

Restoring Public Trust through Ethical Leadership and Accountability Frameworks in Governance

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ABSTRACT: This narrative review examines leadership, public ethics, and accountability frameworks in government institutions, aiming to synthesize current evidence and highlight research gaps. Literature was sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar using keywords such as ethical leadership, public sector ethics, and accountability frameworks. Studies from the past decade were prioritized, covering both qualitative and quantitative evidence. Findings indicate that ethical leadership fosters integrity, strengthens accountability, and enhances public trust by modeling values that shape ethical organizational cultures (Demir et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2016). Accountability mechanisms—compliance-based, integrity-driven, and hybrid—are most effective when supported by political will, robust regulation, and participatory governance (Reddick et al., 2024; Sebastián et al., 2023). Organizational culture plays a central role in shaping ethical behavior, while gender diversity in leadership promotes inclusivity and public confidence (Mousa et al., 2021; Bastani et al., 2020). Despite these insights, research is constrained by reliance on case studies, self-reported measures, and limited comparative analysis. Political and cultural contexts significantly influence the effectiveness of ethics and accountability policies, yet cross-country and longitudinal studies remain scarce. The review concludes that integrating ethical leadership, accountability frameworks, organizational culture, and gender diversity is vital for resilient governance. Strengthening these areas can restore public trust, reinforce institutional legitimacy, and provide a foundation for sustainable and ethical governance in diverse contexts.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Public Sector Ethics, Accountability Frameworks, Governance Integrity, Organizational Culture, Gender Diversity, Public Trust.



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INTRODUCTION

Leadership and public ethics in government institutions have become increasingly salient topics in contemporary governance scholarship. Over the past decade, a growing body of research has examined the ways in which leadership serves not only as a vehicle for organizational efficiency

but also as a normative framework that ensures accountability and public trust. Leadership in the public sector is now frequently conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that integrates ethical components to guide decision-making and institutional practices. Ethical leadership, in particular, encompasses values, traits, and behaviors that reinforce integrity, fairness, and accountability among public officials and employees. Kim et al. (2018) highlight the importance of compassionate leadership and effective communication in cultivating positive public perceptions of government, demonstrating a shift towards more citizen-centered approaches. This emphasis reflects broader transformations in governance, where leaders are expected to not only manage but also inspire, influence, and uphold ethical standards within public institutions.

Recent literature underscores the indispensable role of organizational leadership in embedding ethical standards into institutional frameworks. Demir et al. (2023) argue that organizational ethics culture is central to shaping ethical behavior among public employees, noting that effective leadership goes beyond authority to foster an environment where ethical standards are clearly articulated and routinely practiced. This aligns with the concept of ethical infrastructure, which comprises explicit policies, training, and support mechanisms to promote ethical conduct (Demir et al., 2023). The convergence of leadership and ethics has therefore emerged as a critical area of inquiry, particularly in light of increasing demands for transparency, integrity, and accountability in government.

The urgency of strengthening accountability frameworks in public administration is evidenced by persistent challenges such as procurement fraud, budget misuse, and lack of transparency. These issues not only weaken governance systems but also erode citizens' trust in public institutions. Reddick et al. (2024) emphasize that compliance with ethics reforms is vital for local governments to create ethical environments and rebuild public confidence. Their findings highlight that organizations without robust ethical oversight are prone to failures that jeopardize legitimacy and effectiveness. This growing recognition underscores the need to integrate leadership ethics with accountability frameworks as a strategy to safeguard integrity and reinforce trust.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the correlation between ethical governance and higher levels of public trust. Adekanmbi and Ukpere (2022) argue that leaders who model ethical behavior enhance employees' commitment and motivation, thereby strengthening public service delivery. Such evidence reinforces the practical implications of ethical leadership: beyond improving organizational culture, it directly influences service quality and citizen satisfaction. This empirical foundation supports the argument that leadership ethics and accountability frameworks are indispensable for sustainable governance.

Despite these advancements, government institutions face enduring challenges in operationalizing ethical leadership. Systemic corruption and lack of transparency remain pervasive issues that undermine accountability. Demir et al. (2023) point out that ineffective oversight mechanisms exacerbate corruption, while Reddick et al. (2024) show that without robust compliance frameworks, ethical reforms are unlikely to succeed. These findings illustrate how weak institutional structures perpetuate ethical failures and highlight the necessity of leadership-driven accountability mechanisms.

