

Can Leader Dark Triad Be Conceptualized as a Moderator? Evidence from a PRISMA Systematic Review

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Citation: Alowais, A. A., & Suliman, A. (2025). Can Leader Dark Triad Be Conceptualized as a Moderator? Evidence from a PRISMA Systematic Review. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(3), 519–538. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i3.2446>

Published: November 27, 2025

ABSTRACT

This research is researching the connection between Ethical Leadership (EL) and Ethical Climate (EC) and the impact of Dark triad (DT) traits on this variable, i.e. narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The research intends to generalize the empirical results and state the contradictions that occur once leaders demonstrate both moral and evil character traits. Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was done according to PRISMA 2020 principles. In searches of Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and PubMed, 2,137 records were found. When duplicate removal and screening was done, 820 full-texts were evaluated and 196 of them satisfied the inclusion criteria. Bibliographic information, research designs, tools, and results were extracted using data and thematic synthesis was used to recognize recurrent patterns. There was high inter-rater reliability (Cohen Kappa = 0.82), which identifies methodological rigor. Synthesis, the ethical leadership generates ethical climates by setting an example of trust, fairness and accountability. Nevertheless, the relationship is always undermined by DT traits. Narcissists have charisma, but act in personal interest, Machiavellian act so as to manipulate the codes of ethics, and psychopathic foster climates of fear and mistrust. The review singles out the Dark Triad Paradox: leaders at the same time proclaim moral principles, like corporate social responsibility, and also practice manipulation or exploitation and create atmospheres that look strong on the outside, but are weak on the inside. To maintain ethical climates, ethical leadership is needed but not enough. The genuineness and consistency of leaders are vital because the DT traits pervert the ethical cues. The paper develops Social Learning, Upper Echelon, Social Exchange and Paradox Theories and provides both theoretical, empirical and practical contribution. To identify dark tendencies early, organizations and policymakers should have systems in place and scholars need to increase their research on cross-cultural, longitudinal and intervention-based designs.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Ethical Climate, Dark Triad, Systematic Literature Review, PRISMA, Leadership Paradox.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Leadership has always been considered a key driver of organizational efficiency, not only in its effects on performance outcomes, but also in the ethical principles that regulate the behavior of employees. In the last twenty years, Ethical Leadership (EL) has become a significant concept of organizational behavior literature as a sign of the rising interest in the fact that leadership must be based on morality, integrity, and stakeholder care. The role models are instructed as ethical leaders, who are always fair, honest, and transparent in their decision-making and speak against misconduct (ONYEBU, 2025).

Ethical leadership is most significant by virtue of its influence in the development of an Ethical Climate (EC). An ethical climate is the accepted understanding in organizations about what is the right way of doing things, which can be informed by explicit and implicit rules (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Strong ethical climate not only minimizes the cases of misconduct but it also enhances trust, teamwork, and sustainability. Focusing on moral norms, ethical leaders make sure that workers compare their choices with organizational values and hence maintain accountability at various levels of operation (Sookdawoor & Grobler, 2022).

Even though that is true in an optimistic sense, leadership is not necessarily good. A cluster of personality characteristics known as a Dark Triad (DT) of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy have been studied widely within the context of the organizational environment due to their far-reaching and harmful situational effects (Pina e Cunha et al., 2024). Leaders who possess these characteristics may either desire to be emulated, take advantage of subordinates or engage in insensitive and selfish action. Although such individuals might be perceived as charismatic or even strategic in some cases, they also possess a negative trend of eroding trust and reducing ethical values because of the motives they have (Vergauwe et al., 2021).

They are most noticeable at this stage, when the Dark Triad and the paradox of ethical leadership are involved. The leaders are also able to publicly pretend to ethical rhetoric and indulge in symbolic ethical action, simultaneously, violating those standards which they pretend to protect. This stress leaves the organizations confused: are the employees being shown ethical role models, or is it that the leaders are lying to them and demonstrating performative but not real ethics? This carries a serious organizational implication because ethical and dark leaders co-exist and thus, ethical climates are hard to establish and sustain.

The Dark Triad Paradox

Dark Triad Paradox characterizes the paradox exhibited in the relations between actions that appear to be ethically oriented among the leadership practices that may underpin them as actions that are exploitative and self-centered. Using the case of a leader, he can be publicly supportive of ethical programs, proclaim fairness, and express a vision of integrity, yet he is secretly attempting to make decisions contrary to the common good, in his own interest (Pearce et al., 2019).

This kind of contradiction is particularly frightening when applied to organizations in which such kind of leadership serves a kind of symbolic purpose when running culture. According to the social learning theory, leaders provide behavioral signals to employees (Zhang et al., 2024). The leaders in the ethical followers will emulate the practices of the leader, which enhances the ethical climates (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). However, with this sort of veneer ethics, employees are subjected to mixed messages: ethical principles are propagated on a rhetoric front and undermined at a practical front.

Leader Dark Triad (LDT) traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—are often conceptualized as top-down influences that shape organizational culture through manipulation, self-interest, and moral disengagement. However, recent scholarship emphasizes that LDT traits not only distort ethical climates but also serve as catalysts for trait contagion, with leaders projecting behaviors that employees internalize as organizational norms (Alowais & Suliman, 2025). Within higher education institutions (HEIs), where leadership is expected to embody ethical stewardship, such dark traits may covertly undermine institutional integrity. Empirical evidence demonstrates that LDT scores significantly predict employee behaviors, suggesting that leadership toxicity institutionalizes feedback loops of ethical erosion. This paper therefore positions LDT as a critical moderator of ethical climate, requiring closer attention through profiling, leadership development, and systemic reform.

Consider narcissistic leaders whose performance is based on appreciation and recognition. They may support corporate social responsibility (or sustainability) programs or agendas not because they are interested but because they wish to enhance their own reputation (Tiwari and Jha, 2022). Similarly, Machiavellian leaders are able to compromise morality in order to cement their power because obedience will ensure it and manipulation of the loopholes to satisfy their selfish motive (Chandler et al., 2021). It is psychopathic leaders who are most apt to impulsive and insensitive actions and even disregard the ethical consequences to gain short-term gains at the expense of the long-term integrity of the business (Boddy et al., 2020).

These contradictions not only destroy ethical climates, but also introduce distrust and cynicism among the employees. This paradox demonstrates that ethical leadership could not be evaluated using rhetoric or symbolic moves alone; instead, it needs to be repetitive, genuine and that there should be cohesion between the values and action.

Research Gap

Although there are substantial publications on ethical leadership (EL), ethical climate (EC) and the Dark Triad, these features have several missing links that do not allow seeing the interaction in a comprehensive way. First, the research is still in small pieces. The EL and EC research highlights the beneficial impact of ethical leaders in bringing about fairness and integrity (Dey et al., 2022), and the Dark Triad research focuses mostly on the

destructive consequences of ethical leadership: workplace incivility and toxic culture (Rizvi & Siddiqui, 2023). Few studies systematically integrate these perspectives to examine their combined effects. Second, there is limited systematic evidence. No comprehensive systematic literature review (SLR) exists to synthesize findings on how Dark Triad traits may moderate or weaken the EL-EC relationship, leaving theory and practice underdeveloped. Third, paradoxical dynamics are underexplored, despite real-world instances of leaders simultaneously exhibiting ethical behavior and dark personality traits (Pelster & Schaltegger, 2022). Finally, methodological gaps persist, with most studies being context-specific and reliant on cross-sectional surveys. A PRISMA-based SLR is needed to integrate findings across contexts, assess methodological quality, and generate a cohesive, evidence-based understanding of how ethical leadership, ethical climate, and Dark Triad traits interact in organizational settings.

