ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO CORRUPTION AND ITS IMPACT ON ETHICAL CULTURE AND CORPORATE REPUTATION – A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hisham Mustafa

Palestine Technical University-Kadoorie, Tulkarm, Palestine

h.mostafa@ptuk.edu.ps

Abstract

The study aims to explore the effect of political corruption on the relationship between ethical leadership styles, ethical culture, and corporate reputation. The study presents a framework to investigate how ethical leadership fosters ethical culture and enhances corporate reputation, and how political corruption moderates and weaken these relationships. The study presents a conceptual model which integrates ethical leadership, ethical culture, and corporate reputation within the context of corruption, in order to provide new insights into managing reputation and maintaining ethical culture in challenging environments. Further, recommending to the future research to deeply testify the link between ethical leadership, ethical culture, and corporate reputation in both countries and corporate level.

Keywords: corporate reputation, political corruption, ethical culture, ethical leadership

INTRODUCTION

Corporate reputation is considered as one of the most valuable assets the organization can have (Walker, 2010). It is considered as an intangible resource which contributes to enhancing organizational performance (Pires & Trez, 2018), however, it offers both opportunities and potential risks, it can drive an organization forward, but any damage to it can cause a severe setback. Moreover, a strong reputation will not only give the company a competitive advantage, but also it acts as a protector against external pressures (Baruah & Panda, 2020). In today's dynamic and unpredictable business environment, characterized by

growing different stakeholder demands, the strategic management of the reputation became more important than ever (Shamma, 2012).

Organizations with a strong reputation will achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, as reputation fosters value creation and as a result drives the organization performance (Ali et al., 2015), because the perception of the company between its stakeholders influence its business outcomes, such as employee loyalty, customer satisfaction, and consumer commitment (Chun, 2005), and this positive stakeholder evaluations play a critical role in strengthening the organization image and credibility (Javed et al., 2020). In this regard, ethical branding has become a strategic tool to differentiate the organization, and to create a virtuous cycle in which strong ethics enhance the brand, and in return, the brand enhances the company's reputation (Fan, 2005).

Leadership plays a significant role in building the corporate reputation. Ethical leadership is characterized by the exercise of power in a responsible way in which leaders decisions and actions reflect the company commitment to fairness, integrity, and accountability (Y. Zhu, 2014), leaders who embody core values like honesty and integrity achieve positive leader outcomes and organization performance (Saha et al., 2020), as the ethical behavior of the organization is a reflection of its leadership, which emphasize that the reputation of top executives significantly impact the company's reputation (Shamma, 2012). Transparent

leadership practices and strong ethical practices are essential in building stakeholder trust, which in turn enhance the organization reputation (Pires & Trez, 2018). Additionally, leaders who take into consideration the interests of different stakeholders will contribute to the effectiveness and success of the organizations (Waldman, 2011), and embracing virtuous leadership will not only enhance the performance and ethical climate of the organization, but also will promote the personal well-being and job satisfaction (Wang & Hackett, 2016), therefore, by engaging with stakeholders, responsible leaders in their ethical practices will enhance the social capital, which plays a critical role in enhancing the organization's reputation (Javed et al., 2020).

However, the relationship between ethical leadership and corporate reputation does not operate in isolation, because external factors, like political corruption, can influence this relationship. Political corruption, which defined as the misuse of public authority for personal gain (Navot & Beeri, 2018), represents a significant challenge. Political corruption expansion and aspects vary across different political and cultural contexts, and it is shaped by institutional structures and societal norms (Heywood, 1997), making the definition of what is considered as a corrupt behavior is often influenced by cultural traditions and norms (Philp, 1997), therefore, to

effectively combat corruption, it is important to understand the societal and systemic factors that influence it (Navot & Beeri, 2018).

In the environments where political corruption is exists, the efforts of ethical leaders to foster a strong corporate reputation may be hindered, because corrupt practices can hinder the ethical foundations of trust and integrity that the leaders are try to establish.