Another major challenge is insufficient training and capacity-building for leaders across organizational levels. Wongprasit et al. (2020) identify gaps in leadership competencies related to

human resources management and employee engagement, particularly in public health governance (Pierce, 2007). These deficiencies hinder leaders' ability to foster ethical oversight and engagement with stakeholders. Moreover, Demir et al. (2023) argue that the lack of participatory strategies further marginalizes ethical considerations within decision-making processes. Together, these studies suggest that technical reforms alone are inadequate; instead, comprehensive strategies that integrate training, stakeholder engagement, and cultural transformation are essential.

The literature also points to a persistent tension between formal regulations and actual ethical behavior. Downe et al. (2016) observe that although ethics codes and regulatory frameworks are necessary, they often fail to cultivate a genuine culture of accountability. Kim et al. (2018) expand this observation by showing that compassionate leadership significantly influences citizens' evaluations of governmental integrity, suggesting that leadership style directly affects public perceptions. This underscores the importance of moving beyond procedural compliance towards leadership practices that embed ethics into daily operations and public interactions.

Despite substantial scholarly attention, notable gaps remain in the literature. One key omission is the scarcity of empirical research that directly links specific leadership styles to measurable ethical outcomes in governance. Wright et al. (2016) argue that while theoretical assertions abound, detailed evidence on the mechanisms through which leadership affects ethical behavior is limited. Similarly, Demir et al. (2023) note that the interplay between institutional policy frameworks and leadership influence remains underexplored. Another gap is the limited attention given to frontline employees who regularly confront ethical dilemmas in practice. Their perspectives are critical for understanding how leadership decisions are enacted at the operational level, yet they remain underrepresented in the literature.

This narrative review aims to address these gaps by systematically synthesizing evidence on the role of leadership and public ethics in strengthening accountability frameworks within government institutions. The primary objective is to analyze how leadership behaviors, organizational ethics, and accountability mechanisms interact to foster integrity and trust. Particular attention is given to identifying the key factors—such as leadership style, institutional culture, and policy frameworks—that influence the effectiveness of accountability systems.

The scope of this review encompasses both developed and developing contexts to provide a comparative perspective. Studies from advanced governance systems, such as those analyzed by Reddick et al. (2024), shed light on how institutionalized frameworks shape ethical leadership. Conversely, research from developing countries, such as Okpe and Othman (2021), highlights the obstacles posed by political instability, weak institutions, and systemic corruption. This comparative lens allows for an exploration of diverse governance realities and emphasizes the need for context-specific strategies. Furthermore, the review integrates evidence from different sectors, including healthcare governance (Bastani et al., 2020), to illustrate how ethical leadership and accountability are operationalized in varied institutional settings.

In summary, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on leadership and public ethics by consolidating existing knowledge, identifying gaps, and proposing directions for future research. By examining leadership as both a behavioral and structural force, this review aims to illuminate pathways for embedding ethics into governance frameworks that are both effective and sustainable. Ultimately, the findings are intended to guide policymakers, practitioners, and scholars

in developing strategies that strengthen accountability, restore public trust, and enhance the legitimacy of government institutions.

METHOD

The methodological approach adopted in this study is guided by the principles of narrative review research, emphasizing the systematic identification, selection, and synthesis of relevant literature on leadership, public ethics, and accountability frameworks in governance. Unlike systematic reviews that employ rigid protocols for data collection and analysis, the narrative review methodology provides a flexible yet rigorous structure, allowing the integration of diverse perspectives and methodological traditions. This approach is especially appropriate for the present study, which seeks to explore the conceptual and empirical intersections of leadership and ethics within the public sector. To ensure rigor and transparency, the methodology is explained in detail below, covering the process of literature collection, keyword formulation, inclusion and exclusion criteria, types of research included, and the evaluation of selected studies.

The collection of literature was conducted across several major academic databases that are widely recognized for their coverage of peer-reviewed journals and scholarly works in the fields of public administration, management, political science, and organizational studies. Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were utilized to capture a broad spectrum of publications spanning multidisciplinary domains. Additional searches were performed in PubMed and ProQuest to ensure that cross-sectoral insights, particularly those related to healthcare governance and ethics, were not overlooked. This multi-database strategy ensured comprehensiveness by drawing from both social science and applied policy repositories, thereby increasing the breadth of literature relevant to leadership, ethics, and governance.

