

Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 11 February 2026
Revised 26 March 2026
Accepted 31 May 2026
Published online 01 September 2026

Seyyed Mohammad Reza. Parhizkar Azbari¹, Serajedin. Mohebi^{2*}, Mashalah. Valikhani Dehaghani³, Zahra. Saeidi Mobarakeh⁴

- 1 Department of Public Administration, KI.C., Islamic Azad University, Kish, Iran
- 2 Department of Management, Shi.C., Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran
- 3 Department of Management, ST.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
- 4 Department of Industrial Engineering, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Corresponding author email address:
mohebi.abcd@gmail.com

How to cite this article:

Parhizkar Azbari, S. M. R., Mohebi, S., Valikhani Dehaghani, M., & Saeidi Mobarakeh, Z. (2026). Presenting a Structural Model for Explaining Organizational Health: Transitioning from Organizational Terrorism Syndrome with an Emphasis on Ethical Leadership (Case Study: Mostazafan Foundation). *Future of Work and Digital Management Journal*, 4(5), 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.61838/fwdmj.257>



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Presenting a Structural Model for Explaining Organizational Health: Transitioning from Organizational Terrorism Syndrome with an Emphasis on Ethical Leadership (Case Study: Mostazafan Foundation)

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to develop a structural model for explaining organizational health through transitioning from organizational terrorism syndrome with an emphasis on ethical leadership within the Mostazafan Foundation. This study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach (qualitative–quantitative) with a sequential exploratory design. In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 senior managers of the Mostazafan Foundation, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Based on the findings, 12 major themes related to organizational terrorism syndrome were identified, including fear-based governance, suppression of dissenting voices, a culture of silence, corruption, weakening of meritocracy, and erosion of human capital, and an initial model was subsequently developed. In the quantitative phase, the resulting model was tested using a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 38 items administered to 203 employees of the Mostazafan Foundation. Quantitative data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The findings indicated that the proposed model demonstrated an acceptable fit. Path analysis revealed significant causal relationships among the model variables. The development of ethical leadership capabilities, as the cornerstone of the model, had a strong and direct effect on the establishment of transparent governance systems, the creation of psychological safety, and the institutionalization of meritocracy. These mediating variables, in turn, contributed to strengthening social capital and trust, supporting critical voice, enhancing organizational resilience, and increasing human and organizational capital. Ultimately, the three pathways of enhancing organizational resilience, increasing human capital, and strengthening social capital and trust directly and significantly contributed to weakening organizational terrorism syndrome. Model fit indices (e.g., SRMR = 0.081) confirmed the satisfactory quality of the model. Consequently, the final research model demonstrates that overcoming organizational terrorism syndrome is a systematic, multilayered, and sequential process whose core foundation lies in leadership transformation and the establishment of ethical and transparent governance. This model can serve as a practical roadmap for managers, consultants, and policymakers in identifying, preventing, and confronting this destructive phenomenon in Iranian organizations, particularly large and complex institutions. The findings emphasize the necessity of adopting an integrated and reinforcing approach in which leadership, structural, procedural, and cultural reforms are pursued simultaneously and in alignment.

Keywords: Exit Model, Syndrome, Organizational Terrorism, Mostazafan Foundation

Introduction

Organizational health has emerged as one of the most important determinants of sustainability, effectiveness, and long-term competitiveness in contemporary organizations. In highly dynamic and uncertain environments, organizations are

increasingly confronted with internal threats that undermine employee commitment, institutional trust, organizational learning, and adaptive capacity. Among these threats, organizational syndromes have attracted significant scholarly attention due to their destructive influence on organizational behavior, decision-making processes, and institutional legitimacy [1, 2]. Organizational syndromes refer to pathological and dysfunctional patterns that gradually become embedded in organizational structures, cultures, and managerial practices, eventually reducing organizational vitality and weakening institutional performance [3, 4]. Such syndromes may emerge in different forms, including burnout, organizational silence, impostor syndrome, organizational numbness, counter-citizenship behavior, organizational Stockholm syndrome, and fear-based organizational climates [5-7].

In recent years, the concept of organizational terrorism has increasingly been used metaphorically to describe highly destructive managerial and organizational environments characterized by fear, intimidation, suppression of dissent, ethical erosion, and systematic abuse of power. Organizational terrorism does not merely refer to interpersonal hostility or authoritarian management; rather, it denotes a systemic pattern in which employees are psychologically controlled through fear, silence, exclusion, insecurity, and coercive governance structures [8]. In such environments, employees gradually lose their psychological safety, autonomy, and willingness to express critical opinions, ultimately resulting in weakened organizational resilience and deteriorating institutional effectiveness. Organizational terrorism creates conditions in which organizational members prioritize survival over creativity, conformity over innovation, and silence over constructive participation [9, 10].

The emergence of fear-based organizational climates has profound implications for employee behavior and organizational outcomes. According to organizational silence theory, when employees perceive that expressing concerns or criticisms may result in punishment, marginalization, or career threats, they intentionally withhold valuable information and refrain from participating in organizational dialogue [9]. This culture of silence gradually institutionalizes passivity and reduces collective problem-solving capacity. Similarly, Schein emphasized that organizational culture strongly shapes patterns of communication, leadership, trust, and ethical conduct, and dysfunctional cultures can reproduce fear and silence across organizational levels [11]. In organizations suffering from organizational terrorism syndrome, silence becomes normalized, ethical boundaries become blurred, and organizational learning processes deteriorate.

