

The *Ubuntu* paradox: exploring the tensions and synergies between moral awareness, ethical leadership, and moral courage within urban councils in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between moral awareness, Ubuntu, ethical leadership, and moral courage within urban councils in Zimbabwe. The study was anchored in the positivist paradigm and utilized a cross-sectional survey research design. The population of the study comprised 406 senior, middle managers, and office employees. The target population was made up of 324 office employees, including frontline managers and clerical staff within the six urban councils in Mashonaland West Province. A criterion purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents. The sample size was 324 respondents. Data was collected using a questionnaire. The validity of the instrument was established through confirmatory factor analysis, and while reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha statistic. Descriptive statistics summarized the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while inferential statistics, including regression and correlation analyses, were used to test hypotheses, moderation, and mediation. The findings of the study revealed that moral awareness enhances ethical leadership. The results indicated no mediating effect of Ubuntu on the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership. The study found that moral courage was a critical factor in enabling leaders to translate moral awareness into observable moral conduct. The study recommended that urban councils implement ethics training programmes.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, moral awareness, moral courage, Ubuntu, urban councils.

Introduction

Ubuntu is being accepted as a potential framework for promoting good governance in contemporary African societies (Sipondo, 2025; Ngcetane-Vika & Pule, 2025; Zondi & Ehiane, 2025). Ubuntu emphasizes collective responsibility and relational relationships (Van Norren,

2022), reflecting the values and lived experiences of pre-colonial African communities (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). Ubuntu embodies the principle that the well-being of an individual is linked to the welfare of others (Laughton et al., 2024). In the context of Zimbabwe, urban councils continue to face governance challenges. These challenges include corruption, poor service delivery, and a lack of accountability (Mutema, Kanyane, Masimba, Poshai, 2025; Marumahoko, 2024). This paper argues that by embracing Ubuntu principles, urban councils can enhance ethical leadership through moral awareness and moral courage. These values emphasize character and virtue (Chibaya, 2024; Nicolaidis & Dlodla, 2023). Ethical leadership one of the positive leadership styles that goes beyond just establishing and adhering to codes of conduct, but creating a reciprocal exchange relationship between leaders and their followers (Iqbal & Parray, 2024). Such a value-driven and accountable leadership style is necessary for modeling moral values for employees to imitate (Pardhi & Suri, 2024). The interaction between Ubuntu, moral awareness, moral courage, and ethical leadership makes the relationship relevant and timely for Zimbabwe (Sipondo, 2025). The focus on moral responsibility is considered vital for addressing the governance challenges being experienced within urban councils (Nicolaidis & Dlodla, 2023). Leaders within urban councils ought to cultivate moral awareness (Mohi & Zhang, 2023). While moral awareness plays an influential role in ethical conduct (Yusnaini & Meirawati, 2023), it has to be blended with moral courage for it to translate into observable moral action (Mollaei, Metanat, Javazm & Motie, 2025).

Despite the presence of policy frameworks and codes of conduct within urban councils in Zimbabwe, these councils continue to be blamed for poor service delivery as a result of governance challenges such as corruption and a lack of accountability (Marumahoko, 2024; Mutema et al., 2025). The continued presence of these challenges despite such policies indicates that policies and laws alone cannot force moral conduct. This calls for measures and strategies that can nurture a moral person. There is a dearth of studies that have directly looked into the interplay of moral awareness, Ubuntu, ethical leadership, and moral courage in the context of urban councils in Zimbabwe. Without a full understanding of how these variables interact, it hinders the development of relevant culturally imbued frameworks that promote sustainable ethical governance within urban councils is hindered. With this in mind, therefore, there is a need to probe how moral awareness can inform ethical practices through moral courage and Ubuntu principles

to improve governance within urban councils. This probing is done through the following research questions:

1. How does moral awareness interact with ethical leadership in the context of urban councils?
2. What is the influence of moral awareness on Ubuntu in the context of urban councils?
3. How does Ubuntu influence ethical leadership in the context of urban councils?
4. How does Ubuntu mediate the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership in the context of urban councils?
5. What is the moderating role moral courage play in shaping the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership in the context of urban councils?

Theoretical framework guiding the study

The conceptual framework of this study is anchored in the relationship between moral awareness, ethical leadership, Ubuntu as a mediator, and moral courage as a moderator, all hitched on the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) advanced by Bandura (1986) and refined over the years (Zhai et al., 2023). This framework explored how these constructs interact to influence ethical behaviour within urban councils and public institutions. The Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the interaction between cognitive processes, environmental influences, and individual characteristics in shaping human behaviour. It postulates that individuals learn behaviours through observation and imitation. This assumption is relevant in organizational settings where leaders serve as role models. This theory provides a foundation for understanding how ethical behaviour, moral awareness, and moral courage are cultivated and sustained within organizations. The current study positioned moral awareness as the independent variable. Moral awareness is defined as the ability to recognize ethical issues and dilemmas in decision-making processes. Previous research highlights that leaders who are aware of moral issues are more likely to engage in ethical conduct (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). This study predicted that increased moral awareness can lead to more effective ethical leadership practices, as leaders who recognize ethical issues are better equipped to address them.

Ethical leadership is conceptualized as a leadership style characterized by the demonstration of ethical behaviour. In this study, ethical leadership is taken as the dependent variable. Ethical

leaders serve as role models, influencing the behaviour of their followers and the decision-making processes within their organisations (Coffie et al., 2023). The effectiveness of ethical leadership is then dependent upon the moral awareness of a leader and the organizational culture, which is influenced by contextual factors, including cultural frameworks. Ubuntu, which emphasizes relational values and collective responsibility, is perceived to play a mediating role in this framework. It is assumed that Ubuntu enhances moral awareness by motivating leaders to recognize ethical issues within their cultural context. Leaders and employees who are influenced by Ubuntu principles are likely to appraise ethical issues more effectively and act in alignment with their ethical convictions. This aligns with the literature suggesting that cultural orientations impact ethical behaviour (Chigangaidze et al., 2021).

Moral courage is introduced as a moderator in the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership. It refers to the willingness to uphold ethical principles regardless of the adversities being faced. The presence of moral courage is perceived to enhance the capabilities of a leader to act on their moral awareness. This assumption is supported by studies that indicate moral courage is positively correlated with ethical decision-making (Luo et al., 2023). The interaction between moral awareness and moral courage suggests that leaders who possess both traits are more likely to champion ethical practices within their organizations. The connection between the constructs that frame this framework creates a dynamic system where moral awareness influences ethical leadership, mediated by Ubuntu and moderated by moral courage.

Literature review

The literature review looked into the key issues emerging from the themes of the study in relation to moral awareness, ethical leadership, moral courage, and Ubuntu.

