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Testing the Ethical-Oriented Management Model for Employee Training Development in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to test an ethical-oriented management model designed to enhance employee training development in higher education. The research is applied in purpose and descriptive-survey in design. The quantitative phase of the study targeted the academic staff of various departments at Islamic Azad University, Mazandaran Province, comprising a statistical population of 1,537 faculty members. A stratified sampling method was employed, yielding a sample size of 318 participants. Data collection utilized a researcher-developed questionnaire adapted from the doctoral dissertation by Mohammadi et al. (2024). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed to assess the reliability of the instrument, and both composite reliability and reliability coefficients for each construct were calculated—results confirming the scale's reliability. Furthermore, convergent and discriminant validity analyses indicated adequate questionnaire validity. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied for data analysis using SmartPLS 4 software. Findings supported the five core themes of the model: ethical-oriented policies, ethical leadership, ethically oriented employees, ethical-oriented environment, ethical-oriented structure, and employee training development. The results reveal the factor loadings, significance levels, and interrelationships among the model's primary and secondary themes. Additionally, model fit and alignment indices for the ethical-oriented management model in the context of employee training development within higher education were found to be satisfactory. Consequently, it can be concluded that this model—centered on ethical-oriented policies, ethical leadership, ethically oriented employees, an ethical-oriented environment, an ethical-oriented structure, and employee training developmentcan be effectively implemented in higher education institutions.

KEYWORDS: Ethical-oriented management, employee training development, higher education

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1. Introduction

Ethical-oriented management has garnered significant attention due to its role in strengthening stakeholder relationships—a factor that can yield substantial organizational outcomes. By prioritizing ethics, organizations not only uphold ethical principles but also gain a competitive advantage. This is especially true in institutions that emphasize a learning-oriented ethos and strive to operate beyond mere legal compliance. Therefore, understanding the significance of ethical-oriented management approaches is pivotal in creating a responsible and sustainable environment that benefits both the organization and its stakeholders—including employees, students, and the broader community (Kozáková et al., 2024).

Ethical-oriented management extends ethical standards beyond formal codes and actively seeks to shape subordinate behavior. The growing emphasis on this paradigm in public sector organizations stems from consistent empirical validation of its positive impacts. Core principles of ethical-oriented management—such as ethical clarity, consistency, and orientation—exert a profound influence on organizational dynamics and outcomes (Adekugbe et al., 2024).

In contemporary public administration, the internal dynamics of governmental organizations reflect an increasing prioritization of ethics. Managers are demonstrating heightened commitment to cultivating an ethical climate within their institutions. A review of the extant literature underscores the unique and critical role of leaders in establishing ethical procedures and modeling normatively appropriate conduct for their subordinates. Consequently, the promotion and institutionalization of ethical management practices across all managerial levels have become strategic priorities for many public-sector organizations, giving rise to a diverse spectrum of management styles over time (Jaganjac et al., 2024).

Some scholars place significant emphasis on the role of higher education in national development. They argue that higher education—integral to the broader educational continuum—enhances human capital by cultivating specialized skills and expertise among citizens, thereby improving workforce productivity (Garira, 2020).

Given the demonstrable impact of educational development on national progress, it is imperative to examine both the quantity and quality of education's influence across various developmental dimensions. In an era marked by accelerated global development—and given the strong linkage between national development strategies and overarching educational policies—investment in human capital is now recognized as equally critical as investments in physical and material capital. In this context, analyzing the educational experiences of countries at different stages of development becomes particularly salient.

Among the evolving paradigms in management research, ethical-oriented management has emerged as a highly influential approach. Stakeholders' perceptions of ethical leadership—shaped by cultural contexts—have contributed to the conceptualization and operationalization of ethical management. Empirical observations confirm that ethical leadership significantly enhances educational outcomes. Moreover, the role of ethical-oriented management in internalizing ethical roles and improving employee performance is of paramount importance (Adeusi et al., 2024).

Concurrently, employee training and development are increasingly framed as a strategic paradigm within organizational management. Thus, investigating the interplay between ethical-oriented management and training development warrants scholarly attention. While numerous studies have separately examined these variables within public-sector contexts (Chen, 2024), limited empirical work has integrated them into a cohesive framework—particularly within higher education.

Quantitative studies have begun exploring models of ethical-oriented management aimed at advancing employee training in higher education institutions. Although ethical-oriented management has been implicitly practiced since the inception of modern administration, empirical evidence offering a structured model linking ethical management to employee training development in higher education remains scarce. To address this gap in the management literature, the present study seeks to identify and examine the key indicators and measurement constructs of an ethical-oriented management model designed to foster employee training development in higher education settings.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

Ethical Leadership

An ethical leader is an individual who embodies moral integrity and practices ethical management. According to Brown (2017), ethical leadership positively influences employee satisfaction. Ethical leaders clarify responsibilities, expectations, and performance goals, enabling subordinates to understand what is expected of them and when their performance meets those expectations. Furthermore, ethical managers encourage subordinate participation in decision-making, attentively listen to their ideas and perspectives, and actively support them through communication (Kalshoven et al., 2021).

