Ethical Leadership and Employee Well-Being in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: Evidence from Ekiti State

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Abstract

Ethical leadership plays a vital role in advancing employee well-being, especially within tertiary institutions where staff morale, motivation, and psychological health are influenced by leadership practices. This research explores the influence of ethical leadership on employee well-being in selected public tertiary institutions in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The main purpose is to determine how ethical leadership characterised by fairness, transparency, and integrity affects the psychological and emotional well-being of academic and non-academic staff. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was adopted; the population comprised 5,647 employees across four institutions, and a sample size of 286 was drawn using stratified random sampling. Data were collected via structured questionnaires, verified through expert assessment and pilot evaluation (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.84), and analysed using descriptive statistics and simple linear regression. The findings reveal that ethical leadership considerably enhances employee well-being ($\beta = 0.781$, $p < 0.001$), with 52.4% of the variance in well-being outcomes explained by leadership behaviour ($R^2 = 0.524$). The study concludes that ethical leadership is essential for fostering trust, motivation, and psychological safety in higher education. Recommendations include institutionalising ethical leadership training, incorporating ethical standards into leadership appraisals, and strengthening staff support systems to promote long-term well-being and institutional performance.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, employee well-being, tertiary institutions, organisational behavior.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of employee well-being has gained increasing prominence within higher education, where staff are confronted with rising performance expectations, limited resources, and intensifying emotional and psychological demands (Elufioye et al., 2024). These pressures have drawn scholarly attention to organisational practices that can foster healthier and more supportive work environments. Among these practices, ethical leadership has become a key influence on employee well-being (Jia et al., 2022).

Ethical leadership, characterised by integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability, helps to create a workplace culture built on trust, inclusiveness, and psychological safety (Abay & Mengistu, 2023). Research from various countries affirms the positive role of ethical leadership in strengthening employee psychological and emotional well-being. For instance, in the United States, Haidar et al. (2023) discovered that ethical leadership greatly reduced emotional exhaustion and increased job engagement among healthcare workers. Similarly, Rivers et al. (2021) reported that ethical leadership in U.K. student unions enhanced employee well-being

by promoting fairness and trust. In Canada, Smith et al. (2022) found that ethical leadership behaviours contributed to lower psychological distress and greater overall wellness among hospital staff.

Further evidence from Europe supports the notion that ethical leadership reduces workplace stressors such as incivility and burnout by fostering role clarity and transparent communication (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2020; Zagenczyk et al., 2021). In Austria, ethical leadership practices among healthcare professionals were linked to reduced emotional fatigue and greater psychological safety. Likewise, Dey et al. (2022) observed that university employees under ethical leadership experienced reduced stress and an enhanced sense of belonging due to fair decision-making and inclusive communication.

Despite the robust global literature, research on how ethical leadership influences employee well-being in African higher education remains scarce. In the Nigerian context, especially in Ekiti State, tertiary institutions continue to face challenges related to poor leadership, inadequate staff welfare, and declining morale. These institutions are frequently affected by non-transparent governance, political interference, and insufficient accountability, all of which undermine employee trust and emotional stability (Katircioglu et al., 2022). Research by Akinwale and Amah (2024) in Nigerian universities showed that ethical leadership enhanced institutional trust, reduced conflicts, and improved staff morale through participatory governance.

In Ekiti State, these challenges are particularly visible. Many tertiary institutions struggle with underfunding, inconsistent salaries, weak leadership structures, and a widespread lack of recognition and encouragement for staff (Adeoye et al., 2023). Staff members frequently report low morale and psychological strain due to inadequate welfare provisions and unresponsive leadership. Institutions that fail to adopt ethical leadership practices often face high staff attrition, lower engagement, and reduced productivity factors that compromise organisational effectiveness (Burhan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022).

This study seeks to assess the influence of ethical leadership on employee well-being in tertiary institutions in Ekiti State. By investigating this relationship, the study aims to generate empirical insights that can guide the development of value-driven leadership practices, foster supportive institutional cultures, and strengthen organisational performance within Nigeria's higher education sector.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership can be described as the practice of encouraging morally sound behaviour through personal example, thoughtful decision-making, and ethically guided relationships (Brown et al., 2005). Leaders who embrace this style are marked by qualities such as responsibility, honesty, fairness, and genuine care for the welfare of others. In higher education, ethical leadership typically manifests through open governance, consistent treatment of academic and non-academic staff, and a strong institutional commitment to upholding moral and professional standards (Dinc et al., 2014).

Given the collaborative and intellectually autonomous nature of academic environments, ethical leadership plays an essential role in cultivating an atmosphere of honesty and mutual trust. Leaders not only shape formal policies but also influence day-to-day behaviours and institutional values through ethical role modelling (Nguyen et al., 2021). However, while a significant body of research links leadership to performance outcomes, there is still a limited number of studies directly exploring its impact on employee well-being.

