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Ethical Leadership And Employee Performance: A Systematic Literature Review Of Trust, Engagement, And Organizational Outcomes

Tubel Agusven[1], Alkausar Bagegia Kembaren[2], Muhammad Raffi Sarwani[3], Radit Pratama[4], dan Yeriasa Putra Malaya[5]

[1,2,3,4,5]Departement of Management, STIE Pembangunan Tanjungpinang, Tanjungpinang, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: t17abel@gmail.com

Abstract

Ethical leadership is relevant to employee performance, yet the mechanisms involving trust and work engagement require careful differentiation. This manuscript develops a systematic review framework addressing three questions: the association between ethical leadership and employee performance; the explanatory role of employee trust; and the contribution of work engagement to performance and organizational outcomes. The original ScienceDirect search log reported 236 records, 193 exclusions during title-and-abstract screening, 43 reports assessed for eligibility, and 30 provisionally selected reports. A subsequent supplementary search identified 31 candidates across publishers, comprising 21 core candidates and 10 conceptual support papers. These two bodies of evidence cannot be merged into one PRISMA identification flow without reconstructing the complete search history. Publisher abstracts confirm that ethical leadership is associated with performance quality and reduced work stress in hospitality settings, while organizational trust partially explains associations with service recovery performance and absenteeism. Other studies suggest that psychological and motivational mechanisms deserve further investigation. However, full-text eligibility, risk-of-bias assessment, and final study-level synthesis remain incomplete. The paper therefore presents a transparent preliminary narrative synthesis, a provisional PRISMA diagram, and an auditable reference register.

Keywords: ethical leadership; employee performance; organizational trust; work engagement; PRISMA 2020.

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INTRODUCTION

Employee performance is one of the key determinants of an organization's success because it is directly linked to the effectiveness of work execution, service quality, and the achievement of organizational goals. An increasingly dynamic work environment requires organizations not only to rely on employees' technical competencies but also to foster leadership practices capable of creating a work environment characterized by fairness, accountability, and integrity. In this context, ethical leadership has gained attention as a leadership approach that emphasizes moral exemplary behavior, consistency in conduct, and the application of ethical principles in decision-making. The relevance of ethical leadership to employee performance lies not only in its ability to guide work behavior but also in its potential to foster psychological conditions and social relationships that support the achievement of performance goals.

Research findings indicate that the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance involves various mechanisms. Schwepker & Dimitriou (2021), through a study in the hospitality industry, found that ethical leadership is associated with reduced ethical ambiguity and work stress, as well as improved performance quality among employees who interact with customers. These findings suggest that leaders' ethical behavior can influence work outcomes through a clearer work environment and reduced psychological stress. Meanwhile, Eluwole et al. (2022) found that ethical leadership is associated with increased trust in the organization, improved service recovery performance, and reduced employee absenteeism. The study also showed that trust in the organization acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and a number of work outcomes. The differences in emphasis between the two studies indicate that the contribution of ethical leadership to performance cannot be explained by a single mechanism.

Subsequent studies have broadened the focus to include trust and work islamengagement as relational and motivational mechanisms. Islam et al. (2024) found that trust in leaders mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement, while harmonious work passion acts as a moderator. In the context of Indonesian Islamic banking, Junaidi (2024) demonstrates that ethical leadership is associated with employee trust, knowledge sharing, and job satisfaction, all of which support employee engagement. These findings indicate that work engagement is one of the key outcomes of ethical leadership. However, an increase in work engagement does not automatically imply improved performance unless this relationship is directly tested within the same research model.

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The diversity of findings in previous studies highlights conceptual and methodological issues that require attention. Some studies use performance quality or service recovery performance as an outcome variable, while others focus on work engagement, work behavior, or psychological outcomes. Furthermore, trust in leaders and trust in the organization are often discussed in close proximity, even though they have different objects and formation mechanisms. Differences in sectors, respondent characteristics, research designs, and variable measurements also limit the comparability of results. Therefore, the same direction of relationships found in several studies is not sufficient to conclude that ethical leadership has a uniform influence on all dimensions of employee performance.

Based on these developments, the research gap lies in the need for a synthesis that explicitly distinguishes the relationship between ethical leadership and individual performance, trust mechanisms, and the contribution of organizational commitment to organizational behavior and outcomes. The limitations of previous studies, as evident from the preliminary evidence, stem not merely from a lack of research on ethical leadership, but rather from the insufficient comparability of constructs, relationship pathways, and levels of analysis used across different studies. A synthesis that ignores these differences risks producing overgeneralizations and obscuring the mechanisms that have actually been empirically tested.

