that we need to lead a humanly flourishing life. According to these authors, virtue represents the means by which we become fully human because it enables us to achieve our natural end, the good eudemonic life. The term "Eudaimonia" has been variously translated as "happiness" or "well-being" (Bedi et al., 2016). It is necessary to emphasize that according to Sarros and Cooper (2006), virtues are essential in the character of a leader and can be developed over time. With this in mind, a key question arises in order to understand whether ethical leaders possess special virtues (Petit & Saint-Michel, 2018). Several works have been able to identify six traditional virtues (Peterson & Seligman 2004; Neubert et al., 2009), including courage, temperance, justice, prudence, humanity and transcendence. Petit and Saint-Michel (2018) clarified that these six virtues are essential in defining who ethical leaders actually are. Generally speaking, having ethical practices requires wisdom and knowledge to convey new visions in the workplace, courage to implement them, justice to maintain fairness among collaborators, temperance to act reflectively, and finally transcendence to offer a positive and enthusiastic vision of the future (Petit & Saint-Michel, 2018).

To understand this construct in more detail, we will present a different interpretation of ethical leadership that draws primarily on philosophical approaches in order to establish a robust theoretical framework and to identify the conceptual differences between the definitions that exist to date.

2.3. Ethical leadership and philosophical foundations: A normative interpretation

Early work on ethical leadership is characterized by a purely normative orientation[1] (Oiry et al., 2015). Indeed, the majority of researchers have mobilized the work of Russell (1945) to evoke philosophical traditions and distinguish between different philosophical readings of ethics in business. It is, therefore, essential to draw on the work of Ünal et al. (2012) to distinguish the three main philosophical approaches that have informed thinking about ethical leadership.

It begins with the *deontological approach*, which focuses on the consequences of the actions of ethical leaders. An ethical behavior is considered to be an act whose consequences can be considered as good or bad. The philosophical foundations of this approach can be found in Kantian philosophy, which aims to characterize an act by the consequences it produces.

Secondly, the *teleological approach* focuses on the ends pursued by the leader who engages in ethical behavior and seeks to identify whether that ethical behavior has increased the happiness of individuals. Unlike the deontological approach, which focuses on the nature of a decision, the teleological approach focuses on maximizing the good produced by a decision and primarily on the consequences of decisions (Audi, 2007). Utilitarianism primarily favors decisions that generate the greatest happiness for the greatest number of individuals in a society (Audi, 2007). Jeremy Bentham, often considered the founder of utilitarianism, was particularly concerned with the equality of interests and individual capacity to achieve happiness (Dinwiddy 1989). Because this approach focuses primarily on cost-benefit analyses, it is a theory that deals with ethical dilemmas and is often mobilized to study economic phenomena such as profit maximization (Audi, 2007). There are several types of utilitarianism, including act utilitarianism[2] (Oiry et al., 2015) and rule utilitarianism[3] (Audi, 2007), but these types of utilitarianism refer to Bentham's seminal philosophical work. According to Oiry et al. (2015) for this approach it is no longer the consequences of acts that allow them to be considered ethical but the purposes with which they were initiated.

Thirdly, the *virtue ethics approach*, not only focuses on the consequences of ethical behaviors and the ends pursued by those who perform them, but strives to highlight that ethical leadership is related to individuals who cultivate specific "virtues" such as excellence, judgment, integrity (Oiry et al., 2015). According to Solomon (1993), virtues represent a shorthand way of summarizing the ideals that define good character in individuals. Thus, individuals who demonstrate virtues are oriented toward developing good communities that reinforce the pursuit of a virtuous life, strive for excellence, understand and respect the obligations of organizational roles, find consistency between the pursuit of excellence in all areas of personal and professional life, demonstrate integrity through trustworthy and honest behavior, and demonstrate deep reflection when faced with an ethical dilemma (Solomon, 1993).

The normative approach offers a prescriptive interpretation of ethical leadership, however, it does not allow researchers to analyze what the behaviors of individuals are "in situation". It does not aim to describe the behaviors of ethical leaders in organizations, which is the objective of the descriptive approach to ethical leadership. This approach is considered to be emerging and aims to describe ethical leadership practices in organizations (Mayer et al., 2009). The descriptive approach builds on the seminal work of Gerth and Mills (1948). The work analyses the views of Max Weber who distinguished what he called the "ethics of conviction"[4] from the "ethics of

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[1] Normative philosophy includes all questions that concern normative concepts such as values, norms, virtues, rights, goods, etc.

