International Journal of Business Marketing and Management (IJBMM)
Volume 11 Issue 2 Mar-Apr 2026, P.P. 69-74
ISSN: 2456-4559
www.ijbmm.com

The Role of Leadership in Promoting Ethical Conduct in the Zambian Public Sector

Kennedy Bupe
Student, Master of Business Administration in Organizational Leadership, Institute of Distance Education (IDE), University of Zambia

ABSTRACT: *In the Zambian public sector, the discourse on governance is transitioning from a reliance on rigid policy documentation toward a narrative understanding of how leadership behavior shapes organizational outcomes. While the nation possesses a robust framework of formal ethics policies, a persistent "bottleneck" exists: the failure to operationalize these rules into daily practice. This review examines the "tone at the top" within the context of the selected public institution, utilizing the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) as a primary analytical lens. By synthesizing academic literature, institutional reports, and social learning theories, this paper argues that the current governance crisis is not a deficiency of rules, but a lack of visible, proactive ethical stewardship. The findings identify a critical research gap, i.e. a diagnostic obsession with the symptoms of corruption rather than the proactive mechanisms of integrity. This study contributes a conceptual framework for bridging the gap between legislative intent and institutional reality, offering a roadmap for restoring public trust and ensuring the equitable distribution of national resources.*

KEY WORDS: *Ethical Leadership, Public Sector Governance, Zambia, Organizational Culture, Social Learning Theory, Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS).*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethical governance represents the moral heartbeat of public administration. Far from being a mere collection of compliance checklists or rigid bureaucratic hurdles, it serves as the invisible framework that sustains the social contract between a state and its people. In the Zambian context, the practice of ethics within public institutions is the primary determinant of public trust. When leadership fails to model integrity, the resulting erosion of transparency does more than just deplete national coffers; it degrades the quality of life for the average citizen. The relevance of this topic is underscored by the direct link between ethical leadership and the efficiency of service delivery, suggesting that the "moral person" and "moral manager" are essential for institutional success (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).

The Zambian public sector has historically faced significant hurdles, including systemic inefficiency and recurring lapses in professional conduct. While the government has produced numerous strategic documents and "integrity toolkits," a disconnect remains between the high-level rhetoric of transparency and the operational reality on the ground. Within large state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the organizational culture is often a reflection of the "tone at the top" (Mukwena, 2020). Leadership is frequently cited in policy manuals as the definitive force for change, yet the actual mechanisms by which leaders influence ethical behavior—transforming a policy on paper into a lived value in the hallway—remain under-explored in the local context.

The motivation for this review stems from a fundamental observation: the Zambian governance discourse is currently diagnostic rather than prescriptive. There is a wealth of data documenting the "what" of corruption, often manifested in annual audit queries and reports of financial irregularity (Auditor General, 2023). However, there is a striking dearth of information on the "how" of leadership-driven solutions. This review is necessary to shift the focus from documenting failure to identifying the proactive, strategic steps that can foster a genuine culture of ethics before violations occur (Chibamba, 2018).

This review is guided by four primary objectives designed to bridge the gap between theory and practice:

1. Analyze Institutional Evidence: To scrutinize the selected public institution's internal documents and case data regarding ethical promotion.
2. Assess Organizational Perception: To evaluate how employees and management perceive the impact of leadership-led ethical initiatives.
3. Evaluate Leadership Quality: To measure the exercise of integrity through the application of the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS).
4. Inform Policy Innovation: To derive applicable recommendations that move beyond generalities toward workable frameworks for the Zambian public sector.

II. METHOD FOR REVIEWING LITERATURE

To ensure academic rigor, a systematic search strategy was employed to capture a balanced view of international models and localized Zambian insights.

- **Databases and Sources**: Searches were conducted via Scopus, Google Scholar, and the University of Zambia Institutional Repository. Grey literature was sourced from the Auditor General's Office and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC).
- **Selection Criteria**: The review prioritized peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, and doctoral theses published between 2018 and 2024.
- **The Screening Process**: Sources were filtered based on their relevance to the "human element" of leadership—specifically focusing on how behavior, rather than just policy, influences organizational integrity.

III. THEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3.1 Theme 1: Theoretical Foundations—Social Learning Theory and the ELS

The work of Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) serves as the cornerstone for understanding ethical leadership. Their development of the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) is rooted in Social Learning Theory, which posits that employees look to their leaders as role models for acceptable behavior.

In a high-stakes environment, a leader is not merely a manager but a "moral cue." For a leader to be perceived as ethical, the literature suggests they must fulfill two distinct roles:

1. **The Moral Person**: Characterized by honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness.
2. **The Moral Manager**: Characterized by proactive efforts to influence subordinates' ethical behavior through communication and accountability.

