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Designing an Ethical Leadership Model for Managers of Educational Organizations (Case Study: Educational Organizations in Tehran Province)

ABSTRACT

Today, ethical leadership in organizations has received considerable attention and is rapidly expanding because the moral failures of managers across organizations, environments, and sectors have drawn attention to the importance of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership can be considered a point of convergence between spiritual leadership and transformational leadership. What is significant in ethical leadership is that ethical leaders think about the outcomes, consequences, shortcomings, and benefits of the decisions they make in the long term. In every organization, ethical leaders are the center and pivot of high moral standards and act in alignment with these standards to guide their conduct. Ethical leaders also make the behavioral boundaries within the organization clear and explicit to employees. The main objective of the present research was to design a desirable ethical leadership model for managers of educational organizations in Iran. Accordingly, this study employed a qualitative approach based on the grounded theory method. Within this method, the systematic approach (Straussian approach) was used to derive the paradigm model. In the quantitative phase, the current state of ethical leadership was examined. This research was applied in purpose and used an exploratory mixed-method design (combining qualitative and quantitative approaches). In the quantitative phase, because the current situation was assessed, a descriptive survey method was used, while in the qualitative phase, the study explored and examined concepts and categories related to the dimensions of the desirable ethical leadership model for managers of Iranian educational organizations using MAXQDA software. The statistical population consisted of managers of educational organizations in Tehran. Using Cochran's formula, a sample of 252 managers was selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods. The results of the model fit analysis using AMOS and PLS software indicated that the proposed structural model had a good fit. Furthermore, it was found that among the conditional factors, only contextual and intervening factors had a significant direct effect on interactive factors, while causal factors did not have a significant effect on interactive factors. Additionally, the indirect effect of causal factors on consequential factors was not significant, but the indirect effect of intervening and contextual factors on consequential factors was significant.

Keywords: Ethics, Leadership, Ethical Leadership, Managers of Educational Organizations

Introduction

Ethical leadership has emerged as one of the most critical dimensions of effective governance in contemporary organizations, particularly within educational settings where human development and value transmission are central objectives. The failure of leaders to uphold moral standards has historically resulted in organizational mistrust, reduced employee commitment, and weakened learning environments [1, 2]. In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined

how ethical leadership fosters integrity, justice, and responsible decision-making, enabling managers to navigate complex organizational challenges and align institutional actions with socially accepted values [3, 4]. Educational organizations, as spaces where ethical formation intersects with performance and innovation, demand leadership models that integrate moral principles into decision-making and interpersonal relationships [5, 6].

The conceptual basis of ethical leadership has evolved through interdisciplinary research linking psychology, management, and educational sciences. Ethical leadership is defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers via communication, reinforcement, and decision-making [1, 7]. This perspective connects ethical leadership with broader frameworks such as transformational and spiritual leadership, both of which emphasize moral influence and meaningful engagement [8, 9]. Research also indicates that ethical leadership mediates relationships between leader behaviors and key organizational outcomes such as employee trust, knowledge sharing, and reduced resistance to change [2, 10].

Educational organizations require ethical leadership because their mission inherently involves shaping future citizens and cultivating intellectual and moral capacity [11, 12]. Leadership in schools and universities goes beyond administrative oversight and includes moral guidance, fairness, and the creation of climates conducive to trust and collaboration [13, 14]. When ethical leadership is present, employees demonstrate greater organizational citizenship behaviors, share knowledge openly, and commit to continuous improvement [15, 16]. Conversely, the absence of ethical guidance can result in knowledge hiding, low morale, and cynicism toward institutional goals [12, 17].

Linking ethical leadership and organizational performance is especially significant in the context of educational reform. Several studies have shown that ethical leaders influence the academic performance of teachers and students by modeling fairness and encouraging professional ethics [5, 6]. Ethical leaders also support faculty growth and mitigate burnout by fostering climates of respect and purpose [18, 19]. They strengthen psychological safety, allowing staff and students to voice concerns and engage in constructive problem-solving [4, 20]. This is particularly relevant in higher education institutions facing rapid transformation and competition [8].