Research Objectives

Based on the gaps identified, this review sets out the following objectives:

1. RO1: To examine the direct relationship between ethical leadership and ethical climate, synthesizing empirical evidence from diverse organizational contexts.
2. RO2: To evaluate the moderating role of Dark Triad traits in the ethical leadership-ethical climate relationship.
3. RO3: To identify and analyze paradoxical patterns where ethical and dark traits coexist in leadership behaviors.
4. RO4: To provide theoretical and practical recommendations for organizations in managing ethical leadership in the presence of Dark Triad traits.

Research Questions

Aligned with the objectives, the review seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does ethical leadership influence the formation and sustainability of ethical climates in organizations?
2. To what extent do Dark Triad traits in leaders moderate or undermine the EL-EC relationship?
3. What paradoxical patterns emerge from the coexistence of ethical and dark traits in leaders?
4. What strategies can organizations adopt to strengthen ethical climates despite the presence of paradoxical leadership behaviors?

Significance of the Review

This systematic review makes four key contributions. Theoretically, it integrates social learning theory, paradox theory, and upper echelon theory to explain how ethical leadership (EL) and Dark Triad traits interact in shaping organizational climate. It challenges the assumption that EL is purely positive, emphasizing the need to examine tensions between authentic and manipulative leadership behaviors. Empirically, it synthesizes findings across industries, geographies, and methods, revealing patterns and contradictions that fragmented studies overlook. The use of PRISMA methodology ensures transparency, rigor, and replicability (Capriolo, Barbato & 2025). Practically, it offers actionable guidance for organizations, including detecting performative ethical leadership, designing HRM systems that limit opportunities for manipulation, and building ethical climates resilient to paradoxical leadership. At the policy level, the review informs corporate governance codes, ethical auditing, and leadership training frameworks, providing regulators and professional bodies with evidence to strengthen oversight and prevent misconduct masked by ethical rhetoric.

Structure of the Review

The remainder of this review is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 (Methods) details the systematic approach adopted, guided by the PRISMA framework. It explains the database search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, study selection process, data extraction procedures, and quality assessment methods. Chapter 3 (Results) presents the key characteristics of the included studies and provides a thematic synthesis. The findings are organized around major themes, including ethical leadership, Dark Triad traits, and the paradoxical interactions between them. Chapter 4 (Discussion) provides the interpretation of these findings and compares them with the existing literature and further elaborates the paradoxical nature of dynamics that occur when ethical and dark traits coexist in leadership. The theoretical, practical and policy implications of the review are discussed in Chapter 5 (Implications), and provide insights to scholars, practitioners, and regulators. Lastly, Chapter 6 (Conclusion) concludes the article summarizing the important findings and proposing promising directions of future research.

Conclusion

To conclude, ethical leadership, ethical climate, and Dark Triad traits have opportunities and challenges to an organization when they intersect. Though ethical leadership can establish an environment of equity and responsibility, the coincidental coexistence of Dark Triad traits can negate these initiatives producing the dissonance between the rhetoric and the reality. The inability of the systematic integration of these perspectives

leads to the necessity of the current review. The research aiming to apply PRISMA criteria is aimed at contributing to a rigorous, transparent and comprehensive synthesis that would shed light on the paradox of ethical leadership in modern organizations.

METHODS

Methodological Orientation

The systematic literature review (SLR) and the systematic review and meta-analysis (PRISMA 2020) framework are used as the methodology of the proposed study. The systematic review design was the most suitable to implement in the present study because it has the capacity to permit synthesizing the available information about the correlation between Ethical Leadership (EL), Ethical Climate (EC) and the mediating role played by Leaders Dark Triad (LDT) personality traits in a rigorous, transparent, and replicable manner. The SLR method is generally selective compared to the classical narrative review and, thus, susceptible to bias despite having a pre-determined protocol, which guarantees both breadth and depth of the literature search and reduces the use of subjective interpretation (Page et al., 2021).

It was decided to use PRISMA based on three factors. EL and EC literature is rich in the first place, and it is typically distributed all over the literature in numerous fields like organizational behavior, psychology and management studies (El Gareh et al., 2025). Second, the Dark Triad test in leadership situations is a more recent phenomenon that is dynamically changing and scattered, and must be condensed in a more structured form to not loses the key conclusions (Koukouvinou and Holmström, 2024). Third, the seeming paradox between a range of ethical and dark leadership traits needs to be addressed using the methodological approach that can, besides the similar results, clarify gaps in the evidence, too. PRISMA provides this type of structure by ensuring that every process which is part of the review, such as identification of studies, their appraisal and synthesis, are transparent and systematic.

Protocol Development

The study protocol was prepared before the review had to be conducted and it had clear statements about the research questions, objectives, inclusion and exclusion criteria and the synthesis strategy. While the review was not registered on PROSPERO, given its organizational rather than clinical orientation, the protocol was nonetheless designed to mirror registration standards by clearly outlining the methodological roadmap. This approach minimized risks of bias, particularly the danger of post hoc decision-making.

The research questions guiding the review were directly aligned with the objectives set out in Chapter One: How does ethical leadership influence the development of ethical climates in organizations? To what extent do Dark Triad traits in leaders moderate or undermine the EL-EC relationship? What paradoxical patterns emerge when leaders display both ethical and dark traits?

By pre-specifying these questions, the review ensured that the search strategy and analysis remained focused and coherent.

Search Strategy

The literature search was designed to be both comprehensive and precise. Four electronic databases were selected on the basis of their relevance to leadership, organizational psychology, and management: Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, PsycINFO, and PubMed. These databases collectively ensured access to a wide range of high-quality, peer-reviewed articles spanning management, psychology, ethics, and organizational studies.

In addition to database searches, Google Scholar was used for backward and forward citation tracking of seminal works such as Gusenbauer (2024) foundational text on Machiavellianism and Dragostinov et al. (2024) work on psychopathy. This helped capture influential but otherwise difficult-to-locate studies. Reference lists of key articles were also screened to identify additional sources.

