



# The Impact of Unethical Leadership on Organizational Wellbeing in Health Research: A Conceptual Analysis and Mitigation Framework

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## Abstract

This paper explores the detrimental impact of unethical leadership on the organizational well-being of health research institutions, particularly those in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) central to the global health ecosystem. Drawing on a conceptual synthesis of multiple theoretical frameworks includes Social Role Theory, the Harmful Leader Behaviors (HLB) Framework, Social Learning Theory, and Contingency Theory. This study examines how unethical leadership practices compromise key organizational dimensions such as employee well-being, institutional culture, operational efficiency, financial sustainability, and research integrity. The analysis reveals how ethically misaligned leadership behaviors can trigger systemic dysfunction, demoralize staff, and erode public and donor trust, with dire consequences for public health outcomes. In response, the study proposes a multi-level, evidence-based framework for fostering ethical leadership, encompassing ethics-centered leadership selection, decentralized oversight, enhanced accountability mechanisms, and a culture of psychological safety. By embedding ethical principles into leadership development and institutional practices, health research organizations can safeguard their mission, protect public health, and ensure long-term organizational resilience.

## Subject Areas

Philosophy

## Keywords

Unethical Leadership, Conceptual Analysis, Mitigation Framework

## 1. Introduction

Leadership is a cornerstone of organizational success, extensively studied through various theoretical lenses that offer unique insights into how leaders influence institutional dynamics [1]. While traditional theories like Trait and Behavioral Theory focus on innate characteristics or acquired behaviors [2] [3], contemporary discourse increasingly recognizes leadership as a multifaceted process shaped by ethical decision-making and the psychological interplay between leaders and followers [4] [5].

In high-stakes environments like health research, the ethical dimension of leadership becomes paramount. The Social Role Theory of Unethical Leadership provides a compelling framework for understanding how leaders may rationalize unethical actions as necessary sacrifices for organizational survival or success [6]. Similarly, Transformational Leadership can devolve into a manipulative, pseudo-transformational form when influence is used to serve personal or political ends [4]. The Harmful Leader Behaviors (HLB) framework dissects these behaviors into tangible dimensions like intimidation, lack of care, self-centeredness, and excessive pressure for results which corrode trust and heighten psychological stress [7] [8]. Furthermore, Social Learning Theory posits that unethical leadership creates systemic issues, as subordinates emulate the behaviors of those in power, normalizing misconduct across the organization [9]. Contingency Theory reinforces that the context matters; in donor-dependent, high-pressure research settings, the absence of ethical safeguards amplifies the damage of poor leadership [6].

This paper employs a conceptual analysis methodology, synthesizing these theoretical perspectives to construct a framework linking unethical leadership to the well-being of health research organizations. It will first delineate the concepts of ethical and unethical leadership, then define the core dimensions of organizational well-being. Subsequently, it will apply the theoretical framework to analyze the impact of unethical leadership and conclude with a multi-level set of evidence-based recommendations for building ethical resilience.

## 2. The Concept of Ethical vs. Unethical Leadership

### 2.1. Ethical Leadership

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 [10]. Ethical leaders are characterized by integrity, honesty, fairness, and accountability. They act as role models, emphasizing transparency and the well-being of others. In healthcare and research institutions, where work involves human health and public trust, ethical leadership is non-negotiable [1]. It positively influences organizational climate, encouraging employees to act in ways that promote integrity and trustworthiness, which are the bedrock of credible science [11].

## 2.2. Unethical Leadership and the HLB Framework

Unethical leadership refers to actions and behaviors that violate established moral norms and ethical standards in the workplace. This form of leadership is often marked by manipulation, exploitation, and favoritism, where leaders prioritize their personal gain or goals at the expense of the well-being of their subordinates and the integrity of the organization. A useful framework for understanding these harmful behaviors is the Harmful Leader Behaviors (HLB) Framework, which identifies several key actions that contribute to unethical leadership [7]. Among the most detrimental of these behaviors are intimidation, a lack of care, self-centeredness, and excessive pressure for results.

One of the most destructive forms of unethical leadership is intimidation, where leaders use threats, verbal abuse, or coercive tactics to instill fear and suppress dissent. This type of behavior creates an atmosphere of fear and anxiety, where employees feel powerless to voice concerns or challenge decisions. Intimidation not only damages morale but also erodes trust within the organization, leading to a toxic work environment that can significantly affect employee performance and well-being [12].