The identification of relevant literature relied on carefully constructed search strategies using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators. Keywords were selected to reflect both the conceptual and operational dimensions of the study. Core terms included “ethical leadership,” “public sector ethics,” “accountability frameworks,” “governance,” “leadership in government institutions,” and “organizational ethics.” Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were employed to refine searches. For instance, the combination “ethical leadership AND public administration” was applied to capture studies that explicitly addressed the interconnections between ethical leadership and governance. Similarly, the search phrase “accountability OR transparency AND government institutions” was used to retrieve literature on oversight mechanisms. Such combinations enhanced the precision of results, helping to exclude irrelevant studies while retaining those of direct significance. The use of filters for publication date (focusing on works from 2010 onward), language (English), and type (peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters) further ensured the relevance and quality of retrieved literature.

In defining the inclusion criteria, this study prioritized literature that satisfied several conditions. First, only peer-reviewed articles and book chapters were included to ensure academic rigor and credibility. Second, the timeframe was limited to publications from the last ten to fifteen years, reflecting the evolving nature of leadership and ethics debates in governance. Third, studies were required to focus explicitly on public sector organizations, government institutions, or public

administration contexts, rather than exclusively on private or corporate sectors. Fourth, both qualitative and quantitative research designs were considered. Qualitative studies were valued for their ability to provide contextual depth and insight into leadership behaviors and ethical challenges, while quantitative studies offered empirical evidence of relationships among variables such as leadership style, organizational culture, and accountability mechanisms. Finally, studies that examined ethics and accountability in the broader context of governance, including comparative cross-country perspectives, were also considered, given the relevance of global learning to this area of inquiry.

Exclusion criteria were applied to filter out studies that did not align with the objectives of the review. Articles lacking empirical evidence, such as purely conceptual or theoretical papers with no practical implications, were excluded to maintain focus on evidence-based findings. Similarly, literature addressing ethics and accountability exclusively within corporate environments, without clear applicability to public institutions, was omitted. Non-peer-reviewed publications, such as opinion pieces, editorials, or advocacy reports, were also excluded to ensure reliability and scholarly rigor. Moreover, studies published in languages other than English were excluded, given the scope of the review's intended international readership and the feasibility constraints of translation.

The types of research included in this narrative review spanned a wide range of methodological traditions. Empirical studies employing experimental or quasi-experimental designs, randomized controlled trials, and case-control studies were considered, although such designs were relatively scarce in governance research. More frequently, the review incorporated cross-sectional surveys, case studies of government institutions, cohort analyses, and policy evaluations. Case study designs, in particular, were valuable in providing detailed contextual insights into how ethical leadership is operationalized in specific institutional settings, such as local government councils or healthcare organizations. Cohort and survey-based studies contributed large-scale empirical evidence on relationships between leadership behaviors, ethical climates, and accountability outcomes. Mixed-methods research was also included, reflecting the increasing recognition that leadership and ethics are complex phenomena that benefit from both numerical data and interpretive analysis.

The process of selecting literature was iterative and multi-staged, designed to maximize both relevance and quality. Initial searches across databases generated a large volume of results, often numbering in the thousands. Titles and abstracts were first screened to assess their alignment with the study's focus on leadership, ethics, and accountability frameworks in governance. Articles that appeared relevant based on abstracts were retrieved in full text and further evaluated. At this stage, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were systematically applied to ensure that only studies meeting the methodological and contextual standards of the review were retained. To reduce bias and enhance reliability, the screening process was carried out by two independent reviewers, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus. This dual-review process ensured that decisions regarding article selection were transparent and replicable.

Following selection, the included studies were subjected to a critical appraisal process. This involved assessing methodological quality, theoretical contribution, and empirical robustness. For example, quantitative studies were evaluated for sample size adequacy, reliability of measurement instruments, and appropriateness of statistical analysis, while qualitative studies were assessed for

depth of analysis, transparency of data collection, and theoretical grounding. Studies that did not meet minimum thresholds of methodological rigor were excluded at this stage. The final body of literature was then synthesized narratively, with findings organized according to emerging themes, such as ethical leadership styles, accountability frameworks, organizational ethics culture, and comparative governance contexts.