Organizational terrorism is also closely associated with the erosion of social capital and institutional trust. Trust constitutes one of the foundational elements of organizational health because it facilitates cooperation, commitment, knowledge sharing, and collective resilience. However, environments characterized by intimidation and coercive leadership weaken interpersonal trust and create fragmented organizational relationships [12]. In such conditions, employees may develop defensive coping mechanisms, emotional detachment, and organizational cynicism, all of which contribute to declining performance and reduced institutional legitimacy. Research has demonstrated that fear-driven management systems significantly reduce employee engagement and organizational commitment while increasing turnover intentions and emotional exhaustion [5, 13].

Another critical consequence of organizational terrorism is the weakening of meritocracy and professional competence within organizations. Fear-oriented leadership systems often prioritize obedience and loyalty over competence and expertise, resulting in ineffective decision-making and strategic stagnation. Arar et al. introduced the concept of “Achilles’s Tendon Syndrome” to explain how structural weaknesses within organizations can create chronic vulnerability and reduce adaptive

capacity [14]. Similarly, Khamashaya et al. conceptualized organizational numbness as a condition in which employees become emotionally and cognitively disengaged due to persistent exposure to dysfunctional organizational conditions [6]. These phenomena collectively contribute to declining organizational effectiveness and weakened institutional sustainability.

Within the Iranian organizational context, the issue of organizational syndromes has gained increasing importance due to structural complexities, bureaucratic challenges, centralized governance, and cultural barriers to transparency and accountability. Several Iranian studies have highlighted the prevalence of organizational silence, counterproductive organizational behaviors, lack of transparency, and dysfunctional administrative cultures in public and semi-public institutions [1, 15]. Yadollahi and Yadollahi emphasized that organizational syndromes not only affect employee well-being but also generate broader institutional consequences such as reduced productivity, weakened trust, and deteriorating organizational legitimacy [2]. Likewise, Momeni and Etemadinia identified organizational syndromes as major barriers to organizational citizenship behavior and institutional development [4].

The Mostazafan Foundation represents one of the largest and most complex economic and social institutions in Iran. Due to its broad organizational structure, multidimensional activities, and strategic importance, organizational health within this institution carries significant managerial and social implications. Previous studies conducted within the Mostazafan Foundation have demonstrated that organizational excellence and institutional effectiveness depend heavily on transparency, ethical governance, and managerial accountability [16]. However, large organizations with complex hierarchical structures may also become vulnerable to dysfunctional managerial practices, organizational silence, and fear-based governance if effective ethical leadership mechanisms are absent.

Ethical leadership has increasingly been recognized as one of the most effective approaches for promoting organizational health, strengthening institutional trust, and reducing destructive organizational behaviors. Ethical leaders create environments characterized by fairness, transparency, accountability, and respect for human dignity. Such leaders not only influence employee behavior through moral modeling but also establish organizational systems that support psychological safety, participation, and open communication [17, 18]. Ethical leadership plays a crucial role in reducing organizational fear because it encourages dialogue, critical thinking, and constructive feedback. Employees working under ethical leadership are more likely to express concerns, share innovative ideas, and engage in collaborative problem-solving processes.

Recent research has increasingly linked ethical leadership to organizational commitment, organizational climate, and institutional sustainability. Rabbi et al. demonstrated that ethical leadership positively influences affective organizational commitment through the mediating role of ethical climate [19]. Similarly, Rihal argued that ethical leadership contributes to sustainable organizational performance by fostering ethical organizational identity and culture [20]. Stansberry Beard also emphasized that ethical decision-making frameworks enhance organizational engagement, transparency, and institutional trust by supporting sensemaking and participatory leadership processes [21]. Collectively, these studies suggest that ethical leadership may serve as a foundational mechanism for transforming dysfunctional organizational systems and mitigating organizational terrorism syndrome.

Psychological safety constitutes another central component in the process of organizational transformation and recovery from organizational terrorism. Edmondson defined psychological safety as a shared belief that individuals can express ideas, concerns, questions, and mistakes without fear of humiliation or punishment [10]. In organizations characterized by organizational terrorism, psychological safety is systematically undermined, resulting in silence, disengagement, and reduced

learning capacity. Conversely, organizations that foster psychological safety encourage experimentation, knowledge sharing, and adaptive learning. This issue is particularly important in large institutions where hierarchical structures may discourage upward communication and critical voice.

Support for critical voice and employee participation also play essential roles in organizational health. Caldwell and Canuto-Carranco argued that employees' willingness to exercise voice is significantly influenced by leadership ethics and organizational moral climate [8]. In environments dominated by fear and coercion, employees often avoid expressing dissenting opinions because they perceive such behavior as risky or futile. However, organizations that institutionalize ethical governance and participatory communication systems are more likely to benefit from employee creativity, collective intelligence, and organizational resilience.