The interaction of moral awareness and ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is a construct that is influenced by various factors. To nurture ethical behaviour, organizations should promote moral identification among their employees (Yue e al., 2022) and cultivate an ethical climate (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). Ethical leadership has been shown to have a positive influence on various employee outcomes and organizational behaviour, such as reducing workplace cheating behaviour (Yue et al., 2022); enhancing organizational justice (Al Halbusi et al., 2021); increasing internal whistleblowing intentions (Mkheimer et al., 2022); amplifying

employee voice (Hosseini & Ferreira, 2023); and influencing an ethical climate (Al Halbusi et al., 2021).

Moral awareness enables leaders to identify moral issues with regard to their decisions or actions (Alwali & Alwali, 2024; London & Heidari, 2024). Leaders with strong moral awareness are observed to be better equipped to recognize and respond to ethical dilemmas that arise and understand their implications within their organizations (Kruijtbosch et al., 2025). Cullen (2020) discussed the concept of 'Moral Recovery,' arguing that because of moral awareness, an ethical leader can rise after a moral lapse or failure. This observation suggests that moral awareness can be developed and sharpened through learning and practice. Moral awareness has been reported to play an important role in shaping ethical behaviour across different fields (Ammari & Gantare, 2024; Hegazy et al., 2024). In the context of urban governance, moral awareness is considered crucial for policymakers and public servants in upholding ethical principles (Armstrong & Stedman, 2024). Despite its critical role, some scholars agree that it is not always easy for leaders to develop this awareness. Under public institutions, where vices such as corruption and nepotism are rife, ethical judgment can be distorted (Cardinal, 2025; Romero, 2024). Moral awareness can also be influenced by cultural and social values (Couto, Pilati & Kakinohana, 2025; Hong, 2023).

The influence of moral awareness on Ubuntu

Ubuntu puts much focus on relational relationships, mutual respect, and empathy (Nicolaidis & Dlodla, 2023; Sipondo, 2025). These values are subsumed in African axioms such as “A person is a person through other persons”, "I am because we are", and “It takes the whole village to raise a child”. Grounded in African moral and ethical values, Ubuntu has been identified as a framework with the potential to address several social challenges (Chigangaidze et al., 2021; Gondwe, 2024). The identity of individuals through others brings out the essence of moral awareness embodied in Ubuntu (Laughton et al., 2024). This nurtures self-awareness and societal responsibility. It appeals to individuals to consider the implications of their choices and to put the welling being of others ahead of own self-interests (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). Even though no prior studies have focused on the relationship between moral awareness and Ubuntu, the influence of different cultural orientations on various leadership outcomes and organizational behaviour was highlighted by Shneor et al. (2021) in their collectivist to individualist cultural analysis. Similarly, the influence

of cultural dimensions is observed in other cultural orientations such as the Confucian cultures (Rochmansjah & Saputra, 2024).

Moral awareness is an important cognitive element that can interplay between individual ethical orientations and organizational culture (Wen & Chi, 2023). Moral awareness refers to the ability of an individual to recognize the moral dimensions of a situation and understand its ethical implications (Ogunfowora et al., 2022). This cognitive process enables an individual to identify potential ethical issues in a given context and is viewed as a basis for ethical decision-making and as a precursor to moral judgment (Formosa, 2021; Nguyen & Crossan, 2021). Research shows that moral awareness is influenced through various factors such as moral disengagement (Ogunfowora et al., 2022), competition, and moral identity, personal moral philosophies, perceived moral intensity, and cultural backgrounds (Rasheed et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2022). Other scholars suggest that moral awareness is augmented by moral sensitivity, a concept which goes beyond just recognizing ethical issues but being able to organize and interpret moral information correctly (Formosa, 2021; Luo et al., 2023).

The close relationship between moral awareness and moral sensitivity points to an intricate relationship and the significance of individuals in developing both these cognitive processes. We argue that by nurturing moral awareness in individuals within organizations, ethical behaviour can be promoted (Poszler & Lange, 2024). Within the context of this paper, moral awareness plays a crucial role in helping leaders in the public sector to navigate governance challenges such as the misuse of power, nepotism, embezzlement of funds, and procurement fraud (Sommersguter-Reichmann & Reichmann, 2024). Ubuntu, through the promotion of a worldview that views individuals as part of a larger community, influences the moral values of individuals (Akpa-Inyang & Chima, 2021). Individuals are encouraged to consider the impact of their decisions and choices on the well-being of others (Chigangaidze, Matanga & Katsuro, 2021). Such an outlook is considered to shape individual moral awareness by instilling a strong sense of moral sensitivity within their organisations (Metz, 2021). Unlike Western ethical frameworks, which prioritize individual responsibility and autonomy, Ubuntu ethics require leaders not just to be accountable to themselves, but also to be accountable to their entire communities (Akpa-Inyang & Chima, 2021). This is relational accountability, where ethical decisions and their breach affect the entire society. (Mhlambi & Tiribelli, 2023; Reviglio & Alunge, 2020). The role of Ubuntu in shaping

moral awareness is particularly relevant in Zimbabwe, where community well-being and social cohesion are central values (Wuta, 2025). The philosophy of Ubuntu (or unhu/hunhu in Shona) emphasizes interconnectedness and the idea that one's humanity is realized through others, influencing how individuals recognize and respond to moral issues (Dube & Higgs, 2024).

The interaction between Ubuntu and ethical leadership

Ubuntu and ethical leadership are two approaches that share noticeable common features in their approach to leadership and organizational behaviour (Rahaman, 2024). This alignment is evident in Ubuntu's emphasis on relational accountability and community engagement (Layden et al., 2024). The moral dimension of Ubuntu instills a sense of ethical duty and behaviour in leaders (Laughton et al., 2024). This moral dimension aligns with the concept of moral modelling in ethical leadership, where leaders are expected to demonstrate high ethical standards and serve as role models (Pardhi & Suri, 2024). It is being argued that the integration of Ubuntu into ethical leadership can enhance organizational identity (Aliye, 2020; Abbas, 2023).

Despite available evidence indicating that ethical leadership can help counteract corruption and other unethical vices (Antunez et al., 2023), the application of ethical leadership can be undermined by self-interested public officials (Aliye, 2020). For instance, citing the results coming from a study conducted in Pakistan where ethical leadership was reported having a positive link with unethical pro-organizational behavior (Ahmed & Khan, 2024). This observation aligns with the realities in many African countries, where Ubuntu originates. It is perplexing to observe that corruption remains a significant obstacle to effective governance and leadership (Zhai, 2022), against the backdrop of Ubuntu values being cardinal in African societies (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). This state of affairs creates tensions between traditional collective approaches and modern individualistic systems in public institutions (Khan, 2023).

