

Title:

Ethical Leadership and Anti-Corruption Efforts in Nigeria

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Abstract

Corruption is a global challenge that undermines development, stability, and social cohesion. It affects public trust and human suffering and hinders efforts to establish a sustainable and inclusive economy. Despite numerous institutional efforts, such as the establishment of anti-corruption agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), corruption persists at high levels. Therefore, this study investigates how ethical leadership contributes to the development and enforcement of anti-corruption measures, fosters a culture of accountability within Nigerian organisations, and addresses the challenges associated with implementing ethical leadership in a corruption-prone environment. The study recommends the application of ethical leadership at the national level to combat corruption in Nigeria. While ethical leadership offers a transformative approach to combating corruption, its successful implementation requires strong institutional backing, transparency, and the commitment of the leaders to adopt the ethical leadership style and lead by example.

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Introduction

Corruption remains one of the most pervasive challenges facing nations globally, undermining development, stability, and social cohesion (Johnson, 2024). The consequences of corruption are multifaceted, with significant implications for both the economy and the quality of governance. It affects public trust, exacerbates human suffering, and frustrates efforts to establish a sustainable and inclusive economy (Jaiyeola and Musumhi, 2023). To effectively combat corruption, countries must adopt principles of good and ethical governance, which are essential to addressing the root causes of unethical behaviour. Good governance encompasses a transparent, organised leadership structure, alongside policies that prioritize ethical decision-making and the welfare of the citizens (Agu, Nkwo, and Eneiga, 2024). In Nigeria, the path to eradicating corruption lies in a leadership framework that prioritises ethical conduct and the well-being of its society.

In Nigeria, the battle against corruption is multifaceted, involving efforts to address unethical behaviour both within the leadership and across society at large. Given that leadership is critical in effecting societal change, it is important to focus on the leadership style adopted by Nigerian authorities. A leader in this context is an essential agent of transformation, possessing the power and authority to shape the direction of public policies and actions (Verne, 2023). While the focus of this paper is on ethical leadership, it also considers the broader notion of “ethical government,” where leadership is characterized by ethical decision-making, and corruption is systematically eradicated from the political and economic spheres of Nigeria.

As one of the largest economies in Africa, with a population exceeding 200 million, Nigeria faces a significant challenge in combatting corruption, despite a history of governmental efforts. The Nigerian government has taken several proactive steps to curb corruption, including the establishment of key institutions such as the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), responsible for investigating and prosecuting corruption-related crimes, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), which addresses financial crimes like money laundering. Additionally, the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB) is tasked with promoting high standards of public morality and ensuring that public officials are held accountable for their actions (Jaiyeola and Musumhi, 2023). Despite these institutional measures, Nigeria is still regarded as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index.

According to the 2023 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Nigeria ranks 145th out of 180 countries, scoring a low 25 out of 100. This ranking highlights the persistence of corruption across both public and private sectors, which weakens institutions, undermines governance, and erodes public trust in leadership (Agu, Nkwo, and Eneiga, 2024). These pervasive corruption-related issues contribute to negative outcomes, including market inefficiencies, deepening inequality, declining foreign direct investment (FDI), and imbalanced power dynamics (Agu, Nkwo, and Eneiga, 2024). Hence, corruption has negatively impacted on the development of the nation (Hoffmann, 2025). Despite the government’s continuous efforts to address corruption, these systemic challenges persist (Hoffmann, 2025), making it crucial to critically examine the broader factors contributing to the perpetuation of corrupt practices. This study contends that ethical leadership is a central element in the fight against corruption.

Ethical leadership refers to leadership practices that are grounded in principles of fairness, accountability, and integrity. This paper investigates the role of ethical leadership in shaping anti-corruption policies and practices in Nigeria’s public and private sectors. Specifically, the study aims to explore how ethical leadership contributes to the development and enforcement

of anti-corruption measures, its role in fostering a culture of accountability in Nigerian organisations, and the challenges associated with implementing ethical leadership in a corruption-prone environment. The study reviewed literature in line with the following research questions:

- How does ethical leadership contribute to the development and enforcement of anti-corruption measures in Nigeria?
- In what ways does ethical leadership foster a culture of accountability within Nigerian organisations?
- What are the barriers to implementing ethical leadership within Nigeria's socio-political and organisational contexts?