The main purpose of this study is to demonstrate the impact of political corruption on the relationship between ethical leadership patterns and company reputation to enhance the culture of ethical leadership and enhance the company's reputation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate Reputation

Corporate reputation refers to how key stakeholders perceive an organization based on their experiences and interactions with it (Ali et al., 2015). It reflects the overall image of a company which was shaped by its past actions and also the expectations about its behavior in the future (Chun, 2005), which means that it is not just about what the company was done before but also about how it is expected to behave in the future, comparing it with the competitors (Pires & Trez, 2018). Managing corporate reputation involves addressing the stakeholder view about different aspects of the business which are more than just the financial performance, like the social responsibility, and environmental impact (Walker, 2010), the process of building reputation goes through managing the way of how stakeholders think and feel about the company, and reputation can either become stronger or weaker, it depends on how the company's behavior over time (Baruah & Panda, 2020), these perceptions come from different groups of stakeholders, including internal stakeholders, like employees, and external one, like customers, investors, and the public, influenced by the stakeholders culture and norms (Veh et al., 2019).

The organization's ethical culture act as a key role in shaping its reputation. Ethical culture includes the shared beliefs, values, and expectations about specific behavior inside the organization, and it is reflected in the organization governance, and especially leadership practices (Tanner et al., 2019), which has a strong impact on corporate reputation, by the way top managers and leaders are perceived, which can significantly influence how the entire organization is perceived too (Pires & Trez, 2018). Moreover, the external environment factors such as political factors, economic conditions, social trends, technological changes, and competitive dynamics also affect corporate reputation (Shamma, 2012). However, corporate reputation is dynamic, it is shaped by what happens inside the organization and the external factors of the environment it is operating in.

Ethical Culture

Ethical culture refers to the shared values, norms, and beliefs about what is considered ethical behavior within organization, it is a specific part of the wide concept of the organization culture, it focuses on how ethics is understood and applied in the organization daily activities, it helps to predict the ethical behavior of the people inside the organization (Key, 1999). The ethical culture of the organization is shaped by both the formal systems, like the company policies, and the informal systems, like the organization norms and leadership behavior (Schwartz, 2013).

An organization's ethical culture is reflected in the organization demonstration of the ethical values in its structure, process, and the behavior of its members (DeBode et al., 2013), which means that to build a strong ethical culture, companies need to embed the ethical principles into all areas of the operations and everyday practices (Schwartz, 2013), which will insure that ethics are not just ideas but they are a part of the organization function.

Ethical culture has two key components: promoting ethical behavior and preventing unethical actions (Chadegani & Jari, 2016), which will create an environment where employees know what is expected from them and feel supported when they make ethical decisions, and provide them with a framework for making the right choices (Key, 1999). However, it's important to know that the ethical behavior is not as the same as the behavior that aims to build the organization reputation, the difference is in the motivation, while the ethical behavior is driven by a commitment to do what is right, the behavior to build the reputation is driven by the required image to be delivered to the others (Dobson, 1990).

Ethical culture plays a crucial role in influencing corporate reputation, because the company's reputation evolves over time by its consistent in demonstrating the ethical values and meeting the stakeholder's expectations (Bendixen & Abratt, 2007). Ethics, which reflect principles of fairness, justice, and equity, are key factors in shaping the stakeholder's judgement about the company's behavior (Geng et al., 2022), and its image, which will not just enhance its reputation, but will also give the company a competitive advantage (Fan, 2005).

This relationship between ethical culture and corporate reputation highlights the important of the ethical environment within organizations, that when ethical principles are embedded in the organization culture, they will influence the stakeholder perceptions, which will enhance the corporate image and reputation, leading to the first hypothesis (*see* Figure 1: Conceptual Framework).

Ethical Leadership Styles

Virtuous Leadership

Virtuous leadership goes beyond following ethical rules or avoiding harm, as ethics often focus on prevent doing wrong, virtuous leadership focus on reaching the highest potential (Cameron, 2011), It's not just about doing what is right to avoid negative outcomes but about achieving the best and enhancing positive growth.