[2] Do ethical acts produce individual or collective happiness?
[3] Is it the rules that produce this?
[4] It says what must be. To do this, it considers that principles of relevance of the conviction pre-exist the action. This ethic is not directly concerned with the acts performed in the name of these principles. Individuals who adopt this type of ethic are generally self-confident, act doctrinally and may demonstrate

responsibility"⁵ (Oiry et al., 2015). The literature on the descriptive approach to ethical leadership sometimes struggles to articulate this seminal work with its renewed approach to ethical leadership (Treviño et al., 2003). For Oiry et al. (2015) the objective here is no longer to say what ethical behaviors should be but to describe what they are and how they diffuse within the company.

2.3. What actually is ethical leadership?

In order to explore ethical leadership, we have identified twelve commonly mobilized definitions of it as a concept (see Table 1) belonging to the dominant perspective of normative philosophy. These fall into two categories:

1. Morally appropriate and useful leadership behaviors (Wang & Hackett, 2020). The authors who have mobilized this utilitarian approach are interested in the ends pursued by the leader who engages in ethical behaviors and strives to identify whether their actions influence the behaviors of their collaborators.

2. Virtue-based leadership behaviors (Newstead et al., 2021). Proponents of this court emphasize the importance of virtues in the behavioral influence process.

The first of the above two categories is reflected in a utilitarian definition of ethical leadership by Craig and Gustafson (1998) and Yukl et al. (2013), who defined the behaviors of an ethical leader as beneficial and not harmful to actors in the workplace. Additionally, Brown et al. (2005) defined ethical leadership as "normatively appropriate conduct" and thus also in a normative manner. Other researchers have followed a normative approach in their definitions. For example, Kaptein (2019, p. 1141) defined ethical leadership as a process of moral entrepreneurship that seeks to develop new ethical norms in order to deal with moral problems that will arise in the short or long term. Also, Shakeel et al. (2020, p. 10) define ethical leadership as the implicit and explicit pursuit of desired ethical behavior for oneself and one's collaborators through rules and principles.

In contrast, there are four other conceptualizations of ethical leadership, which reflect the virtues or good intentions of a leader (Newstead et al., 2021). Riggio et al. (2010) took the virtues-based approach explicitly and defined ethical leadership as adherence to prudence, courage, temperance, and justice as virtues of leaders. Similarly, Langlois et al. (2014) viewed ethical leadership as a social practice that follows three ethical dimensions, namely: questioning, caring and justice. Another conceptualization supported by the virtues approach is that of Fehr et al. (2015, p. 184) who viewed ethical leadership as the demonstration and promotion of ethical behaviors in business.

It is necessary to refer to the definition of Kalshoven et al. (2011) who situate ethical leadership on the terrain of tension between altruism and selfishness. In other words, the ethical leader must demonstrate consistency and integrity.

He/she must also promote ethical conduct while enabling his/her collaborators to achieve their goals.

Moreover, it is clear that the key difference between the two proposed approaches to ethical leadership lies in the dynamic that exists between the leader and his/her collaborators;

1. On the one hand, the proponents of the utilitarian current have focused mainly on the impact of the position that the leader occupies on his/her employees. Indeed, by acting as a role model, the ethical leader enables employees to learn to behave in a more ethical manner and to convey an ethical vision in the workplace.

2. On the other hand, researchers who mobilize a virtue-based approach tend to emphasize the personal characteristics of ethical leaders. This perspective links leaders' individual beliefs to their behaviors, which makes it easy for them to promote ethics in business.

It can, therefore, be understood that ethical leadership focuses more on compliance and alignment with norms and normative expectations. From this perspective, the majority of empirical studies on ethical leadership mobilize the definition of Brown et al. (2005) without giving any justification or reflexive argumentation. This is certainly due to the simple and very clear formulation in which the two components of ethical leadership moral person and moral manager are distinguished (Brown et al., 2005) as well as the large number of citations that can easily influence the researchers' choice. Nevertheless, there are two articles that clearly explain this choice (Mayer et al., 2009; Rubin et al., 2010) by placing ethical leadership at the heart of positive forms of leadership and by referring to the direct and explicit orientation of the concept towards the ethical aspect of leadership.

