

A Stratified Comparative Analysis of the Effect of Ethical Public Leadership on Organizational Citizenship Behavior and Performance

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Abstract

Ethical standards in public leadership serve as moral principles that guide leaders' actions set by administrative discretion. Ethical public leadership builds trust through transparency and accountability, promotes fairness in governance, discourages corruption, and inspires positive change and innovations. Although ethical public leadership plays these crucial roles in the public sector, its influence on public servants' behavior is not adequately explored across administrative levels. This article investigates the effect of ethical leadership on public servants' behavior with particular reference to organizational citizenship behavior and performance across administrative levels. Quantitative research approach with survey research design was applied to determine their relationship. Representative samples were drawn using stratified sampling at each administrative level independently. The data were collected using self-administered questionnaire. Simple linear regression was applied to analyze the data. The findings indicated that ethical public leadership positively correlated with organizational citizenship behavior and performance at all administrative levels. It has a more substantial influence on performance than on organizational citizenship behavior. It influences public servants' behavior with varying magnitude across administrative levels. Notably, the strongest predictive capacity is observed at the zonal level followed by local level. The variances in effectiveness across administrative levels attributed to contextual factors such as autonomy and oversight. Hence, ethical public leadership is an important organizational factor that affect behavior and more effective at local administrative levels. These insights underscore the necessity for public organizations to invest in tailored ethical leadership development programs to optimize organizational outcomes and cultivate a culture of integrity and accountability.

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1. Introduction

Public leadership focuses on promoting the public good that faces intricate challenges, including diverse stakeholders, conflicting values, and limited resources (Getha-Taylor et al., 2011; Garofalo and Geuras, 2009). This complexity necessitates a multidimensional approach to leadership skills that surpasses traditional models (Bromell, 2019). It is argued that ethical public leadership should prioritize collective and diverse interests over material concerns typical of private organizations (Svara, 2015; Garofalo and Geuras, 2009). Thus, ethics serves as a moral framework for public leaders, guiding their interactions and decision-making in ways that prioritize the common goods. Furthermore, ethics assists public leaders “to work with people want and value different things” (Bromell, 2019:12). By prioritizing ethical leadership, public institutions can cultivate a positive work environment that fosters ethical behavior among their employees, ultimately leading to improved organizational outcomes. In the context of public administration, leaders who exemplify ethical values foster an environment conducive to ethical behavior among subordinates (Menzel, 2018).

Public-sector organizations face growing demands for accountability, ethical stewardship, and high-quality service delivery amid resource constraints, political polarization, and increasing public scrutiny (Brewer & Selden, 2020; Christensen et al., 2022). Within this context, leaders' ethical behavior is theorized to shape not only compliance and rule-following but also discretionary behaviors that sustain organizational effectiveness, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and objective and subjective measures of job performance among public servants (Vigoda-Gadot & Beerli, 2019). However, extant public administration research is fragmented in two key ways that limit practical and theoretical progress. First, most studies examine single-level relationships (e.g., leader → individual outcome) and do not model the multilayered structure of public organizations where individual attitudes and behaviors are simultaneously shaped by

supervisors, team climates, and organizational/institutional contexts (Kroll & Vogel, 2021; Andersen et al., 2023). Second, measurement and conceptual clarity are lacking. Ethical leadership has been operationalized in divergent ways (moral person vs. moral manager), and OCB constructs in public settings often blend prosocial motives with compliance-related extra-role behaviors, making it unclear which facets are most responsive to ethical leadership (Mayer et al., 2021). Performance outcomes are likewise heterogeneous, ranging from self-reported task performance to objective service metrics, limiting cross-study comparability and policy relevance. There is also limited empirical evidence on boundary conditions: factors such as perceived organizational support, procedural justice, work overload, and political control may strengthen or weaken the linkage of ethical leadership with OCB and performance (Nguyen & Tran, 2022). Moreover, most recent meta-analytic syntheses draw heavily on Western or private-sector samples, leaving unanswered whether and how ethical public leadership operates across different administrative traditions and in resource-constrained settings where ethical prescriptions may clash with pragmatic pressures (Zhang et al., 2023).

Given these limitations, a rigorous multilayered analysis is needed to unpack the pathways through which ethical public leadership influences public servants' OCB and performance, to use consistent, context-sensitive measures of both OCB and performance. Addressing this problem has direct implications for leadership development, integrity systems, and public-sector reforms intended to foster sustainable, citizen-centered service delivery.

The importance of ethical public leadership in influencing the behavior of public servants is now widely acknowledged as essential for achieving effective and trustworthy governance (Ellapan et al., 2025; Buye, 2020). Though, its positive influence on various aspects of public servant behavior is acknowledged (Abdi et al., 2024), a gap remains in fully understanding the nuances through which ethical public leadership affects the comprehensive spectrum of public servants' behavior (Weinberg, 2014).

Despite progress in conceptual development, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) as an aspect of organizational uniqueness and behavior

in the public sector not received much attention. There is also a lack of comprehensive empirical understanding regarding the factors that affect OCB and their effect on performance-level outcomes (de Geus et al., 2020). Recent studies emphasized antecedents such as Public Service Motivation (PSM) (de Geus et al., 2020, Mostafa, Gould-Williams, and Bottomley, 2015; Pandey, Wright, and Moynihan, 2008), while others focused on moderators of OCB and other organizational variables (Rainey, 2014). Prior empirical literature strongly advocated the investigation of ethical leadership in the public sector as a vital antecedent to OCB (de Geus et al., 2020).