The novelty of this study lies in the development of a structured literature review that integrates three dimensions of discussion: the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance; the role of trust as an explanatory mechanism; and the contribution of organizational commitment to both individual and organizational outcomes. Unlike discussions that merely catalog the relationships between variables, this study seeks to compare the characteristics of the findings, distinguish between trust in leaders and trust in the organization, and evaluate the limitations of generalization based on context and the type of outcomes measured. This novelty lies in the synthetic approach, which still needs to be substantiated through a systematic mapping of all selected studies; it is not a claim that no similar review has ever been conducted.

Based on this research problem, this study aims to answer three research questions: (RQ1) How is the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance based on previous research findings? (RQ2) How does trust play a role in explaining the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance? (RQ3) How is organizational commitment related to ethical leadership, employee performance, and organizational outcomes? This study aims to synthesize and evaluate empirical evidence related to these three questions through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. Theoretically, the study is expected to clarify the differences in psychological, relational, and motivational mechanisms underlying the relationship

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between ethical leadership and performance. Practically, the findings are expected to provide a basis for organizations to develop ethical leadership practices and build employee trust and work engagement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design and Reporting Guidelines

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach with a narrative-thematic synthesis to identify, evaluate, and integrate findings from previous research on ethical leadership, employee performance, trust, and work engagement. The PRISMA 2020 guidelines were used as a reference to ensure transparency in reporting the processes of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. A narrative-thematic synthesis was chosen because the reviewed studies differed in sample characteristics, organizational sectors, variable definitions, and analytical approaches. These differences needed to be taken into account before determining whether the research results could be compared or combined.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search focused on scientific journal articles published between 2021 and 2026 related to ethical leadership, employee performance, organizational trust, and work engagement. The keyword combination included “ethical leadership” AND (“employee performance” OR “job performance” OR “service performance” OR “trust” OR “work engagement”). Based on preliminary documentation, 236 records were reported; however, details regarding search sources, the distribution of records across databases, and deduplication decisions still require reconciliation. Therefore, this number is treated as provisional search data and not yet as a final, audited identification result.

Eligibility Criteria and Assessment

The inclusion criteria focused on empirical articles that explicitly examined ethical leadership and tested its relationship with employee performance, trust, or job commitment. Articles that only discussed other leadership styles or lacked a clear connection to the main construct were not included in the core synthesis. The information to be extracted includes publication details, research context and location, study design, number of respondents, variable measurements, relationship models, test results, and study limitations. The analysis is organized around three research questions by comparing similarities, differences, and inconsistencies in the findings, and by distinguishing empirical results from conceptual interpretations.

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Data Extraction and Synthesis

For each study that passed the full-text assessment, data extraction must include authors, year, country and industry, study design, sample size, ethical leadership instrument, type of performance, trust or engagement construct, mediation/moderation pathways, effect estimates, confidence intervals or significance levels, and study limitations. The synthesis is organized according to RQ1–RQ3, taking into account positive, negative, and non-significant results, as well as contextual heterogeneity. The risk of bias assessment is determined after the design of each article is examined.

