Adaptive Ethics: A Contingency Perspective on Ethical Leadership Behavior

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Abstract

In the knowledge-based economy, SHRM is vital for attracting, developing, and retaining talent that fuels innovation. This study analyzes how SHRM aligns human capital with organizational goals in knowledge-intensive sectors. Using theories like the Resource-Based View and Human Capital Theory, it proposes a framework linking attraction, development, and retention. It highlights employer branding, adaptive learning, and value-based engagement in strengthening workforce capability and loyalty. In Indonesia's digital economy, it explores SHRM's alignment with workforce policies. Theoretical contributions include a unified model for knowledge economies. Practical insights support HR leaders and policymakers. The research shows SHRM's role in building agile, innovation-ready organizations in emerging markets.

Keywords

strategic human resource management; knowledge-based economy; talent strategy; human capital development; retention

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is an evolving construct shaped by situational dynamics, cultural expectations, and ethical considerations. As modern organizations face increasing uncertainty and complexity, the ability of leaders to adapt while maintaining ethical integrity has become critically important (Northouse, 2022). Contingency theories of leadership propose that no singular leadership style is universally effective; instead, leadership success depends on the interaction between the leader's behavior and the specific demands of the situation (Robbins & Judge, 2019, p. 410).

Simultaneously, ethical leadership has emerged as a vital dimension of organizational effectiveness, especially in environments where trust, transparency, and accountability are paramount (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Integrating these two perspectives—situational adaptability and moral clarity—offers a promising framework for understanding the traits that define successful ethical leaders in practice.

The foundational contributions of Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 387) emphasize leadership as both a relational and situational phenomenon, requiring flexibility in both strategy and values. While contingency models, such as Fiedler's LPC theory and Hersey-Blanchard's situational leadership, offer frameworks for adapting leadership styles, they often understate the ethical implications of those adaptations.

Ethical leaders are not only responsive to contextual needs but are also guided by core principles that shape their actions and influence others (Kalshoven et al., 2011). This dual lens reveals a gap in current literature: while contingency theories are effective in predicting leadership outcomes based on external factors, they often lack the internal moral compass that drives long-term trust and organizational legitimacy.

Several empirical studies have affirmed that ethical leadership contributes to employee engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, and reduced counterproductive work behavior (Mayer et al., 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2011). However, less attention has been paid to how ethical traits function within contingency-based leadership models.

Particularly in Indonesia, where leadership expectations are deeply influenced by cultural, religious, and normative values, the integration of ethics into situational leadership is crucial for contextual relevance (Suryani, 2023). A culturally grounded approach to ethical leadership that also considers contingency variables can offer a more holistic and adaptable framework, enhancing leadership development in both public and private sectors.

Despite the proliferation of leadership models, a clear disconnect persists between theory and applied ethics in leadership practice. Most contingency theories do not explicitly incorporate ethical variables, while ethical leadership studies often overlook

situational dynamics. Furthermore, studies frequently examine Western leadership paradigms, leaving a contextual gap in non-Western environments such as Southeast Asia. This raises a pertinent question: How do ethical characteristics manifest within contingency leadership frameworks in diverse organizational settings? Addressing this research gap is essential for developing leadership strategies that are both adaptable and morally sound.

This study aims to explore how ethical traits intersect with contingency-based leadership approaches. It seeks to answer three central research questions: (1) What are the core ethical traits exhibited by leaders operating within contingency frameworks? (2) How do situational variables influence the ethical behavior of leaders in organizational settings? (3) How can integrating ethical considerations into contingency theory improve leadership effectiveness across different cultural contexts? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the refinement of leadership theory, enhances practical leadership development, and promotes ethical governance in complex environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on leadership has evolved from trait-based models to more context-sensitive approaches, with contingency theory becoming a central framework for understanding leadership effectiveness. Contingency theory posits that the success of a leader is not solely determined by inherent traits but by the alignment between leadership style and situational variables (Fiedler, 1967; Robbins & Judge, 2019, p. 412). Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 391) emphasize that effective leaders diagnose situations accurately and respond with adaptive behaviors rather than fixed strategies.

This adaptability, however, often overlooks the ethical dimensions of decision-making, particularly in cross-cultural and complex institutional contexts. As organizational dynamics grow more diverse and decentralized, ethical leadership frameworks have become critical to supplement contingency models with moral accountability and value-driven actions.