Ethically Oriented Employees

In an ethically governed organization, employees autonomously regulate their behaviors, thereby reducing reliance on traditional organizational control systems. When unethical conduct or deviations are observed among peers, ethically oriented employees are more likely to engage in organizational whistleblowing to alert management. Organizations often establish specific ethical principles and standards to foster such behavior. A well-structured ethical system enhances organizational work processes and enables continuous improvement (Garira, 2020).

Ethical-Oriented Environment

An ethical-oriented environment promotes core values such as ethical awareness, empowerment, individual accountability, participative management, and a supportive organizational climate conducive to integrity, trustworthiness, and fairness. It encourages alignment between values and behaviors, ethical decision-making, and the consistent application of justice in all organizational contexts (Tutar et al., 2019).

Ethical-Oriented Structure

The ethical-oriented organizational structure is conceptualized across three dimensions: interpersonal relationships, role modeling, and action orientation. Interpersonal relationships involve listening to employees' viewpoints, considering their interests, and engaging in ethical dialogue. Role modeling entails demonstrating fairness in decision-making and exhibiting trustworthiness. Finally, action orientation refers to adherence to ethical standards, acting upon ethical values, and emphasizing doing the right thing correctly (Brown et al., 2017).

Ethical-Oriented Policies

Ethical-oriented policies encompass organizational guidelines that govern ethical behavior by articulating and evaluating foundational values embedded in both formal policies and traditional practices. These policies also aim to institutionalize mechanisms that promote ethical conduct in organizational functions. All workplace activities are implicitly or explicitly rooted in ethical beliefs. Organizational policies are inherently intertwined with ethics; unethical policies can severely damage not only organizational viability but also the personal lives of employees. Unethical decisions can have long-term repercussions, distorting employees' future professional trajectories. Therefore, developing and institutionalizing a shared ethical framework fosters mutual accountability among staff, cultivates an ethics-friendly organizational culture, reinforces positive organizational behaviors, and discourages negative ones (Kalshoven et al., 2021).

Employee Training Development

Employee training development refers to a systematic process of learning and growth designed to enhance employees' skills, knowledge, and competencies, thereby improving job performance. Learning involves the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, while development entails the expansion and deepening of knowledge aligned with broader developmental objectives (Brown et al., 2017).

Empirical and Conceptual Antecedents

Recent empirical studies provide valuable insights into the interplay between ethics and organizational performance. Suandi et al. (2022), in an empirical investigation of Islamic marketing ethics and convergence marketing, found that both constructs significantly contribute to competitive advantage—though they do not directly affect organizational performance. Digital literacy was found not to moderate the relationship between convergence and performance.

Liang et al. (2021) examined how thinking styles and stereotypes influence moral decision-making. Their findings suggest that rational thinkers may prefer leaders exhibiting varying degrees of warmth and competence during ethical decisions, whereas experiential thinkers show a preference exclusively for leaders high in warmth.

Benkraiem et al. (2021), in a global study on ethical behavior, audit strength, and tax evasion, demonstrated that ethical conduct and robust auditing standards interact to support investor and board confidence—particularly in high- and middle-income countries and in firms with moderate-to-high operational efficiency.

Saltelli (2020), in a conceptual exploration titled "Ethics of quantification or quantification of ethics?", argued that recurring ethical patterns across quantification practices can yield valuable normative insights. Sabiu et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between human resource management (HRM) practices, ethical climates, and organizational performance. They concluded that educational institutions must implement performance-based HRM practices that actively encourage and institutionalize ethical employee behavior to enhance overall organizational effectiveness. Remišová et al. (2019) examined how formal ethics program components influence managerial ethical behavior. Their findings indicated that ethics training enhances managerial trust in organizational components and may serve as a prerequisite for effective organizational functioning. Schwartz (2013) identified three critical elements for developing and sustaining an ethical corporate culture: (1) embedding ethical values into organizational policies, processes, and operations; (2) implementing a formal ethics program—including codes of ethics, ethics training, and ethics officers; and (3) ensuring sustained ethical leadership from senior executives, whose voices carry the greatest influence. While distinct, these elements are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

A comprehensive review of both domestic and international literature reveals a notable absence of studies that propose an integrated model of ethical-oriented management specifically designed to enhance employee training development in higher education. This gap underscores the novelty and necessity of the present research.