While existing literature acknowledges the positive influence of ethical leadership on public sector outcomes (Peteraf, 2021); Alkhadra et al., 2022), a comprehensive understanding of its specific effect on public servants' performance remains limited (Alkhadra et al., 2022). Though studies suggest ethical leadership enhances organizational commitment, reduces absenteeism, and encourages reporting of ethical concerns, there's a need for deeper exploration into how these translate into tangible performance improvements at the individual public servant level (Oladimeji & Abdulkareem, 2023; Syahrani et al., 2022). Current research often examines the mediating roles of factors like public service motivation (Syahrani, 2022), employee satisfaction (Oladimeji & Abdulkareem, 2023), and leader-member exchange (Oladimeji et al., 2022). Addressing these gaps will provide valuable insights for developing targeted interventions to foster ethical conduct and improve performance in the public sector.

1.1. Theoretical Foundations

The present study is grounded in several interconnected theoretical perspectives that directly support the problem formulation and the conceptualization of OCB and public servant performance as parallel rather than sequential outcomes. First, virtue-based ethics provides a foundational lens for ethical public leadership in administration. This perspective emphasizes leaders' character, moral virtues, and stewardship of public trust over rigid duties or utilitarian outcomes, making it particularly suitable for public sector contexts where discretionary judgment and the common good predominate (Songklin, 2017; Cooper, 2012).

Building on this ethical foundation, three complementary behavioral theories explain the mechanisms through which ethical public leadership influences employee behavior. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) posits that ethical leaders foster trust, perceived organizational support, and fairness, prompting employees to reciprocate with both discretionary extra-role behaviors (OCB) and heightened in-role task performance. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) further argues that ethical leaders serve as role models, transmitting ethical norms through observation and reinforcement and thereby shaping subordinates' extra-role and in-role conduct. Public service motivation (PSM) theory (Perry & Wise, 1990) integrates these perspectives by asserting that ethical leadership amplifies intrinsic motives to serve the public interest, directly enhancing both OCB and performance. Recent empirical extensions of PSM, informed by moral foundations theory, further highlight how ethical leadership aligns individual moral values with organizational goals (Wang et al., 2020).

Ethical leadership in the public sector is characterized by leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and a commitment to the public good (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Cooper defines ethical public leadership as the practice of guiding public organizations based on moral principles, emphasizing integrity, justice, and the common good (Cooper, 2012). Cooper determined leaders as stewards of public trust. Ethical standards in public leadership function as moral guidelines that govern the actions of leaders, going beyond mere adherence to rules and regulations based on administrative discretion (Garofalo and Geuras, 2009; Cheteni and Shindika, 2017). Ongoing debates surround the elements of ethical leadership in both the public and private sectors. However, for the purpose of this article, the key components of ethical public leadership were identified as rooted in a duty-based approach to ethics, which outlines the responsibilities of public administrators (Svara, 2015). For this study, the key components of ethical public leadership are categorized into three groups: (a) desired outcomes (civility, fidelity, altruism), (b) correct processes (prudence, proficiency, fairness, principled decision-making), and (c) appropriate relationships (reflection, impartiality).

The principle of fidelity emphasizes the duty of administrative leaders to reconcile their political authority with the statutory mandates of their

offices (Winston, 2003; Svara, 2015; Bromell, 2019). Altruism involves prioritizing public interests and placing service to the community above personal gain (Svara, 2015 and Garofalo and Geuras, 2009). Civility emphasizes that administrative leaders must seek public consensus on shared issues and act in alignment with that consensus (Bromell, 2019; Winston, 2003, 2009). Fairness signifies with procedural justice in which public resources are distributed to and the interaction with the public (Bromell, 2019). Prudence refers to the responsibility of administrative leaders to engage in ethical inquiry when the situation requires it (Bromell, 2019; Winston, 2003, 2009). Proficiency reflects an administrative leader's moral capacity to create institutions and structures that facilitate collective decision-making and action (Winston, 2003; 2009). Principled decision-making refers to the degree to which an administrative leader considers moral values when making decisions (Svara, 2015 and Garofalo and Geuras, 2009). Reflection embodies the ability of administrative leaders to understand the moral perspectives of others when addressing their problems (Winston, 2003; 2009). Impartiality refers to the degree to which an administrative leader treats the public without regard to their personal relationships with them (Svara, 2015 and Bromell, 2019). These components have not been comprehensively examined for their effects on public servants' behavior.

Organ (1988:4) defined OCB as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization.” Hence, OCB refers to discretionary, extra-role behaviors that benefit the organization and are not explicitly rewarded (Amer et al., 2020; Mostafa, 2018), such as helping coworkers, volunteering for additional tasks, and promoting a positive organizational image. In public organizations, OCB is particularly important for achieving effectiveness, efficiency, fairness, social justice, and sustainable development, especially under budget constraints (de Geus et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2025). As a result, OCB becomes an essential component of organizational responses to challenges, as it encourages employees to exceed their formally assigned roles and responsibilities.

Ethical public leadership promotes OCB by creating a positive ethical climate, building trust, fostering perceived organizational support, and ensuring fairness and psychological well-being (Abdi et al., 2024; Fatima & Siddiqui, 2019; Makumbe, 2025; Su & Hahn, 2005). These mechanisms align with social exchange theory, whereby employees reciprocate positive leadership treatment with discretionary behaviors (Verma et al., 2025).