Despite its wide use, Brown et al.'s (2005) design is still very limited and attracts much criticism. Indeed, Fehr et al. (2015) note that these researchers have downplayed the role of other less-studied elements of morality, such as honesty and loyalty. The current focus on a narrow part of the moral domain does not provide the necessary elements to build a comprehensive theory of ethical leadership (Fehr et al., 2015). As a result, Fehr et al. (2015) believe that Brown et al.'s (2005) conception lacks openness and primarily neglects issues that are of paramount moral importance to many individuals around the world. Thus, the focus is too much on the interpersonal component of leadership rather than analyzing how ethical leaders set ethical goals in the workplace.

Furthermore, Kaptein (2019) discusses that the leader is under the obligation to create opportunities and situations in which ethical values can be conveyed. Indeed, this component complements the other two components of ethical leadership, i.e., moral person and moral manager and allows the leader to focus on the norms to be established and implemented. The obligation to create ethical norms remains indispensable and at the same time allows for compliance with existing ethical norms and the stimulation of others to follow them.

Finally, this paper defines ethical leadership as the ability to behave ethically with all stakeholders, to convey and promote ethical standards to employees, to ensure the application of these standards, and also the ability to create ethical standards.

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a certain disregard for the consequences of acts performed in the name of their ethical principles.
⁵ This type of ethics considers that such principles of relevance do not pre-exist action and that ethics is judged in actions. Individuals who adopt this "ethic of responsibility", therefore, accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

Table 1. Summary of definitions and measurement scales for ethical leadership

Author(s)	Definitions	Scale of measurement	Ethical approach
Craig and Gustafson (1998, p. 129)	"Rule-based utilitarian approach (Burns & Hart, 1970) labels an act [leader] wrong or unethical if it violates explicit or implicit rules which, if followed by all, would maximize outcomes for the majority of individuals".	Perceived Leader Integrity Scale (PLIS)	Utilitarian approach
Brown et al. (2005, p. 120)	"The demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making".	Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS)	Utilitarian approach
Spangenberg and Theron (2005, p. 2)	"Leadership of ethics comprises the creation and sharing of an ethical vision (based on careful diagnosis of the external and internal environments in which all relevant parties participate); preparing the leader, followers, and the organization — particularly its structures and culture — for implementing the vision; and the actual implementation process itself".	Ethical Leadership Inventory (ELI)	Utilitarian approach
De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008, p. 300)	"Through role modeling, ethical leaders promote altruistic behavior among organizational members… Moreover, via ethical behavior leaders earn the confidence and loyalty of their followers".	Ethical Leadership Dimensions Scale (morality and fairness, role clarification, and power sharing)	"Virtue ethics" approach
Riggio et al. (2010, p. 235)	"Ethical leader is one who adheres to the four cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice".	Leadership Virtue Questionnaire (LVQ)	"Virtue ethics" approach
Kalshoven et al. (2011, p. 53)	"Ethical leadership including acting fairly, demonstrating consistency and integrity, promoting ethical conduct, being concerned for people, allowing 'followers' voice, and sharing power".	Ethical Leadership at Work Questionnaire (ELW)	"Virtue ethics" approach
Eisenbeiss (2012, p. 793)	"Open what norms ethical leaders may refer to when promoting them to followers… Does ethical leadership behavioral ways mean compliance with the prevalent organizational norms? What if these norms demanded behavior that is not in accordance with general moral values and standards?"	The author promotes the use of the ELS by Brown et al. (2005) and the ELW by Kalshoven et al. (2011)	Utilitarian approach
Yukl et al. (2013, p. 38)	"Ethical leaders engage in acts and behaviors that benefit others, and at the same time, they refrain from behaviors that can cause any harm to others".	Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ)	Utilitarian approach
Langlois et al. (2014, p. 312)	"Ethical leadership is defined as a social practice by which professional judgment is autonomously exercised. It constitutes a resource rooted in three ethical dimensions — critique, care, and justice — as well as a powerful capacity to act in a responsible and acceptable manner".	Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ)	"Virtue ethics" approach
Fehr et al. (2015, p. 184)	"We define ethical leadership as the demonstration and promotion of behavior that is positively moralized. Moralization, in turn, refers to the process through which an observer confers a leader's actions with moral relevance".	The authors proposed a model with six dimensions that builds on other measurement scales such as ELW, ELQ, ELS.	"Virtue ethics" approach
Kaptein (2019, p. 1141)	"Moral entrepreneurship depends on whether there are moral issues that need to be addressed or that will arise in the short or long term. These moral issues, whether they are problems, dilemmas, or challenges, are conditions for or enablers of societal improvement and development. If everything were and remained perfect, there would be no need to develop new ethical norms".	The author favors the use of the ELW Kalshoven et al. (2011) because of its multidimensional nature.	Utilitarian approach
Shakeel et al. (2020, p. 10)	"Ethical leadership is the implicit and explicit pursuit of desired ethical behavior for self and followers through efforts governed by rules and principles that advocate learning motivation, healthy optimism and clarity of purpose to uphold the values of empowerment, service to others, concern for human rights, change for betterment and fulfilling duty towards society, future generations, environment and its sustainability".	Broader Conceptualization and Measurement Scale of Ethical Leadership (BELS)	Utilitarian approach

