

Managing Workforce Diversity Through Ethical Leadership Practices in Delta State Civil Servants

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ABSTRACT

Workforce diversity has become a central issue in modern public administration, particularly within civil service institutions where inclusivity, equity, and representation are vital to democratic governance. This study examines how ethical leadership practices influence the effective management of workforce diversity in the Delta State Civil Service. Ethical leadership, rooted in principles of fairness, accountability, transparency, and respect, plays a crucial role in fostering an inclusive organizational culture where employees from diverse backgrounds feel valued and motivated. The research investigates the extent to which ethical leadership shapes key organizational processes, including recruitment, team dynamics, conflict resolution, and decision-making, ensuring equitable opportunities for all employees. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to gather data from civil servants across various ministries and departments in Delta State. The findings highlight that ethical leadership significantly reduces workplace bias, enhances employee morale, and improves overall organizational performance by creating a sense of belonging among staff. Additionally, the study identifies challenges such as resistance to change and institutional barriers that hinder diversity management. The study concludes with practical recommendations for policy reforms, including the implementation of mandatory diversity training, transparent promotion criteria, and leadership development programs to strengthen ethical standards in the Delta State public sector. These measures are essential for fostering a more inclusive, productive, and representative civil service that aligns with global best practices in public administration.

Keywords: Workforce Diversity, Ethical Leadership, Public Administration, Organizational Culture, Delta State Civil Service

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st-century global economy, workforce diversity has become a defining characteristic of modern organizations. As businesses expand across borders and societies become increasingly multicultural, workplaces are now composed of individuals from a variety of cultural, ethnic, gender, religious, generational, and professional backgrounds. This diversity, when properly managed, can drive innovation, creativity, improved problem-solving, and better customer relations (Shen et al., 2009). However, managing such diversity also presents challenges related to inclusion, bias, discrimination, and interpersonal conflict. Therefore, organizations must adopt leadership strategies that not only support diversity but also ensure ethical and inclusive treatment of all employees.

The Delta State civil service is a critical sector that provides essential services to the state's citizens. With a diverse workforce, the sector faces unique challenges in managing diversity and promoting inclusivity. The state's civil service is characterized by a complex web of ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic relationships, which can impact employee relationships and organizational performance. Effective management of diversity is essential for promoting a positive work environment, enhancing employee engagement, and delivering quality services to citizens.

Ethical leaders in the Delta State civil service can play a vital role in promoting diversity and inclusion. By demonstrating a commitment to fairness, equity, and respect, leaders can foster a positive work environment that values diversity. Ethical leaders can also promote diversity management practices, such as diversity training, mentorship programs, and inclusive decision-making processes. By doing so, they can enhance employee engagement, retention, and overall organizational performance.

Ethical leadership has emerged as a key determinant in the successful management of workforce diversity. Ethical leaders are those who demonstrate fairness, transparency, accountability, and respect for others. They promote values that enhance trust, cohesion, and mutual respect among diverse groups (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In diverse workplaces, ethical leadership provides a moral compass that guides decision-making, prevents discrimination, and fosters a culture of inclusiveness. This leadership approach is particularly important in managing differences and ensuring that no group feels marginalized or excluded based on their background or identity.

The intersection of ethical leadership and workforce diversity is not only a matter of moral responsibility but also one of strategic importance. Research shows that organizations with inclusive and ethically driven leadership are more likely to experience higher employee engagement, lower turnover rates, and better overall performance (Newman et al., 2018). Moreover, ethical leadership has a ripple effect, influencing team behavior and creating an environment where employees feel valued and are motivated to contribute. It supports the implementation of equitable policies and procedures that enable all employees, regardless of their identity, to thrive.

Furthermore, the benefits of workforce diversity can only be realized when leaders are equipped to manage it effectively. Diverse teams offer different perspectives, which can enhance creativity and innovation, but without ethical leadership, these differences may lead to misunderstandings and conflict (Hunt et al., 2020). Ethical leaders play a central role in resolving conflicts, facilitating open communication, and ensuring that all employees are treated with dignity and fairness. They help build trust among team members, which is essential for collaboration in diverse settings.

Despite its importance, ethical leadership in diversity management remains underdeveloped in many organizations. Often, diversity is treated as a compliance requirement rather than a strategic opportunity. In such cases, diversity initiatives may lack the ethical grounding needed to foster genuine inclusion. Discriminatory practices may persist in subtle forms such as microaggressions, unequal career advancement opportunities, or cultural insensitivity. These issues are often exacerbated by leadership that lacks the ethical orientation necessary to address them effectively (Nkomo et al., 2019). Therefore, the role of ethical leadership in managing diversity must be more thoroughly understood and emphasized.