2.1.2 Employee Well-being

Employee well-being refers to the psychological, emotional, and at times physical condition of individuals within the workplace. It is often shaped by factors including job satisfaction, recognition, independence, organisational assistance, and a supportive work setting. Within higher education systems, staff well-being is closely tied to job security, leadership style, resource availability, and institutional responsiveness (Kaffashpoor et al., 2020).

Institutions that prioritise staff well-being typically benefit from enhanced performance outcomes and a greater sense of organisational belonging among employees (Irfan et al., 2022). In contrast, environments characterised by managerial neglect, weak leadership, and poor support structures tend to contribute to stress, low morale, absenteeism, and burnout. Within Nigerian tertiary institutions, these challenges are further exacerbated by systemic issues such as inadequate funding and excessive workloads, reinforcing the need for ethical and empathetic leadership practices.

2.1.3 Linking Ethical Leadership and Employee Well-Being

An expanding range of scholarly evidence indicates that ethical leadership is positively linked to employee well-being. Leaders guided by ethical principles often help to reduce work-related stress and contribute to employees' psychological security, emotional stability, and satisfaction in their jobs (Shinwari et al., 2024; El-Gazar et al., 2021). Such leaders promote a work atmosphere where people feel appreciated, respected, and meaningfully involved. For example, Irfan et al. (2022) reported that among nurses, ethical leadership contributed to greater emotional wellness and higher engagement at work, with organisational trust serving as a mediating factor. Similarly, research by Jandaghian-Bidgoli et al. (2023) indicated that ethical leadership in Iranian healthcare settings reduced stress and improved staff satisfaction. While these findings offer strong theoretical support, their primary focus on healthcare contexts limits their generalisability to academic institutions. In tertiary institution, particularly in Nigerian public institutions, employees often work with considerable autonomy and emotional investment in their roles. In such settings, ethical leadership tends to function less as directive oversight and more as a facilitator of fair, respectful, and inclusive organisational climates. Practices such as transparent communication, equitable evaluation, and recognition of individual contributions are essential for supporting employee well-being. Nonetheless, empirical studies examining this link in Nigerian higher education remain limited, indicating a significant gap in the existing research base.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on two major theoretical foundations that clarify how ethical leadership relates to employee well-being: Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Ethical Leadership Theory. These frameworks offer complementary insights, merging relational dynamics with moral leadership practices to explain how ethical behaviour among leaders shapes staff outcomes within tertiary institutions.

Social Exchange Theory, first proposed by Blau (1964), posits that social behaviour results from a reciprocal process in which individuals aim to maximise benefits and reduce costs. In organisational contexts, SET suggests that when leaders demonstrate fairness, honesty, and concern for their subordinates, employees tend to respond through constructive workplace actions such as increased commitment, trust, and psychological well-being (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Within higher education settings, ethical leadership is frequently reflected through respectful treatment, open communication, and fair decision-making. These behaviours cultivate an atmosphere of trust and emotional safety, improving resilience and morale among staff (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005). Employees who view their leaders as ethically consistent are more inclined to feel appreciated and, in return, display loyalty, engagement, and extra-role effort.

Ethical Leadership Theory, developed by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), defines ethical leadership as demonstrating and encouraging morally appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, and structured reinforcement systems. Leaders serve as ethical exemplars as well as facilitators who articulate moral standards and reward integrity-based behaviour within the organisation.

In tertiary institutions, ethical leadership holds particular importance due to complex interpersonal relations and morally charged decision-making processes. When academic leaders display honesty, fairness, and accountability, they promote institutional justice and psychological clarity. This reduces uncertainty, alleviates stress, and encourages emotional stability and overall well-being among staff (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Furthermore, consistent ethical leadership has been found to strengthen motivation, satisfaction, and institutional commitment (Den Hartog et al., 2012).

Ethical Leadership Theory provides the conceptual anchor for this research, presenting a structured framework for analysing how ethically guided leadership influences employee well-being within tertiary education. The theory highlights the leader's role in modelling values such as integrity, fairness, and openness qualities that encourage trust, emotional safety, and a supportive institutional culture. In Nigerian higher education, where persistent issues such as poor welfare and weak governance prevail, ethical leadership serves as a stabilising force that enhances satisfaction, morale, and resilience. Through its emphasis on moral conduct and values-based decision-making, the theory offers an analytical lens for evaluating how leadership behaviour impacts the emotional and psychological health of both academic and administrative staff.