Ethical leaders who endeavour to embrace and implement Ubuntu values may face hurdles in their attempt to reconcile the Ubuntu collective approach and contemporary individualistic accountability approaches (Mokhutso, 2022). This divide between societal values and contemporary leadership practices in African public institutions threatens the realization of the potential benefits of Ubuntu (Aliye, 2020). This highlights the need to close the gap between cultural values and contemporary governance challenges. Ubuntu's emphasis on relational ethics

and communal wellbeing offers such a framework to address contemporary governance issues in African public institutions (Chigangaidze et al., 2021). We argue that by reframing leadership within the lenses of Ubuntu principles, public institutions in Africa can foster a more inclusive, accountable, and ethically imbued governance system (Aliye, 2020). This integration can instill a sense of shared responsibility and reciprocity among leaders and their communities (Munung et al., 2024).

The influence of moral courage on moral awareness and ethical leadership

Moral awareness plays a crucial role in influencing ethical leadership (Coffie et al., 2023). Research has shown that moral awareness is a fundamental factor in making moral decision-making (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Luo et al., 2023). It influences how leaders perceive and respond to ethical issues in their organisations. Leaders who possess high moral awareness are more likely to recognize ethical dilemmas, they are more likely to make principled decisions (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). Moral courage plays a major role in leadership decision-making. Studies have shown that moral courage is positively correlated with ethical decision-making ability (Luo et al., 2023). Moral courage enables leaders to challenge unethical decisions within organizations, even when under pressure to act against their ethical convictions (Alshammari & Alboliteeh, 2023). Moral courage empowers individuals to move from recognizing an ethical issue to actually taking ethical action Luo et al., 2023). It has been observed that moral courage goes beyond individual traits and, as such, it is influenced by organizational factors such as ethical leadership and a positive ethical climate (Hakimi et al., 2023; Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022). Leaders who exhibit moral courage are more likely to make decisions that are aligned with ethical principles, even under challenging circumstances (Yang et al., 2023). These findings underscore the importance of developing moral courage in leadership to improve overall decision-making processes and outcomes.

It is argued that moral courage strengthens the link between moral awareness and ethical leadership. Leaders with both high moral awareness and strong moral courage are more effective in promoting ethical governance (Asiimwe, 2023). There is scant or no literature that directly shows the evidence to support the claim that moral courage strengthens the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership. However, the conclusion can only be arrived at in the context of various individual papers on ethical leadership, moral courage, and their impacts. Moral

courage has been shown to have a positive effect on ethical leadership (Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022). The perception of moral courage is also reported to extend beyond leadership to individual employees as well (Hakimi et al., 2023). This suggests that ethical leaders can foster moral courage in their followers (Mohi & Zhang, 2023). More so, moral courage was found to predict ethical leadership mediated by ethical climate (Awad & Ashour, 2022). This again demonstrates the role of moral courage in promoting ethical leadership. It was also observed that moral courage acts as a buffer against moral distress and moral injury (Berdida & Grande, 2023). Similarly, moral courage has been found to mitigate compassion fatigue through the combined mediating effects of moral sensitivity and professional identity (Yi et al., 2024). These observations highlight the critical role of moral courage as a necessary attribute for leaders and other professionals.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

The conceptual framework for this study was designed to explore the relationship between moral awareness, ethical leadership, moral courage, and Ubuntu within urban councils in Zimbabwe. This framework was informed by the reviewed relevant literature, which highlighted the importance of these constructs in promoting ethical conduct within urban councils. The reviewed literature indicated that Ubuntu is framed on collective responsibility. It serves as the foundation for ethical leadership, nurturing a sense of community and shared values (Sipondo, 2025; Ngcetane-Vika & Pule, 2025). Ethical leadership is one of the positive leadership styles that prioritizes character and virtue (Iqbal & Parray, 2024). The literature portrays moral awareness as a construct foundational for ethical conduct (Yusnaini & Meirawati, 2023). It refers to the ability to recognize ethical issues. Moral courage goes beyond mere awareness; it translates moral awareness into ethical action. It denotes the willingness to act on one's ethical beliefs, even in the face of adversity (Mollaei et al., 2025). The framework suggests that moral courage moderates the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership. By examining the interplay of these constructs, governance challenges faced by urban councils in Zimbabwe can be mitigated. Enlightened by the reviewed literature and the conceptual framework, the following hypotheses were posited:

1. H1: Moral awareness positively influences ethical leadership among leaders in urban councils.

2. H2: Moral awareness has a positive influence on Ubuntu among leaders in urban councils.
3. H3: Ubuntu positively influences ethical leadership among leaders in urban councils.
4. H4: Ubuntu mediates the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership among leaders in urban councils.
5. H5: Moral courage moderates the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership among leaders in urban councils.

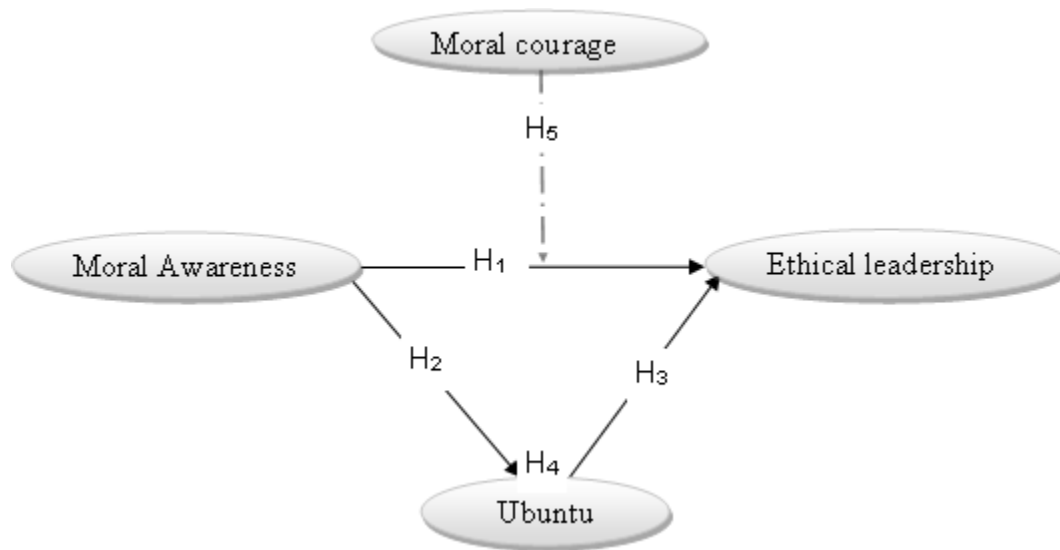


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Source: Author (2025)

Methodology

Research philosophy

The study was anchored in the positivist paradigm, which affirms that knowledge is best acquired through observable phenomena and empirical evidence (Pretorius, 2024). Due to its emphasis on observable phenomena and quantifiable data, the positivism paradigm fitted the needs of the study, which had relationships and hypotheses that needed statistical analysis, such as the relationship between ethical leadership, moral awareness, and the mediating role of Ubuntu.

