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# Leadership Styles and Their Influence on Ethical Decision-Making in Organizations: Synthesis of the Literature

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## Abstract

Leadership styles significantly influence organizational outcomes, including ethical decision-making. This conceptual study investigates how four major styles – autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, and transformational – influence leaders' moral decisions. Despite growing attention, ethical breaches continue, highlighting gaps in understanding the complex dynamics that influence principled behavior, especially when competing priorities arise. The situational leadership and Vroom-Yetton decision models offer valuable frameworks. The goal is to review literature that contrasts leadership approaches and their relationships with ethical judgments. The issue is that conflicting findings exist regarding whether certain styles promote values-attentive decisions or whether contextual factors exert greater influence. A lack of shared ethical definitions further undermines consistency. Analysis will reveal whether leadership styles influence moral behavior. Key findings show that while all leaders face ethical dilemmas, transformational leadership possesses the greatest potential to foster ethical climates through inspiring vision and purpose, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and motivation. However, it appears that character is more crucial than style. Leaders, as moral individuals, place integrity, humility, and service at the heart of their decisions. Moral managers uphold ethical standards and accountability through communication, policies, and consequences. This study fills gaps by consolidating emerging insights into the dynamics linking leadership approaches and ethical decision elements. The findings highlight the importance of ethical consciousness in shaping an overarching vision that permeates culture. While context and style play a role, principled leaders view ethics as a guiding value integrated into choices, not tradeoffs. Further research can help clarify leadership predictors of moral behavior.

**Keywords:** *Leadership Styles, Ethical, Decision-Making, Organizations*

## 1.0 Introduction

Becoming a leader involves navigating a multitude of choices and making regular decisions. While every decision-maker desires a simple, four- or five-step approach to ensure optimal outcomes, ethical dilemmas often present a complex challenge. Unlike routine decisions, the certainty of future choices diminishes in the face of ethical considerations (Handy & Russell, 2018). The Vroom-Yetton-Jago model offers a structured approach to navigating ethical dilemmas, research suggests, leading to increased leader effectiveness and team satisfaction (Vignesh, 2020). Northouse (2016) emphasizes the inherent presence of ethical concerns in every decision-making context, shaping leaders' reactions and guiding their choices. In today's globalized world, characterized by technological advancements and the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, leaders must excel in several areas. They require strategic thinking, initiative, and the ability to inspire a shared vision across all levels. Crucially, they must make well-considered judgments even in unpredictable environments (Ang'ana & Chiroma, 2021). Vignesh (2020) argues that leaders need both astuteness and a rational decision-making process.

A structured methodology like the Vroom-Yetton model provides valuable structure and consistency to what might otherwise seem like an intuitive or idiosyncratic process. It also helps identify the most effective path to a decision, emphasizing the importance of the situation at hand rather than individual traits or preferred decision-making styles (Vignesh, 2020). Researchers and leadership experts have proposed a participatory theory of leadership, suggesting that a company's performance hinges on the degree to which leaders share or retain decision-making power. This theory helps assess leader effectiveness (Vroom & Jago, 2007; as cited by Kayode et al., 2014). Leadership can be understood as a set of behaviors exhibited over time, employing diverse styles that adapt to context and conditions (Mathema, 2006; as cited by Tiwari, 2021). Notably, leadership styles and conduct are inextricably linked. Studying leadership styles, therefore, involves examining how leaders fulfill their responsibilities, wield power and influence, and approach decision-making (Mathema, 2006; as cited by Tiwari, 2021). This conceptual study examines four leadership styles - autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, and transformational - and their respective influences on ethical decision-making within an organization.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

Leaders in organizations face daily challenges related to decision-making (Ejimabo, 2015). This skill is crucial, as every organization's very existence hinges on its leaders' ability to make decisions that impact all members. Leadership decisions involve significant resource commitments and have a profound impact on a company's overall performance and long-term success (Ejimabo, 2015). Carvalho and Abe (2018) argue that every sound decision arises from considering various elements impacting the organization. Each element's influence varies, potentially indicating the company's viability (positive decision), infeasibility (negative decision), or remaining inconclusive (Carvalho & Abe, 2018). To determine "good," we must first identify the core principles guiding behavior (Dignum, 2019). Ethical and cultural values are subjective, so understanding how ethical decisions are made within a specific ethical framework, in addition to different leadership styles and their influences, is crucial. This paper focuses on a key factor: how ethical decision-making, shaped by various influences, affects leaders' choices.

