

How Poor Leadership Skills Elicit Unethical Behavior: Evidence from Public Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Global political and financial entities have witnessed many scandals linked to leaders' unethical behavior. Previous research suggests that the susceptibility of leaders to act in an unethical way is rooted in various individual, organizational, and social factors. However, unethical leadership is scarcely examined in the context of African countries. This study explores the role of poor leadership skills and qualities in eliciting unethical leadership behavior in Algerian public organizations. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, 15 leaders and managers were included in series of in-depth interviews. The results of the data analysis revealed that poor leadership skills and competencies are critical antecedents of unethical leadership behavior within Algerian public organizations. This study contributes to the ongoing research efforts that seek to identify and minimize the causes of unethical behaviors of leaders across sectors and disciplines. This study provides insights into the construct of unethical leadership and how individual, organizational, and social factors predict leaders' unethical behavior. While there are many studies on the issue of unethical leadership, research on the potential role of poor leadership skills in eliciting unethical behavior is scarce, especially in Algeria. This study found that there is a strong link between skills and competencies of leaders and their ethical behavior within organizational settings. Keywords: Unethical leadership, Unethical behavior, Leadership Skills, Ethics, Algeria.

ABSTRAK

Entitas politik dan keuangan global telah menyaksikan banyak skandal terkait dengan perilaku tidak etis para pemimpin. Penelitian sebelumnya menunjukkan bahwa kerentanan pemimpin untuk bertindak dengan cara yang tidak etis berakar pada berbagai faktor individu, organisasi, dan sosial. Namun, kepemimpinan yang tidak etis jarang diperiksa dalam konteks negara-negara Afrika. Studi ini mengeksplorasi peran keterampilan dan kualitas kepemimpinan yang buruk dalam memunculkan perilaku kepemimpinan yang tidak etis dalam organisasi publik Aljazair. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif eksplorasi, 15 pemimpin dan manajer dilibatkan dalam serangkaian wawancara mendalam. Hasil analisis data mengungkapkan bahwa keterampilan dan kompetensi kepemimpinan yang buruk merupakan anteseden penting dari perilaku kepemimpinan yang tidak etis dalam organisasi publik Aljazair. Studi ini berkontribusi pada upaya penelitian berkelanjutan yang berupaya mengidentifikasi dan meminimalkan penyebab perilaku tidak etis para pemimpin lintas sektor dan disiplin ilmu. Studi ini

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HOW TO CITE:

Benlahcene, A., & Meddour,
H. (2022). How Poor
Leadership Skills Elicit
Unethical Behavior:
Evidence from Public
Organizations. *Jurnal Studi
Pemerintahan*, 13(3)
409-422

ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received: September 2, 2022
Revised: October 12, 2022
Accepted: November 3, 2022

memberikan wawasan tentang konstruksi kepemimpinan yang tidak etis dan bagaimana faktor individu, organisasi, dan sosial memprediksi perilaku tidak etis para pemimpin. Meskipun ada banyak penelitian tentang masalah kepemimpinan yang tidak etis, penelitian tentang peran potensial keterampilan kepemimpinan yang buruk dalam memunculkan perilaku tidak etis masih langka, terutama di Aljazair. Studi ini menemukan bahwa ada hubungan yang kuat antara keterampilan dan kompetensi pemimpin dan perilaku etis mereka dalam pengaturan organisasi.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Tidak Etis, Perilaku Tidak Etis, Keterampilan Kepemimpinan, Etika, Aljazair

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the growing volume of research in moral psychology and behavioral ethics has demonstrated that even good individuals can act in an unethical manner. Examples of these unethical behaviors include deceiving in interpersonal relationships, overstating contributions and performance related to teamwork, cheating on taxes, lying in negotiations, and inflating business reports ([Gino, 2015](#)). In line with this, the present era has witnessed many public scandals linked to the immoral and unethical behaviors of leaders, which has prompted researchers to explore how and when unethical leaders influence their followers and how followers respond to them ([Malik, Nawab, & Shafi, 2022](#)). The current complex and globalized work requires competent and ethical leaders who can steer organizational resources in the right direction. Leaders in any public or private domain play a significant role in determining the success or failure of their organizations ([Nicolaidis & Duho, 2019](#)). Effective and ethical leadership have been linked to a positive influence on organizations. On the other hand, recent studies have shown interest in the meaning and implications of unethical leadership and how it might influence individual and organizational performance. As ethical leaders may have a positive influence on their respective organizations, unethical leaders may have a greater negative influence ([Sam, 2021](#)). Previous research on unethical leadership suggests that the main antecedents of leaders' unethical behavior are related to three main factors: the leader, followers, and organizational environment. Moreover, prior research suggests that unethical leadership behavior is caused by a combi-