Ethical leadership has been defined by traits such as fairness, honesty, and concern for others (Brown & Treviño, 2006). This form of leadership has been associated with positive outcomes such as increased employee satisfaction, reduced turnover intentions, and stronger organizational commitment (Walumbwa et al., 2011; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). However, ethical leadership studies have largely treated ethical behavior as a static personal trait rather than an adaptive response to changing organizational environments. The integration of ethics into leadership theory is often more implicit than explicitly operationalized. As noted by Eisenbeiß and Brodbeck

(2014), there is a growing need to conceptualize ethical leadership not just as a fixed ideal, but as a contextually responsive practice. This opens space for synthesizing contingency theory's situational awareness with ethical leadership's moral grounding.

Several scholars have called for a more integrative leadership model that combines adaptability with ethical orientation (Resick et al., 2011). Such integration is particularly relevant in multicultural contexts, where ethical norms and leadership expectations vary. Indonesian scholarship, for example, underscores the influence of *nilai-nilai luhur* (noble values) and *musyawarah* (consultative decision-making) in shaping perceptions of ethical leadership (Hamid, 2023).

Yet existing models often do not accommodate this cultural complexity. By drawing from contingency theory while embedding ethical sensitivity, leadership practices can be better tailored to both organizational performance goals and normative expectations. The existing literature points to a theoretical gap that this study aims to fill: the lack of cohesive models that integrate situational flexibility with ethical steadfastness across culturally diverse settings.

Theoretical Framework

Contingency theory represents a foundational model in leadership studies, positing that there is no singular best way to lead; rather, effectiveness is contingent upon the alignment between leadership style and specific situational variables. Fiedler's Contingency Model, which emphasizes the leader-member relationship, task structure, and positional power, remains influential in explaining why certain leadership styles succeed in specific contexts (Robbins & Judge, 2019, p. 415).

Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 394) argue that effective leaders must assess the readiness of followers and select behaviors that fit the situation. This perspective encourages strategic adaptability but often omits explicit moral dimensions. By foregrounding context, contingency theory provides a flexible framework; however, it needs further development to incorporate the ethical responsibilities that modern leaders face.

The concept of ethical leadership is rooted in moral philosophy and organizational behavior, defined by traits such as integrity, fairness, humility, and role-modeling (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Ethical leadership influences employee attitudes and behaviors through mechanisms like social learning, trust-building, and value transmission (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Robbins and Coulter (2021, p. 432) emphasize that ethical leaders are not only competent decision-makers but also act as moral agents who inspire ethical conduct in followers.

This ethical dimension is increasingly seen as critical to organizational legitimacy, especially in environments where stakeholders demand transparency and accountability. Ethical leadership, however, has often been examined in isolation from situational adaptability, which limits its practical relevance in dynamic, high-pressure organizational settings.

To bridge these frameworks, scholars have proposed integrative models that embed ethical considerations within adaptive leadership approaches. For instance, the Ethical Leadership Framework by Eisenbeiß and Giessner (2012) emphasizes contextual sensitivity, arguing that ethical decision-making must consider not just universal principles but also situational constraints and stakeholder perspectives.

This approach aligns with Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory, which focuses on adjusting leadership behaviors based on follower maturity and task complexity (Schermerhorn et al., 2020, p. 398). The synergy between these theories suggests that ethical leadership can be dynamic and context-sensitive, provided leaders maintain moral clarity while responding to environmental shifts. This theoretical synthesis allows for a more realistic portrayal of leadership in complex organizations.

Cultural contingency also plays a significant role in shaping ethical leadership behavior. In Indonesian contexts, leadership is influenced by values such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *amanah* (trust), and *hikmah* (wisdom) (Suryani, 2023). These values suggest that ethical leadership is interpreted through a local lens, and thus, universal leadership theories must be contextualized. Contingency theory, with its inherent adaptability, offers a framework that can integrate such localized ethical expectations.

Robbins and Judge (2019, p. 421) argue that effective leadership is contextually grounded, requiring leaders to adjust not only their strategies but also their ethical reasoning to align with cultural expectations and organizational realities. Therefore, an integrative theoretical model that marries ethical leadership and contingency thinking is both theoretically sound and contextually relevant.

Furthermore, this synthesis creates space for a new leadership model—"Ethical Contingency Leadership"—which assumes that moral responsibility and situational flexibility are not mutually exclusive. Rather than being reactive or rigid, leaders under this model are guided by stable ethical principles while dynamically adjusting their behaviors. This conceptual expansion responds to critiques of both theories: that contingency theory lacks moral depth, and that ethical leadership lacks situational responsiveness. As such, this framework will guide the analysis and interpretation of findings throughout this study, offering a robust lens through which to examine how leaders navigate ethical challenges within varied organizational contexts.

