

**The Impact of Unethical Leadership Practices on Employees' Hierarchical Needs: A  
Descriptive Case Study**

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## Abstract

This qualitative descriptive case study explored how unethical leadership disrupts employees' ability to satisfy fundamental human needs as defined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Unethical behaviors such as manipulation, exploitation, and abuse of authority were found to undermine employee well-being, trust, and workplace functionality. The purpose of this study was to examine employees' lived experiences with unethical leadership and how such leadership influenced the fulfillment of their hierarchical needs across the dimensions of safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow's framework guided the analysis of these relationships, providing insight into the ways unethical practices obstruct motivation and engagement. Purposeful sampling identified participants with experience in organizational settings affected by unethical leadership, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis to ensure triangulation and credibility. Thematic analysis revealed that unethical leadership impaired employees' ability to meet psychological and professional needs, resulting in emotional exhaustion, diminished confidence, mistrust, and restricted professional growth. Participants described feelings of disengagement, anxiety, and a lasting sense of psychological strain that negatively influenced morale and organizational commitment. The findings underscored the urgent need for organizations to promote ethical leadership and protect employee well-being through leadership development, ethical training, and transparent reporting systems. These initiatives are essential for fostering trust, accountability, and a positive organizational culture. The study's implications highlight the importance of ethical conduct as a foundation for employee motivation, retention, and long-term organizational success. Future research should examine how organizational climate moderates the effects of unethical leadership and identify proactive strategies to prevent such behaviors.

Overall, this study advances understanding of how unethical leadership undermines the fulfillment of employees' hierarchical needs, leading to adverse psychological, professional, and organizational outcomes, while offering practical guidance for cultivating ethical, human-centered leadership practices that support both individual and institutional effectiveness.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Problem Statement .....	3
Purpose of the Study .....	5
Introduction to Theoretical Framework .....	6
Introduction to Research Methodology and Design .....	8
Research Questions .....	10
Significance of the Study .....	11
Definitions of Key Terms .....	12
Summary .....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	15
Theoretical Framework .....	22
The Impact of Unethical Leadership on Employee Well-being .....	25
Trust Erosion and Organizational Dysfunction .....	43
Toxic Work Environments and Psychological Toll on Employees .....	45
Employee Turnover and Retention Issues .....	50
The Normalization of Unethical Leadership and Ethical Blind Spots .....	63
Financial and Reputational Consequences of Unethical Leadership .....	71
Organizational Culture as a Reflection of Leadership Ethics .....	79
Summary of Literature .....	81
Chapter 3: Research Method .....	84
Research Methodology and Design .....	84
Population and Sample .....	85
Sample and Sampling Strategy .....	85
Instrumentation .....	86
Study Procedures .....	87
Data Analysis .....	90
Assumptions .....	92
Limitations .....	93
Delimitations .....	95
Ethical Assurances .....	96
Summary .....	98
Chapter 4: Findings .....	100
Trustworthiness of the Data .....	103
Results .....	109
Evaluation of the Findings .....	124

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions .....	139
Implications.....	142
Recommendations for Practice .....	147
Recommendations for Future Research .....	149
Conclusion .....	153
References.....	156
Appendix A.....	200
Appendix B.....	201

**List of Tables**

Table 1 Demographics .....	111
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### List of Figures

Figure 1 Percentage of participant responses organized by thematic categories .....	116
Figure 2 Percentage breakdown of participant responses across research questions .....	124

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Unethical leadership has emerged as a pressing issue within organizational studies, given its profound impact on employee well-being, organizational culture, and overall performance (Brown & Mitchell, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023). Recent research has underscored how leaders who engage in unethical behaviors can create harmful environments, undermining organizations' very structure and function (Brown & Mitchell, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Traditionally viewed as a positive force for motivation and growth, leadership can take a destructive turn when ethical considerations are disregarded in favor of personal gain or power (Treviño et al., 2021). The effects of unethical leadership are far-reaching, often leading to decreased employee morale, higher turnover rates, and a toxic organizational climate that stifles innovation and collaboration (Franco & Antunes, 2022; Johnson et al., 2023).

This study sought to provide a deeper understanding of unethical leadership by examining it through Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, offering a novel framework for analyzing how unmet needs at different levels may contribute to the emergence and persistence of unethical behaviors among leaders. By exploring this relationship, the research aimed to shed light on the complex dynamics between human motivation, leadership ethics, and organizational outcomes (Williams & Wiggins, 2023). The concept of unethical leadership continued to be a critical issue in organizational behavior. Recent studies have expanded upon earlier work, highlighting toxic leadership's negative effects on individuals and organizations. For instance, research by Stouten et al. (2019) and Zhang and Liu (2021) delved into the dynamics of unethical leadership, discussing its adverse effects on employee well-being, organizational culture, and overall performance. However, the integration of Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a theoretical framework for understanding the root causes of unethical leadership remains

relatively underexplored. Maslow's (1943) theory, which maintains that individuals are motivated by a series of hierarchical needs ranging from physiological to self-actualization, offers a valuable lens through which to examine how unmet needs might influence a leader's propensity to engage in unethical behaviors. By understanding the motivations behind unethical leadership, organizations can better address the root causes and potentially mitigate such behaviors before they manifest into larger organizational issues.

The relevance of this research topic is underscored by the increasing reports of unethical leadership across various sectors, ranging from corporate scandals to political corruption (Brown & Mitchell, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Unethical leadership not only disrupts organizational harmony but also tarnishes the reputation of institutions, leading to long-term negative consequences for stakeholders (Treviño et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2023). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the challenges faced by leaders as they navigate unprecedented pressures and ethical dilemmas, making the study of leadership ethics more pertinent than ever (Williams & Wiggins, 2023). This research aimed to contribute to the existing body of literature by offering a deeper understanding of the psychological underpinnings of unethical leadership, with a particular focus on the role of unmet needs as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1943; Kenrick et al., 2022).

Previous research on unethical leadership has largely focused on its outcomes, such as employee dissatisfaction, decreased organizational commitment, and increased workplace deviance (Brown & Mitchell, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Liu, 2021). However, there is a gap in the literature concerning the antecedents of unethical leadership, particularly from a psychological need's perspective. This study is warranted as it sought to fill the gaps by examining how unmet needs at various levels of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy may predispose

leaders to engage in unethical behaviors. Understanding these antecedents is crucial for developing interventions to prevent unethical leadership and promote ethical behavior within organizations. Moreover, this research had practical implications, as it can inform leadership development programs and organizational policies aimed at fostering ethical leadership.

This study addressed these gaps by employing a qualitative research method, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of individuals who have observed or experienced unethical leadership. Through interviews and thematic analysis, this study sought to uncover the underlying psychological motivations that drive leaders to act unethically, as well as the impact of these behaviors on followers and organizational culture. By integrating Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs into the analysis, this research provided a nuanced understanding of how unmet needs can lead to unethical leadership, offering valuable insights for scholars and practitioners in organizational behavior.

This study contributed to the existing literature on unethical leadership by introducing a novel theoretical perspective based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. It also addressed a critical gap in the literature by exploring the antecedents of unethical leadership from a psychological need perspective. The findings of this study have important implications for leadership development and organizational policy, as they offered actionable insights into how organizations can prevent unethical leadership and promote ethical behavior. The next section presents the problem statement, outlining the specific issues this study aimed to address.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed in this qualitative, descriptive case study was that unethical leadership practices created toxic work environments, which undermine employees' ability to meet fundamental psychological and professional needs—ultimately impairing organizational

functioning. Therefore, it is not known if or to what extent unethical leadership is hurting organizational culture in a large organization in the Philadelphia region. Studies show that unethical leadership practices result in decreased employee morale, higher turnover rates, and compromised trust among employees and stakeholders (Hassan et al., 2023). For instance, the American Psychological Association (2021) reported that 70% of employees who perceive their leaders as unethical lose trust in their organizations, severely impacting collaboration and productivity. Similarly, a 2023 report by the Corporate Executive Board (CEB) found that organizations with unethical leadership experience a 20% decline in productivity due to employee disengagement.

Another critical issue is the perpetuation of a toxic work environment. Leaders who modeled unethical behavior set a dangerous precedent, encouraging similar conduct among subordinates. This created a vicious cycle where unethical practices become normalized, further entrenching the problem (Pelletier, 2024). Such environments are frequently marked by favoritism, lack of accountability, and disregard for employee well-being, all of which hinder collaboration and innovation (Jannat et al., 2022). Addressing unethical leadership requires a multifaceted approach, including robust ethical training, transparent governance structures, and a strong emphasis on accountability. Organizations must foster a culture that prioritizes ethical behavior, supports whistleblowers, and ensures that ethical considerations are integrated into decision-making processes (Zakiy & Satyarini, 2025). By doing so, they can mitigate the negative impacts of unethical leadership and promote a more sustainable and equitable business environment.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine how employees perceive and experience the influence of unethical leadership on organizational culture, with a focus on its impact on morale and well-being. Framed by Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, this study explored how unethical leadership behaviors interfere with employees' ability to satisfy fundamental psychological and safety needs in the workplace. Specifically, this study aimed to investigate how unethical leadership behaviors, such as manipulation, dishonesty, and favoritism, influence employees' psychological well-being, workplace satisfaction, and engagement. This study addressed the problem of declining employee morale linked to unethical leadership practices, as highlighted by previous studies that demonstrated the detrimental effects of such behaviors on organizational performance and employee retention (Brown & Mitchell, 2020; Gallup, 2022).

The main purpose of this study was to explore the impact of unethical leadership on organizational culture. Understanding this relationship is crucial, as it can inform strategies to promote ethical leadership, enhance employee well-being, and foster a positive organizational culture. By identifying the consequences of unethical leadership, organizations can implement measures to prevent such behaviors and mitigate their negative effects. By examining these dynamics within a specific organizational context, this study sought to contribute to the broader understanding of how unethical leadership behaviors influenced organizational culture and employee morale (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2019).

This study represented a logical response to the stated problem by employing a qualitative case study design that captures the lived experiences of employees who have been subjected to unethical leadership. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with

participants drawn from government contracting organizations in the broader Philadelphia region. This includes areas such as Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Delaware, Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, and Maryland. A sample size of approximately 20 participants was targeted to ensure data saturation and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of recurring patterns and themes related to unethical leadership and its impact on employees' experiences.

### **Introduction to Theoretical Framework**

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is a psychological framework that organizes human needs into a five-tiered structure, each level building upon the other. These levels, from the most basic to the most complex, include physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, and finally, self-actualization. The key principle of this framework is that lower-level needs must be satisfied before individuals can focus on higher-order needs (Kenrick et al., 2022). For example, an individual cannot be concerned with self-esteem or personal growth if they struggle to meet their physiological or safety needs. These concepts are interrelated in a sequential manner, meaning that unmet lower-level needs will take precedence over higher-level desires (Tang et al., 2021).

In the context of unethical leadership, this hierarchical framework became crucial in understanding how leadership behaviors impact employees' ability to meet their needs. Unethical leadership, characterized by practices such as manipulation, dishonesty, or exploitation, can prevent individuals from fulfilling even the most basic physiological and safety needs (Fatima et al., 2023). When unethical practices are practiced, they taint a work environment, employees may face job insecurity, lack of proper working conditions, or even threats to their physical well-

being. For instance, unethical leaders may create a climate of fear or unpredictability, preventing employees from feeling safe in their roles. As Maslow's (1943) theory asserts, until these safety needs are addressed, employees are unlikely to be motivated to pursue higher-order needs, such as those related to belonging, esteem, or self-actualization (Lemoine et al., 2019).

The concept of unmet needs being the primary source of motivation in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy was particularly relevant in this analysis. When employees under unethical leadership found that their safety needs are not met, they focused their energy on survival rather than thriving within the organization. This frustration with unmet lower-order needs stalled their psychological and professional development (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020). Rather than engaging in creative thinking, pursuing new opportunities, or contributing meaningfully to the team, employees instead expended their emotional and cognitive resources on protecting themselves from further harm or instability.

Unethical leadership also affected the higher levels of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, particularly love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. An unethical environment can erode trust and connection between employees, preventing them from forming strong, supportive relationships at work (Bedi et al., 2022). This lack of social cohesion and a toxic work culture lead to isolation, reducing employees' sense of belonging and social acceptance. Without a sense of connection or recognition, the individual's need for esteem also remains unmet. Unethical leaders often fail to provide genuine recognition or create an environment where employees feel valued, thus hindering their capacity to build confidence and self-respect.

At the highest level, self-actualization, the detrimental impact of unethical leadership became most apparent. Self-actualization refers to the process of realizing one's full potential, engaging in personal growth, and achieving meaningful life goals (Maslow, 1943; Lemoine et

al., 2019). In a workplace governed by ethical leadership, employees are encouraged to pursue their interests, develop their skills, and align their work with their values (Yang et al., 2020). However, unethical leadership stifles this process. Employees are likely to feel constrained, unfulfilled, or unable to explore their creative potential when working under leaders who prioritize self-interest or unethical gains over the well-being of their team (Yang et al., 2020). The toxic environment that unethical leadership fosters undermines the intrinsic motivation that drives individuals toward self-actualization, leading to disengagement, dissatisfaction, and stagnation.

In conclusion, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provided a compelling lens through which to analyze the impact of unethical leadership. Unmet lower-level needs, such as physiological and safety needs, prevent individuals from progressing to higher levels of personal and professional fulfillment. Unethical leadership stunts this progression and creates an environment in which employees struggle to achieve even basic needs, let alone attain self-actualization (Fatima et al., 2023). By examining the narratives of those affected by unethical leadership, this study sought to reveal how such leadership behavior interrupts individuals' efforts to meet their hierarchical needs.

### **Introduction to Research Methodology and Design**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the effects of unethical leadership on individuals' ability to meet their needs as conceptualized by Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Qualitative research was particularly suitable for investigating complex, subjective experiences, as it allowed for a deeper understanding of participants' personal narratives and perceptions (Levitt, 2021). The design of this study followed a case study approach, centering on the Enron scandal as a real-world example of unethical leadership. By

focusing on this case, the study examined how unethical leadership behaviors hinder employees' progression through Maslow's (1943) hierarchy and the overall impact on their well-being.

This study's primary data collection method was a narrative data analysis, through which participants recounted their personal experiences with unethical leadership. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who are currently employed by government contractors or formerly employed in the Philadelphia Region, which includes Virginia, Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., Delaware, and Maryland. Those interviewed allowed for a detailed exploration of how the participants' physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs were affected by the unethical practices of their leaders. The semi-structured format offered the flexibility to explore unforeseen areas of interest while maintaining focus on the key aspects of Maslow's (1943) framework.

Each interview was conducted via a virtual platform, depending on the availability of the participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. Participants were asked open-ended questions that invited them to reflect on their experiences with leadership and how those experiences impacted their sense of security, job satisfaction, and personal development. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports.

In addition to interviews, focus groups served as a secondary data collection method. Data analysis of this study followed a thematic approach, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and themes in the participants' narratives. Thematic analysis was particularly useful for capturing the complexity of human experiences, as it involved coding the data into key themes that emerge organically from the participants' accounts. In this case, the analysis focused

on how participants' needs, as outlined in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, were met or frustrated under unethical leadership (Adams et al., 2021; Nyumba et al., 2018).

First, the interview transcripts and documents were reviewed multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Then, initial codes were developed based on key concepts from Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, such as safety, belongingness, and self-actualization. As the coding process continued, more specific sub-themes were identified, that allowed for a detailed analysis of how different levels of needs were affected.

For instance, under the theme of safety needs, sub-themes such as job insecurity, fear of retaliation, or financial instability may emerge. Similarly, the theme of esteem needs might yield sub-themes related to a lack of recognition or loss of self-worth. By organizing the data into such themes, the study illuminated the ways in which unethical leadership disrupts employees' ability to meet their needs.

The findings from the thematic analysis were triangulated with the document analysis to ensure the validity of the results. The triangulation process helped corroborate the narratives participants provided with concrete evidence from the organizational documents, enhancing the reliability of the study's conclusions. In this way, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of the negative effects of unethical leadership on employees' fulfillment of their hierarchical needs, offering valuable insights into the human impact of leadership practices.

### **Research Questions**

#### **RQ1:**

How does unethical leadership influence employee morale in organizations?

#### **RQ2:**

How does unethical leadership have an impact on employee turnover rates in organizational environments?

**RQ3:**

How does the presence of unethical leadership practices affect the overall trust among employees and stakeholders in an organization?

**Significance of the Study**

This study of unethical leadership using Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs as a theoretical framework was critically important because it addressed a pressing issue that impacts organizational culture, employee well-being, and overall business success. Unethical leadership has far-reaching effects, not only on individual employees but also on the organization's long-term sustainability and reputation. By examining how unethical leadership influenced employees' ability to meet their needs—from basic physiological needs to higher-level aspirations such as self-actualization—this research provided insights into how leadership behavior shapes organizational dynamics and personal well-being.

One of the central reasons this study was important is its potential to offer a more nuanced understanding of how unethical leadership affected employees at various levels of an organization. Leadership is a key determinant of organizational culture, and when it is unethical, it can create a hostile work environment, erode trust, and decrease employee morale. These outcomes are detrimental to employees and have a ripple effect on organizational performance (Brown & Treviño, 2019). By applying Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, this study systematically explored how unethical leadership undermines employees' fulfillment of needs at each stage, from physiological safety to self-esteem and self-actualization, providing a

comprehensive framework for understanding the impact of unethical behavior on employee motivation and engagement.

The connection between leadership and employee needs is well-documented in recent research. For example, Arun (2022) emphasized that employees under unethical leadership often experience unmet safety and esteem needs, diminishing their job satisfaction and productivity. Such employees are more likely to experience stress, burnout, and disengagement and less likely to contribute to organizational goals. In this context, applying Maslow's (1943) framework was particularly valuable because it allowed researchers and practitioners to pinpoint exactly how unethical leadership disrupts the normal progression of needs, offering actionable insights for improving workplace conditions.

This study also filled a gap in the current literature by focusing on unethical leadership through the lens of human needs rather than solely focusing on moral or ethical deficiencies. While much of the literature on leadership ethics explores the moral failings of unethical leaders (Johnson, 2020), there has been less emphasis on how these failings translate into tangible impacts on employees' psychological and emotional well-being. By shifting the focus to Maslow's framework, this study highlighted the psychological mechanisms at play, offering a more holistic understanding of the leadership-employee relationship.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

### ***Antecedents of Unethical Leadership***

These underlying factors or unmet psychological needs may predispose leaders to act unethically, often driven by unresolved conflicts within Maslow's hierarchy (Zhang & Xu, 2021).

### ***Ethical Dilemmas***

Situations where leaders face conflicting values or ethical considerations, often intensify under pressure, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, and testing their commitment to ethical behavior (Williams & Wiggins, 2023).

### ***Toxic Work Environment***

An organizational climate characterized by conflict, fear, favoritism, and lack of accountability, typically perpetuated by unethical leaders, which diminishes collaboration and employee morale (Jannaet al., 2022).

### ***Turnover Rates***

The rate at which employees leave an organization tends to rise in environments with unethical leadership due to increased stress, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished trust (SHRM, 2023).

### ***Unethical Leadership***

Leadership that involves dishonest, manipulative, or exploitative behaviors that compromise employees' well-being and disrupt organizational culture (Brown & Mitchell, 2020).

### **Summary**

In conclusion, this study was important because it addressed a critical gap in leadership and organizational studies by exploring the effects of unethical leadership through the lens of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. It offered a comprehensive understanding of how unethical leadership disrupts employees' ability to meet their needs at various levels, from basic safety to self-actualization. This study's findings will contribute to the fields of organizational psychology and leadership by providing empirical evidence on the harmful effects of unethical leadership, offering practical recommendations for improving workplace culture, and expanding the application of Maslow's theory in the context of leadership. As organizations continue to grapple

with the consequences of unethical leadership, studies like this was essential for developing strategies to foster ethical behavior and support employee well-being. Chapter 2 will present an in-depth review of the literature that supports the theoretical framework and provides a foundation for understanding how unethical leadership influences employees' ability to fulfill their hierarchical needs.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Unethical leadership has persisted throughout history, deeply embedded in the interplay of power, morality, and societal structures (Banks et al., 2021). From ancient rulers who exercised absolute authority to contemporary corporate executives who engage in fraudulent activities, unethical leadership is often driven by the exploitation of power, self-interest, and a disregard for ethical governance. The roots of unethical leadership can be traced to historical contexts where hierarchical systems, lack of accountability, and societal norms either condoned or failed to regulate moral misconduct (Karam et al., 2019). Understanding these origins necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from history, philosophy, psychology, and business ethics.

The evolution of leadership throughout has significantly influenced contemporary discussions on the ethical responsibilities of leaders and the consequences of ethical failures. Ethical leadership is often examined through philosophical frameworks such as deontological and consequentialist ethics, which provide different perspectives on moral decision-making. Deontological ethics, as established by Kant (2020), asserts that moral actions are inherently right or wrong based on adherence to universal principles, regardless of their outcomes. This perspective suggests that leaders have a duty to act with integrity, honesty, and fairness, irrespective of the consequences. In contrast, consequentialist theories, such as utilitarianism, evaluate leadership decisions based on their overall impact on stakeholders (Mill, 2020). These ethical frameworks offer valuable insights into the nature of unethical leadership and its broader implications for organizations and employees.

From a Kantian perspective, unethical leadership represents a fundamental failure to uphold moral duty, as it often involves deception, exploitation, or the pursuit of self-interest at

the expense of others (Kant, 2020; Brown & Treviño, 2019). When leaders engage in unethical practices, such as financial fraud or abuse of power, they violate the categorical imperative, which requires that actions be universally justifiable and respect individuals as ends rather than means (Kant, 2020). Such leadership behaviors not only compromise ethical integrity but also create environments of distrust and disillusionment within organizations.

Recent research highlights the interplay between organizational culture, incentive structures, and psychological factors in shaping ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2020). Organizational culture serves as a critical determinant of ethical or unethical behavior, influencing decision-making processes and reinforcing norms (Lim, 2024). Incentive structures, particularly those emphasizing short-term financial gains over ethical considerations, often contribute to moral disengagement among leaders (Park et al., 2022). Additionally, psychological factors such as moral identity, cognitive biases, and ethical fading play a role in leadership decision-making (Bailey, 2023). By integrating these perspectives, this review establishes a comprehensive framework for understanding how unethical leadership obstructs employees' ability to fulfill their hierarchical needs within Maslow's framework, thereby affecting their productivity, well-being, and organizational commitment.

The review further explored the impacts of unethical leadership on organizational culture, emphasizing how unethical behaviors erode trust, undermine core values, and foster toxic workplace environments (Xie et al., 2024). Ethical lapses in leadership often lead to widespread distrust among employees, which can manifest in reduced cooperation, cynicism, and resistance to organizational initiatives (Bajaba et al., 2025). Furthermore, unethical leadership contributes to adverse psychological outcomes such as stress, job dissatisfaction, burnout, and diminished motivation (Mostafa et al., 2021). When analyzed through Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs,

these consequences illustrate how unethical leadership hinders employees from achieving basic psychological and self-fulfillment needs, leading to disengagement and a lack of organizational commitment (Idrus, et al., 2022).

The issue of employee turnover and retention was also examined, given the strong correlation between unethical leadership and high turnover rates. Toxic leadership environments create conditions that push employees to seek alternative employment, ultimately leading to costly turnover and loss of institutional knowledge (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019). High turnover rates have financial and operational repercussions, including recruitment costs, training expenditures, and reduced overall efficiency (Ayodele et al., 2020).

A critical discussion on trust and ethical leadership followed, focusing on trust as a cornerstone of ethical leadership and the severe consequences of trust violations in organizational settings (Kayondo & Kyobe, 2025). The erosion of trust resulting from unethical leadership can lead to systemic dysfunction, employee disillusionment, and reputational damage (Brown & Mitchell, 2023). This discussion will transition into an in-depth case study of the Enron scandal, illustrating the real-world consequences of unethical leadership on employee morale, organizational culture, and public trust. Enron's leadership failures exemplify the dangers of unethical decision-making, fraudulent practices, and the broader societal consequences of corporate misconduct, serving as a persistent cautionary tale in discussions of corporate governance and accountability (Nguyen & Canh, 2021).

Finally, the review evaluated the contemporary leadership theories, such as transformational and authentic leadership, and their potential to address and mitigate unethical practices in organizations (Banks et al., 2021). Transformational leadership, characterized by a strong ethical foundation, visionary inspiration, and employee empowerment, continues to be

linked to positive organizational outcomes and enhanced ethical awareness among leaders (Hoch et al., 2019). Similarly, authentic leadership promotes self-awareness, relational transparency, and ethical behavior, reinforcing its potential as a viable strategy for addressing unethical leadership practices (Gardner et al., 2021). Practical solutions, including accountability measures, ethical leadership training programs, and robust corporate governance structures, will be proposed as strategies to promote ethical behavior and ensure sustainable organizational success.

This structured review provided a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted impacts of unethical leadership on organizations and employees, integrating theoretical, empirical, and case study insights to inform future research and leadership practices. In ancient societies, leadership was often tied to divine authority or hereditary power, granting rulers unchecked control over their domains (Northouse, 2022). The absence of accountability mechanisms often led to unethical practices. For instance, leaders in ancient empires such as Rome and Egypt frequently exploited their subjects, engaged in corruption, and waged wars for personal or political gain (Northouse, 2022). These actions were justified under the guise of divine will or the supposed greater good of the state.

Such instances highlight the early intertwining of power and unethical behavior, driven by a lack of checks and balances. The philosophical discourse on morality and leadership further illuminates the origins of unethical leadership. In ancient Greece, philosophers like Plato and Aristotle grappled with the ethical responsibilities of leaders (Plato, *The Republic*; Aristotle, *Politics*; Banks et al., 2021). Plato's concept of the "philosopher-king" suggested that only those who possess wisdom and virtue should lead. However, his idealized vision acknowledged the risks of power being corrupted by greed and ambition. Aristotle emphasized the importance of

leaders serving the common good rather than their interests. Despite these early warnings, history shows that many leaders failed to adhere to such principles, driven instead by personal ambition and a desire for power (Banks et al., 2021).

The Industrial Revolution marked a significant turning point in the history of leadership, as the rise of capitalism and industrialization created new opportunities for unethical practices (Northouse, 2022). The rapid expansion of industries in the 18th and 19th centuries often came at the expense of labor rights and environmental sustainability. Business magnates like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, while celebrated for their entrepreneurial achievements, were also criticized for exploiting workers and engaging in monopolistic practices (Karam et al., 2019). This era underscored the tension between profit motives and ethical leadership, a dynamic that continues to shape modern discussions about corporate responsibility (Banks et al., 2021; Northouse, 2022).

The goal of this descriptive qualitative case study was to investigate how unethical leadership affects organizational culture, specifically through its influence on employee morale, within an organization in the Philadelphia region, which significantly impacts employee well-being, organizational culture, and business performance. The purpose was to explore its influence on employee morale, turnover rates, and overall trust among employees. Motivation has been a cornerstone of psychological and organizational research, offering insights into human behavior and productivity (Gopalan et al., 2020). Among the plethora of motivation theories, Maslow's hierarchy of needs remains one of the most enduring and widely referenced models. Introduced in 1943, the hierarchy presented a sequential framework of human needs, ranging from basic physiological requirements to complex psychological aspirations. Despite its widespread adoption, Maslow's hierarchy of needs continues to face criticism regarding its

empirical validity and limited cross-cultural applicability (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2022; Ozsungur, 2021).