Public servant performance refers to the effectiveness and efficiency with which employees fulfill job responsibilities, including quality and quantity of work, commitment to agency goals, accountability, responsiveness to citizen needs, and adherence to ethical standards (Dhammika, 2013; Qamari et al., 2024). It is a multidimensional concept reflecting dedication, skills, and alignment with the public mission (Ghebregiorgis & Negusse, 2022; Perry & Wise, 1990). Ethical public leadership enhances public servant performance by strengthening public service motivation, employee engagement, and work discipline (Abdi et al., 2024; Oladimeji & Abdulkareem, 2023; Qamari et al., 2024; Syahrani et al., 2022). By promoting ethical values and a supportive environment, leaders inspire higher task performance and overall public sector effectiveness (Lorenz, 2025).

Although prior studies have occasionally examined organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) as a potential mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance in general management contexts, the present study conceptualizes OCB and public servant performance as two independent behavioral outcomes of ethical public leadership. This positioning is theoretically grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and public service motivation theory (Perry & Wise, 1990; Wang et al., 2020), which predict that ethical leaders foster both discretionary extra-role behaviors (OCB) and in-role task performance through parallel mechanisms of reciprocity, role modeling, and intrinsic motivation. Consistent with Organ's (1988) foundational distinction between extra-role and in-role behaviors, and recent public-sector reviews (de Geus et al., 2020), the two constructs are treated as conceptually and empirically distinct rather than sequentially linked.

This parallel-outcomes approach directly addresses an important research gap: while the positive influence of ethical leadership on OCB and performance is acknowledged separately (Abdi et al., 2024; Makumbe, 2025), few studies compare the relative magnitude of these effects or examine variation across administrative levels in the public sector (de Geus et al., 2020). In resource-constrained multilevel systems such as Ethiopian urban administration, understanding differential impacts offers more actionable insights for leadership development and governance. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives justify examining ethical leadership's differential influence on OCB versus performance across administrative levels, where contextual variations may moderate reciprocity and role modeling.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical propositions, a diagrammatic conceptual framework was developed to outline the relationships among ethical public leadership, OCB, and performance (see Figure 1). The core elements are ethical public leadership; comprising civility, fidelity, proficiency, reflection, prudence, impartiality, fairness, altruism, and principled decision-making) as the independent variable. Whereas, OCB consisting courtesy, generalized compliance, sportsmanship, civic virtue, organizational loyalty, individual initiative, self-development and performance comprising efficiency, responsiveness to assigned tasks, responsiveness to change, contribution to team, punctuality, attendance, accountability, initiative, compliance to policies and procedures as parallel dependent variables.

1.3 Objectives and Significance of the Study

The main objective of this article is to investigate the effect of ethical public leadership on public servants' behavior. Consequently, the article explores public servants' behavior, focusing on two core work related behaviors such as OCB and performance (perf). Specifically the article intended: (1) to determine the relationship of ethical public leadership with OCB and performance; (2) to compare the degree of ethical leadership influence on OCB and Performance; and (3) to examine the variation of ethical public leadership influence across administrative levels.

The article holds incredible significances as it examines the vital role of ethical public leadership in influencing the behavior of public servants, particularly regarding OCB and performance at different administrative levels. Through a comparative multilevel analysis, the study sheds light on how ethical leadership affects employee engagement and effectiveness within public organizations. Gaining insight into these dynamics can guide leadership development strategies, improve organizational performance, and promote a culture of accountability and trust in the public sector, ultimately leading to enhanced governance and more effective public service delivery.

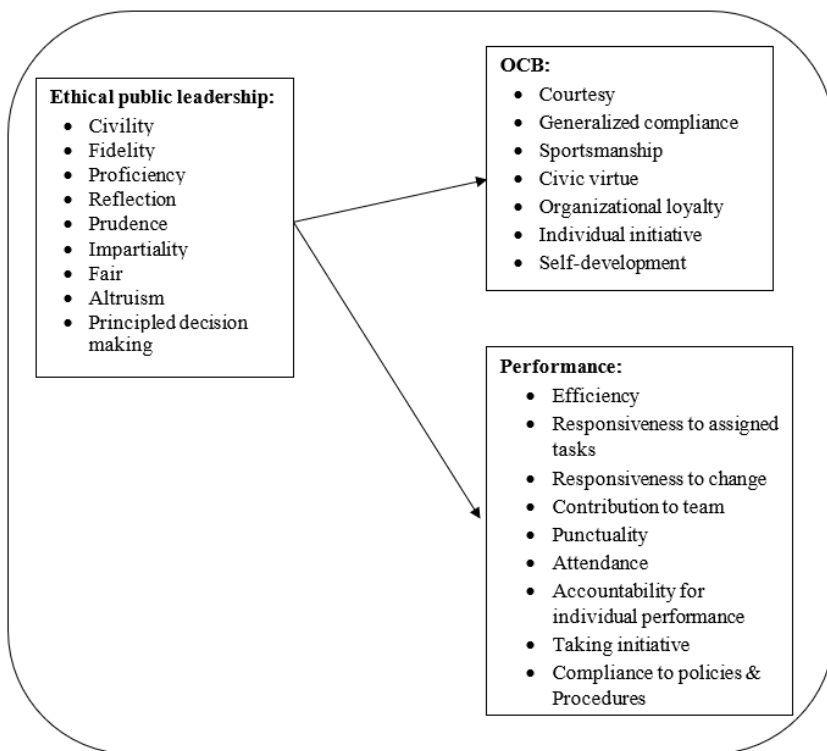


Figure 1: The relationship between main concepts of the study Source: Author formulation

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Site

The research was examined the relationship between ethical public leadership and behavior in specified government departments concerning urban administration in Ethiopia. Urban governments are selected as a result of different factors. Urban governments deliver complex, high-volume public services; understanding how ethical leadership promotes discretionary behaviors (OCB) and improves performance can guide leadership training and policy to boost service quality and citizen trust. They are also heterogeneous (diverse departments, teams, neighborhoods), making them ideal for testing multilevel effects of leadership ethics on individual OCB and performance. Furthermore, growing public concern about integrity and service effectiveness in urban centers creates an urgent need for evidence on leadership practices that foster ethical behavior and productive discretionary efforts. It covered four levels of government; including federal, regional, zonal, and local levels at Ministry of Urban Development and Infrastructure (MoUDI); South Ethiopia Region Urban Development and Construction Bureau (SERUDCB), Gedeo Zone Urban Development and Construction Office (GZUDCO); and Dilla Town Administration (DTA) respectively. By focusing on ethical administrative leadership across these levels, the study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between ethical leadership and public servants' behavior.