Organizational resilience itself has become an increasingly important concept in management literature, particularly in relation to organizational adaptability and sustainability. Resilient organizations possess the capacity to adapt to crises, recover from disruptions, and maintain functionality under adverse conditions. Senge emphasized that learning organizations continuously develop adaptive capacities through collective learning, dialogue, and systems thinking [12]. Ethical leadership, transparent governance, and psychological safety collectively contribute to organizational resilience by strengthening social capital, employee trust, and institutional flexibility.

Human and organizational capital are also critically influenced by organizational climate and leadership style. Organizations characterized by fear and intimidation often experience reduced employee motivation, talent erosion, and declining institutional knowledge. Burnout syndrome, emotional exhaustion, and turnover intention become increasingly prevalent under such conditions [5, 13]. Conversely, organizations that promote ethical leadership and meritocracy are more capable of retaining talent, fostering innovation, and strengthening institutional competencies. Tayebi's study on organizational syndromes in sport organizations similarly demonstrated that dysfunctional organizational climates significantly weaken institutional performance and employee development [3].

Despite the growing body of literature on organizational syndromes, ethical leadership, and organizational health, significant theoretical and empirical gaps remain regarding the structural mechanisms through which organizations can transition from organizational terrorism syndrome toward organizational health. Most previous studies have focused either on isolated organizational syndromes or on general leadership concepts without proposing integrated structural models capable of explaining the interrelationships among ethical leadership, psychological safety, social capital, organizational resilience, and organizational terrorism. Furthermore, limited research has examined these relationships within large Iranian institutions characterized by complex governance structures and multidimensional organizational environments.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this gap by proposing and testing a structural model for explaining organizational health through transitioning from organizational terrorism syndrome with an emphasis on ethical leadership in the Mostazafan Foundation.

Methodology

The present study employed a mixed-methods research approach. This approach was selected because the simultaneous use of the strengths of qualitative and quantitative data provides a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The specific design adopted in this study was a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. In this design, two

distinct phases were implemented: first, qualitative data were collected and analyzed, and subsequently, the findings from this phase were utilized to design and implement the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase of the study was conducted with the aim of deeply exploring the phenomenon, identifying key components, and ultimately developing the model. The findings of the qualitative phase constituted the basis for entering the quantitative phase of the research. Semi-structured interviews with experts were used as the primary data collection instrument in this stage. Thematic analysis was employed for analyzing the qualitative data in order to extract the main themes and codes and to develop the final framework for overcoming organizational terrorism syndrome in the Mostazafan Foundation.

The primary objective of the quantitative phase was first to design and subsequently to test the model for overcoming organizational terrorism syndrome within the Mostazafan Foundation. The research population in the qualitative section consisted of senior managers and executives of the Mostazafan Foundation who possessed extensive professional experience and advanced academic qualifications. In this study, the criteria for selecting participants in the qualitative section included: (1) holding a master's or doctoral degree, (2) occupying a managerial position within the organization, and (3) having more than 15 years of professional experience. In the qualitative section, purposive sampling (goal-oriented sampling) and snowball sampling were employed to select experts until theoretical saturation was achieved. The qualitative sample consisted of 25 participants, determined through theoretical saturation. In total, 517 minutes of interviews were conducted.

The statistical population in the quantitative phase consisted of administrative employees of the Mostazafan Foundation. The total number of employees in the organization was approximately 430 individuals. Based on Cochran's finite population formula, a sample size of 203 participants was calculated and selected using convenience random sampling. Accordingly, 203 headquarters employees of the Mostazafan Foundation in Tehran were selected and provided with the questionnaire.

In this study, interviews and questionnaires were used as data collection instruments. Two questionnaires were utilized: (1) a semi-structured interview questionnaire for interviewing experts regarding overcoming organizational terrorism syndrome, and (2) a questionnaire developed for testing the extracted model through structural equation modeling. The latter questionnaire consisted of 38 items. The data in the present study were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale.

Semi-structured interviews, one of the most common forms of interviews, were employed in this study. Necessary arrangements were made for conducting interviews with the selected experts, and interviews were conducted according to the schedules determined by the interviewees. Efforts were made to conduct the interviews in a calm and disturbance-free environment outside official working hours, while also ensuring brevity of the interview sessions to maintain participants' comfort. During the interviews, responses were immediately documented. When necessary, and with the interviewees' permission, audio recordings were made for subsequent use. Furthermore, to comply with research ethics principles, the confidentiality of the collected information was guaranteed and participants' informed consent was obtained.

A researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 16 open-ended questions was used for conducting the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the questionnaire included three demographic questions. After completion of the interview process, coding, and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, various important components and categories related to designing the model for overcoming organizational terrorism syndrome were identified. Subsequently, a pairwise comparison questionnaire was developed. The theoretical saturation table is presented below.