3. ETHICAL LEADERSHIP VERSUS LEADERSHIP STYLES FOLLOWING AN ETHICAL APPROACH: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

One of the known criticisms of ethical leadership is that made by Levine and Boaks (2014) who believe that it may simply be a good leadership style. Therefore, it is important to understand how ethical leadership differs from other leadership styles. Indeed, an important part of any conceptualization is to differentiate the concept from others that might be closely related or even overlap in several characteristics. Thus, in the case of ethical leadership, we should distinguish it from other types of leadership, in particular those related to the ethical approach, meaning: authentic leadership, servant leadership and responsible leadership. The objective of this part of the paper is to summarize the foundations of the leadership styles that belong to the same theoretical line of thought. This summary will help to identify the convergences and divergences that exist between these different leadership styles.

3.1. Authentic leadership

The authentic leader is most often portrayed as someone who is transparent and positive and uses a coherent discourse to interact with their employees. Yukl et al. (2013) highlighted several positive characteristics associated with authentic leaders such as honesty, selflessness, caring, and optimism. George (2004) points out that authentic leaders go out of their way to use their leadership to serve others and are guided as much by heart, compassion, and reason as they are by analytical qualities. Many researchers describe authentic leaders as individuals who have a very high level of self-awareness. Indeed, this characteristic includes knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, the dominant and recessive aspects of one's personality, and the impact of one's emotions on one's behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Henderson & Hoy, 1982).

Henderson and Hoy (1982) saw authentic leaders as responsible, non-manipulative individuals who strive to be themselves regardless of the roles they take on. The concept was then further developed by Gardner et al. (2005) and Luthans and Avolio (2003) following a series of scandals that appeared in the organizational environment. Indeed, these authors emphasize that authentic leaders are perceived by their collaborators as being as aware of their own strengths, skills, and guiding values as they are of those of others. They are aware of the context in which they operate, confident and hopeful, resilient, and highly moral (Françoise, 2016).

Although authentic leadership is considered a precursor concept to all other leadership styles that follow an ethical approach (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), it primarily manifests attributes such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and leader self-concordance (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). In contrast to the ethical leader who places great emphasis on compliance and normative aspects in his/her relationships with others.

3.2. Servant leadership

In contrast to ethical and authentic leadership, servant leadership takes a backseat to its representation of the leader and his/her role (Françoise, 2016). Thus, this leadership style shows that there is another, more inclusive version than the one that presents the leader as a heroic figure. Belet (2011) confirmed that the servant leader sees himself/herself as serving the group rather than the other way around. From this perspective, Françoise (2016) cites Van Dierendonck (2011) who illustrates this form of inversion: placing oneself at the service authorizes someone to exercise a form of leadership, whereas leading only implies that others are at one's service (Françoise, 2016, p. 169).

Servant leadership has been defined by Greenleaf (1970, 1977, 1998) as a leader who is, above all, at the service of others and his/her presence is very important to ensure the evolution of employees, to allow them to grow professionally while being wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servant-leaders. "The servant-leader is servant first… to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served… Do those serve to grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 27). In his article, Spears (2010) identified ten characteristics to categorize a servant leader, namely: listening, empathy, knowing how to ease the pains of others, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the development and growth of others, and the ability to build community. These characteristics enable leaders to ensure organizational goals and at the same time, ensure the growth of their people.