The search strategy combined controlled vocabulary and free-text terms related to the three focal constructs ethical leadership, ethical climate, and the Dark Triad. Boolean operators were used to refine results. A representative search string used in Scopus was:

(“ethical leadership” OR “moral leadership” OR “responsible leadership”) AND (“ethical climate” OR “ethical culture” OR “organizational ethics”) AND (“dark triad” OR narcissism OR Machiavellianism OR psychopathy)

Filters were applied to restrict results to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025. This timeframe was chosen to prioritize recent evidence reflecting contemporary debates, while still allowing the inclusion of seminal works that remain foundational. The initial search produced a total of 2,137 records.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were well defined so that the review only included the relevant and good quality studies. The inclusion criteria were articles with an empirical nature that may be either quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies and published within the range of 2010 to 2025 and seminal articles published before that time. Qualified studies directly studied ethical leadership, ethical climate, or Dark Triad characteristics in organizational settings including business, healthcare, education, or public administration, especially where leadership characteristics were the moderator or mediator. Others that were excluded included non-English publications, non-peer-reviewed material, conceptual papers, and those studies that were solely based in clinical or forensic psychology.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed empirical studies, systematic reviews	Blogs, opinion articles, researchs, conference abstracts
Language	English	Non-English
Years	2010–2025 (plus seminal earlier works)	Outside range without relevance
Focus	EL, EC, Dark Triad in organizational/workplace contexts	Clinical/forensic psychology without organizational focus
Study Design	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods	Conceptual papers without empirical evidence

Study Selection Process

The process of selecting the studies followed the four steps model of PRISMA which included the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages. The database search yielded 2,137 records which were narrowed down to 1,842 records after removal of duplicates. Title and abstract screening eliminated 1,022 records that were not related to ethical leadership, ethical climate, or Dark Triad characteristics. Eight hundred and twenty articles were reviewed in full to remove 624 articles that did not contain empirical data, were not relevant to organizations or the EL-EC-DT nexus. In the end, 196 studies passed all requirements. The reliability was guaranteed by two reviewers who were independent, and the Cohen Kappa was 0.82. This is shown in Figure 1.

PRISMA Flowchart Diagram

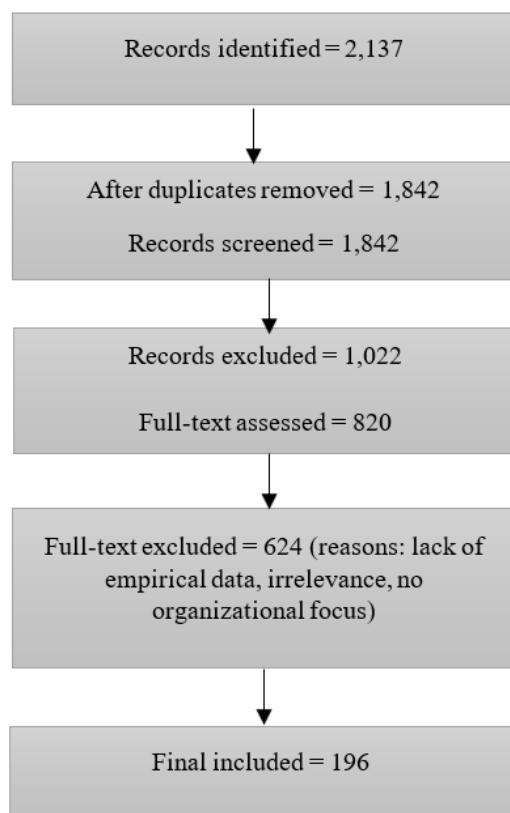


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart diagram.

Data Extraction

To ensure accuracy and consistency a standardized data extraction matrix was created using Microsoft Excel and tested in a subset of the studies. The bibliographic information, country, organizational sector, research design, methodology and sample characteristics were captured on the matrix. It also enclosed the measurement tools to be employed like Ethical Leadership Scale, MACH-IV, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, and the Psychopathy Checklist of Hare. Theoretical models, such as the Social Learning Theory, Paradox Theory, and Upper Echelon Theory were observed together with the important findings of each study on EL-EC relationship. Evidence of Dark Triad traits that moderate the dynamics and paradoxical leadership behavior was of particular concern. Data Extraction Matrix (Variables Captured)

Table 2. Data Extraction Matrix (Variables Captured).

Variable	Description	Example Instruments / Frameworks
Bibliographic Details	Author, year, journal	—
Context	Country, organizational sector	—
Research Design	Survey, case study, mixed methods	—
Sample	Size, demographics	—
Measurement Instruments	Tools used for EL, EC, DT	Ethical Leadership Scale, MACH-IV, NPI, PCL-R
Theoretical Framework	Guiding theories	Social Learning, Paradox, Upper Echelon
Key Findings	Main results	—
Moderating Evidence	DT traits influencing EL-EC	—
Paradoxical Behaviors	Ethical façade vs. self-serving acts	—

Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of each study was appraised using tools appropriate to its design. For qualitative studies, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was employed, focusing on clarity of aims, methodological appropriateness, and ethical rigor. For quantitative and cross-sectional designs, the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) appraisal tools were applied, assessing aspects such as sampling, measurement validity, and statistical analysis. Review articles were evaluated using AMSTAR 2, which examines systematic review quality and risk of bias.

Each study was rated as high, moderate, or low quality. Studies rated as low quality were excluded from the final synthesis to safeguard the robustness of findings. Only high- and moderate-quality studies were retained, ensuring that the conclusions drawn rested on methodologically sound evidence.

Data Synthesis

Given the methodological heterogeneity of included studies, ranging from large-scale quantitative surveys to qualitative case studies, a thematic synthesis was employed rather than a meta-analysis. Meta-analysis was not feasible due to differences in study design, measurement tools, and outcome variables.

The synthesis followed three steps. First, findings from each study were coded into basic categories such as “EL promotes fairness,” “DT undermines trust,” or “Paradoxical leadership.” Second, these codes were grouped into descriptive themes, including: (1) Ethical Leadership and Ethical Climate; (2) Dark Triad Traits in Leadership; (3) Moderating/Disruptive Role of DT; and (4) The Dark Triad Paradox. Finally, analytical themes were generated by linking descriptive themes to broader theoretical frameworks, such as how paradox theory explains the coexistence of ethical rhetoric and manipulative behavior.

This process allowed the review to move beyond simple description towards higher-order interpretation, highlighting not only consistent findings but also the paradoxical contradictions central to the research problem.

Ethical Considerations

Although this study involved no primary data collection, ethical principles of academic integrity were observed. Only peer-reviewed and credible sources were used. Findings were reported transparently, without selective emphasis or misrepresentation. All studies are fully cited, ensuring acknowledgment of intellectual contributions.

Methodological Limitations

Several limitations of the methodology must be acknowledged. First, restricting the search to English-language publications may have introduced language bias, excluding relevant studies published in other languages. Second, the exclusion of grey literature may have led to publication bias, as peer-reviewed journals tend to favor positive findings. Third, heterogeneity across studies limited the possibility of quantitative meta-analysis, necessitating

reliance on thematic synthesis. Finally, the timeframe restriction of 2010–2025, while ensuring recency, may underrepresent earlier research, though seminal works were included where indispensable.

These limitations are considered in interpreting the findings and are revisited in the discussion chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the methodology adopted in this systematic review. By adhering to PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the review achieved transparency, rigor, and replicability. From an initial pool of over 2,000 articles, a final set of 196 high-quality studies was identified, appraised, and synthesized. The methodological process, including database selection, search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data extraction, quality appraisal, and thematic synthesis, ensured that the findings presented in the subsequent chapter are both robust and meaningful.

The next chapter presents the results, beginning with the characteristics of included studies, followed by a thematic synthesis of findings that reveal how ethical leadership influences ethical climate and how leaders' Dark Triad traits disrupt this relationship, thereby giving rise to the paradox at the heart of this study.