## 1.2 Research Questions

This study focuses on the following key research question in light of the aforementioned problem statement:

- i. How do leadership styles influence ethical decision-making in organizations?
- ii. The following sub-questions are used to explore this question:
- iii. How does each leadership style influence how leaders make decisions?
- iv. What if any, are the factors influencing ethical decision-making?

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study of leadership styles and ethical decision-making is informed by key theories that provide useful lenses. The section outlines relevant frameworks on situational leadership and the Vroom-Yetton-Jago decision model. These perspectives contextually analyze interactions between leaders and followers, recognizing different scenarios call for suitable leadership approaches. Additionally, they systematically incorporate multiple factors and stakeholder participation levels into moral decision processes - augmenting rational determination of most appropriate solutions.

### 2.1.1 Situational Theory

The situational approach, developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969a) and grounded on Reddin's (1967) 3-D management style theory, centers on leadership in settings (Northouse, 2016; p.93). The theory's assumption, according to Northouse (2016), is that diverse conditions call for a diverse range of leadership styles to be employed, and being an effective leader, according to this perspective, entails changing one's approach to the demands of varied scenarios. As Northouse (2016) points out, the situational method mandates that leaders adjust their approach in light of their team members' skill sets and dedication. Effective leaders are able to recognize the needs of their followers and adapt their strategies to meet those needs in a way that is authentic to them. According to situational theory, leaders should select the kind of response that is most suitable for the given set of events and situations in order to maximize their effectiveness (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). It's possible, according to Amanchukwu et al. (2015), that certain types of decision-making are better adapted to certain kinds of leadership styles.

### 2.1.2 The Vroom-Yetton-Jago Model

As a framework for making decisions based on situational leadership, the Vroom-Yetton-Jago Decision Model is unique (Vignesh, 2020). The model, according to Vignesh, 2020, is designed to assist one find the optimal decision-making strategy and leadership style to follow, based on the current conditions, and can be utilized by anyone, irrespective of status or leadership role, and aids to choose the right style of management in different contexts. According to Janse (2018), when making a decision, a few factors should be considered: *The decision's impact* and how crucial it is to find the proper solution. Higher-quality decisions require more members to participate. *Involvement and Collaboration* - how crucial it is for everyone in a team to consent to a choice, and how this affects the level of participation, and finally *if there's limited time*, a swift autocratic method may be more ideal, as there's little time to lose in some instances, but if there's a lot of time, more team members can be included in the decision-making process (Janse, 2018; Vignesh, 2020). How these aspects affect the circumstance determines the appropriate leadership style and decision technique.

## 2.2 Leadership Styles

Ethical leadership involves leading through ethical values, relationships, and decisions that consider moral implications. According to Brown et al. (2005), "ethical leaders exhibit concern for people, ethical awareness and decision making, motivate and encourage followers, empower others, and manage ethical accountability." When making decisions, ethical leaders consider morality and are more likely to respect rules and norms promoting ethical conduct (Mayer et al., 2010). The choices leaders make also reflect their personal ethics, values and principles (Northouse, 2016). Arar and Saiti (2022) outline four key steps in ethical decision-making including: recognizing moral issues involved, making ethical analyses weighing duties and consequences, forming moral intentions, and ethical actions. However, contexts and situational factors mediate how different leadership styles approach ethical choices. Transformational leadership in particular focuses on inspiring moral vision, intellectually stimulating followers, and modeling ethical accountability, which evidence links to ethical climates and culture (Zhu et al., 2011). According to Kayode et al. (2014), the process of exerting influence on other persons in order to bring about the desired outcome and accomplishment of a common objective is one practical definition of leadership that is universal. Leadership is additionally described as a process through which leaders can inspire followers and followers inspire leaders (Northouse, 2016). Early scholars divided leadership into three categories: authoritarian or autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire (Kayode et al., 2014), with transformational leadership gaining prominence in recent years. Assessing leadership styles is a major challenge, Kayode et al. (2014) opine. Understanding why there are so many various leadership styles requires first gaining an awareness of the context, which is vital. Since Frederick Taylor offered the world scientific management (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017), the international business community has made a lot of progress, and as Buchanan (2013) notes, the globe has gone through many stages of leadership since the beginning of the 20th century.