Research design

The study used a cross-sectional survey research design in line with the quantitative research strategy adopted. The cross-sectional research design allowed the researcher to collect data

composed of all the attributes of the sample at a single moment without revisiting the research site at a later stage. This was beneficial in terms of time and costs during the data collection process.

Population and target population

The population for this study comprised 406 senior managers, middle managers, and office employees within 6 urban councils in Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe. The target population of 324 was limited to office employees in these six urban councils in the province. The employees occupied clerical, first, and mid-level administrative roles. Senior management, which included town clerks and departmental directors, was excluded from this study. The exclusion was done to enable a bottom-up view of ethical leadership and related experiences.

Sampling frame and sample size

The study used a criterion-based purposive sampling method with proportionate representation to select the respondents who met the predefined criteria. Purposive sampling enables a researcher to collect data that aligns with the specific parameters and research objectives of a study, regardless of whether it is a qualitative or quantitative study (Memon et al, 2025). The purposive sampling method allowed the researcher to select the respondents who met the criterion of the target population. The high response rate was achieved partly as a result of the hand distribution and physical collection of the questionnaires.

Data collection instrument development

A Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire was developed based on the literature. For items that measured ethical leadership (Johnson et al., 2023; Uluturk et al., 2023; Wadei et al., 2023). Ubuntu items (Chigangaidze, Matanga, and Katsuro, 2021; Marovah and Mutanga, 2023; Adewale, 2023), moral awareness (Mohi & Zhang, 2023), and Moral courage (Mollaei, Metanat, Javazm & Motie, 2025). Ethical Leadership was measured through 15 items. Moral courage was measured by 5 statements, as well as moral awareness. Ubuntu was measured through 6 items aimed at assessing the importance of Ubuntu principles. The items measuring the variables used a 5-point Likert scale with measures from 1. Strongly Disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Neutral; 4. Agree; 5. Strongly Agree. The questionnaires were hand-distributed and physically collected from March 2025 to July 2025. The high response rate achieved can be attributed to the hand distribution and physical collection of the questionnaires.

Reliability and Validity

The measurement instrument was validated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and reliability analysis before the hypotheses were tested. The CFA was done through AMOS version 21, and SPSS version 21, and reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficients with SPSS version 21.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics, such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies for the demographic variables. These descriptions were presented in tables. Inferential statistics utilized in this study included correlation analysis, moderation analysis, and hypothesis testing using regression analysis.

Results

Demographic profile of respondents

The results indicate a mature workforce made up of the age group 40-49 years (31.4%) which is assumed to have considerable experience working in urban councils. The age group of 30-39 years makes 27.3% of the respondents, which is a significant portion of the workforce in their early to mid-career stages. The demographic results further indicate that younger employees, those less than 30 years represent 22.2% of the respondents while older employees, those in the 60+ years range, are the least of the respondents at 4.1%. The distribution suggests a rather younger workforce with a mix of experienced individuals. Studies indicate that age and experience can influence ethical decision-making. Older employees are viewed as bringing more experience, which can lead to better ethical judgments (Hermayanti et al., 2024). Urban councils can benefit by having a mature workforce for informed and improved ethical judgments. While older individuals may have stronger ethical intentions, some studies indicate that age alone does not always predict better ethical judgments. In some cases, older adults are seen as more likely to make deontological, duty-bound decisions (Singh et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2021).

The gender distribution indicates that the majority of the respondents are female (61.8%), while males account for 38.4% of the respondents. This gender disparity may reflect the broader societal trends in Zimbabwe, where more women are increasingly participating in the workforce. It indicates a diverse perspective in leadership and decision-making in relation to moral awareness,

moral courage, and ethical leadership. The results show that the majority of the respondents have a Bachelor's degree (45.7%). Those with a national diploma and a master's degree each comprise 16.5%. This result indicates a well-educated workforce. The results show the presence of a PhD holder (0.3%), suggesting a very small representation of highly specialized professionals in these councils. Having a balanced gendered workforce within urban councils supports studies that have shown that gender diversity in organisations and in leadership can lead to improved organizational performance and ethical decision-making (Keller, 2024; Li & Mohammad, M. (2024). The same can be said with regard to educational levels. Literature often associates higher educational attainment with increased ethical awareness and decision-making abilities within organisations (Andersson et al., 2022). Having an educated employee means that urban councils have employees who are better equipped to navigate moral dilemmas and uphold ethical standards.

The employment demographics indicate that the majority of the respondents are permanent employees (80.3%) with a smaller proportion being on contract (17.5%) or casual (2.2%). This employment distribution indicates job stability within the urban councils. On the experience side, the experience distribution indicates that those with 5-10 years of experience making 36.8% of respondents, indicating a workforce that is comparatively experienced, mixed with new employees (28.6%) who have less than 5 years of experience. The results show that there are fewer employees who have 21 years and above experience. The tenure of employees in urban councils aligns with studies on job stability. Employees with a stable tenure can nurture a culture of ethical behaviour within organisations, as employees who feel secure are more likely to engage in ethical practices (Lee, Hur & Shin, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2024). Stability allows employees to focus on long-term goals rather than short-term gains, which is essential for nurturing ethical conditions with urban councils. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were analysed to understand the sample composition as indicated in table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Statistics of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
Less than 30	70	22.2
30-39	86	27.3
40-49	99	31.4

50-59	47	14.9
60+	13	4.1
Gender		
Male	121	38.4
Female	194	61.8
Education level		
National Diploma	52	16.5
Higher National Diploma	28	8.9
Bachelor's degree	144	45.7
Master's degree	52	16.5
PhD	1	.3
Other	38	12.1
Employment type		
Contract	55	17.5
Casual	7	2.2
Permanent	253	80.3
Experience		
Less than 5 years	90	28.6
5-10 years	116	36.8
11-15 years	47	14.9
16-20 years	36	11.4
21 years and above	26	8.3

Source: Research (2025)

Reliability

Construct reliability was assessed using the Cronbach's Alpha statistic. The results showed that the ethical leadership scale with 10 items ($\alpha = .973$), the moral awareness scale with five items ($\alpha = .916$), the moral courage scale with five items ($\alpha = .928$), Ubuntu scale with six items ($\alpha = .938$). Literature indicates that a Cronbach's alpha of .70 or higher is generally considered acceptable, indicating that the items are measuring the same underlying construct (Hussey et al., 2025; Pentapati et al., 2025; Yun, Ulang & Husain, 2023). The values for all the constructs were found to be reliable in relation to the accepted convention. The values exceeded this threshold, indicating

the reliability of the items in measuring their latent constructs. Reliability results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Reliability test results

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Ethical leadership	10	.973
Moral awareness	5	.916
Moral courage	5	.928
Ubuntu	6	.938

Source: Research (2025)

Model fit indices

The measurement model showed a good fit as the value for CMIN/df fell between 0 and 3, with lower values indicating a better fit (Goretzko, Siemund & Sterner, 2023). In addition, the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Residual (RMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) were considered in determining the measurement model fit indices. The values for all the indices were within the convention (Goretzko, Siemund & Sterner, 2023), as indicated in Table 5. This strong relationship between the observed variables and their corresponding latent constructs was also supported by the results of the Cronbach's alpha reliability statistics in Table 3, which had high values ranging from .928 to .973.