Theoretical framework

The study is embedded in two theories, which are the ethical leadership theory and the institutional theory.

Ethical leadership theory

Ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.” (Brown, Treviño and Harrison, 2005). This theory stressed that fairness, care, honesty, trustworthiness and responsibility are important traits of an ethical leader. This implies that ethical leaders should conduct themselves in a generally accepted manner, portraying such qualities as fairness, care, honesty, trustworthiness, empathy, and being a role model for their followers.

In the Nigerian context, where corruption is often systemic (Hoffmann, 2025), ethical leadership offers a crucial counterbalance by promoting transparency, accountability, and fairness within the political institutions. This implies that ethical leaders should make decisions that are guided by ethical principles of fairness and justice, which is believed to portray the minds and needs of the people. Thus, leaders should serve as role models in transforming societal behaviour, engage in proactive communication of values, and create a culture that fights corruption (Brown, Treviño and Harrison, 2005; Hoffmann, 2025). Having such role models can help alleviate corruption within public offices and foster anti-corruption initiatives in the nation.

On the other hand, the perception of the people also plays a role in determining how ethical leaders can successfully enforce anti-corruption strategies in the country. Leaders should be recognised as individuals who are highly motivated and credible with efforts to foster integrity and transformation within the organisation (Hoffmann, 2025). Ethical leaders are interested in the needs of the people, consider fairness in decisions for all groups involved, and can do good and show care selflessly (Brown, Treviño and Harrison, 2005).

Institutional theory

This study is grounded in institutional theory, as articulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), which emphasises how institutions conform to established rules, norms, and societal expectations in their environment. According to this theoretical perspective, institutions which include regulatory frameworks, cultural norms, and cognitive structures shape the behaviour of individuals and organisations by promoting conformity and stability (Pinto, 2017). In

relation to the current study, institutional theory offers valuable insights into how policies, legal frameworks, and international standards can influence and potentially enable ethical conduct among leaders.

In the Nigerian context, the theory suggests that the broader institutional environment comprising both formal regulations and informal societal norms plays a crucial role in shaping leaders' ethical behaviour. When these institutional mechanisms are weak, inconsistent, or poorly implemented, they can undermine the effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives (Hoffmann, 2025). Such an institution can even lose control due to the influence of the environment (Schiavi, Behr and Marcolin, 2024). This may help explain why most anti-corruption initiatives often struggle with implementation and lack long-term sustainability. Thus, institutional theory not only frames the environmental determinants of leadership ethics but also highlights the challenges of fostering integrity in settings where institutional supports are weak.

Research Gap

While few studies have examined the prevalence and consequences of corruption in Nigeria (Story et al., 2022; Agu, Nkwo, and Eneiga, 2024), and several have highlighted the importance of institutional reforms and anti-corruption agencies (Jaiyeola and Musumhi, 2023; Hoffmann, 2025), limited research has focused specifically on the role of ethical leadership in shaping and sustaining anti-corruption efforts within both the public and private sectors. Existing literature emphasises structural and legal frameworks such as EFCC and ICPC, without adequately investigating the behavioural and leadership aspects that influence the effectiveness of these institutions. Moreover, the concept of ethical leadership is often discussed in abstract terms or as it pertains to business organisations, with insufficient empirical investigation into how it can be embedded as part of a country's socio-political environment.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining ethical leadership not only as a moral ideal but as a practical mechanism for shaping anti-corruption policies, fostering accountability, and transforming institutional leadership culture. It seeks to contribute to the literature by exploring how ethical leadership can be operationalised and sustained in a corruption-prone environment like Nigeria and by identifying the barriers that undermine its implementation. In doing so, this study advances the discourse on anti-corruption strategies by incorporating a leadership-centred approach that is currently underexplored.