nation of complex and entangled individual and situational factors.

Although it is important to understand ethical and unethical practices at all levels of organizations, scrutinizing these practices in the context of leadership is crucial because the range of impact leaders have on the behavior of followers and on shaping organizational culture ([Benlahcene & Ramdani, 2019](#)). The unethical behavior of leaders exerts negative consequences at all organizational levels and for all stakeholders, including leaders and followers, demise, organizational failure, and followers' mistrust ([Chandler, 2009](#); [Pelletier, 2010](#)). Workplace deviance is described as behavior that damages organizations and their members and violates important organizational principles ([Brown & Mitchell, 2010](#)). According to Ciulla (2018), human nature is not always consistent and the circumstances surrounding the context and role of leaders present their own type of temptations ([Ciulla, 2018](#)). Accordingly, a great body of research across various disciplines, including philosophy, management, neuroscience, and social psychology, has attempted to understand why individuals behave in ways inconsistent with their own moral principles or ethical values. These efforts to explore unethical accounts of people's behavior suggest that the antecedents of unethical behavior range from individual differences to situational forces ([Sam, 2021](#); [Thoroughgood, Sawyer, Padilla, & Lunsford, 2018](#)).

The unethical behavior of leaders is similar yet more complex than that of ordinary individuals, and there are various causes for leaders to act unethically, such as incompetence, personality, low organizational identification, threat to their identity, perceived injustice, and financial reasons ([Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010](#)). Given the complexity of the role and context of leadership, it is important to establish a robust understanding of the notion of leadership from different perspectives, not only through the lens of effective leadership. Among these perspectives, researchers should examine failed or bad lead-

ership ([Erickson, Shaw, & Agabe, 2007](#)). Hassan et al. (2022) argued that despite the distinctive and consequential nature of unethical leadership, researchers have made scant attempts to organize the scholarly work in this field in a systematic way which could provide a sound understanding of the phenomenon of unethical leadership from an academic standpoint ([Hassan, Kaur, Muchiri, Ogbonnaya, & Dhir, 2022](#)). Similarly, Malik et al. (2022) posited that research on unethical leadership lags, both empirically and theoretically ([Malik et al., 2022](#)).

Different types of organizations are experiencing many challenges that influence their people and business operations or even their survival, including unethical behaviors, lack of leadership skills, and crises and disasters ([Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020](#)). This study argues that existing research on leaders' unethical behavior provides an insufficient understanding of the key factors and conditions that shape leadership's unethical behavior within organizational settings. Given the high value that organizations and scholars place on leaders' ethical behavior, it is important to understand when and why unethical behavior emerges. While the literature related to leadership unethical behavior and its antecedents is well-established, research on the role of skills and competencies in the ethical behavior of leaders is still in its infancy. Existing studies in this domain have mainly focused on how individual and organizational characteristics, including individual leadership traits, ethics training, and ethics education, elicit or inhibit unethical behavior of leaders. The field of unethical behavior has a limited understanding of how poor leadership skills and competencies may elicit unethical or deviant behavior.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to contribute to the ongoing body of research on unethical leadership by exploring the potential role of leadership skills and competencies in eliciting unethical leadership behavior in Algerian public organizations. Guided by this objective, this study posits the following question: Is there a link between poor leadership skills and un-

ethical behavior among leaders of Algerian public organizations? This study adds value to the academic literature in this area by offering new insights into the nature of unethical leadership behavior. Recognizing the need for further analysis of unethical leadership behavior, this study attempts to extend our knowledge in this growing research area.

