ADDRESSING INTEGRITY IN THE WORKPLACE: STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING ETHICAL BEHAVIOR AMONG EMPLOYEES

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Abstract*: Integrity in the workplace plays a pivotal role in maintaining organizational success and fostering ethical behavior among employees. This study investigates the challenges organizations face in promoting integrity and the strategies that can be implemented to enhance ethical practices. The problem lies in the prevalence of unethical behaviors such as fraud, harassment, and corruption that continue to undermine organizational values. The objective of this research is to identify effective methods for promoting ethical behavior, with a focus on leadership, training, and organizational policies. The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights from employee experiences with quantitative assessments of ethical outcomes. The results suggest that ethical leadership, structured training programs, and robust policies are critical in mitigating unethical behaviors and improving organizational culture. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of fostering a culture of integrity, which not only ensures long-term sustainability but also strengthens trust with stakeholders and enhances overall employee morale.*

Keywords*: Integrity, Ethical Leadership, Organizational Culture*

Introduction

According to the researcher Ahmad, Daud, Anis, & Yusoff (2021), "integrity is a crucial element in ensuring the success of an organization's vision, mission and motto. Violations of integrity, reflected in employee misconduct within the organization, indicate poor governance, weak employee discipline and a low level of professionalism among the workforce". According to Gardiner (2024), we can determine that integrity is often viewed as one of the most important and highly sought after characteristic of both employees and employers. According to the research McCurry (2024), we can determine from the global perspective that one in five respondent admits that their organization has had a significant integrity incident, such as a major fraud, data privacy and breach or regulatory compliance violation, in the last two years. The fact captured in this statistic, therefore, paints a depressing picture of the nature of the continued and rampant struggle organizations continuously endure in nurturing an integrity culture. Poor conduct, for example extortion, sexual terrorism or fraud can bring about painful penalties for the people involved and firms, regulatory punishments and loss of business reputation. As a result, organization are going back to the drawing board to ensure they institute ethics programme and encourage training of cultures of integrity are focused at developing standards of ethical behavior, promoting and encouraging communication that is ethical and most importantly cultivating ethical voices. Building integrity as a standard organizational value system is one way to reduce risks and build truth in the organizations.

On a local level, the importance of integrity in the workplace is equally important and so the promotion of its values also receives due attention. According to the Mat, Yunus, Mahmood, Mohamad, & Aziz (2022), because of the rise in unethical behaviour, attempts to improve integrity with codes of ethics, norms and regulations aimed at establishing an effective civil service delivery system in the organizations have intensified. For instances, in Malaysia workplace misconduct and corruption have attracted the government and anti-corruption agencies. According to Diyana Isamudin (2024), the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) said 20 per cent of complaints received between 2022 and July 2024 were on public and private procurement matters. According to the researcher Hassan, Ansari, Rehman, & Moazzam (2021), we can determine that among public sector employees, ethical leadership is related to greater intrinsic motivation, effort and willingness to report problems. Lack of ethical standard behaviors includes such practices as financial fraud, misleading advertisement, evading emission tests or discriminating employers can harm organizational image, productivity and stakeholder confidence. Solving these local issues entails that organizations in Malaysia apply the global ethics standards while at the same time devising some ways that can work withing the culture and legal framework. Malaysian companies can strengthen an environment conducive to acting with integrity and which simultaneously allows employees to contribute positively to the workplace, by offering ethics training, clear reporting mechanisms and supportive leaders.

According to the Global Business Ethics Survey, employees who feel pressured in their workplace are twice as likely to see unethical behaviors than those without such pressure. The type of misconduct illustrated includes instances of abusive behavior, conflict of interest, corruption, discrimination, sexual harassment and safety regulations. The incidence of observed misconduct among employees under pressure is significantly higher for each category. This could imply a greater chance of ethical violation when there exists a high stress environment; therefore, organizations need to resolve workplace pressure to construct a more ethical culture. According to the researcher National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2024-2028, analysis of public complaints received that are three main categories of public dissatisfaction with federal

ministries during 2019-2023 period which are the misappropriation of client funds, enforcement failures and noncompliance with standard operating procedures (SOP's). Collectively, these issues constituted 56% of all public complaints received in 2019. In 2023, complaints on these three issues jumped to 72%.