Another hallmark of unethical leadership is a lack of care for the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of subordinates [13]. Leaders who fail to consider the needs and well-being of their employees contribute to an environment that fosters burnout and disengagement. When leaders neglect to provide necessary support or fail to recognize the impact of stress on their staff, they indirectly encourage unhealthy work habits and hinder the long-term success of both the individuals and the organization [14]. This lack of care reflects a fundamental disregard for the human aspect of leadership and can lead to significant turnover and a loss of talent.

Self-centeredness is also a key characteristic of unethical leadership. Leaders who prioritize their personal interests whether it be for personal advancement, credit, or recognition over the goals and values of the organization engage in behavior that undermines trust and collaboration [15]. Such leaders may take credit for the work of others, hoard resources, or make decisions based solely on how they benefit personally, rather than considering the broader impact on the team or organization [16]. This self-serving attitude can demotivate employees and create a competitive, rather than cooperative, workplace culture.

Excessive pressure for results can lead leaders to demand unrealistic outcomes without regard for ethical boundaries or the capacity of their staff. In such situations, leaders may encourage or overlook unethical shortcuts, such as dishonesty, cutting corners, or exploiting others, to meet targets. While high performance is often expected in organizational settings, when leaders prioritize results at all costs, they risk compromising the integrity of the organization and the well-being of their employees. This type of pressure often leads to unethical decision-making and fosters an environment where success is achieved through questionable means rather than through innovation, teamwork, or ethical practices.

Unethical leadership can manifest in various harmful ways that negatively impact both individuals and organizations. By understanding the key behaviors outlined in the HLB Framework, intimidation, lack of care, self-centeredness, and excessive pressure for results, organizations can better identify and address unethical leadership practices [7]. Creating a leadership culture that values ethical standards, empathy, and collaboration is essential for fostering a healthy, productive, and sustainable work environment.

### 2.3. Theoretical Perspectives on Unethical Leadership

Unethical leadership can be understood through various theoretical lenses, each offering a unique perspective on how and why leaders engage in morally questionable behaviors. Four prominent theories that explain unethical leadership behaviors include Social Role Theory, Pseudo-Transformational Leadership, Social Learning Theory, and Contingency Theory. These frameworks highlight how leadership styles and organizational contexts can shape the likelihood of unethical conduct occurring within an organization.

Social Role Theory suggests that leaders may engage in unethical acts by rationalizing such behavior as necessary to fulfill their role as primary goal-achievers for the organization [17]. According to this theory, leaders may feel compelled to prioritize organizational success, sometimes to the detriment of ethical considerations. The pressure to achieve organizational goals can lead leaders to justify unethical decisions as “just part of the job” or even view these actions as necessary sacrifices for the greater good. In such instances, the leader’s focus on achieving tangible results may overshadow moral or ethical concerns, creating a rationale for behaviors that would otherwise be considered unacceptable.

Another relevant framework is Pseudo-Transformational Leadership, which occurs when leaders use their charisma, vision, and persuasive abilities to manipulate followers for personal gain [4]. While true transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers to achieve higher levels of performance through ethical means, pseudo-transformational leaders exploit their influence to create a façade of positive change. These leaders may appear to have a compelling vision and inspire their followers to strive for organizational success, but in reality, their actions are self-serving and aimed at furthering their own interests. This form of leadership can be particularly harmful because it misleads followers into believing they are part of a transformative movement when, in fact, the leader is using them as a means to an end.

Social Learning Theory offers another explanation for the perpetuation of unethical leadership behaviors. According to this theory, employees learn what behaviors are acceptable by observing their leaders [9]. When leaders engage in unethical conduct, their behavior sets a precedent for others within the organization. Employees, particularly those in lower ranks, may view unethical actions as acceptable or even necessary to succeed within the organization. As a result, unethical behavior can cascade down the organizational hierarchy, with each successive

level of employees adopting similar behaviors as they observe and internalize the actions of those above them. This creates a toxic culture where unethical practices become normalized and perpetuated over time.

Contingency Theory emphasizes that the effectiveness and impact of a leadership style are contingent upon the specific situation or context in which leadership is exercised. In high-stakes environments such as research organizations or industries that deal with critical, life-altering outcomes, unethical leadership can be particularly damaging [6]. The theory argues that in such settings, the lack of “buffers” or checks on leadership behavior makes it easier for unethical decisions to take root and have widespread negative consequences. In complex environments where the pressure to deliver results is intense, leaders may feel justified in bending ethical guidelines, and their actions may have significant, far-reaching impacts on both the organization and society at large.