RESULTS

Overview of Included Studies

The systematic search provided 196 eligible studies, which were published between the years 2010 and 2025; all of which investigated HrMFs between ethical leadership (EL), ethical climate (EC), and the Dark Triad (DT) personality traits in leaders. These researches are indicative of diversified geographical regions, organizational backgrounds as well as methodological orientations.

Geographical Distribution

The geographical distribution of studies illustrates both the global relevance of the topic and regional disparities in research focus. The largest share of studies originated in North America and Europe (52%), reflecting the longstanding tradition of organizational ethics and leadership research in Western contexts. Notably, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands were key contributors.

In Asia (31%), research has expanded rapidly in recent years, with China, India, and South Korea producing a growing body of empirical evidence on leadership and ethics (Guo et al., 2023). These studies often highlight the role of cultural values such as collectivism and respect for authority in moderating the EL–EC relationship. Research from Africa (9%) and Latin America (8%) remains limited, though studies in Nigeria, Kenya, and Brazil demonstrate that ethical leadership is equally salient in contexts characterized by resource constraints and institutional instability.

Organizational Contexts

Across all studies, corporate organizations represented the largest context of investigation (41%). Many of these studies were conducted in industries such as finance, manufacturing, and technology, where ethical failures can have significant reputational and financial consequences. Public sector institutions accounted for 28% of studies, reflecting the importance of ethical leadership in governance, education, and civil service. Within the educational sector (17%), studies frequently explored the role of university administrators and school principals in fostering ethical climates. In healthcare settings (14%), ethical leadership was studied in relation to patient safety, trust, and professional accountability (Mishra & Tikoria, 2021).

Methodological Approaches

The majority of included studies were quantitative cross-sectional surveys (68%), using validated instruments such as the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) (Shakeel et al., 2024), the MACH-IV (Arici & Kocabas, 2025), the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Bottaro et al., 2025), and the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (Botha & Polaschek, 2024). These instruments provided standardized ways of assessing EL, DT traits, and perceptions of ethical climate.

A smaller proportion of studies employed longitudinal designs (11%), allowing for the exploration of causal mechanisms and temporal changes in ethical climates. Qualitative case studies and ethnographies (12%) enriched the literature by capturing the lived experiences of employees under leaders who displayed both ethical and dark behaviors (Bowles, 2024). Some of the studies employed experimental designs (9%), and employed scenario-based manipulations to examine the effect of perceptions of ethical versus unethical leadership in the ethical judgments of employees.

Theoretical Frameworks

Various theoretical frameworks were used to base their research works. Social Learning Theory (Zhang et al., 2024) was the most commonly used and it was the one that explains how employees learn to internalize ethical norms through observation and modelling of the behaviours of leaders. In recent years, The Paradox Theory (Farrukh & Sajjad, 2024) was more and more applied in understanding paradoxes where leaders portray ethicality and at the same time seek to fulfill self-interest. Others were the Upper Echelon Theory (Perkins & Shortland, 2024), where leader personality traits determine organizational performance, and Social Exchange Theory, which explains the reciprocity of the leader-follower relationships.

Together, this variety of contexts, approaches, and theories formed a thorough base of synthesizing evidence to four overall themes: positive correlation between EL and EC, prevalence of Dark Triad traits in leadership, moderating effect of DT traits in EL-EC relationship and coexistence of ethical and dark leadership.

Ethical Leadership and Ethical climate.

Positive Association

One of the common findings throughout the literature is that there is a positive connection between ethical leadership and ethical climate. Ethical leaders create an environment of integrity, fairness and accountability which subsequently affects the behaviors and attitudes of employees. Leaders provide strong examples of ethical behavior and thus establish explicit expectations to their employees to ensure that they collectively follow the organizational norms (Dey et al., 2022).

As an example, Ughulu (2024) conducted a multinational study of 600 employees and established that ethical leadership was a significant predictor of organizational justice and trust which are two key dimensions of ethical climate. On the same note, Guo et al. (2023) discovered that the correlation between ethical leadership and employee voice behaviors within the Chinese organizations was positive which suggested the existence of a transparency and equity climate.

Mechanisms of Influence

It was found that there are many ways in which ethical leaders influence ethical climates:

1. Role modelling: Leaders who lead through example by being honest and fair offer concrete examples to their employees who emulate the behaviours.
2. It touches on the communication and reinforcement: Ethical leaders not only explain the ethical standards in a manner that makes sense but also reward good behavior and punish bad behavior.
3. Empowerment: Leaders encourage the involvement of the people in decision making processes in the organization and they are fair and transparent in the processes.

All these are processes that are part of climates in which the ethical norms are institutionalized in the formal and informal systems.

Contextual Variability

The strength of the EL-EC relationship varied across contexts. In hierarchical organizations with rigid power structures, ethical leadership was less effective in shaping climate, as structural barriers limited employee participation (Mishra & Tikoria, 2021). In contrast, in flatter organizations with open communication, ethical leadership had stronger effects on ethical climate, as employees perceived leaders' behaviors as more visible and authentic.

Limitations

While the positive link between EL and EC is robust, some studies noted that ethical leadership alone is insufficient to guarantee ethical climates. For example, in organizations with entrenched unethical cultures, individual ethical leaders faced structural resistance, limiting their influence. This suggests that while EL is necessary, it must be complemented by organizational systems and values to sustain ethical climates.

Dark Triad Traits in Leadership

Thematic Synthesis

Table 3. Thematic Synthesis.

Theme	Key Insights	Supporting Studies
Ethical Leadership and EC	EL fosters trust, fairness, accountability	Kuenzi et al. (2020); Guo et al. (2023)
Narcissism	Charisma masks self-interest; undermines trust	Wallace & Buil (2025)

Machiavellianism	Strategic manipulation of ethics; climates of cynicism	Pearce et al. (2019)
Psychopathy	Fear, mistrust, burnout, ethical erosion	Palmer et al. (2020)
Dark Triad Paradox	Leaders espouse ethics but act self-serving	Pina e Cunha et al. (2024)

Prevalence of Dark Traits

The second key theme which comes up as a result of synthesis of the studies is the occurrence of Dark Triad (DT) traits in leadership. Despite the fact that these traits are usually linked to morally wrong practices, they are, ironically, common among people that reach positions of power. According to the scholars, the observable benefits these properties bring to the competitive settings could be the reason as to why they have continued to be prevalent in leadership (Chandler et al., 2021). Narcissism, in particular, can be easily disguised as charisma, confidence, and ambitious vision and passed off as the attributes of a good leader. Machiavellianism based on manipulation and long-term strategy can be seen as tactical intelligence or political acumen. With its focus on the lack of fear and lack of emotion, psychopathy can be misunderstood as resiliency or the ability to make decisions despite circumstances. The presence of these misinterpretations enables dark leaders to be able to influence others at the cost of integrity in organizations.

