



МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ ОПЫТ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО УПРАВЛЕНИЯ

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

DOI: 10.22363/2312-8313-2026-13-1-118-133


EDN: RUJNAF

Research article / Научная статья

Ethical leadership strategies and employees' engagement: Insights from the Nigerian public sector

Abasilim D. Ugochukwu  , David O. Oluwabimpe 

Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria

 ugochukwu.abasilim@covenantuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract. Ethical leadership has emerged as a key driver of employee engagement, particularly in the public sector, where unethical practices often weaken trust, reduce motivation, and compromise organizational performance. This study investigates the relationship between ethical leadership strategies and employee engagement in Ado/Odo Ota Local Government Council, Ogun State, Nigeria, while identifying the barriers to ethical leadership and strategies for strengthening workforce commitment. A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Quantitative data were collected from 189 employees through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were obtained from semi-structured interviews with seven departmental heads and senior administrators. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 27, while thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted with ATLAS.ti 25. The hypothesis that no significant relationship exists between ethical leadership strategies and employees' engagement was tested using linear regression. Findings revealed that ethical leadership strategies explained 29.6% of the variance in employee engagement ($R^2 = 0.296$). Among the predictors, clear ethical guidelines and policies ($\beta = 1.311$, $p < 0.05$), continuous training in ethical practices ($\beta = 0.592$, $p < 0.05$), and enhanced transparency and accountability ($\beta = 0.577$, $p < 0.05$) were significant contributors to engagement, while recognition and incentives ($\beta = 0.177$, $p > 0.05$) showed no significant effect. The overall model was statistically significant ($F = 19.234$, $p < 0.05$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The study concludes that ethical leadership is crucial to enhancing employees' engagement and, by extension, improving public sector performance. Strengthening ethical frameworks, institutionalizing continuous ethics training, and fostering transparency are critical strategies for local government reform. The study contributes to public administration theory by offering empirical evidence that ethical leadership fosters trust, accountability, and professionalism, enhancing employee engagement.

Keywords: accountability, reform, transparency, organizational ethics, state administration, workplace motivation



Contribution. All the authors participated in the development of the concept of this review, data collection, processing and analysis, drafted the manuscript, and formulated the conclusions.

Acknowledgements. The authors express sincere gratitude to all participants of the study for their valuable contributions, which greatly informed the research findings. The authors assume full responsibility for the content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this article.

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Article history:

The article was submitted on 10.11.2025. The article was accepted on 10.12.2025.


For citation:

Ugochukwu AD, Oluwabimpe DO. Ethical leadership strategies and employees' engagement: Insights from the Nigerian public sector. *RUDN Journal of Public Administration*. 2026;13(1):118–133. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8313-2026-13-1-118-133> EDN: RUJNAF

Этические стратегии лидерства и вовлеченность сотрудников: выводы из государственного сектора Нигерии

А.Д. Угочукву  , Д.О. Олувабимпе 

Университет Ковенант, Ота, штат Огун, Нигерия

 ugochukwu.abasilim@covenantuniversity.edu.ng

Аннотация. Этическое лидерство заняло центральное место среди факторов, определяющих вовлеченность сотрудников, особенно в государственном секторе, где неэтичные практики зачастую подрывают доверие, снижают мотивацию и ухудшают результаты деятельности организаций. Исследование направлено на выявление взаимосвязи между стратегиями этического лидерства и вовлеченностью сотрудников в администрации местного правительства Адо/Одо Ота штата Огун (Нигерия), а также на определение барьеров, препятствующих реализации этического лидерства и стратегий укрепления приверженности персонала. Применены смешанные методы исследования. Количественные данные собраны среди 189 сотрудников посредством структурированных анкет, а качественные — в ходе полуструктурированных интервью с семью руководителями подразделений и старшими администраторами. Количественные данные анализировали с использованием SPSS 27, а качественные подвергали тематическому анализу в ATLAS.ti 25. Гипотезу об отсутствии существенной взаимосвязи между стратегиями этического лидерства и вовлеченностью сотрудников проверили с помощью линейной регрессии. Результаты показали, что стратегии этического лидерства объясняют 29,6 % дисперсии вовлеченности работников ($R^2 = 0,296$). Среди предикторов значимыми оказались: наличие четких этических норм и политик ($\beta = 1,311$, $p < 0,05$), регулярное обучение этическим практикам ($\beta = 0,592$, $p < 0,05$) и повышение прозрачности и подотчетности ($\beta = 0,577$, $p < 0,05$), тогда как признание заслуг и стимулирование ($\beta = 0,177$, $p > 0,05$) не оказали заметного влияния. Модель в целом оказалась статистически значимой ($F = 19,234$, $p < 0,05$), что привело к отклонению нулевой гипотезы. Сделан вывод о том, что этическое лидерство является ключевым фактором повышения вовлеченности персонала и, следовательно, улучшения эффективности государственного сектора. Усиление этических рамок, институционализация непрерывного обучения по вопросам этики и развитие прозрачности представляют собой критически важные стратегии реформирования местного самоуправления. Исследование вносит вклад в теорию государственного управления, представляя эмпирические доказательства того, что этическое лидерство укрепляет доверие, подотчетность и профессионализм, тем самым повышая вовлеченность сотрудников.