Previous Research

A foundational study by Brown and Treviño (2006) conceptualized ethical leadership as the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate behavior through personal actions and interpersonal relationships. Using survey data, they identified traits like integrity, fairness, and power-sharing as central to ethical leadership, leading to improved employee satisfaction and trust. However, their work did not explicitly integrate contingency theory or analyze how these traits vary across different leadership situations.

Building on this, Walumbwa et al. (2011) tested a multidimensional ethical leadership model across multiple cultures. Using structural equation modeling, they found that ethical leadership predicted employee outcomes such as organizational commitment and citizenship behavior. While this research offered empirical rigor, it treated ethical leadership as a stable construct without analyzing its situational variability— highlighting a need to explore its adaptability in diverse settings.

Eisenbeiß and Giessner (2012) advanced the theoretical discourse by proposing that ethical leadership should consider context, culture, and organizational complexity. They introduced the concept of contextualized ethics, arguing that ethical behavior must be responsive to situational demands. Yet their study remained conceptual and lacked empirical exploration of how leaders adapt ethical behaviors within structured contingency frameworks.

Kalshoven et al. (2013) developed the Ethical Leadership at Work (ELW) questionnaire, a tool for measuring ethical leader behaviors in organizations. Their work validated multiple ethical leadership dimensions but did not explore how these behaviors manifest under different situational pressures, such as crisis, organizational change, or team conflict—scenarios well explained by contingency models.

Resick et al. (2014) explored ethical leadership across cultures, comparing practices in the United States, Germany, and South Korea. They observed that ethical standards are shaped by cultural norms, implying that leadership behavior must be both ethically grounded and context-sensitive. However, they stopped short of merging this insight into existing contingency frameworks, thus underscoring the need for an integrated approach.

More recently, Suryani (2023) investigated ethical leadership within Indonesian organizations, noting that cultural values such as *amanah* (trustworthiness) and *musyawarah* (deliberation) heavily influence leader behavior. While this study contextualized ethical leadership, it did not apply contingency theory to explain why

leaders behave differently in varied scenarios, such as hierarchical versus egalitarian workplaces.

From this body of work, a clear research gap emerges: although ethical leadership and contingency theory have been independently validated, there is limited research integrating both to explain how ethical traits adjust under situational demands, especially in culturally diverse environments. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how ethical leadership characteristics operate within contingency frameworks and how these adapt across organizational and cultural contexts.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative and textual data approach, focusing on scholarly literature, theoretical models, and documented organizational practices. Qualitative data is especially appropriate for exploring leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon that varies with context and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 104). Textual data enables the examination of ethical traits and leadership behaviors as represented in peer-reviewed research, books, and institutional documents. This type of data provides nuanced insights into how contingency and ethical leadership are conceptualized and how they operate across cultural and organizational environments (Yin, 2016, p. 88).

The data sources include reputable international and Indonesian publications such as books by Robbins and Schermerhorn, peer-reviewed journal articles, and official institutional publications. International books were used for foundational theories (e.g., contingency theory, ethical leadership), while Indonesian journal articles helped provide contextual relevance. For instance, Suryani (2023) offers culturally grounded insights, while Eisenbeiß and Giessner (2012) contribute integrative conceptual frameworks. This variety ensures that both global theories and local realities are adequately represented in the analysis. Emphasizing these diverse yet credible sources helps establish theoretical robustness and cross-cultural validity (Silverman, 2021, p. 132).

Data collection involved extensive literature review and document analysis. Literature was selected based on its relevance to contingency theory, ethical leadership, and cross-cultural leadership studies. Databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were utilized to ensure the inclusion of peer-reviewed and high-impact studies. Document analysis followed a rigorous screening process to ensure all materials were published no later than 2025, aligning with methodological standards for currency and reliability in qualitative inquiry (Bowen, 2009). All sources were cataloged using citation management software to maintain consistency and traceability.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, where patterns and themes were derived from the literature. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model guided the coding process, beginning with data familiarization and culminating in the identification of key themes such as ethical traits, situational variables, and leadership adaptability. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for synthesizing diverse perspectives and constructing integrative frameworks (Nowell et al., 2017). Themes were then cross-referenced with established theories from Robbins and Schermerhorn to assess alignment and divergence, allowing a critical dialogue between data and theory.