2.2 Research Philosophy and Design

The researchers applied a positivist research philosophy. Positivist research philosophy emphasizes objective measurement, hypothesis testing, and the use of quantitative methods to identify generalizable laws of social phenomena through empirical observation and statistical analysis (Saunders et al., 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2022). Applied to this study a positivist approach frames ethical leadership, OCB, and performance as measurable constructs that can be operationalized with validated scales and objective performance indicators; it prioritizes standardized data collection, in this case, structured surveys, and probability sampling across urban government units (Preacher et al., 2010). Under positivism, researcher neutrality and procedural controls for bias (temporal separation of measures, multiple data sources, control variables, and tests for common-method variance) are emphasized to

strengthen internal validity and permit causal inference insofar as the cross-sectional design and analytical controls allow (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The approach supports generating replicable, policy-relevant findings about how ethical leadership at the supervisor or managerial level influences individual discretionary behavior (OCB) and objective or supervisor-rated performance across levels (individuals nested within teams/agencies), and it enables estimation of effect sizes and the testing of multilevel mediation or moderation models that inform evidence-based managerial interventions in urban government (DeRue & Wellman, 2022). Positivism's limitations, particularly constraints on establishing definitive causality with cross-sectional data and reduced attention to contextualized meanings, can be mitigated by transparent reporting, sensitivity analyses, and, where feasible, triangulation with administrative records or follow-up longitudinal or experimental studies to strengthen causal claims (Spector, 2019; Maxwell, 2013).

The article applied a Cross-sectional survey design. Cross-sectional survey design enables efficient measurement of relationships of leadership ethics with OCB and performance across a large, multilayered sample at a single point in time (Podsakoff et al., 2019; Hagger-Johnson et al., 2021). Moreover, a cross-sectional survey balances methodological rigor with feasibility and timeliness, providing actionable evidence for policy and organizational interventions while remaining transparent about causal limitations inherent to non-longitudinal designs (Spector, 2019). A self-administered questionnaire was employed to gather primary data from public servants regarding the study's main concepts. Thus, the unit of analysis were individual public servant at local, zonal, regional, and federal level.

2.3 Measurement

The perception of public servants regarding ethical leadership was measured based on 9 items reflecting the extent to which leaders apply ethical principles such as civility, fidelity, proficiency, reflection, prudence, impartiality, fair, altruism, and principled decision making. Responses to survey items regarding ethical public leadership were measured on a five-point Likert like scale where "1= very low" and "5 = very high". Performance was also measured based on 9 items which involves how public servants behave at their work including; accomplishing work with efficiency and effectiveness, responsiveness

to assigned task, positive response to change, contribution to team, timeliness in reporting to work, working throughout scheduled work day by employees, demonstration of accountability for individual performance, taking initiative in the department, and compliance with organization policies and procedures. OCB was measured based on 7 items that addressed courtesy, generalized compliance, sportsmanship, civic virtue, organizational loyalty, individual initiative, and self-development. Responses to OCB and performance items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale; where “1= strongly disagree” and “5=strongly agree”. Composite scores for each domain were derived by aggregating item responses within the respective constructs. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded before aggregation to ensure that higher scores uniformly indicated higher levels of ethical leadership, organizational citizenship behavior, and performance.

Before gathering extensive data, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the questionnaire's clarity, relevance, and feasibility. Validity of the questionnaire was ensured thorough review of the relevant literature and a subject matter expert review. Reliability was quantified using Cronbach's Alpha statistics, which indicated that all three scales exhibited high internal consistency. Specifically, the ethical public leadership scale achieved alpha value of 0.86, indicating good reliability among its items. OCB scale also showed good reliability with alpha value of 0.85, indicating consistent capture of the intended behaviors. The performance scale also produced a standardized alpha of 0.87, reflecting relatively strong internal consistency. Overall, these findings suggest that all scales are psychometrically robust and appropriate for further statistical analysis, instilling confidence that the constructs measured are consistently operationalized across items.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

According to information from the public service bureau at each administrative level, the target populations for questionnaire respondents were 228, 126, 65, and 206 for MoUDI, SERUDCB, GZUDCO, and DTA, respectively. For the study, stratified sampling technique was employed; from each stratum (administrative level) a simple random sampling was employed to select public servants. Yamane's (1967) formula was used to draw sufficient samples from each administrative level target population. This approach balanced

representativeness with practicality in a resource-constrained setting. As a result, the sample sizes for each administrative level were 145 for MoUDI, 96 for SERUDCB, 56 for GZUDCO, and 136 for DTA. These sample sizes were carefully determined to balance capturing a sufficient number of respondents from each level while ensuring statistical rigor.