Ключевые слова: подотчетность, реформирование, прозрачность, организационная этика, государственное управление, мотивация труда

Вклад авторов. Все авторы участвовали в разработке концепции исследования, сборе, обработке и анализе данных, написании текста рукописи, формулировке выводов.

Благодарности. Авторы выражают искреннюю благодарность всем участникам исследования за их ценный вклад, который существенно повлиял на результаты работы. Авторы несут полную ответственность за содержание, интерпретации и выводы, представленные в статье.

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

История статьи:

Поступила в редакцию 10.11.2025; принята к публикации 10.12.2025.

Для цитирования:

Ugochukwu A.D., Oluwabimpe D.O. Ethical leadership strategies and employees' engagement: Insights from the Nigerian public sector // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Государственное и муниципальное управление. 2026. Т. 13. № 1. С. 118–133. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8313-2026-13-1-118-133> EDN: RUJNAF

Introduction

Nigeria's organisations struggle with an increasingly unpredictable socio-economic and political climate, where global service disruptions and high business liquidation rates threaten operational continuity [1]. In such a context, the ability to foster and sustain a highly engaged workforce has emerged as a critical factor for organizational survival and performance. Employee engagement, as manifested through commitment, enthusiasm, accountability, and proactive problem-solving, reflects employees' willingness to invest discretionary effort, uphold organizational interests, and contribute innovative ideas for improvement [2]. However, engagement is neither accidental nor self-sustaining; it requires conscious effort through leadership practices that inspire trust, fairness, and shared purpose. Ethical leadership has become a critical determinant of employee engagement, particularly in the public sector. Ethical leadership is characterized by integrity, transparency, fairness, and accountability; these qualities create a work environment where employees feel valued, respected, and intrinsically motivated to contribute to collective goals. While its strategic value for enhancing organizational effectiveness is widely acknowledged, ethical leadership remains insufficiently institutionalized in many Nigerian local government councils [3]. Ethical leadership goes beyond leaders' conduct and deliberately promotes ethical norms and behaviors across all organizational levels.

Existing literature has consistently emphasized the central role of leadership in shaping employee motivation, engagement, and productivity [4–7]. Employees who perceive their leaders as ethical exhibit considerable organisational commitment, higher job satisfaction, and enhanced productivity [8]. Ethical leadership plays a vital role in sustaining engagement

in public administration, where service delivery, equity, and accountability are paramount; however, despite growing theoretical insight into this relationship [9–11]. Nigeria's public sector continues to grapple with low engagement and unethical conduct. These challenges are evident in global governance assessments, as despite numerous acts and policies promoting ethical conduct in the country, Nigeria still ranks low on international indices of ethical leadership and government. For instance, the 2022 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) placed Nigeria 145th out of 180 countries, scoring 20/100 [12]. Such a position reflects the prevalence of self-interest over public duty, contributing to a lack of trust in the public sector. These ethical deficits are compounded by poor employee engagement, which manifests as diminished motivation, weak commitment to public service mandates, and inefficiency in service delivery.

This study draws on Social Exchange Theory (SET) as its guiding lens to address these systemic weaknesses. SET posits that workplace relationships are shaped by a cost-benefit evaluation, where individuals assess whether the rewards of a relationship outweigh its costs [13; 14]. The theory assumes that human interactions, such as economic transactions, are motivated by maximizing benefits (e.g., recognition, trust, career growth) and minimizing costs (e.g., stress, unfair treatment). A core assumption of SET is the principle of reciprocity, which states that when one party provides valued resources or support, the other feels obligated to reciprocate in kind. Applied to this study, the theory suggests that employees who perceive their leaders as ethical, demonstrating fairness, transparency, and accountability, experience the reward of psychological safety, trust and value recognition. Therefore, they are more inclined to reciprocate through greater engagement, discretionary effort, and loyalty. Conversely, unethical leadership represents a cost that discourages such reciprocity, leading to disengagement and reduced performance. The justification for using SET lies in its ability to explain the mechanism by which ethical leadership translates into sustained employee engagement. By framing leadership-employee interactions as exchanges where ethical conduct serves as a high-value resource, the theory provides a predictive model for strengthening engagement in Nigeria's public sector.