Table 1*Theoretical Saturation Status of Themes*

Row	Main Theme	Identifying Experts	Frequency	Saturation Status
1	Fear-based governance and intimidation	1, 3, 6, 11, 13, 15, 17	7	Excellent
2	Systematic suppression of dissenting voices	1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 22, 23, 25	9	Excellent
3	Culture of silence and self-censorship	1, 6, 13, 25	4	Good
4	Ethical gap and erosion of trust	2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 21, 24	7	Excellent
5	Corruption and non-transparent management	5, 12, 14, 19, 24	5	Good
6	Weakening of recruitment and meritocracy systems	2, 9, 18, 19, 25	5	Good
7	Erosion of human and organizational capital	2, 6, 21, 23	4	Good
8	Weakening of monitoring and accountability mechanisms	5, 12, 21	3	Moderate
9	Decline in organizational performance and legitimacy	14, 16, 20	3	Moderate
10	Strategic weakness and inefficient decision-making	4, 9, 13, 16	4	Good
11	Erosion of organizational ethics and values	1, 8, 18, 25	4	Good
12	Leadership weakness	17	1	Weak

Based on the final extracted model aimed at overcoming organizational terrorism and derived from qualitative analysis, the variables of the model were operationalized and a questionnaire was designed and developed for testing the model. This questionnaire consisted of 38 items. Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The constructs and corresponding item numbers are presented in the appendix.

To assess face validity, the questionnaire was presented to several experts, including the supervisor, advisor, and organizational managers. They were asked to express their opinions regarding the quality of the questionnaire items. In the present study, both questionnaires—(1) the semi-structured interview questionnaire and (2) the model assessment questionnaire—were approved following review by the supervisor and advisor, as well as consultation with specialists and experts within the Mostazafan Foundation, after incorporating the recommended revisions.

To quantitatively assess content validity, the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) was used. The CVR is a method for evaluating questionnaire validity developed by Lawshe, a pioneer in research methodology. This ratio is calculated based on expert judgments regarding the content of the instrument. Accordingly, experts were requested to evaluate each factor using a three-point scale including “essential,” “useful but not essential,” and “not essential.” In this formula, n_E represents the number of experts who selected the “essential” option, and N represents the total number of experts. If the calculated value exceeds the value presented in Table 2, the content validity of the component is accepted {Hajizadeh & Asghari, 2011}.

Table 2*Decision-Making Table for CVR {Hajizadeh & Asghari, 2011}*

Row	Number of Experts	Minimum Acceptable CVR	Row	Number of Experts	Minimum Acceptable CVR
1	5	0.99	7	15	0.49
2	6	0.99	8	20	0.42
3	7	0.99	9	25	0.37
4	8	0.85	10	30	0.33
5	9	0.78	11	40	0.29
6	10	0.62			

Based on Table 2, the CVR value for 25 experts should be greater than or equal to 0.37. Since the number of experts in the present study was 25, and because the calculated CVR for each component exceeded 0.37, the validity of the extracted themes was confirmed.

Furthermore, several methods exist for determining the reliability of measurement instruments, among which Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was used in this study. Initially, 20 questionnaires were distributed among the statistical sample and

subsequently collected. Cronbach's alpha was then separately calculated for each set of questionnaire items measuring the model variables. The closer the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1, the greater the reliability, internal consistency, and stability of the items. According to the conventional rule of thumb, the minimum acceptable Cronbach's alpha should exceed 0.70 for questionnaire reliability to be confirmed. Since the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the questionnaire items were above 0.70, the reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed.

Table 3

Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for the Structural Variables of the Research Model

Row	Structural Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Development of ethical leadership capabilities	4	0.774
2	Establishment of a transparent governance system	4	0.855
3	Institutionalization of meritocracy	4	0.867
4	Creation of psychological safety	4	0.771
5	Strengthening social capital and trust	4	0.782
6	Mechanisms supporting critical voice	4	0.720
7	Enhancement of organizational resilience	4	0.786
8	Increase in intellectual and organizational capital	4	0.827
9	Weakening organizational terrorism	6	0.832

Findings and Results

The number of expert participants in the study was 25 individuals, all of whom were senior managers of the Mostazafan Foundation. Most interviewees held master's or doctoral degrees and, given their extensive professional experience, possessed a high level of occupational expertise. The demographic characteristics of the experts participating in the interviews are presented in Table 4. Furthermore, the results of the conducted interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Of the 25 experts who participated in the first phase of the study, 24 were male and 1 was female. In terms of work experience, the majority of participating experts had more than 21 years of professional experience.

Based on the collected data, the descriptive analysis of the demographic variables related to the employee sample in the quantitative phase (203 participants) is also presented in Table 4. In terms of gender, the sample was predominantly male (approximately two-thirds of the sample). Regarding educational attainment, most respondents held master's degrees (46.3%) and bachelor's degrees (38.4%), indicating the high educational level of the studied population. In terms of work experience, the largest group consisted of employees with 11 to 20 years of experience (42.4%), reflecting the substantial professional experience of the sample. Finally, regarding occupational position, nearly half of the respondents were employed in specialist positions (47.8%), while managerial positions (deputy directors, department heads, and chief executive officers) collectively accounted for 36.9% of the sample. This profile demonstrates that the research sample primarily consisted of highly educated men with moderate to extensive work experience occupying specialist and managerial positions.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Variables

Experts (n = 25)				Employees of the Mostazafan Foundation (n = 203)			
Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage	Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	24	96	Gender	Male	134	66.0%
	Female	1	4		Female	69	34.0%
Education	Master's degree	13	52	Education	Diploma and Associate Degree	16	7.9%
	Doctoral degree	12	48		Bachelor's degree	78	38.4%
					Master's degree	94	46.3%
					Doctoral degree	15	7.4%