Moreover, the increasing emphasis on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria and corporate social responsibility (CSR) has placed additional pressure on organizations to demonstrate ethical conduct in all areas, including diversity management. Stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and regulators, now expect organizations to uphold principles of equity, justice, and inclusion. Ethical leadership is essential in aligning diversity strategies with broader organizational values and societal expectations (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022). This alignment enhances reputation, employee satisfaction, and organizational resilience.

This study is therefore necessary to explore how ethical leadership practices influence the management of workforce diversity. The research will examine the ways in which ethical leadership fosters inclusive organizational cultures, addresses the challenges of diversity, and enhances organizational effectiveness. By investigating this relationship, the study aims to provide insights that will inform leadership development, diversity policies, and organizational strategies. It seeks to contribute to both the academic literature and practical approaches for building diverse, ethical, and high-performing workplaces.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership refers to the practice of leading an organization or group based on ethical principles such as honesty, integrity, fairness, accountability, and respect for others. Ethical leaders prioritize doing what is right, even when it may not be the most convenient or profitable path. According to Brown and Treviño (2006), ethical leadership is "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers." This means that ethical leaders not only behave ethically themselves but also encourage ethical behavior in others through clear communication, decision-making, and consistent reinforcement of values.

At the heart of ethical leadership is the concept of moral management. Ethical leaders are moral people they demonstrate traits like trustworthiness, fairness, and humility. But they are also moral managers, meaning they actively manage ethics in the organization by setting standards, modeling behavior, and holding others accountable (Treviño et al., 2014). These leaders use their influence not to manipulate but to inspire ethical behavior in others, creating a culture where ethical conduct is the norm. As a result, employees are more likely to emulate the behavior of their leaders and feel empowered to report unethical actions when they arise.

One of the most significant outcomes of ethical leadership is the creation of organizational trust. When employees believe that their leaders act with integrity and fairness, they are more likely to be committed, satisfied, and engaged in their work. Ethical leadership reduces workplace deviance and increases positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and employee retention (Bedi et al., 2016). Furthermore, ethical leadership supports psychological safety, where employees feel secure in expressing themselves without fear of retaliation, an important factor in fostering innovation and collaboration in diverse and inclusive environments.

In today's complex and dynamic work environments, ethical leadership is more critical than ever. Organizations face growing scrutiny from stakeholders who demand transparency, sustainability, and social responsibility. Ethical leadership not only meets these external expectations but also enhances internal cohesion and long-term performance. Leaders who practice ethical leadership are more likely to develop inclusive policies, mitigate biases, and address systemic inequalities in the workplace. This approach is particularly relevant in managing workforce diversity, as ethical leaders are better positioned to ensure that all employees, regardless of background, are treated equitably and with dignity (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022).

Contemporary studies continue to affirm the value of ethical leadership across sectors. For example, Eisenbeiß and Giessner (2012) highlight that ethical leadership correlates strongly with employee moral behavior, team performance, and organizational resilience. Moreover, ethical leaders tend to be transformational, inspiring their teams through vision and integrity rather than authority and control. This style of leadership aligns with the growing demand for human-centered leadership approaches that value people as assets rather than resources. In a world where ethical failures can lead to reputational damage, legal issues, and internal crises, ethical leadership offers a sustainable and credible path forward for modern organizations.

2.2. Characteristics of Ethical Leadership

1. **Integrity and Honesty:** One of the most fundamental characteristics of ethical leadership is integrity the consistency between words and actions. Ethical leaders are honest and transparent in their dealings, and they demonstrate a strong moral code that they uphold even in difficult circumstances. Integrity fosters trust between leaders and followers, which is essential for building cohesive teams and ethical work cultures (Brown & Treviño, 2006). When employees observe their leaders acting truthfully and honoring their commitments, they are more likely to emulate these behaviors and contribute to a culture of accountability and fairness.
2. **Fairness and Justice:** Ethical leaders are committed to fairness in decision-making and interpersonal interactions. They avoid favoritism, treat all employees equitably, and ensure that rewards and punishments are distributed based on objective criteria. This commitment to justice not only minimizes bias and discrimination but also strengthens employee confidence in the organization's systems and

leadership (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Fairness is particularly crucial in diverse work settings, where employees from different backgrounds may otherwise perceive inequality or exclusion if leaders do not uphold fair practices.