Discussion

Integrity and Ethical Behavior in the Workplace Organizational integrity and ethical behavior encompass a set of guidelines on the ethical ways that people can transact business and relate to their subordinates, peers, supervisors, clients and the rest of the community in the business organization. According to the Smith et al. (2022), integrity influences staff who display positive behavior, such as non-inventive behavior and non-actionable counterproductive activities, including theft, vandalism, unauthorized breaks, and unauthorized absence of work. Integrity is about practicing moral principles even in situations where one can easily go uncaught while ethical behavior in interpersonal relations. However, ethical behavior explains a set of personal and organizational behaviors that conform to the rules of operation in society. According to the Brown & Trevino (2020), ethical behavior workplace elements may be characterized by respect of other people's rights, privacy and principles of equity in taking decisions. According to the research Huberts (2018), other unethical behaviors, such as sideline activities, fraud and private time misbehavior lead to legitimate and credible system of the political and administrative system are decisive indicators to conflict of interest. Upholding integrity in the workplace does not only minimize unethical incidences but also has the organizations standings in the market. In the nutshell, integrity and ethical behavior among the civil servants are very crucial role to nurture become nature so that Malaysia might have a competitive and developed nation.

Role of integrity and ethical behavior among the employee and employers in the workplace

Integrity and ethical behavior within the working environment can promote a healthy organizational climate, equitable relations and confidence inside and outside organizations. According to the Cheng, Liu & Zhou (2023), psychology employee is an important psychological mechanism and cognitive process for employees' mediating the variety of leadership styles and employees' work behaviors in organizations. For employees, integrity entails practicing integrity and ethical behavior when performing any other corporate activities interacted with the public in the organization. Ethical behavior actions should always be pursued in order to ensure that the reputation of the organization is proper.

The role of ethics for employers does not entail just individual behavior, it is much more comprehensive by defining the sort of environment fairness, inclusiveness and respect for all people be embraced and nurtured. According to the Ahmad & Khan (2023), the association between ethical leadership and employees' behavior has also been shown to be positive in ethical leadership. This creates the environment for work that discourages unethical behaviour among employees and leaders who emphasize fair treatment and reveal information are more inclined to nurture a work environment that discourages unethical behavior among the employees. According to the Ruiz-Palomino, Martinez-Canas & Banon-Gomis (2021), organizations that create a responsible climate are capable of counteracting the bleak consequences of unethical leadership on employees development and their intention to remain with the organization.

Important of having the integrity and ethical behavior in the workplace

An effective reason why integrity and ethical behavior are crucial in the workplace one of the main essential reasons being that it creates a trustworthy environment. According to the Vivekananda & Meenakshi (2024) , honesty is the building block of trust and credibility because others trust the truthful communication and behaviour of people to create a positive relationship. People find integrity when they are honest with themselves, and then with others when they align their actions to their values and believer of individuals to form positive relationships. Integrity is achieved when people do what they say and say what they do when they're honest with themselves as well as others. High levels of employee engagement, motivation and job satisfaction are found in ethically minded work environments because employees are more likely to feel respected and valued when that organization adheres to high standards of integrity. According to the Radu (2023), a positive workplace cultures helps employees learn, be included and feel well and support the values and aims of the organization. On the other hand, while the moral awareness for the unethical behavior is low for those with higher performance goals, people with high performance goals but unethical tendency are usually focused to just few things, which may result in lower moral awareness.

Furthermore, it is also the factor that helps to maintain the reputation and also the success of the organization. According to the Bag, Srivastava, Westgate, Gupta, & Wilmot (2024), necessity of ethical behaviour in companies, meeting stakeholders' expectations, creating leverage of corporate ethical identity as a strategic advantage and contribution to responsible business practices and sustainability that are growing increasingly important in today's business environment. According to the Acc Kim & Thapa (2018), suggest that ethical leadership impacts CSR through many other factors such as company size, structure and culture. Therefore, we view organizational culture as mediating ethical lead. However, unethical practices tend to land the company in legal problems, financial penalties, and painful damage to their reputation and the performance of service-based organizations.

In addition, an enviable integrity and ethical behavior in the workplace allows compliance with law and regulation. Ethical behavior involves stopping employees and employers from using practices that run the chance of causing the violation or lawsuit. According to the Duxbury & Higgins (2022), crucial for not only avoiding legal penalties but also for protecting the company's image and retaining stakeholder trust. Failure to follow regulations because of immoral behavior can face a lot of consequences. Hefty fines, operational shutdowns, and criminal charges filed against organization or its executives are among the legal violations.