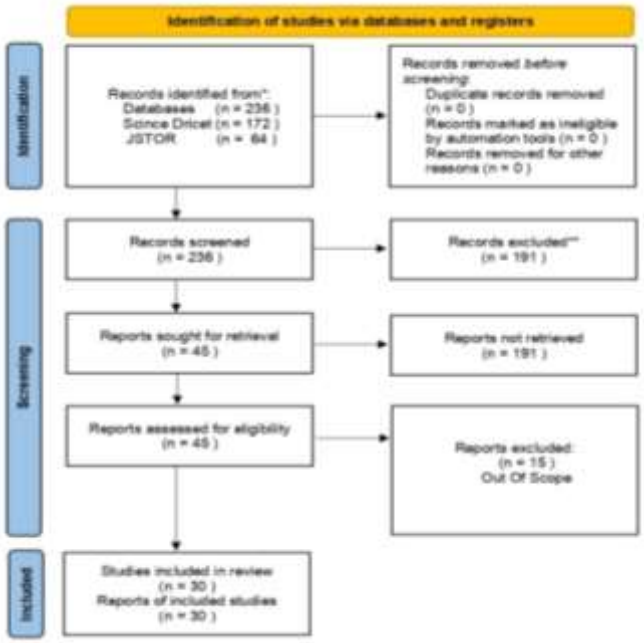

Figure 1. Prisma Diagram
Source: Data processing(2021-2026)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the literature search, a total of 236 records were identified through the ScienceDirect and JSTOR databases. After screening the titles and abstracts, 193 records were excluded because they did not meet the study's relevance criteria, leaving 43 articles to proceed to the eligibility assessment stage. At that stage, 13 articles were excluded because they did not fit within the scope of the study, and 30 articles were included in the systematic literature review. This selection process highlights the importance of establishing specific criteria to ensure that the analyzed literature is relevant to ethical leadership, trust, work engagement, and employee performance.

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Table 1. Core Synthesis of SLR Mechanism Clusters

No	Researcher	Title	Focus Variables / Key Findings
1	Schwepker & Dimitriou (2021)	Using ethical leadership to reduce job stress and improve performance quality in the hospitality industry	Quality of service employees' performance; stress and ethical ambiguity.
2	Eluwole et al. (2022)	Ethical leadership, trust in organization and their impacts on critical hotel employee outcomes	Trust in the organization mediates part of the relationship with service recovery performance.
3	Baydeniz et al. (2025)	Organizational characteristics, ethical leadership, and employee job performance: An investigation from the lenses of appraisal responses to the behavioral outcomes model	Ethical leadership is positively associated with job performance in the hotel industry.
4	Yang et al. (2023)	Can ethical climate and ethical self-efficacy channel ethical leadership into service performance? A multilevel investigation	The mediating effects of team ethical climate and ethical self-efficacy on service performance.
5	Udin (2024)	Ethical leadership and employee performance: The role of Islamic work ethics and knowledge sharing	Employee performance; Islamic work ethics and knowledge sharing.
6	Mahendra et al. (2024)	Ethical Leadership, Ethical Culture, Voice Behaviour, and Employee Performance	Voice behavior mediates the relationship with employee performance.

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No	Researcher	Title	Focus Variables / Key Findings
7	Purnama et al. (2024)	Ethical Leadership and Employee Performance: The Mediating Role of Intrinsic Motivation among Health Workers	Intrinsic Motivation in the Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Healthcare Workers' Performance.
8	Hayati & Caniago (2025)	Exploring the influence of ethical leadership on employee performance: the mediating role of Islamic work ethic	Task and contextual performance; the mediating role of Islamic work ethics.
9	Yuniawan & Mas'ud (2025)	Examining the Impact of Ethical Leadership on Employee Performance: Mediating Effects of Islamic Ethics and Knowledge Sharing in Indonesia	The direct effect is not significant; the indirect effects via Islamic ethics and knowledge sharing are significant.
10	Liu et al. (2024)	Ethical leadership and nurses' job performance: the mediating role of self-compassion	Nurses' performance; self-compassion as a partial mediator.
11	Oladimeji et al. (2022)	Impact of Ethical Leadership on Employee Performance in the Public Sector: Does Leader-Member Exchange Matter?	Ethical leadership, public sector employee performance, and leader-member exchange (LMX).
12	Sari et al. (2022)	Ethical Leadership, Compensation, and Culture and Employee Performance: Census Sampling Approach	The effect of ethical leadership on employee performance was reported to be insignificant.
13	Ayad & Hasanein (2024)	Unveiling the power of ethical leadership: Improving employee	Ethical leadership, employee well-being,

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No	Researcher	Title	Focus Variables / Key Findings
		performance through promoting employees wellbeing in the tourism sector	and the performance of the tourism sector.
14	Aftab et al. (2022)	Does CSR mediate the nexus of ethical leadership and employee's job performance? Evidence from North Italy SMEs	CSR as a mediating variable between ethical leadership and employee performance in SMEs.
15	Ma et al. (2022)	The effect of ethical leadership on service recovery performance: A moderated mediation model of organizational virtuousness and trait mindfulness	Service recovery performance; organizational virtuousness and trait mindfulness.
16	Nguyen (2025)	Ethical leadership and public service recovery performance: the roles of thriving at work and moral self-efficacy	Performance in the recovery of public sector services and thriving at work.
17	Zia et al. (2025)	Proactive, trustworthy and adaptable? Linking ethical leadership and adaptive performance through sequential mediation of trust in leaders and job crafting	Trust in leaders and job crafting mediate adaptive performance.
18	Thiel et al. (2022)	The (electronic) walls between us: How employee monitoring undermines ethical leadership	Electronic monitoring undermines the process of trust and behavioral outcomes.

