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Moral management in practice: a qualitative study of values, habits, and ethical interventions among top managers in Estonia

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ABSTRACT

Top managers are leaders and role models for subordinates. Although numerous research papers have been published on ethical leadership, to the best of our knowledge, recent research has largely overlooked the phenomenon of how managers apply ethical principles in their everyday leadership practices. Moreover, we are interested in finding out how top managers see ethical behaviour. Our research relies on Carroll's moral management theory.

The current article focuses on how top managers' values and habits influence ethical intervention and proactive ethical leadership, and identifies the conditions under which moral managers can act as influential drivers in shaping and strengthening organisational ethical culture.

We conducted 12 semi-structured narrative interviews with top managers in Estonia, who described the ethical conflicts they encountered in workplace situations. Based on our study results, we demonstrate the model of moral managers regarding values and habits in the context of unethical behaviour occurring in everyday business life. By clarifying how managerial values shape ethical reasoning and action across diverse ethical situations, stronger support can be provided for leaders in cultivating an ethical climate that reinforces integrity and reduces unethical behaviour.

Introduction

Managers and leaders are moral agents whose moral compass sheds light on ethical behaviour within whole organisations. In many organisations, there are written rules and a code of conduct; however, the example set by top management is a key factor in shaping the reality of organisational behaviour. There are many studies about ethical leadership (Treviño and Nelson 2017; Zhu et al. 2019), ethical decision-making (Brown et al. 2005; Kaptein 2008; Mayer et al. 2010), handling ethical problems (Chung and Monroe 2007; Hiekkataipale and Lämsä 2017; den Nieuwenboer et al. 2025), and many others. Yet, an important gap remains – we still know comparatively little about ethical intervention as situated executive practice; specifically, which values trigger intervention, what kinds of unethical situations elicit flexible versus inflexible responses, and how leaders' moral habits translate values into action under social and organisational constraints. This is especially salient given Treviño et al.'s (2000) distinction: leaders may be 'moral persons' yet fail as 'moral managers' if they do not actively foreground ethics, communicate standards, and consistently reinforce them. Wainryb and Pasupathi (2015) suggest that there is a need to look more deeply into the degree to which moral values are prioritised in the context of competing moral and non-moral concerns, as well as how values shape individuals' responses to life situations.

The current research aims to understand the role of values in ethical intervention by top managers in many layers. First, we analyse which managers' values (Rokeach and Ball-Rokeach 1989) – terminal or instrumental – are triggers for intervention. Second, we would like to understand what the role of moral habits (Carroll 2003) is in this context. Third, we ask what kind of managers are proactive in building and empowering an ethical climate. Analysing the results of 12 semi-structured interviews, we contribute to the theory of ethical leadership. We visualise the values and habits, moral management types, and interventions to unethical behaviour. The model helps to understand in which circumstances moral managers could be influencers in building a new level of organisational ethical culture.

The study contributes an empirically grounded account of everyday ethical practice by top managers, a nuanced application of Carroll's moral management types to contemporary executive practice, and implications for cultivating ethical climates – clarity, discussability, congruency, and sanctionability – through leaders' routine behaviours and interpretations of subordinates' conduct (Kaptein 2008; Mayer et al. 2010). More broadly, we respond to calls to move beyond survey correlations to understanding how leaders apply ethics at work, enriching theory and providing actionable guidance for executive development and governance.

Theoretical approach

Managers who demonstrate ethical leadership behaviours significantly influence the ethical climate of their organisations. This leadership style involves setting clear ethical standards, modelling ethical behaviour, and holding employees accountable (Mulki et al. 2009; Racelis 2025). When these practices are sustained, leaders contribute to a positive ethical climate, defined by shared values, norms, and expectations, which in turn encourages ethical behaviour and lowers the likelihood of unethical practices. Consistent with a social learning perspective, followers tend to imitate ethical leaders because these leaders are viewed as attractive and credible role models who demonstrate normatively appropriate conduct (Brown et al 2005). Ethical climate is therefore not simply an organisational given but a social product that managers continually reproduce through daily decisions, policies, and enforcement practices (Demirtas and Akdogan 2015).

Ethical leadership theory (Brown et al. 2005) is centred around two primary components: the leader as a moral person and the leader as a moral manager. These components are essential for fostering an ethical organisational culture and guiding ethical behaviour among followers.

The concept of the leader as a moral person emphasises the intrinsic qualities and behaviours that define the leader's character. Key attributes include honesty, fairness, and care (Zhu et al. 2019; Limbore et al. 2025), which align with Rokeach and Ball-Rokeach's (1989) instrumental values. Ethical leaders are expected to demonstrate honesty in their actions and decisions, ensuring transparency and building trust within the organisation. Fairness involves treating all individuals with equity and justice, ensuring that decisions are made impartially and without favouritism. Ethical leaders show genuine concern for the well-being of their followers, fostering a supportive and nurturing environment. The role of the leader as a moral manager involves actively promoting and reinforcing ethical standards within the organisation. This includes role modelling, reinforcing ethics, and discipline (Zhu et al. 2019; Pircher Verdorfer and Peus 2020). Ethical leaders serve as role models by exemplifying ethical behaviour, which followers are likely to copy. Leaders reinforce ethical behaviour through policies, rewards, and sanctions that align with ethical standards and promote followers' well-being (Bedi et al. 2016). Ethical leaders are responsible for disciplining unethical behaviour, ensuring that there are consequences for actions that violate ethical norms.