This theoretical framework is particularly applicable to the Nigerian local government context, where historical patterns of ethical lapses and low morale have consistently undermined service delivery. By operationalizing ethical leadership in line with SET principles, local council leaders can foster mutually reinforcing relationships that enhance employee engagement and improve public and organizational performance.

The purpose of the study is to examine the implementation strategies for integrating ethical leadership and achieving public sector outcomes. In line with this objective, the null hypothesis tested was that there is no significant relationship between ethical leadership strategies and employees' engagement in Ado/Odo Ota Local Government Council, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Materials and methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a holistic understanding of the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement in the Nigerian public sector. Using more than one method allowed for triangulation, which enriched the findings by providing multiple layers of evidence and ensuring that the results were statistically reliable and contextually meaningful [15]. The quantitative aspect of the study was designed as a cross-sectional survey. This approach provided a clear picture of employees' prevailing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors simultaneously, capturing the general workforce patterns. To complement this, the qualitative component involved in-depth interviews with selected staff members. These interviews were particularly valuable for drawing out insights that structured surveys might overlook, such as personal experiences, perceptions of leadership practices, and subtle workplace dynamics.

The research was conducted among all 318 employees of the Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Council in Ogun State, Nigeria, as of November 2024. This council was deliberately chosen because of its distinctive profile as the most industrialized local government area in Ogun State and a leading contributor to the state's internally generated revenue [16]. Its diverse workforce, including departmental heads, supervisors, artisans, and clerical staff, ensured that voices from across different functional and hierarchical levels were represented in the study. The study area provides a rich context for examining ethical leadership and employee engagement. Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Council was officially created on 19 May 1989, following the merger of the former Ifo/Ota Local Government with the Ado-Odo/Igbesa district of Yewa South Local Government. Today, it is the largest of the nineteen local government areas in Ogun State, in terms of population and administrative scope. The council comprises eight core departments: General Services and Administration; Finance and Supply; Community and Social Development; Works and Housing; Budget, Planning, Research and Statistics; Education, Information and Sports; Agriculture and Natural Resources; and Water Supply and Sanitation.

These departments represent the institutional machinery through which governance is organized and services are delivered to citizens. Their functions range from financial management and infrastructural development to social welfare, agriculture, and education. This diversity sustains administrative effectiveness and demonstrates the council's strategic orientation toward inclusive development and economic growth. For these reasons, Ado-Odo/Ota provides a compelling and relevant setting to study how ethical leadership practices influence employee engagement in the Nigerian public sector.

Simple random sampling techniques were employed to ensure that every member of the target population had an equal chance of being selected, thereby reducing selection bias. Using Krejcie and Morgan's sample size determination table [17], 189 respondents were identified as acceptable for statistical representation. This sample size strikes a balance between the need for precision in parameter

estimation and the practical feasibility of data collection. The study used two well-established and psychometrically sound instruments to acquire quantitative data. The first was the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which assessed the three primary elements of employee engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption. The second tool utilized is the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS), which was designed to evaluate leaders' integrity, fairness, transparency, and provision of ethical counsel. Both instruments have been widely used in organizational behavior research and have shown high internal consistency and construct validity [18; 19].

In addition to these scores, the structured questionnaires included demographic information such as age, gender, department, years in office, and educational attachment. These variables served as a contextual foundation for analyzing patterns in employee engagement and views of ethical leadership in the study's setting. By combining proven measuring techniques with pertinent background information, the instrumentation ensured that the data collected was reliable and rich. The study employed a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem, drawing on both primary and secondary sources of information. Structured questionnaires were distributed to a representative sample of employees to obtain primary data. This quantitative method enabled consistent measurement of variables and statistical comparisons among answers. In-depth interviews were also performed with a purposefully selected subset of participants. These qualitative methodologies provided greater in-depth insight into employees' experiences and personal viewpoints on ethical leadership practices inside the company.

Secondary data were sourced from existing academic literature, policy material, and government publications to supplement the primary data. These sources helped to contextualize and match the study findings with broader trends and empirical data in Nigeria's public sector. The combination of primary and secondary data enhanced the research, enabling a more nuanced analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize demographic features and engagement patterns. Inferential Statistics, including Pearson correlation, simple and multiple regression analyses, and one-way ANOVA with post hoc tests, were employed to investigate the relationships between ethical leadership, employee engagement, and key contextual variables. The ATLAS.ti 25 software was used to facilitate theme analysis of the qualitative data. A systematic coding approach was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and correlations, enabling convergence and divergence analysis alongside the quantitative data. Ethical approval was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of their identity and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty. Data were securely maintained and utilized exclusively in accordance with ethical research norms.

Results

To determine the extent to which ethical leadership strategies influence employees’ engagement within the Ado/Odo Ota Local Government Council, Ogun State, Nigeria, a statistical analysis was conducted. The analysis examined the predictive power of ethical leadership strategies on employees’ engagement, thereby providing empirical evidence to either validate or refute the stated hypotheses. The results are presented below, beginning with the test of the hypothesis.