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No	Researcher	Title	Focus Variables / Key Findings
19	Islam et al. (2024)	How does ethical leadership enhance employee work engagement? The roles of trust in leader and harmonious work passion	Trust in a leader serves as a mediator between work engagement and a harmonious sense of passion for work.
20	Junaidi (2024)	The role of ethical leadership to employees work engagement: A social learning theory perspective	Ethical leadership, trust, and employee engagement.
21	Khattak et al. (2022)	Nexus of Ethical Leadership, Career Satisfaction, Job Embeddedness, and Work Engagement in Hospitality Industry: A Sequential Mediation Assessment	Job Commitment and Career Satisfaction in the Hospitality Industry.
22	Liu et al. (2023)	How Ethical Leadership Cultivates Innovative Work Behaviors in Employees? Psychological Safety, Work Engagement and Openness to Experience	Work engagement as a mediator of innovative work behavior.
23	Oprea et al. (2025)	Ethical leadership and followers' job crafting: the mediating role of followers' role-breadth self-efficacy and work engagement	Work engagement partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and job crafting.
24	Cheng et al. (2024)	How does ethical leadership influence work engagement in project-	Work engagement and sensemaking in project-based organizations.

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No	Researcher	Title	Focus Variables / Key Findings
		based organizations? A sensemaking perspective	
25	Lorenz (2025)	Ethical Leadership: A Multi-Stage Mediation Model of Value Congruence and Organizational Identification on Employee Engagement	Employee engagement through value congruence and organizational identification.
26	Fang et al. (2023)	Interactive effect of leader ethicality and competency on Chinese customs officers' organizational citizenship behaviors	Trust and engagement mediate the relationship with organizational citizenship behavior (OCB).
27	Dey et al. (2022)	Ethical leadership for better sustainable performance: Role of employee values, behavior and ethical climate	Sustainable performance through employee values, behavior, and an ethical work environment.
28	Triguero-Sánchez et al. (2026)	General commitment, ethical leadership and work teams in an emerging Latin American economy: Evidence from Peru	Perceived organizational performance through commitment and teamwork.
29	Aswath & Celina (2026)	Ethical Leadership and Its Impact on Corporate Integrity, Accountability and Employee Performance: Building Trust and Commitment Through Vision, Empathy and Courage	The relationship between trust, commitment, integrity, accountability, and employee performance.

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No	Researcher	Title	Focus Variables / Key Findings
30	Alsetoohy et al. (2026)	Fostering adaptive performance and mitigating deviance behavior in hotels: insights from ethical leadership and Islamic work ethics	Adaptive performance and deviant behavior through ethical leadership and Islamic work ethics.

Source: Processed data from ScienceDirect SLR results (2021-2026)

DISCUSSION

The Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Employee Performance (RQ1)

The synthesis findings indicate that ethical leadership is associated with improvements in several dimensions of employee performance, although the mechanisms explaining this relationship vary across studies. Schwepker & Dimitriou (2021) emphasize the reduction of ethical ambiguity and work stress in relation to performance quality in the hospitality sector, while Eluwole et al. (2022) highlight the role of trust in the organization in explaining service recovery performance. Both studies show that leaders' ethical behavior is relevant to work outcomes, but the explanatory pathways are not identical. These findings suggest that ethical leadership is not only directly related to work behavior but also to the psychological and relational conditions that support task performance.

Differences in results are evident in the study by Yuniawan & Mas'ud (2025), which, in its synthesis table, reports that the direct relationship is not significant, while the indirect path through Islamic work ethics and knowledge sharing is reported to be significant. If these findings are confirmed by the full text, the results may indicate that the relationship between ethical leadership and performance does not always occur directly. Thus, inconsistencies in the results do not necessarily indicate a contradiction but may reflect differences in mediation mechanisms, organizational characteristics, and performance measurements. A gap that still needs to be explored is the conditions that determine when ethical leadership is directly related to performance and when the relationship is primarily explained by mediating mechanisms.