In addition, a variety of elements can aid in establishing the sort of leadership style most appropriate and/or when to use a distinct or combinations of leadership styles, according to Amanchukwu et al. (2015). These factors as defined by Ibara (2010, pp. 74-76; as cited in Amanchukwu et al., 2015): include: 1) *the organization size*, where numerous organizations have a propensity to form and, as they increase, to splinter into smaller groups where actual decision-making power is concentrated, and as firms and organizations develop in size and complexity, there is a tendency for decision-making to become increasingly consolidated, 2) *Level of contact or collaboration*, organizational contact or collaboration in this paradigm, is referred to as interpersonal style including two or more individuals centered on collective and organizational structures targeted at attaining objectives (Ololube, 2012; as cited in Amanchukwu et al., 2015), and considering the ambiguity that most circumstances in organizations entail, leaders must engage their employees, 3) *Members personalities*, personality traits of teams and other supervisors/leaders within an organization might impact its leadership style. Some individuals react more strongly than others to particular leadership styles, 4) *Congruence of objectives*, the phrase congruence of objectives refers to the company that guarantees that all of its activities and operations are promoting the attainment of its goals, and based on the extent of goal congruence in a company, different leadership styles may be required, and 5) *Level of Decision Making*, which means that the strength of decision-making, and the fact that strategic leaders make good decisions or conclusions that end in desirable organizational outcomes, may be one way to distinguish

effective leaders from ineffective leaders (Schoderbek et al., 1988; as cited in Amanchukwu et al., 2015).

Amanchukwu et al. (2015) posit that the style of leadership required is influenced by the setting of decision-making, which is the operational specialty of the company. The majority of successful leaders, regardless of their favored style, base organizational decisions on a leadership process and philosophy. This demands a great level of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and contextual influences within and without the institution, none of which occurs by chance (Rooke & Torbert, 2005; as cited by Gandolfi & Stone, 2017). Leaders are required to demonstrate verifiable ability and to maintain a reputation for professional knowledge and high credibility by resolving significant challenges, making solid decisions, and offering sound counsel (Oginde, 2011). Top managers in some parts of the world have been criticized for use of top-down, command-and-control leadership techniques to manage their followers, which often leads to negative responses from their employees and hinders amicable relations between the two groups (Akinbode & Fagbohunde, 2012; as cited in Abasilim et al., 2019). A brief overview of four categories of leadership styles namely, authoritarian or autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, and transformational styles are briefly discussed.

### **2.2.1 Autocratic Style**

According to Khan et al. (2015), this is commonly regarded as the classical technique. The authoritarian or autocratic leadership style is one where the leader, according to Khan et al. (2015) holds as much control and decision-making power as possible without consulting or allowing employees to contribute. The environment of incentive is generated by developing an organized set of rewards and penalties, and employees are expected to accept directives without receiving any clarifications, nor are they allowed to ask any questions (Khan et al., 2015). In the autocratic style of leadership, the leader acts as the knowledge custodian; they neither consult nor interact with their subordinates, and they make all of the decisions based on their own preferences. In the past 30 years, this leadership style has been widely criticized, according to Khan et al. (2015). Organizations with more authoritarian leaders, according to some research, have a greater absenteeism and turnover rate than those with few.