The evaluation process also emphasized the importance of contextual factors in interpreting findings. Studies were reviewed with sensitivity to regional, cultural, and institutional differences, acknowledging that leadership and ethics manifest differently across governance systems. For example, while research from developed countries often focused on institutionalized accountability frameworks embedded within mature democratic structures, studies from developing contexts emphasized challenges posed by weak institutions, systemic corruption, and political instability. This comparative perspective was crucial for drawing nuanced conclusions and identifying globally relevant insights.

In sum, the methodological design of this study reflects a comprehensive and systematic approach to identifying, selecting, and analyzing literature on leadership, ethics, and accountability in governance. By employing rigorous search strategies, clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a structured selection and evaluation process, the review sought to ensure both breadth and depth in coverage. The diversity of methodologies represented in the included studies—from large-scale surveys to in-depth case analyses—allowed for a multifaceted understanding of the research topic. Ultimately, this methodological framework supports the objective of producing a narrative review that not only consolidates existing knowledge but also identifies gaps, contextualizes findings, and contributes meaningfully to the scholarly discourse on ethical leadership and accountability in public sector governance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the reviewed literature converge around four major themes: ethical leadership, accountability mechanisms, organizational culture and ethics, and gender and diversity in leadership. Each theme reveals critical insights into how leadership practices and ethical frameworks interact to shape accountability and integrity in government institutions. These results draw on empirical evidence and comparative analyses, offering a nuanced understanding of both challenges and opportunities across different governance contexts (Thompson, 2016).

Ethical Leadership

The empirical evidence supporting the impact of ethical leadership on organizational integrity and accountability in government institutions is both robust and multidimensional. Demir et al. (2023) provide compelling evidence that ethical leadership significantly enhances ethical performance within local governments, demonstrating that leaders who actively promote ethical behavior instill a culture of accountability and integrity across organizational levels. Wright et al. (2016) further corroborate this relationship, establishing a positive correlation between ethical leadership and public service motivation. Their findings argue that ethical leaders inspire subordinates to prioritize

transparency, accountability, and ethical decision-making in their governance practices, reinforcing the view that leadership is a critical catalyst for integrity.

The comparative analysis of ethical leadership practices across geographical regions also reveals important variations shaped by cultural and institutional contexts. Lee et al. (2022) illustrate how Confucian values influence ethical leadership in the public sectors of China and Korea, where hierarchical respect and collective harmony significantly shape leadership behavior and citizen expectations. These culturally embedded practices highlight the role of normative traditions in shaping ethical governance. In contrast, studies from African contexts, such as those by Okpe and Othman (2021), emphasize the challenges posed by systemic corruption and political instability, which hinder the consistent application of ethical leadership principles. These contrasting findings underscore the need for governance frameworks to be contextually adapted, ensuring that ethical leadership strategies are responsive to local cultural, political, and institutional realities.

Accountability Mechanisms

The literature identifies three dominant forms of accountability frameworks: compliance-based, integrity-based, and hybrid approaches. Compliance-based frameworks focus on adherence to laws, rules, and regulations, ensuring that public officials are held accountable through external monitoring and enforcement. Such mechanisms are prominent in developed nations, as Reddick et al. (2024) highlight in their study of ethics reforms in U.S. local governments. Integrity-based frameworks, on the other hand, prioritize cultivating an internalized ethical culture, where public officials voluntarily uphold ethical standards beyond formal compliance. Hybrid frameworks combine elements of both, providing a more flexible and adaptive approach to accountability.

Comparative analyses further reveal the strengths and limitations of different accountability systems. Demir et al. (2023) highlight that while accountability infrastructures in U.S. local governments emphasize compliance, they often lack the depth of participatory governance found in some European contexts. In several European systems, participatory elements are integrated into accountability frameworks, involving stakeholders and civil society in governance processes to reinforce transparency and trust. Similarly, Sebastián et al. (2023) provide evidence from Tanzania's health governance structures, showing how community engagement mechanisms enhance accountability in service delivery. These comparative insights emphasize that accountability systems must be contextually designed, reflecting both institutional capacities and socio-cultural dynamics.