This literature review was systematically structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between unethical leadership and employee well-being through the lens of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. The study delved into the concept of unethical leadership, defining its characteristics, manifestations, and broader organizational implications. Following this, the review critically examined the detrimental effects of unethical leadership on employees, particularly its role in obstructing their ability to fulfill their hierarchical needs, from physiological security to self-actualization. Additionally, to provide a comparative perspective, the discussion introduced alternative leadership theories that embody ethical and transformational principles, highlighting leadership approaches that foster employee growth and organizational integrity. Finally, the review synthesized key findings, identified critical gaps in existing research, and laid the groundwork for the study's methodological approach, ensuring a rigorous and well-founded investigation into the phenomenon of unethical leadership.

This literature review provides a critical examination of the foundational aspects of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, its applications across diverse contexts, and its critiques, while also integrating contemporary leadership theories and challenges. Maslow's (1943) theory, originally developed to explain human motivation, has been extensively applied in organizational settings to assess employee well-being and performance. However, scholars have debated its universality, questioning its applicability across cultures, industries, and leadership dynamics (Ackerman, 2024). To provide a comprehensive understanding, this review not only explored the relevance of Maslow's (1943) framework in modern leadership studies but also juxtaposed it with emerging theories in organizational psychology and behavioral ethics.

The literature search for this dissertation was conducted using a rigorous approach to ensure the inclusion of high-quality, multidisciplinary, and peer-reviewed sources. A diverse range of academic databases and search engines was employed to maximize the breadth and depth of the research. Primary databases such as ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and JSTOR were instrumental in retrieving scholarly journal articles, doctoral dissertations, and theses that provide foundational insights into unethical leadership, organizational culture, and employee morale. These databases ensured access to well-established theoretical frameworks and empirical research, which are essential for building a robust academic foundation.

To supplement these sources, Google Scholar and ScienceDirect were utilized to identify recent empirical studies and grey literature, including conference proceedings, government reports, and industry analyses. These platforms facilitated the inclusion of contemporary discussions on leadership challenges, ethical dilemmas, and emerging trends in organizational behavior. Furthermore, Emerald Insight and SAGE Journals provided access to specialized research in business, organizational psychology, and leadership ethics, allowing for a deeper exploration of the intersection between leadership practices and employee well-being.

The search strategy incorporated a combination of controlled vocabulary (e.g., MeSH terms and subject headings) and Boolean operators to refine search queries, ensuring precision and relevance. Additionally, citation tracking and reference mining techniques were employed to identify seminal works and influential studies in the field. This systematic methodology ensured a comprehensive and interdisciplinary review of existing literature, supporting a nuanced understanding of unethical leadership and its implications within organizational settings.

PubMed complemented this study by providing psychological studies that highlighted the effects of leadership behaviors on motivation and morale, while Taylor & Francis Online was

used to access multidisciplinary literature exploring the broader societal impacts of leadership ethics. Finally, Google served as a supplemental search engine to identify case studies, between the years of 2022 through 2025, including the Enron scandal, and to locate grey literature such as industry reports and conference proceedings. This diverse range of databases ensured that the research incorporated both theoretical and practical perspectives, offering a comprehensive foundation for understanding the multifaceted impacts of unethical leadership within organizations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, a foundational model in psychology and organizational behavior for understanding human motivation. Originally proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943, this theory asserts that human behavior is driven by the pursuit of fulfilling a series of hierarchical needs, starting with basic physiological requirements and progressing toward higher-order aspirations of self-actualization (Gopalan et al., 2020). Maslow's framework arranges these needs into a five-tier pyramid: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Each level represents a set of needs that must be at least partially satisfied before progressing to higher levels (Gopalan et al., 2020).

In the context of leadership, ethical leaders contribute to employees' ability to meet these needs by fostering trust, stability, and personal growth. Conversely, unethical leadership can obstruct this process, leading to job insecurity, stress, and disengagement (Banks et al., 2021). This study used Maslow's framework to analyze how unethical leadership affects employees at each level of the hierarchy, ultimately influencing organizational culture and performance.

Physiological needs, such as adequate wages and comfortable working conditions, form the foundational layer of employee satisfaction. When organizations fail to meet these basic requirements, employee morale, productivity, and engagement are severely impacted (Gopalan et al., 2020). The second tier, safety needs, encompasses physical security, job stability, and a predictable work environment. Unethical leadership, characterized by practices such as favoritism, harassment, or exploitation, threatens these safety needs, leading to heightened stress and a sense of insecurity among employees (Banks et al., 2021).

The third level of the hierarchy, love and belonging, highlights the importance of social relationships in the workplace, such as camaraderie, team cohesion, and a sense of belonging. Leaders play a pivotal role in fostering or undermining this level of need. Unethical practices, such as exclusion or manipulation, disrupt workplace relationships and erode trust, ultimately alienating employees (Banks et al., 2021). Esteem needs, which encompass recognition, respect, and a sense of achievement, are similarly vulnerable to unethical leadership. Employees who feel undervalued or disrespected by their leaders often experience reduced self-worth, leading to disengagement and decreased organizational loyalty (Gopalan et al., 2020).

At the apex of the hierarchy lies self-actualization, which represents the fulfillment of an individual's potential. In the workplace, this might involve opportunities for creativity, personal growth, and meaningful contributions. Unethical leadership can stifle self-actualization by limiting employees' autonomy, undermining their confidence, and creating an environment where fear and compliance overshadow innovation and development (Fatima et al., 2023, Lemoine et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2020). Employees who perceive leadership as unethical often struggle to reach their full potential, as the organizational climate fails to support higher-order aspirations (Gopalan et al., 2020).

Critically, Maslow's (1943) theory also provided a framework to examine the motivations and behaviors of leaders themselves. Leaders who are motivated by unmet lower-level needs, such as esteem or safety, may prioritize personal gain over ethical practices, resulting in toxic leadership behaviors (Banks et al., 2021). Conversely, leaders who have achieved self-actualization are more likely to act ethically, valuing the growth and well-being of their teams over their own self-interest (Northouse, 2022).

While Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs has been widely adopted across disciplines, it has also faced significant scrutiny, particularly regarding its universal applicability and empirical basis. Contemporary researchers have argued that the rigid sequential nature of the hierarchy does not account for cultural or individual differences, where needs may be pursued simultaneously or in a non-linear fashion (Gopalan et al., 2020). Despite these critiques, Maslow's (1943) framework remains a valuable tool for understanding the interplay between human needs and organizational dynamics, particularly in the context of leadership. By applying this framework, this study seeks to uncover how unethical leadership impacts the fulfillment of employee needs at various levels and the subsequent effects on organizational culture and morale.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy has been widely employed in leadership and organizational studies to examine motivation and well-being. Gopalan et al. (2020) used the framework to analyze employee engagement in contemporary organizations, finding that leaders who address higher-order needs, such as esteem and self-actualization, foster greater productivity and satisfaction. Similarly, Banks et al. (2021) employed the model to explore the effects of ethical leadership on employee morale, emphasizing the role of trust in fulfilling safety and belonging needs.

Alternative frameworks, such as Herzberg's two-factor theory, continue to inform workplace motivation research by distinguishing between hygiene factors and intrinsic motivators, offering insight into employee satisfaction and performance (Tampubolon & Sihombing, 2021). While Herzberg's model is valuable for identifying workplace dissatisfiers, it lacks the hierarchical progression of needs present in Maslow's framework. This study chose Maslow's model for its comprehensive approach to understanding both individual and organizational dynamics, as well as its applicability to analyzing the cascading effects of unethical leadership on employee well-being.

### **The Impact of Unethical Leadership on Employee Well-being**

Unethical leadership has become a critical issue in organizational studies, as it significantly impacts employee well-being and overall workplace culture. Leaders who engage in manipulation, dishonesty, and exploitation create a toxic work environment that fosters stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion among employees (Greenbaum et al., 2022). Studies have shown that unethical leadership contributes to workplace anxiety, lowers morale, and discourages employees from reporting misconduct due to fear of retaliation (Kiewitz et al., 2021). These negative consequences not only affected individual employees but also hindered organizational performance and sustainability. This study explored the psychological distress caused by unethical leadership, its impact on workplace morale, the challenges employees face in reporting unethical behavior, and the role of organizational support in mitigating these effects. By addressing these issues, organizations can better understand the importance of ethical leadership and develop strategies to promote a healthier and more productive work environment.

### ***Psychological Distress and Burnout***

Unethical leadership has been extensively examined in scholarly literature as a significant contributor to employee psychological distress. Behaviors such as manipulation, dishonesty, and exploitation by leaders have been linked to increased stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion among employees (Greenbaum et al., 2022). Research indicates that exposure to unethical leadership correlates with heightened levels of workplace anxiety and psychological distress (Greenbaum et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). Recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that unethical leadership significantly contributes to employee stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced psychological well-being (Zhao et al., 2022).

This stress often manifests as emotional exhaustion, a key component of burnout, which can lead to decreased job satisfaction, lower productivity, and higher turnover rates (Schmid et al., 2021). Furthermore, prolonged exposure to unethical leadership is associated with learned helplessness, a psychological condition in which employees feel powerless to change their circumstances, leading to disengagement and withdrawal from workplace activities (Huang et al., 2020).

Given these implications, organizations must implement strong ethical guidelines, promote leadership accountability, and foster a culture of integrity to mitigate the harmful effects of unethical leadership (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Greenbaum et al., 2022; Treviño & Brown, 2021). Leadership development programs that emphasize ethical decision-making and emotional intelligence have been shown to reduce instances of unethical behavior and enhance employee well-being (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019). By prioritizing ethical leadership practices, organizations can create a more supportive and psychologically healthy work environment.

### ***Fear and Low Morale in the Workplace***

Unethical practices, including manipulation and dishonesty, foster a culture of fear and low morale within organizations. Employees may feel threatened or coerced, leading to a pervasive sense of insecurity. This environment not only affects individual mental health but also undermines team cohesion and overall organizational effectiveness (Schyns & Schilling, 2021). Employees under unethical leadership often struggle with workplace anxiety and emotional exhaustion, leading to a toxic work culture where productivity and engagement decline. Such toxic environments not only deteriorate individual mental health but also erode team cohesion and organizational performance, as employees prioritize self-preservation over collaboration and innovation (Khan et al., 2022). The psychological toll of unethical leadership can manifest in chronic stress, anxiety, and even symptoms of depression among employees, diminishing job satisfaction and increasing absenteeism (Zhang & Bednall, 2022).

Workplace anxiety and emotional exhaustion are common consequences of unethical leadership, as employees constantly navigate a climate of unpredictability and distrust (Schmid et al., 2021). Prolonged exposure to such conditions can lead to burnout, a state of physical and emotional depletion characterized by cynicism, fatigue, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2022). This toxic work culture often results in a decline in productivity and engagement, as employees become disengaged from their roles and less willing to take initiative or contribute creatively (Treviño & Brown, 2021).

Furthermore, unethical leadership fosters a cycle of deviant workplace behaviors, where employees, in response to mistreatment, may engage in counterproductive work behaviors such as decreased effort, resistance to authority, or even unethical conduct themselves (Kish-Gephart et al., 2019). By prioritizing ethical leadership, organizations can cultivate a culture of trust,

inclusivity, and psychological safety, ultimately leading to higher employee engagement, increased innovation, and long-term organizational success.

### ***Barriers to Reporting Unethical Behavior***

The fear of retaliation is a significant barrier that discourages employees from reporting unethical behavior. This reluctance perpetuates a cycle of misconduct and stress. Kiewitz et al. (2021) found that employees often experience anxiety and anger when requested by leaders to engage in unethical behavior, with these negative emotions spilling over into their personal lives. The anticipation of negative consequences for whistleblowing exacerbates psychological distress, as employees feel trapped in an unethical environment with no safe outlet for their concerns.

This emotional burden can manifest in symptoms such as insomnia, decreased job satisfaction, and even physical health issues like headaches and hypertension (Schneider et al., 2019). Furthermore, employees caught in ethical dilemmas may resort to emotional withdrawal, disengagement, or even counterproductive work behaviors as coping mechanisms (Fida et al., 2023). Employees who witness or are asked to participate in unethical acts often experience moral distress, as they struggle to reconcile personal values with professional obligations, leading to heightened psychological discomfort (Treviño et al., 2020).

The anticipation of negative consequences for whistleblowing exacerbates psychological distress, as employees feel trapped in an unethical environment with no safe outlet for their concerns. Research by Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2019) highlighted that employees are less likely to report unethical behavior in organizations lacking robust whistleblower protections or where leadership is perceived as retaliatory. This environment not only harms individual well-being but also weakens organizational integrity, eroding trust among employees and stakeholders

(Kaptein, 2020). By prioritizing ethical safeguards and promoting a culture of accountability, organizations can break the cycle of misconduct, reduce workplace stress, and create an environment where employees feel empowered to uphold integrity without fear of repercussions.

### ***The Role of Organizational Support***

Perceived organizational support plays a critical role in mitigating the adverse effects of unethical leadership. When employees believe that their organization values their well-being and is committed to ethical practices, the negative impact of unethical leadership on their mental health is lessened (Greenbaum et al., 2022). Conversely, a lack of organizational support can intensify feelings of helplessness and stress among employees. Studies have also shown that a poor workplace ethical climate is associated with higher rates of burnout among employees (Franczukowska et al., 2023). This, in turn, helps buffer the harmful effects of unethical leadership by reinforcing employees' trust in the organization, even when individual leaders fail to uphold ethical standards (Shoss, 2023).

When employees perceive that their organization does not prioritize ethical values or employee well-being, they may experience increased job dissatisfaction, anxiety, and disengagement (Kim & Beehr, 2021). Prolonged exposure to such an environment can lead to higher levels of workplace cynicism, decreased morale, and a sense of powerlessness, ultimately fostering a culture where unethical behavior persists unchecked (Treviño & Brown, 2021). Employees in organizations with weak ethical support structures may feel pressured to conform to unethical norms or remain silent in the face of misconduct, further exacerbating workplace toxicity and ethical erosion (Kaptein, 2020).

Studies have also shown that a poor workplace ethical climate is associated with higher rates of burnout among employees (Franczukowska et al., 2023). Burnout, characterized by

emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy, is particularly prevalent in organizations where ethical concerns are ignored or dismissed (Borreliet et al., 2023).

Employees working in unethical environments often experience a mismatch between personal values and organizational expectations, leading to moral distress and long-term psychological strain (Huang et al., 2020). Furthermore, organizations that fail to foster a positive ethical climate often struggle with high turnover rates, decreased productivity, and reputational damage, all of which impact long-term sustainability and success (Mayer et al., 2022).

To address these issues, organizations should implement clear ethical guidelines, provide leadership training in ethical decision-making, and establish confidential reporting mechanisms to encourage ethical behavior. Research has shown that organizations that actively promote ethics and integrity through leadership development programs and employee engagement initiatives experience lower levels of unethical conduct and higher overall job satisfaction (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019). By fostering a supportive and ethically sound workplace, organizations can reduce the detrimental effects of unethical leadership and create a culture that prioritizes integrity, accountability, and employee well-being.

### ***Long-Term Consequences of Unethical Leadership***

Long-term exposure to unethical leadership can lead to chronic burnout, characterized by persistent emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. This condition not only affects employees' personal health but also results in higher turnover rates, decreased productivity, and increased healthcare costs for organizations (Schyns & Schilling, 2021). Therefore, addressing unethical leadership is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for organizational sustainability.

The negative consequences of burnout extend beyond the workplace, affecting employees' personal lives, leading to sleep disturbances, anxiety, and even long-term health issues such as cardiovascular disease and depression (Kim & Beehr, 2021). Employees suffering from burnout often become disengaged from their work, exhibit lower levels of creativity, and are more likely to make errors, further diminishing organizational performance (Huang, Wellman, & Ashford, 2020). Beyond the individual impact, the organizational consequences of unethical leadership-induced burnout are significant. Higher turnover rates are a direct result, as employees seek to escape toxic environments in search of healthier, more ethical workplaces (Mayer et al., 2022).

High turnover, in turn, leads to increased recruitment and training costs, disrupting workflow continuity and reducing institutional knowledge retention (Treviño & Brown, 2021). Additionally, decreased productivity is a common outcome, as employees facing ethical dilemmas and emotional exhaustion struggle to maintain focus, motivation, and efficiency in their roles (Franczukowska et al., 2023). Studies show that workplaces characterized by unethical leadership experience lower levels of employee engagement and organizational commitment, further exacerbating performance declines (Kaptein, 2020).

Moreover, unethical leadership and the resultant stress-related burnout contribute to increased healthcare costs for organizations. Employees experiencing chronic stress are more likely to take frequent sick leave, seek mental health support, and develop stress-related medical conditions, all of which contribute to rising healthcare expenditures (Eisenberger et al., 2020). Organizations with unethical leadership cultures may also face legal liabilities, workplace lawsuits, and reputational damage, further adding to financial burdens and operational risks (Brown & Mitchell, 2019).

From a strategic perspective, addressing unethical leadership is not just a moral imperative but also a business necessity. Organizations that fail to curb unethical leadership behaviors risk long-term instability, declining profitability, and weakened stakeholder trust (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019). Implementing ethical leadership training programs, establishing strong organizational accountability mechanisms, and fostering a culture of transparency can help mitigate the adverse effects of unethical leadership (Greenbaum et al., 2022). Furthermore, aligning leadership development initiatives with ethical decision-making principles can create a sustainable workplace environment where employees feel valued, psychologically safe, and motivated to contribute positively (Shoss, 2023).

### ***Trust Erosion and Organizational Dysfunction***

The loss of trust in leadership is consistently a core theme in research on unethical leadership. Scholars repeatedly note that unethical leaders, by virtue of their behavior (e.g., dishonesty, favoritism), contribute to a culture of mistrust within organizations, which is discussed as a major factor contributing to dysfunction across teams and departments. However, unethical leaders, through behaviors such as dishonesty, favoritism, and manipulation, erode this trust, leading to widespread organizational dysfunction (Schyns & Schilling, 2021). When employees perceive their leaders as lacking integrity, they become disengaged, less willing to invest in their work, and more likely to withhold discretionary effort, ultimately diminishing overall organizational effectiveness (Greenbaum et al., 2022).

Scholars repeatedly note that unethical leaders contribute to a culture of mistrust within organizations, which serves as a major factor in dysfunction across teams and departments. Research suggests that when employees witness unethical behaviors, they experience moral distress and cognitive dissonance, leading to increased workplace anxiety and a decline in job

satisfaction (Treviño & Brown, 2021). Furthermore, organizations with pervasive leadership mistrust often see a breakdown in teamwork, as employees become hesitant to collaborate or share information out of fear of exploitation or retaliation (Mayer et al., 2022). This erosion of trust disrupts communication channels, weakens decision-making processes, and fosters an environment where employees prioritize self-preservation over collective organizational goals (Kaptein, 2020).

The impact of mistrust extends beyond interpersonal relationships to the structural integrity of the organization itself. Studies indicate that in environments where leadership trust is compromised, employees are more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors, such as withholding critical information, resisting change initiatives, or even engaging in unethical behaviors themselves as a form of retaliation (Kim & Beehr, 2021). Additionally, a lack of trust in leadership is strongly correlated with higher turnover rates, as employees seek employment in organizations where ethical leadership and fairness are upheld (Franczukowska et al., 2023). High turnover, in turn, creates instability, increases recruitment and training costs, and damages institutional knowledge retention, further exacerbating organizational dysfunction (Huang et al., 2020).

To rebuild trust and mitigate the detrimental effects of unethical leadership, organizations must prioritize ethical leadership development, enforce transparent decision-making processes, and establish clear accountability mechanisms (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Greenbaum et al., 2022). Research shows that ethical leadership—characterized by honesty, fairness, and principled decision-making—plays a crucial role in restoring trust and improving overall workplace morale (Brown & Treviño, 2021). Organizations that actively cultivate an ethical climate through leadership training, employee empowerment initiatives, and

whistleblower protection policies foster stronger employee commitment, improved teamwork, and enhanced organizational performance (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019). Ultimately, trust in leadership is not merely a soft skill but a critical determinant of organizational stability, innovation, and long-term success. Addressing unethical leadership and rebuilding trust requires a deliberate commitment to integrity, transparency, and ethical accountability at all levels of the organization.

### ***Toxic Work Environments and Psychological Toll on Employees***

Scholarly articles examining workplace toxicity due to unethical leadership continuously discuss how environments of favoritism, exclusion, and unethical practices cause psychological harm to employees (Greenbaum et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). This leads to disengagement, anxiety, and reduced productivity, with long-term consequences on organizational morale. Toxic leadership behaviors, such as manipulation, deceit, and preferential treatment, erode trust, disrupt team cohesion, and contribute to a pervasive sense of insecurity within organizations (Schyns & Schilling, 2021).

When employees perceive leadership decisions as unfair or self-serving, they often experience feelings of resentment, helplessness, and diminished organizational commitment (Greenbaum et al., 2022). Over time, these negative experiences manifest as disengagement, workplace anxiety, and decreased productivity, significantly impacting both individual well-being and overall organizational morale (Franczukowska et al., 2023). One of the most detrimental consequences of unethical leadership is the creation of a psychologically unsafe work environment.

Psychological safety refers to an employee's ability to speak up with ideas, questions, or concerns without fear of negative consequences, and has been increasingly linked to team

effectiveness and employee well-being (Liang et al., 2021). However, in workplaces where unethical leadership prevails, employees are often reluctant to speak up due to the fear of repercussions, leading to suppressed innovation, reduced collaboration, and stagnation in problem-solving efforts (Mayer et al., 2022). Additionally, favoritism—where certain employees receive unjustified advantages—breeds division and resentment, further exacerbating workplace toxicity (Eisenbeiss & van Knippenberg, 2020). This erosion of trust weakens professional relationships and contributes to a fractured work environment where employees focus more on self-preservation than collective success (Kim & Beehr, 2021).

The psychological toll of workplace toxicity is well-documented in organizational behavior research (Greenbaum et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). Employees who operate under unethical leadership often report heightened stress levels, increased absenteeism, and greater susceptibility to burnout (Schyns & Schilling, 2021). Chronic exposure to unethical behaviors, such as exclusion and favoritism, leads to emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction, ultimately prompting higher turnover rates (Huang et al., 2020). Furthermore, prolonged workplace anxiety has been linked to adverse health effects, including sleep disturbances, cardiovascular issues, and weakened immune system responses, further underscoring the severity of toxic work environments (Shoss, 2023).

Addressing workplace toxicity requires a multi-faceted approach centered on ethical leadership, accountability, and organizational transparency (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Greenbaum et al., 2022; Trevino & Brown, 2021). Organizations that implement clear ethical guidelines, leadership training programs, and whistleblower protection policies are better positioned to mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership (Brown & Mitchell, 2019). Research suggests that ethical leaders who demonstrate fairness, consistency, and genuine

concern for employee well-being help foster a culture of inclusion, trust, and high performance (Greenbaum et al., 2022). Additionally, fostering open communication channels and implementing anonymous reporting mechanisms can empower employees to voice concerns without fear of retaliation, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more ethical work environment (Kaptein, 2020).

In conclusion, unethical leadership fosters workplace toxicity that results in psychological harm, disengagement, and decreased productivity (Greenbaum et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). The long-term impact of such environments extends beyond individual employees, affecting overall organizational effectiveness and sustainability (Brown & Mitchell, 2020; Johnson et al., 2023). Companies that proactively address these issues through ethical leadership initiatives, transparent policies, and employee support systems can create a more inclusive and resilient workforce, ultimately improving both employee well-being and organizational success (Franczukowska et al., 2023).

### ***Employee Turnover and Retention Issues***

Employee turnover because of unethical leadership is a recurring theme. Many articles consistently tie unethical leadership practices—such as lack of recognition, exploitation, and job insecurity—to higher turnover rates and the resulting negative impact on the organization's stability and performance (Johnson et al., 2023; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Numerous studies consistently link unethical leadership practices—such as lack of recognition, exploitation, favoritism, and job insecurity—to higher turnover rates, which in turn destabilize organizations and hinder long-term performance (Schyns & Schilling, 2021).

When employees perceive their leaders as unethical, they often experience job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and diminished commitment to their organization,

ultimately prompting them to seek alternative employment opportunities (Greenbaum et al., 2022). High turnover rates not only disrupt team cohesion and institutional knowledge retention but also impose significant financial and operational burdens on organizations (Kim & Beehr, 2021).

One of the primary reasons unethical leadership drives turnovers is its negative impact on employees' psychological well-being. According to social exchange theory (Ahmad et al., 2023) employees expect a reciprocal and fair relationship with their employer, where dedication and effort are met with appropriate recognition and ethical treatment. However, when employees feel exploited or undervalued due to unethical leadership practices, the psychological contract between them and the organization is violated, leading to disengagement and increased intention to quit (Eisenbeiss & van Knippenberg, 2020). Exploitative leadership—where leaders take credit for employees' work, provide minimal rewards, or create an environment of excessive job demands—fosters resentment and frustration, pushing employees toward voluntary exit (Huang et al., 2020).

Another major driver of turnover linked to unethical leadership is job insecurity. Research indicates that employees who perceive instability in their roles—whether due to arbitrary terminations, favoritism in promotions, or inconsistent decision-making—are more likely to seek employment elsewhere (Franczukowska et al., 2023). When leaders engage in unethical behaviors such as misleading employees about job stability or using fear-based tactics to maintain control, employees experience heightened anxiety and stress, leading to lower engagement and increased attrition (Treviño & Brown, 2021). In such environments, employees are less likely to invest in their work or contribute innovatively, as they feel uncertain about their future within the organization (Kaptein, 2020).

The consequences of unethical leadership-induced turnover extend beyond individual employees and significantly impact overall organizational stability. High turnover disrupts workflow efficiency, weakens team dynamics, and increases recruitment and training costs (Schyns & Schilling, 2021). Research suggests that organizations with consistently high turnover rates struggle to maintain institutional knowledge, resulting in decreased productivity and innovation (Kim & Beehr, 2021). Additionally, frequent departures can harm an organization's reputation, making it more challenging to attract top talent and retain skilled professionals in the long run (Brown & Mitchell, 2019).

Addressing employee turnover caused by unethical leadership requires organizations to implement strategic interventions that promote ethical behavior and employee retention (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023; Treviño & Brown, 2021). Leadership development programs that emphasize ethical decision-making, accountability, and fairness can help cultivate a leadership culture that prioritizes employee well-being (Treviño & Brown, 2021). Additionally, organizations should establish transparent promotion and recognition systems to ensure that employees feel valued for their contributions (Kaptein, 2020). Implementing regular employee feedback mechanisms and whistleblower protection policies can also create an environment where unethical leadership behaviors are identified and addressed proactively (Franczukowska et al., 2023).

### ***The Role of Organizational Culture in Enabling or Preventing Unethical Leadership***

Organizational culture plays a central role in perpetuating or mitigating unethical leadership. Articles frequently address the systemic nature of unethical behavior in organizations, noting that a culture that tolerates or enables such practices will continue to foster unethical leaders (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023; Treviño & Brown, 2021).

Ethical cultures, conversely, are seen as protecting against this. Scholarly research consistently highlights the systemic nature of unethical behavior within organizations, emphasizing that an environment that tolerates or enables unethical practices creates conditions where such behaviors become normalized and perpetuated (Treviño et al., 2021).

When unethical leadership is embedded within an organization's culture—whether through implicit acceptance, lack of accountability, or rewards for unethical success—it creates a reinforcing cycle in which future leaders and employees internalize these behaviors as acceptable norms (Kaptein, 2020). A culture that enables unethical leadership is often characterized by weak ethical policies, ambiguous accountability mechanisms, and a lack of transparency in decision-making (Brown & Mitchell, 2019).