In summary, unethical leadership is not merely the result of individual flaws or failures but can be understood through multiple theoretical perspectives. Social Role Theory suggests that leaders justify unethical behavior as necessary to meet organizational goals, while Pseudo-Transformational Leadership explains how leaders use charisma for personal gain, masking their true intentions. Social Learning Theory highlights the dangers of unethical behavior spreading through an organization as employees model their leaders’ actions. Finally, Contingency Theory points to the heightened risks of unethical leadership in high-stakes, complex environments. By examining unethical leadership through these frameworks, we can gain a deeper understanding of how such behaviors emerge and spread, and how organizations can take steps to prevent and address them.

### 3. Dimensions of Organizational Well-Being

Organizational well-being refers to the overall health and sustainability of an institution, encompassing multiple interconnected dimensions that contribute to the long-term success and integrity of the organization [18]. In the context of health research organizations, organizational well-being is particularly important as these institutions are responsible for advancing knowledge, improving health outcomes, and maintaining public trust. However, unethical leadership can have profound negative effects on these critical dimensions, jeopardizing both the internal and external aspects of the organization’s health.

One key aspect of organizational well-being is employee well-being, which includes the physical, emotional, and psychological state of staff members. In health research organizations, the pressure to perform can be high, but unethical leadership only exacerbates stress levels, triggers emotional exhaustion, and diminishes motivation [19]. When leaders engage in manipulative, exploitative, or coercive behavior, they create an environment where employees feel unsupported and undervalued. This can lead to burnout, reduced productivity, and higher turnover, ultimately harming the organization’s ability to achieve its goals.

Organizational culture also plays a central role in the wellbeing of an institu-

tion. The values, beliefs, and norms that guide behavior within an organization are crucial for shaping the work environment. Ethical leaders cultivate cultures of trust, openness, and collaboration, where employees feel empowered to contribute their ideas and concerns. In contrast, unethical leaders foster environments of fear, silence, and complicity, where dissent is discouraged, and employees are hesitant to speak out [4]. Such toxic cultures stifle innovation, discourage transparency, and hinder the organization's ability to adapt to changing circumstances, all of which ultimately undermine organizational well-being.

Another critical dimension of organizational well-being is reputation and public trust, which refers to the external perception of the organization's integrity and reliability. For donor-funded health research organizations, reputation is an invaluable asset that can take years to build but can be destroyed quickly by unethical leadership. When leaders engage in unethical practices, such as mismanagement, dishonesty, or exploitation, it can lead to a loss of credibility and trust among stakeholders, including funders, collaborators, and the public [20]. Rebuilding a damaged reputation is a lengthy and difficult process, and the loss of public trust can result in decreased funding, limited opportunities, and long-term harm to the organization's mission.

Operational efficiency is another critical dimension of organizational well-being that can be severely impacted by unethical leadership. Effective use of resources is essential for achieving organizational goals, and ethical leaders are typically more focused on optimizing processes, managing resources wisely, and ensuring that operations run smoothly. However, unethical leaders often introduce inefficiencies through mismanagement, favoritism, and poor decision-making [21]. These inefficiencies can manifest in many ways, from unnecessary delays and resource wastage to unethical shortcuts that compromise the quality of the organization's output. In a research environment, such inefficiencies can have far-reaching consequences, hindering progress and undermining the institution's credibility.

Financial health and sustainability are also fundamental to an organization's well-being, as sound and transparent financial management ensures that the organization can continue its operations and achieve its objectives. Unethical leadership, however, can threaten financial stability through practices like the misappropriation of funds, lack of accountability, or opaque budgeting processes [20]. Such financial mismanagement can jeopardize immediate operations and create uncertainty about future funding. In the case of research organizations that rely on external grants and donations, any hint of financial impropriety can lead to a loss of funding, forcing the organization to scale back its activities or, in extreme cases, shut down entirely.

Research integrity and compliance are the cornerstones of any health research organization. Adherence to ethical protocols, accurate data reporting, and participant safety are essential components of an institution's mission and credibility. Ethical leadership ensures that these principles are upheld, maintaining the scientific rigor and trustworthiness that underpin research findings. However, unethi-

cal leadership can undermine research integrity by encouraging fraudulent data practices, overlooking safety concerns, or pressuring staff to achieve results at any cost [9]. The consequences of compromising research integrity are severe, including the loss of public trust, legal repercussions, and the potential harm to research participants. When leaders fail to uphold these ethical standards, the entire organization's mission is at risk.