Work Experience	10 years or less	3	12	Work Experience	1–10 years	34	16.7%
	11–20 years	7	28		11–20 years	86	42.4%
	21–30 years	11	44		21–30 years	48	23.6%
	More than 30 years	4	16		More than 30 years	35	17.2%
Organizational Position	Deputy Director	5	20	Occupational Position	Specialist	97	47.8%
	Director General	11	44		Deputy Director	40	19.7%
	Department Head	5	20		Department Head	25	12.3%
	Chief Executive Officer	4	16		Chief Executive Officer	10	4.9%

Table 5 presents the path coefficients among the model variables, as well as the corresponding t-values and significance levels. By analyzing the path coefficients and examining the corresponding t-values and significance levels, the relationships among the research model variables can be scientifically interpreted. Accordingly, all hypothesized relationships in the model were statistically significant and confirmed. The results indicate that the standardized path coefficients among the model variables were significant.

The development of ethical leadership capabilities, as a foundational variable, demonstrated direct, positive, and significant effects on three other variables. Its strongest effect was on the establishment of a transparent governance system ($\beta = 0.362$, $t = 5.317$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the development of ethical leadership is the strongest predictor of transparent governance within the organization. This variable also affected the creation of psychological safety ($\beta = 0.283$) and the institutionalization of meritocracy ($\beta = 0.278$). The establishment of a transparent governance system, in turn, had direct and significant effects. This variable positively influenced both the strengthening of social capital and trust ($\beta = 0.200$, $p < 0.05$) and support for critical voice ($\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.001$). Its effect on support for critical voice was stronger.

The creation of psychological safety emerged as a key variable with a broad range of positive and significant effects. This variable influenced the enhancement of organizational resilience ($\beta = 0.205$, $p < 0.01$), the increase of human and organizational capital ($\beta = 0.135$, $p < 0.05$), the strengthening of social capital and trust ($\beta = 0.247$, $p < 0.001$), and support for critical voice ($\beta = 0.280$, $p < 0.001$). Its strongest effect was on support for critical voice.

Strengthening social capital and trust, similar to psychological safety, played an important mediating role and exerted positive and significant effects on the enhancement of organizational resilience ($\beta = 0.279$, $p < 0.001$), the increase of human and organizational capital ($\beta = 0.179$, $p < 0.05$), and the weakening of organizational terrorism ($\beta = 0.202$, $p < 0.05$). The institutionalization of meritocracy had direct, positive, and significant effects on increasing human and organizational capital ($\beta = 0.336$, $p < 0.001$) and strengthening social capital and trust ($\beta = 0.199$, $p < 0.05$). Its effect on increasing human capital was stronger.

Support for critical voice also affected two variables: enhancement of organizational resilience ($\beta = 0.188$, $p < 0.05$) and increase of human and organizational capital ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.01$). Ultimately, three direct paths led to the weakening of organizational terrorism, all of which were positive and significant: enhancement of organizational resilience ($\beta = 0.241$, $p < 0.01$), increase of human and organizational capital ($\beta = 0.201$, $p < 0.01$), and strengthening social capital and trust ($\beta = 0.202$, $p < 0.05$). The findings indicate that all direct relationships in the structural research model were confirmed.

The model demonstrated satisfactory explanatory power and showed that the development of ethical leadership capabilities, as the cornerstone of the model, leads to desirable outcomes such as weakening organizational terrorism,

increasing human capital, and enhancing resilience through both direct and indirect mechanisms, including transparent governance, psychological safety, and meritocracy.

Table 5

Path Coefficients Between Model Variables

Model Paths	Path Coefficient	t-value	Significance Level
Independent Variable	Dependent Variable		
Enhancement of organizational resilience	Weakening organizational terrorism	0.241	2.837
Establishment of transparent governance system	Strengthening social capital and trust	0.200	2.331
Establishment of transparent governance system	Support for critical voice	0.283	3.703
Increase of human and organizational capital	Weakening organizational terrorism	0.201	2.760
Creation of psychological safety	Enhancement of organizational resilience	0.205	2.996
Creation of psychological safety	Increase of human and organizational capital	0.135	2.196
Creation of psychological safety	Strengthening social capital and trust	0.247	3.461
Creation of psychological safety	Support for critical voice	0.280	3.951
Strengthening social capital and trust	Enhancement of organizational resilience	0.279	3.599
Strengthening social capital and trust	Increase of human and organizational capital	0.179	2.180
Strengthening social capital and trust	Weakening organizational terrorism	0.202	2.461
Development of ethical leadership capabilities	Establishment of transparent governance system	0.362	5.317
Development of ethical leadership capabilities	Creation of psychological safety	0.283	3.983
Development of ethical leadership capabilities	Institutionalization of meritocracy	0.278	3.472
Support for critical voice	Enhancement of organizational resilience	0.188	2.340
Support for critical voice	Increase of human and organizational capital	0.211	2.928
Institutionalization of meritocracy	Increase of human and organizational capital	0.336	4.493
Institutionalization of meritocracy	Strengthening social capital and trust	0.199	2.384

Table 6 presents the values of the model fit indices. Analysis of the reported fit indices provides a comprehensive evaluation of the quality and validity of the structural model. These indices, including SRMR, d_ULS, d_G, NFI, and RMS_theta, each assess a specific aspect of model fit. The SRMR index, representing the standardized root mean square residual, was reported as 0.081 for the estimated model, which is within the acceptable threshold of 0.08 and indicates a high-quality model fit. This value demonstrates that the average prediction error of the model is at a desirable level.