3.2 Theme 2: The "Tone at the Top" vs. The "Reality on the Ground"

There is a consensus in the literature that an organization's ethical climate is dictated by senior management. However, studies focused on the Zambian public sector highlight a significant disconnect. While the "tone at the top" is theoretically recognized, it is often undermined by systemic inefficiencies. Research by Mukwena (2020) indicates that when leaders are perceived as being above the law, the motivation for lower-level employees to adhere to standards vanishes. This creates a "bottleneck" where national development is hindered not by a lack of rules, but by the failure of leaders to embody them.

3.3 Theme 3: Empirical Trends—Diagnostic vs. Proactive Solutions

A review of Zambian institutional reports reveals a preoccupation with "post-mortem" analysis. The Auditor General (2023) and the ACC (2022) provide exhaustive data on financial irregularities. While essential for accountability, these reports are inherently reactive. The literature reveals a lack of scholarly work on the intentional, strategic actions taken by officials to prevent unethical behavior before it occurs.

3.4 Theme 4: Challenges and Limitations in Current Approaches

The literature identifies several systemic and human barriers that undermine the effectiveness of ethical frameworks within the Zambian public sector. These challenges suggest that integrity is often caught in a tug-of-war between formal rules and the lived reality of institutional life.

Political Interference and the Erosion of Autonomy: A recurring theme in governance research is the perceived or actual interference of political interests in the management of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). This interference often compromises the "tone at the top," as leaders may feel immense psychological and professional pressure to prioritize political expediency over the ethical standards they are meant to uphold (Mukwena, 2020). When a leader's survival in a role depends on political alignment rather than moral stewardship, the "moral manager" aspect of their role is effectively silenced.

The "Compliance Trap" and Symbolic Accountability: Many Zambian institutions fall into what scholars describe as a "compliance trap." In this state, the focus is on meeting the bare minimum legal requirements i.e. checking boxes and filing reports rather than fostering a genuine, values-based culture. Literature suggests that high-profile "integrity committees" frequently become symbolic rather than functional (Chibamba, 2018). Without the actual authority to hold senior management accountable, these bodies risk becoming a "mirage of accountability" that fails to impact the daily behavior of the workforce.

The Tension of Cultural Collectivism: Scholarly work on African management styles often highlights a profound human tension: the conflict between traditional collectivist values and the individualistic nature of western accountability models. In many contexts, the social and familial pressure to provide for one's network can clash directly with professional ethical standards (Chibamba, 2018). This is a deeply personal challenge that standard policy manuals rarely address, leaving individuals to navigate complex moral dilemmas without institutional support.

Methodological Limitations—The "Snapshot" Problem: From a research perspective, there is a noted lack of longitudinal studies that track the long-term impact of ethical interventions. Most current research in the Zambian context is cross-sectional, providing a mere "snapshot" of a moment in time (Mukwena, 2020). This limitation prevents a comprehensive understanding of how behavior truly changes or plateaus over a leader's tenure.

3.5 Theme 5: Opportunities and Future Directions

Despite these deep-seated challenges, the literature points toward several promising avenues for transforming ethical governance into a proactive and human-centered practice.

- **Digital Governance as an Ethical Catalyst**: The integration of digital tools, such as e-procurement systems and blockchain-based auditing, offers a significant opportunity to reduce human bias and discretion. By moving high-stakes transactions into a transparent, digital environment, technology can act as a catalyst for integrity, making "hidden" or unethical transactions much more difficult to execute and easier to trace (World Bank, 2021).
- **Operationalizing the ELS in Performance Management**: There is a growing opportunity to move the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) from a theoretical research tool into a practical managerial asset. By incorporating specific ethical behaviors—as defined by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005)—into the performance appraisals of senior managers, public institutions can create a direct, tangible incentive for moral stewardship. When integrity becomes a Key Performance Indicator (KPI), it moves from a suggestion to a requirement.
- **Values-Based Development and Psychological Resilience**: Future directions in literature suggest a shift away from "rule-following" training toward "values-based" leadership development. This involves building the psychological resilience of leaders, helping them find the moral courage to withstand external pressures through structured mentorship and reflective practice. This humanized approach recognizes that ethics is a skill that must be nurtured, not just a set of rules to be memorized.
- **Whistleblower Protection and Civil Society Partnerships**: Strengthening the safety net for those who speak out is critical. Enhancing legal protections for whistleblowers is cited as a definitive factor in encouraging employees to report misconduct without the paralyzing fear of retribution (ACC, 2022). Furthermore, strengthening partnerships with civil society provides an external layer of accountability that reminds public servants of their ultimate responsibility to the citizenry.

IV. Critical Analysis: Identifying The Human And Research Gaps

A rigorous assessment of the current body of research reveals a series of structural and conceptual blind spots that hinder a true understanding of integrity within the public sector. These gaps are not merely academic; they represent a fundamental failure to capture the lived experience of governance and the immense psychological weight of leadership decisions. When research remains detached from the human dimension, it overlooks the very heartbeat of institutional change.