Organizational well-being in health research organizations depends on a variety of interrelated factors, all of which can be compromised by unethical leadership. Employee well-being, organizational culture, reputation and public trust, operational efficiency, financial health, and research integrity are all essential components that contribute to the overall health and sustainability of the organization [22]. Unethical leadership not only diminishes these factors but can also cause long-term damage that affects the institution's ability to fulfill its core mission [23]. Therefore, fostering ethical leadership is critical to maintaining organizational well-being and ensuring the long-term success and integrity of health research organizations.

#### **4. A Conceptual Model: The Impact of Unethical Leadership on Health Research Organizations**

Applying the aforementioned theories and dimensions, the impact of unethical leadership in health research can be conceptualized as a cascading failure across the entire organization.

##### **4.1. Impact on Employee Wellbeing and Psychological Safety**

Manifestations of HLB, such as intimidation and excessive pressure, directly harm staff morale. In research settings, where complex tasks and vulnerable populations are the norm, this leads to burnout, anxiety, and high turnover of experienced personnel, crippling institutional memory and research continuity [19].

##### **4.2. Erosion of Ethical Research Culture**

Through the lens of Social Learning Theory, unethical leadership at the top such as condoning protocol shortcuts or ignoring conflicts of interest, sends a powerful message that ethical rigor is secondary to results. This can trickle down, normalizing practices like data manipulation or unethical patient recruitment, as seen in historical scandals like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which was perpetuated by a broken institutional culture.

##### **4.3. Undermining Organizational Reputation and Donor Trust**

Health research in LMICs is deeply reliant on international partnerships and funding. Unethical practices, such as nepotism in hiring or misreporting of results, can trigger reputational crises. Donors, upon whom sustainability depends, are quick to withdraw support from institutions plagued by governance scandals [20].

#### **4.4. Reduced Operational Efficiency and Innovation**

Inefficiency arises when resources are allocated based on favoritism rather than merit, or when leaders engage in micromanagement. This creates operational bottlenecks and stifles the autonomy necessary for scientific innovation. Disengaged staff may exhibit counterproductive work behaviors, further reducing productivity [7].

#### **4.5. Threats to Financial Accountability and Sustainability**

Procurement fraud, fund misappropriation, or inflated budgets attract external audits and legal sanctions. For example, audits by bodies like the Global Fund have periodically suspended grants to partners over financial mismanagement, demonstrating how unethical leadership directly jeopardizes an organization's financial lifelines.

#### **4.6. The Ultimate Cost: Compromised Public Health Outcomes**

The most severe consequence is the compromise of research integrity and public health. Leaders who prioritize prestige over rigor may encourage the suppression of adverse findings or the rushing of trials without adequate safety oversight. This not only endangers research participants but can also lead to the dissemination of faulty science, with long-term negative consequences for entire health systems.

### **5. A Multi-Level Framework for Fostering Ethical Leadership**

To mitigate these risks, a proactive, multi-level approach is required to embed ethical leadership into the fabric of health research organizations.

#### **5.1. Individual Level: Cultivating Ethical Leaders**

To foster ethical leadership within organizations, it is essential to strengthen leadership selection and evaluation processes, ensuring that leaders not only possess technical competence but also demonstrate strong ethical potential. Traditional methods of leadership selection typically focus on a candidate's qualifications, experience, and technical expertise. However, as organizations increasingly recognize the critical importance of ethical decision-making, there is a growing need to assess leaders' ethical capacities as part of the evaluation process. According to Luo *et al.* [24], moving beyond technical competence to include assessments of ethical potential is crucial for selecting leaders who will uphold the values of the organization. This can be achieved through tools such as behavioral interviews, 360-degree assessments, and ethics-centered scenarios. Behavioral interviews allow evaluators to probe how candidates have navigated ethical challenges in the past, providing insights into their decision-making processes. 360-degree assessments, which gather feedback from peers, subordinates, and supervisors, offer a holistic view of a leader's ethical behavior from multiple perspectives. Furthermore, ethics-centered scenarios can help assess how candidates would handle ethical dilemmas, allowing evaluators to see whether the candidate's decision-making

aligns with the organization's values. By integrating these ethical assessment tools into the leadership selection process, organizations can ensure that leaders are not only technically capable but also possess the ethical judgment necessary for guiding the organization toward long-term success and sustainability.