RESEARCH METHOD

Studies on the issue of unethical leadership in the Algerian context are scarce, and the different individual, organizational, and social factors that shape (un)ethical leadership are yet to receive sound analysis. This study followed an exploratory qualitative design to investigate the potential role of poor leadership skills and competencies in eliciting unethical leadership behavior within Algerian public organizations. The use of an exploratory qualitative design assists in scrutinizing unmapped social and organizational issues.

The respondents in this study were 15 top managers (14 males, 1 female) from four Algerian public organizations. The age range of the respondents was 32-61 with a range of experience ranging from 5 to 35 years. Participants held roles in different divisions and departments (human resources, finance, environmental protection, administration and logistics, transportation, business development, manufacturing, accounting, and operations). This study used a purposive sampling technique to select participants who could inform the objective of the study. According to Guest et al. (2006), when the objective of research is to explore or describe perceptions, behaviors, or shared beliefs among a relatively homogeneous group of respondents, a sample of 12 will be satisfactory for the study (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). However, following Braun and Clarke (2006) conceptualization of data saturation, the researchers decided that data saturation was reached at 15 interviews and no further respondents were needed. The main criteria for choosing the study participants were years of experience, role or position in a public organization, and will-

ingness to participate in the study.

Leaders' perspectives and views on the role of poor leadership skills and competencies in eliciting unethical leadership behavior were assessed using semi-structured interviews that included a standardized list of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions offer rich data that reflects participants' experiences and perspectives in their social world ([Creswell & Creswell, 2017](#); [Lasch et al., 2010](#); [Qu & Dumay, 2011](#)). The interview guidelines included opening remarks that explained the study's objective to the participants, key concepts, and the confidentiality of the information being collected. The interviews were face-to-face, and the average duration of the interview sessions ranged from 1/2 to 2 hours, depending on the respondents' willingness to add further information.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. In doing so, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was adopted. Following the step-by-step guide suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researchers began by (1) transcribing, organizing, and reading thoroughly within the data. (2) After reading and rereading the transcribed data, the researchers reflected on and wrote down the initial codes and notes. (3) The third phase of this process involves searching for and forming themes. (4) The researchers reviewed and matched the themes with the general nature of the data. (5) Defining, naming, and renaming themes. (6) The final step was to produce the thematic analysis's final report to provide a nuanced and detailed account of each theme. The process of transcribing, analyzing, and reporting was facilitated by the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti 8, which was used to organize the collected data and present the transcribed content into consistent and logical structures.

RESULTS

The main objective of this study was to explore the role of poor leadership skills and competencies in eliciting unethical leadership behavior within the Algerian public organizations. The

thematic analysis of collected data suggested that the lack of leadership skills and competencies are one of the key individual antecedents that elicit unethical behavior among leaders of the Algerian public organizations. Shared views by respondents indicated that several ethical and managerial issues arise in the absence of the required leadership skills and competencies that enable leaders to cope with different challenges and tasks in the organization. See Figure 1 for details.

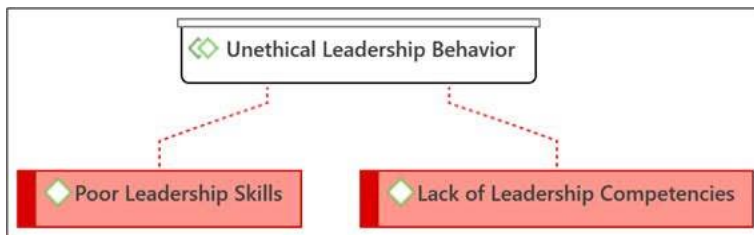


Figure 1. The Role of Poor Leadership skills and Competencies in Eliciting Unethical Leadership Behaviour.

The majority of respondents posited that leaders failed to deal with organizational issues because of their incapability and poor skills. Skills refer to the ability to perform well, to embrace the mental, and physical proficiency to understand or to have knowledge about a particular task. Having skills means a relevant knowledge gained by practice, training, and experiences ([Guzmán, Muschard, Gerolamo, Kohl, & Rozenfeld, 2020](#)). In the absence of the necessary skills and competencies, organizational leaders will not be able to understand and manage workplace issues properly. This issue recurred in interviewees' responses. One of the respondents put it: -

“I think we are in need of leaders who have good competencies pertaining to their roles and field of work because unqualified and unprepared leaders will make mistakes in doing their tasks, they will also lack confidence especially if they were appointed through unfair recruitment ways.”