### **2.2.2 Democratic Style**

Democratic leadership focuses on meaningful engagement and decision-making in order to develop grounds for respectful interactions, collaborative partnerships, and active cooperation (Kilicoglu, 2018). By establishing a politically informed commitment to justice for all, it facilitates the construction of social, learning, and culturally relevant institutions, in part through the use of techniques for accomplishment and the facilitation of specific dialogues and challenges (Gale & Densmore, 2010; as cited in Kilicoglu, 2018). Dike and Madubueze (2019) assert that managers that use democratic leadership styles are better able to make sound judgments, work collaboratively with others, and delegate some responsibilities. According to Khan et al. (2015), this style of leadership requires the leader to act as a coach who has the last word, but obtains data from employees prior to making any decision. The democratic style of leadership empowers the subordinates. Empowerment here entails providing the appropriate skills and information for assigned goal accomplishment as well as assisting group decision-making; a democratic leader's main responsibility is to ensure democratic discussion while making group decisions.

Responsibility for making decisions and resolving issues is shared by democratic leaders (Wachira et al., 2018).

### 2.2.3 Laissez-faire Style

The laissez-faire style of leadership has an unappealing quality when it comes to developing trust (Bass, 1985; as cited by Yasir et al., 2016). Employees' confidence in their leaders necessitates the presence of the leaders, as well as their continued support and involvement. Laissez-faire leadership, on the other hand, entails a lack of direction and little or no involvement with subordinates (Northouse, 2016). This leadership style is defined by a lack of involvement, a lack of interest, a lack of presence when it is essential, and a failure to notice both successes and difficulties. Rather than giving directives, this type of leadership encourages individuals to make their own choices (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Koech & Namusonge, 2012; Solomon, 2016; as cited in Gemedu & Lee, 2020). In this style of leadership, all power or control is given to the employees, who are responsible for separately establishing goals, making decisions, and resolving issues (Khan et al., 2015).

### 2.2.4 Transformational Leadership Style

Transformational leadership, according to Al Khajeh (2018), focuses on growing subordinates while also taking their needs into consideration. Leaders who emphasize transformational leadership pay close attention to strengthening their employees' whole value system, ethics, abilities, and motivation levels (Al Khajeh, 2018; Kimani, 2021). Kimani (2021) argues that transformational leaders bring remarkable inspiration to followers' goals and moral principles and motivate people to think creatively about challenges and that their power rests on their capacity to inspire others by their words, thoughts, and actions. There is widespread consensus that transformational leadership is one of the most successful styles of leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2016; as cited by Kimani, 2021). There are four components that make up transformational leadership and they include (Avolio & Bass, 1991; Bass & Avolio, 1990b; as cited by Kleefstra, 2019 & Yasir et al., 2016): *idealized influence* which is the extent to which a leader inspires morals, principles, respect, a deep sense of meaning, and a shared sense of purpose in his or her followers; *intellectual stimulation* which is the capacity to embrace contrasting viewpoints and promote thought; *individualized consideration* that recognizes each person's participation; and *inspirational motivation* which is the capacity to inspire and motivate followers.

Zhu et al. (2011; as cited in Northouse, 2014) believe that true transformational leadership favorably influences followers' ethical orientations and moral emotions (e.g., compassion and responsibility), which as a result, ethical decision-making emerges as well as ethical behavior on the part of the followers. In addition, the authors suggest that real transformational leadership is favorably related to group moral atmosphere, decision-making, and ethical behavior (Northouse, 2014; p.163). Leaders who exhibit idealized attributes and idealized earn the recognition and regard of their followers by placing their followers' needs ahead of their own, discussing their most essential beliefs and values, and reinforcing the ethical and moral implications of critical decisions (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985; as cited by Groves & LaRocca, 2011). Based on a number of studies, transformational leaders are those who create an appropriate and adaptable work environment for their followers (Hiwa et al., 2021). This environment gives followers the opportunity to become more engaged and productive, share their thoughts, participate actively in the decision-making process, and advance their careers to higher posts or ranks within the organizational structure

(Tajeddini, 2015, 2016; as cited by Hiwa et al., 2021). Another issue that transformational leadership has a significant impact on is staff fatigue, which can be reduced through this style of leadership (Khan et al., 2020).