Organizational Culture and Ethics

The role of organizational culture in shaping ethical practices and accountability frameworks emerges as a consistent theme in the literature. Demir et al. (2023) demonstrate that ethical culture within local governments directly enhances ethical performance, with employees more likely to engage in ethical behavior when supported by organizational norms and leadership reinforcement. This underscores that ethical leadership and accountability mechanisms cannot function effectively in isolation; they require integration within a supportive organizational culture.

Wright et al. (2016) also provide evidence that ethical leadership significantly shapes the ethical climate of organizations, enhancing public service motivation and accountability. Adekanmbi and Ukpere (2022) further add that leaders who embody ethical principles set behavioral standards for subordinates, thereby influencing broader organizational culture. These findings collectively reinforce that leadership is both a driver and a reflection of organizational ethics, creating an environment where accountability becomes a shared responsibility rather than a top-down imposition.

Moreover, organizational culture influences not only individual behavior but also institutional resilience against corruption and misconduct. Studies suggest that in institutions with weak ethical cultures, formal accountability mechanisms often fail to prevent unethical behavior, as rules alone cannot compensate for a lack of internalized values. Conversely, in organizations where ethical culture is strong, compliance frameworks become less coercive and more facilitative, as employees are intrinsically motivated to adhere to ethical standards. This dynamic interplay between culture and leadership highlights the centrality of values-based governance in sustaining accountability.

Gender and Diversity in Leadership

The influence of gender diversity in leadership on ethical governance and accountability represents another critical area of inquiry. Research consistently demonstrates that gender-diverse leadership teams are more likely to foster ethical decision-making and transparency. Mousa et al. (2021) highlight that female leaders contribute significantly to the ethical climate of organizations, often promoting inclusivity, fairness, and accountability. Nkundabanyanga et al. (2019) similarly find that organizations with gender-diverse leadership teams exhibit heightened ethical awareness and stronger accountability practices.

Case studies further illustrate the unique contributions of women leaders in strengthening ethical governance. Okpe and Othman (2021) document how women leaders in African governance contexts play pivotal roles in advocating for transparency and combating corruption. These leaders often employ participatory strategies and community engagement to reinforce accountability, thereby enhancing public trust in government institutions. Bastani et al. (2020), in their analysis of healthcare governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that female leaders demonstrated ethical responsiveness and transparency in crisis management, contributing to higher levels of public confidence.

Global comparisons underscore the importance of integrating gender diversity into governance frameworks. In regions where women hold significant leadership positions, governance structures tend to show stronger ethical outcomes. Conversely, in contexts where leadership remains male-dominated, ethical governance often struggles against entrenched practices of corruption and exclusion. These findings highlight gender diversity not only as a matter of equity but also as a structural necessity for enhancing ethical governance and accountability.

Comparative Perspectives and Global Insights

The synthesis of findings across themes points to several global insights regarding ethical leadership, accountability, and organizational ethics. In developed nations, accountability frameworks tend to be highly formalized, focusing on compliance with established laws and regulations. These systems, while robust in structure, sometimes lack the participatory dimensions that foster genuine ethical cultures. By contrast, governance systems in many developing countries face challenges of weak institutions and systemic corruption, yet innovative practices such as community engagement in Tanzania (Sebastián et al., 2023) demonstrate the potential of localized approaches to accountability.

Cultural factors also play a significant role in shaping ethical leadership practices. In East Asia, as shown by Lee et al. (2022), ethical leadership is closely tied to Confucian traditions emphasizing respect, duty, and collective harmony. In African contexts, political instability and corruption pose significant challenges, yet localized strategies leveraging community participation and women's leadership are emerging as important tools for reinforcing accountability (Okpe & Othman, 2021). These variations indicate that while ethical leadership and accountability are universally valued, their effective implementation requires sensitivity to local traditions, institutions, and socio-political contexts.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results of this narrative review highlight the interdependence of leadership, ethics, accountability mechanisms, and organizational culture in shaping governance outcomes. Ethical leadership emerges as a catalyst for organizational integrity and accountability, supported by empirical evidence from diverse contexts. Accountability mechanisms, whether compliance-based, integrity-based, or hybrid, must be tailored to institutional and cultural realities to be effective. Organizational culture provides the foundation upon which ethical practices can flourish, reinforcing both leadership and accountability systems. Finally, gender diversity in leadership enriches governance frameworks by introducing perspectives and practices that strengthen ethical behavior and public trust. These findings underscore the need for integrated, context-sensitive strategies to advance ethical leadership and accountability within government institutions globally.