Test of Hypothesis

The initial hypothesis assumed no significant relationship between ethical leadership strategies and employee engagement in Ado/Odo Ota Local Government Council, Nigeria.

The results in Table 1, show an R² of 0.296, indicating that specific ethical leadership strategies accounted for 29.6% of the variation in employee engagement. The results of the ANOVA for the regression relationship between employees’ engagement and specific strategies in ethical leadership are presented in Table 2.

Table 1

Summary of the results of linear regression for specific strategies in ethical leadership and employee engagement

Model R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
0.544	0.296	0.281	2.75899

Source: developed by U.D. Abasilim, O.O. David independently based on Researcher’s Field Survey Data (2025).

Table 2

Summary results of the ANOVA for the linear regression for specific strategies in ethical leadership and employee engagement

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-calc.	Sig.
1 Regression	585.649	4	146.412	19.234	0.000 ^b
Residual	1393.005	183	7.612		
Total	1978.654	187			

Note. F-critical = 2.42. Significant at the 5% level (p < 0.05).

Source: developed by U.D. Abasilim, O.O. David independently based on Researcher’s Field Survey Data (2025).

The result in Table 2 reveals that the F-calculated (19.234) obtained is greater than the F-critical (2.42) at the 0.05 significance level. This implies a significant regression relationship between specific strategies in ethical leadership and employee engagement. The estimates of the multiple linear regression model are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

**Parameter estimates of linear regression for specific strategies
in ethical leadership and employee engagement**

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	14.061	1.300		10.814	0.000
Well-defined ethical guidelines and policies	1.311	0.265	0.344	4.943	0.000
Ongoing training in ethical practices	0.592	0.240	0.173	2.465	0.015
Acknowledgement and incentives for ethical behaviour	0.177	0.267	0.054	0.665	0.507
Increased transparency and accountability	0.577	0.284	0.157	2.033	0.044

Note. Coefficients significant at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$).

Source: developed by U.D. Abasilim, O.O. David independently based on Researcher's Field Survey Data (2025).

The hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between ethical leadership strategies and employee engagement in Ado/Odo Ota Local Government Council (LGC), Ogun State, Nigeria, was empirically examined through linear regression analysis. The results indicate that specific strategies in ethical leadership collectively accounted for 29.6% of the variance in employee engagement ($R^2 = 0.296$). This suggests that while other factors contribute to employee engagement, ethical leadership strategies play a substantial and measurable role in enhancing it. The regression coefficients revealed that well-defined ethical guidelines and policies ($\beta = 1.311$, S.E. = 0.265, $t = 4.943$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.05$), ongoing training in ethical practices ($\beta = 0.592$, S.E. = 0.240, $t = 2.465$, $p = 0.015$, $p < 0.05$), and increased transparency and accountability ($\beta = 0.577$, S.E. = 0.284, $t = 2.033$, $p = 0.044$, $p < 0.05$) were all significant positive predictors of employee engagement. In contrast, acknowledgement and incentives for ethical behavior ($\beta = 0.177$, S.E. = 0.267, $t = 0.665$, $p = 0.507$, $p > 0.05$) demonstrated a positive but statistically insignificant effect. Among the significant predictors, well-defined ethical guidelines and policies emerged as the most influential factors, underscoring the importance of clear ethical frameworks in fostering employee engagement. Furthermore, the overall regression model was statistically significant ($F = 19.234 > F\text{-critical} = 2.42$, $p < 0.05$), rejecting the null hypothesis.

These findings demonstrate that adopting and consistently implementing targeted ethical leadership strategies have a significant and positive influence on employee engagement within the council. Establishing robust ethical guidelines, providing continuous ethics training, and enhancing transparency and accountability mechanisms are critical levers for strengthening workforce commitment and performance in the public sector. The qualitative findings from the interviews strongly support the results of the quantitative analysis, thereby reinforcing the robustness of the study's conclusions. Insights from the interviews reveal that leaders in Ado/Odo Ota Local Government Council of Ogun State, Nigeria, have implemented various strategies to enhance employee engagement. These strategies, identified by participants as both deliberate and ethical leadership practices, include employee welfare and engagement initiatives, the promotion of work-life balance, the provision of incentives, a commitment to transparency and accountability, recognition and reward systems, as well as the organization of seminars and training programs.

One notable strategy is promoting work-life balance, which participants linked directly to improved employee motivation and performance. This approach, sometimes referred to as “palliative care” by respondents, was associated with tangible benefits such as reduced transportation costs and heightened diligence during working hours. As one participant explained:

“Work-life balance, also known as palliative care, has improved the level of engagement of the staff in the council. Having two days off weekly has reduced transportation costs, motivating us to be diligent during the three days at work” (Respondent 1).