Narcissism

The most common DT trait in leadership studies is narcissism, in part due to its two-sided nature. Narcissistic leaders can be typically charismatic, visionary and convincing at the surface level. Wallace and Buil (2025) discovered that narcissistic CEOs at European companies often posed as reformers in the corporation, often leading high-profile corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Although such efforts created a good publicity, a more scrutinized look at them revealed that in most cases, they were personal goals of the leaders and not a sign of true ethical dedication. Employees lacked trust since decisions were often motivated by self-promotion, reputational management, or monetary gain to the detriment of building climates of trust. Rhetoric and reality conflicted especially in sectors where reputational risks were high and leaders projected ethical appearances in place of their own selfish motives.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism was always considered as being manipulative, opportunistic and full of strategic exploitation. Those leaders who were more Machiavellian were more skillful in politics and could therefore uphold the facade of moral accountability whilst secretly compromising ethics in an organization. Pearce et al. (2019) depicted the selective use of ethical codes by such leaders who did not implement them unless compliance would boost their personal power or legitimacy. Employees working under leaders who had Machiavellian traits cited climates that were characterized by favoritism, fear, and cynicism because organizational justice was administered unequally. This type of selective treatment undermined the credibility of ethical programs that created ethical climates that were unstable and subject to doubt.

Psychopathy

Even though psychopathy in leadership is less common than narcissism and Machiavellianism, it was associated with the most devastating outcomes. Palmer et al. (2020) proved that psychopathic leaders were impulsive, callous, and unconcerned with ethical guidelines, which resulted in climates of fear and distrust. In contrast to narcissistic or Machiavellian leaders who tended to give facades of ethical behavior, psychopathic leaders were more blatantly opposed to the ethical standards. Psychopathic leadership in healthcare settings was highly related to employee burnout, turnover, and erosion of ethics. Lack of empathy not only caused dysfunction within the organization, but it also brought about psychological pressure to those employees who witnessed such kind of leadership.

Cross-Trait Insights

Even though narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are distinct in their manifestations, the three tendencies all have a similar focal point they share, i.e., the self-interest over the wellbeing of the collective. People who provide leadership services of the DT type tend to be portrayed as ethical or competent leaders and it is hard to evaluate their authenticity only according to their visible actions. This duality makes it difficult to judge the effectiveness of leadership as people can exhibit qualities that followers want to emulate but promote unethical behavior in organizations. The cross-trait implications are that it is essential to take a critical look at the underlying motives and behaviors of leaders and not just to be guided by apparent performance or verbal promises to do the right thing.

Moderating Role of Dark Triad Traits

Watering Down the EL EC Relationship.

The third theme discloses that the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical climate is moderated by Dark Triad traits such that they tend to have a negative or inverted impact on the positive effect of EL. The positive impacts of ethical leadership were weakened or even negated in organizations that leaders portrayed the characteristics of DT.

As an illustration, it was discovered that narcissistic leaders speak the ethical rhetoric but implement the ethical standards inconsistently and this practice creates the climate of confusion and mistrust (Vergauwe et al., 2021). The instrumentality of ethical leadership was exploitative because it was implemented as a tool to guarantee legitimacy, and was not a legitimate commitment to ethics by Machiavellian leaders (Rizvi and Siddiqui, 2023). Psychopath leaders, on the contrary, tended to ignore ethical norms altogether, and made ethical leadership irrelevant as a token gesture.

Contextual Moderation

The moderating effect of DT traits depended on situations in the organizations. The narcissistic and Machiavellian leaders are also better suited to the high-pressure settings such as finance and technology as their personality was mixed up with ambition or innovation. Psychopathy, on the other hand, was notably disastrous in the general population and healthcare particularly, since it was inconsistent with those professions that required compassion and understanding.

Implication of Authenticity

The mediating role of DT traits is significant in the exposure of the role of authenticity in leadership. The leaders who demonstrate ethical behaviours in an outward way but are motivated by self-interest destroy ethical climates. Workers are soon to identify discrepancies between words and deeds, which causes cynicism and disinterestedness. This observation supports the idea that ethical leadership cannot be judged based on rhetoric only but needs to be measured against those traits of leaders and their regular behaviors.

The Dark Triad Paradox

The co-existence of ethical and dark traits is a concept that is widely applied in management and psychology; nevertheless, the notion of ethical and dark traits coexisting can be elucidated through this theory

Coexistence of Ethical and Dark Traits

The concept of ethical and dark traits coexisting is broadly used in management and psychology; however, the idea of coexistence of ethical and dark traits can be explained by this theory.

The theme of ethical and dark aspects of leadership coexisting paradoxically is the most impressive one. It was found that most leaders parallel projected ethical conducts and preached moral values even as they performed manipulative, exploitative or self-serving actions behind the scenes.

This is not the paradox of theory alone but it is a repetitive result of empirical studies. Pina e Cunha et al. (2024) recorded the actions of leaders in multinational companies who led the initiative of promoting CSRs but went ahead to exploit loopholes to maximize their profits at the expense of trusting their employees. Equally, Palmer et al. (2020) demonstrated how psychopathic leaders within the health care field applied the rhetoric of ethics to make patients obedient and their actions undermined patient safety.

Mechanisms of the Paradox

The paradox is due to a number of mechanisms:

- Impression management: Narcissistic or Machiavellian leaders employ ethical rhetoric on tactical basis with a view to developing legitimacy and a positive image.
- Selective use of ethics: Ethics are applied selectively to serve the leader, and not applied in cases where the latter are threatened by this action.
- Cognitive dissonance: It is possible that some leaders consider themselves to be ethical and, at the same time, become involved in unethical behavior of self-deception or rationalization.

Consequences of ethical climate.

This dark and ethical coexistence creates climates which are ethically shallow and, in actuality, imperfect. However, employees might start off with a good ethical climate but with time, they are disillusioned by inconsistencies. This loss of trust breeds cynicism, disconnection and in certain instances, whistleblowing.

Theoretical Contribution

The Dark Triad Paradox disputes linear theories of ethical leadership and ethical climate. It implies that leadership should be interpreted as a dialectical process according to which moral and immoral inclinations can also co-exist in the same person. The paradox theory is a helpful approach in understanding these contradictions as it reveals the tensions that leaders are exposed to in striving to be authentic, to be powerful, and to be self-interested.

Summary of Findings

A study on 196 studies confirms that several rich lessons can be learnt. First of all, ethical leadership will always be associated with improved ethical climate, primarily, through mediation of modelling, communication and empowerment processes. Second, leadership Dynamic triad traits are likewise prevalent and they impact negatively the climates with respect to ethics. Third, they are the traits which moderate the ELEC relationship which dilutes or bends the good power of ethical leadership. And lastly, the characters of good and evil accept the pretense to form a paradox that sets off the weak and vulnerable climates which are weak morally.

All these observations put together show that leadership may be a complicated process within an organization. They also explain that it is crucial that organizations do not just see the visible actions of leaders, but also test their character and their true devotion to ethics.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The chapter reports the conclusions of the systematic review on the existing theories, the past studies and the conflicting correlations of the ethical and dark personalities in leadership. Whereas, the proof confirms that ethical leadership (EL) and ethical climate (EC) have a positive relationship, it is intermediated by the disruptive mediating element the Dark Triad (DT). As a result of the combination of such threads and interaction, which leaders are held by, the paradox of existence on the light and dark side is disclosed. This paradoxical contradiction with the linear approaches to leadership requires a look at the sincerity, plausibility, and power in the organizational life of a smarter look.