In the present study, we approach moral management from two angles. First, we draw on Carroll's typology of managerial moral orientations, which distinguishes immoral, amoral, and moral managers. Second, we examine managers' ethical habits and values to better understand how ethical leader types translate into concrete interventions when subordinates behave unethically (Carroll 2000, 2003, 2021).

According to Carroll's (2000) typology, the strategy used by immoral managers exploits opportunities and cuts corners wherever it is helpful; norms and values are obstacles that have to be overcome while aiming profit and self-interest. Carroll believes that immoral managers are in minority and the impact of external stakeholders forces them to change or disappear from a management position.

Carroll further differentiates two forms of amoral management: intentional and unintentional. Intentional managers follow the mindset that moral considerations have no relevance in organisational or business life. Morality and business are different dimensions. They do not see the moral consequences of their decisions and acts. Unintentional amoral managers are generally well-intentioned, they are not denying ethics, but in daily business they just do not take into consideration ethical aspects. They are silent about ethics. Acts of unintentional managers are mostly driven by law and regulation, not more. Carroll believes that unintentionally amoral managers are the majority of managers, and they are moving toward being moral managers.

By contrast, moral managers aim to live by sound ethical standards and often seek to act beyond what law and regulation require. Importantly, moral managers are also moral persons: they embody ethical conduct personally and reinforce it institutionally. Carroll argues that moral managers can function as creators and carriers of moral standards within stakeholder networks, demonstrating stakeholder inclusiveness and a strong concern for fairness (Carroll 2003). Carroll's approach toward moral managers is supported by many other researchers (Kaptein 2008; Ciulla 2014; Zhu et al. 2019).

Moving on to the second angle, we examine managers' ethical habits and values. Ethical habits, developed through consistent practice and reinforcement, help managers and employees to internalise ethical standards (Decrinis 2025). These habits contribute to a sustainable ethical climate and reduce the likelihood of ethical blind spots. Building on Carroll (2003), we focus on seven habits of highly moral leaders: 'a) strong ethical character (courage; values-driven conduct), b) passion to do right (internal moral motivation), c) moral proactivity (anticipate issues; role-model; keep ethics in the foreground), d) stakeholder inclusiveness (consider impacts on all legitimate stakeholders), e) obsession with fairness (distributive, procedural, and compensatory justice), f) principled decision- making (explicit values; "high road" commitments), g) integration of ethics and management wisdom (no "ethics vs. business" split)'.

Finally, we integrate a values perspective because leaders' interventions are rarely driven by rules alone. Values-oriented ethics programmes that emphasise core principles (e.g. integrity and fairness) are often more effective at reducing unethical behaviour than compliance-oriented programmes

that rely primarily on monitoring and sanctions (Rokeach and Ball-Rokeach 1989; Porto et al. 2024). Within values theory, terminal values are end-goals that managers strive to achieve, such as a stable ethical climate or a long-term organisational success. Terminal values often drive managers to implement comprehensive ethical programmes and foster a culture of integrity (Demirtas and Akdogan 2015; Racelis 2025; Gonçalves 2026). Instrumental values, in turn, refer to preferred modes of conduct, such as honesty, responsibility, and fairness, that function as means for reaching those end-states. Managers with strong instrumental values are likely to engage in ethical leadership behaviours, setting a positive example for their subordinates and promoting ethical practices within the organisation (Buchko 2007; Demirtas and Akdogan 2015; Hernández-Cuadra and Fernández-Fernández 2024).

Nevertheless, acting ethically is far from being a black-and-white practice. According to the strain theory (Agnew 1992; De Clercq and Dakhli 2009; Su et al. 2019), unethical behaviour can occur when personal strains and frustrations lead to deviant means, such as telling lies or violating the law in one's own or an enterprise's interest, with an aim to achieve desired goals. People working in challenging business and technology management positions require a mature moral identity that will support their ethical principles even in ambivalent business contexts. According to Klebe et al.'s (2022) research, followers experience less positive leadership and more abusive leadership when leaders are strained.

Materials and methods

The current study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured narrative face-to-face interviews as the primary data source. Narrative interviewing is well suited to understand experience and behaviour (Anderson and Kirkpatrick 2016; Hill et al. 2024) and, when coupled with a semi-structured guide, supports exploration of the values embedded in participants' stories and the reasoning underpinning their actions (Ntinda 2018). The only criterion to be interviewed was current or prior experience in a top-managerial position. We used purposive sampling, complemented by convenience considerations to ensure access, recognising the attendant risk of sampling bias (e.g. shared professional socialisation or value orientations). To mitigate this risk, we sought heterogeneity across sectors and organisational contexts. Participation was voluntary; interviewees received information about the study and could decline participation, skip questions, or terminate the interview at any point. Research ethics was the ultimate principle in our research process.

Twelve senior managers from diverse industries and organisations participated. Prior to data collection, we piloted the interview guide with a small subset of managers to assess clarity and relevance, which led to some revision in the research instrument. For example, we simplified some technical terms and added targeted follow-up prompts to probe ethical dilemmas in greater depth. One week before their interview, participants received the guiding questions and were asked to describe a salient ethical dilemma from their managerial practice. This preparation was intended to facilitate rich, example-based narratives about moral conflict and intervention.