2.5 Data Collection Procedure

A self-administered questionnaire was employed to gather primary data from public servants regarding the study's main concepts. To minimize the risk of social desirability bias, the public servants were contacted directly rather than through their departments and promised that their responses would be treated anonymously. A paper and pen questionnaire was used and was distributed during working hours. Of the questionnaires distributed at each administrative level 145 at MoUDI, 96 at SERUDCB, 65 at GZUDCO, and 136 at DTA questionnaires distributed, 142, 91, 53, and 124 were returned respectively, providing a response rate of 98%, 95%, 82%, and 91% respectively.

2.6 Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted on returned questionnaires. Descriptive statistics were employed to describe the salient features of the respondents and the main interest variables. Given the assumption that the strength of the associations may vary across administrative levels, a stratified analytical approach was adopted. Specifically, separate linear regression models were estimated for each administrative level to examine the relationships between ethical public leadership, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and performance. This approach allowed for the assessment of potential heterogeneity in the magnitude and direction of associations across strata. All analyses were carried out using SPSS Version 26.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout various aspects of the study, including participant involvement, incentives provision, participant protection, research design, and reporting of findings. The participants willingly participated in the study based on

informed consent, which was obtained through comprehensive communication about the required information, its purpose, their expected involvement, and its direct or indirect impact on them. To ensure confidentiality, participant names were not specified in the questionnaire. Rigor was prioritized through meticulous research design and adherence to all research steps. Biased language or words targeting any individuals were deliberately avoided. Both negative and positive findings were reported, as long as they were relevant to the analysis.

3. Results

This section presents results of descriptive and simple linear regression analysis. Descriptive analysis involves demographic and socioeconomic characteristic, mean and standard deviation. Simple linear regression specifically focuses on two components that constitute this behavior, namely OCB and performance. By examining these components, the results aim to elucidate how ethical leadership influences various facets of public servants' actions and attitudes in their professional roles.

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics summarize and organize data to reveal central tendencies, dispersion, and distribution patterns, offering a clear baseline view of the sample. They help detect outliers, compare groups, assess representativeness, and inform the choice of further inferential analyses, thereby improving data interpretation and research validity. Hence, in the case of this study descriptive statistics regarding selected respondents' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, mean, and standard deviations were considered.

Describing respondents' characteristics is essential for clarifying sample context, supporting internal validity, and enhancing the usefulness of findings. Demographic and job-related variables situate who the public servants are and allow readers to judge the applicability of results to specific groups or organizational settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bryman, 2016).

Table 1: Respondents' characteristics

Variables	Response category	Administration levels			
		Federal	Region	Zone	Local
Sex (%)	Female	28.7	22.8	7.4	13.6
	Male	71.3	77.2	92.6	86.4
Education level (%)	Diploma	0.7	-	-	.8
	First Degree	40.6	66.3	79.6	96.8
	Second Degree	58.7	33.7	20.4	2.4
Age	Mean	40.42	41.05	40.76	34.85
	Standard Deviation	7.74	6.59	6.96	5.88
Year of experience	Mean	15.17	14.66	14.63	8.71
	Standard Deviation	7.95	6.26	7.54	4.65

Sources: Authors own work

The results in Table 1 shows male respondents predominate at all levels, especially at Zone and Local, with lower but still majority proportions at Federal and Region. Female representation is highest at Federal and lowest at Zone. With regard to education, Federal level has the highest share of advanced qualifications in a second and a first degree, with negligible diploma holders. Regional and Zone levels show progressively lower proportions of second-degree holders and higher proportions of first-degree holders. Local level is dominated by first-degree holders with very few second-degree holders and a small diploma presence. Table 1 further depicted that mean ages are similar across Federal, Region, and Zone, while Local respondents are notably younger. Mean years of experience are highest at Federal, slightly lower at Region and Zone, and substantially lower at Local level.

Mean and standard deviation provide a concise informative snapshot of the data, enabling researchers to explore patterns, identify potential outliers, and establish a baseline understanding before conducting more advanced inferential analyses (Alabi & Bukola, 2023; Acosta & Brooks, 2021) Moreover, they allow for clear and accessible interpretation of the sample's characteristics and the core variables under investigation (Vetter, 2017; Acosta & Brooks, 2021). The results of data analysis are presented in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 show notable differences in mean scores and variability for ethical leadership, OCB, and performance. Federal and Regional levels report the highest mean perceptions of ethical leadership. Local level is intermediate, while Zonal respondents report

substantially lower perceived ethical leadership. The larger SD at Zonal suggests greater disagreement among respondents there. Federal respondents again show the highest mean OCB. Local and Regional are lower and similar, while Zonal has the lowest mean OCB and relatively high dispersion. Federal respondents report the highest performance. Regional, Local, and Zonal show similar, lower performance means; Zonal exhibits the greatest variability.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of main study variables

Variables	Level of administration							
	Federal		Regional		Zonal		Local	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ethical leadership	18.57	7.42	18.51	5.68	13.22	9.48	16.75	7.14
OCB	13.24	5.68	9.59	4.61	8.43	6.18	10.10	5.38
Performance	18.69	6.37	12.84	5.55	12.24	8.62	12.83	6.96

Source: Authors own work

3.2 The Effect of Ethical Public Leadership on OCB

In this section the results of data analysis regarding the effect of ethical public leadership on OCB are presented. The results are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Effect of ethical leadership on OCB at different administrative levels

Administrative level	Number of obs.	Sign. (P-value)	F-test	R ²	Reg. Coef.	Std Reg. Coef.	Constant	St.Err
Federal	142	0.05	3.90	0.03	0.13	0.16	15.91	0.06
Regional	91	< 0.001	13.85	0.13	0.30	0.36	7.74	0.08
Zonal	53	< 0.001	62.02	0.55	0.48	0.74	4.23	0.06
Local	124	< 0.001	46.66	0.28	0.40	0.52	6.31	0.06