In such environments, employees may feel pressured to conform to unethical norms, particularly if they witness colleagues being rewarded for unethical behavior while those who attempt to uphold ethical standards face retaliation or exclusion (Schyns & Schilling, 2021). According to social learning theory (Ahmad et al., 2023), individuals observe and model behaviors that are reinforced within their environment. If unethical practices are consistently rewarded—through promotions, financial incentives, or public recognition—employees and future leaders are more likely to replicate these behaviors, thereby entrenching a culture of misconduct (Treviño & Brown, 2021).

Conversely, organizations that foster ethical cultures serve as a protective mechanism against unethical leadership. Ethical cultures are defined by strong organizational values, clear ethical guidelines, and leadership accountability structures that reinforce integrity (Kaptein, 2020). Leaders in such organizations serve as role models for ethical behavior, demonstrating fairness, honesty, and transparency in decision-making (Eisenbeiss & van Knippenberg, 2020).

Research suggests that ethical organizational cultures enhance employees' trust in leadership, improve workplace morale, and reduce the likelihood of unethical behavior spreading throughout the organization (Brown & Treviño, 2021).

Additionally, organizations that prioritize ethics tend to implement robust reporting mechanisms, whistleblower protections, and ethics training programs that empower employees to recognize and challenge unethical behavior when it arises (Franczukowska et al., 2023). The concept of ethical climate provides a framework for understanding how organizational culture influences ethical behavior (Kuenzi et al., 2020). Ethical climate refers to the shared perceptions of what constitutes ethical conduct within an organization. When organizations establish a strong ethical climate—where ethical considerations are embedded in daily decision-making, accountability is emphasized, and unethical behavior is met with clear consequences—employees are more likely to adhere to ethical standards and resist pressures to engage in misconduct (Kaptein, 2020).

Conversely, a weak ethical climate, characterized by ambiguity in ethical expectations and leniency towards unethical actions, fosters conditions where unethical leadership can thrive (Treviño et al., 2021). In practice, cultivating an ethical organizational culture requires proactive efforts from leadership and structural mechanisms that reinforce integrity. Ethical leadership development programs, transparency in decision-making, and strong enforcement of ethical policies are essential to preventing unethical leadership from taking root (Eisenbeiss & van Knippenberg, 2020). Organizations should also encourage open communication channels that allow employees to express ethical concerns without fear of retaliation. Research shows that companies with well-defined ethical cultures experience lower incidences of workplace

misconduct, higher employee satisfaction, and stronger overall performance (Brown & Mitchell, 2019).

Ultimately, organizational culture serves as either a foundation for ethical integrity or a permissive environment for unethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Caldwell & Hassan, 2019). The systemic nature of organizational ethics underscores the importance of cultivating a workplace culture that actively discourages unethical leadership while reinforcing ethical values at all levels (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Greenbaum et al., 2022). By prioritizing ethical leadership, fostering transparency, and holding leaders accountable, organizations can break the cycle of unethical behavior and create a sustainable, integrity-driven workplace (Kaptein, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021).

### ***Financial and Reputational Consequences of Unethical Leadership***

The financial and reputational damage caused by unethical leadership is frequently mentioned in case studies of corporate scandals (e.g., Enron, Wells Fargo). Scholars often link unethical behavior with long-term financial loss, including decreased stock prices, regulatory penalties, and loss of consumer trust (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). The financial and reputational damage resulting from unethical leadership is not only significant but often enduring, affecting various stakeholders, including investors, employees, and consumers (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2021). As a result, unethical behavior within organizations is frequently linked to long-term financial consequences, such as decreased stock prices, regulatory penalties, and a profound erosion of consumer trust (Aziz, 2025; Mayer et al., 2022).

One of the key repercussions of unethical leadership is a sharp decline in stock prices. When corporate leaders engage in fraudulent or unethical practices, investors lose confidence,

leading to sell-offs that can significantly reduce the company's market value (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2021). For instance, the Enron scandal, which involved corporate leaders engaging in accounting fraud and misrepresentation of financial health, resulted in the company's stock price plummeting from over \$90 per share to less than \$1 by the time of its collapse in 2001 (Healy & Palepu, 2019). Similarly, Wells Fargo's fraudulent accounts scandal, which involved employees creating millions of unauthorized accounts to meet sales targets, led to a sharp drop in stock prices and severe financial losses for investors (Heitger, 2021).

Beyond the immediate financial losses, unethical leadership often leads to significant regulatory penalties. Corporations involved in unethical practices face legal repercussions, including hefty fines, penalties, and legal settlements. In the case of Wells Fargo, the bank was subjected to multiple investigations and faced over \$3 billion in fines and settlements related to its fraudulent activities (McCarthy & Schneider, 2024). Enron's downfall also resulted in a massive regulatory overhaul, including the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, aimed at increasing corporate accountability and preventing future financial fraud (Nwogugu, 2022). These regulatory penalties highlight the severe long-term impact of unethical leadership on a company's financial standing and the broader industry.

Another critical consequence of unethical behavior is the loss of consumer trust (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Trust is a foundational element of customer loyalty, and when corporations engage in unethical practices, they risk alienating their customer base (Johnson et al., 2023; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Enron's fraudulent practices and subsequent collapse led to a loss of consumer and business partner trust, which made it difficult for the company to recover, even before its bankruptcy (Vinocur et al., 2023). Similarly, Wells Fargo's scandal led to a massive loss of consumer confidence, with many customers choosing to take their business elsewhere,

further compounding the financial damage. Once trust is broken, regaining it becomes an arduous task, often requiring years of transparent, ethical behavior to rebuild the brand's reputation (Kim et al., 2022)

The long-term financial losses linked to unethical leadership also have a profound impact on the company's employees (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2021). When organizations engage in unethical behavior, the resultant fallout can lead to layoffs, salary reductions, and diminished morale among employees (Johnson et al., 2023; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Research has shown that unethical behavior from leaders not only decreases job satisfaction but also contributes to a toxic organizational culture that can undermine the overall performance and productivity of the company (Ogunfowora et al., 2022). The impact of unethical leadership on employees, coupled with the financial and reputational damage, underscores the critical importance of ethical decision-making at the highest levels of corporate governance.

### **Trust Erosion and Organizational Dysfunction**

Unethical leadership significantly undermines employee well-being and organizational functionality. Leaders who engage in manipulation, dishonesty, and exploitation foster environments where trust is eroded, leading to increased stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion among employees (Hetrick et al., 2023). This toxic atmosphere not only diminishes individual morale but also precipitates organizational dysfunction, characterized by decreased productivity and engagement (Impact of Toxic Leadership on Employee Performance, 2023). Moreover, fear of retaliation often deters employees from reporting unethical behaviors, perpetuating a cycle of misconduct and distress (Cantrell et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges necessitates a commitment to ethical leadership and the cultivation of a supportive workplace culture (Jia et al., 2022).

***Unethical leadership breaks down trust between employees and management.***

Trust is the foundation of any productive relationship in the workplace (Dirks & Ferrin, 2020). When leaders behave unethically, whether through dishonesty, manipulation, or exploitation, it erodes this foundation (Brown & Treviño, 2019). Employees begin to question the intentions and integrity of management, leading to a breakdown in the relationship between them (Kish-Gephart et al., 2021). This lack of trust creates an environment where employees feel unsupported and unsure about their leaders' motives, which often results in disengagement and resentment (Burke et al., 2022). As trust deteriorates, employees may withdraw, emotionally detaching themselves from their work and the organization (Schaubroeck et al., 2020). The breakdown of trust is often accompanied by heightened job insecurity, as employees worry about the reliability of their leaders and organizational decisions (Caldwell & Dixon, 2021). This atmosphere of uncertainty severely limits the effectiveness of leadership, as employees no longer feel motivated to align their goals with the organization's objectives (Zhu et al., 2019).

***Distrust leads to a lack of collaboration, poor communication, and increased workplace conflicts.***

When employees lose trust in their leaders, collaboration within teams and between different organizational units begins to deteriorate (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023). Without trust, there is little incentive for employees to engage in open, honest communication, which is essential for effective teamwork (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Treviño & Brown, 2021). Employees may withhold information or avoid sharing ideas, fearing that their contributions will be misused or taken credit for by others (Wolor et al, 2023). This lack of transparency and communication inhibits innovation and problem-solving, as critical information is not being exchanged freely. Furthermore, the atmosphere of distrust fosters workplace

conflicts, as employees who are unsure of each other's intentions or leadership decisions may become defensive or antagonistic (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023).

Disagreements become more frequent and more difficult to resolve, creating a hostile environment where collaboration becomes increasingly challenging (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Treviño & Brown, 2021). This dysfunction leads to inefficiencies, reduced productivity, and ultimately a decline in organizational performance (Johnson et al., 2023; Treviño & Brown, 2021).

### **Toxic Work Environments and Psychological Toll on Employees**

Toxic work environments are characterized by negative behaviors, unethical leadership, poor communication, and a general lack of support that create an atmosphere of stress and distrust (Greenbaum et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2021). Such environments can lead to significant psychological harm to employees, affecting their mental health, well-being, and overall job satisfaction (Greenbaum et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). Research has consistently shown that when employees are exposed to toxic work environments, they are more likely to experience heightened stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression (Maslach & Leiter, 2019). These adverse psychological effects not only diminish the individual's ability to perform at their best but also have a ripple effect on organizational productivity and employee retention (Greenbaum et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2021). Toxic behaviors such as bullying, manipulation, and dishonesty from leadership contribute to feelings of fear, helplessness, and low morale, which can diminish engagement and motivation (Schmid et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). Understanding the psychological toll of such environments is essential for organizations seeking to improve employee well-being and enhance overall performance (Greenbaum et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022).

### ***The Breakdown of Trust Due to Unethical Leadership***

Unethical leadership is a significant detriment to organizational success, primarily because it erodes trust between employees and management (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023; Treviño & Brown, 2021). Trust serves as the foundation for any productive work environment, and when leaders engage in unethical practices such as manipulation, dishonesty, and exploitation, it becomes increasingly difficult for employees to feel secure or supported (Kiewitz et al., 2021). The relationship between employees and their leaders is crucial for maintaining an atmosphere of collaboration and productivity. When leaders act unethically, employees begin to question their motives and integrity, leading to a breakdown in the trust that is essential for effective teamwork (Greenbaum et al., 2022). This breakdown of trust can manifest as disengagement and skepticism among employees, who may begin to withdraw emotionally or even seek employment elsewhere (Schyns & Schilling, 2021).

Beyond internal consequences, unethical leadership also tarnishes an organization's external reputation, affecting stakeholder relationships and long-term viability (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Companies led by unethical leaders often face higher turnover rates, as employees actively seek healthier work environments where ethical values are upheld (Kim & Beehr, 2022). Additionally, organizations that tolerate unethical practices risk damaging their brand image, leading to decreased customer trust and investor confidence (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2021). This loss of credibility can have significant financial implications, as consumers and investors are increasingly prioritizing corporate social responsibility and ethical business practices. In extreme cases, unethical leadership can lead to corporate scandals, legal consequences, and regulatory scrutiny, further diminishing organizational success (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). Ultimately, fostering ethical leadership is not

just a moral obligation but a strategic necessity for ensuring organizational sustainability and resilience in an evolving business landscape.

### ***Unethical Leadership Breaks Down Trust Between Employees and Management***

A lack of trust undermines the foundation of an organization by fostering an environment of fear and uncertainty (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Treviño & Brown, 2021). Employees may feel that their interests are not aligned with those of the leadership, resulting in reduced motivation and lower job satisfaction (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023). This disconnection from management is not only harmful to employees' well-being but also impacts their level of commitment to organizational goals (Kiewitz et al., 2021). Without trust, employees struggle to see the bigger picture or align themselves with the broader goals of the organization, reducing overall engagement and productivity (Schyns & Schilling, 2021). Consequently, an organization's culture begins to shift towards one of caution, self-preservation, and hesitation.

As trust deteriorates, employees may also become more resistant to change, further hindering an organization's ability to adapt and grow. Trust is a critical component of organizational agility, as employees who feel secure in their leadership are more willing to embrace innovation and take calculated risks (Burke et al., 2022). However, when leadership is perceived as unethical or untrustworthy, employees often respond by minimizing their contributions, withholding feedback, or resisting new initiatives due to fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 2019). This reluctance to engage in proactive behaviors can stifle creativity, reduce collaboration, and ultimately hinder the organization's ability to remain competitive. Additionally, teams suffering from a lack of trust tend to experience higher levels of

conflict, as employees may become suspicious of one another's motives and compete for self-preservation rather than collective success (Carmeli & Gittel, 2021).

Beyond internal organizational dysfunction, a breakdown of trust can also have serious external ramifications, including reputational damage and decreased stakeholder confidence (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Customers, investors, and business partners are more likely to disengage from organizations that exhibit signs of ethical misconduct or internal instability (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2021). Furthermore, research suggests that companies with low levels of internal trust often experience higher turnover rates, leading to increased recruitment and training costs, as well as a loss of institutional knowledge (Kim & Beehr, 2022). These financial and operational setbacks make it increasingly difficult for an organization to recover, further exacerbating the negative cycle of distrust and disengagement. Ultimately, organizations that fail to prioritize ethical leadership and transparency risk not only internal inefficiencies but also long-term sustainability in an evolving business landscape (Treviño & Nelson, 2021).

### ***Distrust Leads to a Lack of Collaboration, Poor Communication, and Increased Workplace Conflicts***

Distrust between employees and management often leads to a lack of collaboration, poor communication, and increased workplace conflicts (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023). When employees are unsure of their leaders' intentions, they become less inclined to share information or collaborate openly (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Treviño & Brown, 2021). Knowledge sharing is essential for innovation, problem-solving, and decision-making in any workplace, but when trust is lacking, employees are more likely to hoard information or only share selectively (Lee et al., 2020). This behavior is counterproductive as it hinders effective

communication between departments and teams, resulting in missed opportunities for growth and improvement.

In addition to the breakdown in collaboration, distrust also leads to an increase in workplace conflicts. When employees feel uncertain about their leaders or colleagues' behavior, they are more likely to interpret actions and words negatively, which can escalate into misunderstandings and disagreements (Greenbaum et al., 2022). These conflicts can further contribute to a toxic work environment, where cooperation becomes strained, and individuals become more focused on self-preservation rather than team success. As conflicts multiply, the organizational culture becomes increasingly fragmented, and the collective focus shifts from achieving business objectives to addressing interpersonal issues (Lee et al., 2020).

A culture of distrust also has profound psychological and emotional consequences for employees, leading to stress, burnout, and disengagement. Research indicates that employees who work in environments characterized by low trust report higher levels of anxiety and emotional exhaustion due to the constant uncertainty and lack of psychological safety (Mo & Shi, 2022). This heightened stress can negatively impact both individual and team performance, as employees may struggle to remain productive in an environment where they feel unsupported or undervalued (Newman et al., 2021). Furthermore, disengagement can lead to higher absenteeism and turnover rates, as employees seek work environments that offer greater transparency, ethical leadership, and a sense of belonging (Kim & Beehr, 2022). Organizations that fail to address distrust risk not only losing top talent but also damaging their long-term reputation as a desirable workplace.

Beyond internal ramifications, distrust can also harm an organization's external relationships with clients, partners, and investors. Businesses rely on strong stakeholder

relationships to thrive, but when an organization's internal culture is perceived as toxic or dysfunctional, it can erode external confidence in the company's leadership and decision-making processes (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2021). For example, studies have shown that ethical leadership and trustworthiness significantly influence customer loyalty and investor confidence, making trust a key determinant of organizational sustainability (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). If employees openly express dissatisfaction or if workplace conflicts become public knowledge, the organization's brand image may suffer, leading to declining consumer trust and potential financial losses. Therefore, fostering a culture of trust within the organization is not just an internal necessity but a strategic imperative for long-term success.

### **Employee Turnover and Retention Issues**

Employee turnover and retention have become pressing concerns for organizations in today's competitive business landscape. High turnover rates not only disrupt operations but also incur significant costs related to recruitment, training, and lost productivity (Hancock et al., 2021). When employees leave, the knowledge, skills, and experience they take with them can have a lasting impact on organizational efficiency and morale (Collins et al., 2022). At the same time, retaining top talent is increasingly difficult as employees seek workplaces that offer more than just financial rewards but also a positive culture, career growth opportunities, and work-life balance (Kwon & Kim, 2020). Factors such as poor leadership, lack of career development, and a toxic work environment have been linked to higher turnover rates, highlighting the importance of creating a supportive and engaging workplace (Rosen et al., 2021). Addressing employee retention issues requires organizations to understand the underlying causes of turnover and implement strategies that foster job satisfaction, loyalty, and a sense of belonging among their workforces (Hom et al., 2019).

One of the key drivers of employee retention is the presence of ethical and transformational leadership. Leaders who foster trust, transparency, and professional development opportunities tend to cultivate a more engaged and committed workforce (Bass & Riggio, 2020). Research has shown that employees who feel valued and supported by their leaders are more likely to stay with an organization, contributing to long-term stability and reduced turnover costs (Kim & Beehr, 2022). Additionally, organizations that prioritize leadership training and mentorship programs enable managers to develop stronger relationships with their teams, creating an environment where employees feel heard, respected, and motivated to grow within the company (Clarke & Mahadi, 2022). Furthermore, organizations that adopt a participative leadership style, where employees are encouraged to contribute to decision-making, tend to experience lower turnover rates and higher job satisfaction (García-Granero et al., 2020).

Beyond leadership, fostering a positive organizational culture plays a crucial role in retaining employees. A workplace that prioritizes inclusivity, recognition, and work-life balance tends to attract and retain top talent more effectively than one that neglects these aspects (Ramarajan & Reid, 2021). Research indicates that employees who experience a sense of belonging and alignment with company values are significantly more engaged and less likely to seek alternative employment opportunities (Allen et al., 2020). Offering flexible work arrangements, career advancement programs, and mental health support are essential strategies that organizations can implement to enhance job satisfaction and reduce burnout (Parker et al., 2021). Ultimately, businesses that invest in a people-centered culture not only improve employee retention but also enhance overall organizational performance and long-term sustainability (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2021).

### ***The Impact of Unethical Leadership on Employee Turnover***

Employee turnover remains one of the most significant challenges faced by organizations worldwide. It is not only a reflection of an organization's work environment but also a critical factor in the overall performance and sustainability of a company (Hancock et al., 2021). Employees exposed to unethical leadership are more likely to leave their jobs in search of healthier work environments, ultimately contributing to high turnover rates (Schyns & Schilling, 2022). This issue not only affects the employees who depart but also incurs substantial financial costs for the organization in terms of recruitment, training, and lost productivity (Collins, McKinnies, & Lanza, 2022). Studies have shown that turnover can cost organizations up to twice an employee's annual salary due to hiring expenses, onboarding, and the time required for new employees to reach full productivity (Hom et al., 2019). Additionally, high turnover can weaken employee morale, disrupt team cohesion, and lower overall workplace efficiency (Kim & Beehr, 2022).

Unethical leadership contributes to turnover by fostering a toxic work environment where employees feel undervalued, unsupported, or mistreated. Leaders who engage in manipulative, dishonest, or exploitative behaviors create workplace cultures characterized by fear, stress, and dissatisfaction (Greenbaum et al., 2022). Employees who experience workplace mistreatment are more likely to disengage from their roles, leading to decreased job satisfaction and eventual departure (Newman et al., 2021). Moreover, toxic leadership often leads to increased workplace conflict, reduced teamwork, and a lack of psychological safety—factors that further drive employee attrition (Mo & Shi, 2022). Organizations that fail to address these leadership issues risk creating a revolving door of employees, which not only affects productivity but also damages their employer brand and ability to attract top talent (Rosen et al., 2021).

To mitigate high turnover rates, organizations must cultivate ethical leadership practices and a supportive work environment. Research indicates that employees are more likely to remain in organizations where leaders demonstrate integrity, fairness, and a commitment to employee well-being (Bass & Riggio, 2020). Implementing leadership development programs that emphasize ethical decision-making, transparent communication, and employee engagement can significantly reduce turnover (Clarke & Mahadi, 2022). Additionally, organizations should establish clear reporting mechanisms for unethical behavior and foster an inclusive culture where employees feel valued and heard (Parker et al., 2021). Investing in employee development, offering competitive compensation, and promoting work-life balance are also key strategies that can enhance job satisfaction and reduce turnover rates (Allen et al., 2020). By prioritizing ethical leadership and employee well-being, organizations can build a loyal workforce, strengthen their reputation, and improve overall business performance (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2021).

### ***Employees Exposed to Unethical Leadership Are More Likely to Leave Their Jobs***

Unethical leadership has been widely recognized as a catalyst for employee dissatisfaction and turnover. Leaders who engage in dishonest, manipulative, or exploitative behaviors create a toxic environment where employees feel undervalued, unsupported, and even unsafe (Brown & Mitchell, 2019). These unethical practices undermine trust, a critical component of any positive workplace relationship (Kiewitz et al., 2021). Employees who perceive their leaders as unethical are more likely to disengage from their work, experience higher stress levels, and suffer from emotional exhaustion (Schyns & Schilling, 2021). This psychological toll can also result in increased absenteeism, reduced job performance, and long-term career dissatisfaction (Newman et al., 2021). Over time, these negative experiences lead to

a decline in morale, job satisfaction, and ultimately, a desire to leave the organization in search of a healthier work environment (Mo & Shi, 2022).

The decision to leave is often driven by a need to protect one's mental health and well-being. Research has shown that unethical leadership, particularly when it involves bullying, favoritism, or lack of transparency, significantly contributes to employee burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2019). Chronic exposure to unethical leadership fosters workplace stress and anxiety, which can lead to both physical and psychological health problems (Rosen et al., 2021). Employees who feel powerless against unethical management often experience decreased self-efficacy and a lack of motivation to contribute meaningfully to their roles (Kim & Beehr, 2022). When employees feel that their work environment is toxic and that leadership does not have their best interests at heart, they are more likely to seek opportunities elsewhere (Greenbaum et al., 2022). This decision is often accompanied by feelings of disillusionment, frustration, and, in many cases, anger. As a result, organizations that fail to address unethical leadership face a heightened risk of losing talented employees who could contribute significantly to the company's success (Clarke & Mahadi, 2022).

To mitigate the detrimental effects of unethical leadership on employee retention, organizations must actively promote ethical leadership principles and foster a culture of transparency and accountability (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023; Schmid et al., 2021). Implementing leadership training programs that emphasize ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, and effective communication has been shown to reduce toxic workplace behaviors and improve employee morale (Bass & Riggio, 2020). Additionally, organizations must establish clear reporting mechanisms for unethical behavior and ensure that employees feel safe speaking up about concerns without fear of retaliation (Parker et al., 2021). Research

indicates that employees are more likely to stay in organizations where they perceive fairness, inclusion, and genuine opportunities for career advancement (Allen et al., 2020). Companies that prioritize ethical leadership also experience higher levels of employee engagement, productivity, and overall organizational success (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2021). By fostering a work environment based on integrity, respect, and fairness, organizations can enhance employee satisfaction, reduce turnover, and build a strong, committed workforce (García-Granero et al., 2020).

### ***High Turnover Rates Increase Recruitment and Training Costs***

The consequences of high employee turnover extend beyond the loss of valuable talent (Hassan et al., 2023; Schmid et al., 2021). One of the most immediate and substantial costs organizations face is related to recruitment and training (Hassan et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2023). The process of replacing an employee can be time-consuming and expensive, involving costs such as advertising job openings, conducting interviews, and hiring new staff (Hausknecht & Holwerda, 2021). These expenses are compounded by the costs associated with training new employees to get them up to speed and productive in their roles. Moreover, frequent turnover can create instability within teams, as constant changes disrupt workflows and hinder long-term strategic initiatives (Allen et al., 2020). When employees frequently exit an organization, it also affects leadership's ability to cultivate a strong, cohesive workforce, which is crucial for maintaining a positive work environment and sustaining competitive performance (Hancock et al., 2019).

A study by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that the average cost to replace an employee can range from \$4,000 to \$20,000, depending on the position and industry (SHRM, 2020). This includes costs related to onboarding, training, lost

productivity during the transition period, and even the impact on existing employees who may need to take on additional work while new hires are being trained. Additionally, excessive turnover often results in diminished employee engagement, as remaining employees may feel overburdened, demoralized, or concerned about their own job security (Lyons & Bandura, 2020). These financial burdens can significantly drain resources and reduce profitability, especially for smaller organizations with limited budgets (Phillips & Connell, 2021). Furthermore, high turnover disrupts the continuity of work, decreases team morale, and often results in decreased overall productivity. Organizations with higher retention rates tend to outperform those with frequent turnover, as long-term employees contribute to institutional stability and the development of a strong organizational culture (Collins, 2021).

In addition to direct financial costs, high turnover can also lead to a loss of institutional knowledge. Employees who have been with the company for a long time possess a deep understanding of the organization's processes, culture, and customers (Pfeffer, 2021). When these employees leave, their knowledge and expertise are often lost, which can create gaps in operations and hinder the organization's ability to deliver consistent, high-quality products or services. This knowledge drain is particularly detrimental in industries where expertise is critical to maintaining a competitive edge, such as healthcare, technology, and finance (Boushey & Glynn, 2019). Organizations that fail to implement knowledge retention strategies, such as mentorship programs and comprehensive documentation, are at a higher risk of operational inefficiencies and decreased service quality (DeLong, 2020). Additionally, research suggests that workplaces with high turnover struggle to develop meaningful customer relationships, as constant changes in personnel reduce trust and consistency in client interactions (Weller, 2021).

### ***Implications for Organizational Success***

The effects of unethical leadership on turnover rates go beyond just financial and operational concerns; they also impact an organization's long-term success. A high turnover rate can create a vicious cycle where remaining employees feel demotivated and insecure, further contributing to their decision to leave (Rafferty & Restubog, 2021). Additionally, an organization with a reputation for unethical leadership may struggle to attract top talent in the future. Job seekers today are increasingly prioritizing workplace culture and ethical leadership when considering potential employers (Greenbaum et al., 2022). A company that is known for unethical behavior may find itself in a constant battle to fill positions, leading to long-term challenges in maintaining a stable, productive workforce (Kern et al., 2021).

Furthermore, high turnover rates can negatively impact the company's brand reputation. Customers, partners, and stakeholders often notice when organizations are struggling to maintain a stable workforce. In many cases, this can lead to a loss of confidence in the organization, which can further harm its market position (Weber & Williams, 2023). The ability to retain employees is not only a reflection of internal company dynamics but also a crucial factor in maintaining customer loyalty and satisfaction. Employees are often seen as brand ambassadors; therefore, when turnover is high, the consistency of customer experience and the trust they place in the brand can be compromised. Ethical leadership, which fosters an environment of trust and fairness, is crucial in retaining both employees and customers, thus contributing to sustainable business growth and competitive advantage (Liao et al., 2024).

Additionally, the long-term effects of unethical leadership extend beyond immediate turnover concerns to the organization's overall culture. A lack of ethical leadership can lead to a toxic work environment, characterized by mistrust, low morale, and reduced cooperation (Trevino et al., 2022). In such environments, employees are less likely to engage in productive

behaviors and may feel less committed to the organization's goals (Sharma & Singh, 2021). The resulting disengagement can reduce innovation, hinder collaboration, and impair decision-making, all of which contribute to further instability and turnover. Over time, the erosion of a positive organizational culture can lead to long-term structural damage, further compounding the difficulties organizations face in retaining employees and maintaining their market standing (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Hassan et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2023).