The role of contextual and cultural dynamics has been emphasized in recent scholarship. Ethical leadership does not emerge in a vacuum; it is shaped by organizational culture, social expectations, and governance systems [21, 22]. In educational systems where bureaucratic control or rigid hierarchies dominate, leaders may struggle to practice transparency and empowerment [10, 17]. Yet when organizations intentionally create ethical climates—characterized by fairness, accountability, and participatory decision-making—they support leaders in implementing moral values [1, 2]. Moreover, studies highlight the importance of aligning ethical leadership models with local cultural and spiritual values, including religious and philosophical traditions that emphasize service, humility, and respect [11, 23].

Rapid technological change has also introduced new ethical challenges, including data privacy, fairness in digital learning, and artificial intelligence–driven decision-making [24, 25]. Modern leaders in education must navigate digital transformation responsibly while sustaining human dignity and trust. Ethical frameworks can guide technology adoption and mitigate risks associated with surveillance, academic dishonesty, or exclusion [4, 20]. In addition, ethical leadership plays a mediating role in promoting sustainable governance and environmental, social, and corporate responsibility (ESG) practices within public educational institutions [21].

Leadership development and training are recognized as key mechanisms for cultivating ethical capabilities. Research shows that structured programs in moral reasoning, organizational justice, and social responsibility strengthen leaders' ethical awareness and decision-making [16, 26]. Educational systems that integrate ethical training into leadership development help create resilient, innovative, and trustworthy organizations [8, 15]. Such efforts also foster employees' organizational commitment, intrinsic motivation, and willingness to perform discretionary tasks that benefit the community [18, 23].

While ethical leadership's impact is increasingly documented, the need for contextually validated models remains strong. Many frameworks have been developed in Western contexts, yet their assumptions may not fully align with the cultural, social, and regulatory realities of countries like Iran [5, 6]. Studies highlight that Islamic ethical principles, collective organizational cultures, and administrative systems shape leadership expectations in unique ways [11, 22]. Therefore, building an indigenous, evidence-based ethical leadership model is crucial to advancing educational excellence and reform in Iranian institutions [10, 12].

Furthermore, empirical findings indicate that ethical leadership enhances organizational adaptability and creativity by fostering trust and knowledge sharing [2, 8]. In times of uncertainty, such as policy reform or crises, leaders who communicate with integrity and empower staff help reduce resistance to change and encourage proactive problem solving [3, 4]. These competencies are particularly critical for educational organizations striving to remain responsive and innovative in rapidly shifting social and technological landscapes [20, 24].

Recent studies also show a direct connection between ethical leadership and employee well-being. Ethical leaders reduce emotional exhaustion and burnout by creating fairness, voice, and psychological safety [18, 25]. This psychological support contributes to better job satisfaction and lower turnover, essential for stable educational institutions [15, 16]. Ethical leadership is thus not merely a moral imperative but also a practical strategy for sustaining employee engagement and organizational vitality.

The convergence of these insights underscores an urgent need for a context-specific ethical leadership model for educational organizations in Iran. Such a model must integrate universal ethical principles with local cultural and spiritual values, account for organizational and systemic constraints, and respond to emerging global challenges such as digitalization and sustainability [21, 24]. By designing a framework that addresses causal, contextual, and intervening conditions and clarifies interactive strategies and consequences, scholars can equip educational leaders with actionable tools to cultivate integrity-driven, innovative, and adaptive institutions [6, 10].

Given these gaps, the present study aims to design and validate a desirable ethical leadership model tailored for managers of Iranian educational organizations.

Methodology

The main objective of the present research was to design a desirable ethical leadership model for managers of educational organizations in Iran. Accordingly, the study was conducted within a qualitative framework based on the grounded theory approach. Within this approach, the systematic (Straussian) method was employed to achieve the paradigm model. The research is applied in nature. Furthermore, since the study evaluates the appropriateness of the designed and proposed

model, contributes to the development of prior theories and models in the field, and expands the existing knowledge on the subject under investigation, it can also be classified as developmental research.