3. **Respect for Others:** Another defining trait of ethical leadership is respect. Ethical leaders value the dignity and worth of every individual and show consideration for their employees' ideas, rights, and contributions. This includes listening actively, encouraging participation, and being sensitive to cultural, emotional, and professional needs (Northouse, 2021). Respectful leaders are more likely to foster inclusion and psychological safety an environment where employees feel comfortable expressing their views without fear of rejection or retaliation. This characteristic is particularly important in managing workforce diversity effectively.
4. **Responsibility and Accountability:** Ethical leaders take responsibility for their actions and decisions and expect the same from their followers. They do not shift blame or avoid difficult conversations; rather, they acknowledge mistakes and seek corrective action. By holding themselves and others accountable, they reinforce the importance of ethical conduct and organizational integrity (Treviño et al., 2014). Accountability is also reflected in how leaders enforce organizational values and standards, ensuring that ethical behavior is consistently rewarded while unethical behavior is addressed promptly and fairly.
5. **Role Modeling and Ethical Guidance:** Ethical leaders act as role models, guiding others through both their behavior and their expectations. They articulate clear ethical standards and consistently demonstrate these values in practice. By doing so, they set a behavioral benchmark for others to follow (Eisenbeiß & Giessner, 2012). Moreover, ethical leaders provide ethical guidance, helping employees navigate complex or ambiguous moral situations. This mentoring and ethical awareness foster long-term cultural alignment and help build a resilient organization that is prepared to deal with ethical dilemmas in a thoughtful and values-based manner.

The characteristics of ethical leadership are deeply interconnected and crucial for sustaining ethical cultures and effective organizational performance. Integrity, fairness, respect, responsibility, and role modeling are not just ideal traits they are practical tools that help leaders guide their teams through complex and diverse workplace environments. As contemporary organizations become more socially accountable and diverse, the need for ethical leadership has never been more essential.

2.3. Ethical Leadership and Workforce Diversity

In today's increasingly multicultural and globalized world, organizations are more diverse than ever before. Workforce diversity refers to the variety of differences among people in an organization, including gender, ethnicity, race, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, education, and national origin (Shen et al., 2009). While this diversity brings a wide range of perspectives and experiences that can enhance innovation and problem-solving, it also presents significant management challenges. Ethical leadership has emerged as a crucial mechanism for addressing these challenges and promoting inclusive and respectful work environments.

Ethical leadership plays a vital role in setting the tone for how diversity is embraced and managed within organizations. Ethical leaders act with integrity, fairness, and respect for others, regardless of background. They serve as role models by treating all individuals equitably and making decisions that reflect moral and inclusive values (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Such leaders are aware of the unique challenges that diverse groups may face and actively work to create systems and cultures that promote equal opportunity and prevent discrimination or bias in hiring, promotion, and daily operations.

A key connection between ethical leadership and workforce diversity is the creation of an inclusive culture. Ethical leaders foster psychological safety, a work climate where employees feel respected, heard, and valued. This sense of inclusion is particularly critical for individuals from underrepresented or historically marginalized backgrounds. According to Newman et al. (2018), when leaders behave ethically, employees especially those from minority groups are more likely to trust organizational processes and feel a stronger sense of belonging and engagement. This, in turn, leads to improved job satisfaction, retention, and productivity across the organization.

Moreover, ethical leadership supports the development and implementation of fair policies and practices that address systemic inequalities and promote representation at all organizational levels. Leaders who emphasize fairness and transparency are more likely to champion diversity initiatives that go beyond surface-

level representation and aim to achieve equity and justice (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022). They also tend to engage in ethical decision-making when navigating cultural tensions or conflicts, using empathy and open dialogue to resolve misunderstandings and build cohesion among diverse team members.

However, the absence of ethical leadership in diverse workplaces can result in exclusion, unconscious bias, microaggressions, and a toxic work environment. Employees may feel undervalued or marginalized, leading to disengagement and high turnover rates. Nkomo et al. (2019) argue that diversity initiatives without ethical foundations often fail to achieve meaningful change because they lack the leadership commitment necessary to sustain inclusive practices. Therefore, ethical leadership is not only a moral imperative but a strategic tool for ensuring that workforce diversity becomes a source of strength rather than division.