### ***The Role of Organizational Culture in Enabling or Preventing Unethical Leadership***

Organizational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the behavior and ethical standards of leadership within a company (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023). Culture is the set of shared values, beliefs, and practices that guide how members of an organization behave and interact with each other (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023). When properly aligned with ethical principles, organizational culture can act as a strong safeguard against unethical leadership, creating an environment that fosters transparency, accountability, and integrity (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Caldwell & Hassan, 2019). However, when the culture is permissive or indifferent to unethical behavior, it can empower leaders to engage in actions that undermine organizational values and harm employees, customers, and stakeholders (Miraglia, 2024).

Recent studies have shown that unethical leadership is not always an individual failure but often a reflection of deeper cultural issues within an organization (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Hassan et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2023). A culture that tolerates or even encourages unethical behavior can create conditions where leadership misconduct goes unchallenged, resulting in widespread organizational dysfunction (Qing et al., 2020). For example, when employees observe that leaders are not held accountable for unethical decisions, they are more likely to mimic these behaviors or feel that similar actions are acceptable (Mayer et al., 2020).

Conversely, organizations that foster ethical cultures through strong leadership commitment to values such as fairness, respect, and transparency are less likely to experience unethical leadership, as these cultural norms promote ethical decision-making at all levels (Schneider et al., 2021).

Thus, understanding the relationship between organizational culture and leadership ethics is critical for organizations that seek to prevent unethical practices and maintain a positive, productive environment (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Caldwell & Hassan, 2019). By aligning organizational culture with ethical standards and holding leaders accountable, companies can mitigate the risk of unethical leadership and create a work environment where both leaders and employees thrive within the boundaries of ethical conduct (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023).

### ***Organizations That Fail to Establish Clear Ethical Guidelines Create Environments Where Unethical Leadership Can Thrive***

Ethical guidelines serve as a framework for decision-making and behavior within an organization, providing clarity on what is acceptable and what is not (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023). When these guidelines are absent or vague, employees, particularly those in leadership positions, are left without clear parameters to guide their actions, which can lead to the erosion of ethical standards over time (Caldwell & Hassan, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023). Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping organizational culture, and without a clear ethical framework, they may engage in unethical behavior that influences the behavior of others (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Caldwell & Hassan, 2019). This lack of direction can also send a message to employees that ethical breaches are either tolerated or even encouraged, which undermines the

very foundation of trust that is critical for effective teamwork and productivity (Bajabaa et al., 2025).

Unethical leadership often begins with small actions that, if left unchecked, can escalate into more severe violations (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Treviño et al., 2021). For instance, a leader may justify bending the truth in a business negotiation or cutting corners to meet a deadline. While these actions might seem insignificant in isolation, they create a dangerous precedent (Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Over time, such practices may become more frequent and more extreme, leading to a culture of ethical indifference, where unethical behavior is no longer seen as a deviation but as part of the organizational norm (Mayer et al., 2020). In this way, the failure to establish clear ethical guidelines can inadvertently lay the groundwork for widespread misconduct, as leaders and employees become desensitized to ethical violations.

### ***A Culture That Tolerates Small Ethical Breaches Eventually Normalizes Widespread Misconduct***

A culture that tolerates small ethical breaches is a breeding ground for larger-scale misconduct (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Treviño et al., 2021). Research indicates that small violations, when left unaddressed, lead to a normalization of unethical behavior, making it more difficult to address and correct the issue as time progresses (Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). This phenomenon is often referred to as "ethical fading," where individuals gradually lose sight of ethical implications in their decisions because they become accustomed to minor infractions (Rees et al., 2019). When small breaches of ethical conduct are overlooked or justified by the organization's leadership, they send a message to employees that ethical lapses are inconsequential and may even be rewarded or tolerated (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Treviño et al., 2021).

The normalization of unethical behavior can have a cascading effect throughout the organization. Employees who witness unethical behavior from leaders may become more likely to engage in similar misconduct, believing that such actions are acceptable or even necessary for success (Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). A report by the Ethics & Compliance Initiative (2021) found that employees who observe unethical conduct from their leaders are more likely to adopt similar behaviors, which can escalate into a broader organizational crisis. The culture becomes one where ethical lines are blurred, and the organization's long-term sustainability and reputation are jeopardized (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Treviño et al., 2021). Over time, a toxic environment of mistrust and disengagement can develop, undermining employee morale and leading to higher turnover rates, diminished productivity, and decreased overall effectiveness (Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021).

Furthermore, when ethical breaches become normalized, they can extend beyond individual actions to influence broader organizational practices (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). For example, an organization that overlooks minor ethical violations, such as manipulating data or engaging in favoritism, may eventually find that these behaviors are ingrained into the organizational systems and policies. This could lead to systemic corruption, where the organization's operations and business strategies are built upon unethical foundations (Schneider et al., 2021). In such a scenario, ethical leadership is not only undermined but actively discouraged, as employees may see unethical conduct as a pathway to success rather than an anomaly that should be corrected.

### ***The Need for Clear Ethical Guidelines and Accountability***

The establishment of clear ethical guidelines is not simply a reactive measure to prevent unethical behavior; it is a proactive strategy to create a culture of integrity, trust, and

accountability (Trevino & Nelson, 2021). Organizations must take deliberate steps to articulate their ethical standards and integrate them into all aspects of their operations (Brown & Treviño, 2018). This includes providing ethics training, establishing clear reporting channels for ethical concerns, and holding leaders accountable for their actions (Kaptein, 2019). It is also crucial for organizations to ensure that ethical guidelines are consistently enforced, regardless of the individual's position or status within the company (Mayer et al., 2022). When employees see that unethical behavior is addressed and corrected, they are more likely to align their actions with the organization's values, fostering an environment of ethical responsibility and transparency (Weaver et al., 2020).

In addition, ethical leadership must be modeled at the highest levels of the organization (Neubert et al., 2019). Leaders who exemplify ethical conduct set a tone for the entire organization and establish a benchmark for what is acceptable behavior (Walumbwa et al., 2020). When leaders uphold high ethical standards, employees are more likely to follow suit, creating a culture where ethical behavior is not only expected but celebrated (Kalshoven et al., 2021). The failure to establish clear ethical guidelines can create an environment where unethical leadership thrives, leading to widespread misconduct that undermines organizational values and trust (Vullings et al., 2020). A culture that tolerates small ethical breaches ultimately normalizes unethical behavior, which can have far-reaching consequences for employee morale, organizational effectiveness, and long-term success (Bedi et al., 2020). To prevent this, organizations must proactively establish and enforce clear ethical standards, model ethical behavior at all levels of leadership, and hold individuals accountable for their actions. By doing so, they can create an environment where ethical leadership flourishes, fostering long-term success, employee satisfaction, and organizational integrity (Eisenbeiss, 2021).

Beyond setting ethical guidelines and modeling ethical leadership, organizations must also implement robust mechanisms for ethical decision-making and conflict resolution (Resick et al., 2021). Ethical dilemmas are inevitable in any business setting, and employees must be equipped with the knowledge and tools to navigate them effectively (Schminke et al., 2020). Organizations can achieve this by integrating ethics into performance evaluations, rewarding ethical behavior, and encouraging open dialogue about ethical challenges (Van Gils et al., 2022). Furthermore, fostering psychological safety, where employees feel comfortable reporting unethical behavior without fear of retaliation, is essential for maintaining ethical integrity (Detert & Edmondson, 2019). By embedding ethical considerations into the organizational framework, companies can ensure that ethical leadership is not just an abstract principle but a practical, everyday reality that contributes to sustainable success and positive workplace culture (Gao & He, 2023).

### **The Normalization of Unethical Leadership and Ethical Blind Spots**

In organizational settings, the normalization of unethical leadership represents a gradual and often unnoticed shift where unethical behavior becomes accepted as the status quo (Palmer, 2019). As unethical actions by leaders accumulate over time—whether they involve dishonesty, manipulation, or exploitation—such behavior can slowly become normalized within the organization (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). This normalization often occurs through a process of ethical fading, where the ethical implications of actions are overlooked or minimized (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2019). Leaders may justify their misconduct through rationalizations that downplay its severity, or they may operate in environments where ethical boundaries are not clearly defined or enforced (Kish-Gephart et al., 2021). Without intervention, ethical erosion can

become deeply embedded in organizational culture, making it increasingly difficult to reestablish ethical norms.

Ethical blind spots—when individuals fail to recognize the unethical aspects of their own behavior—also play a crucial role in this process (Gino, 2020). Leaders may not even be fully aware of the negative impact their actions have on their subordinates or the organizational culture, leading to a persistent cycle of misconduct (Epley & Kumar, 2019). As unethical behavior becomes ingrained in the organizational culture, it not only damages the integrity of leadership but also erodes trust and morale among employees, contributing to a toxic work environment (Mayer et al., 2022). Employees who witness unethical leadership but feel powerless to act may disengage from their work, leading to decreased productivity and increased turnover rates (Treviño et al., 2018). Recognizing and addressing these ethical blind spots is crucial for organizations aiming to prevent the normalization of unethical leadership and foster a culture of integrity (Resick et al., 2021).

In organizations, unethical behavior can often become normalized when it is left unchallenged (Zuber & Kaptein, 2021). What begins as a minor ethical lapse can gradually escalate, transforming into routine misconduct that employees come to accept as “business as usual” (Ashforth & Anand, 2019). This normalization process is subtle, often occurring over time, and involves the collective acceptance of unethical practices by both leaders and employees (Baucus, 2020). Such behavior does not only stem from individual malfeasance but can be embedded within the organizational culture itself, where ethical boundaries become blurred, and misconduct is ignored or even implicitly encouraged (Pinto et al., 2020). In this environment, employees may justify unethical actions to fit in with the prevailing culture, rationalizing behavior that would otherwise be considered unacceptable (Treviño & Weaver, 2021).

Understanding how and why unethical behavior becomes normalized and how employees justify these actions is critical for organizations seeking to foster a culture of integrity and prevent the damaging effects of unethical leadership.

To counteract the normalization of unethical behavior, organizations must take a proactive approach by implementing robust ethical frameworks, fostering a culture of accountability, and encouraging ethical leadership at all levels (Kaptein, 2019). Ethical leadership is a crucial factor in shaping organizational norms and preventing the spread of unethical conduct (Grolleau et al., 2022). Leaders must lead by example, demonstrating transparency, fairness, and ethical decision-making in their daily operations (Mayer et al., 2022). Establishing comprehensive ethics training programs and creating safe, anonymous reporting channels can empower employees to speak out against unethical behavior without fear of retaliation (Weaver et al., 2020). Additionally, organizations should integrate ethical considerations into performance evaluations and reward systems to reinforce ethical behavior as a core component of success (Khan, M. & Khan, S., 2022). By embedding ethics into the structural and cultural fabric of the organization, businesses can effectively combat ethical fading and prevent the normalization of unethical leadership, ultimately promoting long-term organizational sustainability and integrity (Gao & He, 2023).

### ***Unethical Behaviors Become "Business as Usual" When Left Unchallenged***

Unethical behaviors often start as isolated incidents, but when they go unaddressed, they can quickly evolve into common practices that employees view as normal (Palazzo & Basu, 2022). This phenomenon is known as the normalization of deviance, a concept where behavior that initially deviates from ethical norms becomes accepted over time (Wright, 2023). In many organizations, particularly those with weak ethical frameworks or ineffective leadership, small

ethical lapses by leaders or employees are tolerated or ignored, creating a dangerous precedent (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). Over time, these actions become so ingrained in the organizational culture that they are no longer viewed as unethical. Instead, they are perceived as necessary for success, accepted as part of the corporate environment, or even rationalized as "the way things are done" (Palmer, 2019).

For example, leaders who cut corners on quality control, manipulate performance metrics to meet targets, or engage in deceptive marketing practices may be viewed as making practical decisions to achieve organizational goals (Mayer et al., 2020). These actions might be excused as necessary for survival in a competitive market, particularly in organizations that prioritize short-term financial gains over long-term ethical considerations (Ashforth & Anand, 2019). When such behavior is left unchecked, it sets a precedent for others within the organization, signaling that unethical practices are acceptable if they contribute to the bottom line (Kish-Gephart et al., 2021). Research shows that in organizations where ethical violations are overlooked or unchallenged, employees are more likely to adopt similar behaviors, leading to a cumulative effect where unethical behavior becomes pervasive (Pinto et al., 2020).

The lack of accountability for unethical actions further perpetuates the cycle of misconduct (Schneider et al., 2021). In an environment where ethical guidelines are not reinforced or enforced, employees may begin to view unethical actions as inconsequential (Zuber & Kaptein, 2021). Even when unethical behavior is pointed out, if leadership does not respond appropriately, employees may feel disillusioned or powerless to instigate change (Gao & He, 2023). Over time, ethical violations become embedded in the organizational culture, and employees may come to see them as an inevitable or necessary part of their work environment (SpringerLink, 2023). This normalization process, if left unchecked, can erode the integrity of

the organization, resulting in widespread misconduct and a loss of trust among employees, customers, and stakeholders (Jancsics, 2022).

To prevent the normalization of unethical behavior, organizations must establish clear ethical standards and consistently enforce them across all levels of leadership (Kaptein, 2019). Ethical leadership plays a critical role in setting the tone for organizational behavior, as leaders who model integrity, transparency, and accountability create a culture where ethical behavior is the norm (Resick et al., 2021). Implementing ethics training programs, creating anonymous reporting systems, and integrating ethics into performance evaluations can help reinforce the importance of ethical conduct (Weaver et al., 2020). Organizations should also establish independent oversight mechanisms, such as ethics committees or third-party audits, to ensure ethical guidelines are followed (Treviño & Weaver, 2021). When employees see that unethical actions have real consequences, they are more likely to uphold ethical standards and contribute to a culture of integrity. Ultimately, a commitment to ethical leadership and accountability is essential for maintaining trust, employee engagement, and long-term organizational success (Gino, 2020).

### ***Employees Justify Unethical Actions to Fit into Their Workplace Culture***

The normalization of unethical behavior is often accompanied by employee justifications, where individuals rationalize their actions to align with the culture of their workplace (Paciello et al., 2023). Employees who work in organizations with unethical leaders or environments may feel compelled to conform to the prevailing norms, even if those norms conflict with their personal ethical standards (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). This phenomenon, known as moral disengagement, allows employees to justify unethical behavior by separating their actions from their moral beliefs (Ogunfowora et al., 2022). This mechanism helps them avoid cognitive

dissonance, the psychological discomfort that arises when one's actions contradict their moral values (Harmon-Jones et al., 2022). When unethical behavior becomes ingrained in the workplace, employees may feel that adhering to ethical standards is not only unnecessary but potentially detrimental to their career advancement (Gino, 2020).

For example, an employee may rationalize unethical actions such as manipulating data to meet performance targets by convincing themselves that everyone else is doing it and that failing to do so could jeopardize their career progression (Moore, 2020). In organizations with a toxic culture, employees may justify bending the rules by thinking that these actions are necessary to succeed or remain competitive (Lewis, 2021). They may tell themselves that the organization's long-term goals outweigh the short-term ethical violations or that the leaders' behavior legitimizes their own actions (Mishra et al., 2021). In these instances, the line between right and wrong becomes increasingly blurred, as employees prioritize fitting into the workplace culture over maintaining ethical integrity (Schyns & Schilling, 2021).

Such justifications are not limited to individual actions. When unethical behavior is widespread within the organization, employees may also justify the systemic nature of these practices (Newman et al., 2020). They may believe that the organization's success depends on these practices, even if they violate ethical standards (Trevino et al., 2024). The more entrenched these beliefs become, the harder it is for individuals to recognize the ethical implications of their actions (Bertram-Gallant, 2024). This creates a vicious cycle where unethical behavior is perpetuated, leading to a further breakdown in ethical standards and trust within the organization (Schyns & Schilling, 2021).

Furthermore, employees who engage in these justifications are less likely to report unethical behavior, as they may not recognize it as such or feel that they are complicit in the

organizational culture (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2021). Fear of retaliation or the belief that reporting unethical behavior will have no effect may discourage employees from acting (Yang & Xu, 2020). Research indicates that whistleblowing is significantly lower in organizations where unethical behavior has become normalized, as employees often perceive ethical violations as an accepted part of their work environment rather than infractions (Furnham & Lofthouse, 2024). To counteract this, organizations must foster a culture where ethical concerns can be raised without fear of retaliation (Trevino et al., 2024). Implementing anonymous reporting channels, providing strong protections for whistleblowers, and ensuring that ethical misconduct is addressed promptly can help break the cycle of normalized unethical behavior (Weaver et al., 2020). Ultimately, organizations that prioritize ethical leadership and accountability create environments where integrity is valued, misconduct is challenged, and employees feel empowered to uphold ethical standards.

### ***Implications for Organizational Integrity and Culture***

The normalization of unethical behavior and the justifications employees make to fit into the workplace culture have significant implications for organizational integrity (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). When unethical practices become accepted as the norm, the ethical climate of the organization deteriorates, leading to a lack of trust between leadership and employees (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2021). The erosion of trust can have severe consequences, including decreased employee morale, reduced productivity, and higher turnover rates (Kim & Beehr, 2022). Additionally, organizations with a reputation for unethical behavior may struggle to attract top talent and maintain positive relationships with customers and stakeholders (Greenbaum et al., 2022). A toxic workplace culture driven by unethical norms can also result in legal and financial consequences, as regulatory bodies and

external stakeholders scrutinize companies that fail to uphold ethical standards (Brown & Mitchell, 2019).

Organizations must take proactive steps to challenge unethical behavior and prevent it from becoming normalized (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023; Treviño et al., 2021). This includes setting clear ethical guidelines, providing regular ethics training, and ensuring that unethical actions are addressed promptly and transparently (Newman et al., 2021). Leaders play a critical role in setting the tone for ethical behavior by modeling integrity and holding themselves accountable for their actions (Clarke & Mahadi, 2022). Employees are more likely to follow ethical principles when they see leadership demonstrating commitment to ethical decision-making and fairness in enforcing policies (Mo & Shi, 2022). By fostering a culture where ethical conduct is valued and rewarded, organizations can reduce the likelihood that unethical practices will become “business as usual” and maintain a healthy, productive work environment (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023; Treviño et al., 2021).

The normalization of unethical behavior and the justifications that employees make to fit into their workplace culture present significant challenges to organizational integrity and ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). When unethical actions are left unchallenged, they become embedded in the organizational culture, and employees may justify their own unethical conduct to align with the prevailing norms (Parker et al., 2021). To prevent this, organizations must establish clear ethical guidelines, hold employees accountable, and promote a culture of transparency and integrity (Rosen et al., 2021). Ethical leadership has been shown to be a key factor in preventing the spread of unethical workplace behaviors, as it fosters psychological safety and encourages employees to report misconduct without fear of retaliation (Kim & Beehr, 2022). By addressing these issues head-on,

organizations can prevent the normalization of unethical leadership and ensure that their workplaces remain healthy, ethical, and conducive to long-term success.

A strong ethical culture not only mitigates unethical behavior but also enhances overall organizational performance (Brown & Treviño, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023; Treviño et al., 2021). Research suggests that companies that prioritize ethics and integrity experience higher employee engagement, stronger financial performance, and increased stakeholder trust (Phillips & Connell, 2021). Employees in ethical workplaces report greater job satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty, which contribute to lower turnover rates and higher productivity (Hancock et al., 2019). Moreover, organizations with ethical cultures are better equipped to navigate crises, as employees are more likely to align with corporate values and exhibit ethical decision-making under pressure (Weller, 2021). Implementing robust ethics programs, reinforcing ethical expectations through leadership behavior, and continuously assessing the organization's ethical climate can ensure that ethical values remain at the core of workplace culture (Newman et al., 2021).

### **Financial and Reputational Consequences of Unethical Leadership**

Unethical leadership can have profound and far-reaching effects on organizations, particularly when it comes to both financial and reputational damage (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2021). While the immediate consequences of unethical behavior by leaders might be limited to a specific incident, over time, the repercussions can extend to the entire organization, leading to significant financial losses and long-term damage to its reputation (Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Ethical leadership is crucial not only for fostering a positive work environment but also for ensuring the sustainability and growth of the organization in an increasingly competitive global marketplace (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021).

When leaders engage in unethical practices—such as fraud, dishonesty, exploitation, or conflicts of interest—they jeopardize the trust that stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and regulators, place in the organization (Brown & Treviño, 2020). A study by Mayer et al. (2022) suggests that organizations with a history of unethical leadership often experience a decline in shareholder value and increased regulatory scrutiny, which can further erode their competitive standing.

This erosion of trust can lead to decreased employee morale, loss of customer loyalty, and legal ramifications, all of which contribute to substantial financial losses (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Organizations facing ethical scandals often witness high turnover rates, as employees disengage from toxic work environments and seek positions with companies that prioritize integrity (Treviño et al., 2021). Additionally, research has shown that unethical leadership negatively affects consumer trust, reducing brand loyalty and overall customer retention (Harrison & Klein, 2019). A damaged reputation can have lasting consequences, as stakeholders, including investors and suppliers, may distance themselves from companies perceived as ethically compromised. Notably, the financial impact of reputational damage is not limited to decreased sales and investments but also includes increased costs associated with crisis management, legal fees, and public relations efforts to restore credibility (Kaptein, 2020). Therefore, the financial and reputational consequences of unethical leadership underscore the importance of ethical decision-making and the need for leaders to model integrity in all aspects of their business practices (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021).

In addition to financial losses and reputational harm, unethical leadership can lead to increased regulatory scrutiny and legal consequences that further threaten an organization's

stability (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Governments and industry watchdogs are continuously tightening regulations to hold companies accountable for unethical conduct, leading to heightened compliance requirements (Ferrell et al., 2021). Failure to adhere to ethical and legal standards can result in hefty fines, sanctions, and even criminal charges against leadership, significantly damaging an organization's credibility (Eisenbeiss, 2022). Furthermore, ethical lapses in leadership have been found to decrease employee engagement and productivity, as workers become disillusioned with the company's values and mission (Newman et al., 2020). Research also indicates that firms with a strong ethical culture outperform those with ethical deficiencies, as they attract higher-quality employees and foster innovation through a culture of trust (Pfeffer, 2021). Given these findings, organizations must prioritize ethical leadership, implement comprehensive compliance programs, and cultivate a transparent corporate culture to safeguard against the adverse effects of unethical decision-making.

### ***Unethical Decision-Making Leads to Regulatory Penalties and Investor Withdrawal***

One of the most direct financial consequences of unethical leadership is the imposition of regulatory penalties, which can be financially devastating and damage an organization's credibility (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Companies are expected to comply with various regulations, including those related to financial reporting, consumer protection, and environmental standards (Trevino & Nelson, 2021). When leaders engage in unethical practices—such as manipulating financial statements, engaging in insider trading, or failing to meet environmental standards—the consequences can include hefty fines and other regulatory actions (Ferrell et al., 2021). For instance, the infamous Enron scandal, where the company's leadership manipulated financial data to hide debt, led to the company's

bankruptcy and resulted in the loss of billions of dollars (Healy & Palepu, 2019). Similarly, Volkswagen's emissions scandal in 2015, where the company's leadership knowingly allowed vehicles to cheat emissions tests, resulted in regulatory fines exceeding \$30 billion (Graham, 2019). Such cases highlight the significant financial and reputational risks associated with unethical leadership, demonstrating that regulatory compliance should be a top priority for organizations to maintain sustainability (Kaptein, 2020). Moreover, research indicates that companies with a strong ethical culture experience fewer legal issues and are less likely to face regulatory penalties (Donaldson, 2020).

Regulatory bodies, including the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), are empowered to impose penalties that can severely impact an organization's financial standing (Sethi, 2021). These penalties often arise from violations that could have been avoided if ethical decision-making had been prioritized (Pfeffer, 2021). As regulatory frameworks become more stringent, unethical leadership that disregards legal and moral obligations risks severe financial repercussions, including fines, sanctions, and costly litigation (Donaldson, 2020). Beyond the immediate financial strain, these penalties often require a company to allocate significant resources to legal defense, settlements, and compliance efforts, further draining financial capital and damaging operational efficiency (Brown & Treviño, 2020). Studies have shown that companies with unethical leadership are more likely to experience increased regulatory scrutiny, leading to prolonged legal battles that further destabilize their financial health (Harrison & Klein, 2019). Additionally, noncompliance with ethical and regulatory standards negatively affects corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, weakening a company's ability to build trust with stakeholders and maintain legitimacy in its industry (Goh, 2020).

In addition to the direct financial costs, unethical leadership often leads to investor withdrawal, which further exacerbates the financial toll. Investors seek stable, reputable companies that demonstrate responsible decision-making and ethical business practices (Kaptein, 2020). Unethical leadership erodes the trust of investors, leading them to pull their investments, resulting in a drop in stock prices and a decrease in market valuation (Ferrell et al., 2021). For example, the fallout from Wells Fargo's fraudulent account creation scandal led to a significant drop in stock value, as investors were concerned about long-term legal and reputational damage (Goh, 2020). Similarly, when leaders engage in unethical decision-making, they risk undermining the public's perception of their company, which causes investors to seek alternative, more ethically responsible investments (Donaldson, 2020). Research has indicated that organizations with strong ethical leadership attract higher investor confidence and exhibit greater financial stability over time (Pfeffer, 2021). Furthermore, companies with a positive ethical track record tend to outperform competitors financially, as ethical practices contribute to long-term value creation and investor confidence (Trevino & Nelson, 2021).

The loss of investor confidence can lead to an acute liquidity crisis, where companies find it increasingly difficult to secure new funding or even maintain operations with their existing capital (Kaptein, 2020). This is particularly detrimental to organizations that rely on public investment or those in the process of raising capital (Harrison & Klein, 2019). In extreme cases, investor withdrawal can be the final blow to an organization, leading to its eventual collapse (Brown & Treviño, 2020). A company's financial instability, exacerbated by unethical leadership, can also lead to employee layoffs, loss of strategic partnerships, and a diminished ability to innovate (Pfeffer, 2021). Moreover, organizations facing ethical crises often struggle to rebuild their reputation, as public perception plays a critical role in determining long-term

business success (Ferrell et al., 2021). A study by Donaldson (2020) found that companies recovering from ethical scandals often take years to regain public trust, and some never fully recover, as seen in the cases of Enron and Lehman Brothers. To prevent such outcomes, organizations must integrate ethical leadership into their corporate governance framework, ensuring accountability, transparency, and a strong ethical culture at all levels (Trevino & Nelson, 2021).

### ***Public Scandals and Long-Term Reputational Damage***

Beyond the financial and legal consequences, unethical leadership has profound implications for an organization's public reputation (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). The media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, and when unethical behavior is exposed, it can result in a public relations crisis that undermines consumer trust and loyalty (Ferrell et al., 2021). Studies show that consumer confidence in an organization is directly linked to perceptions of ethical behavior, and negative media coverage can significantly erode brand value (Kaptein, 2020). A tarnished reputation can take years, if not decades, to repair and may result in a loss of customer base, partnerships, and future business opportunities (Donaldson, 2020). Public scandals, such as those involving Enron, Volkswagen, and Wells Fargo, illustrate how unethical leadership practices can dominate headlines and permanently damage a company's image (Healy & Palepu, 2019). Research also suggests that companies with a strong ethical foundation recover more successfully from reputational crises than those with a history of repeated violations (Harrison & Klein, 2019).