Impact of lack of integrity and unethical behavior among employees

Decreased Employee Morale and Job Satisfaction

Employee morale is one of the most immediate effects of unethical behaviour. If employees see unethical things like it on favoritism or dishonest, they can give feelings of disillusioned and not satisfied. According to the De Clercq, Haq, Azeem, & Ahmad (2019), have supported job dissatisfaction as a condition where an employee is dissatisfied with his job. Loss of morale can cause high turnover rate, absenteeism and a low level of commitment towards organisational goals. If employees don't trust their peers or leaders, it can make employees less prone to working to their full potential and therefore perform less overall. Employees may begin to perceive their efforts as undervalued or misaligned with organizational values, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and disengagement from their roles. Over time, this deterioration contributes to a culture of disillusionment and increased turnover. Moreover, staff may feel

unsupported or even complicit if leadership fails to address ethical concerns, deepening the sense of organizational detachment (Alrawadieh, Alrawadieh, & Alon, 2023).

Trust Erosion and Impact on Team Dynamics

A successful team or organization can't be built unless you have trust. In this case, the integrity is broken, and unethical behavior is allowed to circulate, and the erosion of trust on colleagues occurs very quickly. This causes team members to wary of others of their team, putting them at a lower level of collaboration and communication. According to the Johnson and McLaughlin (2023), point out how unethical behavior disrupts the harmony of teams, and at solving problems efficiently. Working with no trust of one another in the work environment prevents the team from innovating, sharing ideas, and collaboration. The organisation's inability to compete in the market is due to the lack of trust. Employees may withhold input, avoid joint problem-solving, or question the intentions behind colleagues' actions. These micro-level breakdowns in interpersonal relationships eventually scale up to undermine team cohesion and productivity. A culture that does not enforce ethical norms inadvertently promotes suspicion, limiting innovation and slowing strategic progress (Kong, Dirks, & Ferrin, 2023).

Legal and Financial Repercussions

The consequences of the unethics behaviour can be very serious for an organisation, in that it can have financial or legal impacts. The cost of some forms of misconduct carry serious prices: For example, fraud, discrimination, harassment and other misconduct can involve costly lawsuits, fines, and settlements. There are also companies that do not respond to unethical behavior that could face regulatory violations which can be combined with more severe financial penalties and harm to their reputation. According to the Red Flag Reporting (2023), Laws such as fraud, embezzlement, environmental misconduct can lead to very hefty fines, lawsuits, and often destroy a company's reputation. If there are any positive financial benefits that can be acquired in the short term by engaging in unethical behaviors, than the financial cost that unethical behavior brings on the organization is far more elevated. In addition, organisations may incur reputational costs that indirectly affect profitability, such as customer attrition or reduced access to capital. Sound ethical governance, therefore, is not only a moral imperative but also a safeguard against systemic risk (Caldwell et al., 2023).

Damage to Organizational Reputation and Customer Trust

Nowadays, companies' reputation is the most valuable asset one has. The bad publicity that accompanies unethical behavior is irreparable harm to the organization's brand image. Consumers want and demand transparency and ethically conscious behavior from those companies they support, which can have a negative impact on this damage spreading into customer relationships. According to the Raufeisen, Wulf, Köcher, Faupel, & Holzmüller (2019), complex crisis spillover can be a crisis in which several (and at least two) organisations of the same industry commit misconduct, causing changes to stakeholders' evaluation of other organizations of the same industry even if those organizations were not involved in transgressive' behavior. The ethical brand seems to lose sales and profit when the customers conceit that the company is unethical. But in addition, investors and stakeholders may pull out support, creating yet another fatal financial blow.

Internal Conflict and Organizational Instability

Internal conflict can also arise because of unethical behavior and a lack of integrity of such an organization. If employees behave unethically, there is likely to be an opponent's environment of rivalry and resentment and enmity between colleagues or between management and staff.

According to the Neupane (2022), when employees of a company have varied opinions about the objectives of the business, it can be quite hard for all of them to stand at the same page. It also may cause an out of alignment between the organizational objectives and employee actions. Unethical behavior causes instability within the organization that narrows its ability to efficiently make decisions and subsequently stunt growth and progress. In extreme cases, toxic subcultures can form, challenging managerial authority and undermining strategic alignment. The resultant instability affects not only daily operations but also long-term organizational resilience and adaptability (Zhou et al., 2023).