Table 3: Measurement model fit indices

Fit Indices	Measurement model	Recommended values	Sources
CMIN/df	2.56	≤ 3.00	
GFI	0.935	> 0.90	
TLI	0.946	> 0.90	Goretzko, Siemund &
CFI	0.968	> 0.90	Sterner, 2023
RMR	0.03	< 0.05	
RMSEA	0.06	$0.05 \leq RMSEA < 0.08$	

Source: Research (2025)

Descriptive statistics of key variables

Table 4

Moral Awareness

	Leaders in my council recognize unethical behaviour.	Leaders in my council actively seek information about ethical standards relevant to their roles.	Leaders in my council are aware of the potential consequences of unethical decisions for the council and the community.	Leaders in my council understand different perspectives when assessing ethical issues.	Leaders in my council regularly reflect on their own values and how they align with their professional responsibilities.	Averages /Mean
Std. Deviation	1.251	1.186	1.275	1.135	1.170	1.203
Mean	2.69	2.59	2.66	2.53	2.40	2.57

The mean scores for all statements related to moral awareness are low, ranging from 2.40 to 2.69 on a 5-point Likert scale. This indicates that the respondents have a general perception that leaders in the councils do not have the capabilities to recognize moral issues. This is indicated by the lowest mean score on the statement for reflecting on personal values (2.40), suggesting a noteworthy gap in leaders actively considering their ethical responsibilities in urban councils.

Table 5

Moral Courage

	Leaders in my council speak up against unethical practices in my council.	Leaders in my council report a colleague if they see engaging in	Leaders in my council take a stand against corrupt activities, even if it is unpopular	Leaders in my council challenge their colleagues when they believe an action is	Leaders in my council promote ethical behaviour among their colleagues, even if it	Averages /Mean
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		corrupt activities.	within the council.	morally wrong.	involves personal risk.	
Std. Deviation	1.158	1.151	1.096	1.082	1.114	1.120
Mean	2.36	2.26	2.24	2.16	2.16	2.24

Source: Research (2025)

The mean scores for statements related to moral courage range from 2.16 to 2.36 on a 5-point Likert scale, notably being on the lower end. This indicates a perceived lack of moral courage among leaders in the urban councils. The highest mean score for the statement about speaking up against unethical practices (2.36) still suggests that leaders lack the courage to speak or act against unethical issues. The lowest mean scores are on challenging colleagues (2.16) and promoting ethical behaviour despite personal risk (2.16), indicating a significant deficiency in moral courage in these areas.

Table 6: Ubuntu

Embracing Ubuntu can influence council leaders to design policies that reflect their compassion for vulnerable members of society.	Adopting Ubuntu can encourage shared responsibility and accountability among employees.	Implementing Ubuntu principles can encourage council leaders to show genuine respect for all stakeholders, regardless of their status.	Demonstrating that Ubuntu can influence everyone in the council to take responsibility for the well-being of fellow employees and the community.	Practicing Ubuntu can encourage council leaders to show empathy and understanding of the needs of employees and citizens.	Principles of Ubuntu can enhance ethical decision-making in my council.	Averages /Mean
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Std. Deviation	.921	.967	.969	.827	.816	.806	.884
Mean	3.95	4.04	4.16	4.14	4.18	4.24	4.12

Source: Research (2025)

The results indicate that mean scores for statements related to Ubuntu are high, ranging from 4.04 to 4.24. This indicates strong perceptions among respondents that Ubuntu principles are influential in leadership practices within urban councils. The highest mean score is observed on the statement about enhancing ethical decision-making (4.24), suggesting that respondents strongly believe in the positive impact of Ubuntu for leaders in making ethical decisions. The results further indicate that all statements on Ubuntu reflect a positive view of its role in promoting compassion, responsibility, and respect within the councils. The standard deviations range from 0.806 to 0.969, indicating low variability in responses. This low variability suggests a consensus among respondents regarding the importance of Ubuntu principles in their urban councils.

Table 7: Mean and Standard Deviation of key variables Summarized

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ethical leadership	2.32	.863
Moral awareness	2.58	1.041
Moral courage	2.23	1.000
Ubuntu	4.12	.757

Source: Research (2025)

Correlation analysis

To examine the correlation among the variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. Pearson product correlation of moral awareness and ethical leadership was found to be strongly positive and statistically significant ($r = .844$, $p < .001$). This suggests that as moral awareness perceptions increase, ethical leadership behaviour would also increase. The same was done for moral awareness and moral courage ($r = .697$, $p < .001$) and moral awareness and ethical leadership ($r = .901$, $p < .001$); both were found to be strongly positive and statistically significant. Pearson product correlation of moral awareness and Ubuntu was found to be weak and negative but statistically significant ($r = -0.082$, $p < .148$), suggesting that as moral awareness increases, the

correlation with Ubuntu decreases. This suggested that Ubuntu may not predict moral awareness. The summarized statistics are indicated in Table 8.

Table 8: Correlation Statistics

Variable Pair	Correlation	
	Coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)
Moral awareness and Ethical leadership	.844	<0.001
Moral awareness and Moral courage	.697	<0.001
Moral courage and Ethical leadership	.901	<0.001
Moral Awareness and Ubuntu	-.082	<0.148

Source: Research (2025)

Regression analysis

A linear regression analysis was conducted to predict H1, H2, and H3. H1 predicted that moral awareness has a positive influence on ethical leadership in urban councils. Ethical leadership was regressed on predicting moral awareness to test the hypothesis. H1 was strongly supported. Moral awareness significantly predicted ethical leadership ($\beta = .844$, $R^2 = .712$, $p < 0.000$). These results indicated the positive effect of moral awareness on ethical leadership in urban councils, with a 71.2% of the variance in ethical leadership explained by moral awareness. H2: The hypothesis assumed that moral awareness influences Ubuntu. Moral awareness was regressed on predicting Ubuntu to test the hypothesis. H2 was not supported ($\beta = -.882$, $R^2 = .007$, $p < 0.148$). The $\beta = -.882$ indicates a strong negative relationship, as moral awareness increases, Ubuntu decreases. $R^2 = .007$ indicates that 0.7% of the variance in Ubuntu was explained by moral awareness, indicating insufficient evidence to support the hypothesis, $p < 0.148$, not statistically significant. H3: The hypothesis predicted that Ubuntu has a positive influence on ethical leadership in urban councils. Ethical leadership was regressed on predicting Ubuntu to test the hypothesis. H3 was not supported ($\beta = -0.136$, $R^2 = 0.018$, $p < 0.016$). The $\beta = -0.136$ indicated a weak negative relationship; higher Ubuntu is associated with lower ethical leadership. A weak positive effect of Ubuntu on performance and the $R^2 = 0.018$ indicates that only 1.8% of the variance in ethical leadership is explained by Ubuntu, whilst the $P < 0.016$ suggests that the relationship was statistically significant, suggesting a weak relationship. The summarized statistics are indicated in Table 9.