The reputational damage from unethical leadership is not limited to consumer relationships but extends to the broader business ecosystem. Suppliers, partners, and other stakeholders may sever ties with organizations implicated in unethical behavior, as they do not

want to be associated with companies that engage in misconduct (Trevino & Nelson, 2021). In some cases, this may lead to the loss of valuable business relationships, further hindering the organization's ability to generate revenue and expand its operations (Sethi, 2021). Moreover, scandals often lead to heightened scrutiny from government regulators, consumer groups, and other watchdog organizations, further exacerbating the organization's reputational damage (Brown & Treviño, 2020). Ethical leadership has been found to be a critical factor in maintaining positive stakeholder relationships, as companies that prioritize ethical decision-making tend to foster trust and long-term collaboration with partners (Pfeffer, 2021). Additionally, research indicates that ethical business practices contribute to stronger financial performance, reinforcing the link between corporate integrity and sustainable business success (Ferrell et al., 2021).

For companies trying to regain consumer and public trust, the road to recovery is long and arduous. Rebuilding trust requires not only rectifying past wrongs but also demonstrating a firm commitment to ethical leadership moving forward (Kaptein, 2020). This often entails significant investments in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, ethical training, and transparency initiatives (Donaldson, 2020). However, even with these measures, the impact of a scandal may continue to linger in the public consciousness, influencing consumer perceptions for years (Brown & Treviño, 2020). A study by Harrison and Klein (2019) found that companies that actively engage in ethical initiatives post-scandal are more likely to regain consumer trust than those that only implement superficial reforms. Moreover, organizations that integrate ethical leadership into their corporate culture rather than treating it as a reactive measure experience higher levels of brand resilience and stakeholder confidence (Trevino & Nelson, 2021).

### ***Financial and Organizational Recovery***

While the financial and reputational damage caused by unethical leadership can be severe, recovery is not impossible (Healy & Palepu, 2020; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). However, it requires sustained effort, leadership commitment, and strategic changes within the organization (Brown & Treviño, 2020). One of the first steps in the recovery process is taking accountability for unethical actions and ensuring transparency in communications with both internal and external stakeholders (Kaptein, 2020). Research suggests that organizations that promptly acknowledge wrongdoing and implement corrective measures are more likely to regain public trust and investor confidence (Ferrell et al., 2021). Clear, decisive actions are required to show that the company is committed to rectifying past wrongs and establishing a culture of ethics and compliance (Donaldson, 2020). Transparency in corporate decision-making and the public disclosure of ethical initiatives can significantly mitigate the long-term consequences of unethical leadership (Harrison & Klein, 2019).

Organizations must implement strong corporate governance mechanisms that prioritize ethics, integrity, and transparency (Trevino & Nelson, 2021). This includes promoting ethical decision-making at all levels of the organization, conducting regular audits, and creating channels for reporting unethical behavior without fear of retaliation (Sethi, 2021). Whistleblower protection programs, for instance, have been found to be effective in deterring unethical behavior and fostering a culture of accountability (Pfeffer, 2021). Ethical leadership plays a crucial role in setting the tone for the organization, as employees tend to follow the behavioral cues provided by senior management (Schneider et al., 2021). By committing to ethical leadership and demonstrating genuine efforts to repair the damage, companies can regain trust over time, rebuild their reputation, and ultimately recover financially (Goh, 2020). Studies indicate that

organizations with proactive ethical compliance programs experience fewer regulatory penalties and stronger financial performance over time (Kaptein, 2020).

The financial and reputational consequences of unethical leadership can be severe and long-lasting. Regulatory penalties, investor withdrawal, and public scandals are just a few of the many repercussions that organizations face when their leadership fails to uphold ethical standards (Ferrell et al., 2021). Beyond the immediate costs, these consequences often result in long-term damage to the company's market position, customer loyalty, and ability to attract investment (Donaldson, 2020). Research highlights that reputational recovery following an ethical scandal is a slow process that requires strategic public relations efforts and consistent ethical behavior over time (Healy & Palepu, 2019). Therefore, ethical leadership is not only a matter of legal compliance but also a crucial factor in maintaining organizational stability, financial health, and public trust (Brown & Treviño, 2020). Companies must recognize the importance of cultivating an ethical culture, as the risks of ignoring unethical behavior far outweigh the potential short-term gains (Sethi, 2021). In the modern business environment, integrity is not just a moral imperative; it is a key driver of sustainable success (Harrison & Klein, 2019).

### **Organizational Culture as a Reflection of Leadership Ethics**

A culture of ethical or unethical behavior originates at the leadership level, shaping the norms, values, and decision-making processes that influence every aspect of an organization (Treviño et al., 2021). Leaders serve as primary role models, guiding employees through their actions and establishing the ethical climate within the workplace. When leadership prioritizes integrity, transparency, and accountability, these values become embedded in the organizational culture, fostering an environment where ethical behavior is encouraged and rewarded (Hassan et

al., 2023). Conversely, leaders who engage in unethical behaviors—such as manipulation, dishonesty, or favoritism—set a precedent that normalizes misconduct, leading to widespread ethical erosion (Mayer et al., 2022). Ethical leadership is critical in building trust and guiding employees toward responsible decision-making, as organizations led by ethical leaders often experience higher employee engagement, job satisfaction, and stronger team cohesion (Zhu et al., 2020). In contrast, workplaces dominated by unethical leadership face trust breakdowns, high turnover rates, and a culture of fear, where employees hesitate to report misconduct or challenge unethical decisions (Bedi et al., 2022).

The impact of leadership on organizational culture can be examined through ethical climate theory, which suggests that employees look to their leaders for behavioral cues (Peterson et al., 2023). Ethical leaders reinforce moral norms that guide employee actions, while unethical leaders create environments where employees may feel pressured to compromise their values, leading to moral disengagement (Ashforth & Anand, 2020). Over time, misconduct can become institutionalized, making ethical lapses more difficult to address (Johnson et al., 2023). Furthermore, leadership influences stakeholder relationships and public perception, as organizations with strong ethical governance attract top talent, maintain positive reputations, and foster long-term sustainability (Lin et al., 2021). Conversely, unethical leadership can lead to legal repercussions, reputational damage, and declining stakeholder confidence, as demonstrated by corporate scandals such as Enron and Wells Fargo (Pelletier & Bligh, 2022; SHRM, 2023). Employees in ethical organizations experience a greater sense of purpose and belonging, contributing to higher morale and productivity, whereas those in unethical environments often experience stress and disengagement, exacerbating organizational dysfunction (Huang et al., 2023; Karakitapoğlu-Aygün et al., 2020).

To cultivate a strong ethical culture, organizations must implement policies and systems that reinforce ethical behavior at all levels (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Treviño et al., 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2021). Clear ethical guidelines, leadership development programs, and accountability measures help deter misconduct, while whistleblower protections and transparent reporting mechanisms empower employees to report unethical behavior without fear of retaliation (Bass & Riggio, 2021; Peterson et al., 2023). Ethical leadership training programs have been shown to reduce unethical behavior by equipping leaders with the skills to navigate moral dilemmas and promote integrity within their teams (Mayer et al., 2022). Ultimately, leadership is the driving force behind organizational culture, and whether that culture is ethical or unethical depends on the values and behaviors modeled by those at the top. By fostering a culture of accountability, transparency, and ethical decision-making, organizations create environments where employees feel supported, trust is strengthened, and long-term success is achieved (Zhu et al., 2020). In contrast, unchecked unethical leadership erodes organizational stability, leading to systemic ethical failures with far-reaching consequences for internal and external stakeholders (Treviño et al., 2021).

### **Summary of Literature**

Unethical leadership remains a critical concern in organizational studies, with far-reaching implications for employee well-being, corporate culture, and long-term business sustainability (Banks et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2023; Treviño et al., 2021). Through the framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, previous chapters have analyzed how unethical leadership obstructs employees from fulfilling their psychological and professional needs, ultimately disrupting organizational stability. Leaders who engaged in unethical behaviors—such as manipulation, favoritism, and dishonesty—created environments of fear and

uncertainty, which negatively impacted trust, engagement, and employee motivation (Franco & Antunes, 2022). Employees subjected to such conditions often experienced heightened stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, making it difficult for them to achieve self-actualization. Furthermore, unethical leadership contributed to the normalization of misconduct within organizations, embedding unethical practices into corporate culture and deprioritizing ethical decision-making (Johnson et al., 2023). This systemic failure not only affected individual employees but also threatened the organization's reputation, increased turnover rates, and diminished stakeholder confidence, ultimately undermining long-term success (Pelletier & Bligh, 2022).

The research also highlighted how unethical leadership fostered a toxic work environment in which employees struggled to meet even their most basic safety needs. Job insecurity, workplace hostility, and financial instability discouraged innovation and collaboration, preventing employees from progressing within the organizational hierarchy (Zhang & Xu, 2021). In these environments, employees often felt undervalued and powerless, leading to reduced morale, diminished job satisfaction, and weakened organizational commitment. Ethical climate theory suggested that employees take behavioral cues from their leaders, and when unethical leadership is prevalent, misconduct becomes ingrained in workplace culture (Peterson et al., 2023). Over time, unethical behaviors become normalized, making it increasingly difficult to implement reforms or restore ethical governance (Ashforth & Anand, 2020). The Enron scandal served as a stark example of these consequences, illustrating how unchecked unethical leadership lead to corporate misconduct, financial ruin, and irreversible reputational damage (Hassan et al., 2023). Organizations that fail to address unethical leadership

risk not only internal instability but also external scrutiny, regulatory penalties, and loss of investor trust.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs offered a compelling theoretical foundation for understanding the consequences of unethical leadership at both individual and organizational levels. Employees in unethical workplaces experience compromised safety, unpredictable leadership, and a lack of trust, preventing them from meeting their fundamental needs (Williams & Wiggins, 2023). The absence of recognition and support further diminished self-worth, while an environment devoid of ethical leadership discourages professional growth and innovation. These conditions contribute to widespread disengagement, reinforcing the cycle of unethical leadership and organizational dysfunction (Treviño et al., 2021). To counteract these effects, organizations must implement ethics training, accountability structures, and transformational leadership development to promote transparency and integrity (Treviño et al., 2021). Companies that prioritize ethical leadership and integrity-driven cultures are more likely to achieve long-term stability, employee satisfaction, and sustainable success.

The preceding chapters have laid the foundation for this study, detailing key research gaps and theoretical insights. Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology, including study design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analytical techniques. This qualitative case study explored the relationship between unethical leadership and employee hierarchical needs, ensuring a rigorous and methodologically sound approach to addressing these critical issues.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

This chapter contains the research method and design for the study. The problem addressed in this descriptive qualitative case study was the pervasive issue of unethical leadership within organizations, which leads to toxic work environments. Therefore, it is not known if or to what extent unethical leadership has a negative impact on organizational culture in a large organization in the Philadelphia region. Studies show that unethical leadership practices result in decreased employee morale, higher turnover rates, and compromised trust among employees and stakeholders (Hassan, et al., 2023).

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative case study was to understand the influence of unethical leadership on organizational culture, specifically in the terms of employee morale. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate how unethical leadership behaviors, such as manipulation, dishonesty, and favoritism, influence employees' psychological well-being, workplace satisfaction, and engagement (Hassan et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2020). This research addressed the problem of declining employee morale linked to unethical leadership practices, as highlighted by previous studies that demonstrate the detrimental effects of such behaviors on organizational performance and employee retention (Brown & Mitchell, 2020;)

#### **Research Methodology and Design**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, which was appropriate for exploring complex, subjective experiences. Qualitative research allowed for in-depth analysis of participants' personal narratives, offering insights into how unethical leadership impacts employees' ability to meet their hierarchical needs.

This study followed a descriptive case study design, specifically examining employees in the Philadelphia region. As an instance of unethical leadership. The case study approach was suitable because it provided a real-world example through which the research problem could be explored comprehensively. By investigating the Enron scandal, this study sought to understand how unethical leadership practices hinder employees' ability to progress through Maslow's hierarchy and how these behaviors affect workplace culture.

Other qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology or ethnography, were considered but deemed less appropriate. Phenomenology focuses on lived experiences of individuals but does not necessarily contextualize these experiences within a specific case. Ethnography, while valuable for studying cultural behaviors, requires prolonged immersion in the environment, which was impractical for this study. Similarly, a quantitative approach was not selected because it would not capture the depth of personal narratives required to understand the psychological and emotional effects of unethical leadership.

### **Population and Sample**

This study's population comprised of individuals currently employed by or retired government contractors in the Philadelphia Region, including Virginia, Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., Delaware, and Maryland. This population was selected because government contractors often operate in high-pressure environments where leadership ethics significantly influence organizational culture.

### **Sample and Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select approximately 20 participants, ensuring a diverse range of experiences with unethical leadership. Purposive sampling is a non-random technique that allowed researchers to intentionally select individuals who have firsthand

knowledge or experience relevant to the study's objectives (Hamblin, 2025). This approach was particularly suitable for qualitative research, as it ensured that participants could provide rich, detailed insights into the effects of unethical leadership on their professional and personal lives (Johnson-Cornett, 2023). By selecting individuals who have directly encountered unethical leadership, this study aimed to capture a wide spectrum of perspectives, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how such experiences impact individuals across different organizational contexts. Furthermore, purposive sampling facilitated the inclusion of participants from various industries, hierarchical positions, and demographic backgrounds, thereby enhancing the transferability of the study's findings (Lewis, 2024).

To achieve data saturation, the sample size was continuously assessed during data collection to determine when sufficient information had been gathered. Saturation occurred when no new themes, patterns, or insights emerged from additional interviews, indicating that the data had become comprehensive and redundant (Guest et al., 2020). This concept was crucial in qualitative research, as it ensured the reliability and depth of the findings. By reaching saturation, the study could confidently present an in-depth analysis of participants' experiences without the risk of missing critical perspectives (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). Additionally, the iterative nature of qualitative research allowed for ongoing reflection and adaptation, meaning that if emerging themes require further exploration, additional participants would have been recruited to refine and validate the findings. This methodological rigor strengthened the credibility of the research, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are well-supported by the data (Bouncken et al., 2025).

### **Instrumentation**

This study utilized semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to share detailed narratives while ensuring consistency in questioning. Open-ended questions were designed to

explore how unethical leadership influenced their physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Focus groups served as a secondary method to cross-validate findings from individual interviews. These focus groups provided a platform for participants to discuss shared experiences and identify common patterns.

### **Study Procedures**

Participants were recruited through professional networks, LinkedIn outreach, and Facebook invitations to government contracting organizations in the specified region. Leveraging professional networks allowed for targeted engagement with individuals who have relevant experiences, increasing the likelihood of obtaining rich, meaningful data (Aversa et al., 2021). LinkedIn outreach is particularly effective for identifying professionals with specific backgrounds in government contracting, as it enabled direct communication with potential participants while maintaining a professional and ethical approach to recruitment (King et al., 2019). Facebook invitations were used to invite participants within the specified region, ensuring a broad and diverse sample of individuals who have experienced unethical leadership in various roles and capacities. This multi-pronged recruitment strategy aligned with best practices in qualitative research, ensuring that participants are purposefully selected to provide valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Abdelgawad, 2024).

Confidentiality was a top priority in the research process to protect participants' identities and ensure ethical integrity. To safeguard anonymity, pseudonyms was assigned to all participants, and any identifiable information was removed or altered in transcripts and reports (Hoft, 2021). Secure data storage measures was implemented, including encrypted digital files and password-protected databases, in compliance with ethical research standards and

institutional review board (IRB) guidelines (Vikash, 2022). Participants were fully informed about the confidentiality protocols before data collection, reinforcing trust and encouraging openness during interviews (Rangecroft et al., 2021). By adhering to those ethical practices, the study ensured that participants could share their experiences without fear of repercussions, ultimately enhancing the credibility and validity of the research findings.

Additionally, informed consent was obtained from all participants before they engaged in the study. The informed consent process outlined the research objectives, data collection procedures, potential risks, and participants' rights, including their ability to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences (Tracy, 2020). This process was critical in qualitative research, as it fostered transparency and ensured that participants made an informed decision about their involvement (Corti et al., 2019). By emphasizing voluntary participation and ethical research principles, the study upheld the highest standards of integrity and respects the autonomy of those sharing their lived experiences. Those measures not only complied with ethical guidelines but also contributed to the overall rigor and trustworthiness of the research.

This study followed a structured approach to participant recruitment, ensuring a diverse and relevant sample for exploring the impact of unethical leadership. Participants were recruited through Facebook invitations, LinkedIn outreach, and organizational referrals, targeting professionals who had firsthand experience with unethical leadership in the workplace. Purposeful sampling was employed to identify individuals who could provide meaningful insights, aligning with qualitative research principles that prioritize depth over breadth (Akkas & Meydan, 2024). Additionally, leveraging LinkedIn and professional networks allowed for direct engagement with potential participants while maintaining ethical recruitment practices (King et al., 2019). Organizational referrals further enhanced participant diversity, as they provided

access to individuals with varying levels of exposure to unethical leadership, increasing the study's credibility and generalizability within qualitative boundaries (Bergeron & Gaboury, 2021).

Before participation, individuals were required to review and sign an informed consent form, ensuring ethical compliance and transparency. The consent form outlined key aspects of the study, including its purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights to withdraw at any time without consequences (Flanagan, 2024). Ethical research practices mandate that participants fully understand the potential risks and benefits of their involvement, which fosters trust and encourages candid responses during data collection (Tracy, 2020). The confidentiality clause was particularly emphasized, ensuring that participants' identities remained anonymous using pseudonyms and secure data storage methods (Hwang, 2023). By adhering to these ethical procedures, this study upheld the integrity and reliability of the qualitative research process.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups, both of which are well-suited for capturing rich, detailed narratives about participants' experiences. Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes, allowed for flexibility in questioning while ensuring consistency across participants (Turner, 2021). Focus groups provided additional depth by facilitating discussion among participants, allowing for the emergence of collective themes and shared experiences (Van Ingelgom, 2020). After data collection, all interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo 15 software, a widely recognized tool for qualitative data management and coding (Lester & Paulus, 2021). Thematic analysis was conducted based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, ensuring that emergent themes align with the study's theoretical framework (Karimi & Makvandi, 2022). By systematically coding and categorizing data, this

approach enabled the identification of patterns that illustrate the effects of unethical leadership on employees' hierarchical needs.

### **Data Analysis**

This study employed thematic analysis to systematically identify and interpret recurring themes in participants' responses. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method that allows researchers to uncover patterns in textual data by organizing information into meaningful categories (Karimi & Makvandi, 2022). This method was particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena, such as the impact of unethical leadership, by capturing the depth and nuance of participants' lived experiences (Alhojailan, 2020). To facilitate this process, NVivo 15 software was utilized for data coding and organization. NVivo 15 is a powerful qualitative research tool that enabled efficient data management, ensuring accuracy and consistency in coding while allowing researchers to visualize connections between emerging themes (Lester & Paulus, 2021). By leveraging thematic analysis and NVivo 15 software, this study provided a structured and transparent approach to data interpretation, strengthening the reliability of findings. The researcher recorded and transcribed each interview and focus group verbatim to ensure the accuracy and integrity of participants' responses.

The first stage of analysis involved initial coding, where transcripts from interviews and focus groups was thoroughly reviewed to develop preliminary codes. Coding is a critical step in qualitative research as it helped to break down raw data into manageable units for further analysis (Saldaña, 2021). During this phase, the researcher identified key phrases, patterns, and concepts that aligned with the research objectives. These initial codes were refined and categorized based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, which served as the theoretical framework for this study. For example, responses related to job security and salary consistency

were coded under physiological needs, while data concerning workplace relationships and team cohesion were grouped under belongingness needs. This systematic approach ensured that findings remain grounded in a well-established psychological model, enhancing the study's theoretical rigor (Tay & Diener, 2023).

To further validate the findings, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing data from individual interviews with focus group discussions. Triangulation is a methodological strategy used in qualitative research to enhance credibility by comparing multiple data sources, thereby reducing potential biases (Akkas & Meydan, 2024). By analyzing data from different perspectives, this study provided a more comprehensive understanding of how unethical leadership affects employees at various levels of need fulfillment. Focus groups allowed the researcher to observe group dynamics and collective narratives, offering additional insights that may not emerge in one-on-one interviews (Kidd & Parshall, 2024). This multi-method approach strengthened the validity of the research, ensuring that the identified themes accurately reflect participants' experiences. By integrating thematic analysis, NVivo 15 software, and triangulation techniques, this study delivered a robust and well-substantiated exploration of unethical leadership's impact on employee well-being.

An additional step in the analytical process involved researcher reflexivity to minimize potential biases in data interpretation. Reflexivity is an essential component of qualitative research, requiring researchers to critically examine their assumptions, perspectives, and potential influence on the study (Musgrave, 2025). By maintaining reflexive journals and engaging in peer debriefing, the researcher ensured that the coding and thematic development process remained objective and grounded in participants' experiences rather than preconceived notions (McLeod, 2025). This approach aligned with best practices in qualitative research,

strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The integration of reflexivity, alongside thematic analysis and triangulation, enhanced the methodological rigor of this study, ensured that the results provided an authentic and nuanced understanding of how unethical leadership affects employees' ability to meet their hierarchical needs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

Every research study operates under certain assumptions that influence the interpretation and validity of findings. In this study, a primary assumption was that participants would provide honest and candid responses about their experiences with unethical leadership. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, there was a risk that participants may withhold information or provide socially desirable answers rather than fully disclosing their true experiences (Brian & Ma, 2023). However, measures such as confidentiality agreements, pseudonyms, and secure data storage was implemented to mitigate risks and encouraged openness. Trust-building strategies, including ensuring informed consent and emphasizing voluntary participation, was employed to create a safe environment for participants to share their experiences (Flanagan, 2024). Despite these safeguards, it remained an inherent assumption that participants would engage in this study with sincerity and provided responses that accurately reflect their lived experiences.

Another key assumption was that thematic analysis would effectively capture the effects of unethical leadership on employees. Thematic analysis is a widely recognized qualitative research method that enables researchers to identify patterns and themes in textual data, making it an appropriate choice for analyzing complex human experiences (Karimi & Makvandi, 2022). It is assumed that this approach would allow for a nuanced understanding of how unethical leadership influences employees' ability to meet their hierarchical needs according to Maslow's

(1943) framework. Furthermore, the use of NVivo 15 software for coding and organizing data was expected to enhance the reliability and accuracy of the analysis (Lester & Paulus, 2021). While thematic analysis was a subjective process requiring researcher interpretation, reflexivity and peer debriefing was incorporated to minimize potential biases and ensure the validity of identified themes (Musgrave, 2025).

Lastly, it was assumed that the theoretical framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs would provide a suitable lens for interpreting the effects of unethical leadership. Maslow's model has been widely applied in organizational psychology and leadership studies, offering a structured approach to understanding employee motivation and well-being (Tay & Diener, 2023). It was expected that participants' experiences would align with the hierarchical structure of needs, from physiological security to self-actualization. However, critics argued that human motivation may not always follow a strict hierarchy, as individuals often experience overlapping or fluctuating needs (Ackerman, 2024). Despite this, the assumption remained that Maslow's (1943) framework would serve as a useful guide for categorizing and analyzing the impact of unethical leadership on employees. By acknowledging these assumptions, this study ensured transparency in its methodological approach while recognizing potential limitations that may influence the findings.

### **Limitations**

While this study provided valuable insights into the effects of unethical leadership, it is subject to certain limitations. One primary limitation was the subjectivity inherent in participant responses, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Qualitative research relies on participants' personal narratives and perceptions, which are influenced by individual experiences, emotions, and cognitive biases (Smith & Osborn, 2022). Because each participant's encounter

with unethical leadership may be shaped by their unique workplace context, cultural background, and personal resilience, the findings may not be universally applicable to all organizational settings. Furthermore, qualitative studies do not seek to establish broad generalizations in the same way that quantitative research does but instead aim to develop a deep understanding of specific phenomena (Tracy, 2020). While this study employed rigorous thematic analysis and triangulation techniques to ensure reliability, the inherent subjectivity in qualitative data remained a challenge in terms of broad applicability.

Another limitation of this study was the reliance on self-reported data, which would introduce various forms of bias. Participants may consciously or unconsciously alter their responses due to social desirability bias, where they provided answers that reflect positively on themselves or aligned with perceived expectations (Bian & Ma, 2023). Additionally, recalled bias may influence the accuracy of responses, as participants may struggle to remember specific details or reconstruct past events in a way that aligned with their current perceptions (Zimprich & Lang, 2024). These biases can affect the authenticity of the data and potentially distort the representation of unethical leadership's impact on employees. To mitigate these issues, this study emphasized confidentiality and anonymity, allowing participants to feel more comfortable sharing their true experiences. Moreover, cross-validation through multiple data sources, including focus groups and document analysis, helped counterbalance potential distortions in self-reported data (Bergeron & Gaboury, 2021).

A final limitation is that this study focused solely on employees' perspectives and does not incorporate viewpoints from leaders or organizational decision-makers. While employees' experiences are crucial in understanding the impact of unethical leadership, a more comprehensive analysis might also consider the rationale or justifications that leaders provide for

their actions (Unal et al., 2022). By excluding leadership perspectives, this study may miss insights into systemic or structural factors that contribute to unethical practices. Future research could address this limitation by conducting a multi-perspective study, incorporating leadership viewpoints, or integrating mixed method approaches that include both qualitative narratives and quantitative measures of unethical leadership's effects. Despite these limitations, this study provided valuable contributions to the existing literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how unethical leadership influences employees' ability to meet their hierarchical needs.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations defined the scope and boundaries of this study, helping to clarify what is included and excluded in the research. One key delimitation of this study is its focus on government contractors in the Philadelphia region. This geographical and industry-specific focus allowed for an in-depth exploration of unethical leadership within a defined context, providing a clearer understanding of the unique challenges faced by employees in government contracting organizations. Limiting this study to one region ensures that external factors such as local policies, economic conditions, and organizational cultures remained relatively consistent, reducing potential confounding variables (Bergeron & Gaboury, 2021). However, this focus meant that findings may not be directly transferable to other regions or industries, as the nature and impact of unethical leadership may vary across different organizational settings (Vikash, 2022).

Another important delimitation was that this study examined only cases related to unethical leadership rather than broader leadership styles or ethical leadership behaviors. By concentrating exclusively on unethical leadership, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of its effects on employees' ability to meet their hierarchical needs, as outlined by

Maslow's (1943) framework. This targeted approach ensured that this study remained focused on the core research problem rather than being diluted by discussions of ethical leadership practices, which have been widely studied in other contexts (Ahmed et al., 2024). However, this delimitation also meant that this study does not explore potential mitigating factors or positive leadership behaviors that could counteract the negative effects of unethical leadership. Future research could address this gap by comparing unethical and ethical leadership styles to understand their respective impacts on employee motivation and well-being.

Lastly, this study is limited to qualitative methods, which focused on capturing participants' lived experiences rather than quantifying the prevalence or statistical significance of unethical leadership behaviors. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena and understanding the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Lewis, 2024). However, this methodological choice excluded quantitative approaches that could have provided broader generalizability, such as surveys measuring the prevalence of unethical leadership behaviors across multiple organizations. Despite this limitation, the use of qualitative methods allowed for a deep and nuanced analysis of how unethical leadership affected employees within government contracting organizations. This study's delimitations ensured a focused and rigorous investigation while acknowledging the boundaries that shaped its scope.

### **Ethical Assurances**

Ensuring ethical integrity in research is paramount, particularly when exploring sensitive topics such as unethical leadership. Before data collection began, this study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that all research procedures complied with ethical standards for human subject research. The IRB review process assessed this study's

design, recruitment methods, informed consent procedures, and data protection strategies to safeguard participants from potential risks (Bergeron & Gaboury, 2021). By obtaining IRB approval, this study aligned with ethical research guidelines set forth by organizations such as the *Belmont Report*, which emphasizes respect for persons, beneficence, and justice in human research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, Vikash, 2022). This approval ensured that participants' rights and well-being were prioritized throughout the study.