The chapter is also divided into five sections. It first contextualizes the findings and is applied on the literature and theories. Second it talks of how the dark and the morally dark sides of leadership oppose one another and go hand in hand. Third, it talks of implications of organizational practice. Fourth, it introduces certain new extensions of the leadership theory. Lastly it theorizes its limitations and proposes future areas of research.

Ethical Leadership and Ethical Climate: Reinforcing Evidence

The findings strongly confirm prior research that ethical leadership is a critical determinant of ethical climates. Studies consistently showed that ethical leaders foster climates characterized by fairness, trust, and accountability (Dey et al., 2022). Through mechanisms of role modelling, communication, and reinforcement, leaders transmit ethical norms that employees internalize and reproduce in their interactions.

Social Learning Perspective

The results align closely with Social Learning Theory (Zhang et al., 2024), which posits that individuals learn behaviors by observing and imitating role models. Leaders who consistently demonstrate ethical conduct provide salient cues that shape followers' judgments of what is acceptable. When these cues are reinforced through organizational policies and reward systems, they generate climates where ethical norms become institutionalized.

Variability in Influence

However, the findings also revealed contextual variability. Ethical leadership was more effective in flatter, participatory organizations compared to rigidly hierarchical contexts. This supports contingency perspectives of leadership, suggesting that the impact of EL depends on structural and cultural conditions (Mishra & Tikoria, 2021). It also highlights that leadership cannot be considered in isolation from broader organizational dynamics.

Beyond Individual Leaders

An important nuance is that while ethical leaders play a pivotal role, they are not sufficient on their own to sustain ethical climates. In organizations with entrenched unethical cultures, ethical leaders often faced resistance, and their influence was muted. This finding aligns with the work of Lapatoura (2025), who argue that ethical leadership must be embedded in organizational systems and values to achieve lasting impact.

In sum, the results reinforce the view that ethical leadership is a powerful but context-dependent driver of ethical climates.

Dark Triad Traits: Disruption and Distortion

A second set of findings highlights the prevalence and disruptive effects of Dark Triad traits in leadership. Despite their association with unethical behavior, DT traits frequently emerge in leaders, partly because their surface qualities can be mistaken for competence.

Narcissism

Narcissism emerged as the most frequently studied trait. Narcissistic leaders often project charisma and vision, which can inspire followers initially. Yet their underlying self-centeredness leads to selective enforcement of ethical norms and prioritization of personal gain (Wallace & Buil, 2025). The results confirm that narcissism creates climates of mistrust, as employees perceive inconsistencies between leaders' rhetoric and actions.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism was consistently linked to manipulation and opportunism. Leaders with high Machiavellian tendencies used ethical codes strategically to secure legitimacy, enforcing them selectively when advantageous (Pearce et al., 2019). The results show that this produced climate marked by cynicism and fear, as employees realized that ethical standards were applied inconsistently.

Psychopathy

Psychopathy, though less common, had the most destructive impact. Psychopathic leaders' lack of empathy and disregard for norms created climates of fear and ethical erosion (Palmer et al., 2020). Unlike narcissistic or Machiavellian leaders, who often maintained ethical façades, psychopathic leaders were more overtly dismissive of ethical standards, resulting in severe psychological strain for employees.

Upper Echelon Perspective

The disruptive nature of DT traits can be well aligned to the Upper Echelon Theory (Muhammad et al., 2024) which argues that the personal traits of leaders influence the organizational outcomes. The results indicate that the positive role of ethical leadership is neutralized by the presence of DT traits, which underscores the need to pay special attention to the role of leader personality in the explanation of the organizational climates.

Moderating Role of Dark triad.

The newest input of this review is the fact that the evidence on the influence of DT traits on the EL- EC relationship attenuates and distorts the positive impacts of ethical leadership.

Distorted Authenticity

Such leaders as narcissists might also use ethical rhetoric, however, use standards unevenly, providing ambiguous climates. Machiavellian rulers can employ ethical practices in a tactical manner and create climates that seem to be ethical in facade, but in reality, there is nothing beneath. Psychopathic leaders can disregard ethics altogether and make the gesture of ethical leadership useless. These results highlight the importance of the fact that ethical leadership can be authentic based on the hidden personality characteristics.

Social Exchange Perspective.

Social Exchange Theory can be used to explain the moderating effect of DT traits. Ethical leadership also creates a positive interaction by being fair and caring and the employees respond with ethical behavior. But, in case leaders are viewed as narcissistic, Machiavellian or psychopathic, the exchange relationship is broken. The reciprocity is withdrawn by employees, and climates of mistrust and cynicism are created.

Conditional Outcomes

The results also indicate that EL -EC relationship is not always positive but conditional. The perceived returns of ethical leadership are watered down in situations where there are salient DT traits. This dispute simple models based on the assumption of a direct, unmediated relationship between leadership and climate, and emphasizes more complex frameworks.

The Dark Triad Paradox

The best part of this review is perhaps the articulation of the Dark Triad Paradox - that there are ethical traits and dark traits present in the same leaders.

Dual Identities

Leaders tended to create a veneer of ethics, promoting ideals of fairness, sustainability or corporate social responsibility, then at the same time they were performing manipulative or self-serving actions. It is this duality that is referred to as the ambidextrous morality of leaders by Pina e Cunha et al. (2024), in which the ethical appearances conceal unethical actions.

Paradox Theory Lens

This paradox can be described in terms of Paradox Theory (Schaap & Vanlommel 2024) that dwells upon the fact that the organizational life is overloaded with contradictions that cannot be resolved but are to be dealt with. Such is the ethical and dark-soul tension that leaders can be true in their beliefs of what is ethical, and simultaneously, they can be driven or forced by their own desire or their own need. It is not by chance, but it is a paradox; it is structural, and it is based on the competing leadership roles.

Consequences for Employees

The paradox brings about some ambiguous environments to the workers. Firstly, ethical behaviors of leaders foster trust but with time any incongruence between action and words creates cynicism. Moral distress can also be experienced by workers which leads to the violation of the ethical codes which should be applied when the leaders are the ones who violate the ethical codes. On the extreme sides, the outcome of the paradox is disengagement, whistle blowing or exit.

Implications to Authenticity.

The paradox provides priority to authenticity of leadership. Ethical leadership is not aimed at doing or hearing anything of the physical world or sound world, but it must be measured in relation to what is always done, in what is said there has to be corresponding action. These findings imply that organizations need to devise methods of creating tools, which would expose and counter such fraudulent leadership that obscures the ugly aspects.

Practical Implications

These are just but a few implications on practice.

Leadership Development

The institutes are supposed to accumulate leadership training plans, which extend past instructing ethical actions, in order to operate with individual character traits. There would also be the determinant-testing in hiring and promoting of DTs which would help in ensuring that the destructiveness of people cannot be allowed to infiltrate the leadership positions.

Organizational Systems

The ethics of leadership must be endorsed with organization systems and structures to endorse ethical conduct. These risks of leaders who will merely be performing as ethical, but will in fact be the reverse can be mitigated through a code of conduct with a well-developed system of reporting and accountability.

Monitoring Authenticity.