Being perceived by others as a servant has been identified as a key attribute of the servant leader (Graham, 1991). While other leadership approaches, such as ethical and transformational leadership, include the notion of behavioral imitation of the leader's actions by his/her collaborators. Several researchers (Liden et al., 2014; Van Dierendonck, 2011) have referred to the culture of serving others or the culture of servant leadership conveyed by the servant leader in business. Furthermore, we find the notion of the "model leader" in this leadership style (Liden et al., 2008). Indeed, servant leaders can, consciously or unconsciously, influence the behaviors of employees by being a source of inspiration or simply a good reference model (Liden et al., 2014).

3.3. Responsible leadership: Can it be considered as a style that follows an ethical approach?

From a normative perspective once again, it is essential to incorporate responsible leadership as a leadership style under an ethical and societal orientation into our comparison. This emerging notion (Maak & Pless, 2006; Doh & Quigley, 2014; Stahl & Sully de Luque, 2014; Waldman & Balven, 2014; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018) finds its place at the heart of an overlap of ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Responsible leadership has been defined by Maak and Pless (2006) as "a relational and ethical phenomenon that takes place in processes of interaction with those who affect or are affected by the leadership and have an interest in the purpose and vision of the leadership relationship" (p. 103). In fact, these authors consider responsible leadership as a phenomenon based on ethical and normative considerations, thus seeking to combine the ethical and CSR vision in the same perspective.

Furthermore, Igalens and Pourquier (2019) see responsible leadership as a relationship based on strong values and ethical principles between leaders and stakeholders that are connected through a shared sense of meaning and purpose through which they rise to higher levels of motivation and commitment for sustainable value creation and social change.

Two very relevant elements mentioned by Miska and Mendenhall (2018) reinforce the idea of placing this leadership style under an ethical approach. On the one hand, this concept is based on a normative assumption inherent in stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). This has long been aligned with the philosophical underpinnings of traditional leadership research. On the other hand, the broad, inclusive, and relational orientation of the concept has led to focused concerns about

the scope of stakeholders involved and the kinds of responsibilities leaders should assume.

In accordance with their respective conceptual definitions presented immediately above, the main distinction between these leadership styles is the respect of norms. Among the ethical approaches to leadership, ethical leadership is the only style where the leader uses rewards and punishments to hold employees accountable to organizational norms and values.

Through Table 2, we have tried to summarize the convergences and divergences between these leadership styles while providing an illustrative diagram (Figure 1) to help assimilate the content.

Table 2. Summary of the differences between ethical leadership and other styles

Leadership style	Definitions	Some key references	Divergence with other styles
Ethical leadership	*Utilitarian approach:* "The demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). *Virtue ethics approach:* "Ethical leadership includes acting fairly, demonstrating consistency and integrity, promoting ethical conduct, being concerned for people, allowing 'followers' voice, and sharing power" (Kalshoven et al., 2011, p. 53).	Brown et al. (2005), De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008), Eisenbeiss (2012), Fehr et al. (2015), Kalshoven et al. (2011), Kaptein (2019), Treviño et al. (2006), Yukl et al. (2013)	• Treating employees fairly • Communicating with openness and honesty • Using rewards and punishments to hold employees accountable for their ethical conduct
Responsible leadership	"Social-relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in social processes of interaction in order to achieve societal and environmental targets and objectives of sustainable value creation and positive change on a global scale" (Maak & Pless, 2006, p. 99).	Doh and Quigley (2014), Igalens and Pourquier (2019), Maak and Pless (2006), Miska and Mendenhall (2018), Stahl and Sully de Luque (2014), Waldman and Balven (2014)	• Consideration of stakeholders • Creating value for the internal and external community • Highly developed societal vision
Authentic leadership	"A process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development" (Luthans & Avolio, 2003, p. 243).	Avolio et al. (2004), Gardner et al. (2011), Luthans and Avolio, (2003), May et al. (2003), Shamir and Eilam (2005), Walumbwa et al. (2008)	• Self-awareness • Authenticity
Servant leadership	"The servant-leader is servant first… the difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant — first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served… do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit or, at least, not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 13–14).	Greenleaf (1970), Greenleaf, (1998), Liden et al. (2008), Liden et al. (2014), Russell and Stone (2002), Van Dierendonck (2011)	• A close relationship with one's employees • Encourages employee autonomy • Promote the objectives of its employees