Overall, the present study is applied in purpose and uses an exploratory mixed-method design (a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods). In the quantitative phase, the current situation was examined using a descriptive survey method, while in the qualitative phase, concepts and categories related to the dimensions of the desirable ethical leadership model for managers of Iranian educational organizations were explored and analyzed.

The execution of this study consisted of two sections. In the qualitative section, the procedure began with interviews conducted with the qualitative sample. Then, based on the data obtained from the interviews, a questionnaire was developed, and standardized questionnaires were also prepared and distributed to participants in the quantitative phase.

In the first stage of the research, which included interviews, the statistical population comprised experts familiar with the research topic (university professors specializing in educational management, social sciences, and psychology, as well as prominent managers knowledgeable about educational and ethical-administrative systems in Iranian educational organizations).

The sampling method for this population was purposive and snowball sampling. Using this approach, 21 participants were selected as the sample. In qualitative research, snowball sampling allows one participant to introduce the researcher to other potential participants. Unlike quantitative studies, purposive sampling in grounded theory research cannot be fully predetermined before data collection and theory development. Therefore, the qualitative sampling approach used in this study was theoretical sampling, which involves the purposive selection of key informants based on their specific knowledge of the research subject.

Theoretical sampling requires collecting data based on categories until theory saturation is reached. In this study, sampling from experts continued until the exploration and analysis reached theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation occurred when the researcher, after initial findings, continued collecting data to clarify and strengthen the relationships between main and subcategories. The process ended when no new data emerged from participants.

The statistical population for the quantitative phase consisted of managers of educational organizations in Tehran, totaling approximately 800 individuals. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, resulting in 252 participants. Cluster random sampling was employed: educational organizations were considered clusters, and managers within them were randomly selected.

Mixed-method research requires collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. Based on the chosen mixed-method strategy, data collection was organized into two parts: designing the model qualitatively and testing the model quantitatively.

In the qualitative section, theoretical coding (derived from grounded theory) was used for data analysis. Data were analyzed separately. Specifically, qualitative data were examined through open, axial, and selective coding, applying the necessary steps for each stage to ultimately develop a theory explaining the organizational culture model. After developing the questionnaire based on the derived theory, the model was validated through structural equation modeling. The validated questionnaire was then distributed, and quantitative data were collected. Confirmatory factor analysis was applied to verify the final model.

Data analysis in the qualitative phase followed the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a qualitative method used to identify the underlying categories of the studied phenomenon. Through analyzing and coding interview transcripts,

a paradigm model was developed. Grounded theory generates theory inductively from data, explaining processes, actions, or interactions at a broader level. Most researchers use the Strauss and Corbin methodology for grounded theory analysis. This theory-building approach involves three types of coding: open, axial, and selective, each described below.

In the quantitative phase, the relationships between variables and the conceptual model were examined using PLS software. Additionally, T-tests were performed to analyze the variables.

In the qualitative phase, interviews were collected based on the research questions and categorized through three types of coding:

- **Open Coding**
- **Axial Coding**
- **Selective Coding**

The grounded theory coding process is as follows:

- **Open Coding:** Coding is the process of analyzing data by breaking it into discrete parts, comparing, naming, conceptualizing, and categorizing. During open coding, data are divided into distinct segments to identify similarities and differences.
- **Axial Coding:** Axial coding is the second stage of grounded theory analysis, aimed at establishing relationships among categories created during open coding. It is called “axial” because coding revolves around a central category. The researcher selects one core category, investigates it as the central phenomenon, and identifies how other categories relate to it.
- **Selective Coding:** Selective coding focuses on the central phenomenon or main idea that integrates all categories. It answers the question, “What do the data indicate?” The core category should be abstract enough to relate to all other key categories and form the conceptual foundation of the emerging theory.

Following coding, demographic information of the quantitative sample was reported, followed by the descriptive analysis of the research variables identified from the qualitative phase. The normality of the research variables was then tested using SmartPLS software.

Findings and Results

In the present study, based on the analysis performed on the interview transcripts, a total of 732 concepts (open codes) were extracted, as shown in the table below.

Table 1

Frequency of Categories

Final Categories	Similar and Related Categories	Question
23	151	First interview question
15	170	Second interview question
5	189	Third interview question
13	851	Fourth interview question
4	137	Fifth interview question
60	732	Total

An example of the open coding of the interview data is shown below.