Table 9: Regression analysis statistics

Hypothesis	Path	Beta Coefficient	R ²	F	P-value
H1	Moral awareness →Ethical leadership	.844	.712	733.355	<0.000
H2	Moral awareness →Ubuntu	-.882	.007	2.107	<0.148
H3	Ubuntu →Ethical leadership	-.136	.018	5.868	<0.016

Source: Research (2025)

Mediation analysis

Mediation was run to test H4, which hypothesized that Ubuntu mediates the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership. To test this hypothesis, a series of regression analyses was conducted using SPSS using Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach of determining direct and indirect effects. The direct effect of moral awareness on ethical leadership was significant, $\beta = 0.844$, $p < .000$, indicating a strong relationship; an increase in moral awareness significantly led to an increase in ethical leadership. When Ubuntu was introduced as a dependent variable, it did not predict moral awareness ($\beta = -0.082$, $p < 0.148$) not statistically significant, indicating that higher moral awareness is not associated with Ubuntu principles. There is a negative relationship between Ubuntu and ethical leadership ($\beta = -0.067$), $p < 0.027$). The indirect effect of moral awareness on ethical leadership through Ubuntu ($\beta = -0.082$, $p < 0.027$) is statistically significant, but indicates a negative indirect effect, indicating that Ubuntu does not mediate this relationship. Thus, the mediation analysis result does not support hypothesis (H4). The direct effect of moral awareness on ethical leadership is strong, whilst the mediation effect through Ubuntu is weak, even though significant, indicating that there is a strong direct relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership. The summarised mediation statistics are indicated in Table 10, and in the path diagram is Figure 2.

Table 10: Mediation Analysis Statistics for H4

Effect Path	Std. Error	Coefficients β	P-value
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Moral Awareness → Ethical leadership	.025	.844	<0.000
Moral Awareness → Ubuntu	.025	.838	<0.148
Ubuntu → Ethical leadership	.034	-.067	<0.027
Moral Awareness→ Ubuntu →Ethical Leadership	.041	-.082	<0.027

Source: Research (2025)

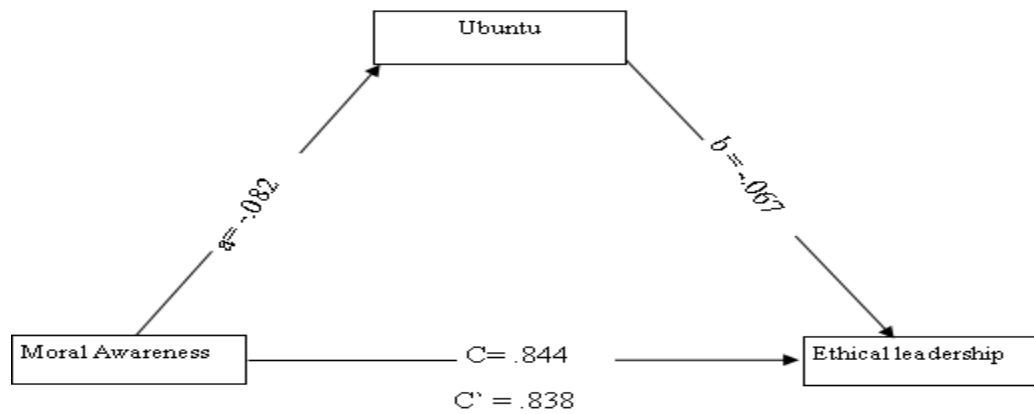


Figure 2: Mediation Analysis Path Diagram for H4

Note: Mediation equation:

$$C = C' + A * B (.844 = .838 + -.082 * -.067)$$

Source: Research (2025)

Moderation analysis

We examined whether the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership is moderated by moral courage (H5) using multiple regression through Hayes Process Macro model number 1 in SPSS. We observed that the constant ($\beta = 0.7829$), the expected value of ethical leadership when both moral awareness and moral courage are zero, $p < 0.000$, indicates that the constant is statistically significant. Moral awareness ($\beta = 0.1702$), $p < 0.000$, shows a strong, significant relationship; for every one-unit increase in moral awareness, ethical leadership increases by 0.1702 units. Moral courage ($\beta = 0.2387$), $p < 0.000$, confirms a significant effect with every one-unit increase in moral courage; ethical leadership increases by 0.2387 units. The Interaction Term (Int_1), $\beta = 0.0870$, $p < 0.000$, indicates a significant interaction. The combined

effect of moral awareness and moral courage on ethical leadership is positive. As the product of moral awareness and moral courage increases, ethical leadership also increases by 0.0870 units. Therefore, H5 was supported. There is a strong positive relationship between both moral awareness and moral courage with ethical leadership. The interaction term also suggests that the impact of moral awareness on ethical leadership is enhanced by moral courage. The results highlight the importance of both moral awareness and moral courage in nurturing ethical leadership within urban councils. The summarized moderation results are indicated in Table 11.

Table 11: Moderation Analysis Statistics for H5

Variable	Effect	SE	t-value	p-value 95%	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	.7829	.1058	7.4023	<0.000	0.5748	0.9910
Moral Awareness	.1702	.0378	4.4999	<0.000	0.0958	0.2446
Moral Courage	.2387	.0563	4.2391	<0.000	0.1279	0.3495
Int_1	.0870	.0159	5.4713	<0.000	0.0557	0.1182

Source: Research (2025)

Discussion of findings

The findings of the current study are in agreement with the literature that emphasizes moral awareness in influencing ethical leadership (Yue e al., 2022). Moral awareness allows leaders to identify ethical issues that may arise within their organizations (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). This consensus illustrates that leaders who are aware of ethical issues are better equipped to act in ways that adhere to expected ethical conduct within their organizations (Coffie et al., 2023). The role of moral awareness in translating ethical leadership into improved governance outcomes is attested by Mohi & Zhang (2023), who stated a positive relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership. Some scholars suggest that developing moral awareness is not as straightforward as one might think, which can be influenced by factors such as corruption and nepotism (Cardinal 2025; Romero, 2024).