Similarly, another respondent affirmed:

“Work-life balance, or palliative care, where staff get three days on and two days off, is an excellent approach to improve engagement” (Respondent 4).

Transparency and accountability in leadership emerged as another crucial factor influencing engagement. Respondents emphasized that the openness of leaders in decision-making and their willingness to be accountable for their actions instilled trust and inspired greater commitment among employees:

“Leaders’ transparency and accountability have helped improve our engagement levels” (Respondent 1).

The organization of seminars and training programs was also recognized as a meaningful avenue for fostering both personal and professional development, thereby enhancing engagement:

“Organized seminars and training have contributed to employee engagement to a certain extent” (Respondent 5).

Another significant practice identified was the recognition and reward of hard work. Employees expressed that acknowledging effort through awards, commendations, or financial compensation served as a strong motivational driver:

“Hard work, recognition, and award-giving have also boosted employee engagement” (Respondent 1).

“Compensation and recognition of hardworking employees are critical to maintaining motivation” (Respondent 5).

“Recognition and award-giving have positively impacted engagement” (Respondent 6).

Furthermore, employee welfare and engagement initiatives were consistently highlighted as hallmarks of ethical leadership within the council. Such initiatives ranged from informal acts of appreciation to structured support systems:

“One thing my director does that has helped push us to be more engaged is good welfare. My boss randomly buys us lunch when she notices how hard we have worked, and she also listens to our concerns and provides solutions” (Respondent 1).

“Staff welfare and incentives, especially during palliative periods, have kept us engaged” (Respondent 2).

“Swift and smooth conversion initiatives, along with retirement assistance and discounted medical healthcare for starters, are also great examples of ethical leadership in practice” (Respondent 4).

Strategies that could be implemented to improve ethical leadership practices for better engagement of employees, as submitted by interview participants, include:

Leadership Awareness and Training

Participants emphasized the importance of leadership training and awareness initiatives to foster ethical leadership and improve employee engagement:

“Leadership training that educates leaders and emphasizes what is expected of them is essential. Leaders should be encouraged to uphold integrity, honesty, discipline, contentment, and deliver high-quality service. They must exhibit the traits they want to see in their subordinates” (Respondent 2).

“Awareness programs for leaders should emphasize that leadership is a position of service, not just authority. Leadership training should be provided not only for leaders who have assumed their roles but also for employees,” (Respondent 1).

“Acknowledgement and rewards for ethical leaders and engaged staff are also important” (Respondent 6).

“Seminar geared towards staff welfare will go a long way to improve engagement level” (Respondent 4).

Provision of Technological Facilities

Participants highlighted the importance of technological facilities to enhance efficiency and employee engagement in the council:

“There is a need for adequate technological facilities, which the council currently lacks” (Respondent 5).

“Better technological development and the use of ICT are essential” (Respondent 6).

“Provision of technological facilities is necessary” (Respondent 2).

“There should be adequate technological facilities to support operations” (Respondent 7).

Increments in Salary and Welfare

Participants emphasized the need for improved salary structures and welfare initiatives to enhance employee satisfaction and engagement:

“Better welfare should be arranged for the staff, which I believe can be achieved if the local government has sufficient autonomy” (Respondent 5).

“Increments in salary without the burden of harsh tax policies would significantly improve employee morale” (Respondent 3).

“The provision of soft loans for workers would greatly support their financial well-being” (Respondent 7).

Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

Participants suggested implementing robust monitoring and accountability measures to ensure ethical leadership and employee engagement:

“I believe that another measure that can be put in place is random routine checks of employees and leaders, along with a reporting platform” (Respondent 1).

“Constant evaluation of leaders and employees is essential to keep everyone in check” (Respondent 3).

“Regular evaluation should be conducted to monitor the level of ethics among leaders and the engagement levels of employees” (Respondent 6).

Implementation of Autonomy

Participants emphasized the need for implementing autonomy in local councils to improve operations and resource management:

“One of the strategies I think can be implemented is autonomy. Local government councils have been promised autonomy, but it has not been implemented. We still have to depend on the state government for resources, which has proven to be a problem as there is not enough money to run the council” (Respondent 5).

“Implementation of local government council autonomy” (Respondent 2).

Job Opportunities

Restoring initiatives that provide job opportunities, especially for retired workers who are still capable of contributing, was suggested:

“Job opportunities for retired workers who can still work should be reintroduced. This initiative was in place before but was scrapped, and I think it should be brought back into the system,” (Respondent 5).