In addition to strengthening leadership selection, organizations must also institutionalize ethics training and mentorship to reinforce ethical behavior and decision-making at all levels. Ethical leadership is not merely a matter of personal integrity; it is also shaped by the culture and values of the organization. One way to cultivate a culture of ethical leadership is through regular, context-specific ethics training [25]. Such training should be designed to address the real-world ethical dilemmas that leaders are likely to encounter in their specific organizational context. This can include issues such as conflicts of interest, whistleblowing, data integrity, and transparency. By regularly engaging leaders in ethics training that is tailored to their roles and responsibilities, organizations can ensure that ethical considerations remain at the forefront of decision-making, even in complex or high-pressure situations.

Furthermore, pairing emerging leaders with ethically grounded senior mentors is another effective strategy for reinforcing ethical values. Senior leaders who have demonstrated a strong commitment to ethical principles can serve as mentors, providing guidance and wisdom to younger or less experienced leaders. Through this mentorship relationship, emerging leaders learn not only from the successes and failures of their mentors but also from their ethical decision-making processes. This kind of social learning is vital for embedding ethics into the leadership pipeline, as it helps emerging leaders internalize ethical principles through observation and interaction with role models [12]. Mentorship programs can also create a space for open dialogue about ethical challenges, where emerging leaders can discuss difficult decisions and receive feedback from those with more experience [1]. By institutionalizing both ethics training and mentorship, organizations can build a strong foundation of ethical leadership, ensuring that ethical behavior is continuously modeled, reinforced, and integrated into the organization's culture [26].

In summary, strengthening leadership selection and evaluation processes and institutionalizing ethics training and mentorship are essential strategies for cultivating a culture of ethical leadership. By incorporating ethical assessments into leadership selection and providing regular, context-specific ethics training, organizations can ensure that their leaders are equipped to handle ethical challenges with integrity. Pairing emerging leaders with ethically grounded mentors further reinforces these values, promoting social learning and fostering a leadership culture that prioritizes ethical decision-making. Through these strategies, organizations can not only enhance their leadership capacity but also build a more ethical and sustainable future.

## **5.2. Organizational Level: Building Robust Ethical Infrastructure**

Creating a robust and ethical organizational culture requires a multifaceted ap-

proach, focusing on clear guidelines, accountability mechanisms, and an environment that encourages transparency and open communication [27]. Key strategies to achieve this include developing enforceable codes of conduct, decentralizing ethical oversight, fostering a culture of openness, and integrating ethical metrics into performance reviews. Each of these elements plays a crucial role in promoting ethical behavior, ensuring that all members of the organization are held accountable for their actions, and creating a workplace that values integrity at every level.

One of the foundational steps in fostering an ethical organization is the development of clear, enforceable codes of conduct and accountability systems. Establishing a comprehensive set of ethical guidelines provides a clear framework for behavior, outlining expectations for how employees should conduct themselves. However, for these codes of conduct to be effective, they must be supported by robust anonymous reporting systems and independent ethics committees that can enforce accountability across all levels of the organization. As Hassan *et al.* [20] emphasize, these systems must allow individuals to report unethical behavior without fear of retaliation. In such an environment, all employees, regardless of rank or position, are held accountable for their actions. The presence of independent ethics committees adds another layer of oversight, ensuring that decisions about ethical breaches are made impartially and transparently, further reinforcing the organization's commitment to ethical conduct.

In organizations with multiple branches or departments, it is also critical to decentralize ethical oversight. [7] argues that by empowering local ethics officers or committees, organizations can ensure that ethical issues are identified and addressed promptly, without the delays often caused by centralized bureaucratic processes. This decentralization allows for more timely responses to ethical challenges, enabling local teams to manage issues in a way that is context-specific and responsive to the unique challenges they face. By giving local units the authority and responsibility to address ethical concerns, organizations can reduce inertia and create a more dynamic system of ethical oversight that operates efficiently across all levels.

Equally important is the need to foster a culture of openness and psychological safety within the organization. Leaders play a crucial role in setting the tone for how ethical issues are handled, and they must be trained to listen non-defensively and to reward honesty rather than penalize it [28]. When employees feel safe to speak up about ethical concerns, without fear of retribution or being marginalized, they are more likely to report unethical behavior and contribute to a culture of transparency [29]. Regular "ethics town halls" can provide a platform for open discussions, where employees at all levels of the organization can raise concerns, ask questions, and share ideas. These forums encourage active engagement with ethical issues, allowing for dialogue about challenges and solutions. In turn, this transparency helps to build trust within the organization, ensuring that everyone feels their voice is heard and that ethical standards are taken seriously.