Interviews were conducted individually in a confidential setting between February and March 2022, with each lasting 74–117 minutes. Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed iteratively. We first identified whether the described case involved an intervention and then undertook a thematic analysis: the first two authors independently generated the initial codes and candidate themes from repeated readings before reconciling discrepancies through collaborative discussion to produce a consensual codebook. In some cases, we recognised several ethical interventions where the manager acted controversially. In these analyses, we handled those cases by considering different social and organisational constraints. To reduce interpretive bias, the transcripts were read multiple times, and the coding decisions were reviewed across cases by all the authors. The interviews were structured as follows: an introduction and building of a trusty and comfortable atmosphere, followed by narrative storytelling, where the interviewee described ethical dilemmas or unethical incidents and his/her interventions in those situations. Guiding questions were provided when needed to probe deeper into specific ethical dilemmas.

Results

The results are presented in Appendix, which summarises the 12 interview cases by showing how top managers with different moral orientations (moral, amoral, immoral) interpret unethical behaviour and translate their values into (non-)intervention in practice. For each case, the table lists the leader type, the key instrumental values and terminal values expressed in the narrative, the presence/absence of Carroll's (2003) moral leadership habits, and whether intervention occurs (and whether it is more flexible or inflexible).

Case 1

This leader represents **a moral manager** who intervenes consistently to protect organisational climate and long-term trust. He terminated a technically competent employee whose persistent badmouthing and toxic behaviour damaged team morale. His actions are primarily driven by instrumental values such as honesty, respect, and fairness. He demonstrates both flexible and inflexible intervention, depending on the severity of the situation, but intervention is always present. His leadership strategy centres on managing by example, proactive communication, and corrective action when respect and trust are threatened.

Case 2

This leader is **a moral manager** who prioritises values and integrity over profitability. He intervened by terminating a high-performing employee involved in an unethical workplace relationship that damaged fairness and transparency. His intervention was guided by terminal values (family security, wisdom) and instrumental values (honesty, helpfulness, politeness, responsibility). He is committed to developing a fair and transparent organisational culture and applies

both flexible and inflexible interventions, depending on the ethical risk involved.

Case 3

This case illustrates **an immoral manager** who consistently avoids intervention and actively engages in unethical practices himself. His value system is dominated by instrumental values linked to ambition, success, and personal achievement, while terminal values are largely absent. He is willing to sacrifice personal relationships for self-interest and justifies unethical behaviour through rationalisations that frame misconduct as inevitable or philosophically acceptable. Although he recognises ethical norms, he reframes violations as ethically neutral, enabling moral disengagement. Despite occasional expressions of compassion, his kindness remains selective and self-serving.

Case 4

This leader represents **an intentional amoral manager** (Type 2) who understands ethical norms but deliberately avoids interventions. He tolerates unethical behaviour, such as disrespectful conduct in meetings, in order to maintain functionality and results. His reasoning is guided by instrumental values such as capability, pragmatism, and self-control, alongside terminal goals related to family security and a sense of accomplishment. Ethical considerations are recognised but remain secondary to performance outcomes and organisational efficiency.

Case 5

This leader is **a moral manager** who intervenes consistently and primarily inflexibly. His value profile closely resembles Case 1, relying on strong instrumental values such as honesty, fairness, kindness, empathy, and justice. He treats ethics as an integral part of managerial responsibility rather than a reflection and actively builds ethical foundation within the organisation. Ethical intervention is viewed as essential to effective leadership and organisational sustainability.

Case 6

This case describes **a moral manager** guided mainly by instrumental values. The leader recognises that people can make mistakes and emphasises accountability through apology, learning, and corrective commitment. Her intervention style is predominantly flexible, aiming to balance responsibility with compassion. Ethics are embedded in reflective practice, focusing on improvement rather than punishment.

Case 7

This leader represents **an unintentional amoral manager** (Type 1) whose actions are morally unclear. While he employs unethical and manipulative methods, he justifies them as necessary to restore justice and serve the greater good. He perceives himself as a role model and insists on transparency, with profit not being the dominant goal. His decisions are guided primarily by terminal values (salvation, self-respect, sense of accomplishment, world of beauty), while instrumental values are neglected. The case illustrates how strong end-goals can override ethical means.

Case 8

This leader is **an intentional amoral manager** (Type 2) whose primary objective is conflict avoidance. Despite recognising unethical situations, she does not interfere to minimise personal inconvenience and emotional strain. Her behaviour is guided by instrumental values such as politeness, friendliness, and avoidance of conflict. She displays no stable moral habits aligned with ethical leadership, and non-intervention is chosen because action would create additional hassle.

Case 9

This leader is **an intentional amoral manager** (Type 2) who rarely considers ethical implications unless external attention is drawn to the issue. His actions are guided by instrumental values such as logic, responsibility, capability, and obedience, alongside a strong commitment to shareholder interests. Ethics function reactively rather than proactively, and intervention occurs only when legitimacy or accountability is threatened.

Case 10

This case illustrates **an unintentional amoral manager** (Type 1) who intervenes selectively based on instrumental values such as justice, responsibility, protection, and forgiveness. Although the organisation has a zero-tolerance policy toward alcohol use, he forgives a serious violation committed by a high-performing employee. His intervention is relatively inflexible in structure but supportive in intent, focusing on teaching, forgiveness, and offering a second chance rather than strict sanctioning.

Case 11

This leader represents **a moral manager** who intervenes consistently and inflexibly when humanity and dignity are threatened. Company values serve as core organisational principles, and his leadership is grounded in instrumental values such as trust, transparency, valuing people, humanity, and keeping promises. He places strong emphasis on the internal microclimate, believing trust to be the foundation of organisational functioning. Ethical leadership is performed through continuous attention to relationships and organisational culture.