Collectively, these narratives underscore the multifaceted nature of ethical leadership in promoting employee engagement within Ado/Odo Ota LGC. They demonstrate that a blend of structural measures, such as formal training programs and welfare policies, alongside interpersonal practices, such as personal recognition and responsive leadership, is instrumental in fostering a motivated, committed, and engaged workforce.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed a statistically significant relationship between ethical leadership strategies and employee engagement in Ado/Odo Ota Local Government Council ($t_{cal} = 5.28$, $t_{critical} = 2.42$, $p < 0.05$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This outcome demonstrates that ethical leadership is not simply desirable in the public sector but a critical driver of workforce motivation, trust, and commitment. In line with earlier [20; 21], the findings underscore the centrality of ethics-based leadership in shaping positive organizational outcomes, particularly employee engagement.

The mixed-methods approach employed in this study provided robust evidence, with the qualitative insights strongly reinforcing the quantitative results. Participants' narratives illustrated how deliberate ethical leadership practices improved staff morale and performance. For instance, the promotion of work-life balance, popularly referred to as "palliative care" by respondents, was repeatedly associated with reduced transportation costs, increased motivation, and more focused productivity during working hours. This echoes the argument of [22; 23] that Personal resources, such as energy and time, are crucial for sustaining engagement.

Transparency and accountability emerged as another prominent theme. Employees expressed that leaders' openness in decision-making and willingness to be accountable built trust and deepened commitment to organizational goals. This aligns with previous literature [3, 24–26]¹ that highlights transparency as a key mechanism for reducing uncertainty and fostering engagement in the workplace.

The recognition and reward of employee effort was equally emphasized as a vital ethical leadership strategy. Acts of recognition, whether symbolic or financial, were reported to boost morale and sustain engagement. Consistent with Social Exchange Theory [27], respondents suggested that such reciprocal gestures from leaders motivated them to reciprocate with greater dedication and performance. Similarly, welfare initiatives, from informal gestures such as lunch to structured support systems like retirement assistance and healthcare benefits, were perceived as tangible demonstrations of ethical leadership. These findings support earlier studies [2, 28–30]² that argue employees exhibit more substantial affective commitment and discretionary effort when they feel valued.

Participants also offered forward-looking recommendations for strengthening ethical leadership and engagement. These included leadership awareness and training to instil values of integrity and service, provision of modern technological facilities to improve efficiency, and enhanced salary and welfare structures to address financial well-being. Calls for monitoring and accountability mechanisms, as well as granting autonomy to local government councils, reflected

¹ Olufunmilayo OA, Onyekachi EC, Demilade OK. *An examination of the nexus between ethical leadership and corporate governance and its impact on organizational performance: Evidence from MTN Nigeria*. URL: <https://hdl.handle.net/10419/321818> (accessed: 15.10.2025).

² Timsina S. *Employee Turnover and Engagement Programs for Retention*. URL: <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:amk-202404166713> (accessed: 15.10.2025).

a broader recognition of systemic challenges that may hinder the sustainability of ethical leadership practices. Importantly, suggestions to restore job opportunities for retirees illustrate how ethical leadership is perceived in relation to present employees and the maintenance of intergenerational social responsibility.

These findings suggest that ethical leadership is multidimensional, encompassing structural interventions (such as training, welfare, and technological support) and interpersonal practices (such as recognition, transparency, and responsive leadership). By blending these approaches, Ado/Odo Ota Local Government Council leaders have demonstrated that employee engagement can be significantly enhanced even in resource-constrained public sector settings. The study thereby contributes to the growing evidence that ethical leadership is morally imperative and practically effective in fostering commitment, productivity, and trust in public organizations.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between ethical leadership strategies and employee engagement in Ado-Odo-Ota Local Government Council, Ogun State, Nigeria. Quantitative and qualitative analyses demonstrate that ethical leadership has a significant impact on employee engagement. Specifically, well-defined ethical guidelines, continuous ethics training, and transparent and accountable leadership emerged as the most influential drivers of engagement. The qualitative findings further revealed that employees perceive ethical leadership in formal structures and interpersonal practices, including welfare initiatives, recognition and reward systems, and work–life balance support. These findings underscore that ethical leadership in the public sector is most effective when relational and human-centered practices complement institutional measures.

This study contributes to leadership scholarship by providing empirical insights from a Nigerian local government context that remains underrepresented in mainstream literature. The findings support Social Exchange Theory, which posits that employees reciprocate fairness and organizational support with greater commitment and engagement. They also extend Ethical Leadership Theory by demonstrating how specific strategies, such as codifying ethical guidelines, regular training, and accountability practices, serve as tangible mechanisms that link leadership conduct to employee outcomes. Notably, the study highlights the multidimensional nature of ethical leadership, where formal structures and informal relational practices interact to sustain engagement.

For practitioners, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating ethical leadership into the culture of public sector management. Local governments should institutionalize explicit ethical norms to create fairness and predictability, complemented by regular ethics training to reinforce desirable behaviors. Transparency and accountability mechanisms should be prioritized to strengthen trust in leadership, while recognition systems and work-life balance initiatives can enhance motivation at the interpersonal level. These practices should be integrated

into human resources and governance frameworks to ensure sustainability, thereby aligning with broader service delivery objectives.