The open coding of data obtained from the interviews was conducted with great precision and attention to detail to ensure that the participants' statements were fully analyzed and that all their perspectives were incorporated.

Table 2

Concepts Extraction

Concepts	Data
Protecting the privacy of stakeholders and clients; prophetic methods; motivational systems; leader's willpower-centered approach; ethical climate; focus on human aspects; education and training-centered approach	Another group of founders of moral movements and ethical social organizations can be identified as the great prophets of God, because throughout history, they have presented rules and ethical principles to train and develop humans, purifying minds and cleansing hearts to remove external pollution and social hostility, and to lead people toward the ideal of moral excellence. As the Prophet of Islam stated: "Indeed, I was sent to perfect noble morals." Therefore, one of the methods that can foster ethical leadership in educational organizations is paying attention to the characteristics and methods of divine prophets, such as smiling, good temperament, trustworthiness, honesty, reliability, respect for others, humility, accountability, acceptance of criticism, guidance and problem solving, attention to others, prioritizing others over oneself, being a role model, appropriate appearance, politeness, honoring clients, and so on. Motivational conditions should exist in the organization; counseling and encouragement should prevail in the educational organization. Conditions should be created in which correct actions are approved and guided. Ethical leaders in educational organizations create ideas and innovation. Leaders should listen to individuals in the organization. Opportunities should be provided for individuals to plan within the organization. The leader of an educational organization should rely on their own character and determination. The organizational climate should encourage mutual respect among members. Management is more commonly applied in social and economic organizations (non-educational), while leadership is more relevant to educational and training organizations. Human aspects are significantly more emphasized in educational and social organizations due to their nature compared to economic or other organizations. Conditions should ensure that the most important issue in an educational organization remains teaching and training.

Table 3

Paradigm Model Components for the Ethical Leadership Model in Educational Organizations

Causal (Research Question 1)	Intervening (Research Question 2)	Contextual (Research Question 3)	Interactive (Research Question 4)	Consequential (Research Question 5)
Integrity, moral health foundation, ethical principles, human dignity, service orientation, organizational performance improvement, strengthening identity and ethical awareness, development of ethical interactions, spirituality, organizational justice, transparency and accountability, managerial charisma, empathy and respect, resolving ethical conflicts	Barriers: centralization, weakness of moral health, organizational resistance, low risk-taking, excessive bureaucracy, personal and organizational indifference Facilitators: organizational support for ethics, empowerment, ethical training, transparency, managerial support, skill development, team collaboration	Organizational environment and culture, structural and ethical conditions, personal conditions	Internal: individual, cognitive, emotional, structural External: economic, geographical, legal, political, technological, cultural, social	Ethical, Professional, Organizational, Personal

Research Question 1 — Causal Conditions: The first question explored the causal conditions influencing ethical leadership among managers of educational organizations. The study identified foundational elements such as integrity and moral health, adherence to ethical principles, respect for human dignity, and a strong service orientation. Additional causal drivers included improving organizational performance, strengthening ethical identity and awareness, fostering ethical interactions, and promoting spirituality and organizational justice. Transparency and accountability, managerial charisma, empathy, respect, and the ability to resolve ethical conflicts were also recognized as core causal factors that initiate the emergence of ethical leadership practices.

Research Question 2 — Intervening Conditions: The second question examined intervening conditions that either hinder or facilitate ethical leadership. On the hindering side, the study found obstacles such as excessive centralization, weakness in moral health, organizational resistance, low risk-taking culture, excessive bureaucracy, and personal or organizational indifference toward ethical concerns. Conversely, facilitators included organizational support for ethics, empowerment of managers and staff, ethical training programs, transparent practices, managerial backing, skill development, and

collaboration within teams. These intervening conditions shape how causal elements translate into actual leadership behaviors.

Research Question 3 — Contextual Conditions: The third question analyzed the broader contextual conditions within which ethical leadership develops. Findings showed that organizational environment and culture, structural and ethical conditions, and personal characteristics of leaders and staff create the context in which ethical leadership emerges. Factors such as institutional norms, administrative frameworks, and personal moral values influence the ability of managers to integrate and sustain ethical leadership practices in educational organizations.