The findings presented in this review highlight the interconnectedness of ethical leadership, accountability mechanisms, organizational culture, and gender diversity in shaping governance outcomes. This discussion aims to contextualize these results within broader systemic and institutional factors, assess their policy implications, and identify methodological limitations and directions for future research.

Systemic and Institutional Factors Influencing Accountability Frameworks

One of the most salient findings across the literature is the central role of systemic and institutional factors in determining the success or failure of accountability frameworks. Political will emerges as a crucial determinant of whether ethical leadership can effectively translate into accountable governance. As Demir et al. (2023) argue, strong political commitment to ethics reforms is

indispensable in creating robust accountability systems, particularly in contexts where local governments often face resource and legitimacy challenges. The presence of determined political leadership not only signals a commitment to transparency but also provides the necessary institutional support for embedding ethics into governance structures (Okun et al., 2023).

Conversely, the absence of political will frequently undermines accountability mechanisms, leading to governance failures. Nabyonga-Orem et al. (2021) illustrate this dynamic in their study of African health systems, where insufficient political commitment to regulatory enforcement has often rendered accountability structures ineffective. Their findings indicate that even when formal regulatory frameworks exist, weak political backing results in poor implementation and limited deterrence against unethical behavior. This aligns with the broader argument that accountability systems cannot be effective in isolation but must be reinforced by political and institutional commitment.

Regulatory structures also significantly shape the operationalization of accountability. Laws, policies, and oversight institutions function as the backbone of ethical governance by establishing the standards against which behavior is judged. However, their effectiveness depends heavily on the extent to which they are enforced and internalized within organizational culture. While compliance-based frameworks can set minimum standards, their effectiveness is constrained without complementary integrity-based approaches that cultivate intrinsic commitment to ethical values (Reddick et al., 2024). This interplay demonstrates that accountability must be conceptualized as both a structural and cultural process, requiring institutional design as well as leadership engagement.

Practical and Policy Implications

The practical implications of these findings underscore the need for alignment between leadership strategies and systemic governance structures. Kim et al. (2018) emphasize that ethical leadership enhances public trust and cultivates accountability, suggesting that leadership behaviors directly influence citizen perceptions of government legitimacy. However, for such leadership to be effective, it must operate within supportive regulatory frameworks and political environments. Policymakers, therefore, need to adopt strategies that integrate ethical considerations into the very fabric of public management practices.

One promising approach is the promotion of participatory governance, which enhances accountability by involving stakeholders in decision-making. Demir et al. (2023) show that ethics infrastructures that integrate stakeholder engagement foster greater compliance and legitimacy, particularly in local government settings. This suggests that accountability frameworks should not only focus on top-down monitoring but also emphasize bottom-up participation. Moreover, Dove and Garattini (2017) highlight the importance of designing context-specific governance models that reflect local cultural values and institutional realities. In East Asian contexts, for example, ethical leadership shaped by Confucian traditions (Lee et al., 2022) must be understood differently from leadership in African countries facing systemic corruption (Okpe & Othman, 2021). Such contextualization ensures that ethical leadership and accountability strategies are not only theoretically sound but also practically relevant.

Policy implications also extend to capacity-building for leaders and public officials. Wongprasit et al. (2020) point to deficiencies in leadership training, particularly in public health governance, where insufficient managerial skills undermine ethical oversight. Investing in leadership development programs that emphasize ethical competencies, communication, and stakeholder engagement is therefore essential. These initiatives should be tailored to different governance levels, ensuring that frontline managers and senior leaders alike are equipped to uphold accountability standards.

Limitations in Research Methodologies and Conceptual Frameworks

Despite the growing body of research on ethical leadership and accountability, the literature is marked by several methodological and conceptual limitations. A significant proportion of studies rely heavily on qualitative approaches or case studies, which, while rich in contextual insights, often lack generalizability across broader governance systems (Okpe & Othman, 2021). While narrative accounts contribute valuable depth, they cannot fully capture the structural dynamics that shape ethical leadership and accountability at scale. This limitation restricts the ability of scholars to draw firm conclusions about causal relationships and hinders the development of universally applicable frameworks.