The study has some limitations. It focuses on a single local government council, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Cross-sectional design also limits causal inferences, and reliance on self-reported data raises the possibility of social desirability bias. Moreover, the absence of longitudinal tracking restricts insights into how the observed relationships may evolve. These limitations suggest caution in interpretation and highlight areas for future research.

Several actionable steps emerge from this study. First, local governments should institutionalize comprehensive ethical frameworks, embedded in policy documents, employee handbooks, and operational codes of conduct. These should be periodically reviewed by ethical committees comprising management, employee representatives, and civil society actors. Second, continuous leadership and ethics training should be mandatory for all employees, including senior officials, to reinforce values such as integrity, discipline, and service delivery. Partnerships with training institutes and universities can strengthen program quality.

Third, investment in technological infrastructure is essential to improve efficiency, reduce delays, and enhance transparency. This should include ICT upgrades, digital platforms for operations, and staff training in their use. Fourth, promoting work–life balance and welfare programs, including flexible work arrangements, mental health support, and wellness initiatives, can mitigate burnout and sustain engagement. Fifth, robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be established, including performance audits, whistleblower channels, and real-time feedback systems, with transparent reporting to citizens.

Ultimately, broader governance reforms are necessary to grant genuine autonomy to local councils, enabling them to allocate resources and make informed decisions promptly. Welfare and reward programs should also be strengthened by reviewing salary structures, providing soft loan facilities, and re-engaging retirees to preserve institutional knowledge and expertise. These measures offer a pathway to transforming local government administration into a more ethical, efficient, and employee-centered institution, capable of fostering trust, enhancing service delivery, and advancing sustainable governance outcomes.

REFERENCES

1. Fubara BJ, Onuoha BC. Leadership development and employee performance of oil service firms in Rivers State. *African Journal of Business and Economic Development*. 2023;3(6):73–93.
2. Al-Kasasbeh O. Exploring the nexus between leadership styles, employee engagement, and organizational performance a multidimensional review. *Historical Journal of History and Social Sciences*. 2024;3(2):154–168. <https://doi.org/10.58355/historical.v3i2.112> EDN: QRWVDR
3. Erwat EA, Banjo AB. Administrative competence and service delivery in Ogun State Local Government Councils. *Frontiers of Knowledge Journal Series International Journal of Management, Business, and Entrepreneurship*. 2021;4(2):1–5.

4. Decuyper A, Schaufeli W. Leadership and work engagement: Exploring explanatory mechanisms. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*. 2020;34(1):69–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2397002219892197>
5. Rabiul MK, Yean TF. Leadership styles, motivating language, and work engagement: An empirical investigation of the hotel industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*. 2021;92:102712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102712> EDN: MELSDK
6. Susanto PC, Syailendra S, Suryawan RF. Determination of motivation and performance: Analysis of job satisfaction, employee engagement and leadership. *International Journal of Business and Applied Economics*. 2023;2(2):59–68. <https://10.0.218.119/ijbae.v2i2.2135> EDN: XIVXAO
7. Sharma R. Leadership styles and employee motivation: A comparative study in the modern workplace. *Journal of Advanced Management Studies*. 2024;1(2):1–6. <https://doi.org/10.36676/jams.v1.i2.7> EDN: PLIHES
8. Brown ME, Treviño LK. Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*. 2006;17(6):595–616. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.004> EDN: VGSHGE
9. Asif M, Qing M, Hwang J, Shi H. Ethical leadership, affective commitment, work engagement, and creativity: Testing a multiple mediation approach. *Sustainability*. 2019;11(16):4489. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11164489>
10. Qing M, Asif M, Hussain A, Jameel A. Exploring the impact of ethical leadership on job satisfaction and organisational commitment in public sector organisations: The mediating role of psychological empowerment. *Review of Managerial Science*. 2020;14(6):1405–1432. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11846-019-00340-9> EDN: ZTSWWP
11. Saha R, Shashi, Cerchione R, Singh R, Dahiya R. Effect of ethical leadership and CSR on firm performance: A systematic review. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*. 2020;27(2):409–429. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1824>
12. Oladimeji KA, Abdulkareem AK, Akindele IT, Adejumo A. Impact of ethical leadership on employee performance in the public sector: Does leader-member exchange matter? *Publica: Jurnal Pemikiran Administrasi Negara*. 2022;14(2):109–120. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpan.v14i2.19912> EDN: QMZZYI
13. Homans GC. Social behaviour as exchange. *American Journal of Sociology*. 1958;63(6):597–606. <https://doi.org/10.1086/222355>
14. Homans GC. The humanities and the social sciences. *American Behavioural Scientist*. 1961;4(8):3–6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000276426100400802>
15. Creswell JW, Clark VL. *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 2017.
16. Ahaka UA, Ola-David O, Okorie UE. Data set on moral values and parental primary school choice: A study of Ado-Odo Ota, local government area, Ogun State. *Data in Brief*. 2021;37:107193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dib.2021.107193> EDN: VYYXSB
17. Krejcie RV, Morgan DW. Sample size determination table. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*. 1970;30(3):607–610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001316447003000308>
18. Schaufeli WB, Salanova M, González-Romá V, Bakker AB. The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two-sample CFA approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*. 2002;3(1):71–92. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015630930326> EDN: EROTDZ
19. Brown ME, Treviño LK, Harrison DA. Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. 2005;97(2):117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002> EDN: XOFRPF
20. Gwamanda N, Mahembe B. The influence of ethical leadership and climate on employee work engagement. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*. 2023;49. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v49i0.2108> EDN: WOIXCH
21. Junaidi JU. The role of ethical leadership in employees' work engagement: A social learning theory perspective. *International Journal of Social Economics*. 2023;51(7):884–898. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSE-03-2023-0218> EDN: TDAOOA
22. Silalahi M, Hadikusumo RA, Simatupang S, Putra HS, Sudirman A. The influence of ethical leadership on employee engagement: Analyzing the role of work-life balance as a mediating

