

The dark side of leadership: ineffective training and poor ethics education

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Executive Summary

This study addresses the influence of ethics training and education on unethical leadership behavior within Algerian public companies, a context marked by persistent administrative corruption and limited prior empirical investigation. The authors argue that both ineffective organizational training programs and deficient pre-professional ethics education are significant antecedents of unethical leadership conduct. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 leaders and top managers from four Algerian public companies, analyzed using thematic analysis facilitated by ATLAS.ti 8 software. Two primary themes emerged: (1) the inadequacy of early ethics education provided by families, educational institutions, and society; and (2) the ineffectiveness of in-organizational training programs in developing leaders' ethical character. Respondents consistently reported that existing training programs lack quality and ethical focus, and that leaders' moral foundations are largely shaped before they enter organizations. The study concludes that ethical leader development requires coordinated effort across social, educational, and organizational domains, and that organizations alone cannot compensate for deficiencies in pre-professional ethical formation. The findings are positioned as a reference point for Algerian and broader African public sector reform efforts.

Key Insights

1. Respondents unanimously reported that training programs in Algerian public companies are inadequately designed to address the ethical dimensions of leadership, with quality and implementation identified as primary deficiencies.
2. Participants emphasized that leaders' ethical character is substantially shaped before organizational entry, implicating families, educational institutions, and broader societal environments as primary ethical formation sites.
3. The study identifies a knowledge gap in non-Western, particularly African, organizational leadership research, noting that most established leadership literature originates from Western contexts with different cultural and institutional systems.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations in contexts with high corruption risk may find ethics training insufficient as a standalone intervention if pre-professional ethical education is also weak — the two domains appear interdependent based on participant perspectives.
- Policymakers and organizational leaders in Algerian and comparable public sector environments are presented with evidence that investment in ethics training program quality, not merely program

existence, is the differentiating factor perceived by leaders.

Frameworks Mentioned

Thematic Analysis — A qualitative data analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006) used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data, applied here to analyze semi-structured interview transcripts.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The study addresses a genuine empirical gap in the Algerian and broader African public sector context. The exploratory qualitative design is appropriate for the sensitive, underexplored subject matter. Thematic analysis is applied systematically with reference to established methodology. Multiple respondent roles and experience levels provide some diversity of perspective. **Limitations:** The sample of 15 participants from four companies in one country severely constrains generalizability. Gender representation is highly imbalanced (14 male, 1 female), acknowledged by the authors but not mitigated. The sensitivity of unethical behavior as a topic introduces social desirability bias — participants may have understated personal involvement in unethical conduct. The study relies entirely on self-reported perceptions rather than observed behavior or organizational records. Causal claims about training deficits causing unethical behavior cannot be substantiated by this design. The article does not define or operationalize 'unethical behavior' rigorously, allowing for varied interpretation across respondents. The authors' institutional affiliation (Universiti Utara Malaysia) and reviewer affiliations may introduce regional perspective bias. The study was approved by Universiti Utara Malaysia but conducted in Algeria, raising questions about contextual ethical oversight.

Organizational Practice

Algerian public companies are described as implementing some formal training and development programs for leaders, but respondents characterized these programs as poorly designed, inadequately implemented, and insufficiently focused on ethical dimensions. Companies recruit leaders without systematic assessment of ethical character. No structured ethics education pipeline from educational institutions to organizational settings is reported. Training workshops and leadership development sessions exist nominally but are perceived by leaders as failing to produce behavioral change.

Strategic Implications

The article's findings point toward a growing recognition that organizational-level ethics interventions operate within — and may be limited by — broader societal and educational ecosystems. For PMS design, this raises questions about whether ethical performance metrics can be meaningfully applied where foundational ethical formation is perceived as absent. The Algerian case may be indicative of wider patterns in public sector organizations in high-corruption environments across the Global South, suggesting that performance management frameworks developed in Western institutional contexts may require significant adaptation. The emphasis on pre-organizational ethical formation also implies that recruitment and selection processes carry ethical development implications that training programs alone cannot address post-hire.