Case 12

This multi-layered case describes **an intentional amoral manager** (Type 2) whose behaviour varies across contexts. He demonstrates strong terminal values (self-respect, social recognition, equality, happiness, world of beauty) and instrumental values (honesty, transparency, sincerity, care). When acting as a middle manager, he leaves an unethical organisational culture to preserve moral identity. However, when confronted with a bribery incident involving a business partner, he acknowledges its unethical nature yet chooses non-intervention to preserve the relationship, effectively permitting the misconduct. The case highlights the tension between stated moral values and situational vulnerability to social pressure and conflict avoidance.

In some cases, managers' morality was diverse. The results showed that the same person (C12, C10) could behave in a contradictory way.

Across the negative cases (immoral leaders, see Appendix), Carroll's seven moral leadership habits are largely absent, even when leaders recognise that something ethically problematic is happening. It means that ethical reflection may exist, but it is separated from intervention and replaced by contextual rationalisations (e.g. cultural reasons, business

reality) or emotion-management strategies (avoiding conflict, withholding truths). However, amoral leaders tend to show partial habits (selectively, and often only when the issue threatens performance, harmony, or legitimacy) or none at all. Some amoral cases still list individual habits (e.g. C7P includes strong character, passion to do right, proactivity, fairness, principled decisions) and lead to decisive action (termination), but this is not described as a stable ethical orientation. Appendix indicates the clearest and most complete presence of Carroll's habits among moral leaders who explicitly name values, keep ethics outstanding, and intervene determinedly. For example, in the moral leader cases (e.g. C1.2, C5, C6), the narrative explicitly ties action to ethical culture-building and internally motivated moral reasoning (not merely compliance).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a theoretically integrated explanation of ethical intervention as a value-based and habit-enabled managerial process. By combining Carroll's (2000) moral management typology, Treviño et al.'s (2000) and Brown et al.'s (2005) distinction between a moral person and a moral manager, and insights from the strain theory, the results represent how ethical leadership is enacted or fails to be enacted in everyday organisational practice.

Consistent with Carroll's (2000, 2003) concept of moral management, leaders classified as moral managers were distinguished not only by their ethical intentions but by their ability to actively promote ethics through habits, intervention, and role modelling. These leaders demonstrated value profiles dominated by kindness- and fairness-oriented instrumental values, often emphasised by terminal values such as self-respect, inner harmony, dignity, or long-term relational trust. Such patterns supported principled ethical reasoning, enabling leaders to evaluate unethical behaviour against stable moral standards rather than situational possibilities. As a result, moral leaders presented the full set of Carroll's moral leadership habits, including moral proactivity, obsession with fairness, principled decision-making, and integration of ethics with management wisdom. This combination consistently concluded in decisive ethical intervention, particularly when core human values were at stake.

The findings extend Treviño et al's moral person / moral manager framework by demonstrating that being a moral person, having personal integrity and ethical awareness, is insufficient on its own. They also need to act as moral managers: communicate ethical expectations, reinforce standards, and sanction unethical behaviour, even when such actions may cause personal or organisational cost. For moral leaders, the instrumental values such as honesty, transparency, fairness, empathy, and responsibility repeatedly appear alongside terminal values such as inner harmony, self-respect, a harmonious team, patient safety, dignity, etc. The representation of Carroll's habits appears to operationalise Treviño's moral manager role, translating internal moral identity into visible and consequential organisational action.

In contrast, amoral leaders, both intentional and unintentional, were characterised by value orientations prioritising pragmatism, tolerance, self-control, and organisational harmony. Their ethical reasoning was predominantly contextual, reflecting what Treviño describes as ethical silence or ethical fading, where moral considerations are acknowledged but not actively integrated into managerial decision-making. These leaders often recognised that something ethically problematic was occurring, yet this recognition did not translate into action. Correspondingly, Carroll's moral leadership habits were present only partially or remained absent, and intervention, if it occurred at all, was selective, reactive, or instrumental, aimed at restoring performance or legitimacy rather than moral order.

For leaders who did not interfere, a repeated logic of action emerged that aligns with Carroll's notion of amoral management. Ethical evaluation was postponed through contextual sensitivity and observation, behaviour was reframed as culturally embedded rather than unethical, and tolerance became a dominant instrumental value. Conflict avoidance and emotional regulation strategies further stopped ethical action, concluding in outcome-oriented justifications that framed misconduct as inevitable or 'part of business reality'. In these cases, ethics remained cognitively present but practically disconnected from leadership action.

Several cases revealed situational inconsistency among amoral leaders with relatively strong ethical awareness. These leaders expressed moral concerns and, in some contexts, demonstrated elements of Carroll's habits, yet held back to interfere when the perceived social or relational cost was high, such as dependence on powerful business partners, fear of damaging trust, or shared financial stakes. This pattern is well explained by the strain theory (Agnew 1992; Klebe et al. 2022), which suggests that social and economic pressures can push individuals toward norm-violating behaviour when conventional means of achieving valued goals become pressured. Rather than reflecting moral blindness, these cases illustrate moral compromise under relational strain, where leaders knowingly tolerate unethical behaviour to preserve critical relationships or organisational stability.

Finally, immoral leaders were characterised by value systems dominated by ambition, performance orientation, autonomy, and personal success. Their ethical reasoning was explicitly self-interested, and Carroll's moral leadership habits were almost entirely absent. While immoral leaders often recognised ethical boundaries, they engaged in systematic moral disengagement, justifying unethical actions as competitively necessary or philosophically acceptable. This aligns closely with Carroll's depiction of immoral management where norms and values are perceived as obstacles to be overcome. In such cases, non-intervention or unethical intervention occurred regardless of whether ethical issues were intentional or unintentional, emphasising the stability of moral disengagement once ethical habits are absent.