The squared Euclidean distance index (d_ULS) was calculated as 2.201 for the estimated model, indicating a small distance between the model and the ideal condition. Similarly, the geodesic discrepancy index (d_G), with a value of 0.514 for the estimated model, further confirms the adequacy of the model fit. The normed fit index (NFI), with a value of 0.895 for the estimated model, was at a highly desirable level, indicating that the model adequately explained the variances and covariances of the data. Finally, the RMS_theta index, with a value of 0.056, demonstrated that the measurement model error was at a highly satisfactory level, thereby confirming the internal validity of the model.

In summary, the model demonstrated a highly satisfactory and appropriate fit, with all indices falling within acceptable to excellent ranges. This level of fit provides strong support for conducting scientific inferences and hypothesis testing with a high degree of confidence.

Table 6

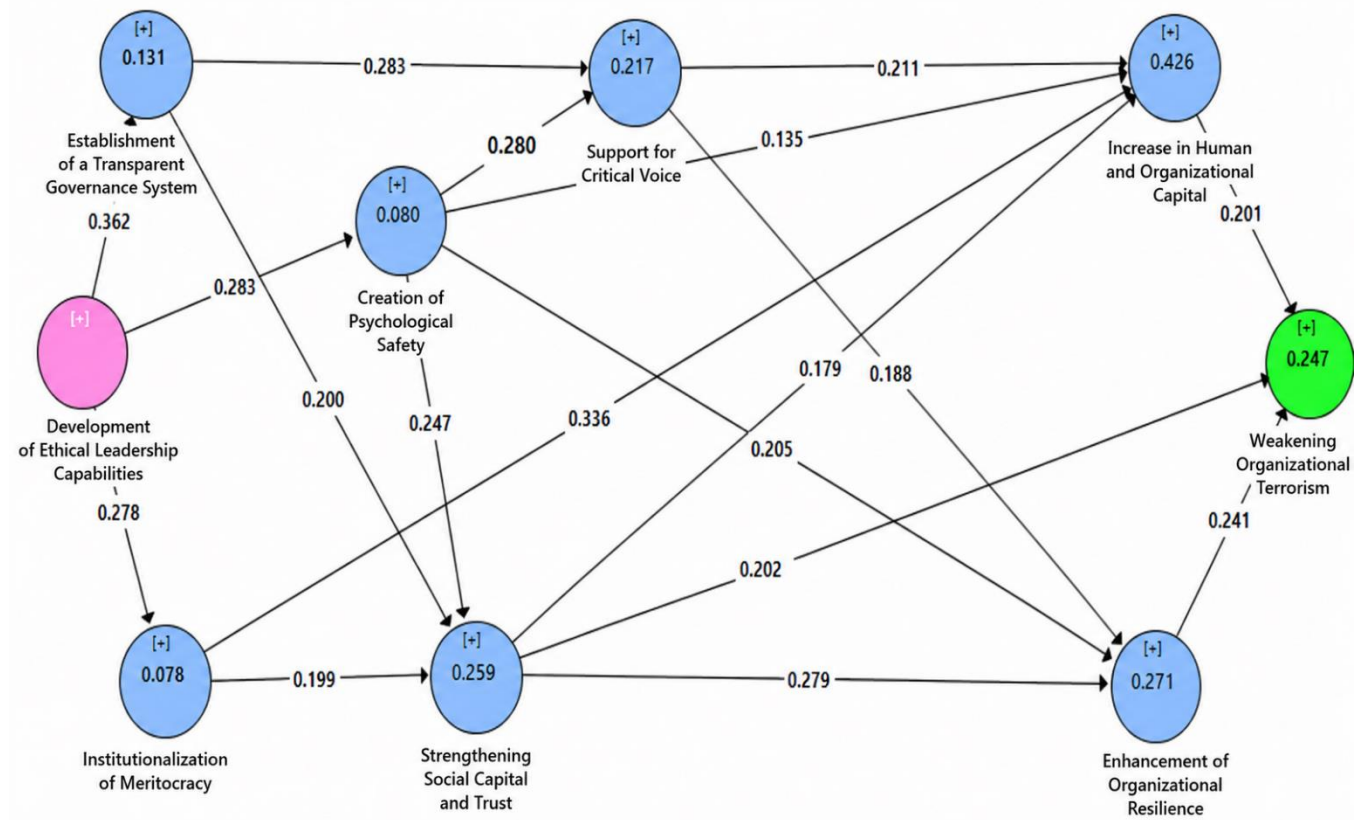
Values of Model Fit Indices (Source: Researcher's Calculations)

Indices	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.050	0.081
d_ULS	1.167	2.201
d_G	0.209	0.514
NFI	0.907	0.895
RMS_theta	—	0.056