Source: Author own work

The results in Table 3 show that the effect of ethical public leadership on OCB differs by administrative level. At the federal level, the relationship is marginally significant and explains only a very small proportion of variance in OCB, with coefficients indicating a small

positive association. At the regional level, ethical leadership is a significant predictor, accounting for a modest share of variance and showing a moderate positive effect. The zonal level exhibits the strongest, highly significant relationship: ethical leadership explains the majority of variance in OCB and the coefficients indicate a large positive effect. At the local level, ethical leadership is also a significant predictor, explaining a substantial portion of variance with a sizeable positive association. Overall, ethical public leadership positively influences OCB across all levels, with effect size and explanatory power increasing from federal (small) to regional (moderate) to local (substantial) and peaking at the zonal level (very strong). These patterns suggest contextual differences in how ethical leadership fosters discretionary citizenship behaviors among public servants. Multivariate analyses controlling for respondent characteristics are recommended to verify these level-specific effects.

3.3 The Effect of Ethical Leadership on Performance

This section presents the results of the data analysis on the effect of ethical public leadership on organizational performance. Key findings are summarized below and detailed in Table 4.

Table 4: Effect of ethical leadership on performance at different administrative levels

Administrative level	No. of obs.	Sign. (P-value)	F-test	R ²	Reg. Coef.	Std Reg. Coef.	Constant	St.Err.
Federal	142	< 0.001	11.93	0.08	0.24	0.28	20.32	0.07
Regional	91	0.02	10.55	0.11	0.32	0.32	12.45	0.10
Zonal	53	< 0.001	67.03	0.56	0.68	0.75	5.77	0.08
Local	124	< 0.001	44.58	0.27	0.50	0.52	8.38	0.08

Source: Author own work

Table 4 indicates that ethical public leadership is a positive predictor of performance at every administrative level, though the magnitude of the effect differs. At the federal level, the relationship is significant but explains only a small share of performance variance, with a small-to-moderate effect size. At the regional level, ethical leadership remains significant and accounts for a modest portion of variance, showing a moderate effect. The strongest association appears at the zonal level,

where ethical leadership is highly significant and explains a large proportion of performance variance, with a very large effect size. At the local level, ethical leadership also significantly predicts performance, explaining a substantial amount of variance. In sum, both effect size and explained variance generally rise across levels and reach their highest at the zonal level, implying that contextual factors influence how ethical leadership affects performance.

4. Discussion

The main aim of this article is to investigate the effect of ethical public leadership on the behavior of public servants, specifically focusing on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and performance. It seeks to establish the relationship between ethical leadership and these behaviors, assess their relative influences, and explore variations across different administrative levels. This approach enhances our understanding of how ethical leadership shapes public servants' behavior in diverse contexts.

4.1 The Relationship of Ethical Public Leadership with OCB and Performance

The results of simple linear regression indicate a significant positive effect of ethical public leadership on both OCB and performance at federal, regional, zonal, and local levels that is consistent with the findings of Abdi et al. (2024). In both instances, the strongest predictive power was noted at the zonal level, with the weakest at the federal level. These results corroborate previous research suggesting that ethical leadership promotes trust and collaboration, thereby improving both OCB and overall performance (Niang, 2023; Hussain & Siddiquee, 2025).

Moreover, the result of simple linear regression model demonstrated a significant overall fit indicating that approximately 3%, 13%, 55%, and 28% of the variance in OCB could be explained by the linear relationships with ethical public leadership at federal, regional, zonal, and local administrative levels, respectively. The robust overall fit of the models aligns with the results of previous related empirical studies.

A study conducted by Walumbwa et al. (2019) found that ethical leadership fosters a culture of trust and commitment among employees, which is essential for promoting OCB. Their research underscores the importance of ethical role modeling in encouraging employees to go beyond their formal job requirements, thereby positively impacting organizational performance. Hence, this relationship emphasizes the need for public organizations to prioritize ethical leadership development as a strategy to enhance OCB, ultimately fostering a more effective and cooperative organizational climate. Furthermore, the robust fit of the models suggests that investing in ethical leadership development could enhance OCB, leading to improved organizational performance and public service delivery. Given that ethical leadership fostering OCB at all levels of administration can cultivate a more engaged and cooperative workforce, ultimately benefiting public sector effectiveness (Organ, 1997).

The result of simple linear regression analysis reveals a significant overall fit for models examining the effect of ethical public leadership on performance (Perf). The variance in performance attributed to linear associations with ethical public leadership varies across administrative levels: approximately 8% at the federal level, 11% at the regional level, 56% at the zonal level, and 27% at the local administrative level. These findings consistently supported by previous studies. The result of the study by Brown & Treviño, (2006) indicated that cultivating ethical practices within public administration can lead to improved employee engagement and performance. Hassan et al. (2014) and Demir et al. (2023) found a notable correlation between ethical leadership and public employees' willingness to report ethical problems, which can lead to improved organizational performance through increased accountability and transparency. Demir et al. (2023) further argued that this is particularly relevant at the local government level, where organizational leadership can reinforce ethics culture and improve ethical performance.

4.2 Comparison of the Degree of Ethical Leadership Influence on OCB and Performance

A comparative analysis indicates that ethical leadership tends to exert a greater influence on performance than on OCB, particularly at the zonal level, underscoring its direct role in achieving organizational

objectives. This supports earlier findings that ethical public leadership has a more pronounced effect on performance than on OCB across all administrative levels, highlighting the essential role of ethical behavior in reaching organizational goals (Hussain & Talpur, 2021).