The current study emphasizes the role of Ubuntu in enhancing moral awareness through its focus on relational values. This view aligns with the common assumption in ethical leadership literature in the African context. Scholars assert that moral awareness leads to better ethical practices

(Chigangaidze et al., 2021). Furthermore, previous studies support the view that cultural orientations play a part in influencing leadership outcomes (Shneor et al., 2021). While the literature supports the idea that cultural and social values influence moral awareness (Yue, Men & Ci, 2022), the specific conditions through which cultural influences function may vary across different societies, as culture and norms are not the same. This becomes so in view of the findings of the current study. Whilst respondents perceived Ubuntu as a necessary framework that can enhance ethical leadership, the mediation result found no direct positive influence of Ubuntu on moral awareness and ethical leadership. This divergence may bolster the notion that the relationship between moral awareness and culturally embedded frameworks such as Ubuntu may not be as straightforward as assumed.

The current study introduced moral courage as a necessary component in translating moral awareness into action. While previous studies emphasize moral awareness itself, the assertion that moral courage is essential for sustaining ethical behaviour in the face of adversity diverges from the conventional focus on moral awareness alone. This addition introduces the assumption that moral awareness must be twined with courage for ethical behaviour to be realized within organizations. Some scholars put forward the issue of moral sensitivity being related to moral awareness (Formosa, 2021). This might explain the complexities in the relationship between moral awareness, ethical leadership, and Ubuntu. While the current study did not substantiate the influence of Ubuntu in this relationship, it could imply that moral sensitivity, the ability to interpret and act on ethical information, might be more relevant in promoting Ubuntu than focusing on moral awareness. If this assumption is correct, it then creates a new dimension for exploring how moral sensitivity could mediate or interact with moral awareness in promoting Ubuntu.

Similarly, literature posits that Ubuntu principles require leaders to be accountable not just to themselves but to their communities (Akpa-Inyang & Chima, 2021). However, the failure by the current study to substantiate this influence may raise questions about what additional factors might be necessary to bridge this gap. Furthermore, in view of the findings, we may conclude that culture influences how moral awareness is perceived. In societies where individualism is prevalent (Ogunfowora et al., 2022), moral awareness may not lead to the expected communal or relational conduct inherent in Ubuntu. If so, this divergence is contrary to the assumption that moral awareness is a universal cognition that enhances collective ethical behaviour. While Ubuntu

promotes a sense of community and shared responsibility, the finding that moral awareness does not significantly influence it suggests that there may be other mediating or moderating factors at play. This complexity is echoed in the literature (Rasheed et al., 2023).

The literature acknowledges the tension between the relational values of Ubuntu and the individualistic accountability systems prevalent in contemporary African governance systems (Aliye, 2020; Nicolaidis & Dlodla, 2023; Sipondo, 2025). This divergence indicates that while Ubuntu is positively viewed, as it was appraised as so by the respondents, its application may be constrained by modern institutional challenges. The finding suggests that Ubuntu may not always translate into the ethical leadership practices expected in contemporary public institutions, particularly in the face of self-interested behaviour among leaders. This brings out the paradoxical nature of Ubuntu (Ahmed & Khan, 2024). This observation may reflect the complexities being exposed in an attempt to apply Ubuntu in modern African businesses and governance systems. This view is suggested in line with the current thinking that bridging traditional practices with modern governance frameworks is crucial (Chigangaidze et al., 2021; Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). The results challenge the status quo; it is not enough just to endorse Ubuntu as a viable relational framework. There must be a deliberate and concerted effort to integrate its principles into existing systems in a way that addresses contemporary ethical challenges.

The findings of the current study are in agreement with the literature that highlights the importance of moral courage in leadership. Studies indicate that moral courage is positively correlated with ethical decision-making abilities (Luo et al., 2023). This convergence suggests that leaders who possess moral courage are more likely to confront unethical decisions and advocate for ethical practices within their organizations. This reinforces moral courage as a crucial factor in enhancing ethical leadership. The literature suggests that moral courage serves as a buffer against moral distress and moral injury (Berdida & Grande, 2023). Not to be overlooked is a clear variance being suggested through the findings of this study. Western-centric perspectives on ethical leadership often emphasize individual traits and personal integrity (Mohi & Zhang, 2023), a view contrasting with Ubuntu, an African perspective which emphasizes relational responsibility and relational ethics (Nicolaidis & Dlodla, 2023; Sipondo, 2025). The integration of moral courage within the Ubuntu framework could yield different results and implications from those observed in individualistic cultures. This view may explain why the assumption that Ubuntu mediates the

relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership was not supported in the current study.

Implications for Institutional Practice

The findings of this study strengthen the importance of moral awareness in influencing ethical leadership. This relationship suggests that enhancing moral awareness among leaders can lead to improved ethical conduct within organizations. This has significant implications for urban councils and other public institutions, the need to cultivate moral awareness among all employees. Moreover, the study highlighted the complex interplay between moral awareness and factors such as corruption and nepotism, factors that can distort moral judgment.

The discussion on the role of Ubuntu in enhancing moral awareness also implied that cultural values have an influence on ethical leadership. While employees within urban councils perceived Ubuntu as a useful framework, the study revealed that its influence on moral awareness and ethical behaviour is not as straightforward as previously assumed. This suggests that urban councils need to adapt Ubuntu principles to contemporary governance frameworks (Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). Furthermore, the introduction of moral courage as a necessary component for translating moral awareness into observable conduct adds another level of complexity. Leaders must not only be morally aware but also possess the courage to act on that awareness even in the face of adversity (Luo et al., 2023). This necessitates a cultural shift within organizations that encourages moral courage, recognizing it as an essential requirement for ethical leadership to flourish (Hakimi et al., 2023). The divergence between Western-centric perspectives on ethical leadership and the communal values inherent in Ubuntu implies that a one sized which fits all to ethical leadership may not work. The findings call for a re-evaluation of ethical frameworks used in diverse cultural contexts. This cultural sensitivity is crucial for fostering an ethical leadership dynamic that is both effective and relevant in different governance systems (Chingangaidze et al., 2021; Wuta, 2025).

Implications to Theory

The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical discourse on the relationships between moral awareness, ethical leadership, and cultural frameworks such as Ubuntu. By reaffirming the consensus in the literature that moral awareness has an influence on ethical leadership, the study enhances existing theories that posit moral awareness as essential for leaders to identify and

address ethical issues. This alignment reinforces the notion that ethical leadership is not simply a function of individual traits but is deeply rooted in the capacity to perceive and respond to ethical dilemmas. Furthermore, the study introduced moral courage as a critical factor that interacts with moral awareness to facilitate ethical conduct. This addition expands theoretical frameworks by suggesting that moral awareness alone is insufficient for ethical behaviour (Luo et al., 2023); it must be combined with the courage to act on that awareness.