Conclusion drawing involved the synthesis of findings across themes and theories. Following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014, p. 276), patterns were interpreted based on both frequency and conceptual significance, not merely prevalence. Key insights were evaluated against the research questions, ensuring internal coherence. The conclusions aimed to connect theory with real-world leadership behavior, demonstrating how ethical leadership traits dynamically adjust within contingency frameworks. This process also helped illuminate theoretical implications and practical applications for organizational leadership in diverse environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The exploration of ethical leadership within a contingency framework highlights the intricate interplay between personal values and situational demands. Drawing from the conceptual underpinnings of Robbins and Judge (2019, p. 410) and Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 387), it becomes evident that leadership cannot be confined to rigid styles or static ethical ideals. Instead, leaders must continuously balance adaptability with principled behavior to meet organizational expectations in diverse and shifting environments. This study synthesizes theoretical insights and prior research to offer a nuanced understanding of how ethical traits manifest and evolve within dynamic contexts.

By aligning contingency leadership with moral reasoning, this research contributes to a broader redefinition of effective leadership. It expands on the frameworks provided by Eisenbeiß and Giessner (2012), suggesting that ethical leadership must be responsive not only to internal character but also to external variables such as team maturity, crisis conditions, and cultural expectations. Suryani's (2023) findings affirm this perspective in Indonesian settings, where ethical behavior is often shaped by collective norms and spiritual values. Thus, ethical leadership is not a fixed identity but a responsive practice, varying in expression while remaining rooted in core values.

The integration of these insights reveals that leadership effectiveness increases when ethical considerations are not sidelined in favor of situational responsiveness. Rather, the two can coexist and reinforce each other. This is particularly evident in high-stakes environments where ethical clarity becomes essential for trust-building, while flexibility ensures operational relevance. Therefore, this study advances the field by offering a model of Ethical Contingency Leadership—where moral integrity and adaptive strategy operate in tandem. The following thematic subsections will elaborate on this model by answering the study's three guiding research questions.

1. First Thematic Subsection: Ethical Traits in Contingency Contexts

Ethical leadership within a contingency framework is characterized by the consistent exhibition of core moral traits, even as behavioral strategies shift according to situational demands. These traits include integrity, accountability, fairness, and empathy—qualities that remain stable even when leadership style varies. Robbins and Coulter (2021, p. 434) argue that ethical leaders maintain internal consistency, particularly under pressure, using moral values as a compass to guide decisions and interactions. This perspective aligns with Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 391), who assert that while behaviors may adapt, ethical identity must remain intact to sustain trust and legitimacy.

Leaders often face scenarios where ethical traits are tested by competing organizational demands or ambiguous rules. For example, during periods of downsizing or crisis, leaders may be required to make unpopular decisions. In such contexts, fairness and transparency become critical ethical traits. Brown and Treviño (2006) note that ethical leaders are able to communicate decisions with clarity and consistency, reducing employee anxiety. Ethical leadership in such situations requires balancing the need for organizational survival with the responsibility to treat people with dignity. The ability to maintain this balance underscores the importance of ethical stability in a contingent environment.

Accountability is another central trait of ethical contingency leaders. According to Mayer et al. (2012), accountability ensures that leaders are answerable not only for results but also for how those results are achieved. This resonates with contingency theory's principle of alignment between leadership style and task requirements, suggesting that ethical leaders must be both effective and morally transparent. Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 394) support this view by highlighting that adaptive leaders who lack ethical clarity may achieve short-term results but erode long-term trust, indicating the indispensable role of ethical accountability.

Empathy and compassion also play vital roles in shaping ethical leadership behavior across varied situations. These traits allow leaders to respond sensitively to the needs and concerns of their teams, especially in emotionally charged contexts (Kalshoven et al., 2013). While contingency theory focuses on behavioral flexibility, the inclusion of empathy ensures that this flexibility is not perceived as manipulative but rather as humane. Robbins and Judge (2019, p. 422) highlight that leaders who adapt empathetically can more effectively motivate and engage followers across different readiness levels and task complexities.

Moreover, courage and moral reasoning are crucial for ethical leaders who must make difficult choices without compromising core values. In multicultural environments like Indonesia, leaders often face conflicting ethical expectations across stakeholder groups. Suryani (2023) emphasizes the importance of *amanah* (trustworthiness) and *hikmah* (wisdom) in local leadership practices, suggesting that moral courage is required to reconcile modern organizational goals with traditional values. This ethical stance within a contingent model promotes culturally sensitive leadership that is both principled and pragmatic.