The comparison of ethical leadership effect on performance and OCB indicates that ethical public leadership exerts a more substantial influence on performance compared to OCB across all administrative levels. The zonal level demonstrated the most significant gap in influence, indicating the ethical dimensions of leadership are particularly impactful in driving performance outcomes. This aligns with the notion that ethical leaders can create a supportive environment that encourages higher levels of accountability, motivation, and productivity among employees (Brown & Treviño, 2006). The finding that ethical public leadership has a more substantial influence on performance compared to OCB across all administrative levels highlights the direct effect of ethical conduct on achieving organizational goals (Hussain & Talpur, 2021). This underscores the importance of integrity, accountability, and transparency in leadership roles, as these qualities foster a work environment conducive to higher productivity and commitment (Bello, 2012; Neamțu & Bejinaru, 2019). Organizations with strong ethical leadership often experience greater employee engagement, reduced turnover, and enhanced stakeholder trust, all of which contribute to improved performance (Bello, 2012). Therefore, prioritizing ethical leadership development is crucial for public sector organizations aiming to enhance their effectiveness and overall performance (Ughulu, 2024).

4.3 Comparison of the Variation of Ethical Public Leadership Influence across Administrative Levels

The results of simple linear regression revealed that ethical public leadership imposed significant positive effect on OCB across all administrative levels. The results suggests for each additional standardized unit of ethical public leadership, OCB is predicted to increase by 0.16, 0.36, 0.74, and 0.52 units at federal, regional, zonal, and local administrative levels respectively. The strongest predictive capacity observed at the zonal level and the least at the federal level. Prior empirical studies have consistently reinforced this notion, highlighting the positive relationship between ethical leadership and

OCB. For instance, the studies by Brown & Treviño (2006) and Walumbwa et al. (2010) indicated that ethical leadership fosters a culture of trust and collaboration among employees. A study by Neubert et al. (2018) advocated that ethical leadership not only directly influences OCB but also mediates the relationship between ethical climate and employee performance. Their findings suggest that when leaders exhibit ethical behavior, employees are more likely to engage in OCB, thus enhancing overall organizational effectiveness. A study by Davis et al. (2018) also indicated that ethical leadership enhances employee commitment and encourages behaviors that go beyond formal job requirements, thereby enriching organizational citizenship. Baker et al. (2022) and Rego et al. (2022) emphasize the critical role of ethical leadership in promoting positive employee behaviors, such as engagement and altruism. Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Wang et al. (2020) synthesized findings from multiple studies and confirmed that ethical leadership has a significant positive effect on OCB across different cultural contexts. This research emphasizes that ethical leadership is not only relevant in specific settings but is universally applicable in promoting OCB.

The variance in the ethical leadership influence on OCB across administrative levels underscores the view that ethical leadership fosters an environment conducive to OCB. This pattern also suggests that as ethical leadership practices are strengthened, OCB also increases, highlighting the importance of ethical conduct in fostering a collaborative and proactive workforce. Hence, by investing in leadership development programs focused on ethical practices, public agencies can create an environment where employees feel motivated to go beyond their formal job requirements, thereby contributing to a more robust public service ethos. Therefore, public organizations should prioritize ethical leadership training to harness its potential in enhancing OCB and achieving better governance outcomes.

The findings from simple linear regression indicate that ethical public leadership imposed a significant positive effect on performance across all administrative levels. Specifically, for each additional standardized unit of ethical public leadership, performance is expected to rise by 0.28, 0.32, 0.75, and 0.52 units at the federal, regional, zonal, and local levels respectively. This results supported consistently by the findings

of previous studies. van Dierendonck (2011) indicated that as ethical leadership practices are enhanced, the performance of public servants is likely to improve significantly, particularly in settings where leaders are more intimately connected with their teams and the communities they serve. A study by Kim et al. (2018) attested that ethical leadership positively influences employee engagement, which in turn enhances job performance and public service motivation. The findings by Mayer et al. (2020) and Zhang et al. (2021) underscored the importance of ethical leadership in enhancing organizational performance by promoting trust, motivation, and a shared vision among employees. Kamalakannan (2021) reported that ethical leadership dimensions positively and significantly influence organizational performance. Recent study by King (2024) also support the assertion that ethical leadership positively influences organizational performance in the public sector. King argues that ethical leadership is crucial for rebuilding citizen trust in government and enhancing performance.

The variance in the effect of ethical leadership across different administrative levels may be due to the varying degrees of autonomy (Aunin et al., 2024), resources (Ashfaq et al., 2021; Santiago-Torner et al., 2025), and oversight mechanisms (Yadava, 2024) at each level. The interplay between autonomy, resources, and oversight mechanisms creates a unique ethical landscape at each administrative level. For instance, ethical leadership may have a more pronounced effect at the zonal level, if leaders there have sufficient autonomy to implement ethical practices, adequate resources to support these practices, and robust oversight to ensure accountability. Conversely, the effect may be weaker at the federal level if leaders face bureaucratic constraints, resource limitations, or weak oversight (Kim & Lee, 2024). Further research is needed to explore these contextual factors and their influence on the relationship between ethical leadership and performance.

A comparative analysis highlights a gradient of effectiveness, with ethical leadership contributing more to performance at the zonal and local levels compared to the federal and regional levels. This may reflect the varying dynamics of leadership influence based on proximity to employees and stakeholders (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999). It imposed strongest effects at the zonal level and the weakest at the federal level.