Finally, no employee can be accused of lacking integrity or behaving unethically if the culture of an organization is poor, employee morale is low, the organization is in a state of financial threat, or the organization lacks reputation. Unethical behavior is allowed to persist and it breeds an environment: trust is broken, collaboration is lost; employees are disengaged. Additionally, organizations that do not tackle the issue of unethical engagements have great risks to legal, financial, as well as reputation related. Promoting integrity and ethical behavior in an organization makes for a positive, productive work environment; increases employee satisfaction; and safeguards that organization's future. Taking a moral stand on ethical behavior is not an act of morality, it is a fundamental part of business that has to be addressed.

Challenges in promoting the strategies integrity and ethical behavior among in the workplace

Working in an Organization without Strong Leadership Commitment

A major obstacle to building an environment that will encourage ethical behaviour and integrity is lack of commitment from top management. Ethics is a top-down thing, and if there is no clear support or commitment from the top leadership it is hard to instill ethics standards through the whole organization. If leaders don't live up to that kind of behavior, or don't have ethical policies, it sends a message to people that integrity is not valued. According to the Yustinus Budi Hermanto, Veronika Agustini Srimulyani, & Didik Joko Pitoyo (2024), strong leadership takes place by means of transformation of organizational culture and practices to deal with social challenges and changes through changing individuals. It is to seek to use it to influence behavior towards positive organizational results. Ethics is also important for leaders to communicate and demonstrating an ethical behavior themselves because if leaders will be effective in inducing positive behavior among the different employees, hence it is very important for their ethical behavior. Without this commitment, employees may erroneously think that ethical standards are an empty, pointless thing, which will then result in unethical work practices. Ultimately, without moral guidance from leadership, the ethical tone of the workplace weakens, discouraging long-term integrity initiatives (Dadhich & Bhal, 2023).

Resistance to Change in the Employees

Resistance to change by employees is another major obstacle toward promoting ethical behaviour. There are many employees who are used to certain practises or behaviour that they consider to be part of the organizational culture. Sometimes to adoption of a more ethically minded approach can run into resistance, in particular where it attacks existing norms or beliefs. According to the Elgohary & Abdelazyz (2020), resistance to change including resistance to modern technology, fear of loss of control, feelings of insecu-rity, fear of inability to implement change and fear of increasing workload in implementing an e government system were found in performance dimensions (efficiency and effectiveness). To overcome this resistance, careful communication, training and a clear sharing of benefit (of behavior) for both individual and the

organization is required. Rather than welcoming new guidelines, some staff may cling to familiar practices, creating friction in the transition process. Overcoming this resistance requires deliberate communication strategies and efforts to demonstrate how ethical conduct enhances both personal and collective outcomes (Falkenberg & Herremans, 2023).

Limited of Resource for Ethical Training and Support

One of the challenges in encouraging integrity and ethical behavior is that there is limited resources that an organization can devote towards (ethics) training and support system. Although many companies have ethics programs in place, most of them have been underfunded or have not had wide enough expanse to be effective. Without access to workshops, mentorship, or reporting tools, staff may default to expedient or harmful choices under pressure. A resource-constrained approach can also signal that ethics is a low priority, further undermining the integrity infrastructure (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2023). According to the Baker (2020), found organizations to be more likely to lead to positive ethical behavior outcomes when investing in comprehensive training programs, and in establishing support systems such as ethics committees or hotlines. However, it remains a challenge for organizations to make the appropriate resources available for these programs in industries where profit margins are thin or ethical behavior is secondary.

Inconsistent Ethical Policies Enforcement

Another barrier that stands in the way to encourage integrity at the workplace is that ethical policies are not consistently enforced. The ability to prevent employees from questioning the organization's commitment to ethics and integrity is jeopardized by lack of consistency of enforcing ethical standards. If enforcement is not consistent, this can make employees think that they are being treated in a 'favouritism or 'unjust' manner and this kills employee trust and morale. According to the Falkenberg & Herremans (2019), inconsistent enforcement of ethical policies only amplify an uncertainty and create an equity issue among the organization. It is up to the organizations to follow up on this challenge and make sure ethical guidelines are applied as fairly and uniformly as across levels within all segments of the workforce regardless of position or tenure. Employees may interpret selective enforcement as favoritism or hypocrisy, leading to disengagement or even retaliatory behavior. To maintain credibility, ethical standards must be applied uniformly, regardless of rank or department. Only through impartiality can policies truly shape behavior (Kaptein, 2023).