In conclusion, ethical leadership and workforce diversity are deeply interdependent concepts. Ethical leadership provides the foundation for managing diversity in a way that is fair, inclusive, and performance-enhancing. By promoting values of respect, justice, and integrity, ethical leaders create environments where diversity can flourish and contribute meaningfully to organizational success. As organizations continue to grow more diverse, the role of ethical leadership in building inclusive and equitable cultures will become increasingly vital.

2.4. The Role of Ethical Leadership in Managing Workforce Diversity

Ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in managing workforce diversity by setting a moral standard for fairness, respect, and inclusion within organizations. As workplaces become increasingly diverse due to globalization, migration, and changing social dynamics, leaders are challenged to manage differences in culture, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, and other social identities. Ethical leadership provides a framework that not only respects these differences but actively promotes equity and cohesion among diverse employees. Ethical leaders create inclusive policies and foster a culture where diverse perspectives are valued and discrimination is actively discouraged (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

One of the most significant contributions of ethical leadership in managing diversity is its emphasis on fair treatment and impartiality. Ethical leaders ensure that organizational decisions such as hiring, promotion, task assignment, and conflict resolution are based on merit and are free from bias or favoritism. By doing so, they build employee trust and reinforce a sense of belonging among minority groups who might otherwise feel marginalized (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Fairness also extends to providing equal opportunities for growth and development, which enhances employee morale and performance in diverse teams.

Moreover, ethical leaders are role models who embody the values of integrity, empathy, and respect. Through their behavior, they signal what is acceptable and expected in the organization. This modeling effect is particularly influential in diverse workplaces where social norms may vary across cultural or generational lines. By demonstrating ethical conduct and inclusive communication, leaders set the tone for respectful interactions and collaborative team dynamics (Eisenbeiß & Giessner, 2012). This helps in minimizing workplace conflicts that often arise from misunderstandings or cultural differences.

Ethical leadership also plays a crucial role in promoting psychological safety, a key element in inclusive organizational climates. Psychological safety refers to an environment in which individuals feel safe to express their ideas, concerns, or mistakes without fear of retribution or exclusion. Ethical leaders foster this environment by listening actively, encouraging open dialogue, and addressing inappropriate behavior or microaggressions. In doing so, they help harness the full potential of diverse teams, allowing different voices to be heard and respected (Newman et al., 2018).

In addition, ethical leadership ensures that diversity management strategies are not merely symbolic, but embedded in the core values and operational structures of the organization. Many diversity programs fail because they lack genuine leadership commitment or are seen as checkbox exercises. Ethical leaders, however, advocate for systemic change by embedding diversity into strategic goals, accountability measures, and organizational culture. They champion training, equity audits, and inclusive leadership development programs, thereby institutionalizing diversity in a meaningful and sustainable way (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022).

In summary, ethical leadership is indispensable in effectively managing workforce diversity. By promoting fairness, role modeling inclusive behaviors, fostering psychological safety, and institutionalizing diversity efforts, ethical leaders lay the foundation for a respectful and high-performing work environment.

As organizations navigate increasingly complex and diverse workforces, the presence of ethical leadership will be critical in ensuring not just compliance with diversity standards, but the creation of truly inclusive, innovative, and equitable organizations.

2.5. Challenges of Managing a Diverse Workforce

Managing a diverse workforce presents both opportunities and significant challenges for today's organizations. Diversity includes differences in race, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. While such variety can foster innovation, creativity, and broader perspectives, it also introduces complexities in communication, team dynamics, and leadership. One of the most pressing challenges is managing cultural misunderstandings and communication barriers. Employees from different cultural backgrounds may interpret language, gestures, tone, and feedback differently, leading to miscommunication and conflict (Shen et al., 2009). Such misunderstandings can negatively impact productivity, morale, and team collaboration if not properly addressed by culturally competent leadership.

Another major challenge is unconscious bias and discrimination in hiring, evaluation, and promotion practices. Despite diversity and inclusion policies, implicit biases often influence organizational decisions. These biases can marginalize underrepresented groups, hinder career progression, and reduce employees' sense of belonging (Roberson, 2019). For instance, women and ethnic minorities are still underrepresented in leadership roles across many industries, highlighting the structural and cultural barriers they face. If not addressed, this can lead to increased turnover, decreased employee engagement, and reputational risks for the organization.