This variation suggests that the effectiveness of ethical leadership may be amplified in contexts where leaders have closer, more direct interactions with their teams and stakeholders, potentially fostering a culture of accountability and high performance (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 2021). In light of these results, it becomes evident that public organizations should prioritize the development and reinforcement of ethical leadership practices, particularly at local and zonal levels, where the effect on performance is most pronounced. By doing so, organizations can not only improve individual and team outcomes but also contribute to the overall effectiveness and integrity of public service delivery.

The less pronounced influence of ethical leadership on performance at the federal level may stem from the complexities and bureaucratic structures typical of federal organizations, where established protocols and layers of management can obscure the direct effects of ethical leadership (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999). The bureaucratic nature of federal settings often results in a slower response to ethical initiatives, making it challenging for ethical leadership to translate immediately into enhanced performance outcomes.

In contrast, at the local level, ethical leadership maintains a strong influence on performance, but the effects are not as robust as those observed at the zonal level. This suggests that while local leaders can cultivate ethical environments that promote performance, they may face different challenges, such as limited resources or support from higher administrative levels, which can hinder their effectiveness (Baker et al., 2022). Overall, these results highlight the need for tailored approaches to ethical leadership development across different administrative levels, recognizing that context plays a critical role in the efficacy of ethical leadership initiatives.

Interestingly, the regional level presents a unique case, where a minimal difference in ethical leadership influence on OCB and performance was recognized. This could imply that in regional administration, the dynamics between ethical leadership and OCB may be more balanced or that other factors, such as organizational culture or external pressures, could mediate this relationship. It suggests that while ethical leadership is essential, its effect on OCB may be moderated by

contextual variables that are more pronounced at this level. The minimal difference in ethical leadership influence on OCB compared to its effect on performance suggests a more balanced dynamic in regional administrations. This may indicate that, in these contexts, the ethical leadership practices are sufficiently integrated within the organizational culture and day-to-day operations, leading to a consistent influence on both performance and OCB (García-Morales et al., 2022). Alternatively, it is plausible that external pressures, such as public accountability and community expectations, could moderate this relationship, compelling leaders to adopt ethical practices that enhance both employee behavior and performance outcomes (Mayer et al., 2020). Consequently, while ethical leadership remains a critical factor in fostering positive organizational outcomes, the regional context highlights the importance of considering additional variables that may shape the effectiveness of ethical leadership. This calls for a more comprehensive approach to leadership development that not only emphasizes ethical standards but also addresses the unique cultural and contextual elements present in regional administrations.

4.4 Practical and Theoretical Implication of the Study

The results of the study emphasize the importance of tailoring ethical leadership strategies to the specific context of each administrative level, taking into account the unique challenges and opportunities presented by varying degrees of autonomy, resources, and oversight (Santiago-Torner et al., 2024; Santiago-Torner et al., 2025). Hence, the results stress the necessity for public sector organizations to invest in ethical leadership development programs, as fostering ethical behavior among leaders can lead to enhanced organizational performance, increased employee morale, and improved service delivery outcomes. Ultimately, prioritizing ethical leadership can facilitate a culture of integrity and accountability, which is essential for effective governance and public trust.

The findings emphasize the critical role of ethical leadership in driving organizational performance across various administrative levels, revealing significant differences in influence that necessitate tailored leadership development strategies. The pronounced effect of ethical public leadership at the zonal level indicates that leaders operating in these contexts can leverage ethical practices to foster a high-

performance environment effectively (Brown & Treviño, 2006). This suggests that organizations should prioritize the cultivation of ethical leadership competencies specifically within zonal administrations, where the potential for performance enhancement is maximized. Additionally, recognizing the unique contextual factors present in regional settings is essential for organizations aiming to harness the full benefits of ethical leadership. By understanding how local culture, organizational dynamics, and external pressures shape leadership effectiveness, organizations can implement more nuanced strategies that reinforce ethical behaviors and align them with performance goals (García-Morales et al., 2022). Ultimately, these insights advocate for a comprehensive approach to ethical leadership development that adapts to the specific needs and challenges of different administrative contexts, thereby enhancing overall organizational effectiveness.

5. Conclusions

This study affirms that ethical public leadership is a meaningful predictor of public servants' work-related behaviors, positively associated with both organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and performance. Importantly, the influence on performance appears stronger and more direct than the effect on OCB, indicating that ethical leadership more reliably translates into measurable task-related outcomes than into discretionary prosocial behaviors. This distinction suggests that ethical leaders may influence formal performance benchmarks through clearer expectations, processes, and accountability mechanisms, while OCB, being voluntary and relational, may depend additionally on interpersonal climate and individual dispositions.

The influence of ethical leadership is not uniform across administrative contexts. Effects are most pronounced at subnational levels, particularly zonal and local administrations, and attenuated at higher tiers. Contextual explanations for this pattern include greater leader–follower proximity, more visible and immediate accountability, and faster implementation of ethical practices at lower administrative levels. These conditions likely amplify the behavioral consequences of ethical signaling, making local leadership a critical leverage point for improving performance outcomes.

Implications for practice and policy follow directly. Leadership development and ethics interventions should be context-sensitive: while system wide integrity policies remain essential, allocating resources to strengthen ethical capacity at zonal and local levels may yield disproportionate gains in performance. Recommended actions include targeted ethics training for frontline managers, mechanisms to increase leader visibility and accountability, and incentives that align ethical conduct with performance metrics. Moreover, further qualitative research has to be undertaken to determine the reasons for the vibration of ethical leadership influence over OCB and performance across administrative levels.

In general, ethical public leadership is a valuable organizational resource for enhancing public-sector effectiveness, particularly in driving performance at lower administrative levels. A strategic, contextually tailored approach to cultivating ethical leadership promises to strengthen both accountability and service delivery in public organizations.

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