Figure 1. Convergences and divergences between the leadership styles of the ethical approach
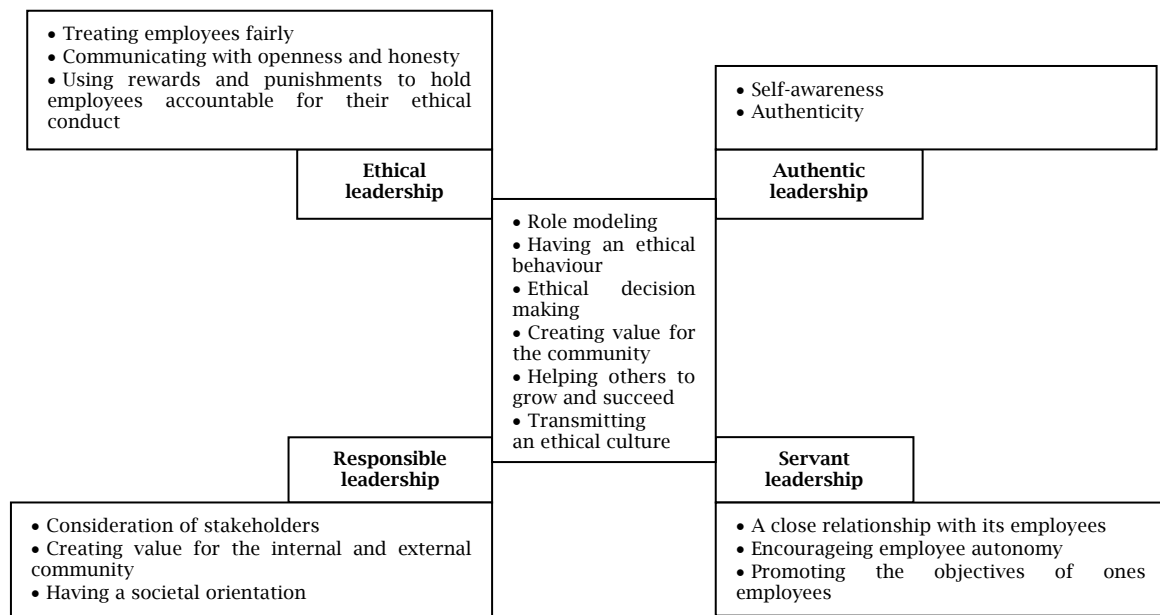
4. THEORIES ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

To explore ethical leadership, Brown and Treviño (2006) mobilized two theoretical frameworks: *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1977) and *social exchange theory* (Blau, 1964). The first theory focuses on the antecedents and consequences of ethical leadership and suggests that individuals learn the norms of appropriate conduct through their own experience, and by observing others (Bandura, 1986). Regarding the second theory, Blau (1964) asserts that employees are more likely to imitate and internalize the value-based behaviors of their ethical leadership model (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

A very recent interpretation proposed by Banks et al. (2021), which is based on signaling theory (Spence, 1974, 2002), explains that leaders can send "ethical" signals through their behavior. Indeed, ethical signals can be received either by employees, customers, suppliers or investors for example. These signals can take various forms, such as making the right decision in the face of an ethical dilemma or rewarding an employee for ethical and responsible behavior. Table 3 summarizes the three theories that can help us understand the influence of ethical leaders in the workplace.

Table 3. Theories for understanding the impact of ethical leadership

Theories	Central question	Description
Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986)	Why and how do ethical leaders influence their employees?	Ethical leaders, because of their hierarchical position and their power of influence, are leading figures among their employees, in particular, because of their attractiveness and their credibility as "role models", as they draw the attention of their team to their exemplary behavior.
Social exchange theory (Blau, 1968; Cropanzano et al., 2017)	How does the ethical leader work with his/her teams to generate positive results?	According to social exchange theory, a principle of reciprocity is implicitly applied. Indeed, when employees perceive a leader as being "concerned" about their expectations and well-being, they feel reciprocally obliged to support him/her, follow him/her and implement his/her directions.
Signaling theory (Spence, 1974, 2002)	How can the signals sent by the leader improve the quality of the leader/collaborator relationship?	If we explore the leader/collaborator relationship, we find that there is a great deal of information asymmetry, particularly on ethical issues in companies, which weakens the relationship between the two parties. Thus, leaders send signals through behaviors and ethical characteristics that will be perceived positively or negatively by employees.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide a theoretical state of the art on the foundations of ethical leadership, its links with other leadership styles and the theories that are necessary to explore and understand its impact in the workplace. In the business world, most theories describe leadership as an ethics-infused model that exposes practices and then leads companies to address unethical behavior. Several authors seek to show, with varying degrees of awareness, that their models of moral leadership are also economically effective. According to Ciulla et al. (2013), most of these theories are normative, at least in the sense that they attach, conditionally if not essentially, a notion of ethics to their definitions of leadership.