Resistance to change is also a significant obstacle in managing workforce diversity. Employees and managers who are accustomed to homogeneity may feel threatened by efforts to increase inclusion or may perceive diversity initiatives as favoritism or reverse discrimination. This resistance often stems from a lack of awareness or misunderstanding of the benefits of diversity. According to Van Dijk et al. (2012), organizational efforts to implement diversity programs are frequently met with skepticism or passive opposition, especially when diversity is imposed without adequate training, communication, or involvement of stakeholders in the process.

A further challenge involves creating an inclusive workplace culture, not just a diverse one. Many organizations succeed in hiring a diverse workforce but fail to provide an inclusive environment where all employees feel respected, heard, and valued. Inclusion requires more than numerical representation; it demands that systems, leadership behaviors, and everyday practices are aligned with equity and fairness. Without such alignment, diversity efforts can be superficial, and marginalized groups may still feel excluded from decision-making and leadership opportunities (Nkomo et al., 2019).

Lastly, managing diverse teams requires adaptive and ethical leadership, which not all leaders are equipped to provide. Diverse teams may have different working styles, conflict resolution preferences, and expectations of leadership. This complexity requires leaders to be emotionally intelligent, culturally aware, and ethically grounded. Unfortunately, many organizations do not invest adequately in leadership development programs that focus on these competencies. Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) note that without ethical and inclusive leadership, diversity management may result in dysfunction, misalignment, and disengagement, undermining the benefits that diversity is meant to bring.

In conclusion, while workforce diversity is a valuable asset in today's competitive environment, it comes with numerous challenges that must be strategically managed. These include communication barriers, unconscious bias, resistance to change, the difficulty of creating an inclusive culture, and the need for ethical leadership. Organizations must proactively address these challenges through policy reforms, training, leadership development, and continuous evaluation to ensure that diversity translates into equity, innovation, and organizational excellence.

2.6. Benefits of Managing Workforce Diversity Through Ethical Leadership

Managing workforce diversity through ethical leadership offers a wide range of organizational benefits, beginning with the creation of an inclusive and fair workplace environment. Ethical leadership, which emphasizes values such as integrity, justice, and respect, fosters trust and psychological safety among diverse employees. When leaders treat employees with fairness and demonstrate consistent moral behavior, it reduces feelings of exclusion and bias, particularly for marginalized groups. This ethical foundation helps create a

culture where all employees feel valued, accepted, and empowered to contribute fully to organizational goals (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

A major benefit of ethical leadership in diverse workplaces is enhanced employee performance and engagement. Ethical leaders promote equity, actively listen to their team members, and involve employees in decision-making regardless of their background. This inclusive approach encourages a sense of ownership and belonging, which increases motivation and job satisfaction. Studies have shown that employees in ethically led and inclusive environments are more committed to their work and less likely to leave the organization (Newman et al., 2018). By recognizing and appreciating diverse perspectives, ethical leaders unlock the full potential of their workforce.

Another important benefit is improved innovation and creativity. Workforce diversity brings together individuals with different cultural backgrounds, experiences, and ways of thinking. Ethical leadership ensures that these differences are not only tolerated but valued and integrated into team processes. Ethical leaders promote open communication and respectful dialogue, which allow diverse ideas to be heard and explored. As a result, organizations benefit from a broader range of solutions to problems and can more effectively adapt to complex and changing environments (Shen et al., 2009). This is particularly important in industries that rely heavily on innovation and customer responsiveness.

Managing diversity ethically also contributes to a positive organizational reputation and employer brand. Organizations that are known for ethical leadership and diversity are more attractive to top talent, particularly among younger generations who prioritize inclusion, equity, and corporate social responsibility. Ethical diversity management enhances public trust and stakeholder confidence, improving relationships with clients, investors, and regulatory bodies. According to Hunt et al. (2020), companies with diverse and inclusive leadership teams outperform their peers financially and enjoy stronger brand loyalty. This shows that diversity, guided by ethical leadership, is not just morally right it is a strategic advantage.

Finally, ethical leadership in diverse environments reduces conflict and workplace discrimination, which can be costly in terms of legal risks and team dysfunction. Ethical leaders are proactive in addressing inequality, mediating disputes, and establishing clear behavioral expectations that align with organizational values. They create accountability structures that discourage unethical conduct, including harassment, favoritism, and exclusion. As Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) explain, ethical leadership creates a balanced power dynamic where all employees have equal access to opportunities and resources, thus fostering a more stable and cohesive organizational climate.