Another respondent added the following:

“Based on my many years of experience within public sector companies, those who are less competent and lack good leadership qualities are the most ones that get involved in immoral behaviors. These leaders many times abuse their power at the expense of their followers and the company.”

Another interviewee highlighted the link between the ineffective recruitment system and the problem of unqualified leaders and how this factor impacted the quality of leaders within Algerian public organizations. This view is uttered in the following quote: -

“Apparently, the situation is not promising; we have problems within this sector with regards to leadership. This situation is mainly because of the reckless and ineffective recruitment system. As a result of that, most of the time unqualified people get into position of power.”

Another respondent stressed the need for competent and responsible leaders within Algerian public organizations:

“State-owned companies need competent leaders and managers; it also requires leaders who are aware of their responsibilities. As we mentioned earlier, this will not happen unless we all work together for that purpose as companies, society, and educational institutions.”

“Leaders who are weak and lack proper leadership skills are very often trying to abuse their followers and use their positions for personal gains”

One interviewee stressed the necessity for competent leaders, leaders who have integrity, and those who can depict good role modeling:

“We need leaders who have integrity, also competent leaders which can show the best role model for other members of this sector.”

“A bad and incompetent leader will only create bad culture within the organization”

In addition, the following interviewee referred to the link between the ineffectiveness of leadership training programs and poor skills and competencies of leaders.

“There are programs for development and training for leaders and employees, but the problem is that it is not implemented well, or the quality of these programs is not good. There is a huge lack of training and development with regards to all types of training in the Algerian public sector. Human resource is the weakest point in the Algerian state-owned companies; we need more qualified, competent, and well-trained leaders and followers.”

Within the last three decades, public companies have operated more like the private sector. These companies have changed their traditional model of public administration and followed a business-like model of management for the purpose of improving effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability ([Sudirman, Siswanto, Monang, & Aisha, 2019](#)). However, this paradigm shift in management systems within public organizations lacks proper investment in attracting, attaining, and training individuals with the right set of skills and competencies. Leaders’ cognitive and ethics skills are of great importance to the public sector because they set the ethical tone within workplace and influence the ethical culture of other organizational members.

DISCUSSION

Previous empirical studies have emphasized that effective leaders must acquire a set of skills that allow them to understand and lead their teams and organizations ([Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020](#)). Organizational leaders have the power to make crucial decisions that influence others within the organization. However, leaders deal with the dynamic and complex frameworks of individual, organizational, and social factors. These factors include individual preferences of employees and investors; organizational ethics and tone at the top; and regulations, laws, and policies. Additionally, these factors are evolving dramatically

in response to globalization ([Martínez, Skeet, & Sasia, 2021](#)). According to Nicolaidis and Duho (2019), leaders play an important role in all stages of an organizations' lifetime in establishing organizational values ([Nicolaidis & Duho, 2019](#)). Given the complexity of tasks, organizational culture, and team dynamics, leaders are expected to be competent in managing different organizational forces. According to Lašáková and Remišová (2015), ineffective leadership that results in sabotaging organizational goals is perceived as unethical. In cases where leaders are unable to achieve organizational goals and are incompetent, they contribute to the decline in productivity and performance of organizational members. In this scenario, their leadership is depicted as unethical ([Lašáková & Remišová, 2015](#)).