2.3 Empirical Review

Dust et al. (2024) investigated how ethical leadership influences employee performance, identifying psychological empowerment and emotional exhaustion as the main mediating factors. Using a moderated mediation model and survey data from U.S. professionals, the study revealed that ethical leadership boosted performance through increased empowerment, though this effect diminished when emotional exhaustion was high. The research highlighted psychological processes as essential to leadership effectiveness but was constrained by self-reported data and a homogeneous sample.

Ayad et al. (2024) explored the relationship between ethical leadership, productivity, and well-being in Egypt's tourism industry, employing SEM to analyse responses from 515 employees. The study found that ethical leadership had a positive effect on both outcomes, with well-being acting as a key mediating factor. The authors stressed the importance of ethical leadership in promoting job satisfaction and recommended further studies in other industries to uncover additional mediators and moderators.

Egwainiovo et al. (2023) examined how ethical leadership relates to employee performance in Nigeria's tourism industry using survey data from 256 participants. The findings demonstrated that ethical leadership significantly improved contextual performance and encouraged citizenship behaviours but did not significantly affect task or adaptive performance. The authors proposed continued investigation into performance categories and suggested capacity-building initiatives to strengthen task-based outcomes.

Asif et al. (2023) analysed the impact of ethical leadership on employee innovation in China's service industry, focusing on job crafting as a mediator and self-leadership as a moderating variable. Using SEM and bootstrapped testing on data from 370 employees, the researchers found that ethical leadership encouraged innovation via job crafting, with the relationship enhanced by higher self-leadership. They advocated for broader studies across sectors and cultural settings to improve generalisability.

3.0 Methodology
3.1 Research Design
A descriptive quantitative survey design was employed to explore the link between ethical leadership and employee well-being in tertiary institutions. This design enabled the gathering of numerical data from a defined group at one period, allowing for an empirical evaluation of how ethical leadership behaviours correspond with employees' emotional and psychological states in the academic workplace.

3.2 Area of the Study
The research took place in Ekiti State, Nigeria, concentrating on four public tertiary institutions. These are Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti; Federal University, Oye-Ekiti; Federal Polytechnic, Ado-Ekiti; and Ekiti State Polytechnic, Isan-Ekiti.

3.3 Population of the Study
The study population comprised 5,647 academic and non-teaching staff drawn from the four selected public tertiary institutions in Ekiti State, Nigeria. This composition ensured diversity and represented a broad mix of leadership approaches, management systems, and workplace settings pertinent to the focus on ethical leadership.

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique
A total sample of 374 participants was calculated using Taro Yamane's formula, with a 0.05 margin of error:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Thus:

$$n = \frac{5647}{1 + 5647(0.05)^2}$$

$$= 374$$

A proportionate stratified random sampling method was applied to guarantee balanced representation across institutions and staff levels. The distribution of respondents is shown below:

Institution	Population	Sample Size
Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti	2,082	138
Federal University, Oye Ekiti	1,997	132
Federal Polytechnic, Ado Ekiti	1,328	88
Ekiti State Polytechnic, Isan Ekiti	240	16

3.4 Research Instrument
A well-structured questionnaire was designed to collect data on ethical leadership and employee well-being. The tool consisted of closed-ended questions arranged on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Two established scales formed its foundation: Ethical Leadership was measured using the Ethical Leadership Scale

(ELS) by Neubert and Dyck (2021), which evaluates perceptions of leader integrity, fairness, and accountability. Employee Well-Being was measured using the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) by Stewart-Brown et al. (2021), which assesses emotional, psychological, and mental health aspects. To encourage participation and ensure inclusivity, both digital and printed versions of the questionnaire were used.

3.5 Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument
The reliability and validity of the instrument were ensured through rigorous procedures. Internal consistency was examined using a pilot test with 30 respondents from similar institutions, producing a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.84, which is above the acceptable benchmark of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), indicating strong reliability. Content validity was verified through expert assessment by three scholars in leadership and organisational psychology to ensure item relevance and goal alignment. Construct validity was established using exploratory factor analysis, which showed appropriate loading of items under expected constructs. Face validity was confirmed through pre-testing with academic staff who assessed the clarity and contextual suitability of the questionnaire.

3.6 Model Specification
A basic regression model was formulated to determine how ethical leadership predicts employee well-being:

$$EW = \beta_0 + \beta_1(EL) + \varepsilon$$

Where:
EW=Employee Well-Being, EL = Ethical Leadership, β_0 = Constant, β_1 = Regression coefficient, and ε = Error term.

3.7 Method of Data Analysis
The collected data were processed and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26). Descriptive tools such as means and standard deviations were used to summarise participants' demographic data and survey responses. Inferential statistics were employed to evaluate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee well-being. Specifically, Pearson's correlation analysis examined the strength and direction of their association, while simple linear regression tested the hypothesis and measured how well ethical leadership predicted well-being. A 5% significance level ($p < .05$) was applied to all statistical analyses.