Research Question 4 — Interactive Strategies: The fourth question focused on the interactive strategies used to enact ethical leadership in response to causal and contextual conditions. These strategies were categorized as internal—covering individual, cognitive, emotional, and structural aspects—and external, which included economic, geographical, legal, political, technological, cultural, and social influences. Managers apply these strategies to align ethical principles with organizational demands and environmental realities, creating a dynamic interplay between personal moral conduct and external pressures.

Research Question 5 — Consequences: The fifth question addressed the consequences of implementing ethical leadership in educational organizations. The study demonstrated that ethical leadership leads to a range of positive outcomes at different levels: ethical outcomes such as improved moral climate and fair decision-making; professional outcomes including enhanced job commitment and competence; organizational outcomes such as better culture, trust, and performance; and personal outcomes like increased integrity and self-awareness among managers and employees. These consequences confirm the transformative potential of ethical leadership when systematically supported by the identified conditions and strategies.

In this section, the demographic information of the statistical sample is first presented.

Table 4

Demographic Findings

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	101	40.7%
Male	144	58.1%
Not reported	3	1.2%
Total	248	100%

Table 5

Description of the Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Conditional Factors (Causal)	110.10	10.03	45.00	120.00
Conditional Factors (Intervening)	63.65	5.93	42.00	70.00
Conditional Factors (Contextual)	22.68	2.26	15.00	25.00
Interactive Factors	58.36	6.60	36.00	65.00
Consequential Factors	18.21	2.22	5.00	20.00

The above table shows that the causal factors have a mean of 110.10. This mean indicates that respondents agree with the presence of causal conditions for the emergence of ethical leadership in educational organizations. The intervening factors have a mean of 63.65, indicating agreement with the presence of intervening conditions. The contextual factors have a mean of 22.68, showing that respondents agree with the presence of contextual conditions for the emergence of ethical leadership. The interactive factors have a mean of 58.36, indicating that respondents agree with the creation of interactive

factors. The consequential factors have a mean of 18.21, indicating agreement with the stated outcomes of ethical leadership (such as increased calmness and security, positive attitudes toward the job, and similar effects).

Table 6

Testing the Normality of the Research Variables

Variable	Statistic	Significance Level	Result
Conditional Factors (Causal)	0.16	0.000	Non-normal
Conditional Factors (Intervening)	0.14	0.000	Non-normal
Conditional Factors (Contextual)	0.16	0.000	Non-normal
Interactive Factors	0.16	0.000	Non-normal

The above table shows that all the research variables are non-normal. Therefore, SmartPLS software was used for analyzing the structural model. The structural model and its fit indices are presented below.

Table 7

Model Fit

Index	Model Value
Root Mean Square Residual (RMSR)	0.049
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.97

The Root Mean Square Residual (RMSR) indicates the square root of the average squared residuals. A value below 0.05 is considered acceptable. The Normed Fit Index (NFI), also known as the Bentler-Bonett Index, is acceptable for values above 0.90 and indicates good model fit.

Table 8

Standardized Coefficients and t-Statistics in the Structural Model

Relationship	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	Significance Level
Contextual Factors → Interactive Factors	0.35	0.11	3.15	0.002
Causal Factors → Interactive Factors	0.23	0.12	1.76	0.08
Intervening Factors → Interactive Factors	0.35	0.08	4.20	0.000
Interactive Factors → Consequential Factors	0.75	0.04	21.04	0.000

The path coefficient represents the existence and intensity of a linear causal relationship between two latent variables, ranging from -1 to $+1$. A value of zero indicates no linear causal relationship. In the present study, the strongest coefficient belongs to the relationship between interactive factors and consequential factors (0.75). Positive coefficients indicate that an increase in one variable leads to an increase in the other. All path coefficients in this study are positive. The results show that among conditional factors, only contextual and intervening factors have a significant direct effect on interactive factors ($p < .01$), while causal factors do not ($p > .05$). Additionally, interactive factors have a significant direct effect on consequential factors ($p < .01$).