Cultural and Social Differences

But it can also be difficult to promote ethical behavior in organizations containing a diverse workforce, with those cultural and societal differences. Employees working in different cultures could have various perceptions in what is considered to be ethical or unethical. Such differences could create a problem of conflict and misunderstanding about organizational values. For instance, attitudes toward authority, honesty, or conflict resolution can vary significantly based on cultural upbringing. Organizations must carefully balance universal ethical principles with sensitivity to local norms, requiring adaptable policies and culturally competent leadership (Shao et al., 2023). According to the Rapp et al (2021), examining social feedback processing among diverse adolescents in multiple units of analysis might lessen the ability to comprehend and mitigate social anxiety related disparities. Therefore, we need to build an immutable framework of ethics and universal moral values (integrity, honesty, and fairness) on top of which and even though there are cultural nuances of a global work force, it can be adapted.

In a conclusion, it's not easy to proceed with integrity and ethical behavior in the workplace. Implementing successful ethical strategies is difficult because there is no strong leadership commitment for such an idea, resistance to change, inconsistent enforcement of policies, cultural differences, complex ethical decision making and limited resources. Unfortunately however, organizations that fail at overcoming these challenges by creating a culture of ethical leadership, allowing for continuous training, enforcing consistency in policy enforcement and resource allocation will not be able to inculcate integrity nor ethical behavior in their employees. Finally, the whether the strategy is ethical or not depends on the organization to sanctify an environment, where ethical conduct is also encouraged and considered central to long term success.

Conclusion & Recommendation

The integrity and integrity, ethical behavior is still at the core of organizational success and sustainability. Keep these values in place and you'll have a trustworthy work environment, take that stress off the employees, as well as avoid some legal or reputation risks. If integrity is a priority for your organization, accountability becomes a secondary benefit for both internal dynamics and interactions with your external stakeholders.

On international level, what is adhering to international frameworks like OECD guidelines and ISO 37001, especially when the former was inspired by ISO 37001 on effective anti-bribery management systems, is a means for a common approach to ethical governance. But this equally requires localized strategies. Regional specific ethical concerns are addressed via the Employment Act 1955 and anti corruption frameworks of the Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission (MACC) in Malaysia, for example. That is, by taking these tailored approaches, organizations will also satisfy both the global standard and local cultural values.

Additionally, such organizations are strengthened through their employees' satisfaction and stakeholders trust, which in turn results in stable and innovation growth. Companies that are ethical can get good people to come and work for them so that productivity levels will improve and create an inclusive work environment that will attract and retain high energy workers in large numbers. Surviving globalization requires embedding integrity into our business DNA and businesses that do can maintain their integrity even amid the complexities of globalization. In reality, integrity is not just a good moral obligation, but something strategic imperative. Organizations with integrated ethical behaviour are able to better meet its long term goals, adapt to market changes and the sustaining its competitive edge in a globalised economy.

An absolute priority for organizations is to have a full blown Code of Ethics which outlines appropriate business conduct thereby mitigating potential conflicts of interest and also compliance with data protection rules. We need this code to become part of the employee on boarding process and standards repeated during frequent training sessions. However, emphasising the importance of these principles in daily business can allow companies to start working towards a culture of ethical behavior from below.

There is another crucial step to develop a whistle-blowing mechanism. A system like this follows standards like ISO 37002, and is a safe, confidential way in which to report misconduct, without fear of retaliation. Not only is this a means of keeping account but also, trust is built amongst people working in the organization, they become transparent and become more inclusive in nature.

Ethical behavior is dependent on leadership. Leadership by example is vital, and integrity in making the decision and interaction is vital for Managers to show. The other thing organizations can do to further reinforce this is embed ethical practices in performance evaluation and rewarding employees who embody ethical practices. Such steps strengthen organizational commitment for congruence of personal values with the organization's ethical picture.

It should finally also be done regular audits and assessments of ethical programs to uncover issues for improvement. To reduce the unethical behavior associated with excessive pressure environments, reducing stressors at work such as excessive workloads and unclear expectations is equally just as important. Stakeholder communication is not only transparent, but also greatly boosts credibility and also serves as a way to make sure that ethical standards are a priority in all organizational activities.

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