In this study, repeated statements by interviewees indicated the need for effective and competent leaders in Algerian public organizations. This implies that public organizations in Algeria need to create effective mechanisms to enrich the quality of their leaders. Moreover, interviewees' perspectives suggested that there is a link between poor leadership skills and the ineffective recruitment system, a system that does not accumulate leaders into the organization based on their merits. Additionally, one of the key findings of this study is the link between poor leadership skills and the unethical or deviant behavior of leaders within Algerian public organizations. According to Haq (2011), leadership skills enable the leader to differentiate between ethical and unethical actions in the workplace. Interpersonal, technical, emotional, and social intelligence skills along with conceptual skills play a role in sound understanding of ethical issues, the establishment of ethical values, ethical decision-making, and dissemination. Leaders who are equipped with the right skills can create and ethics oriented public services ([Haq, 2011](#)). The analysis of interviewees' views signalizes the inclination of leaders with poor skills and qualities to act in an unprofessional and immoral way that harms both followers and organizations. The findings

of this study suggest that in the absence of proper leadership skills and competencies, leaders are more prone to act unethically and against the interests of organizational members.

The main implication of the results of this study is the role of poor leadership skills and competencies in eliciting deviant behavior. Previous studies have suggested that several negative characteristics of leaders result in ineffectiveness and anti-organizational behaviors, such as laziness, lack of proper management skills, failure to build teams, inability to think strategically, and spending more time occupied with matters other than their work assignments ([Ogunlana, 2009](#)). This study argues that there is a strong link between poor skills, competencies, and unethical leadership behavior. In a recent study, Sakr et al. (2022) found that higher leadership skills and competencies are positively linked to professional maturity and consequently to ethical reasoning ([Sakr et al., 2022](#)). Incompetent leaders on the other hand are more prone to act in an unethical manner to control their followers or achieve desired results in the organization. One possible explanation for the link between poor skills and leadership unethical behavior is that, in the absence of proper leadership skills, these leaders realize that the only way to exercise their power is through abuse and deviant behavior. While many studies have proven the role leaders' character treats in the propensity to act unethically, there is no previous empirical evidence on the impact of skills and competencies on the behavioral and psychological accounts of leaders.

The issue of how and why people choose to act unethically continues to riddle both organizations and society. Unethical behaviors harm reputations and relationships while also having a damaging impact on organizations ([Harrison, Summers, & Mennecke, 2018](#)). The current study sought to expand our understanding of leadership unethical behavior and its complex antecedents, with a focus on the role of poor leadership skills and competencies that can serve the extant leadership ethics literature. The study shifted the focus of previous studies on the

antecedents of unethical leadership based on the character traits of leaders to the skills and competencies of leadership. In doing so, this study reveals the potential role of poor leadership skills and competencies in inducing unethical and deviant behavior among leaders. Hence, this study provides practical implications for the development of effective and ethical leaders in organizations. This also contributes to ongoing efforts and interventions aimed at minimizing the effects of unethical and deviant behavior on organizations.

The findings of this study contribute to the empirical and theoretical understanding of the antecedents of unethical leadership behavior and highlight the role of poor leadership skills in eliciting unethical and deviant behavior in organizational settings. However, this study had several limitations. First, it was an exploratory qualitative study designed to scrutinize an unmapped area of research. The generalizability of the findings is limited by the relatively small sample size. Second, we cannot conclude that poor leadership skills and competencies are key antecedents of unethical behavior across different organizational contexts. Rather, we propose that there is evidence pointing to the potential role of poor leadership skills and competencies in eliciting unethical behavior. Third, female leadership figures were underrepresented in this study's sample. Hence, while the findings of this study are promising, future research is needed to examine whether these findings differ across sectors, countries, and organizational settings. Further research efforts are needed to examine the link between leaders' skills and unethical behavior within organizational settings.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to explore the potential role of poor leadership skills and competencies in eliciting unethical leadership behavior within Algerian public organizations. The results of the study reveal that poor leadership skills and competencies are one of the critical antecedents of leadership unethi-

cal behavior within Algerian public organizations. The findings of this study suggest that more sound investigations of the role of leadership skills and competencies in eliciting unethical leadership behavior may reveal further sub-themes related to the link between poor leadership skills and leadership abusive behavior towards followers. This study also argues that theoretical and empirical research is needed on the social factors that elicit unethical leadership behavior across different cultural and organizational settings. Social factors refer to the elements and features of the social milieu; these factors are mainly present outside organizational settings and have the potential role of forming the ethical identity of leaders. Despite the practical importance of this issue, systematic research on the role of social factors in inducing or inhibiting unethical leadership behavior is rare.

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