Having a virtue means to have a strong personal trait that guides the person to do good and make moral decisions, these virtues which are root very deep in an individual character, that influence his way of think, feeling, and his responses in the different situations, and provide him with both the motivation and the reasons behind his actions, which will shape a consistent behavior over time (Alzola, 2012).

Virtue ethics emphasizes personal continuous moral development. It encourages the leaders to improve themselves while they are contributing in their actions to what is good for the society and their organizations (Newstead et al., 2020). Virtue ethics aim is not about looking for perfection, but it's about trying the best to be better, by learning from past experiences, and by making decisions that support the individual well-being and the common good.

Virtuous leadership is grounded in values-based decision-making. Leaders who follow this style of leadership make decisions that reflect strong moral principles, and they aim to create suitable environments so that the people and the organizations prosperity develops (Cameron, 2011). By their actions and decisions, virtuous leaders inspire others inside the organization, they promote positive change, and build ethical culture that support ethical behavior and enhance the organization reputation.

Moral Management Leadership

Moral management leadership aim is to guide others by strong ethical principles and a set of moral values. It is the leadership style that promotes a specific point of view or philosophy about what is right and just, for the aim to influence others to adopt and spread these values (Gini, 1997) through a moral lens. However, leadership in its core involves the use of social power, or maybe economic and political power, which comes with a responsibility to make choices that affect other and to determine what is the acceptable behavior within the organization, which makes the leadership a moral activity by nature (Thompson, 2004).

Moral leaders are expected to act as role models, who set the standards for the ethical conduct by their decisions and behaviors, however, the way how the followers perceive moral leadership can vary, because these perceptions are shape by their beliefs, values, and the

organizational culture (Fehr et al., 2014). Which means that moral leadership is not just about the leader's behavior or intensions, but also about how their actions are perceived by others.

Inspiring others to see the issues from a different ethical perspective, in order to create motivation for positive change in the organization is what is known as emergent moral leadership (Solinger et al., 2020), which makes moral management leadership main aim is to shape the ethical climate, not just follow the rules, and to play a critical role in enhancing ethical culture inside the organization to enhance the ethical climate and reputation.

Socially Responsible Leadership

Socially responsible leadership focuses on how leaders in top positions achieve their goals while prioritize the need and interest of all stakeholders, not just shareholders, making this type of leadership includes two important aspects: the principles of social responsibility and the practices of leadership, it's a unique leadership style approach that emphasizes both ethical conduct and effective management (Waldman, 2011).

One of the key challenges in this leadership style is to balance between the different perspectives. the traditional focus on economic goals, and their accountability to the different stakeholders, like employees, customers, communities, and the environment (Waldman & Balven, 2014), because they recognize the importante of both, the business growth and the social and environmen impact of their actions.

This leadership style is connected to normative stakeholder theory, which suggests that leaders have to be accountable to all groups of stakeholders affected by the organization activities not just the shareholders (Waldman, 2011), so that responsible leadership may look like virtuous leadership because both of them are focus on doing good and achieving

positive outcomes for individuals and the whole society (Cameron, 2011). However, responsible leadership goes in deferent way by addressing the need to balance the different interests of different stakeholder groups, not just about following personal ethical conducts, and unlike virtuous or moral leadership, which focuses on personal values and internal behavior, responsible leadership extends to external stakeholders, by taking into consideration to create a positive change inside the organization and in the external environment (Waldman, 2011). In this way, socially responsible leadership plays a critical role in building organizations emphasize for contribution to society, which will enhance their culture and their reputation.