Finally, role-modeling ethical behavior fosters credibility and long-term influence. Brown and Treviño (2006) suggest that ethical leaders influence followers not through directives alone but through visible moral actions. Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 395) argue that such modeling enhances leader-member exchange, which is a key determinant of contingency effectiveness. Leaders who embody ethical traits provide psychological safety and increase the likelihood of ethical conduct among employees. Thus, ethical role-modeling becomes a stabilizing force in variable environments, reinforcing moral consistency within adaptive leadership strategies.

2. Situational Influences on Ethical Behavior

Situational variables significantly influence the ethical behaviors exhibited by leaders, often prompting nuanced adaptations that blend organizational objectives with moral considerations. Contingency theory emphasizes that leadership behavior should adjust to variables such as task structure, follower maturity, and organizational climate (Fiedler, 1967; Robbins & Judge, 2019, p. 416). These variables do not just shape leadership style—they also affect how ethical principles are applied. For instance, leaders in highly regulated environments may demonstrate more formalized ethics, while those in creative industries may adopt flexible, principle-based ethical interpretations.

One major situational factor is the organizational culture, which defines the implicit and explicit norms guiding leader behavior. In ethically weak cultures, leaders may find it more difficult to act on moral principles, especially if performance pressure overrides ethical conduct. Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 389) highlight the importance of ethical climate as a boundary condition for ethical leadership expression. Leaders in such settings must display moral courage and resilience to uphold ethical standards, demonstrating that the same ethical trait—such as honesty—may manifest differently depending on organizational tolerance and expectations.

Crises and high-pressure situations also influence ethical behavior. Ethical leaders may face dilemmas between transparency and strategic discretion. Brown and Treviño (2006) argue that ethical leadership is most tested during crises, where ethical clarity can either be compromised or exemplified. Ethical contingency leaders must decide not only what actions are effective but also what actions are just, even under time-sensitive constraints. Robbins and Coulter (2021, p. 436) note that ethical decision-making in these contexts requires agility, as leaders must rapidly assess consequences and stakeholder impacts while preserving integrity.

Another critical variable is power distance, especially in hierarchical cultures like Indonesia's. Suryani (2023) explains that leaders are often expected to uphold communal values, religious norms, and organizational hierarchies simultaneously. In such settings, ethical behavior is influenced by expectations of humility, fairness, and consultative decision-making (*musyawarah*). Ethical leaders thus operate within culturally prescribed boundaries that shape not only what is considered ethical but how ethics are demonstrated. This adds complexity to contingency theory, which must be localized to fully explain ethical leadership in such contexts.

Team readiness and competence levels also affect how ethical leadership is enacted. Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory, as cited by Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 398), proposes that leaders adapt their direction and support according to follower maturity. In ethical terms, leaders may exercise more directive ethical oversight in novice teams, while promoting autonomy and ethical reflection in experienced teams. This means that ethical leadership is not static; it evolves alongside team development, making situational awareness a moral as well as managerial necessity.

Finally, institutional policy and external regulations constrain or enable ethical behavior. Leaders in public institutions, for example, operate under strict accountability frameworks. In such contexts, ethical behavior often aligns closely with legal compliance. However, in entrepreneurial or start-up

environments, ethical norms are more self-defined and often dependent on leader discretion. Resick et al. (2014) emphasize that these external structures influence how ethical leadership is perceived and practiced, reinforcing the need for a contingency-informed ethical approach.

In sum, ethical behavior is profoundly shaped by the situational landscape. Leaders must interpret these variables through an ethical lens, making informed decisions that honor both context and core values. The fusion of contingency sensitivity with ethical reasoning allows for a more responsive and responsible leadership model.

3. Integrating Ethics into Contingency Leadership Models

Integrating ethical considerations into contingency leadership theory enhances both the credibility and cultural adaptability of leadership practices. Traditional contingency models emphasize effectiveness based on situational alignment but often ignore the moral dimensions that influence leadership legitimacy (Robbins & Judge, 2019, p. 421). By embedding ethical principles within contingency approaches, leaders can respond flexibly to situational demands while maintaining integrity and trustworthiness—qualities essential for long-term success. This fusion enables organizations to navigate complexity with both strategic and moral clarity.

One clear advantage of this integration is improved stakeholder trust. Ethical leadership fosters psychological safety, while contingency approaches ensure that leadership responses are appropriate to dynamic contexts. Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 396) argue that leadership effectiveness is not merely about adjusting style but about sustaining credibility across situations. In this sense, incorporating ethics into contingency models safeguards against manipulative or opportunistic behavior, offering a more sustainable and accountable leadership framework.