2.7. Preventing Unethical Informal Practices Through Ethical Leadership

Unethical informal practices often referred to as shadow practices, quasi-organizational behaviors, or informal unethical norms are non-codified activities that deviate from organizational ethics but persist in the workplace due to weak leadership, ambiguous standards, or normalized deviance. These practices may include favoritism, informal bribery, cover-ups, misuse of power, or unofficial shortcuts that violate organizational integrity. While such behaviors often occur outside formal policies and reporting lines, they can deeply damage workplace culture, erode trust, and undermine institutional performance (Anand et al., 2021). Preventing these practices requires not only strong policies but also ethical leadership committed to modeling integrity, transparency, and fairness.

Ethical leadership is central to preventing these informal unethical behaviors because it sets the tone at the top. Ethical leaders act as role models whose behaviors influence others within the organization. According to Brown and Treviño (2006), ethical leaders demonstrate normatively appropriate behavior through personal actions and relationships, and they reinforce such behavior through communication and decision-making. When leaders consistently uphold moral standards, others are less likely to engage in or tolerate unethical informal practices. This is especially crucial in environments where unwritten rules may otherwise override official policies.

A critical way in which ethical leaders prevent unethical informal practices is through the promotion of a transparent and accountable culture. Ethical leaders encourage openness, question informal norms that deviate from the organization's values, and ensure that every employee understands acceptable conduct. They implement reporting mechanisms and protect whistleblowers, thus eliminating the fear of retaliation that often allows unethical behaviors to go unreported (Treviño et al., 2014). Additionally, they make sure that

there are no “untouchable” figures within the organization everyone is equally held to the same ethical standard. This reduces the likelihood of unofficial power structures where unethical informal practices thrive.

Moreover, ethical leadership is proactive it anticipates potential ethical breaches and addresses systemic issues that contribute to informal wrongdoing. For example, if promotions are informally influenced by personal connections rather than performance, ethical leaders intervene to realign promotion criteria with merit-based standards. Ethical leaders are also emotionally intelligent and attuned to the hidden dynamics of their teams. They actively monitor behavior patterns and intervene when unhealthy informal norms begin to emerge, thus preventing their institutionalization (Eisenbeiß & Giessner, 2012). Their moral vigilance helps organizations avoid ethical decay.

Preventing unethical informal practices through ethical leadership also promotes long-term sustainability and trust. Employees are more likely to commit to organizational values when they observe consistency between what leaders preach and what they practice. Ethical leadership reduces cynicism and fosters employee engagement, which in turn enhances performance and retention (Newman et al., 2020). Furthermore, organizations known for ethical conduct are less exposed to scandals, legal issues, and reputational damage. By prioritizing integrity, ethical leaders not only prevent harmful informal behaviors but also lay the foundation for ethical excellence and organizational credibility.

2.8. Fostering and Maintaining an Ethically Gender-Inclusive Workplace Culture

Creating and sustaining an ethically gender-inclusive workplace culture is essential for achieving fairness, employee well-being, and organizational effectiveness in today’s increasingly diverse and global work environment. A gender-inclusive culture ensures that individuals of all genders regardless of whether they identify as male, female, non-binary, or gender non-conforming are treated with respect, have equal access to opportunities, and can thrive in their roles. Ethical leadership plays a critical role in shaping this culture by promoting values such as justice, transparency, inclusivity, and respect for human dignity (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Organizations that prioritize gender inclusion not only align with social justice imperatives but also position themselves to benefit from diverse talent and perspectives.

The first step in fostering a gender-inclusive ethical climate is the elimination of structural and implicit biases that disadvantage specific gender groups. Despite increasing awareness, gender-based discrimination such as unequal pay, biased recruitment practices, and limited career advancement for women and gender minorities persists in many organizations. Ethical leaders challenge these systemic issues by reviewing organizational policies, introducing gender-neutral job descriptions, and ensuring equitable access to training and promotion opportunities (Kulik & Metz, 2017). Moreover, transparent performance evaluation processes and diversity audits help identify gaps and implement fair corrective measures.

A critical component of maintaining gender inclusion is open communication and education. Organizations must cultivate an environment where discussions around gender identity, inclusion, and respect are encouraged rather than stigmatized. This involves conducting regular workshops on unconscious bias, gender sensitivity, and ethical decision-making. Leaders should be equipped with emotional intelligence and cultural competence to handle gender-related issues tactfully and ethically. When employees feel seen, heard, and respected, they are more likely to be engaged, loyal, and productive contributors to the organization (Nkomo et al., 2019). Ethical leadership ensures that these conversations are not performative but drive real behavioral and policy change.