The Role of Trust in the Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Performance (RQ2)

Trust emerges as a crucial mechanism explaining the relationship between ethical leadership and employee outcomes. Eluwole et al. (2022) found that organizational trust

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acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and service recovery performance. These findings suggest that leaders' ethical behavior is associated with the formation of positive perceptions of the organization, which in turn supports service-oriented behavior. Meanwhile, a study by Islam et al. (2024) identified trust in leaders as a mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement. A comparison of the two studies reveals similarities regarding the importance of trust, but there are differences in the objects of trust and the types of outcomes analyzed.

These differences indicate that trust in leaders and trust in the organization cannot be treated as identical constructs. Trust in leaders relates to the quality of interpersonal relationships, whereas trust in the organization reflects employees' confidence in the institution where they work. Furthermore, findings regarding work engagement cannot yet be used as evidence of improved performance if the relationship between the two is not tested within the same model. Therefore, a research gap exists regarding the limited comparison of these two forms of trust simultaneously to determine their contributions to various dimensions of employee performance.

Work Engagement and Organizational Outcomes (RQ3)

The results of the literature review indicate that work engagement is one of the relevant motivational mechanisms in the study of ethical leadership. Junaidi (2024) links ethical leadership to trust, knowledge sharing, job satisfaction, and employee engagement. Meanwhile, Islam et al. (2024) demonstrate that trust in leaders plays a role in the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement. The similarity between these two findings suggests that work engagement does not exist in isolation but is linked to the quality of social relationships and employees' psychological experiences within the organizational environment.

Nevertheless, the relationship between work engagement and organizational performance cannot yet be uniformly concluded. The studies in the synthesis table use different outcomes, such as innovative behavior, job crafting, and organizational citizenship behavior. These differences are important because work engagement is an individual psychological state, whereas organizational performance reflects achievements at the organizational level. Therefore, the relationship between the two requires testing that distinguishes between levels of analysis and outcome indicators. A research gap lies in the need for more integrated evidence regarding whether work engagement consistently mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and individual performance and organizational outcomes.

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Critical Synthesis, Research Gaps, and Implications

Overall, the results of the synthesis show that the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance involves complementary psychological, relational, and motivational mechanisms. The reduction of ethical ambiguity and work stress highlights the importance of psychological conditions, while trust in the organization and leaders demonstrates the contribution of social relationships. Work engagement further expands the explanation regarding employee involvement in work activities. Similarities with previous research lie in the relevance of leaders' ethical behavior to work outcomes, while differences emerge in the mediating mechanisms, performance indicators, and organizational contexts.

Inconsistencies in the findings should be examined primarily through differences in the significance of direct and indirect paths, as well as variations in the constructs tested. Not all studies measure employee performance as the final outcome; therefore, the relationship between ethical leadership and trust or job commitment does not automatically prove an increase in performance. This situation indicates that the main gap in the literature lies not only in the relationships between variables but also in the comparability of mechanisms and levels of analysis. Theoretically, this study underscores the need to develop a model that integrates trust and work engagement with more specific performance measures. Practically, organizations can consider strengthening leaders' ethical behavior, building trust, and creating work conditions that foster employee engagement, while taking into account job characteristics and the performance indicators they aim to achieve.

CONCLUSION

It was concluded that ethical leadership has a positive relationship with various aspects of employee performance, although the underlying mechanisms differ depending on the context and research indicators. This relationship is not only direct but also involves psychological and relational factors, particularly through reduced ethical ambiguity and work-related stress, as well as the development of trust in the organization. Trust was found to act as a partial mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and service recovery performance, while trust in leaders was associated with increased work engagement. On the other hand, work engagement serves as a relevant motivational mechanism for employee work behavior; however, the available evidence has not consistently demonstrated its role in linking ethical leadership to individual performance and organizational outcomes. These findings underscore that the effectiveness of ethical leadership must be understood by considering differences in mechanisms, job characteristics, and performance measures. Theoretically, the study's findings reinforce the importance of distinguishing between psychological, relational, and

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motivational mechanisms, while practically, they provide a foundation for organizations to foster leadership behavior characterized by integrity and to build employee trust and engagement. Given the differences in context and indicators across studies, as well as the limitations in verifying the articles as a whole, future research should examine these mechanisms in an integrated manner using more consistent performance measures so that the findings can be generalized more accurately.

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