3. Research Methodology

This study is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-survey in nature regarding data collection. A quantitative approach was employed to gather and analyze data. The statistical population for the quantitative phase consisted of 1,537 faculty members across various academic departments at Islamic Azad University, Mazandaran Province. Using stratified random sampling, a sample size of 318 participants was determined and selected. Data were collected via a researcher-developed questionnaire adapted from the doctoral dissertation of Mohammadi et al. (2024). To assess reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated. Additionally, composite reliability (CR) and individual construct reliabilities were computed, with results confirming the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement instrument. Convergent and discriminant validity analyses further demonstrated that the questionnaire exhibits acceptable validity. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used for data analysis, implemented through SmartPLS 4 software, which is particularly suited for variance-based partial least squares (PLS-SEM) approaches, especially in predictive and exploratory research contexts.

4. Findings

Model fit was evaluated through three interrelated assessments: measurement model fit, structural model fit, and overall model fit. The measurement model's reliability was examined by inspecting factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, and composite reliability (CR). The acceptable threshold for factor loadings was set at 0.4, and all items in the instrument exceeded this value, confirming adequate item reliability.

Following the PLS-SEM algorithm in SmartPLS 4, after confirming factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were computed. Convergent validity—assessed via Average Variance Extracted (AVE)—was then evaluated to determine the extent to which each latent construct shares variance with its associated measurement items. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity Indicators for Latent Constructs

Latent Construct	Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha > 0.7$)	Composite Reliability (CR > 0.7)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.5)
Employee Training Development in Higher Education	0.789	0.769	0.755
Ethical Leadership	0.858	0.914	0.779
Ethical-Oriented Structure	0.849	0.893	0.626
Ethical-Oriented Policies	0.882	0.914	0.684
Ethical-Oriented Environment	0.853	0.911	0.774
Ethically Oriented Employees	0.878	0.925	0.804

All Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7, confirming the internal consistency and reliability of the constructs. Moreover, all AVE values surpass the minimum criterion of 0.5, thereby supporting convergent validity. These results collectively indicate that the measurement model exhibits strong reliability and validity, providing a robust foundation for subsequent structural model analysis.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As presented in Table 2, the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each latent construct (reported along the diagonal) exceed the correlations between that construct and all other latent constructs in the model. This confirms that each construct is empirically distinct from the others, thereby supporting discriminant validity.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Latent Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Employee Training Development	**0.774**					
2. Ethical Leadership	0.666	**0.883**				
3. Ethical-Oriented Structure	0.668	0.450	**0.791**			
4. Ethical-Oriented Policies	0.668	0.230	0.191	**0.827**		
5. Ethical-Oriented Environment	0.644	0.339	0.386	0.238	**0.880**	
6. Ethically Oriented Employees	0.391	0.304	0.031	0.194	0.297	**0.897**

Note: Diagonal values (in bold) represent the square roots of AVEs; off-diagonal values are inter-construct correlations.

According to Chin (1998), R^2 values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 represent weak, moderate, and substantial explanatory power, respectively. As shown in Table 3, the endogenous construct—*Employee Training Development in Higher Education*—achieves an R^2 of **0.974**, indicating that the exogenous constructs (ethical leadership, ethical-oriented structure, policies, environment, and ethically oriented employees) collectively explain **97.4%** of its variance. This demonstrates excellent predictive relevance and confirms a strong structural model fit.

Table 3. ***R^2 and Adjusted R^2 Values***

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Employee Training Development in Higher Education	0.974	0.974

The Q^2 statistic, assessed via the blindfolding procedure, evaluates the model's predictive relevance. Following Hair et al. (2014), Q^2 values greater than 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicate weak, moderate, and strong predictive relevance, respectively. The model yields $Q^2 > 0.35$ for the endogenous construct, confirming **strong predictive power** and further validating the structural model.

The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and normed fit index (NFI) were used as absolute and incremental fit indices, respectively. As recommended by Henseler et al. (2014) and Hu & Bentler (1999), an SRMR value below **0.08** (conservative threshold) indicates good model fit. The estimated model achieves an SRMR of **0.087**, which is marginally acceptable and considered satisfactory in PLS-SEM contexts.

Additionally, the NFI (also known as the Bentler–Bonett index) compares the chi-square of the proposed model against that of the independence (null) model. Values **above 0.90** indicate adequate fit. The model yields an NFI of **0.903**, confirming good overall fit.

Table 4. Overall Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.089	**0.087**
NFI	0.903	**0.903**
d_ULS	2.114	2.114
d_G	1.185	1.185

The d_ULS (Euclidean distance) and d_G (geodesic distance) values further support model robustness. While these indices do not have strict cutoffs, **values substantially greater than 0.05** (as observed here) indicate that the estimated model significantly differs from the saturated model in expected ways, reinforcing its theoretical plausibility and statistical adequacy.