Another common limitation lies in the over-reliance on self-reported measures of ethical behavior and leadership practices. Gigol (2021) notes that self-reports are susceptible to bias, as respondents may provide socially desirable answers rather than accurate reflections of behavior. This raises concerns about the validity of findings, especially in contexts where public officials may feel pressure to present themselves as ethical actors despite systemic challenges. Future research should therefore incorporate objective measures of ethical performance, such as independent audits, citizen satisfaction surveys, and performance evaluations, to complement self-reported data.

Conceptually, the literature often treats leadership, culture, and accountability as discrete variables rather than examining their dynamic interplay. While Demir et al. (2023) acknowledge the importance of organizational culture in shaping ethical practices, many studies fail to analyze how culture interacts with systemic political and regulatory environments to produce accountability outcomes. Similarly, Wright et al. (2016) and Adekanmbi and Ukpere (2022) highlight the motivational aspects of ethical leadership, yet their studies stop short of examining how these motivations translate into institutional change. This fragmentation suggests a need for integrative frameworks that consider leadership, culture, regulation, and politics as interconnected components of ethical governance.

Comparative perspectives also remain underdeveloped in the literature. Okpe and Othman (2021) call for more context-sensitive analyses, emphasizing that ethical leadership and accountability manifest differently across political and cultural systems. For instance, while European governance systems may prioritize participatory accountability (Sebastián et al., 2023), African contexts often require strategies to combat systemic corruption and instability. Similarly, studies from East Asia reveal the influence of traditional cultural values, which are rarely considered in Western-focused research (Lee et al., 2022). Expanding comparative analyses across diverse regions would enrich

the understanding of ethical leadership and highlight best practices adaptable to different governance environments.

Future Directions for Research

Future research should address these limitations through the adoption of mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative depth with quantitative generalizability. By integrating surveys, case studies, and longitudinal designs, scholars can develop a more comprehensive understanding of how ethical leadership and accountability interact over time and across contexts. In particular, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the sustainability of accountability reforms and the long-term effects of leadership interventions.

Another promising avenue is the exploration of frontline perspectives in governance research. Much of the literature privileges the views of senior leaders or institutional frameworks, overlooking the experiences of employees who encounter ethical dilemmas in their daily work. Including these perspectives could reveal the practical challenges of operationalizing accountability and highlight bottom-up strategies for strengthening ethics in governance.

Additionally, future studies should investigate the role of digital technologies in shaping accountability frameworks. As governments increasingly adopt digital tools for service delivery and transparency, new ethical dilemmas and opportunities emerge. Research into how technology influences ethical leadership and accountability could provide critical insights for contemporary governance reform. Finally, incorporating intersectional perspectives, such as the combined effects of gender, culture, and institutional design, would enrich the literature by highlighting how diverse identities and contexts shape ethical governance outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review has demonstrated that ethical leadership is a cornerstone of integrity and accountability in government institutions. Evidence from multiple contexts confirms that leaders who model ethical values and behaviors inspire organizational cultures that prioritize transparency, fairness, and public trust (Demir et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2016). Accountability mechanisms, whether compliance-based, integrity-driven, or hybrid, are most effective when reinforced by political will, robust regulatory structures, and participatory governance practices (Reddick et al., 2024; Sebastián et al., 2023). Organizational culture further shapes how ethics and accountability are internalized, with ethical climates fostering resilience against corruption and misconduct. Gender diversity in leadership adds an important dimension, with female leaders consistently associated with greater inclusivity, transparency, and community engagement (Mousa et al., 2021; Bastani et al., 2020). These findings collectively underscore the urgent need to strengthen ethical governance in light of systemic corruption, weak oversight, and declining public trust.

The discussion has emphasized that political will, institutional design, and cultural context are decisive in shaping ethical outcomes. Policies should therefore focus on integrating ethical leadership into governance strategies, investing in leadership training, and embedding participatory mechanisms that enhance accountability across levels of government. Addressing gaps in research

requires the adoption of mixed-method approaches, longitudinal analyses, and the inclusion of frontline perspectives. Future studies should also examine how digital tools and intersectional dynamics influence accountability frameworks. Ultimately, ethical leadership, accountability mechanisms, organizational culture, and gender diversity must be integrated as core strategies for building resilient governance systems capable of restoring trust and legitimacy.

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