Table 9

Standardized Coefficients and t-Statistics for Indirect Relationships

Indirect Relationship	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	Significance Level
Causal → Interactive → Consequential	0.16	0.09	1.71	0.09
Intervening → Interactive → Consequential	0.26	0.06	3.98	0.000
Contextual → Interactive → Consequential	0.26	0.06	3.98	0.000

The path coefficient between causal and consequential factors, considering the mediating role of interactive factors, is 0.16; this indirect effect is not significant ($p > .05$). The path coefficients between intervening and contextual factors and consequential factors, considering the mediation of interactive factors, are 0.26 and 0.26, respectively, and these indirect effects are significant ($p < .01$).

Figure 1

Model with Beta Values

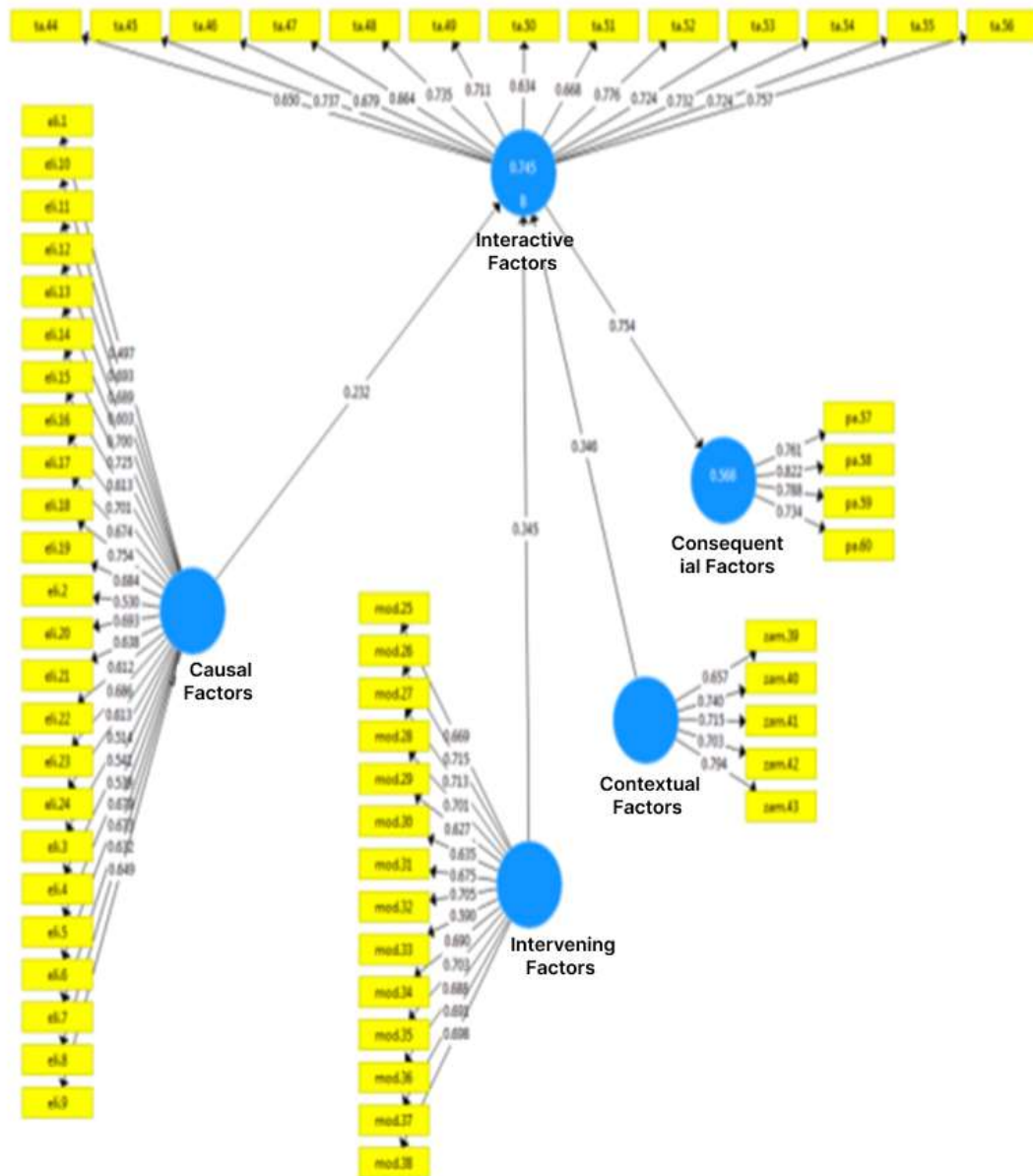
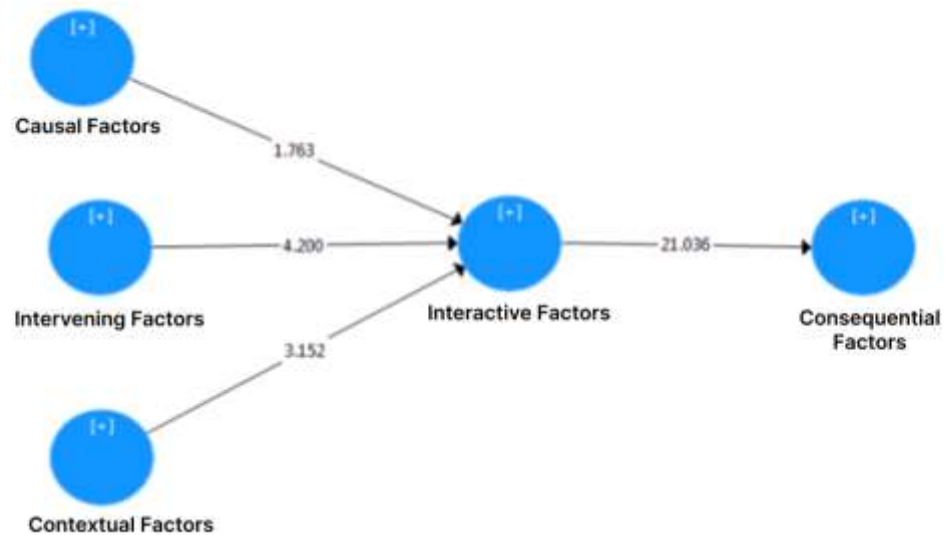