The final model obtained from the study is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Tested Research Model



Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to develop and test a structural model for explaining organizational health through transitioning from organizational terrorism syndrome with an emphasis on ethical leadership in the Mostazafan Foundation. The findings demonstrated that the proposed model possessed acceptable explanatory power and satisfactory structural fit, indicating that the relationships among ethical leadership, transparent governance, psychological safety, meritocracy, social capital, organizational resilience, and organizational terrorism were statistically significant and theoretically coherent. Overall, the results suggest that overcoming organizational terrorism syndrome is not achievable through isolated managerial interventions; rather, it requires a systematic, multidimensional, and ethically grounded organizational transformation process. The study contributes to the organizational behavior literature by integrating concepts related to organizational syndromes, ethical leadership, organizational silence, psychological safety, and institutional resilience into a comprehensive structural framework.

One of the most important findings of the study was the central and foundational role of ethical leadership capabilities in shaping organizational transformation processes. The results revealed that the development of ethical leadership capabilities exerted strong and significant effects on the establishment of transparent governance systems, the creation of psychological safety, and the institutionalization of meritocracy. Among these relationships, the strongest effect was observed between ethical leadership and transparent governance. This finding indicates that ethical leadership constitutes the primary driving

force behind organizational transparency, accountability, and fairness. Ethical leaders create environments characterized by openness, trust, and participatory decision-making, thereby reducing fear-based governance mechanisms and weakening coercive managerial structures. This finding is consistent with the studies of [19], who demonstrated that ethical leadership strengthens organizational commitment through the development of ethical climates, and [20], who argued that ethical leadership contributes to sustainable organizational cultures and institutional performance. Similarly, [18] emphasized the role of justice-oriented ethical leadership in improving public-sector governance and institutional legitimacy in the Iranian context.

The significant relationship between ethical leadership and psychological safety also represents a highly important finding of the study. Psychological safety refers to employees' perception that they can express concerns, ideas, and criticisms without fear of punishment or humiliation. The findings indicate that ethical leadership significantly enhances psychological safety within the organization, thereby reducing fear and organizational silence. This result strongly aligns with the theoretical perspective proposed by [10], who identified psychological safety as a critical condition for learning, innovation, and organizational growth. In organizations characterized by organizational terrorism syndrome, fear becomes institutionalized and employees refrain from participating in organizational dialogue. Ethical leadership disrupts this pattern by creating respectful communication climates and promoting interpersonal trust. The findings are also consistent with [9], who demonstrated that fear-based organizational environments increase organizational silence and reduce employee participation in decision-making processes.

Another major finding of the study was the significant role of transparent governance systems in strengthening social capital and supporting critical voice. The results demonstrated that transparent governance positively influenced both social trust and support for critical voice, with a stronger effect observed for support of critical voice. This finding suggests that transparency is not merely an administrative principle but also a psychological and cultural mechanism that empowers employees to participate in organizational processes without fear. Transparent governance systems reduce ambiguity, favoritism, and hidden power dynamics while strengthening employees' perceptions of fairness and accountability. These findings are consistent with the arguments of [8], who emphasized that ethical organizational systems encourage employees to exercise voice and participate in constructive organizational dialogue. The results also align with the perspectives of [11], who highlighted the importance of organizational culture in shaping communication patterns and trust-based interactions.

The findings further indicated that psychological safety played a broad mediating role in the model by significantly influencing organizational resilience, human and organizational capital, social capital, and support for critical voice. Among these relationships, the strongest effect of psychological safety was observed on support for critical voice. This result demonstrates that employees are more willing to express dissenting opinions, criticisms, and innovative ideas when they perceive the organizational environment as safe and supportive. In fear-based organizations, silence becomes a survival strategy; however, psychologically safe environments transform silence into constructive participation. These findings strongly support the theoretical assumptions of [10] and further reinforce the argument that organizational health depends heavily on employees' emotional and psychological security.

The positive relationship between psychological safety and organizational resilience is also particularly significant. Organizational resilience refers to the organization's ability to adapt to crises, recover from disruptions, and maintain functionality under uncertain conditions. The findings indicate that psychologically safe environments enhance organizational

adaptability and flexibility by encouraging collaboration, experimentation, and knowledge sharing. This result is consistent with the learning organization framework proposed by [12], who argued that resilient organizations continuously learn and adapt through open dialogue and collective learning processes. Psychological safety enables organizations to identify problems earlier, respond more effectively to environmental changes, and maintain collective cohesion during crises.

The findings also revealed that strengthening social capital and trust significantly influenced organizational resilience, human capital development, and the weakening of organizational terrorism. Social capital represents the network of trust-based relationships, shared values, and collaborative interactions that facilitate organizational functioning. In organizations suffering from organizational terrorism syndrome, trust deteriorates and interpersonal relationships become fragmented. The present findings suggest that rebuilding trust constitutes a critical mechanism for reducing organizational fear and restoring organizational health. These results align with the perspectives of [12], who emphasized that trust and collaboration are essential components of sustainable organizations. Moreover, the findings are compatible with the studies of [15] and [2], which identified trust erosion and dysfunctional communication as central characteristics of organizational syndromes in Iranian institutions.