Role of these leadership styles in fostering ethical culture and enhancing reputation

Ethical leadership, defined as the act of apply an ethical behavior through personal actions and relationships, and also promoting the ethical values into others, plays a key role in

shaping the organization ethical culture and reputation. (Toor & Ofori, 2009), because leaders behavior sets the tone for the entire organization, and its behavior is a guide for the employees in making moral decisions (W. Zhu et al., 2019). In fact, the reputation of the leader can account for nearly 48% of an organization's overall reputation (Shamma, 2012), because of the significant influence, ethical leadership should be practiced at all levels of management, to make sure that the organization's core values are reflected in its operations (Schwartz, 2013), therefore, the result will be that leaders who balance strong ethical values with high performance will achieve business goals and gain trust from employees and stakeholders (Neves & Story, 2015).

Ethical leadership helps in creating a positive ethical environment in the organization, by fostering principles like trust and respect, which will encourage employees to act with integrity (Wang & Hackett, 2016), and contribute to better organizational outcomes, including stronger ethical culture (Cameron, 2011), and ethical practices, by creating a work environment where shared values and moral decision-making are the norm (Ullah et al., 2022). Employees tend to align their behavior with their leaders who reflect their own moral beliefs and embed them in the organization culture (Fehr et al., 2014), which help the organization to maintain values and guide behavior especially in the crises and the challenging situations (Jondle et al., 2014).
The combination between ethical leadership and the organizational culture will lead to better ethical behaviors and attitudes between employees (Toor & Ofori, 2009), the point is that ethical leadership shapes organizational culture in the suitable ways that promote ethical practices (Pasricha et al., 2018) by strengthening the bonds between employees and the organization through mutual respect and trust, which will create a culture where ethical behavior is expected and rewarded (Neves & Story, 2015).

Leaders influence ethical culture by embedding shared values across the organization and by their set of clear expectations for ethical behavior (Schaubroeck et al., 2012), by two key pathways: moral self-regard, by motivating the employees to act in line with their personal moral beliefs, and by moral reputation management, by encouraging the behavior that aligns with the organization ethical standards (Fehr et al., 2014).

Corporate reputation is a complex concept, it is influenced by many factors, including product quality, leadership vision, workplace culture, social responsibility, and financial performance (Öncer & Yıldız, 2012). Leadership behaviors, such as communicating a clear vision and serve as ethical role models, help in creating a positive image of the organization internally and externally (Men & Stacks, 2013), influencing the organization's reputation (Y. Zhu, 2014).

Ethical leadership styles, whether through virtuous leadership, moral management, or socially responsible leadership, is a driving force for ethical culture and corporate reputation, by the leader's influence in model ethical behavior, promoting shared values, and building strong stakeholder relationships, which lead to the second and third hypothesis:

Political Corruption

Political corruption occurs when individuals who have power misuse their authority for personal gain (Heywood, 1997). It involves actions like bribery, nepotism, embezzlement, and fraud, all these actions include prioritizing personal interests over public goals, serve private goals over the common good ((Philp, 1997).

Corruption is not just a problem of individual misconduct but it is rooted in systemic and institutional weaknesses (Navot, 2016), it spreads in environments where governance structures lack accountability and transparency, which form an environment where unethical practices become normalized (Andersson, 2017), therefore, addressing corruption requires more than just punishing those who break the rules, but it requires a comprehensive reform to strengthen the institutions (Navot, 2016), and target the broader system that allow corruption to spread, rather than focusing on individual wrongdoing (Philp & Dávid-Barrett, 2015).

Ethical leadership play a critical role in shaping the organizational norms and attitudes toward corruption by their demonstration of integrity and fairness which influence the building of a culture that discourages corrupt practices (Hechanova & Manaois, 2020), and influence employee perceptions of fairness, which will affect their sense of responsibility (Potipiroon & Faerman, 2016), which make them more likely to reject corrupt behaviors and align their actions with ethical standards.

How people perceive corruption is influenced by several factors, like their personal experiences, exposure to corruption, societal values, and media (Navot & Beeri, 2018), but when organizations take a strong ethical stance, they can attract support from stakeholders who appreciate and respond to ethical leadership (Ramakrishna Velamuri et al., 2017), and the type of corruption that the organization is trying to resist impact the organization process in building its ethical reputation and how it is positioning itself as a responsible entity (Ramakrishna Velamuri et al., 2017).