Taking our findings and theoretical framework together, we present the process model for ethical intervention grounded in values, moral types, and habits in Fig. 1.

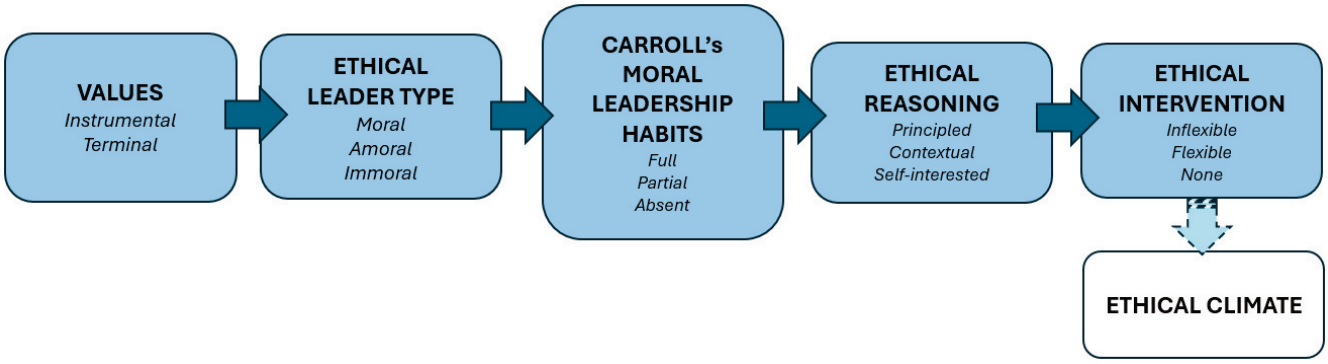

Fig. 1. The process model for ethical intervention.

It proposes that leaders' instrumental and terminal values provide moral direction and shape their ethical leader type (moral, amoral, immoral). From there, leader type is reflected in (and expressed through) two linked mechanisms: the extent to which leaders enact Carroll's moral leadership habits (full/partial/absent), such as strong ethical character, moral proactivity, fairness, principled decision-making, and integrating ethics with management wisdom, and their ethical reasoning style (principled, contextual, or self-interested). These mechanisms together predict whether leaders respond to observed misconduct with decisive intervention, selective intervention, or non-intervention, which ultimately shapes the organisation's ethical climate and (indirectly) subordinates' ethical behaviour.

Study limitations

The study is based on semi-structured narrative interviews interpreted by thematic analysis. While this approach is well suited for understanding experiences and the values embedded in leaders' stories, it does not enable statistical generalisation or causal inference. The process model we propose should therefore be treated as an empirically grounded interpretive framework rather than a causal test of relationships between values, leader type, reasoning, habits, and intervention. The cases are participants' reconstructions of significant ethical dilemmas. Narratives are vulnerable to recall bias (selective memory, post-hoc rationalisation) and social desirability effects (presenting oneself as fair, honest, or humane). This is particularly relevant when leaders describe interventions: the moral framing may be amplified, and organisational constraints or conflicting motives may be softened. Because we did not triangulate accounts with other informants (e.g. subordinates, human resources, peers) or documentary evidence, we cannot verify the accuracy of events, the proportionality of interventions, or how others experienced the same incidents. Mapping narratives into Carroll's ethical leader types and the seven moral leadership habits requires interpretive judgment. Even with independent coding, repeated readings, and compromise through discussion, some coding decisions (e.g. whether a habit is truly present vs implied) remain disputable (e.g. Case 12).

Therefore, we recommend that future researchers extend our findings through a quantitative perspective. For example, next studies could operationalise Carroll's moral types and the moral leadership habits into validated survey instruments (supplemented by scenario-based vignettes), enabling larger-sample tests of whether the proposed process model holds across sectors and contexts, and under what boundary conditions.

Conclusion

This study examined how top managers translate ethical values into action when confronted with unethical behaviour in everyday organisational settings. The findings demonstrate that ethical intervention is not merely a matter of individual character or formal rules but the outcome of an interconnected process linking values, ethical reasoning, moral leadership habits, and situational pressures.

The findings contribute theoretically by showing that ethical leadership is best understood as a configurational process rather than a stable trait. Values provide moral direction, but it is the presence of moral leadership habits that enables leaders to translate ethical intention into action under pressure. In this sense, habits function as a critical implementation mechanism linking ethical awareness to organisational practice. The proposed intervention model can serve as a reflective tool for organisations seeking to strengthen ethical culture and support leaders in navigating morally complex situations.

Overall, the study emphasises that ethical leadership in practice requires more than good intentions: it depends on the alignment of values, reasoning, habits, and organisational conditions that enable leaders to act ethically when it matters most.