Confidentiality was another critical ethical consideration in this study. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms was assigned to each participant, and all identifying details was removed from transcripts and reports. Data was securely stored on password-protected devices and encrypted cloud storage systems, accessible only to the researcher to prevent unauthorized access (Akkas & Meydan, 2024). These measures aligned with ethical research practices that emphasized confidentiality and data security, minimizing the risk of harm or retaliation that participants would face for discussing unethical leadership experiences (Flanagan, 2024). Additionally, all participants was informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence, ensuring that participation remained voluntary and ethically sound.

The researcher's role in maintaining neutrality was crucial in minimizing bias and ensuring the validity of findings. To achieve this, structured interview guides was used to standardize the data collection (Lewis, 2024). Reflexivity, or the practice of self-awareness and critical reflection, was also employed to mitigate potential biases that could influence data interpretation (Musgrave, 2025). By adhering to these ethical principles, this study upheld the highest standards of academic integrity, ensuring that findings were credible, reliable, and

ethically obtained. These ethical assurances reinforced the study's commitment to protecting participants while producing meaningful insights into the effects of unethical leadership.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the methodology used to investigate unethical leadership through a qualitative case study approach. It detailed the research design, which aligned with the study's objective of exploring the lived experiences of individuals affected by unethical leadership within government contracting organizations. By employing a qualitative methodology, this study aimed to capture the depth and complexity of participants' narratives, offering insights into how unethical leadership impacted their ability to meet hierarchical needs as outlined in Maslow's framework (Bergeron & Gaboury, 2021). The rationale for using a case study approach was discussed, emphasizing its suitability for examining real-world phenomena in their natural contexts (Vikash, 2022).

The chapter outlined key methodological components, including participant selection, data collection, and ethical assurances. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify participants with direct experiences of unethical leadership, ensuring that the sample provided rich and meaningful data. Data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups, were chosen to facilitate in-depth discussions and thematic exploration (Akkas, & Meydan, 2024). Additionally, ethical considerations such as IRB approval, confidentiality measures, and researcher neutrality were addressed to ensure the study adhered to rigorous ethical standards. The use of NVivo 15 software for data transcription and thematic coding further strengthened the study's methodological rigor, enabling systematic analysis and theme identification (Cummins, 2024).

The next chapter presents the study's findings based on thematic analysis. Through coding and categorization, key themes related to the impact of unethical leadership on employees was explored, offering a structured interpretation of the data. By applying Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs as a theoretical lens, the analysis provided insights into how unethical leadership affected employees at different levels of psychological and professional fulfillment. These findings contributed to the broader understanding of leadership ethics and organizational behavior, offering implications for policy and practice in government contracting environments.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine how employees perceived and experienced the influence of unethical leadership on organizational culture, with a focus on its impact on morale and well-being. This study captured the perceptions and experiences of employees in federal organizations regarding the influence of unethical leadership on organizational culture. The findings highlighted how unethical practices disrupted employees' sense of stability, weakened trust, and negatively shaped workplace interactions. Participants described how their morale, well-being, and opportunities for growth were constrained under such conditions. The analysis, guided by Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, provided insight into how unethical leadership impeded the fulfillment of fundamental human needs in professional settings. The problem addressed in this qualitative, descriptive case study was that unethical leadership practices created toxic work environments, which undermined employees' ability to meet fundamental psychological and professional needs—ultimately impairing organizational functioning. This issue was especially evident in federal organizations, where hierarchical structures and organizational cultures often magnify the effects of leadership behaviors. Toxic environments emerged when unethical practices such as favoritism, retaliation, and lack of accountability eroded trust and created instability in the workplace. Employees in such contexts often experienced heightened stress, disengagement, and reduced morale, which prevented them from fully contributing to organizational goals.

This chapter begins with an explanation of the procedures used to collect and analyzed the data. The researcher outlined the procedures undertaken to establish the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study by employing strategies such as triangulation of data sources, member checking to validate participants' accounts, and providing

thick, rich descriptions to allow for transferability of the findings. The researcher first presented the results of the data, providing a comprehensive account of the information collected. The data were then analyzed in relation to each research question that had been outlined in Chapter 1, and the analysis was supported by participants' responses from the interviews to ensure that their voices were authentically represented. Finally, the findings were evaluated within the context of the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapters 1 and 2, allowing for a deeper understanding of how the results aligned with and this study's guiding concepts.

This study was based on a purposive sample of 20 participants, selected to ensure representation across professional roles and experiences within the contracting organizations studied. Data collection proceeded until thematic saturation was reached, as no new codes or categories emerged in the final interviews or focus group. To ensure methodological rigor, the researcher personally conducted the coding process using NVivo 15, employing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach to identify and refine patterns in the data. Although a second coder was not utilized, rigor was reinforced through multiple strategies: member checking was conducted as all participants reviewed their transcripts for accuracy; triangulation was achieved by integrating interview, focus group, and document analysis data; and reflexivity was maintained to acknowledge and mitigate researcher bias. This process ensured that the themes of behavior, organizational culture, and trust were systematically derived from the data and that findings were credible, dependable, and confirmable.

The study utilized a purposeful sampling approach to identify participants who possessed direct experience with unethical leadership within government-affiliated or federally contracted organizations in the Philadelphia region. Purposeful sampling was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to select individuals who could provide rich, detailed, and relevant insights related

to the central research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were chosen based on their professional experience, ability to articulate the effects of unethical leadership on their work environment, and their willingness to discuss how such leadership influenced their ability to meet psychological and professional needs as outlined by Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs.

Recruitment was conducted through professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook. The researcher posted a recruitment invitation that described the purpose of the study, participant eligibility criteria, and confidentiality protections. Potential participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence, consistent with ethical research standards for qualitative inquiry (Yin, 2018). Individuals who expressed interest were contacted directly through private messaging and provided with an electronic informed consent form. To protect participant anonymity, all identifying information was removed, and participants were assigned unique identifiers such as P1 through P15 for individual interviews and FGP1 through FGP5 for focus group participants.

The final sample included 15 individual participants and 5 focus group participants, resulting in a total of 20 individuals who met all inclusion criteria. Participants represented a diverse range of tenure, from less than 1 year to more than 20 years of experience within their respective organizations. This diversity strengthened the data by offering multiple perspectives on how unethical leadership manifested across various organizational levels, departments, and roles. The variation in participant experience provided a broad view of how unethical practices influenced employee morale, turnover intentions, and trust (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data saturation was achieved when no new information, perspectives, or themes emerged from the interviews or focus group discussions. After the 13th interview, the data began to show repetition in participants' descriptions of unethical leadership behaviors and their effects on morale and trust. Two additional interviews and one focus group session were conducted to confirm that no new insights or patterns emerged. The researcher determined that data saturation was reached after the 15th interview and fifth focus group, as the subsequent narratives reinforced previously identified patterns without introducing new categories or codes. Achieving saturation ensured that the findings accurately represented the experiences of participants and that the themes identified were robust and comprehensive (Guest et al., 2006; Yin, 2018).

The use of multiple data sources, including both individual interviews and a focus group, enhanced the credibility of the study by allowing for triangulation of perspectives. Participants' responses across both formats were consistent, confirming the reliability of the thematic patterns that emerged during analysis. Each transcript was carefully reviewed and coded, and participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts to verify accuracy and clarify statements. This process not only supported saturation but also strengthened the dependability and confirmability of the data, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in participants' authentic experiences rather than researcher assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

The trustworthiness of this qualitative descriptive case study was established by addressing four interrelated criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these elements was carefully considered to ensure that the findings accurately and fairly represented the lived experiences of participants in relation to the study's three research questions. The research questions sought to explore how unethical leadership influenced

employee morale, how it impacted turnover rates, and how it affected trust among employees and stakeholders. These questions guided the selection of methods, data collection, and analysis strategies, and they also served as the framework for maintaining the rigor and quality of the research process.

### ***Credibility***

Credibility referred to the extent to which the findings were believable and reflected the actual experiences of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Forero et al., 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was addressed by implementing strategies that maximized the accuracy and authenticity of the data. Two primary techniques used to strengthen credibility were triangulation and member checks.

Triangulation was accomplished by collecting data from multiple sources and comparing the results to ensure consistency (Denzin, 1978; Forero et al., 2021; Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews, both individual and a focus group served as a primary and secondary data source, offering participants the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words. For example, individual accounts describing low morale caused by favoritism or manipulation were compared to the focus group that reflected patterns of complaints or procedural inconsistencies. The convergence of these data sources confirmed that similar themes emerged across different forms of evidence, thereby reducing the influence of bias from any single perspective. Such methodological triangulation aligns with current standards for rigor in qualitative research, which emphasize the use of varied data sources to validate findings and strengthen confidence in their accuracy (Forero et al., 2021; Korstjens & Moser, 2021).

Member checking further enhanced credibility by engaging participants in validating the researcher's interpretations. After interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and

initial summaries prepared, these summaries were returned to participants for review. This process allowed participants the opportunity to confirm that their views on morale, turnover, and trust had been captured faithfully, and it provided them the opportunity to clarify, expand, or correct any misinterpretations. Member checking ensured that the voices of participants remained central to the study, reinforcing the alignment between the reported findings and the realities experienced by those involved. This approach is widely recognized in recent methodological literature as a cornerstone of credibility, fostering collaborative validation of the data and reducing the likelihood of misrepresentation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Forero et al., 2021).

### ***Transferability***

Transferability referred to the degree to which the study's findings could be applied or adapted to other contexts. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks statistical generalization, qualitative inquiry emphasizes providing sufficient contextual detail so that readers can determine the applicability of the results to their own situations. Recent scholarship has highlighted that transferability is best achieved through the use of thick, rich descriptions that situate the study within its cultural, organizational, and experiential contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Forero et al., 2021; Korstjens & Moser, 2021). By embedding findings within the lived realities of participants, researchers equip readers with the information necessary to judge the relevance of results to their own organizational environments.

To facilitate transferability, this study provided thick descriptions of the participants' experiences, their organizational contexts, and the events they experienced. Each research question was addressed with specific details that could be meaningful for others in similar situations. For the first research question, regarding morale, the study included extensive

participant accounts illustrating how unethical leadership behaviors interfered with feelings of belonging, safety, and self-worth. For the second research question, on turnover, participants described their experiences of job insecurity, perceived injustice, and the eventual decision to leave or consider leaving their organizations. For the third research question, on trust, the narratives explored both the erosion of confidence in leaders and the broader collapse of trust within the organization. Providing these nuanced accounts allowed readers to evaluate similarities between the study setting and their own organizational realities, an approach that aligns with best practices for enhancing transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2021).

These descriptions were embedded in the context of a real-world example, the Enron scandal, and in the specific environment of government contracting organizations in the Philadelphia region and surrounding states. By presenting the findings within these settings, along with direct quotations and contextual details, this study provided a clear framework that readers in other organizations could use to judge the relevance of the conclusions. Contemporary methodological literature supports this approach, affirming that rich description, supported by context-specific illustrations, strengthens transferability by enabling broader audiences to recognize shared patterns and insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Forero et al., 2021).

### ***Dependability***

Dependability referred to the stability and consistency of the research process throughout this study's duration. It ensured that the findings were not the result of random variations or unrecorded changes in procedure, but rather a reflection of a systematically implemented design. In qualitative research, dependability emphasizes transparency in documenting methodological decisions so that other researchers can understand, and potentially replicate, the process under similar conditions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Forero et al., 2021; Korstjens & Moser, 2021).

This research study was to obtain 20 participants that were current or former employees of a federal organization that worked in the Philadelphia region which consist of the following states: West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Philadelphia, Delaware, Maryland, and Washington D.C., and must have been 18 years old. The researcher utilized personal social media pages such as Facebook and LinkedIn to recruit participants for the study. The researcher received approval from Northcentral University's IRB before conducting the study.

Once approval was granted on June 26, 2025, the researcher posted the approved flyer to their personal social media platforms. There were a few participants that answered the flyer but was not federal employees. The researcher received enough participants to schedule individual Zoom meetings to answer the open-ended questions. Every participant that answered the flyer had given consent to participate in this voluntary research and understood that they could exit the research at any time. Each interview was recorded in the Zoom meeting and Otter.ai transcribed each interview.

The researcher also received enough participants to schedule a focus group using a Zoom meeting to answer the open-ended questions. The focus groups was also recorded in the Zoom meeting and Otter.ai transcribed that interview. The researcher then emailed the transcripts to each participant to ensure that their voices and interpretations were recorded accurately. Each interview lasted between 19–32 minutes and the focus group lasted about 35 minutes. No personal identifiable information was included in any transcript such as participant names, names of co-workers, or their organization. Every participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability ensured that this study's findings were shaped by the data provided by participants rather than by the researcher's personal beliefs, preferences, or biases. It required that conclusions be directly traceable to the evidence collected, thereby demonstrating neutrality in the analytic process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish confirmability, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflection throughout the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). These reflections included consideration of personal assumptions, observations about the interview process, and thoughts on how prior knowledge might have influenced interpretation. By consistently documenting and reviewing these reflections, the researcher was able to remain aware of potential biases and take deliberate steps to minimize their influence (Forero et al., 2021). Recent methodological scholarship emphasizes reflexivity and transparent documentation as central practices for ensuring confirmability and promoting rigor in qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Forero et al., 2021; Korstjens & Moser, 2021).

The analytic process was also designed to ensure that each finding could be linked directly to specific evidence. All transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 15 to develop the codes and themes. For example, themes about declining morale or trust were supported by participants' direct quotes. The audit served a dual purpose here, providing transparency in how the raw data progressed to final conclusions and allowing an independent reviewer to verify that interpretations were supported by the evidence. This layered use of evidence created a clear chain of reasoning that linked raw data to final interpretations. Such practices align with contemporary qualitative standards, which emphasize the importance of maintaining a visible audit trail and ensuring that interpretations are firmly grounded in verifiable data (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Forero et al., 2021).

Through these combined strategies, this study achieved a high degree of trustworthiness by demonstrating that findings were both authentic and defensible. Credibility was established by multiple verification methods, transferability was facilitated through rich contextual descriptions, dependability was maintained through transparent and consistent documentation, and confirmability was ensured by grounding all interpretations in verifiable data. Together, these practices provided confidence that the findings accurately represented the experiences of participants and offered valuable insights into how unethical leadership influenced morale, turnover, and trust within organizations. By adhering to these methodological standards, the study aligns with current expectations for rigor in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

## **Results**

This study examined how unethical leadership influenced employees' ability to fulfill their hierarchical needs as outlined in Maslow's framework. Through interviews, a focus group, and document analysis, participants described experiences that revealed systemic patterns of manipulation, favoritism, and dishonesty that permeated their work environments. These accounts highlighted not only the personal consequences of unethical leadership but also the broader organizational disruptions it created. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis—behavior, organizational culture, and trust—that collectively illustrated how unethical leadership obstructed the progression of employees' needs across Maslow's hierarchy.

Safety needs were threatened when 15 of the 20 participants (75%) reported fear of retaliation, job insecurity, and unpredictable decision-making. The need for love and belonging was undermined by exclusion, favoritism, and a lack of genuine support in the workplace, as expressed by 12 participants (60%). Esteem needs were frustrated when employees described

when 16 participants (80%) diminished confidence, a lack of recognition, and feelings of being undervalued. At the highest level, opportunities for self-actualization were restricted, with 13 participants (65%) stating that toxic environments stifled creativity, innovation, and personal growth. Behavior captured how individuals navigated these conditions, often adopting compliance or withdrawal strategies to protect themselves.

Organizational culture reflected how inequitable norms and toxic practices became embedded and normalized within the workplace. Trust emerged as the most fragile theme, as participants consistently reported that dishonesty and broken promises eroded their confidence in leaders and colleagues (Hassan et al., 2023; Palanski et al., 2021). Together, these themes provided a comprehensive picture of how unethical leadership disrupted employees' professional and psychological needs, destabilizing both individual well-being and the organization's overall effectiveness (Banks et al., 2021; Treviño et al., 2021). Overall, 17 of 20 participants (85%) noted diminished morale under unethical leadership. Only three participants (15%) indicated they could maintain temporary resilience or coping strategies, but even these individuals reported ongoing strain and emotional exhaustion. Behavior captured how individuals navigated these conditions, often adopting compliance or withdrawal strategies to protect themselves.

### ***Demographic Overview***

The participant group consisted of current and former employees from a federal organization with firsthand experience of the organization's leadership culture prior to its collapse. Demographic data collected included participants' current or previous employment and their tenure. The sample reflected diversity in professional backgrounds, ranging from administrative positions to management roles, and represented varied lengths of service, which

enriched the range of perspectives on leadership practices and workplace dynamics. Below is the table to demonstrate the tenure of each participant.

**Table 1**

*Demographics*

Participant	Tenure
P1	22 years
P2	15 years
P3	8 years
P4	7 years
P5	3 months
P6	20 years
P7	6 years
P8	7 years
P9	1 year
P10	8 years
P11	1 year
P12	6 years
P13	9 years
P14	4 years
P15	8 years
FGP1	4 years
FGP2	2 years
FGP3	1 year
FGP4	21 years
FGP5	1 year

*Note.* P=Participant; FGP=Focus Group Participant

***Theme 1: Behavior***

Behavior captured the ways employees adapted to unethical environments and how leadership conduct influenced daily workplace interactions. Participants consistently described altering their actions to avoid punishment or retaliation, often choosing silence or withdrawal as survival strategies. As Participant 1 explained, “After a while, I just kept my head down because standing out made you a target.” Participant FGP4 stated, “We all learned quickly not to question leadership—if you spoke up, you were punished.” Participant 8 recalled, “We have to have tough

skin because of the other adults here, the staff. Students bring their own challenges, but we expect our staff to be models of the expectations we want to see out of our students. And we don't always get that." Lastly Participant 11 stated "Even though they were exhibiting bad behavior, I didn't want to emulate that, because two wrongs don't make a right. So for me, I just pushed that to the side and did my job the best that I could." These behaviors were shaped not by personal preference but by systemic pressures that redefined acceptable workplace conduct.

These findings revealed how behavior connected to multiple levels of Maslow's hierarchy. Safety needs were prioritized as employees sought to maintain job security and avoid conflict. Esteem needs were frustrated when employees felt their contributions were unrecognized or undervalued, leading to withdrawal and disengagement. In the absence of an ethical climate, behavior became defensive, reactive, and constrained. Instead of supporting creativity or collaboration, employee actions reflected an environment focused on self-preservation, limiting the potential for personal and organizational growth.

In the absence of an ethical climate, behavior became defensive, reactive, and constrained. Instead of supporting creativity, innovation, or collaboration, employees' actions reflected an environment focused on self-preservation and damage control. The prioritization of survival over contribution hindered opportunities for growth and development, both individually and organizationally. Fear-based environments stifled risk-taking and openness, ultimately creating cultures where compliance was rewarded while dissent or creativity was punished. This erosion of initiative and collaboration highlighted the broader organizational cost of unethical leadership, where human potential was subordinated to defensive strategies, curtailing innovation and long-term effectiveness. Such findings underscore how behavior functions not only as a

reflection of leadership practices but also as a barometer of organizational health, with unethical leadership producing climates of disengagement, mistrust, and suppressed potential.

### ***Theme 2: Organizational Culture***

Organizational culture emerged as the context within which unethical leadership practices were normalized and sustained. Participants described how favoritism, secrecy, and exclusion were embedded into the cultural fabric of the workplace. Participant 14 noted, “It was understood that certain people always got promotions, no matter their performance.” Participant 2 recalled, “The whole place ran on fear—decisions were made behind closed doors, and no one trusted the process.” Participant 12 stated, “The unethical behavior has a bad influence on the entire center... when the leader is unethical and they don’t show empathy, and they don’t try to build culture and teamwork, that filters down to everybody below them. So even if we try our best to do it, if we don’t have backup or reinforcement, and it’s not a culture for the entire organization, then it’s going to cause dysfunction.” Lastly, FGP1 from the focus group recalled, “I think the experiences could be under trauma bonding... you didn’t really know how leadership would interact with you, or there would be so much instability that the only points of support would be in your colleagues. It just really demonstrates the ripple effect of how a whole culture can be torn down by someone who doesn’t lead with integrity.” These narratives demonstrated that culture extended beyond isolated incidents of unethical leadership to represent systemic conditions that dictated workplace norms.

Maslow’s framework provided a clear lens for understanding the effects of organizational culture. Needs for belonging were undermined as employees felt excluded, unsupported, and disconnected from their colleagues. Esteem was diminished as accomplishments were overlooked in favor of favoritism, leaving employees demoralized and undervalued.

Opportunities for self-actualization were also restricted because innovation and professional growth require cultural support for openness and fairness. Instead, participants described environments that stifled advancement and perpetuated inequity. Organizational culture, therefore, was not only shaped by unethical leadership but also served as a mechanism that reinforced unethical practices and perpetuated disengagement.

Beyond individual needs, organizational culture functioned as a mechanism that perpetuated systemic dysfunction. The entrenchment of favoritism and secrecy not only reinforced unethical leadership but also created barriers to organizational learning and adaptation. Employees learned that challenging leadership or advocating for fairness carried risks, discouraging accountability and innovation. Over time, this produced a self-reinforcing cycle: unethical practices became the norm, employees disengaged, and leadership behaviors remained unchecked.

Such cultures fostered widespread disillusionment, in which employees no longer believed that fairness, recognition, or transparency were attainable. This systemic erosion of organizational values weakened trust, diminished morale, and ultimately undermined long-term organizational effectiveness. Thus, organizational culture was not only shaped by unethical leadership but also actively sustained it, ensuring that patterns of inequity and disengagement were reproduced across employees and generations of leadership.

### ***Theme 3: Trust***

Trust surfaced as the most critical yet fragile theme. Participants emphasized that once trust was broken, it became nearly impossible to restore. They recounted experiences where dishonesty, manipulation, and inconsistent communication from leaders created skepticism and disengagement. Participant 1 explained, “I stopped believing anything my manager said—they

would tell us one thing and do the opposite.” Participant 8 added, “We didn’t share ideas anymore because we assumed they would be stolen or used against us.” Participant 11 added, “It’s kind of hard to trust somebody when you pretty much, it’s like you’re losing trust in the whole program... it makes me feel like I can’t trust you enough with what the program really means, and you’re just doing it for your own gratification.” Lastly, participant 7 recalled, “Building relationships, for me, has never been an issue, but I surely did not trust leadership itself. Moving forward, coworkers I never had issues with unless they became management where then I re-evaluated the circumstance and moved accordingly.” These experiences reflected the collapse of trust both vertically, between employees and leaders, and horizontally, among colleagues.

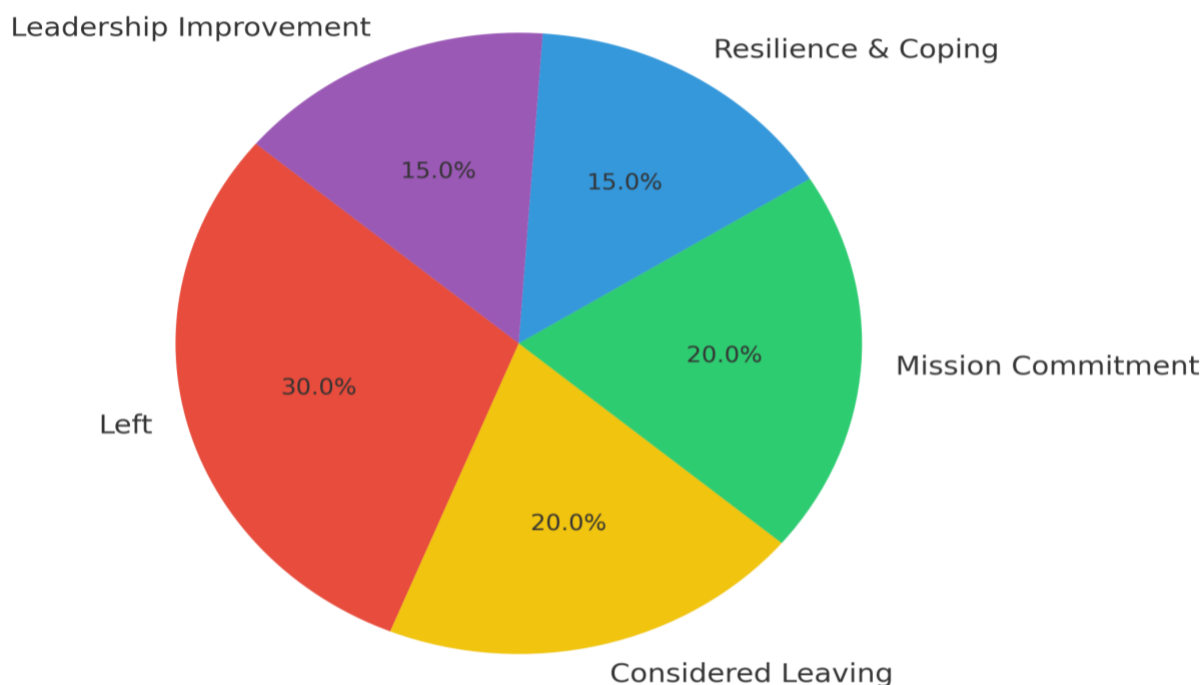
The breakdown of trust affected nearly every level of Maslow’s hierarchy. Safety needs were compromised because employees could not rely on transparent decision-making, creating insecurity about their roles. Belonging was eroded as distrust fragmented teams and weakened peer relationships. Esteem suffered as recognition and fairness gave way to suspicion and manipulation. At the highest level, opportunities for self-actualization disappeared, since creativity and innovation require psychological safety and confidence in organizational integrity. Without trust, employees disengaged, withheld contributions, and prioritized self-protection, further destabilizing organizational performance.

Beyond individual psychological needs, the erosion of trust generated systemic consequences that destabilized organizational culture. Employees reported disengagement from problem-solving, fear of voicing dissent, and a reluctance to contribute innovative ideas, creating an environment where unethical practices remained unchallenged. Leaders who relied on secrecy and dishonesty created a cycle of suspicion, where employees expected manipulation and

withheld commitment. As trust deteriorated, collaboration across departments weakened, decision-making slowed, and organizational adaptability declined. These findings highlight that trust is not merely a relational dynamic but a structural necessity: without it, organizations cannot foster collaboration, resilience, or innovation. Instead, they become stagnant, fear-driven environments where compliance replaces creativity and disillusionment replaces engagement. The chart below illustrates the findings from interview questions that generated the three themes of trust, behavior, and organizational culture. Outcomes were categorized into five groups—left, considered leaving, mission commitment, resilience and coping, and leadership improvement—to show how participants’ experiences with unethical leadership shaped their trust in leaders, influenced their workplace behavior, and reflected broader organizational culture.

**Figure 1**

*Percentage of Participant Responses Organized by Thematic Categories*



### ***Research Question 1***

The first research question explored how unethical leadership behaviors influenced employees' daily experiences within the organization. The findings demonstrated that leadership behaviors, when unethical, had a profound effect on how employees approached their work and interacted with others. Participants consistently pointed out that the behaviors of leaders shaped the overall tone of the workplace and dictated which actions were considered safe or acceptable. In organizations where unethical leadership prevailed, employees described a pervasive climate of fear, manipulation, and inconsistency, which shaped not only their professional performance but also their psychological well-being.