Leadership authenticity should be assessed regularly. 360-degrees feedback, employee survey and external audit may assist in defining the gap between the rhetoric and action of leaders. Whenever red flags exist, organizations should consider them as an indicator of the possibility of the erosion of ethics.

Employee Support

Another thing that organizations should consider is ensuring that they support their employees who have been subjected to paradoxical leadership. Ethical decision-making, whistleblowing, and psychological assistance services allow avoiding the adverse effects of the employment with the dark leaders.

Theoretical Contributions

The review provides a number of contributions to the study of leadership.

1. EL and DT integration - The review challenges the dichotomy that opposes the two ethical and dark traits because it synthesises evidence to illustrate that there is coexistence between the two traits.
2. Conditional EL - EC relationship the results indicate that the relationship between EL and EC is mediated by DT traits, which puts a strain on linear models and requires more complex frameworks.
3. Paradoxical viewpoint - The application of the Paradox Theory in the review adds to a growing body of knowledge, which highlights the multifaceted and contradiction of leadership.

4. Authenticity as an essential parameter - The review shows the significance of authenticity in ethical leadership and argues that consistency in rhetoric and actions is important as much as ethical actions that are observable.

Limitations

While the methodology was rigorous, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, restricting the review to English-language publications may have introduced language bias, excluding relevant studies in other languages. Second, excluding grey literature may have contributed to publication bias, as peer-reviewed journals often favor positive findings. Third, the heterogeneity of included studies limited the possibility of conducting a meta-analysis, requiring reliance on thematic synthesis. Finally, the focus on 2010–2025, while ensuring recency, may have underrepresented earlier contributions outside of seminal works.

Directions for Future Research

A variety of directions should be examined in future research. The need to acquire the various leadership processes implies cross-cultural research especially in African and Latin American contexts. Longitudinal designs would give one an indication in respect to the variation and interaction in time of ethical and dark traits. Experiments could be used to test interventions in order to put Dark Triad traits in their interventions. Leader traits and their associations with the organizational systems, industry norms, and cultural values, should be studied by the use of multi-level analyses. Last but definitely not least, it would be appropriate to create good authenticity measures to identify paradoxical leadership behaviours at an earlier stage.

4.10 Conclusion

The chapter has managed to analyze the results of this systematic review and put them in context in terms of the theoretical and empirical discussion. These findings imply that ethical leadership is a potent instrument that facilitates ethical climates but they also determined that this relationship was weak in the presence of the Dark Triad traits. Such a combination of ethical and the dark side of leadership is a paradox that complicates the existence of organizations, in its turn, and invalidates the theory of simple models of leadership.

It states that organizations cannot be out of the domain of external ethical activity but can discover the true character of the leaders and scholars may create theories which can assist in explaining paradox and contradiction. This ethical and dark description together with ethical one makes the knowledge of the part of leadership in formation of ethical climates complete, and provides the ways of future research and practice.

CONCLUSION

Restating the Aim

The main aim of the research was to test the relationship between Ethical Leadership (EL) and Ethical Climate (EC) as an independent variable and the Dark Triad (DT) traits that influenced the relationship. The systematic literature review (PRISMA 2020) methodology was designed to combine the uncoherent evidence within the framework of organization behavior, psychology and management in this research paper. By doing so, it also brought out the paradoxical nature of the ethical and dark side of leadership; it is a tussle that remains yet to be fully captured by organizations all around the globe.

Summary of Key Findings

The three critical findings were obtained by the systematic synthesis of 196 studies (2010-2025). First, the review reinstated the findings of the previous studies that ethical leadership is always linked to better ethical climates. When leaders act with integrity, fairness, and accountability, this will foster the creation of an organizational environment that is full of trust, transparency, and shared responsibility (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Role modelling mechanisms, the reinforcement of ethical norms and employee empowerment became key means of climate formation.

Second, this review revealed that Dark Triad traits interfere with and bend ethical climates. Narcissism helped leaders to exude charisma whilst being self-serving (Wallace and Buil, 2025). Leaders in the Machiavellian kind of leadership, used codes of ethics to their own benefit (Pearce et al., 2019; Rizvi and Siddiqui, 2023). Psychopathy was the least prevalent but most devastating, having resulted in the atmosphere of fear, distrust, and burnout (Palmer et al., 2020).

Third, the most important contribution has been the identification of the Dark Triad Paradox the presence of both ethical and dark characteristics in the same leaders. Leaders tended to be ethical on the surface and preached about CSR or other fairness agendas, but in the background, they tended to use self-serving or manipulating

maneuvers (Pina e Cunha et al., 2024). This contradiction showed that seemingly solid climates can be solid on the surface and weak when the lack of consistency between the rhetoric and practice is shown.

Theoretical Integration

The research results of this review also lend some theoretic perspectives in leadership and organizational behaviour. The problem of how leaders affect ethical climates can be explained with the help of Social Learning Theory (Social Learning Theory, 1977). Leaders can influence the actions of their subordinates who listen to them and imitate them by exemplifying ethical behaviour, supporting the norms of the organization and conveying the principles of fairness. However, the Dark Triad traits make this process more complex: when the leaders behave in a way that contradicts what they claim to believe in, the role-modelling mechanism becomes warped, the trust is lost, and the ethical learning process is weakened.

The relevance of Upper Echelon Theory (Muhammad et al., 2024), which compares the role of the personal traits of leaders to the organizational results, is also confirmed by the review. The results indicate that narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy are not marginal but center-stage in the influence of ethical climates which tends to undermine the positive impacts of ethical leadership. In this respect, the personality of leaders should be regarded as one of the most crucial factors of organizational ethics.

Furthermore, the results can be also explained by the Social Exchange Theory (Zhou et al., 2024), which is concerned with mutuality of the relationships between the leaders and their followers. When leaders are honest and just, workers are likely to resume ethical behaviors, but when leaders are corrupt or selfish-oriented with cynical climates, workers in an organization lose trust and commitment.

Finally, the review illuminates the significance of the Paradox Theory (Seidemann, 2024) in an attempt to describe the dynamics of leadership. Both the presence of moral and evil character portrays that contradictions are not a one case phenomenon but are structural elements of leadership. Leaders may be upright and manipulative simultaneously and become a source of tensions, which are supposed to be domesticated rather than resolved.

Contribution of the Review

Such a survey has three ways of contribution. It also makes a hypothetical contribution to the synthesis of the ethics literature and literature on Dark Triad as it is dealing with the issue of oppositional models and the formation of a paradoxical attitude to the world of leadership complexity. The empirical contribution brings together about 10 years of studies in other contexts according to the following trends, gaps of findings such as cultural influence, authenticity measures and longitudinal effects. The final and, however, the most crucial contribution is practice that exposes the threats of such shallow ethical leadership and provides the organization with the room in which the concerns of authenticity might assess the challenges objectively and take actions to avoid the toxic impact of dark sides.

Concluding Remark

To sum it up, the review has determined that ethical leadership though not adequately is required to achieve ethical climates. The problem of confounding the effect of DT traits reflects the unsteadiness of the ethical climates and the significance of the concept of investigating the authenticity of leadership. The ironical co-existence of the moral and evil characters presents a challenge to organizations to examine the authenticity of leaders who lack congruency between what they say and what they do.