Data availability statement

Data are available upon request due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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Appendix

Case profiles of ethical/unethical leadership: from values to intervention outcomes

Leader type	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Habits (Carroll 2003)	Intervention occurs
Moral leaders				
C1.1P and C1.2P **Male, age group 40–44** Toxic behaviour and smearing of competitors by an employee: the leader terminates the employment. He is a person who not only follows ethical norms but also develops ethical culture within the organisation. His leadership habits are reflective and internally motivated: he acts ethically not out of fear of sanctions, but because he believes it is the right thing to do.	Transparency Politeness Obedience Honesty Fairness Positivity	Inner harmony Self-respect Sense of accomplishment Harmonious and motivated team	1. Strong ethical character. The leader repeatedly emphasises honesty and transparency toward clients and employees ('I say things as they are'). 2. Passion to do right. Even a small lie or exaggeration 'bothers him deeply'. 3. Moral proactivity. He intervenes when employees use unethical sales tactics or display toxic behaviour to protect organisational values. 4. Stakeholder inclusiveness? 5. Obsession with fairness. He refuses to badmouth competitors even if it might bring short-term benefit. 6. Principled decision-making. The leader describes his team as his own reflection – most have worked with him for a long time and share his principles. 7. Integration of ethics and management wisdom. His consistent behaviour strengthens moral authority and trust within the organisation.	Inflexible He demonstrates that ethical leadership is not merely about compliance with rules but about self-awareness, transparency, and leading by example.
C2.1P and C2.2P **Male, age group 45-49** Sexual relationship between two individuals at the workplace: the leader interferes. If it is an unethical relationship, the leader terminates the employment. Otherwise, the leader intervenes because the action jeopardises the fair completion and distribution of tasks and overall transparency within the organisation.	Selflessness Honesty Helpfulness Politeness Leading by example Chivalry Responsibility Transparency Logic	Family security Wisdom Salvation Equality Sense of happiness Self-respect Personal integrity and inner peace	1. Strong ethical character. The leader is disturbed by dishonesty, denial, and avoidance of responsibility ('When you're caught, admit and apologise. Don't run away'). 2. Passion to do right. He describes a powerful inner drive to act according to what 'feels right', even when it is inconvenient or costly (asking a valued employee to leave). 3. Moral proactivity. He takes initiative in addressing unethical relationships to protect company culture and prevent conflicts of interest. 4. Stakeholder inclusiveness. He believes ethical leadership is a balance between relationships and business needs. 5. Obsession with fairness. He emphasises equality and fairness regardless of gender, position, or power. 6. Principled decision-making. He balances ethical principles with empathy and business needs; he embodies moral pragmatism (depends on practical consequences). 7. Integration of ethics and management wisdom. He keeps promises rigorously ('An agreement is an agreement – even a minor one').	Inflexible and flexible His ethical reasoning shows that he considers not only formal rules but also the unwritten moral code shaping the culture of the organisation. He believes that ethical leadership is fundamentally about balance – between human relationships and business needs, between emotions and rational decisions.

Abbreviations: C – case, P – positive case (ends with intervention), N – negative case (ends with non-intervention)

Continued on the next page

Appendix. *Continued*

Leader type	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Habits (Carroll 2003)	Intervention occurs
Moral leaders				
C5.1P, C5.2P, and C5.3P **Male, age group 50–54** Pregnant employee treated unjustly by HR, disloyalty and breach of a non-competition agreement and autocratic middle-management not tolerated. The leader not only rejects unethical outcomes but actively makes decisions that bring the situation back to fairness and humane treatment, supporting ethical culture rather than treating ethics as plain compliance.	Honesty Fairness Kindness Empathy Justice	Happiness Wisdom Family security Freedom Inner harmony Loyalty	1. Strong ethical character. He frames the main issue as injustice and 'attacking a weaker-position person', and he has the courage to ignore a senior HR decision when it violates humane treatment. 2. Passion to do right. He connects ethical action to being able to 'look in the mirror' and feel at peace with himself. 3. Moral proactivity. He builds preventive practices (e.g. a consultation rule before firing) and intervenes early to avoid escalation. 4. Stakeholder inclusiveness. In the pregnancy case, he explicitly weighs the employee's dignity and emotional state as well as the wider organisational impact (others seeing a crying employee, reputational harm). 5. Obsession with fairness. He repeatedly returns to justice as a guiding principle. 6. Principled decision-making. He justifies decisions with clear principles and explicit commitments (e.g. 'our agreement / work contract says no competition'). 7. Integration of ethics and management wisdom. He treats ethical handling as good management: correcting unfairness prevents reputational damage.	Inflexible His moral reasoning is reflective and internally driven rather than compliance-driven.
C6P **Female, age group 50–54** Dishonest behaviour by an employee providing health services occurs: the employee is hiding, denying mistakes, and refusing to take responsibility for her work. The leader intervenes.	Honesty Transparency Responsibility Humanity Caring / valuing others Empathy/compassion	Human dignity Psychological safety at work	1. Strong ethical character. She explicitly states that lying is intolerable. 2. Passion to do right. Her moral reasoning is described as something that comes from 'inside', and patient safety is chosen because it carries strong emotional weight for her. 3. Moral proactivity. She promotes and strengthens a blame-free / just culture to prevent future harm. 4. Stakeholder inclusiveness. Her decisions explicitly consider patients (safety and harm prevention), employees (dignity, support after an error), and the organisation (process improvement). 5. Obsession with fairness. She treats unintentional errors through a fair, learning-oriented response but applies procedural justice when misconduct is intentional. 6. Principled decision-making. Her principles are explicit: people generally do not come to work intending to cause harm, and leadership must first understand whether the incident was intentional. 7. Integration of ethics and management wisdom. She analyses incidents step-by-step, distinguishing individual vs system causes.	Flexible As a moral leader, she consistently tries to balance patient safety, staff dignity, and organisational learning. She treats ethical practice as something you build through reflection and learning, not as 'being perfect'.