Methodology

The study examines ethical leadership and anticorruption efforts in Nigeria. The study adopts Saunders' research onion methodology as adopted by Abdelhakim (2021) and Haydam and Steenkamp (2021). The research onion methodology provides structure and clarity to the methodological section. Hence, presentation is based on the research philosophy, approaches, choices, strategies, time horizon, and techniques and procedures (Saunders et al., 2019).

The research philosophy is based on the interpretivism philosophy of gaining an understanding of how ethical leadership can support some of the anticorruption initiatives that has been established in Nigeria. Hence, the inductive research approach is adopted for the study. The approach provides insight into the subject matter and mostly utilises qualitative for greater depth (Kirongo and Odooyo, 2020). Thematic literature review is used for the research strategy. Hence, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, databases, and so on, are critically reviewed and synthesised into themes to identify existing gaps and answer the research questions. In addition, the methodological choice is the mono-method qualitative by depending solely on thematic literature review.

Furthermore, the study adopts the case study strategy as anticorruption efforts in Nigeria is explored. Data collection method is through identifying and selecting literature from academic databases including Google scholar and Scopus using keywords such as “ethical leadership” “corruption in Nigeria” “anti-corruption efforts” “public sector governance”. Some of the inclusion criteria includes peer reviewed articles, government documents, local and international case studies with good conceptual and empirical insights. On the other hand, data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis which involves categorising literatures into themes with the intention of achieving the research objectives effectively. Hence, the themes are as follows:

- I. The Role of Ethical Leadership in Anti-Corruption Policies and Practices in Nigeria
- II. Ethical Leadership and Accountability Culture
- III. Barriers to Implementing Ethical Leadership in Nigeria

Discussions

The Role of Ethical Leadership in Anti-Corruption Policies and Practices in Nigeria

A study showed that many Nigerians have shown some significant level of distrust in some of the public institutions, such as the Police, President, Federal and State government, as well as the Judiciary (Hoffmann, 2025). Nevertheless, the Nigerian government has continued to develop a range of policies and anti-corruption measures, including the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003, Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in 2001, and other anti-corruption initiatives. These efforts are designed to promote transparency, restore public trust, and foster a culture of accountability. For instance, the EFCC in 2022 recorded a total of 3785 convicted cases operating on a mission to eliminate economic and financial crimes (EFCC, 2025).

Additionally, recent digital initiatives such as the Cashless Policy, the Biometric Verification Number (BVN), the Treasury Single Account (TSA), and the Integrated Personnel Payroll Information System (IPPIS), are part of the government’s attempt to mitigate corruption through technological means (Jaiyeola and Musumhi, 2023). However, past reforms have largely focused on improving institutional structures, processes, and policies, with relatively little emphasis on the type of leadership or individuals required to drive effective anti-corruption efforts.

Therefore, the importance of leadership in any organisation cannot be overstated. The success or failure of governance largely depends on the leadership style and decisions made by those in power. Effective leadership is crucial to addressing systemic corruption and promoting good governance (Lim, 2024). One key leadership style that has garnered significant attention in recent years is ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is defined as leadership that is grounded in ethical principles, promoting moral values, and striving to advance the common good (Lim, 2024). In this context, ethical leadership is a leadership approach that prioritizes values such as transparency, fairness, integrity, and empathy. Leaders who embrace ethical leadership prioritize ethical decision-making and foster an environment of trust and accountability.

Attributes such bribery, corruption, and fraud contradict the fundamental principles of ethical governance and demonstrate the need for a leadership model rooted in moral integrity. Ethical leaders make decisions based on clear ethical guidelines and lead by example, establishing policies and practices that foster trust, openness, and empathy within both the leadership and the public (Páez Gabriunas, 2023). While much of the research on ethical leadership has been applied within organisational contexts, this study takes a broader perspective, suggesting that

ethical leadership should be applied on a national scale in the fight against corruption in Nigeria.