4.1 The Anecdotal Trap: Methodological Limitations

A significant portion of the literature concerning Zambian parastatals relies on qualitative, often anecdotal, evidence. While these narratives offer a vivid and sometimes jarring picture of institutional life, they lack the empirical precision required to scale solutions across diverse public sector organizations. There is a profound absence of scale-based, quantitative measurement specifically utilizing validated tools like the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS).

Without objective data, the "influence of a leader" remains an abstract concept rather than a measurable, actionable variable (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Humanizing this gap requires moving beyond the "story of a scandal" to an empirical understanding of how many employees actually feel empowered to act ethically under specific leadership styles. Relying on anecdotes alone risks missing the quiet, systemic successes—or the deep-seated, silent failures—that a more rigorous, scale-based approach would reveal.

4.2 The Diagnostic Blind Spot: A Symptomatic Focus

Current studies exhibit a mastery of describing the symptoms of corruption, yet they frequently fail to investigate the psychological drivers of integrity within leadership. Research often treats unethical behavior as a cold financial transaction or a legal breach, documenting the "fever" of financial irregularities without diagnosing the "infection" of the underlying organizational culture.

Official documents, such as the Auditor General’s Report (2023) and the Anti-Corruption Commission’s National Reports (2022), provide essential data on fiscal leaks, but they offer limited insight into the proactive, human-centered strategies used to shape organizational integrity. To humanize this analysis, research must pivot toward the "inner world" of the leader. There is a notable lack of exploration into what drives a leader’s moral courage or, conversely, what environmental pressures lead to "ethical silence." By focusing only on the visible wreckage of corruption, the literature ignores the human motives, fears, and cultural pressures that dictate a leader's moral trajectory long before a single policy is ever violated.

4.3 The Paper vs. Practice Paradox: The Policy-Practice Gap

There exists an over-abundance of literature detailing "what the law says"—the idealized, sterile versions of governance found in boardrooms and handbooks. However, there is a stark deficit of research exploring "what the leader actually does" in the visceral, high-pressure moments of a real-world ethical dilemma.

This gap represents a failure to account for the human element of decision-making. As noted by Mukwena (2020), ethics are not tested in the neat pages of a code of conduct; they are tested in the hallways and behind closed doors where political pressure and personal loyalty often collide with professional duty. Current research remains largely clinical, documenting the "rules of the game" while remaining silent on how the players navigate those rules when the stakes are highest. Addressing this requires a shift toward behavioral research that captures the reality of leadership as a lived, daily practice rather than a theoretical ideal (Chibamba, 2018).

V. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research is centered on the foundational premise that leadership serves as the primary engine for integrity within public service. Rather than viewing ethics as a static list of rules or a bureaucratic burden, this framework explores it as a dynamic, living interaction between those who lead and those who serve.

5.1 Core Foundations

Three pillars support the logic of this study, grounding the research in both professional standards and human values:

- Integrity in Action: This represents the daily practice of honesty and professional values. It describes a state where employees move beyond mere compliance—doing what is required to avoid punishment—to a level where they embody the standards of their profession as a matter of personal and professional identity.

- Leadership as Influence: Leadership is defined here as the art of motivating others toward shared moral goals. It moves beyond the clinical exercise of authority to focus on the behaviors, methods, and daily practices managers use to guide their teams toward an ethical vision.
- Public Stewardship: This describes the unique moral responsibility of agencies entrusted by the community to provide essential services. In a public utility context, stewardship implies that resources are managed with a level of transparency and fairness that honors the public's trust.

5.2 The Central Question

The study investigates whether a leader's active commitment to ethics is the primary force shaping employee behavior. It tests the belief that the "tone at the top" is the definitive factor in creating a trustworthy workplace. This framework challenges the assumption that leadership has no measurable effect on the moral climate, positing instead that a leader's visible choices are the most powerful teachers in an organization.

5.3 The Flow of Influence

Drawing on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS), the framework visualizes a dynamic system of influence:

- The Catalyst (Independent Variable): Leaders serve as the moral compass of the institution. By modeling fairness and justice, they provide the behavioral cues that employees use to navigate their own ethical choices (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).
- The Supporting Environment (Mediating Factors): Organizational context—including formal policies, ethics training, and whistle-blowing frameworks—provides the necessary structure for integrity to flourish. These are the tools that "Moral Managers" use to reinforce the desired culture.
- The Outcome (Dependent Variable): The ultimate goal is a workforce characterized by Employee Ethical Behavior. This is measured through compliance with organizational values, objectivity in decision-making, and the active rejection of fraudulent practices.