Another important finding was the significant effect of meritocracy institutionalization on increasing human and organizational capital and strengthening social capital. This finding suggests that merit-based systems contribute not only to organizational efficiency but also to institutional trust and employee commitment. Organizations characterized by favoritism, political appointments, and non-transparent recruitment systems often experience declining employee morale and increasing organizational cynicism. By contrast, meritocratic systems strengthen perceptions of fairness and encourage employees to invest their skills and knowledge within the organization. This finding is compatible with the arguments presented by [14], who emphasized that structural dysfunctions weaken organizational capacity and adaptive performance. It also supports the findings of [6], who conceptualized organizational numbness as a consequence of persistent organizational dysfunction and reduced employee engagement.

The study further demonstrated that support for critical voice positively affected organizational resilience and human capital development. This finding indicates that organizations benefit significantly when employees are encouraged to express constructive criticism and participate in organizational problem-solving. Fear-based systems suppress dissent and thereby weaken innovation and organizational learning capacities. By contrast, organizations that institutionalize critical voice create opportunities for continuous improvement and adaptive learning. These findings align with [9], who identified organizational silence as a major barrier to organizational effectiveness and change management.

One of the most important contributions of the study is the identification of the direct pathways leading to the weakening of organizational terrorism. The results showed that organizational resilience, human and organizational capital, and social capital directly and significantly reduced organizational terrorism syndrome. This finding indicates that organizational terrorism is not solely a product of authoritarian leadership but also emerges from broader organizational weaknesses, including low trust, weak resilience, poor communication, and deteriorating human capital. Consequently, reducing organizational terrorism requires comprehensive reforms targeting organizational culture, leadership systems, communication mechanisms, and institutional structures simultaneously.

The findings are also consistent with studies addressing broader organizational syndromes and dysfunctional organizational climates. [7] identified organizational Stockholm syndrome as a destructive phenomenon that weakens

organizational citizenship behavior and employee development. Similarly, [22] demonstrated that organizational stress and lack of support contribute to communicatively restricted organizational climates. [13] further showed that burnout syndrome significantly affects employees' coping capacities and professional performance. Collectively, these studies support the argument that dysfunctional organizational climates generate psychological, behavioral, and institutional consequences that undermine organizational health.

The present findings additionally contribute to change management literature by emphasizing the importance of integrated transformation processes. According to [23], sustainable organizational change requires alignment between leadership, culture, structure, and organizational systems. The current study supports this perspective by demonstrating that isolated interventions are insufficient for overcoming organizational terrorism syndrome. Instead, organizations must simultaneously strengthen ethical leadership, transparent governance, meritocracy, social trust, psychological safety, and organizational resilience. Similarly, [21] emphasized the importance of ethical sensemaking frameworks in strengthening organizational engagement and ethical decision-making processes.

The findings also have important implications for Iranian organizations and public institutions. Organizational syndromes in Iranian institutions are often associated with bureaucratic rigidity, centralized power structures, weak accountability systems, and limited employee participation. Previous Iranian studies have repeatedly highlighted the destructive consequences of organizational silence, administrative dysfunction, and unethical organizational climates [1, 4]. The present study extends this literature by proposing a structural model capable of explaining how organizations can transition from fear-based systems toward healthier and more resilient institutional environments.

One of the strengths of the present study lies in its mixed-methods design, which enabled both deep qualitative exploration and quantitative model testing. The qualitative phase facilitated the identification of the core dimensions of organizational terrorism syndrome within the specific organizational context of the Mostazafan Foundation, while the quantitative phase provided empirical support for the structural relationships among the identified variables. This methodological integration enhanced both the contextual relevance and empirical validity of the proposed model.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a single large organization, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other organizational contexts. Second, the study relied primarily on self-report questionnaires, which may increase the possibility of common method bias and socially desirable responses. Third, cultural and organizational sensitivities related to discussing organizational terrorism and fear-based governance may have influenced participants' willingness to provide fully candid responses. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the quantitative phase limits the ability to establish long-term causal relationships among the variables.

Future research should examine the proposed model in different organizational settings, including private-sector organizations, educational institutions, healthcare systems, and governmental agencies. Comparative studies across organizational cultures and sectors may provide deeper insights into the contextual dimensions of organizational terrorism syndrome. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine the long-term effects of ethical leadership and psychological safety on organizational transformation. Additionally, future studies could investigate the moderating roles of organizational culture, power distance, emotional intelligence, and digital organizational environments in shaping the relationships identified in the present study.

From a practical perspective, organizations seeking to reduce organizational terrorism syndrome should prioritize the development of ethical leadership capabilities at all managerial levels. Training programs focused on ethical decision-making, transparent governance, communication skills, and participatory leadership can significantly improve organizational health. Organizations should also establish formal mechanisms that encourage employees to express concerns and criticisms safely without fear of retaliation. Furthermore, strengthening meritocracy systems, reducing opaque administrative practices, and enhancing institutional accountability can contribute substantially to rebuilding organizational trust and resilience. Finally, managers and policymakers should adopt an integrated organizational reform strategy in which leadership, culture, communication systems, and structural processes are simultaneously aligned toward strengthening organizational health and institutional sustainability.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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