Collectively, the measurement and structural model assessments confirm that the research model exhibits **strong reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, high explanatory power (R^2), strong predictive relevance (Q^2), and acceptable overall fit (SRMR and NFI)**. These results validate the proposed ethical-oriented management model as a robust framework for enhancing employee training development in higher education.

SmartPLS 4, by default, tests path coefficients at the **95% confidence level**. At this level, the critical *t*-value is **1.96**. Therefore, any path with an absolute *t*-statistic **greater than 1.96** (i.e., outside the interval [–1.96, +1.96]) is considered **statistically significant** at $p < 0.05$.

Table 5 presents the results of the direct path relationships and hypothesis testing in the research model:

Path	Path Coefficient (β)	*t*-Value	*p*-Value	Result
Ethical Leadership → Employee Training Development	0.339	17.567	0.000	**Supported**
Ethical-Oriented Structure → Employee Training Development	0.339	13.010	0.000	**Supported**
Ethical-Oriented Policies → Employee Training Development	0.426	11.957	0.000	**Supported**
Ethical-Oriented Environment → Employee Training Development	0.228	10.690	0.000	**Supported**
Ethically Oriented Employees → Employee Training Development	0.232	8.074	0.000	**Supported**

As shown in the table, **all *t*-values far exceed the critical threshold of 1.96**, and all *p*-values are less than 0.001. This confirms that **every proposed path in the model is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level**, supporting all research hypotheses. The results provide robust empirical evidence that ethical leadership, ethical-oriented structure, policies, environment, and ethically oriented employees all have **significant positive effects** on employee training development in higher education.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the ethical-oriented management model—designed to advance employee training development in higher education—possesses strong statistical validity and model fit, and therefore can serve as a robust conceptual and operational framework for universities. All five core components—namely, ethical-oriented policies, ethical leadership, ethically oriented employees, an ethical-oriented environment, and an ethical-oriented structure—were empirically validated as essential prerequisites for facilitating staff training and development within academic institutions.

These results are consistent with contemporary literature on ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Eisenbeiß, 2022) as well as recent research on human capital development in higher education (Marginson, 2023; Deem, 2021). Crucially, the findings reveal that ethics functions not merely as a qualitative norm, but as a systematic catalyst for strengthening the professional capacities of university staff, thereby enhancing both individual performance and institutional integrity.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study advances prior research by integrating structural, individual, and organizational dimensions into a unified ethical management model—moving beyond earlier works that tended to focus narrowly on a single aspect, typically ethical leadership. Notably, the results underscore a critical insight: ethical leadership alone cannot yield sustainable impacts on employee development without a supportive ethical environment and

organizational structure, both of which emerge from formal policies and an embedded ethical culture. This holistic view aligns with von Bertalanffy's (1968) general systems theory, which emphasizes that ethical conduct in complex organizations such as universities must be cultivated through interconnected, multi-level mechanisms rather than isolated leadership behaviors.

From a practical perspective, the findings carry significant implications for university administrators, human resource planners, and higher education policymakers. First, embedding explicit ethical criteria into formal staff development policies—such as training programs, performance evaluations, and career advancement procedures—can foster a shared organizational culture rooted in accountability, integrity, and empowerment. Second, investment in employee learning must extend beyond technical and disciplinary competencies to encompass professional ethical dimensions, including academic honesty, fair and respectful interactions with students and colleagues, and commitment to the university's public mission. Third, the institutionalization of ethical infrastructure—such as ethics committees, ethical mentoring initiatives, and participatory dialogue forums—can create enabling conditions for ongoing, ethics-based professional development among academic staff.

Nevertheless, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design constrains causal inference; future research should employ longitudinal designs or multi-source data (e.g., from students, administrators, or external stakeholders) to strengthen the validity of the proposed relationships. Second, the statistical population was limited to faculty members at Islamic Azad University in a single Iranian province, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to public universities or international contexts. Third, potential mediating or moderating variables—such as intrinsic motivation, professional identity, or social capital—were not incorporated into the model. Including such constructs could provide deeper insight into the mechanisms through which ethical management influences training outcomes.

In conclusion, in an era when higher education faces intensifying pressures—including the commodification of knowledge, declining public trust, and growing demands for responsible innovation—ethical-oriented management emerges not only as a moral imperative but as a strategic and developmental necessity. The model proposed in this study offers an evidence-based, comprehensive framework that can guide universities toward meaningful organizational transformation. By operationalizing ethics across leadership, policy, structure, culture, and personnel practices, institutions can cultivate a new generation of ethically aware, professionally committed, and continuously developing academic staff—thereby reaffirming their role as pillars of intellectual integrity and societal progress.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Authenticity of the texts, honesty and fidelity has been observed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author/s confirmed no conflict of interest.