Figure 2*Model with T-Values*

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide an integrated and evidence-based model of ethical leadership tailored for managers of educational organizations. The structural analysis revealed that contextual and intervening conditions play a decisive role in shaping interactive factors, which in turn strongly predict the consequential outcomes of ethical leadership. Specifically, while contextual and intervening factors showed significant direct effects on interactive factors, causal factors alone did not demonstrate a significant direct relationship. Furthermore, interactive factors exhibited the strongest direct effect on consequential outcomes such as improved organizational climate, professional growth, and personal moral development. These results show that ethical leadership in educational settings is not only a matter of personal integrity but is deeply embedded in the surrounding organizational and social environment [2, 10].

One of the key findings is that contextual factors, including organizational culture, ethical climate, and personal moral orientation, directly influence interactive processes that enable ethical leadership to be practiced and sustained. This aligns with the assertion that leadership cannot exist in isolation but is situated within a broader cultural and structural framework [21, 22]. Previous research demonstrates that educational institutions with strong value systems and ethical governance structures provide fertile ground for leaders to enact fairness, transparency, and justice [26, 27]. Similarly, when organizational systems reward ethical conduct and reinforce moral standards, leaders feel empowered to make decisions that promote human dignity and long-term organizational health [1, 23].

Another significant outcome is the strong role of intervening conditions, particularly empowerment, ethical training, and managerial support, in shaping interactive factors. These findings corroborate studies indicating that organizational learning and empowerment mediate the effects of leadership ethics on behavior [10, 17]. Providing leaders and staff with tools such as moral reasoning workshops, structured ethical guidelines, and participatory decision-making opportunities helps translate

values into action [8, 16]. When educational organizations invest in these enabling mechanisms, ethical ideals are more likely to transform into consistent behavioral norms and strategic initiatives [11, 25].