Abbreviations: C – case, P – positive case (ends with intervention), N – negative case (ends with non-intervention)

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Appendix. *Continued*

Leader type	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Habits (Carroll 2003)	Intervention occurs
Moral leaders				
C11P **Male, age group 55–59** Despite good results, the employee's disregard for people, cooperation, and respect is seen as ethically unacceptable. The leader intervenes because high performance cannot justify behaviour that damages the internal working climate and violates core organisational values.	Trust Transparency Valuing people Humanity Keeping promises Fairness Valuing teamwork	Self-respect Happiness Inner harmony Trustworthy and humane organisational climate Long-term relational trust Human dignity	1. Strong ethical character. Courage, values-driven conduct. 2. Passion to do right. Acting against his values would 'feel bad'. 3. Moral proactivity. Ethics are kept continuously in the foreground through values discussions, storytelling, and role modelling. 4. Stakeholder inclusiveness. Decisions explicitly consider impacts on individuals, teams, and the wider organisation. 5. Obsession with fairness. He rejects outcomes achieved at others' expense and insists on consistency between stated values and actual behaviour. 6. Principled decision-making. He draws clear boundaries: values are non-negotiable, even if short-term performance suffers. 7. Integration of ethics and management wisdom. Ethics and effective management are fully integrated; protecting trust and humanity is treated as essential to organisational sustainability.	Inflexible and flexible Intervention is initially flexible (warnings, dialogue, explanation, opportunity to change behaviour) but becomes inflexible when value violations persist. Repeated disregard for humanity, teamwork, or respect results in termination of employment, even for high performers.
Amoral leaders				
C4N amoral intentional (Type 2) **Male, age group 45–49** When faced with disrespectful or confrontational behaviour in meetings, the leader chooses not to intervene, interpreting it as a cultural pattern rather than misconduct. He thinks ethically but acts pragmatically respecting others' values without enforcing his own. His ethical reasoning is primarily guided by instrumental values such as tolerance, pragmatism, and self-control. His terminal values, such as harmony and trust, function as long-term aspirations rather than criteria for moral judgment.	Tolerance Capability Pragmatism Respect Self-control Reliability	Trust and long-term legitimacy (building continuing trust within multicultural or complex environments) Organisational harmony (maintaining functional and culturally balanced working relationships)	Carroll's list is absent. 1. Non-intervention as a managerial strategy. Ethical passivity is intentional – the ethical evaluation depends on context, not universal principles. 2. Contextual sensitivity and observation before judgment. The leader consistently prefers to observe before acting, stating that 'you must first understand how the organisation operates before taking a position'. 3. Respect for cultural and social differences. He avoids judging or interfering in culturally embedded behaviour. He sees respect as understanding others' context rather than enforcing one's values. 4. Pragmatic and outcome-oriented reasoning. The leader repeatedly emphasises results and organisational effectiveness over moral or emotional considerations. 5. Value of patience and trust-building. He builds trust through listening, non-judgment, and giving others space to act.	No intervention A leader who is not overly unethical but intentionally separates ethics from managerial decision-making. Ethical reflection is seen as context-dependent or secondary to achieving organisational effectiveness, cultural sensitivity, or strategic outcomes.

Abbreviations: C – case, P – positive case (ends with intervention), N – negative case (ends with non-intervention)

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Appendix. *Continued*

Leader type	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Habits (Carroll 2003)	Intervention occurs
Amoral leaders				
C7P amoral unintentional (Type1) **Female, age group 50–54** The manager describes entering an organisation with a strongly autocratic culture and then facing a serious interpersonal-misconduct incident involving an employee who was sending threatening messages (secretly) to a colleague. She uses a strategic, negotiation-based approach, which she herself recognises as involving manipulation, to bring the truth to the surface.	Justice Obedience Honesty	Salvation Self-respect Sense of accomplishment World of beauty	Partial Carroll's habits: Strong ethical character (stays balanced, passion to do right). She is morally proactive and obsessed with fairness. She is principled in decision-making (explicit values, 'high road' commitment).	Inflexible Termination of the employment but with mutual understanding and keeping respect
C8N amoral intentional (Type 2) **Female, age group 55–59** The ethical dilemma centres on information as power and potential manipulation in an organisational setting with internal competition. The manager repeatedly finds herself in situations where she possesses more information than others expect yet fears that full disclosure would intensify conflict.	Politeness Conflict avoidance Friendliness	Open, fear-free ethical climate based on trust (people can speak freely without fear of consequences)	Partial Carroll's habits: Strong ethical self-reflection and intention ('I don't lie') but limited moral courage / proactivity in confronting distortion of truth.	No intervention The leader refrains from intervening and selectively withholds some truths to avoid stirring strong emotions that could lead to quarrels among people.
C9P amoral, intentional **Male, age group 35–39** The company experiences financial difficulties, jeopardising investors' funds. The leader intervenes to seek a solution, resulting in the necessity to terminate the employment of several employees.	Logic Responsibility Capability Obedience	Organisational survival and viability Functioning, sustainable team Trustworthy relationships with stakeholders	Partial Carroll's habits: 1. Proactive sense-making and problem-mapping before acting (turning 'unknown into known', diagnosing root causes). 2. Involving the affected party instead of deciding unilaterally (e.g. bringing the other side into the process rather than 'cutting off' immediately). 3. Developing people through coaching/mentoring routines (habitual investment in growth). 4. Pragmatic containment in crisis (withholding information briefly to prevent broader harm/chaos).	Inflexible Intervention occurs but can be indirect/managed. He intervenes actively through diagnosis, engagement, and decisions; yet, in crisis he may delay full transparency to control harm.