### **2.2.5 Ethical Decision-Making**

Ethical considerations may inspire leaders to make appropriate decisions in order to protect the company from unethical actions (Emery, 2016). According to Northouse (2016), ethics deals with the different types of values and principles that an individual or a community considers to be beneficial or acceptable. The ethical theory offers a set of rules or principles that might serve as a guide when determining if something is appropriate or inappropriate, good or bad in a certain circumstance (Northouse, 2016; p.330). Ethical decision-making has more to do with individual morals and values rather than the decision itself. As Brown et al. (2005) put it, "ethical leaders have four characteristics:" As people-oriented and thoughtful leaders, they value and treat their followers fairly, uphold high ethical standards, and take personal responsibility for their actions. They have a broad ethical awareness and prioritize doing what is best for the group over doing what is best for themselves. The choices that leaders make and the way they react to a particular situation are shaped and driven by their ethics, and ethical considerations are always present, whether they are brought up openly or not, in any situation in which decisions need to be made (Northouse, 2016; p.330). Individuals, groups, and organizations all rely on decision-making processes to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage, therefore selecting the best decision style is a difficult task (Mls & Otčenášková, 2013).

## **3.0 Research Methodology**

A qualitative interpretative study utilizing secondary data was conducted to analyze theories and models related to leadership styles and their influence on ethical decision-making. An extensive literature review of publications from 2010-2022 was performed to uncover empirical research on leadership styles (autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, transformational) and decision-making. Databases including EBSCO, SAGE Open, Springer Open, Google Scholar and other peer-reviewed journals were searched using keywords such as "leadership styles," "leadership," "ethical decision-making," and "decision-making." Sources were included if they: (a) were published in English, (b) were published between 2010-2022, (c) empirically examined one of the four leadership styles listed along with decision-making. One paper from 2005 was also included for context. While quality assessment of publications was not conducted, the selected studies met the inclusion criteria. The situational leadership theory and Vroom-Yetton-Jago model of decision-making are discussed.

## **4.0 Results and Contributions**

Leaders, according to situational theory, must be aware of the interests of their subordinates before they can adjust their style of leadership, and in order to succeed as a leader, one must be able to adapt the leadership style to the situation at hand (Northouse, 2016; p.99). The study, having looked at various leadership styles finds that there is a need for leaders to adjust their leadership style in relation to the situation at hand. Additionally, how leaders make decisions will depend not only on their leadership style but studies show that leaders make decisions based on urgency or depending on the type of decision to be made. The study shows that the Vroom-Yetton-Jago Decision Model would be helpful in supporting leaders at all altitudes to make decisions as it helps



one determine the appropriate mode of management to use in a variety of decision-making scenarios.

The study found that leaders make ethical decisions depending on their personality, their values, and their standards and has more to do with the individual rather than the style of leadership. The over-arching question this study sought to answer on how leadership styles influence ethical decision-making in organizations, was answered, in that the study found that ethical decision-making is not necessarily influenced by the leadership styles, but more by the personality of the leader. Of the four leadership styles involved in this study, the transformational leadership style was proven to be the most successful in influencing ethical decision-making as the transformational leader not only considers how decisions affect them but also the rest of the team and seek the well-being of all, and overall, the organization. Transformational leadership style creates a productive work atmosphere that is conducive to the development of fresh and original concepts that will have a positive influence on the business in the long term (Hiwa et al. 2021).

## 5.0 Conclusion

Every leadership style is unique and would play a unique role in various situations within the organization. Different types of leadership serve both similar and unique aims, and their application necessitates distinct approaches. The transformational style of leadership is favored over other types because it encourages followers to increase their decision-making knowledge and skills and enables them to develop leadership qualities (Khan et al., 2015). Additionally, the democratic style of leadership seems appropriate for ethical decision-making as the leader involves the team and collates information, and is not influenced by personal values and beliefs. Given that leaders may be expected to fulfill a variety of roles, do a variety of tasks, or operate in a variety of circumstances, leadership styles should evolve in order to meet the expectations of multiple stakeholders (Park et al., 2019) and decisions should also be made based on the situation at hand and what is most critical for the organization. Training could be provided to leaders or managers in organizations on the use of the Vroom-Yetton-Jago Decision Model which could provide guidance on decision-making in different situations, making them more agile. Further studies could be done on how the different leadership styles influence decision-making and the effect on overall organization performance.

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