The results also show that causal factors—such as integrity, justice orientation, and spirituality—while foundational, do not directly trigger interactive processes without the presence of supportive context and interventions. This complements the understanding that individual moral traits, although essential, require an enabling environment to be operationalized [2, 12]. For example, even when a principal values honesty and respect, bureaucratic constraints or lack of organizational support may suppress the expression of ethical leadership [5, 14]. Our findings emphasize that ethical leadership development must move beyond personal virtue to consider systemic reinforcements and learning opportunities.

The strong path from interactive factors to consequential outcomes underscores the transformative potential of ethical leadership once interactive mechanisms—such as moral communication, participatory decision-making, and fair performance evaluation—are activated. This observation aligns with evidence that ethical leaders inspire organizational citizenship behavior, reduce turnover intentions, and increase job satisfaction [4, 15]. Moreover, by cultivating trust and mutual respect, ethical leaders can mitigate resistance to change and promote adaptability, both critical for educational systems facing constant reform [2, 3].

Our study further confirms that ethical leadership produces wide-ranging outcomes at multiple levels. At the organizational level, it improves culture, transparency, and performance [1, 27]. At the professional level, it strengthens teachers' moral commitment and fosters professional growth [5, 6]. At the personal level, it supports integrity, self-reflection, and psychological well-being [18, 25]. These findings resonate with prior research showing that ethical leaders create psychologically safe climates that reduce emotional exhaustion and encourage positive identity development [18, 23].

A novel insight from our results is the importance of cultural adaptation in ethical leadership frameworks. Iranian educational organizations operate within cultural systems where spiritual values and community orientation are central [11, 22]. Western-based leadership models often focus heavily on individual autonomy and formal governance but may underrepresent collective responsibility and religious ethical codes. Our model integrates these dimensions, reflecting local traditions of service, humility, and moral accountability while remaining aligned with global ethical leadership constructs [21, 24].

Additionally, the findings contribute to contemporary debates on ethical leadership in digital and rapidly changing environments. The integration of ethical considerations with technological advancements, such as AI-based decision-making in education, requires leaders to navigate privacy, fairness, and monitoring dilemmas [4, 24]. Our results suggest that interactive processes—including transparent communication and stakeholder participation—can help resolve these challenges by balancing innovation with human-centered ethics. This reinforces recent work on sustaining trust in technology-driven organizations [20, 25].

Finally, the study's results strengthen the argument that ethical leadership is a strategic capability essential for resilience and sustainability in education. By embedding moral reasoning into organizational structures, leaders can enhance adaptability during reforms and crises [2, 3]. As public expectations for fairness and accountability in schools and universities increase, ethical leadership provides a framework for governance that aligns with both societal values and organizational performance demands [8, 21].

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a single national context (Iran) and focused on educational organizations; therefore, its cultural specificity may limit the direct generalizability of the model to other countries or sectors. Second, the qualitative phase, while rigorous, relied on expert interviews and may have been influenced by subjective perceptions or professional biases. Third, although the quantitative phase employed robust structural equation modeling, cross-sectional data cannot establish causal relationships over time. Finally, self-reported responses from managers may introduce social desirability bias, potentially leading to an overestimation of ethical behavior.

Future studies should examine the proposed ethical leadership model in diverse cultural and organizational contexts to test its adaptability and universality. Longitudinal research could explore how ethical leadership evolves and influences organizational change and employee outcomes over time. Additional variables, such as digital ethics competence, sustainability orientation, and psychological safety, could be integrated into the model to address emerging challenges in educational systems. Finally, comparative studies between educational and non-educational sectors could help identify sector-specific ethical leadership drivers and barriers.

Educational policymakers and organizational leaders should focus on building ethical infrastructures that support leaders beyond individual moral traits. This includes developing clear ethical guidelines, integrating ethics training into leadership development programs, and creating systems that reward transparency and fairness. Organizational culture should be deliberately shaped to promote trust, open communication, and respect. Moreover, leaders should be equipped with strategies to manage ethical dilemmas associated with technology adoption and digital transformation while sustaining human-centered values. These efforts can help ensure that ethical leadership becomes a sustainable driver of organizational excellence and positive educational outcomes.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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