The findings also highlighted the complexities associated with cultural influence on moral awareness and ethical leadership. While previous literature has often examined these concepts in predominantly Western contexts, this study emphasizes the need for theories that account for cultural variations, particularly in non-Western settings (Shneor et al., 2021). The limited support for the direct influence of Ubuntu on moral awareness and ethical leadership suggests that existing theories may require adaptation to incorporate contextual factors that affect ethical behaviour (Chigangaidze et al., 2021). Moreover, the divergence noted between individualistic and relational values in ethical leadership raises important questions about the universality of moral theories (Ogunfowora et al., 2022). The findings suggest that theories developed in Western contexts may fail to represent the intricacies of ethical leadership in societies that are predominated by relational relationships. This insight calls for the development of culturally sensitive frameworks that integrate communal values, such as those found in Ubuntu, into broader theories of ethical leadership.

Conclusion

The probe into the interplay between moral awareness, Ubuntu, ethical leadership, and moral courage has revealed critical insights that contribute to our comprehension of ethical leadership in the purview of urban councils. The study found that moral awareness plays an influential role in ethical leadership. Leaders with high levels of moral awareness are well prepared to recognize ethical problems and make the right decisions (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). However, while moral awareness was found essential, its usefulness may be constrained by circumstantial factors, including organizational culture and individual behaviour that prioritize self-interest (Romero, 2024). Although the hypothesis on Ubuntu mediating the relationship between moral awareness and ethical leadership was not supported, the framework remains valuable for promoting ethical values (Aliye, 2020). The divergence in mediation highlights the complexities of integrating

traditional values into contemporary governance. This divergence suggests that the current status of Ubuntu is a mere ideal framework that needs deliberate efforts to integrate its principles into contemporary business and governance systems in the African context (Nicolaidis & Dlodla, 2023). The current study underscores the need for cultivating moral courage in leaders, as it goes beyond making ethical decisions to also nurture a supportive ethical climate among employees (Hakimi et al., 2023; Pakizekho & Barkhordari-Sharifabad, 2022).

The interaction between moral awareness, Ubuntu, and moral courage revealed a complex relationship in shaping ethical leadership. The findings of this study have far-reaching repercussions for leadership development programmes in urban councils and other public institutions in Zimbabwe. There is a need for an approach that not only emphasizes ethical awareness and moral courage but also integrates Ubuntu principles to nurture a culture of collective responsibility and relational ethics (Nicolaidis & Dlodla, 2023). The study highlighted the intricacies and challenges in applying Ubuntu principles within contemporary Zimbabwean governance systems (Khan, 2023). Addressing these challenges will require commitment to promote ethical leadership that is aligned with both traditional values and modern governance realities in the African context. It is envisaged that such an integrated approach can lead to an enhanced ethical governance system within urban councils and benefit their communities at large (Wuta, 2025).

Future Research Directions

Building on the findings and discussions from the current study, there are issues that emerged and warrant further exploration to expand, deepen, and close the identified gaps. Future research should explore the specific mechanisms through which moral courage interacts with moral awareness to influence ethical leadership. There might be a need for longitudinal studies to aid our comprehension of the development of moral courage over time. In view of the limited influence of Ubuntu on moral awareness and ethical leadership as revealed in the current study, more studies are required to explore the contribution of different cultural frameworks in shaping ethical leadership practices. We may benefit from comparative studies carried out across diverse cultural settings and find out how communal values and individualistic predispositions shape moral awareness and ethical behaviour.

The study suggested a possible link between moral sensitivity and the efficacy of Ubuntu in promoting ethical leadership. Future research should explore how moral sensitivity interacts with moral awareness and ethical leadership with a focus on culturally diverse settings. Future studies may look into how institutional policies influence ethical leadership. We envisage studies that explore how governance systems interact with the cultivation of moral awareness among leaders. There is a real need for future studies that focus on how to integrate Ubuntu principles into main stream contemporary governance frameworks, with reference to African governance systems. We may benefit much from case studies of institutions, if they do exist, institutions that have successfully blended traditional values with contemporary business practices.

Limitations

While this study has contributed valuable insights on moral awareness, Ubuntu, and ethical leadership, there are some deficiencies that have to be acknowledged to inform future research and highlight areas for improvement in methodology and scope. The study focused on a specific sample of employees from a particular region of urban councils in Zimbabwe, which may not be representative of all urban councils in Zimbabwe and beyond. This drawback may impact the generalization of the results to other regions, cultures, and different types of organizations.

The research used a cross-sectional research which captured data at a single moment. This design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between moral awareness, Ubuntu, and ethical leadership. To address this limitation, longitudinal studies are recommended to track changes over time. The study depended on individual-reported measures of moral awareness and ethical leadership through survey questionnaires, a measure that may be subject to bias. Respondents may have overvalued their moral awareness and ethical practices. The study employed a quantitative method to evaluate connections between the variables. Incorporating qualitative insights could have enriched the understanding of how moral awareness and Ubuntu are perceived and implemented in practice. Future research should integrate qualitative research approaches such as interviews and focus groups to capture the finer details that cannot be captured through a quantitative methodology.

Recommendations

To nurture moral awareness and ethical leadership, there is a need for mandatory ethics training programmes for all leaders and employees within urban councils (Mohi & Zhang, 2023). Urban councils should establish policies and frameworks that clearly detail ethical decision-making to guide leaders in their roles (Coffie et al., 2023). There is a need for Urban councils to create and nurture an organizational culture that encourages open dialogue on ethical issues within their institutions (Chigangaidze et al., 2021; Nicolaidis & Dlodla, 2023). This can be achieved through an open-door policy where leaders are accessible and approachable whenever employees have any ethical issues to present. This can further be strengthened through setting up mechanisms that guarantee confidential reporting of unethical behaviour (Akpa-Inyang & Chima, 2021). This might include the need for a clear and well-publicized policy on whistleblower protection.

Urban councils are encouraged to institute ethical committees mandated to provide guidance and oversight on all matters to ethical issues (Aliye, 2020). Such committees could be the arm tasked in advocating for policies that protect leaders within urban councils from undue political interference on issues that require ethical decision-making.

Urban councils are advised to value and reward those leaders and employees who demonstrate and uphold ethical values (Luo et al., 2023). These recognition incentives may encourage a culture of accountability. Leaders who exemplify ethical behaviour should be celebrated, their actions should be publicized as desired examples for others to follow (Berdida & Grande, 2023; Pardhi & Suri, 2024). Further so, leaders who violate ethical values should be held accountable for their conduct (Rasheed et al., 2023). The consequences for the violations of such ethical conduct should be clearly laid out. The sanctions for such violations should be deterrent enough and executed swiftly.

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