Political corruption create environment where it is hard to act ethically, because when corruption is embedded in the system the leaders may find it hard to enforce ethical behaviors, because they will face external pressures against their values. Also, political corruption affects the effect of ethical leadership on corporate reputation, because the organizations operating in

corrupt environments may find it difficult to maintain a positive public image, which lead to the fourth and fifth hypothesis (*see* Figure 1: Conceptual Framework).
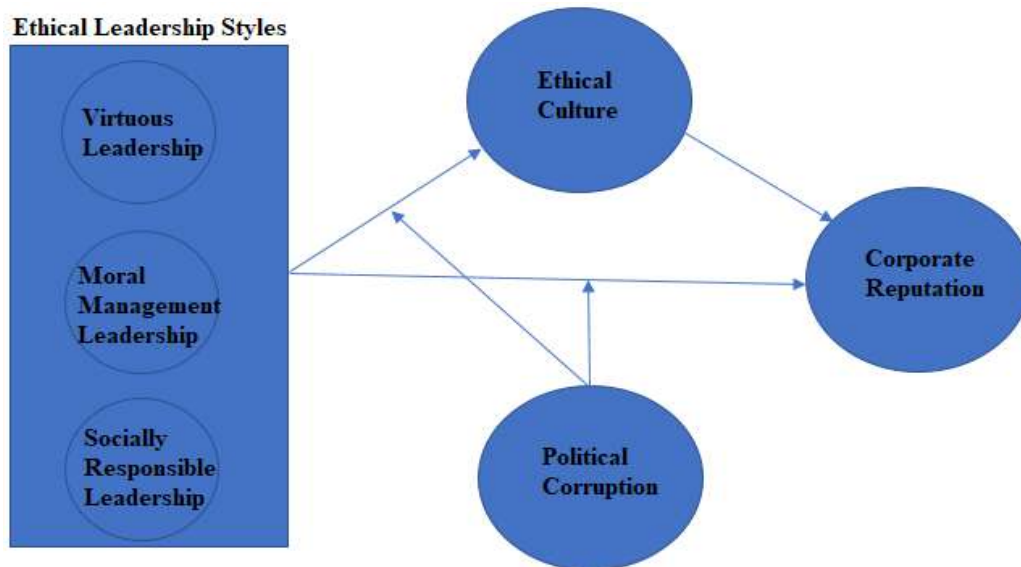
Conceptual Model/Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model examines the relationships between ethical leadership styles, ethical culture, corporate reputation, and political corruption. Ethical leadership styles positively enhance and foster ethical culture and corporate reputation. Ethical culture in turn enhances corporate reputation. However, political corruption moderates the relationship between ethical leadership styles and both ethical culture and corporate reputation by weakening these relationships. The model emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership and the challenges in the existence of corruption in achieving ethical culture and the reputation of the organization.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study contribute to ethical leadership and corporate reputation literature by highlighting how ethical leadership fosters ethical culture and enhances reputation under the moderating effect of political corruption which weaken these relationships.

For practitioners, this study emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership in resisting corruption to achieve a corporate reputation by its effect in enhancing and fostering ethical culture and corporate reputation.

This study highlights the critical role of ethical leadership in fostering ethical culture and enhancing corporate reputation, by shaping the organization norms and stakeholder perceptions. However, the study also emphasizes the moderating effect of political corruption and its negative effect in weakening these positive relationships.

Understanding these relations is important for organizations which are trying to maintain ethical integrity and strong reputation to achieve competitive advantage. Future research may explore the impact of ethical leadership in different cultures, especially in high corrupt environments. Additionally, investigating other moderating factors, such as regulatory frameworks could provide deeper insights.

This study also recommends for ethical management practitioners respect the beliefs, moral values, dignity and rights of others. By being trustworthy, honest, charismatic, fair and not being affected by external pressures from the political corruption system to undermine the company's reputation.

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