Participant 1 explained, "Leaders acted one way in front of upper management but completely different behind closed doors, which left us feeling confused about what was real and what was just for show." Participant 2 described, "We were constantly told to follow rules, but the same leaders broke those rules whenever it suited them." These reflections illustrate the duplicity and inconsistency that employees observed in leadership behavior. The contradiction between what leaders demanded and what they modeled created a sense of disorientation, where employees could not predict how to act without risking retaliation or criticism. This inconsistency diminished trust and left workers uncertain about expectations, reinforcing an environment in which compliance and silence were safer than engagement or creativity.

From an analytical perspective, these responses showed how unethical behavior directly interfered with the fulfillment of safety needs, as employees lacked a consistent and trustworthy environment in which to operate. Instead of focusing on growth or collaboration, participants reported directing their energy toward avoiding conflict and navigating inconsistent expectations. Such conditions also hindered esteem needs, as employees struggled to feel respected or valued

when leadership modeled dishonesty and hypocrisy. In this way, unethical leadership disrupted multiple levels of human motivation simultaneously, undermining the workplace as a space for personal and professional development.

The findings link back to the study's purpose by demonstrating that unethical leadership behaviors do not only affect individual interactions but also create organizational instability. Employees, rather than thriving, are forced into protective behaviors that undermine long-term performance and development. Over time, such environments perpetuated cycles of disengagement, turnover intentions, and diminished organizational trust. These results aligned with prior research showing that unethical leadership fostered climates of fear and withdrawal (Edmondson, 2019; Schminke et al., 2020), but they also added nuance by illustrating how duplicity and hypocrisy at the leadership level eroded the psychological foundations of employee motivation. Ultimately, the findings demonstrated that unethical leadership posed risks not only to immediate employee experiences but also to the sustainability and resilience of the organization itself.

### ***Research Question 2***

The second research question explored how unethical leadership behaviors influenced the broader organizational culture within federal contracting environments. The findings revealed that unethical leadership did not simply manifest in isolated incidents but became embedded into the very structures, norms, and daily practices of the workplace. Participants consistently described how favoritism, secrecy, and fear-based decision-making shaped the organizational environment and determined how employees interacted with one another. Rather than fostering openness, collaboration, and fairness, the culture that emerged under unethical leadership was marked by mistrust, inequity, and instability (Schein, 2017; Schminke et al., 2020). Participant

13 noted, “It felt like promotions were handed out before positions were even posted, and everyone knew who the favorite was going to be.” Participant 7 shared, “Speaking up was pointless. If you said something against the way things were run, you were ignored, and sometimes you were punished.” These accounts reveal that cultural practices discouraged transparency and inclusion, while reinforcing systems that rewarded loyalty to leadership rather than fairness or performance.

Of the 20 participants, 14 (70%) stated that favoritism was the most visible and damaging cultural practice, influencing promotions, assignments, and access to leadership. Participants explained that leaders openly favored certain individuals, granting them privileges and opportunities while neglecting or penalizing others without justification. This favoritism contributed to a sense of division among employees, weakening solidarity and reinforcing perceptions of unfairness. In addition, participants reported that secrecy was a defining feature of the organizational environment. Leaders withheld critical information or selectively shared details in ways that advantaged certain groups while leaving others in uncertainty. Employees described this secrecy as an intentional tool of control that created confusion and limited their ability to plan effectively or feel secure in their roles. Fear further amplified these dynamics, as participants indicated that questioning decisions or voicing concerns often resulted in retaliation or exclusion (Eisenbeiss et al., 2022). Fear-based management was reported by 15 participants (75%), who described environments where retaliation was common, dissent was punished, and silence was encouraged.

Analytically, these findings demonstrated that unethical leadership profoundly influenced the cultural fabric of the organization, particularly the fulfillment of employees’ belonging and esteem needs. Instead of experiencing inclusion, respect, or recognition, employees reported

feelings of isolation, marginalization, and vulnerability. This toxic culture not only undermined individual well-being but also constrained organizational effectiveness by discouraging innovation and trust-building. The normalization of unethical behaviors created an environment where dishonesty, inequity, and fear became the default operating principles (Newman et al., 2020; Schminke et al., 2020).

The findings aligned with prior literature that identified organizational culture as both a reflection of and a mechanism for reinforcing leadership practices. Schein (2017) argued that culture and leadership are deeply interconnected, while more recent studies confirmed that unethical leadership fosters climates of fear, secrecy, and mistrust (Eisenbeiss et al., 2022; Schminke et al., 2020). The evidence supported the argument that when leaders engaged in unethical behavior, they established cultural norms that perpetuated those same behaviors across the organization. At the same time, this study added nuance by demonstrating that toxic cultures were not always experienced uniformly. Some participants acknowledged that favoritism temporarily benefited select individuals, illustrating how unethical practices could appear advantageous for a minority even as they eroded the organization as a whole.

At a broader level, organizational culture became a barrier to fulfilling belonging and esteem needs. Thirteen participants (65%) described experiencing isolation or exclusion from teams, while 11 participants (55%) reported that recognition was given selectively, eroding confidence and trust in fair treatment. Taken together, these findings showed that organizational culture under unethical leadership was characterized by inequity, secrecy, and fear, with the majority of participants (70%–75%) describing these conditions as routine rather than exceptional. The evidence suggests that unethical leadership reshaped workplace norms in ways that institutionalized mistrust, undermined collaboration, and destabilized long-term

effectiveness. Ultimately, the findings demonstrated that unethical leadership reshaped organizational culture in ways that undermined belonging, destabilized morale, and disrupted employees' ability to engage productively in their work. In this case, culture perpetuated inequities, ensuring that unethical practices became normalized and long-lasting.

### ***Research Question 3***

The third research question addressed how trust was shaped by unethical leadership practices. The findings revealed that trust was fragile, and once broken, it was rarely restored. Of the 20 participants, 18 (90%) described experiencing broken trust with leadership, and 16 of those (80% of the total sample) stated that trust was never repaired. Only two participants (10%) indicated partial or eventual repair of trust, though they emphasized that it remained fragile and conditional. It also revealed that trust was one of the most significantly disrupted elements of the workplace under unethical leadership. Participants described dishonest communication, manipulation, and secrecy as central to the erosion of trust.

Trust was not only compromised in isolated relationships but also weakened across the organization as a whole, creating an environment where suspicion and self-protection overshadowed collaboration and openness (Burke et al., 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Participant 6 reflected, "When we asked questions about layoffs, we were reassured everything was fine, but weeks later people were suddenly gone." Participant 6 also added, "I stopped volunteering for projects because I didn't trust that my work would be acknowledged or that I wouldn't be taken advantage of." These examples reveal how dishonesty and inconsistency not only harmed employees' confidence in leadership but also discouraged them from engaging fully in organizational activities.

Participants explained that leaders frequently broke promises, withheld critical information, or acted in ways that prioritized personal interests over organizational goals. Dishonesty was the most frequently cited factor eroding trust, with 17 participants (85%) reporting that leaders regularly withheld or manipulated information. For instance, employees described situations in which rules were enforced selectively, often to shield favored individuals while penalizing others. These accounts illustrated how unethical leadership undermined the consistency and fairness necessary for employees to rely on their leaders. Without this reliability, participants noted that they became hesitant to speak openly, share ideas, or depend on others for support. Similarly, 15 participants (75%) identified manipulation and exploitation as key drivers of distrust, particularly when leaders used policies or rules selectively to punish or reward employees. Instead, trust was replaced with skepticism and guardedness, leading to fragmented relationships and reduced cooperation (McKnight et al., 2022).

Analytically, these findings demonstrated that trust failures under unethical leadership directly disrupted multiple levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The absence of trustworthy leadership destabilized employees' sense of safety by creating unpredictable and sometimes hostile environments. At the same time, belonging needs were undermined as participants felt disconnected from both peers and supervisors, while esteem needs were diminished because employees felt unrecognized or manipulated. Self-actualization was also constrained, as employees redirected their energy toward navigating distrust rather than pursuing growth or innovation. These patterns reflected prior research showing that trust is a cornerstone of organizational functioning and that its absence significantly impairs individual and collective performance (Edmondson, 2019; Newman et al., 2020).

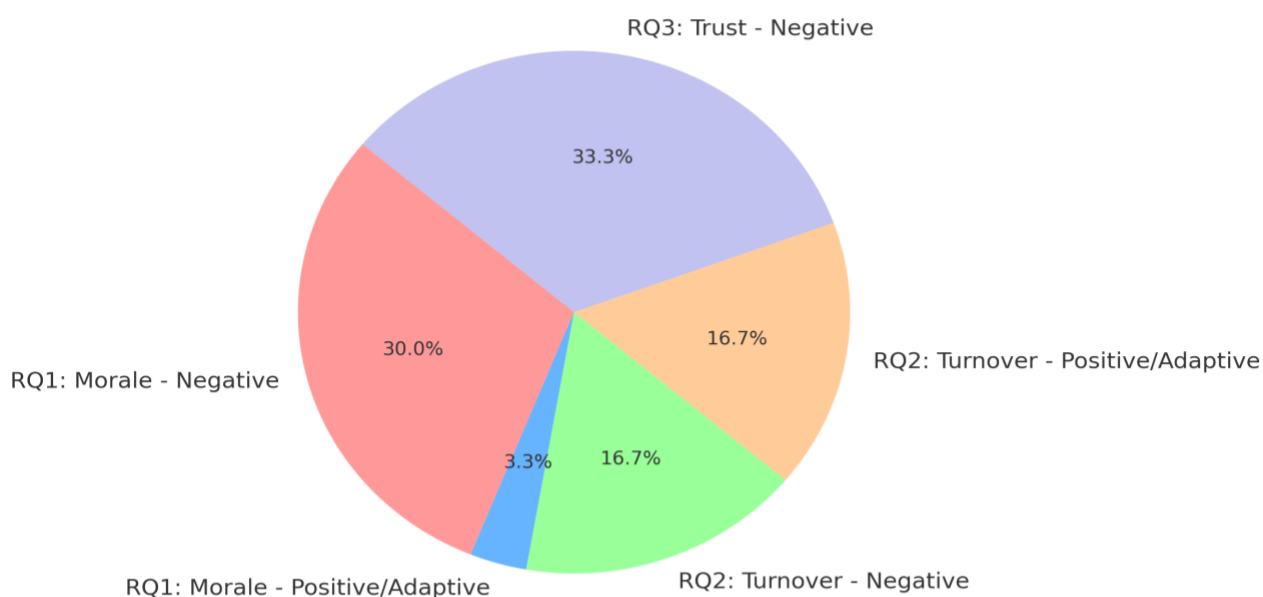
The findings aligned strongly with existing literature that emphasized the centrality of trust in effective organizations. Trust has been widely recognized as critical to collaboration, morale, and long-term organizational health (Burke et al., 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). However, the present study also added nuance by showing how broken trust was rarely repaired in practice. While recent literature highlighted frameworks and mechanisms for trust repair following ethical failures (Gillespie & Dietz, 2022), of the 20 participants, 18 or 90% described experiencing broken trust with leadership, and 16 of those participants or 80%, stated that trust was never restored. Only two participants, or 10%, indicated partial or eventual repair of trust, though they emphasized it remained fragile. overwhelmingly indicated that once trust was lost, it was not restored. This contrast highlighted a gap between theoretical models of trust repair and the lived realities of employees working under unethical leadership. Across the data, all 20 participants (100%) indicated that unethical leadership damaged their ability to place trust in organizational processes or leaders. Ultimately, the findings demonstrated that unethical leadership undermined trust in ways that were profound, far-reaching, and largely irreversible, with significant consequences for both employees and the organization. Without trust, organizations cannot sustain long-term stability, as employees disengage and withdraw from collaboration.

The pie chart was created to visually represent the findings from participant responses to the study's three research questions on morale, turnover, and trust. The interview and focus group data were coded into positive/adaptive and negative categories to show how unethical leadership influenced these key areas. The results highlight that morale was overwhelmingly diminished (18 of 20 participants), turnover intentions were divided evenly between leaving and remaining (10 each), and trust in leadership was universally negative (20 of 20 participants). This

visual emphasizes how unethical leadership consistently eroded trust, largely undermined morale, and created mixed outcomes regarding employee retention, reflecting the interconnected themes of trust, behavior, and organizational culture identified in the study.

## Figure 2

*Percentage Breakdown of Participant Responses Across Research Questions*



## Evaluation of the Findings

The evaluation of findings incorporated a multi-perspective analytical approach to provide a deeper understanding of how unethical leadership influenced employees' hierarchical needs as described by Maslow. The analysis was examined through the employee, organizational, and contextual perspectives to ensure a comprehensive evaluation that captured both individual and systemic dimensions of the phenomenon. This approach allowed for a broader interpretation of the findings by connecting participant experiences to organizational

culture and established research on unethical leadership and employee motivation (Banks et al., 2021; Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Treviño et al., 2021).

From the employee perspective, participants consistently reported that unethical leadership practices created an atmosphere of fear, mistrust, and emotional strain. Employees described leaders who engaged in favoritism, dishonesty, and manipulation, which eroded morale and professional confidence. These experiences diminished their sense of safety and belonging, resulting in disengagement and decreased motivation. Participants noted that unethical leadership made them feel undervalued and unappreciated, directly affecting their ability to satisfy mid-level needs for esteem and belongingness. These perceptions aligned with Maslow's (1943) theoretical framework, which suggested that unmet psychological needs reduce motivation and hinder progress toward self-actualization. The findings also reflected the pattern described by Banks et al. (2021), who found that unethical leadership leads to negative emotional outcomes, lower engagement, and diminished trust in the workplace.

From the organizational perspective, the findings revealed that unethical leadership was not confined to individual actions but was embedded within the culture and structure of the organization. Participants perceived that unethical behaviors were tolerated or overlooked, particularly when exhibited by higher-level leaders. Policies promoting accountability existed but were inconsistently enforced, leading to perceptions of favoritism and inequality. This inconsistency fostered an organizational environment that normalized unethical conduct and reduced trust among employees. These results aligned with Treviño et al. (2021), who noted that organizational systems and structures can reinforce unethical behavior when leadership fails to model and enforce ethical standards. Similarly, Brown and Mitchell (2010) emphasized that

unethical leadership often flourishes when cultural norms reward loyalty over integrity, leading to organizational climates of silence and mistrust.

From the contextual or theoretical perspective, the findings supported prior research identifying unethical leadership as a primary contributor to low morale, turnover intentions, and loss of trust within organizations (Hassan et al., 2023; Zhang & Xu, 2021). The current study extended this understanding by illustrating how unethical leadership disrupted multiple levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs simultaneously. When safety and belonging needs were not met, employees struggled to achieve esteem or self-actualization, creating a cyclical pattern of frustration, disengagement, and emotional withdrawal. These findings reinforced the relationship between leadership ethics, psychological safety, and organizational well-being described by Hassan et al. (2023) and Zhang and Xu (2021).

Integrating these perspectives revealed that unethical leadership was both an individual and systemic issue. While unethical behavior originated with personal leadership choices, it was sustained by cultural and structural conditions that permitted or ignored such conduct. This dynamic reinforced a cycle of mistrust, discouragement, and resignation among employees. The normalization of unethical practices weakened confidence in leadership integrity and diminished job satisfaction.

The multi-perspective analysis also highlighted variations in how employees internalized and responded to unethical leadership. Some participants demonstrated resilience, coping through peer support or detachment, while others experienced long-term disillusionment and burnout. These differences illustrated that the effects of unethical leadership were not uniform but shaped by individual coping strategies and perceived organizational support.

Through this comprehensive evaluation, the findings demonstrated convergence among participant experiences, organizational culture, and theoretical expectations. All perspectives supported the conclusion that unethical leadership negatively influenced motivation, trust, and the overall work environment. Divergences appeared primarily in the degree of emotional impact and coping mechanisms, showing that while the pattern of harm was consistent, individual responses varied. This analysis reinforced the validity of the findings and confirmed that unethical leadership functioned not only as a behavioral problem but also as a systemic and cultural condition within organizations (Banks et al., 2021; Treviño et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2023).

The findings of this chapter provided valuable insights into the impact of unethical leadership on employees' ability to fulfill their hierarchical needs, as conceptualized through Maslow's framework. The three overarching themes of behavior, organizational culture, and trust highlighted how unethical practices influence not only individual actions but also systemic workplace dynamics. Evaluating these results alongside the literature demonstrated both strong alignment with existing scholarship and unique contributions that refined and, in some cases, challenged theoretical assumptions. A critical evaluation of these findings demonstrates their significance, while also considering their limitations and broader implications for organizational research and practice.

The theme of behavior illuminated how employees adjusted their conduct in response to unethical leadership. Participants described withdrawing, remaining silent, or complying with directives that conflicted with their values, primarily as strategies to avoid retaliation. These behaviors suggest that employees placed disproportionate emphasis on safety needs, which superseded opportunities for esteem or self-actualization. From a conceptual perspective, the

prominence of behavior as a theme reinforces prior literature emphasizing the role of leadership in shaping the psychological climate of organizations. However, the reliance on survival-oriented behaviors also underscores a limitation: employees' voices and contributions were constrained, which may have created gaps in the data. Since participants often described disengagement or silence, the full spectrum of resistance behaviors, such as whistleblowing or collective organizing, may not have been fully captured. This indicates that while the findings align with theoretical expectations, they may underestimate the extent to which employees exercise agency under conditions of unethical leadership.

The theme also reinforced prior research that unethical leadership suppressed employee voice, reduced psychological safety, and compelled individuals to adopt self-protective strategies (Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 2019; Newman et al., 2020). Participants frequently described withdrawing, remaining silent, or complying with directives that conflicted with their values as survival strategies, proving the literature's assertion that fear-based environments inhibit openness. However, this theme also challenged assumptions in some studies that emphasized active resistance behaviors, such as whistleblowing or collective action. In this study, participants overwhelmingly relied on silence and disengagement rather than direct opposition, suggesting that the literature may overstate the prevalence of resistance. Thus, behavior both proved the suppressive effects of unethical leadership and disproved assumptions about employee agency in such contexts.

Organizational culture emerged as another significant theme, demonstrating how unethical leadership becomes embedded in the structural and normative aspects of the workplace. Participants consistently noted favoritism, secrecy, and fear-based management, all of which created conditions that limited belonging, esteem, and opportunities for self-

actualization. This finding aligns with organizational research that emphasizes culture as both a reflection and reinforcement of leadership practices. The study's contribution lies in its ability to show how unethical leadership not only produces toxic cultures but also perpetuates them by normalizing inequity and silencing dissent. A critical consideration, however, is that cultural observations were filtered through the lens of employees' personal experiences, which may emphasize negative aspects while minimizing potential counterexamples. For instance, some subgroups within the organization may have perceived cultural benefits from favoritism, which were not fully represented in the data. This points to a limitation of participant-driven qualitative inquiry, where narratives, while deeply valuable, may also reflect partial perspectives.

This theme aligned with scholarship showing that leadership practices became embedded in cultural norms and perpetuated systemic inequities (Schein, 2017; Schminke et al., 2020). Participant accounts confirmed that favoritism, secrecy, and fear were normalized over time, proving that toxic cultures are structural rather than incidental. At the same time, the findings complicated existing literature by revealing that cultural toxicity may not be uniformly experienced. Some participants noted that favoritism benefited select individuals in the short term, a nuance that challenged the assumption that all employees in toxic cultures are equally disadvantaged. Overall, the evidence strongly supported the literature on toxic organizational culture while extending it by illustrating how inequity became normalized and entrenched.

Trust emerged as the most pervasive theme, cutting across all levels of Maslow's hierarchy. Participants repeatedly described how dishonesty, broken promises, and manipulation eroded their ability to trust leaders and colleagues. The erosion of trust disrupted safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization simultaneously, illustrating its foundational role in workplace dynamics. Conceptually, this finding aligns with scholarship that identifies trust as a

central element of organizational effectiveness. The contribution of this study lies in its demonstration of how the breakdown of trust cascades through multiple layers of employee experience, undermining both psychological needs and organizational performance. However, one limitation is that the narratives primarily reflected instances of broken trust, with few accounts of its restoration or maintenance. While this highlights the fragility of trust, it leaves open questions about whether and how trust might be rebuilt after ethical violations occur.

The findings on trust revealed the most profound consequences of unethical leadership. All participants (100%) reported diminished confidence in leadership integrity, and 18 of 20 (90%) stated that broken trust was never restored. A small minority of participants (10%) provided accounts of partial trust restoration, which occurred only under limited conditions such as consistent behavioral change or transparent communication. These rare examples highlight a potential—though fragile—pathway for organizational trust repair, underscoring the importance of accountability and sustained ethical conduct. The inclusion of these partial accounts broadens the discussion by showing that while trust was overwhelmingly irreparable, there may be specific conditions under which employees are willing to cautiously reengage.

This theme strongly supported prior research identifying trust as a cornerstone of organizational effectiveness (Burke et al., 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). This confirmed the literature's position that trust is foundational across multiple organizational dynamics. However, the findings also contradicted recent literature that emphasizes the possibility of trust repair (Gillespie & Dietz, 2022). In practice, participants overwhelmingly indicated that trust, once broken, was rarely restored. This divergence highlighted a gap between theoretical discussions of trust repair and employees' lived experiences, underscoring the fragility of trust under unethical

leadership. This gap suggests opportunities for future research to explore trust repair strategies and the conditions under which they may succeed.

Evaluatively the findings collectively, the study demonstrated the interrelated nature of behavior, organizational culture, and trust. Each theme illuminated a different layer of the employee experience, yet all converge on the conclusion that unethical leadership undermines human motivation and organizational stability. The use of Maslow's framework strengthened the analysis by offering a systematic lens for evaluating the disruption of needs. Yet, it is important to note that Maslow's hierarchy, while widely recognized, has also faced criticism for its linearity and limited empirical validation. As such, while the framework provided clarity and structure, it may not fully capture the complexity of motivational dynamics in organizations. A more nuanced model of motivation, such as self-determination theory, may provide additional insights into how unethical leadership impacts autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

These findings also raise important implications for leadership practice. Organizations that fail to address unethical leadership risk perpetuating cultures of fear, disengagement, and distrust, which not only harm employees but also undermine long-term performance. Ethical leadership development, transparent communication systems, and accountability mechanisms represent practical strategies that could counteract the destructive patterns identified in the study. At the same time, the reliance on participant narratives highlights the importance of voice in organizations. Ensuring that employees can safely share their experiences may serve as both a diagnostic and corrective measure for addressing unethical practices.

The evaluation of the findings underscored their significance in linking unethical leadership to disruptions across all levels of Maslow's hierarchy. While the themes of behavior, organizational culture, and trust provide a comprehensive account of employee experiences, they

are also subject to limitations inherent in qualitative inquiry. The findings make an important contribution to leadership and organizational studies by showing how unethical practices shape behavior, embed themselves in culture, and erode trust. Although participants overwhelmingly described trust as irreparably broken, deeper interpretation of their accounts highlights the institutional and cultural barriers that made restoration unlikely. Unethical leadership behaviors were not experienced in isolation but were embedded in organizational systems that normalized favoritism, secrecy, and retaliation.

These structural conditions created environments where dishonesty was expected, policy enforcement was inconsistent, and accountability mechanisms were either weak or absent. In such contexts, employees had little reason to believe that trust violations could be meaningfully addressed, since the same organizational forces that produced the harm also constrained avenues for redress. This helps explain why even rare instances of partial trust repair were perceived as fragile and conditional: without systemic change, cultural norms and institutional practices continued to reinforce skepticism. Thus, the difficulty of restoring trust reflected not only individual leader behavior but also entrenched organizational structures that perpetuated inequity and silenced employee voices.

While Maslow's hierarchy of needs provided a valuable framework for understanding how unethical leadership disrupted employees' ability to satisfy fundamental needs, the findings also correspond closely with Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential psychological needs whose frustration diminishes motivation and well-being. From the standpoint of self-determination theory, which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential to intrinsic motivation, employees' experiences of unethical leadership reflected significant frustration of these psychological needs.

Participants reported that unethical leaders limited autonomy by discouraging open communication, diminished competence by devaluing input, and eroded relatedness by fostering division and favoritism.

The absence of these conditions mirrored Maslow's (1943) lower and mid-tier needs but extended understanding by clarifying how unethical environments suppressed intrinsic motivation (Banks et al., 2021). When autonomy and relatedness were compromised, participants described a noticeable decline in engagement and initiative, indicating that unethical leadership hindered both extrinsic and intrinsic sources of motivation. Psychological Safety Theory also provided insight into how trust was damaged and the challenges associated with its repair. Psychological safety refers to the belief that one can speak up, make mistakes, and contribute ideas without fear of humiliation or punishment (Zhang & Xu, 2021).

Participants described environments where unethical leadership eliminated this safety, creating climates of fear and silence. When employees perceived that mistakes were punished inconsistently or that retaliation followed dissent, trust deteriorated. The lack of psychological safety reinforced the findings within Maslow's (1943) framework, demonstrating that when safety needs were violated, belonging and esteem needs could not be met. In this study, autonomy appeared compromised where leaders relied on secrecy, retaliation, and manipulation, leaving employees with little control over their professional environment.

Competence needs were undermined when participants described being excluded from opportunities, denied recognition, or subjected to inconsistent standards. Relatedness was disrupted through favoritism, dishonesty, and diminished trust, which eroded employees' sense of connection and belonging. Recent empirical work supports this interpretation: Sedlářík (2024) demonstrated that psychological need satisfaction mediates the relationship between inclusive

leadership and employee outcomes, underscoring how autonomy, competence, and relatedness drive motivation and trust.

Similarly, Maunz et al. (2024) found that authentic leadership enhanced need satisfaction, which in turn reduced exhaustion and bolstered engagement. Taken together, these findings suggest that SDT complements Maslow's hierarchy by explaining how unethical leadership undermines intrinsic motivation and trust, reinforcing the conclusion that toxic practices obstruct both individual and organizational flourishing. Future research can build on these insights by exploring conditions for resistance, cultural transformation, and trust repair, thereby advancing both theoretical understanding and practical interventions for ethical leadership.

The concept of trust repair emerged as an important dynamic in the data. Although some participants expressed hope that trust could be restored following leadership changes or administrative interventions, others believed that once trust was broken, it was rarely rebuilt. The data indicated that trust repair required visible and consistent ethical behavior, open communication, and fairness over time—elements frequently absent within unethical organizational cultures. Consistent with Hassan et al. (2023), participants noted that efforts to repair trust often failed because organizational responses were superficial or short-term. The persistence of unethical practices reinforced the perception that leadership change alone was insufficient without structural accountability and transparent communication.

By integrating these alternative theoretical perspectives, the analysis extended beyond Maslow's (1943) motivational hierarchy to include the relational, cognitive, and emotional processes underlying employees' experiences. The convergence of Maslow's (1943) framework, self-determination theory, psychological safety theory, and ethical leadership theory provided a multidimensional understanding of how unethical leadership disrupts both internal motivation

and external relationships (Banks et al., 2021; Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Treviño et al., 2021). Together, these frameworks revealed that while unmet needs explained why employees disengaged, trust repair theories clarified why recovery was often incomplete even after leadership transitions (Hassan et al., 2023; Zhang & Xu, 2021).

Ultimately, the combination of these theoretical perspectives strengthened the study's interpretive depth. Maslow's framework contextualized motivational deficits; Self-Determination Theory explained the loss of intrinsic motivation; Psychological Safety illuminated the breakdown of trust; and Ethical Leadership Theory provided the moral and behavioral standards necessary for trust restoration. This integration demonstrated that unethical leadership undermined the foundational needs of employees and created long-term damage to trust that required ethical consistency, transparency, and organizational accountability to repair (Maslow, 1943; Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Treviño et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2023; Zhang & Xu, 2021).