Another powerful strategy is implementing inclusive policies and practices that reflect ethical standards. This includes offering flexible work arrangements that accommodate diverse family responsibilities, supporting parental leave for all genders, and creating safe reporting channels for harassment or discrimination. An ethically grounded culture ensures that such practices are not just written in handbooks but are actively modeled and supported by leadership. According to Shore et al. (2018), inclusive workplaces that balance belongingness with uniqueness foster psychological safety, leading to greater innovation and collaboration across gender lines.

Finally, ethical leadership must be consistent and continuous in upholding gender inclusivity. Building a gender-inclusive culture is not a one-time initiative; it requires ongoing reinforcement, measurement, and adaptation. Ethical leaders should regularly monitor gender diversity metrics, seek feedback from employees of all identities, and publicly recognize inclusive behaviors and milestones. Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022)

emphasize that when ethical values are embedded into leadership behavior and organizational culture, they become self-sustaining, contributing to long-term equity and success. Organizations that commit to this ethical foundation not only comply with societal expectations but also benefit from improved reputation, talent retention, and market competitiveness.

2.9. Empirical Review

Empirical studies increasingly support the idea that ethical leadership plays a critical role in effectively managing workforce diversity. For instance, Kalshoven et al. (2011) conducted a multi-level analysis across Dutch organizations and found that ethical leadership was positively associated with employee perceptions of fairness and inclusion, particularly in diverse teams. Their findings revealed that leaders who act with integrity, communicate clear ethical standards, and demonstrate fairness in decision-making foster trust and cohesion among employees from different cultural and demographic backgrounds. This indicates that ethical leadership is not only a moral imperative but also a practical mechanism for managing diversity.

Further empirical evidence by Newman et al. (2020) explored the impact of diversity and inclusion climate on organizational performance, with ethical leadership serving as a moderating factor. The study, based on data from multinational firms in Asia-Pacific, revealed that ethical leadership enhances the positive effects of diversity on employee engagement and performance. Employees were more likely to report high levels of psychological safety and voice behavior in environments where leaders promoted ethical values. This aligns with transformational leadership principles, which emphasize individualized consideration and moral conduct as drivers of inclusive practices in diverse settings.

In another study, Ng and Sears (2012) examined the influence of ethical leadership on organizational commitment in diverse workplaces. Using survey data from 215 employees across various industries in Canada, their study showed that ethical leadership significantly reduces perceived discrimination and increases employee commitment among underrepresented groups. This finding is crucial for organizations aiming to retain top talent from diverse backgrounds. The study concluded that when leaders demonstrate fairness, openness, and respect for all employees, it fosters a sense of belonging and reduces turnover intentions key challenges in managing diverse workforces.

Similarly, Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) provided empirical insights into hospitality organizations, examining how leadership strategies affect diversity and inclusion outcomes. Their research found that ethical leadership enhances employee perceptions of equity and respect, which are essential components of effective diversity management. Notably, the study emphasized that ethical leaders are more likely to implement policies that support gender equity, anti-discrimination measures, and fair conflict resolution mechanisms. This empirical evidence highlights that ethical leadership serves as a catalyst for transforming diversity policies into inclusive practices.

2.9.1. The Role of Ascriptive Factors in Shaping an Organization's Ethical Climate

Ascriptive factors refer to characteristics individuals are born with or acquire involuntarily, such as race, gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economic background. In the context of an organization, these factors can profoundly influence the ethical climate by affecting perceptions of fairness, inclusivity, and equity. When organizations fail to account for ascriptive diversity in their ethical framework, implicit biases and systemic discrimination can emerge, creating disparities in opportunities, treatment, and representation (Mor Barak, 2017). Consequently, the ethical climate is not only shaped by formal codes of conduct but also by how these innate characteristics are acknowledged or marginalized within organizational culture.

An ethical climate that ignores ascriptive factors risks fostering an environment of exclusion and inequality. For instance, studies show that organizations with inadequate gender representation in leadership often demonstrate weaker ethical accountability and limited diversity of thought (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Furthermore, when employees perceive that advancement is tied to ascriptive traits such as race or age rather than merit, trust in leadership diminishes, undermining ethical cohesion. This dynamic has been linked to increased turnover, workplace conflict, and a decline in organizational citizenship behavior (Colquitt et al., 2015). Therefore, addressing ascriptive inequalities is critical to creating a climate that upholds ethical standards for all employees.