Furthermore, this paper makes an important contribution to the literature on ethical leadership by demonstrating that ethical leadership plays

a major role in managing negative employee attitudes and behaviors in the workplace. Because it encompasses ethical communication and reinforcement of appropriate behavior, ethical leadership can promote ethical actions by employees and prevent unethical intentions and behaviors. The literature has emphasized the importance of ethical leadership in cultivating positive attitudes and behaviors, such as organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior, and its importance in achieving higher levels of job performance (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Neubert et al., 2009).

Consequently, ethical leadership involves setting and pursuing ethical goals and influencing others in an ethical manner. Current approaches to ethical leadership have focused on the interpersonal component of leadership by analyzing how ethical leaders exercise power and influence. In summary, it is clear that individuals in power must synchronize ethics with the pragmatism that management demands in order to be perceived as ethical leaders by employees. Otherwise, they are likely to be seen as hypocrites, if not practicing what they preach, because hypocritical leaders talk about the importance of ethics, but their actions show that they can be dishonest and unscrupulous.

While this study provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for ethical leadership as a strategic asset in responsible management, several limitations should be mentioned. These limitations present opportunities for future research to refine and extend our understanding of ethical leadership in complex organizational environments.

This study primarily employs a conceptual and theoretical approach to ethical leadership, similar to previous works such as Brown et al. (2005) and Kaptein (2019). While this method allows for a rich synthesis of ideas, it lacks empirical validation. Future research should incorporate longitudinal and experimental studies to examine how ethical leadership behaviors evolve over time and influence organizational performance in dynamic settings. Additionally, ethical leadership has been widely studied in Western contexts, but research in emerging economies remains limited (Eisenbeiss, 2012; Shakeel et al., 2020). This paper does not account for how cultural dimensions, such as collectivism versus individualism, shape ethical leadership perceptions and practices. Future studies should conduct cross-cultural analyses to understand how ethical leadership manifests across diverse institutional and socio-political environments.

Although this study differentiates ethical leadership from authentic, servant, and responsible leadership, prior research (Liden et al., 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2008) suggests that these leadership styles often overlap. Empirical studies should further investigate the distinct and complementary effects of ethical leadership in contrast to these related constructs, particularly in influencing employee behavior and ethical decision-making. Furthermore, similar to past studies (Treviño et al., 2003; Mayer et al., 2009), this research largely focuses on the individual and organizational levels of ethical leadership. However, ethical leadership operates within a multi-level framework, influencing not just individual employees but also teams, industries, and societal institutions. Future research should explore how ethical leadership cascades across different levels, including its effects on industry-wide ethical norms and corporate governance standards.

A lot of studies (Neubert et al., 2009; Kalshoven et al., 2011) confirm that ethical leadership impacts job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, the direct relationship between ethical leadership and employee mental health remains underexplored. Future research should investigate how ethical leadership contributes to psychological well-being, burnout prevention, and workplace inclusivity. Over the past eight years, high-impact academic reviews have established key findings in ethical leadership, highlighting its impact on employee engagement, knowledge sharing, organizational silence, and performance outcomes. This study diverges by proposing a conceptual framework that situates ethical leadership not only as a behavioral influence but also as a strategic asset for corporate governance and sustainable management. Unlike prior reviews that focus on leader-follower dynamics, this study integrates ethical leadership within broader organizational structures, emphasizing its role in shaping ethical corporate cultures and industry-wide ethical norms. Future research should build on this perspective by exploring the long-term strategic advantages of ethical leadership in various organizational settings.

Finally, this paper provides a foundational framework for understanding ethical leadership's role in responsible management. However, future research must address the identified gaps by leveraging empirical methodologies, cross-cultural studies, and multi-level analyses. Expanding the scope of ethical leadership research will not only refine theoretical insights but also enhance its practical application in contemporary organizations.

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