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Appendix. *Continued*

Leader type	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Habits (Carroll 2003)	Intervention occurs
Amoral leaders				
C10P amoral, unintentional (Type2) **Male, age group 65–69** An employee is discovered under the influence of alcohol at the workplace. He receives a reprimand but is not dismissed, even though he violates the code of conduct. The manager makes a rare exception because the employee is extremely good and hard to replace – later acknowledging it as a compromise that still 'pains' him due to the message it could send to others.	Justice Protectiveness Forgiveness Responsibility Loyalty Professionalism	Self-esteem World of beauty Equality Organisational sustainability / survival in crisis	Partial Carroll's habits: 1. Stakeholder inclusiveness and accessibility (any level employee can come, open door). 2. Moral proactivity (changed an unfair practice instantly, later made tough cost-cut decisions). 3. Problem-solving orientation (if no immediate solution, convenes and finds one). 4. Principled self-reflection after value–conflict decisions.	Flexible Reprimands, tough talks, giving a new chance
C12P amoral, intentional **Male, age group 40–44** 1. Cultural differences emerge within the company where the Russian owners show a low attitude toward their workforce, lacking respect and courtesy in their treatment of employees. These activities cause the leader to intervene by departing from the organisation. 2. A business partner decides to take a bribe to continue the business. The leader accepts his partner's unethical action and does not interfere, as avoiding conflict with a close business partner becomes more important than being honest. In this case, the leader aims to maintain harmony with his business partner and sits in his comfort zone yet later regrets consenting to the act of bribery.	Transparency Truth Honesty Being loving Sincerity	Self-respect Social recognition Equality Happiness World of beauty	Partial/inconsistent Carroll's habits: He can show moral identity protection (e.g. leaving an unethical culture), but under social/relational pressure he avoids conflict and permits misconduct rather than acts on the ethical concern.	Inflexible and selective His behaviour varies by context. In one setting, he protects his moral identity by withdrawing from an unethical organisational culture, but intervention does not occur in the focal bribery incident (he acknowledges it is unethical but allows it to preserve the relationship).

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Appendix. *Continued*

Leader type	Instrumental values	Terminal values	Habits (Carroll 2003)	Intervention occurs
Immoral leaders				
C3N **Male, age group 35–39** The leader developed a similar product as a business partner and sent it to the market with some guilty feelings but without any intervention to stop it. Although he recognises when a decision may conflict with moral principles, he chooses not to intervene – justifying it as 'an inevitable situation' and 'part of business reality'.	Ambition Need to be successful Self-discipline and persistence Adaptability (flexibility to justify actions depending on circumstances) Efficiency	Sense of accomplishment Business success and performance Excellence Autonomy and control (freedom to act without moral or emotional constraints)	Carroll's list is absent. Aware of ethical boundaries but willing to cross them when they conflict with business advantage. His reasoning displays moral disengagement, where ethics is perceived as relative, context-dependent, and often incompatible with competitiveness.	No intervention A leader whose primary orientation is toward self-interest and business gain, with ethical considerations playing a secondary role. He is dominated by rational calculation, competitiveness, and outcome-orientation.

Abbreviations: C – case, P – positive case (ends with intervention), N – negative case (ends with non-intervention)

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Eetiline juhtimine praktikas: kvalitatiivne uuring väärtustest, harjumustest ja sekkumistest Eesti tippjuhtide seas

Merle Ojasoo, Karin Reinhold, Marii Haak ja Amit Gupta

Tippjuhid on oma alluvatele nii liidrid kui ka eeskujud. Kuigi eetilise juhtimise kohta on avaldatud palju uuringuid, on seni vähem tähelepanu pööratud sellele, kuidas juhid tegelikult rakendavad eetilisi põhimõtteid oma igapäevases juhtimistöös. Samuti pakub huvi, kuidas tippjuhid ise eetilist käitumist mõtestavad ja milliste põhimõtete järgi nad keerulistes olukordades otsuseid teevad. Käesolev uurimus tugineb Carrolli moraalse juhtimise teooriale ning annab empiiriliselt põhjendatud ülevaate tippjuhtide igapäevasest eetilisest praktikast. Näitame, kuidas moraalse juhtimise eri tüübid avalduvad Eesti tippjuhtide igapäevases tegevuses.

Viisime läbi 12 poolstruktureeritud narratiivintervjuud tippjuhtidega, kes kirjeldasid eetilisi konflikte, millega nad on tööolukordades kokku puutunud. Tulemusi analüüsides vaatlesime, kuidas tippjuhtide väärtused ja harjumused mõjutavad eetilist sekkumist ning proaktiivset eetilist juhtimist ning millistel tingimustel saavad moraalsed juhid tegutseda mõjusa jõuna organisatsiooni eetilise kultuuri kujundamisel ja tugevdamisel. Tulemuste põhjal esitleme moraalse juhi mudeli, mis käsitleb väärtuste ja harjumuste rolli igapäevases ärikeskkonnas esineva ebaeetilise käitumise kontekstis. Töö laiem eesmärk on liikuda edasi üksnes küsitlusandmete korrelatsioonidest ning mõista sügavamalt, kuidas juhid eetikat praktikas töökohal rakendavad. Nii rikastab uurimus nii teooriat kui ka pakub praktilisi suuniseid juhtide arendamiseks ja organisatsiooni juhtimise tugevdamiseks. Lisaks toob uurimus esile, kuidas juhtide igapäevased käitumisviisid ja tõlgendused alluvate tegevuse kohta aitavad kujundada eetilist kliimat.