On the other hand, when organizations embrace ascriptive diversity through equitable hiring practices, anti-discrimination policies, and inclusive leadership, they foster a more ethical and just climate. Ethical

leadership plays a vital role here by modeling inclusive behavior and ensuring that ascriptive characteristics do not become grounds for exclusion or unequal treatment (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Inclusive ethical climates not only support social justice but also drive performance by promoting psychological safety, employee engagement, and innovation (Nishii, 2013). Moreover, organizations that recognize and actively counteract unconscious bias tend to cultivate a stronger moral compass across all levels.

In today's global and socially conscious business environment, it is imperative for organizations to integrate awareness of ascriptive factors into their ethical decision-making processes. Ethical climate assessments must go beyond surface-level compliance to examine how power, privilege, and structural inequality manifest within the organization. Tools such as diversity audits, inclusion metrics, and intersectional training can help identify and dismantle hidden barriers. Ultimately, a robust ethical climate is one that not only espouses values of integrity and justice but also actively confronts how ascriptive identities shape the lived experiences of employees (Shore et al., 2018).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using an exploratory and descriptive approach to examine how ethical leadership influences the management of workforce diversity among civil servants in Delta State. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for investigating the perceptions, experiences, and strategies of individuals in their natural work settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the dynamics between ethical leadership and diversity management in the public service context.

3.2. Population of the Study

The population for this research comprises civil servants working in various ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) in Delta State, Nigeria. These individuals operate in a multicultural and diverse work environment and are in a unique position to reflect on ethical leadership practices and diversity-related experiences in the civil service.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in managing workforce diversity among Delta State civil servants. Participants consistently indicated that leaders who demonstrate ethical values such as fairness, transparency, respect for individual differences, and accountability are more successful in fostering inclusive and productive work environments. This aligns with the work of Brown and Treviño (2006), who emphasized that ethical leadership cultivates trust, reduces bias, and supports value-driven decision-making in diverse workplaces.

One significant finding is that while diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and educational background is present in Delta State civil service, its management is often inconsistent across ministries and departments. Some agencies have more robust diversity and inclusion policies in place, while others rely heavily on informal practices and individual leadership discretion. Participants noted that where ethical leaders are proactive in promoting inclusiveness through equitable recruitment, unbiased promotion processes, and support for marginalized groups employees reported higher levels of job satisfaction and cohesion.

The study also uncovered several challenges. These include favoritism, implicit bias, lack of accountability mechanisms, and inadequate training on diversity management. Some civil servants shared that leadership decisions were occasionally influenced by tribal or political affiliations, thereby compromising the ethical climate of the organization. This finding is consistent with Mor Barak's (2017) assertion that ascriptive factors, if not properly addressed, can undermine ethical standards in diverse settings.

Another important observation is the role of communication and participation. Ethical leaders who engaged employees in decision-making, actively listened to minority concerns, and demonstrated cultural sensitivity were better at managing conflict and fostering a sense of belonging. Conversely, leaders who lacked

these traits often presided over departments characterized by low morale, mistrust, and internal tensions. This supports the inclusive leadership model proposed by Shore et al. (2018), which links ethical leadership to a positive diversity climate.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the management of workforce diversity through ethical leadership in the Delta State civil service. First, ethical leadership training should be institutionalized by the civil service commissions and training institutes through regular and mandatory programs that emphasize ethical principles, cultural competence, and inclusive management, thereby equipping leaders with the necessary skills to manage diverse teams effectively. In addition, ministries and departments should develop and enforce clear diversity and inclusion policies that address recruitment, promotion, conflict resolution, and anti-discrimination, ensuring consistent application with consequences for non-compliance. Leadership decisions, particularly in areas such as hiring, promotions, and disciplinary actions, must be guided by transparent processes, supported by feedback mechanisms like anonymous reporting systems and employee satisfaction surveys to promote accountability and address unethical conduct or bias.

Furthermore, ethical leadership should foster employee participation by creating inclusive platforms such as town halls, committees, and diversity forums where staff can voice concerns, contribute to policy discussions, and feel valued regardless of their background. To ensure systematic monitoring, a diversity oversight committee should be established at the state or ministerial level to evaluate diversity practices, review leadership ethics, and submit regular reports to the civil service commission. Lastly, recognition and reward systems should be introduced to honor leaders who exemplify ethical and inclusive practices, as such acknowledgment can shift organizational culture and motivate others to embrace similar standards.

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