IMPLICATIONS

Practical Implications

Recruitment and Selection

Companies ought to have screening processes to identify Dark Triad tendencies of a leadership applicant. Ethical climates are likely to be promoted by individuals whose traits undermine them and these could be avoided by using psychometric measures, interviews, and reference checks (Shinde, 2025). Although there are short-term advantages of DT traits, including expediency or charisma, the dangers of the traits on organizational ethics and trust are considerable in the long-term.

Leadership Development

The leadership programs should touch on self-awareness, authenticity and empathy, and not compliance with codes of conduct. Leaders, in turn, should be revealed to the possible inconsistency of their speech and actions during the training to be able to identify and eliminate paradoxical trends (Chughtai et al., 2020). Accountability

structures can be advised with the help of coaching and mentoring, whereas ethics-oriented workshops can strengthen the correspondence between the personal values and expectations of the organization.

Organizational Systems

Ethical climates depend not only on individual leaders but also on systemic reinforcement. Transparent reporting mechanisms, whistleblowing protections, and regular ethical audits create safeguards against leaders who exploit ethical codes for personal gain (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Reward systems should emphasize collective integrity rather than individual achievement, reducing incentives for manipulative behavior.

Employee Empowerment

Employees must be empowered to participate actively in sustaining ethical climates. Providing anonymous reporting channels, ethics training, and recognition programs for ethical behavior enhances resilience against paradoxical leadership (Ahmed & Ishfaq Khan, 2024). Empowered employees act as ethical counterweights, holding leaders accountable through collective pressure.

Theoretical Implications

Rethinking Ethical Leadership Models

Traditional models assume a linear EL-EC relationship. This review demonstrates that the relationship is conditional and moderated by DT traits. Theoretical frameworks must therefore account for leader personality traits and the authenticity of ethical behavior (Alavi, 2024).

Integrating Ethical and Dark Leadership Research

The study highlights the value of integrating ethical leadership and DT literatures, which have often developed in isolation. Doing so provides a more holistic understanding of how leaders shape ethical climates in practice (Skiba, 2024).

Extending Paradox Theory

By documenting the coexistence of ethical and dark traits, this review extends the application of Paradox Theory in leadership research. Future work should explore how leaders manage or rationalize paradoxes and how employees respond to contradictions over time (Liu et al., 2025).

Implications for Future Research

Cross-Cultural Studies

There is a regional imbalance in current research, with limited studies from Africa and Latin America. Future studies should examine how cultural values influence the manifestation of ethical and dark leadership traits, particularly in collectivist societies (Palmer et al., 2025).

Longitudinal Research

Most studies were cross-sectional, limiting causal inference. Longitudinal studies can reveal how ethical and dark traits interact dynamically over leaders' careers and during organizational crises (Rizvi & Siddiqui, 2023).

Methodological Innovation

There is scope for multi-level and mixed-method approaches. For example, combining employee surveys with observational methods could capture discrepancies between leaders' rhetoric and actions. Experimental studies could test interventions aimed at reducing DT influence in leadership (Wallace & Buil, 2025).

Measuring Authenticity

The findings highlight the critical importance of authenticity, yet reliable measures are lacking. Future research should design instruments that assess alignment between leaders' words and behaviors, helping organizations detect ethical façades (Pina e Cunha et al., 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This research analyzed the connection between Ethical Leadership (EL) and Ethical Climate (EC) with a special focus on whether Dark Triad (DT) traits mediate the association or not. The study is a synthesis of almost

ten years of empirical studies published between 2010 and 2025 conducted using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) framework of PRISMA 2020.

The results confirm the fact that ethical leadership has a powerful impact on the development of the ethical climates. By being examples of how things are supposed to be in the organization, leaders develop trust, fairness, and accountability as employees follow their examples to reinforce organizational norms (Guo et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the review also notes that such a relationship is weak and conditional because the traits of a DT destroy the genuineness of ethical leadership. Narcissistic leaders pretend to be charismatic, but they act with self-interest (Wallace and Buil, 2025); Machiavellian ones, in turn, use codes of ethics as an opportunity to act (Pearce et al., 2019); and psychopathic ones create an environment of fear and mistrust (Palmer et al., 2020).

One of the contributions is the statement of the Dark Triad Paradox, according to which leaders, on the one hand, promote the signs of an ethical attitude, including corporate responsibility, and, on the other hand, adopt manipulative or exploitative strategies (Pina e Cunha et al., 2024). This paradox shows that the ethics of climates can be ethically sound on the outside but not on the inside where the words and actions of leaders are not applied.

Theoretically, the results build on Social Learning Theory (Zhang et al., 2024) by demonstrating that authenticity affects role-modelling, Upper Echelon Theory by identifying that leaders possess specific traits and agree with the Social Exchange Theory in explaining employee reactions. Most importantly, they develop Paradox Theory, which shows that leadership is composed of contradictions. Finally, there is the need but a lack of ethical leadership. Ethical climates can only be healthy when authenticity, consistency and systemic safeguards are in place.

Recommendations

The conclusions of this research lead to practical suggestions to organizations, policymakers, and researchers.

For Organizations

Building integrity in leadership starts with the recruitment and selection. Psychometric tests and structured behavioural interviewing must be included in order to determine the Dark Triad inclinations before these candidates take up influential positions (Coleman & Dulewicz, 2025). To promote integrity in addition to results, succession planning has to balance between ethical and financial performance to promote leaders based on integrity as well as performance. The leadership development programs must be more than compliant and focus on self-awareness, empathy, and authenticity and instruments like 360-degree feedback and coaching can help to identify blind spots and minimize risks of narcissism and manipulation. There is also need of strong ethical infrastructures. The companies are to create codes of conduct, independent audit, and whistleblowing. It is also essential that employees are empowered, ethical decision-making is trained, there are safe reporting mechanisms and ethical actions are rewarded.

For Policymakers

Ethical leadership can also be supported by the policy frameworks. Transparency will be enhanced, and ethical performance disclosure combined with financial reporting will reduce the cases of ethics-washing. At the same time, independent ethical certifications need to be created to promote surface branding and tolerate shady behavior (Pina e Cunha et al., 2024). Moreover, more powerful whistleblower protections are required to protect workers, who reveal hypocrisies between the rhetoric and the actions of leaders.

For Scholars

Further studies must extend their boundaries to other cross-cultural situations especially those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Longitudinal designs are capable of following the development of paradoxical features of crises (Rizvi and Siddiqui, 2023). The observed and perceived behaviors will be captured using methodological innovation like ethnographies and experimentation. Lastly, it is important to design strong authenticity indicators that can be used to identify ethical fronts promptly (Guo et al., 2023).

Final Reflection

The ethical and dark leadership paradox is not the exception, and the important feature of the organizational life. It is possible to state that the forces of performance and morality can clash, putting leaders under the pressure that makes them act with ethical obedience and falsification at the same time. The question that concerns both organizations and even societies is how the organizations can be able to find such contradictions and how the organizations can be able to come up with some mechanisms that can resolve these contradictions.

This is just a rough observation that cannot be made by using rhetoric and codes to hold the ethics climates. It is this unwillingness to leave the paradox that will allow organizations to build climates, which, however, are not only ethical at the surface, but robust at the base.

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