Ethical Leadership and Accountability Culture

Ethical leaders are characterized by their commitment to accountability, humility, and integrity. They possess qualities such as empathy, altruism, fairness, and a genuine concern for the well-being of their constituents (Lim, 2024). Ethical leadership involves cultivating a culture of accountability, where leaders not only model ethical behaviour but also encourage transparency and openness in governance. However, due to poor accountability and implementation of some the anti-corruption initiatives, the fight against corruption within public institutions and the society at large has lingered (Hoffmann, 2025). Through leading by example, ethical leaders can inspire trust and accountability among their followers, creating an environment in which ethical behaviour is encouraged, and corruption is actively challenged.

Hence, one key aspect of ethical leadership is the emphasis on leading by example, as leaders ensure that ethical actions and principles are reflected in their decision making (Göçen, 2021). Leaders who demonstrate accountability and transparency in their decision-making processes send a clear message to the public and other stakeholders that unethical behaviour will not be tolerated. This approach helps to restore public trust and confidence in government institutions, as citizens begin to see concrete efforts to address corruption at the highest levels of leadership. When ethical principles are embedded in leadership practices, they become a powerful tool for fostering a culture of accountability within organisations and across society. Hence, ethical leadership can bring about positive changes through a blend of culture and ethical leadership qualities, thus providing better wellbeing for the people (Story *et al.*, 2022).

Barriers to Implementing Ethical Leadership in Nigeria

While ethical leadership holds significant potential for transforming Nigeria's governance structures, several challenges must be addressed for its successful implementation. One key challenge is the complex socio-political environment in which Nigerian leaders operate. Cultural norms, religious beliefs, and long-standing political practices often create resistance to the adoption of ethical leadership practices (Story *et al.*, 2022). In many cases, entrenched political elites and powerful interest groups may resist efforts to introduce ethical reforms, as these changes threaten their existing power structures and personal gains (Story *et al.*, 2022).

Additionally, the political landscape in Nigeria is marked by high power distance (Chukwu, Conrad, and Crosbie, 2019), which often leads to the prioritization of personal and political interests over ethical considerations. Leaders may face pressure to engage in unethical practices, such as patronage or bribery, to maintain political support or secure favourable outcomes for their parties. As a result, ethical leadership may be seen as a liability rather than an asset in the highly competitive world of Nigerian politics.

Furthermore, the lack of strong institutional support for ethical leadership poses another challenge. While anti-corruption agencies such as the EFCC and ICPC have been established, their effectiveness is often undermined by political interference, inadequate funding, and corruption within the agencies themselves. Without robust institutional frameworks to support ethical leadership, leaders may struggle to implement policies that align with ethical standards, leading to a cycle of corruption and ineffective governance. However, through networked coalitions approach, Nigeria can fight corruption by collaborating with key individuals in the society to achieve a common goal -in this case fight corruption (Hoffmann, 2025).

Opara (2014) posits that the growing challenges facing leadership in Nigeria stems from the disregard for ethics as a core necessity in management. Leaders who lack skills in leadership ethics have impacted negatively on the performance outcomes of public sector organisations. The root of this crisis or failed leadership is the lack of critical thinking, prior preparation and skills acquisition of those who are entrusted with leadership roles (Iheduru, 2016). Even where leaders were ostensibly prepared both through education and training, many of them fail to rise to the occasion and provide the responsible leadership expected of them. This is because they lack the ethical core values of “ethic-based leadership” that is cultivated through liberal education and critical thinking (Iheduru, 2016; Opara, 2014; Ogbewere, 2015).

Conclusion

Ethical leadership offers a transformative solution to Nigeria’s persistent corruption problem. By emphasizing values such as integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability, ethical leaders can help foster a governance environment where corruption is actively challenged, and public trust is restored. However, for ethical leadership to be effective, it must be supported by strong institutions, a commitment to transparency, and a willingness to challenge entrenched political practices. If Nigeria’s leaders adopt the principles of ethical leadership and lead by example (“do as I do principle”), the country can begin to move toward a future where corruption is no longer an impediment to sustainable development. Ultimately, ethical leadership is key to creating a more transparent, accountable, and moral society in Nigeria, and its widespread adoption is essential for achieving lasting change.

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