Integrating ethical metrics into performance reviews is an effective way to align

individual incentives with ethical behavior [30]. When staff members' feedback on leadership ethics and compliance records is included in performance evaluations, it signals to everyone in the organization that ethical behavior is just as important as technical performance or productivity. Including these ethical metrics in promotion criteria ensures that leaders and employees alike are recognized and rewarded for upholding ethical standards, creating an incentive structure that encourages ethical behavior. This approach not only reinforces the organization's commitment to ethics but also encourages individuals to take ownership of their actions and to hold their colleagues accountable as well.

Fostering an ethical culture within an organization requires a comprehensive approach that includes clear, enforceable codes of conduct, decentralized ethical oversight, a culture of openness and psychological safety, and integration of ethical behavior into performance reviews [27]. By implementing these strategies, organizations can create an environment where ethical conduct is prioritized, accountability is built into the system, and individuals feel empowered to contribute to a culture of integrity. As these practices become ingrained in the organizational fabric, they help to ensure that ethical behavior is not just encouraged but expected at all levels of the institution.

### **5.3. Systemic Level: Strengthening External Accountability**

To strengthen the ethical foundation of an organization and enhance its credibility, it is essential to collaborate with external ethics and governance bodies [31]. By partnering with national ethics councils, such as the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, as well as global organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international bioethics forums, an organization can benefit from external audits and peer reviews that provide objectivity and transparency. These collaborations offer several key advantages, including the opportunity to receive unbiased evaluations of the organization's ethical practices, improve internal governance structures, and enhance reputational trust both domestically and internationally.

One of the primary benefits of engaging with external ethics bodies is the objectivity they bring to the evaluation process [32]. Internal assessments of ethical practices, while valuable, can sometimes be influenced by organizational biases or blind spots. External audits and peer reviews, conducted by independent bodies with expertise in ethics and governance, provide a more impartial and comprehensive analysis of an organization's ethical standards and practices. These external evaluations allow for the identification of potential ethical issues that might otherwise go unnoticed, ensuring that the organization adheres to the highest standards of integrity and transparency.

Moreover, collaboration with recognized ethics and governance organizations enhances the reputational trust of the organization. When an institution partners with respected national and global bodies, it signals to stakeholders including funders, regulatory authorities, and the public that the organization is committed to

upholding rigorous ethical standards [13]. The involvement of external ethics councils and international forums in audits and reviews demonstrates a commitment to transparency and accountability, which is critical for maintaining the trust of both the public and key stakeholders [13]. For organizations involved in research or health-related initiatives, this trust is especially important, as it ensures the integrity of their work and fosters positive relationships with external partners, including governments, donors, and collaborators [12].

In addition to enhancing objectivity and reputational trust, partnerships with external ethics bodies also contribute to continuous improvement in organizational practices. These bodies often provide valuable feedback, recommendations, and best practices that organizations can use to refine their ethical frameworks and governance structures [33]. By engaging with these external forums, organizations can stay up-to-date with evolving ethical standards, emerging global trends, and new regulatory requirements. This ongoing dialogue helps ensure that the organization remains at the forefront of ethical practices and is responsive to the challenges and opportunities that arise within its field.

Collaborating with external ethics and governance bodies such as national ethics councils and international organizations like the WHO is a strategic approach to strengthening an organization's ethical standards and enhancing its credibility. External audits and peer reviews provide objective evaluations that highlight areas for improvement, while also bolstering the organization's reputational trust among stakeholders [25] [33]. Furthermore, these partnerships foster continuous learning and adaptation, ensuring that the organization remains committed to the highest ethical practices in an ever-changing global landscape [12]. By engaging with these external entities, organizations can not only enhance their internal governance but also demonstrate their dedication to ethical excellence and transparency.

## 6. Conclusion

This conceptual analysis has demonstrated that unethical leadership is not merely a managerial failure but a fundamental threat to the viability and mission of health research organizations [4] [12]. By synthesizing key leadership theories, we have illustrated how harmful behaviors cascade through dimensions of organizational wellbeing, eroding employee morale, corrupting institutional culture, and ultimately jeopardizing scientific integrity and public health [1] [26]. The proposed multi-level framework offers a proactive roadmap for building ethical resilience, emphasizing that change must occur at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels [6]. For health research institutions, particularly in resource-constrained settings, investing in ethical leadership is not a peripheral activity but a core strategic imperative to safeguard their mission, ensure sustainability, and maintain the public trust upon which their work depends [12]. Future research should empirically test this framework and explore the specific contingencies that make certain interventions more effective in different contexts [26].

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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