Cultural responsiveness is also enhanced when ethics are integrated into contingency leadership. In high-context cultures like Indonesia, leadership is evaluated not just on outcomes but on the *cara* (manner) in which decisions are made (Suryani, 2023). Ethical leadership that respects local norms—such as *amanah* (trust) and *hikmah* (wisdom)—while adjusting strategies based on situational complexity, creates a culturally coherent leadership model. Robbins and Coulter (2021, p. 438) support this by highlighting that culturally sensitive leadership improves employee alignment and organizational cohesion, particularly in diverse workforces.

Furthermore, integrating ethics into contingency theory promotes long-term adaptability by institutionalizing moral decision-making processes. Rather than relying on personal virtue alone, organizations can embed ethical reflection into leadership development programs. Eisenbeiß and Giessner (2012) propose structured ethical frameworks that can be taught alongside situational assessment tools, enabling leaders to make consistent yet contextually appropriate decisions. This institutional approach reduces ethical drift and reinforces a leadership culture that values both results and responsibility.

The integration also encourages better decision-making under uncertainty. In volatile or ambiguous environments, ethical considerations serve as stabilizing reference points. For example, during crises or organizational change, leaders guided by both situational logic and moral conviction are more likely to inspire confidence. Kalshoven et al. (2013) emphasize that employees perceive such leaders as fair and trustworthy, which increases engagement and reduces resistance to change. This suggests that ethical contingency leadership is not only morally commendable but also operationally effective.

Finally, this integrative model fosters innovation and ethical risk-taking. When ethics are viewed not as constraints but as foundational enablers of trust, leaders can explore bold solutions with the backing of moral legitimacy. In entrepreneurial and public sectors alike, such integration supports strategic experimentation within ethical boundaries. Schermerhorn et al. (2020, p. 399) observe that leaders who are both adaptable and ethical foster cultures of innovation grounded in responsibility. Thus, the Ethical Contingency Leadership model supports both agility and accountability, offering a versatile approach suitable for diverse organizational landscapes.

This study has demonstrated that ethical leadership traits—such as integrity, fairness, accountability, and empathy—are not static characteristics but dynamic competencies that operate effectively within contingency leadership frameworks. The first research question explored the core ethical traits exhibited by adaptive leaders, and the findings confirm that such traits act as moral anchors that provide consistency amidst behavioral flexibility. The second research question examined how situational variables influence ethical behavior, revealing that leaders adjust ethical expressions in response to organizational culture, crisis scenarios, team maturity, and cultural norms. Finally, the third research question addressed the impact of integrating ethical considerations into contingency theory, showing that this synthesis strengthens leadership effectiveness, builds trust, and enhances cross-cultural adaptability.

By embedding ethical principles within contingency frameworks, this study offers a refined conceptual model—Ethical Contingency Leadership—that bridges the gap between situational responsiveness and moral responsibility. Theoretically, this model contributes to leadership studies by challenging the compartmentalization of ethics and adaptability, offering instead a unified approach that is context-sensitive and ethically grounded. Practically, the findings provide organizations with a leadership strategy that is not only agile but also values-based, supporting performance goals without compromising moral standards. This model is particularly relevant for leadership development in multicultural and ethically complex environments, such as Indonesia, where societal expectations deeply influence leadership legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intersection of contingency theory and ethical leadership, offering a nuanced understanding of how moral principles can coexist with situational flexibility. Through the integration of theoretical models and contextual analysis, it has become evident that effective leadership in today's complex environments requires more than adaptability—it demands a steadfast ethical compass.

The core findings affirm that ethical traits such as integrity, fairness, accountability, and empathy are essential across leadership contexts, serving as stable reference points for decision-making in dynamic situations. Furthermore, situational variables—ranging from organizational culture to cultural expectations—significantly shape how ethical behaviors are enacted, making ethical leadership a responsive rather than static construct.

By proposing the Ethical Contingency Leadership model, this study reinforces the importance of integrating ethics into leadership strategies, not as an adjunct but as a foundational element. This model not only enhances leadership effectiveness across cultural and organizational boundaries but also addresses long-standing theoretical gaps in leadership discourse.

For practitioners, the findings offer actionable strategies for developing leadership programs that prioritize both adaptability and integrity. For scholars, the study encourages future research to explore how ethics and contingency can be operationalized in specific industries and regions. In conclusion, leadership that is both morally grounded and contextually adaptive represents the most promising path forward in a world marked by rapid change and ethical complexity.

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