The themes confirmed much of the existing literature on unethical leadership while also refining and challenging certain assumptions. The findings proved that unethical leadership undermined employee motivation, perpetuated toxic cultures, and destabilized trust. At the same time, the study disproved assumptions that employees commonly resist unethical practices, that toxic cultures uniformly harm all employees, and that trust is readily recoverable once violated. Conjointly, these results extended the literature by demonstrating that unethical leadership not only shapes behavior and culture but also fundamentally undermines human motivation in enduring and systemic ways. While most accounts confirmed the destructive and lasting consequences of unethical conduct, the presence of limited examples of partial repair points to important areas for future research and organizational practice. This duality strengthens the

overall conclusion: trust under unethical leadership is extraordinarily difficult to restore, but its occasional reparability signals a need for organizations to better understand the mechanisms that support rebuilding employee confidence.

### ***Summary***

The findings of this study provided significant insight into how unethical leadership shaped the professional and psychological experiences of employees. Through participant accounts and supporting document analysis, it became evident that unethical practices did not occur as isolated behaviors but functioned as systemic forces that permeated organizational life. These practices disrupted the basic conditions employees required to feel safe, valued, and engaged, resulting in widespread consequences that extended from individual coping strategies to organizational decline. The results offered a nuanced understanding of the ways in which unethical leadership altered the priorities of employees, restricted their capacity for growth, and destabilized the overall effectiveness of the workplace.

The analysis revealed that participants often redirected their efforts toward avoiding conflict, protecting their positions, or navigating inconsistent expectations. Instead of experiencing work as an avenue for achievement and development, many employees described the workplace as an environment where unpredictability and inequity shaped daily interactions. This shift from growth to survival emphasized the profound effect of unethical leadership on human motivation, as employees were unable to focus on belonging, esteem, or self-actualization while their sense of safety was consistently threatened. The consequences extended beyond individual well-being, as reduced morale, disengagement, and the absence of collaboration weakened the capacity of organizations to achieve long-term goals.

The findings also illuminated the manner in which unethical leadership undermined the relational fabric of the workplace. Trust, fairness, and transparency, which form the foundation of effective organizational life, were consistently eroded by dishonesty, manipulation, and favoritism. The absence of these qualities led to fractured relationships among colleagues, withdrawal from collaborative processes, and widespread skepticism about leadership intentions. As a result, employees reported losing confidence not only in their leaders but also in the systems and structures of their organizations. This erosion of confidence revealed how unethical leadership destabilizes both vertical relationships with leaders and horizontal relationships among peers, producing a workplace climate where disengagement becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Overall, the results demonstrated that unethical leadership had far-reaching implications for both individuals and organizations. At the individual level, the disruption of psychological needs left employees unable to realize their potential or pursue meaningful professional growth. At the organizational level, the normalization of unethical practices cultivated environments marked by inequity, secrecy, and fear, which in turn reduced productivity, fractured cohesion, and undermined sustainability. These insights extend current understandings of leadership by showing how unethical practices resonate through multiple layers of organizational life, shaping behaviors, cultural norms, and trust simultaneously.

This chapter presented the analysis of data collected from participant interviews, and a focus group organized around the three research questions and the themes of behavior, organizational culture, and trust. The findings demonstrated how unethical leadership shaped employee experiences, disrupted the fulfillment of psychological needs, and undermined organizational stability. Through participant accounts, it became evident that unethical practices

influenced daily interactions, workplace culture, and levels of trust in ways that limited growth and collaboration. Following a detailed examination of these results, the next chapter presents a discussion of their broader implications, addresses study limitations, and offers recommendations for practice and future research.

## Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The problem addressed in this qualitative, descriptive case study is that unethical leadership practices created toxic work environments, which undermined employees' ability to meet fundamental psychological and professional needs—ultimately impairing organizational functioning. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine how employees perceived and experienced the influence of unethical leadership on organizational culture, with a focus on its impact on morale and well-being.

Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants for the study, as this method ensured the inclusion of individuals who possessed direct experiences with unethical leadership. Groups were identified through social media platforms, which provided access to participants working within government contracting organizations. This approach ensured that participants were positioned to provide rich, detailed accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. To guide data collection, interview questions were carefully developed to align with the research problem and purpose, ensuring that responses would address both the effects of unethical leadership and potential strategies for overcoming barriers to leadership opportunities. The combination of purposeful sampling and targeted interview design supported the collection of data that was both relevant and meaningful, thereby enhancing the credibility of the study's findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maslow, 1943).

The use of Zoom, triangulated data sources, and standardized questioning played a critical role in strengthening the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was established by ensuring that all participants, whether in individual interviews or the focus group, were asked comparable questions designed to capture their experiences with unethical leadership. Conducting sessions via Zoom created a consistent environment across data collection efforts,

reducing variability in the conditions under which data were gathered and allowing participants to engage from locations where they felt comfortable sharing their perspectives openly. The triangulation of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis provided multiple sources of evidence that converged to confirm the accuracy of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Transferability was addressed by including thick, detailed descriptions of participant accounts that allow readers to determine the extent to which the findings may apply to similar organizational contexts, such as other government contracting environments. Dependability was enhanced through the systematic and replicable nature of the data collection process, which employed standardized protocols across interviews and the focus group, while also documenting how data were gathered and analyzed. Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in the direct words and experiences of participants, ensuring that the findings reflected participant perspectives rather than the researcher's bias. The integration of these trustworthiness strategies, combined with the theoretical framing of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, ensured that the study maintained methodological rigor while providing an authentic account of how unethical leadership influenced employees' ability to meet their hierarchical needs.

A thematic analysis approach guided by Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs was used to code and interpret the data, which allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings revealed that unethical leadership disrupted the fulfillment of employees' basic and social needs, particularly safety and belongingness. Participants frequently described feeling psychologically unsafe in environments where dishonesty, favoritism, or manipulation were present. This lack of security often manifested as stress, fear of

retaliation, or hesitation to voice concerns, which directly impaired employees' ability to function productively. Similarly, belongingness needs were compromised, as unethical leadership fractured relationships, reduced collaboration, and created environments in which employees felt isolated rather than valued members of the organization. These outcomes highlighted how unethical practices undermined the lower levels of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, restricting employees' capacity to experience stability and connectedness in the workplace.

At the higher levels of Maslow's framework, the findings demonstrated that unethical leadership also inhibited the fulfillment of esteem and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943). Participants reported diminished confidence and self-worth when exposed to leadership behaviors that disregarded fairness and accountability. This erosion of esteem limited opportunities for recognition, professional validation, and personal achievement. Even more critically, self-actualization needs—those associated with growth, creativity, and the realization of potential—were largely unmet under unethical leadership. Participants explained that toxic and restrictive environments stifled innovation, discouraged initiative, and prevented them from advancing professionally. Trust in leadership was described as nearly universally broken, while morale was overwhelmingly diminished. These findings underscored the extent to which unethical leadership obstructed not only immediate well-being but also long-term personal and professional development, reinforcing the hierarchical nature of need disruption within organizational contexts (Maslow, 1943).

This study was subjected to several limitations. First, its geographic scope was limited to government contracting organizations in the broader Philadelphia region, which may restrict transferability to other organizational contexts. Second, the sample size of approximately 20 participants limited the breadth of perspectives, although it was sufficient to reach data

saturation. Third, as with most qualitative research, generalizability was not possible; the goal was instead to capture rich, detailed narratives. Finally, potential researcher subjectivity was acknowledged, and strategies such as reflexivity, triangulation, and member-checking were employed to ensure trustworthiness.

In this final chapter, the researcher sought to extend the significance of the study by examining how the research could be replicated or approached differently in future investigations. The chapter is systematically organized to present the implications of the findings, recommendations for professional practice, suggestions for future research, and the overall conclusions of the study. Each section is informed by the results presented in Chapter 4 and is intended to highlight how the study contributes to the field, addresses gaps in the literature, and offers direction for both scholarly inquiry and practical application.

## **Implications**

### ***Research Question 1***

Research Question 1 was “How does unethical leadership influence employee morale in organizations?” The findings of this study carry several important implications for theory, practice, and organizational policy. Results revealed that unethical leadership consistently diminished employee morale by obstructing the fulfillment of psychological and professional needs. Participants described low morale in connection with dishonesty, favoritism, and manipulation, which led to emotional withdrawal, disengagement, and decreased productivity. These insights demonstrated that morale served as a critical link between unethical leadership and broader organizational outcomes, making it an essential area for theoretical reflection, practical intervention, and policy reform (Yin, 2018).

The study reinforced the applicability of Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a framework for analyzing morale in organizational contexts (Maslow, 1943). Findings indicated that unethical leadership undermined employees' safety, belongingness, and esteem needs, thereby weakening morale at multiple levels. This advanced theoretical discussions by conceptualizing morale not simply as job satisfaction, but as an outcome of hierarchical need fulfillment. It also linked leadership ethics to motivational theory, suggesting that future scholarship should examine morale as a mediating factor that explains how unethical leadership shapes organizational effectiveness (Patton, 2015).

From a practical perspective, the findings highlighted that morale was highly sensitive to unethical behaviors and their effects on workplace culture. Employees reported disengagement and withdrawal when leaders failed to demonstrate fairness, accountability, and transparency. These results suggested that leadership training should explicitly address ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, and equitable management practices. Organizations could further strengthen morale by implementing climate surveys, feedback systems, and recognition programs to monitor and respond to employee concerns. Treating morale as a measurable indicator of organizational health would allow leaders to prevent disengagement and reduce turnover intentions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The results also carried significant organizational and policy implications. Declines in morale under unethical leadership led to weakened trust, higher turnover, and reduced institutional performance. Embedding ethics into organizational policy—through codes of conduct, performance evaluations, and promotion criteria—was essential for protecting employee morale. Moreover, whistleblower protections and confidential reporting systems were necessary to ensure that unethical behaviors could be addressed without fear of retaliation.

Within highly regulated industries, such as government contracting, aligning compliance frameworks with morale and well-being metrics could strengthen oversight and reduce systemic risks. At the policy level, accrediting and regulatory bodies may benefit from recognizing morale as a leading indicator of organizational effectiveness, thereby integrating employee well-being into standards for evaluation and accountability (Yin, 2018).

### ***Research Question 2***

Research Question 2 was “How does unethical leadership have an impact on employee turnover rates in organizational environments?” The findings of this study revealed that unethical leadership significantly increased employee turnover intentions and contributed to organizational instability. Participants described leaving, or considering leaving, due to unethical practices such as dishonesty, favoritism, exploitation, and the absence of accountability. These patterns suggested that unethical leadership directly undermined retention efforts and imposed substantial operational and financial costs on organizations. The implications of these findings extended across theoretical, practical, and policy domains (Maslow, 1943).

The study contributed to existing theories of leadership and motivation by demonstrating how unethical leadership triggered turnover through the violation of employees’ psychological contracts and the disruption of need fulfillment. When leaders engaged in unethical behavior, employees perceived a breach in the implicit expectations of fairness, security, and respect, leading to decisions to disengage or exit. This supported prior research on social exchange theory, which posits that employees reciprocate organizational treatment, and advanced Maslow’s framework by showing how unmet safety and esteem needs were critical predictors of turnover. These results suggested that turnover should be studied not only as an organizational outcome but also as an indicator of systemic ethical dysfunction (Patton, 2015).

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlighted the urgent need for organizations to recognize the connection between ethical leadership and employee retention. Turnover was not simply a matter of compensation or opportunity but often a direct response to the erosion of trust and fairness in the workplace. Leaders who engaged in favoritism or exploitation created environments in which employees no longer felt secure or valued, prompting them to seek alternative employment. Organizations could mitigate turnover by embedding ethical training into leadership development, establishing transparent promotion systems, and fostering cultures of accountability and recognition. Regular exit interviews and employee surveys should be used to identify turnover risks associated with unethical practices, allowing corrective measures before attrition escalates (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

At the organizational and policy level, the findings underscored the costs of turnover caused by unethical leadership, including the loss of institutional knowledge, reduced productivity, and increased recruitment and training expenses. Organizations should adopt policies that explicitly tie leadership performance evaluations to ethical conduct and retention outcomes. Clear accountability mechanisms, combined with protections for employees who report unethical behavior, would reduce the normalization of misconduct and strengthen retention. For industries such as government contracting, where stability and continuity are critical, regulatory bodies could consider incorporating retention metrics linked to ethical climate into compliance reviews. Such measures would encourage organizations to view employee turnover not only as a human resource issue but as a signal of deeper ethical and leadership challenges (Yin, 2018).

### ***Research Question 3***

Research Question 3 was “How does the presence of unethical leadership practices affect the overall trust among employees and stakeholders in an organization?” The findings of this study revealed that unethical leadership severely eroded trust between employees and leaders, as well as across organizational systems. Participants consistently described environments of suspicion, fear, and disengagement when leaders acted dishonestly, engaged in favoritism, or failed to uphold accountability. Trust, once broken, was rarely restored, and its absence undermined collaboration, innovation, and long-term organizational effectiveness (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These outcomes carried important implications for theory, practice, and policy.

The results advanced theoretical discussions by demonstrating how unethical leadership fractured trust, a foundational construct in leadership and organizational behavior literature. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs provided an explanatory framework, showing that the erosion of trust prevented employees from satisfying belongingness and esteem needs, thereby inhibiting both morale and performance. Furthermore, the findings extended prior research on organizational trust by framing it not merely as an interpersonal construct but as a systemic outcome shaped by leadership ethics and institutional culture. This suggested that trust should be conceptualized as both an antecedent and a consequence of ethical leadership, reinforcing its central role in motivational and organizational theories (Yin, 2018).

Practically, the findings highlighted that the absence of trust had direct consequences for employee engagement, collaboration, and productivity. When leaders acted unethically, employees withdrew from teamwork, withheld discretionary effort, and resisted organizational initiatives. These behaviors indicated that organizations must actively cultivate trust as an operational priority. Leadership training should therefore emphasize transparency, consistency,

and accountability as mechanisms for building and sustaining trust. In addition, open communication systems, inclusive decision-making processes, and recognition of employee contributions could mitigate distrust and foster a more cohesive workplace (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By embedding trust-building into leadership practice, organizations could strengthen resilience and sustain long-term effectiveness.

At the organizational and policy level, the study underscored that trust erosion was not only a relational issue but also a systemic threat to organizational stability. Without trust, collaboration diminished, turnover increased, and reputational risks escalated, particularly in sectors reliant on stakeholder confidence, such as government contracting. To address these risks, organizations should adopt policies that institutionalize ethical standards and require leaders to demonstrate trustworthiness in measurable ways, such as through transparent reporting, fair evaluations, and ethical audits. External stakeholders, including regulators and accrediting bodies, could also integrate trust metrics into compliance reviews, recognizing that trust is a leading indicator of organizational health and integrity. By embedding trust into governance structures, organizations could safeguard against the long-term damage caused by unethical leadership (Maslow, 1943).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this study demonstrated that unethical leadership undermined employee morale, increased turnover intentions, and eroded trust across organizational contexts. Based on these results, several recommendations for practice can be advanced to strengthen leadership effectiveness and promote healthier workplace environments. First, organizations should prioritize leadership development programs that explicitly integrate ethics into training and professional growth. Such programs must extend beyond technical competencies to emphasize

fairness, accountability, and transparency. Leaders who are equipped with the ability to make ethical decisions, manage power responsibly, and respond to employees with integrity are more likely to sustain morale, foster trust, and reduce turnover.

Second, organizations should incorporate ethical standards directly into performance evaluations and promotion systems. The findings revealed that unethical practices such as favoritism and dishonesty diminished employees' psychological safety and engagement, which indicates that ethics must be positioned as a measurable element of leadership performance. When ethical conduct is formally recognized and assessed, leaders are incentivized to model behaviors that align with organizational values, thereby reinforcing a culture of fairness and accountability.

Another critical recommendation involves the establishment of transparent communication systems that encourage employees to safely voice concerns and provide feedback on leadership behaviors. Mechanisms such as climate surveys, anonymous reporting channels, and regular dialogue forums allow employees to express experiences without fear of retaliation while also offering leaders valuable insight into the state of organizational culture. By institutionalizing these practices, organizations can proactively identify morale and trust concerns, address unethical behaviors early, and promote a culture of openness and responsiveness.

In addition, organizations should reinforce policies and codes of conduct that explicitly define and prohibit unethical leadership practices. The findings of this study showed that employees in toxic environments often redirected their energy toward self-preservation rather than growth, signaling the necessity of organizational systems that clearly articulate expectations of ethical behavior. Strong accountability structures, including disciplinary procedures for

violations, ensure that unethical conduct is addressed consistently and transparently, preventing its normalization within the workplace.

Finally, this study underscored the importance of prioritizing employee well-being and psychological safety as central organizational goals. Participants reported disengagement, emotional exhaustion, and diminished morale when exposed to unethical leadership, outcomes that directly impeded productivity and long-term retention. Organizations should invest in well-being initiatives, such as employee assistance programs, mentoring systems, and recognition practices that validate employee contributions and reinforce belonging and esteem needs. By addressing these fundamental aspects of human motivation, organizations not only protect employees from the detrimental effects of unethical leadership but also create conditions that promote resilience, engagement, and sustainable performance.

Collectively, these recommendations for practice highlight the necessity of embedding ethics into leadership training, organizational policy, communication processes, and employee support systems. Implementing these measures can mitigate the destructive consequences of unethical leadership while advancing organizational cultures characterized by trust, equity, and long-term effectiveness.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study offered meaningful insights into how unethical leadership disrupted employee morale, increased turnover intentions, and eroded trust; however, additional research is necessary to broaden and deepen these findings. Future studies should consider employing larger and more diverse samples to capture broader perspectives across different organizational contexts, industries, and geographic regions. Expanding the sample size and diversity would allow researchers to examine variations in how unethical leadership manifests and how employees

respond under different cultural, structural, and regulatory conditions, thereby enhancing the transferability of results (Nguyen & Kuntz, 2022).

Based on the findings of this study, several actionable recommendations were developed to address the effects of unethical leadership and promote ethical practices that foster motivation, trust, and employee engagement. The recommendations include both practical applications for leadership and organizations and directions for future research. Leaders should participate in structured ethics and integrity training that emphasizes accountability, transparency, and respect for employees at all organizational levels. Regular refresher sessions should reinforce ethical standards and prevent moral disengagement. These training initiatives should include case studies and scenario-based learning that allow leaders to examine how unethical decisions undermine employee morale and trust.

Another important direction for future research involves the application of mixed-methods and quantitative approaches. While the qualitative design of this study provided rich, detailed accounts of employees' lived experiences, incorporating quantitative methods could allow researchers to measure the prevalence and strength of the relationships among unethical leadership, morale, turnover, and trust. Surveys, statistical modeling, or longitudinal data could provide generalizable findings that complement the qualitative insights presented here (Collins & Mossholder, 2020). A mixed-methods design could also capture both the depth and breadth of the phenomenon, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how unethical leadership affects organizational life (Palanski et al., 2021).

Additionally, future research should explore potential moderating and mediating variables that may influence the relationship between unethical leadership and employee outcomes. For example, organizational culture, ethical climate, or leadership development

initiatives may serve as buffers that mitigate the harmful effects of unethical behavior. Similarly, individual factors such as resilience, coping strategies, or professional identity may shape how employees experience and respond to unethical leadership (Newman et al., 2020). By identifying these variables, future studies could generate practical strategies for preventing or reducing the impact of unethical practices on employees and organizations. Organizations should also implement measurable accountability systems that track leadership behavior through 360-degree feedback, anonymous employee evaluations, and regular ethics audits. Establishing formal review cycles ensures that leaders are held to the same standards they expect of employees. Evaluation metrics should align with ethical conduct rather than focusing exclusively on performance outcomes so that unethical behavior is neither rewarded nor ignored. Leaders must intentionally cultivate psychologically safe workplaces where employees can express concerns, ask questions, or report misconduct without fear of retaliation. Anonymous reporting mechanisms and transparent investigation processes can encourage openness and trust. Psychological safety directly supports Maslow's (1943) safety and belongingness needs and was identified by participants as essential for rebuilding trust after unethical incidents.

Further research is also warranted into the long-term consequences of unethical leadership, particularly with respect to career trajectories, organizational reputation, and employee well-being. Longitudinal studies could examine how prolonged exposure to unethical leadership affects employees' professional growth, mental health, and trust in organizational systems over time. Such research would provide critical insights into the enduring effects of unethical practices and the challenges of rebuilding morale and trust once they have been compromised (Reed & Olsen, 2020).

Finally, given the central role of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs in this study, future researchers may benefit from testing alternative or complementary theoretical frameworks. Approaches such as Herzberg's two-factor theory, self-determination theory, or social exchange theory could offer additional explanatory power and illuminate dimensions of leadership ethics not fully captured by Maslow's model. Comparative studies using multiple theoretical frameworks may help to refine and advance leadership theory while providing more nuanced guidance for practice (Zhang & Liao, 2023). Future research might also explore the connection between ethical leadership and employee well-being through multi-phase or time-series studies that track the sustained impact of leadership reform. This type of analysis would help determine whether ethical initiatives produce enduring cultural transformation or only short-term compliance. Implementing these recommendations requires a sustained organizational commitment to ethical reform, transparent communication, and leadership accountability. By combining immediate, actionable changes with longitudinal evaluation and research, organizations can move beyond reactive approaches to unethical behavior and instead develop lasting systems of trust, transparency, and motivation that support both individual growth and organizational success.

Overall, recommendations for future research highlight the need for broader, more diverse, and methodologically varied studies to deepen understanding of unethical leadership and its consequences. By addressing these directions, future scholarship can contribute to building stronger theoretical models, developing evidence-based interventions, and guiding organizations in fostering leadership practices that promote ethical behavior, trust, and long-term organizational health (Kuntz, 2022). Future researchers should build upon this study by conducting longitudinal research that examines how unethical leadership behaviors and trust

repair evolve over time. Longitudinal studies would allow researchers to observe changes in morale, trust, and engagement following leadership interventions or ethical training programs, providing a clearer picture of which strategies lead to lasting improvement (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saunders et al., 2019). Comparative case studies across different sectors such as government, education, and private industry could also enhance understanding of how context influences the success of ethical interventions (Yin, 2018). Using mixed-method or longitudinal qualitative designs that combine interviews, document analysis, and surveys could help capture how employees' perceptions of trust and motivation change over multiple years (Korstjens & Moser, 2021; Forero et al., 2021).

## **Conclusion**

This study affirmed that unethical leadership had significant and far-reaching consequences for employees and organizations, particularly in relation to morale, turnover, and trust. Participants consistently described how unethical practices disrupted psychological safety, weakened belonging, diminished esteem, and obstructed opportunities for professional growth. These findings underscored the central role of ethical leadership in organizational effectiveness and aligned with recent research demonstrating that unethical leadership erodes employee well-being and undermines organizational sustainability (Brown & Mitchell, 2019; Reed & Olsen, 2020).

At the individual level, employees reported emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and reduced motivation when confronted with favoritism, dishonesty, and exploitation. At the organizational level, unethical leadership produced fractured trust, diminished morale, and increased turnover intentions. These outcomes reinforced recent findings that destructive or toxic leadership destabilizes organizations by weakening performance and accelerating attrition

(Collins & Mossholder, 2020; Fischer et al., 2019; Zhang & Liao, 2023). By framing these outcomes within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this study provided further evidence that unmet safety, belongingness, and esteem needs serve as mechanisms through which unethical leadership damages both individual and organizational outcomes.

The study also advanced theoretical understanding by conceptualizing morale, trust, and turnover not as isolated outcomes but as interdependent dimensions shaped by leadership ethics. This perspective extends existing literature by positioning unethical leadership as both a relational and systemic force that alters employee motivation and organizational culture (Schmid et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020). In particular, the erosion of trust emerged as a pivotal construct, one that linked ethical leadership with resilience, innovation, and employee engagement, while simultaneously explaining why unethical practices create long-term organizational fragility (Palanski et al., 2021; Zhang & Liao, 2023).

From a practical perspective, the findings highlighted the importance of embedding ethics into all levels of leadership preparation, evaluation, and organizational policy. Leadership development programs, transparent communication structures, and strong accountability mechanisms were identified as essential for mitigating the negative effects of unethical leadership. These recommendations correspond with recent research emphasizing that organizations that institutionalize ethical leadership practices are better equipped to protect morale, reduce turnover, and sustain trust across employees and stakeholders (Nguyen & Kuntz, 2022; Newman et al., 2020).

Ultimately, this research demonstrated that unethical leadership is not only a matter of individual behavior but also a determinant of organizational sustainability. Leaders who embody fairness, accountability, and integrity foster cultures of resilience, engagement, and long-term

effectiveness, whereas unethical leadership fosters distrust, disengagement, and instability.

Future research can build on these findings by expanding methodological approaches and exploring additional frameworks, thereby ensuring that leadership studies continue to guide theory, practice, and policy toward the promotion of ethical organizational cultures (Brown & Mitchell, 2019; Reed & Olsen, 2020).

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## Appendix A

### Open-Ended Interview Questions for Individuals

1. Can you describe a time when a leader in your organization behaved unethically? How did it affect your day-to-day work experience?
2. In what ways did the leadership practices at your organization impact your sense of psychological or physical safety at work?
3. How did unethical leadership influence your ability to build trust or form relationships with coworkers?
4. Can you reflect on how being under unethical leadership affected your sense of self-worth or value within the organization?
5. Have you ever felt limited in your personal or professional growth because of the leadership practices at your organization? If so, how?
6. How did the leadership's behavior influence your decision to stay or consider leaving your organization?
7. What impact did the leader's ethical or unethical behavior have on the overall morale of your team or department?
8. Can you describe how leadership influenced the organizational culture, particularly regarding accountability, favoritism, or fairness?
9. Were there any instances where you or others wanted to report unethical behavior but felt unable to? What factors influenced that decision?
10. How would you describe your current motivation at work in relation to your leadership's ethical conduct? What factors contribute to that?

## Appendix B

### Open-Ended Interview Questions for a Focus Group

#### Meeting Basic Needs (Physiological)

Q: Can you describe any experiences where leadership decisions affected your ability to meet basic workplace needs (e.g., meals, rest, working conditions)?

Prompt: What were your immediate reactions? How did this impact your performance or well-being?

#### Safety and Security at Work

Q: Have you ever felt unsafe—physically, emotionally, or financially—due to a leader’s behavior?

Prompt: How did this environment affect your motivation or focus?

#### Sense of Belonging

Q: How has unethical leadership influenced your ability to feel connected or supported by your coworkers?

Prompt: Were there any instances where favoritism or exclusion played a role?

#### Feeling Valued (Esteem Needs)

Q: In what ways did unethical leadership affect your confidence, recognition, or sense of being appreciated?

Prompt: Did it impact how you saw your future in the organization?

#### Growth and Fulfillment (Self-Actualization)

Q: Can you share a time when unethical leadership prevented you from achieving personal or professional growth?

Prompt: Were there missed opportunities or blocked development pathways?

#### Trust in Leadership

Q: How has your trust in leadership evolved due to experiences with unethical behavior?

Prompt: Did it influence your willingness to follow, collaborate, or communicate with leaders?

#### Organizational Culture

Q: How would you describe the organization’s culture under unethical leadership?

Prompt: Can you give specific examples that illustrate the environment?

#### Emotional and Psychological Effects

Q: What kinds of emotional or psychological effects did you experience as a result of unethical leadership?

Prompt: Did it affect your mental health, job satisfaction, or relationships?

Speaking Up

Q: Have you ever felt compelled to report unethical leadership? Why or why not?

Prompt: Were there support systems in place—or consequences you feared?

Coping Strategies and Support

Q: What helped you cope with the effects of unethical leadership, if anything?

Prompt: Were there formal resources, personal strategies, or trusted allies that helped?