4.0 Results and Discussion
This section presents the descriptive analysis used to evaluate how respondents perceived ethical leadership and its influence on employee well-being in selected tertiary institutions across Ekiti State, Nigeria.

4.1 Descriptive Analysis
The analysis summarises the mean values and standard deviations (SD) for ten survey statements assessing ethical leadership and employee well-being, based on feedback from 286 participants.

S/N	Item	Mean	SD
1	Ethical leadership in my institution enhances my satisfaction with my job	3.90	0.383
2	My leaders demonstrate fairness in decision-making	4.07	0.234
3	The ethical values of my leaders make me feel satisfied in my role	3.67	1.114

S/N	Item	Mean	SD
4	Ethical leadership practices make me feel supported in my work	4.22	0.360
5	I am more motivated in my job due to the ethical standards upheld by my leaders	4.23	0.408
6	Ethical leadership positively impacts my well-being at work	4.26	0.447
7	I feel valued and respected due to the ethical behaviour of my leaders	4.27	0.325
8	My leaders' ethical practices improve my overall job satisfaction	4.17	0.393
9	Ethical leadership practices have contributed to a positive work environment	4.18	0.318
10	My leaders act with integrity, positively affecting my well-being and motivation	4.16	0.360

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The outcomes show consistently high averages across all items, suggesting that participants largely believe ethical leadership has a positive effect on their well-being. Items 6–9, each above 4.15, highlight strong agreement that ethical leadership fosters support, satisfaction, and motivation in the workplace. The small SDs, especially for items concerning fairness, integrity, and support, indicate close agreement among respondents.

4.2 Regression Results
To test how ethical leadership influences employee well-being, a simple regression model was applied. Ethical leadership served as the predictor variable, while employee well-being represented the dependent variable.

Variable	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t	Sig. (p)
Constant	1.214	0.175	6.951	0.000
Ethical Leadership	0.781	0.044	17.665	0.000

Model Summary

Statistic	Value
R	0.724
R²	0.524
Adjusted R²	0.522
F	312.045
Sig. (ANOVA)	0.000

Dependent Variable: Employee Well-Being
Source: Authors' Field Survey (2025)

The correlation (R = 0.724) reflects a strong positive link between ethical leadership and employee well-being. The coefficient of determination (R^2 = 0.524) indicates that ethical leadership explains 52.4% of the variance in employee well-being. The t = 17.665 and p = 0.000 confirm a statistically significant relationship at $p < .05$. The regression coefficient (B = 0.781) implies that each one-unit increase in ethical leadership results in a 0.781-unit improvement in well-being.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

This research explored how ethical leadership shapes employee well-being in selected tertiary institutions across Ekiti State, Nigeria. Regression analysis identified a strong, statistically significant connection (R = 0.724; R² = 0.524), revealing that ethical leadership accounts for 52.4% of differences in well-being levels. This finding suggests that leadership practices rooted in ethical values significantly influence employees' psychological states. High means for items such as *"Ethical leadership positively impacts my well-being at work"* (M = 4.26) and *"I feel valued and respected due to the ethical behaviour of my leaders"* (M = 4.27) affirm this view. These results are consistent with earlier studies highlighting the mental-health benefits of ethical leadership. Heuss et al. (2023) found that ethical communication and principled actions by leaders improved employee well-being. Dinc et al. (2014) noted that ethical leadership enhances job satisfaction and organisational commitment, both tied to well-being. Similarly, Samad et al. (2022) showed that ethical and transformational leadership styles reduce turnover and create emotionally supportive environments, while Akinbode et al. (2024) demonstrated that ethical leadership improves well-being by encouraging employee voice and satisfaction. Within Nigeria's tertiary institutions often challenged by limited funding, poor governance, and weak staff welfare ethical leadership acts as a stabilising force, strengthening motivation, resilience, and institutional effectiveness.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations
5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how ethical leadership affects employee well-being in selected tertiary institutions within Ekiti State, Nigeria. The analysis revealed a clear, positive association between the two variables, highlighting the importance of transparent, fair, and integrity-driven leadership in boosting morale, motivation, and psychological strength. Ethical leaders promote trust, job satisfaction, and supportive work environments factors that jointly enhance individual productivity and long-term institutional performance, particularly in contexts of limited resources and governance challenges.

5.2 Recommendations

In view of the findings, tertiary institutions in Ekiti State and similar settings should embed ethical leadership values in their management structures. Investing in training and professional development that emphasises accountability, fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness is essential. Leadership assessments should include ethical-behaviour indicators to reinforce these standards throughout the organisation. Cultivating ethical leadership at every level will not only elevate employee well-being but also fortify institutional integrity, engagement, and sustainability.

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