- variable. *International Journal of Business, Law, and Education*. 2024;5(2):2628–2639. <https://doi.org/10.56442/ijble.v5i2.915> EDN: BLXUEB
23. Rajkumar S, Cherian E, Sharma J, Singh A. Effectiveness of work-life balance programs in reducing employee burnout. *Journal of Marketing and Social Research*. 2025;2(3):186–193. <https://doi.org/10.61336/jmsr/25-03-22>
 24. Madubueze MH, Egberi AE, Mbanefo OD. Responsible leadership, social trust, and governance in Nigeria: A systematic review. *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*. 2025;5(3):1460–1467. <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2025.5.3.4472> EDN: KEDJAF
 25. Quynh TN, Alang T, Le TD. Examining the relationships between ethical leadership and organisational citizenship behaviours in a transitional country: the mediation of public service motivation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*. 2025;47(3):286–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23276665.2025.2453862>
 26. Sipondo A. Ubuntu ethical leadership in the African public sector: conceptual proposals. *International Journal of Public Leadership*. 2025;21(2):140–154. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-10-2024-0119> EDN: CJOJKL
 27. Blau PM. Justice in social exchange. *Sociological Inquiry*. 1964;34(2):193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1964.tb00583.x>
 28. Yadav P, Srivastava AR. Embedding ethical values in HR practices: A strategic approach. *Purushartha J Manag Ethics Spiritual*. 2024;16(2):1–20. <https://doi.org/10.21844/16202116201> EDN: COGBNJ
 29. Kolawole KD. Employees' welfare and productivity relations. *International Journal of Social Science and Religion*. 2024;5(3):576–600. <https://doi.org/10.53639/ijssr.v6i1.290>
 30. Gemechu D. Exploring the influence of ethical leadership dimensions on employee engagement. *International Journal for Novel Research in Economics, Finance and Management*. 2025;3(1):163–73.

Information about the authors:

Abasilim D. Ugochukwu — Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Department of Political Science and International Relations, Covenant University, KM 10, Idiroko Road, Canaan Land, Ota, Ogun State, 112233, Nigeria (ORCID: 0000-0002-4754-2355) (Scopus ID: 56818982600) (e-mail: ugochukwu.abasilim@covenantuniversity.edu.ng).

David O. Oluwabimpe — Master of Science (MSc), Department of Political Science and International Relations, Covenant University, KM 10, Idiroko Road, Canaan Land, Ota, Ogun State, 112233, Nigeria (ORCID: 0009-0004-0899-9119) (e-mail: Oluwabimpe.davidpgs@stu.cu.edu.ng).

Информация об авторах:

Угочукву Абасилим Д. — доктор философии (PhD), департамент политологии и международных отношений, Университет Ковенант, Нигерия, 112233, штат Огун, город Ота, Канаан Ленд, дорога Идиороко, КМ 10 (ORCID: 0000-0002-4754-2355) (Scopus Author ID: 56818982600) (e-mail: ugochukwu.abasilim@covenantuniversity.edu.ng).

Олувабимпе Дэвид О. — магистр наук (MSc), департамент политологии и международных отношений, Университет Ковенант, Нигерия, 112233, штат Огун, город Ота, Канаан Ленд, дорога Идиороко, км 10 (ORCID: 0009-0004-0899-9119) (e-mail: Oluwabimpe.davidpgs@stu.cu.edu.ng).