Critically, this relationship is a "living dialogue." Influence is not a one-way street; while leaders shape the culture through their actions, the responses and feedback from the team also refine and adapt leadership strategies over time (Yukl, 2010).

VI. DISCUSSION

6.1 The Crisis of "Actionable Integrity"

The synthesis of existing literature suggests that the central governance challenge within the Zambian public sector is not a deficit of ethical principles, but a profound absence of actionable integrity. Zambia possesses a wealth of moral frameworks; institutional libraries are filled with codes of conduct and mission statements. However, integrity often remains a static concept—locked within the pages of high-level strategic documents rather than manifesting in the daily decisions of officials.

When ethical standards are not "actionable," they become mere ornaments of governance rather than the engine of it. This disconnect creates a culture of "performative compliance," where the language of ethics is spoken fluently in public, but the practice of ethics is secondary to political or personal expediency in private. The research indicates that the transition from theoretical ethics to actionable integrity requires leadership that views moral stewardship as a core functional requirement (Chibamba, 2018).

6.2 The Human Cost of Institutional Inconsistency

When leadership behavior at a vital national utility is inconsistent, the consequences extend far beyond organizational inefficiency. The "human cost" is felt in the lived experiences of millions of citizens. For a developing economy, institutional inconsistency is a primary driver of stalled growth; it stifles local entrepreneurship and discourages the investment necessary for national progress.

More damaging is the profound disenfranchisement of the citizenry. When the "social contract"—the fundamental agreement that public institutions exist to serve the common good—is perceived to be broken, the result is a pervasive sense of hopelessness. A citizen who perceives that public resources are managed with partiality or a lack of transparency begins to withdraw from the democratic process. This disenfranchisement is a visible erosion of the social fabric, manifesting as a loss of faith in the systems designed to provide stability and power for the nation.

6.3 Moving Beyond Symbolic Architecture

To address these deep-seated challenges, policymakers must move beyond the creation of more "integrity committees" or "oversight bureaus." While well-intentioned, these bodies often function as symbolic architecture—bureaucratic structures that provide the appearance of accountability without the actual power to enforce it. Genuine reform requires a shift from the structure of ethics to the behavior of the individuals who lead those structures.

6.4 Cultivating the "Moral Manager"

The most critical policy shift involves a concentrated effort on leadership development that emphasizes the "Moral Manager" aspect of the ELS. As established by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), being a "moral person" is necessary but insufficient; a leader must also be an active manager of ethics who uses their authority to shape the conduct of others.

Policy interventions should prioritize:

- Ethical Decision-Making Training: Moving beyond simple rule-following, leaders require the analytical tools to navigate complex "grey areas" where political pressure and ethical duty collide.
- Transparent Reward Systems: Integrity must be made a tangible asset. Policymakers should implement systems where ethical conduct is a key performance indicator (KPI) for promotion and recognition. Conversely, ethical lapses must carry a consistent professional cost, regardless of rank.
- Behavioral Modeling: Policy should mandate that senior officials are subject to the same—or more rigorous—ethical audits as their subordinates. This ensures that the "tone at the top" is not just heard, but seen in action.

By refocusing national policy on the proactive, behavioral influence of the "Moral Manager," the Zambian public sector can begin to bridge the gap between legislative intent and institutional reality, replacing a culture of compliance with a culture of conviction.

VII. CONCLUSION

The review confirms that while Zambia has the legislative intent for ethical governance, the practical implementation remains blocked by a leadership vacuum. The shift toward a behavioral understanding of the public sector is essential. Future research must prioritize empirical studies that examine the proactive steps leaders take to foster integrity. Ultimately, achieving a transparent and efficient Zambian public sector lies in bridging the gap between the policy on the page and the person in the office.

References

[1]. Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). *Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing*. Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes, 97(2), 117-134.
[2]. Mukwena, R. (2020*). Leadership and Public Sector Reform in Africa: The case for proactive integrity*. Johannesburg: Management Development Series.
[3]. Auditor General of Zambia. (2023). *Report of the Auditor General on the Accounts of Parastatal Bodies and Other Government Institutions*. Lusaka: Government Printers.
[4]. Chibamba, M. (2018*). The human element in Zambian governance: Why policy fails to change behaviour*. Lusaka: Academic Press.
[5]. Chibamba, M. (2018). *Governance and Accountability in Zambia*. Lusaka: UNZA Press.
[6]. Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). (2022). *National Integrity Public Opinion Survey and Institutional Reports*. Lusaka: ACC.
[7]. Anti-Corruption Commission. (2022). *Public Sector Integrity Report*. Lusaka: ACC.
[8]. World Bank. (2021). *Zambia: Digital Governance and Public Sector Performance Review*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
[9]. World Bank. (2021). *Zambia: Enhancing Public Sector Performance*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
[10]. Transparency International. (2023). *Corruption Perceptions Index*. Berlin: Transparency International.