



Rethinking Ethical Conduct of Public Leaders in Tanzania

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How to cite this paper: Mosha, A., Oswald, E. and Malele, D. (2026) Rethinking Ethical Conduct of Public Leaders in Tanzania. *Open Access Library Journal*, **13**: e15779.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1115779>

Received: July 17, 2026

Accepted: October 27, 2026

Published: October 30, 2026

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Abstract

Ethical leadership is one of the necessary ingredients of good governance, particularly in public institutions where leaders exercise authority over public resources and decision-making. Despite efforts to improve governance, frameworks, and structures, public leaders' ethical disposition continues to hamper accountability, public trust, and institutional performance in Tanzania. This study rethinks ethical leadership in relation to good governance by examining the implementation of ethical leadership practices and the effects of unethical conduct within Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). The study adopted a constructivist philosophy and an exploratory qualitative case study design. The study adopted an institutional theory analytical framework and collected data via in-depth interviews with 15 purposively selected MDAs and documentary reviews. Thematic analysis of the findings revealed that Tanzania has established strong ethical leadership, regulatory, and normative frameworks as designated by the constitution. However, the implementation remains constrained by weak enforcement, organizational culture and behaviour patterns that limit accountability mechanisms. Unabated unethical conduct creates a contagion of laxity that escalates 'business as usual' mechanisms, dragging down efforts to promote ethical leadership. Thus, ethical leadership and good governance are strengthened by a triad of mutually reinforcing regulative, cultural-cognitive and normative pillars.

Subject Areas

Public Policy

Keywords

Ethics, Ethical Conduct, Accountability, Integrity, Public Service, Tanzania

1. Introduction

Ethical conduct is considered a key prerequisite and a cornerstone of good gov-

ernance in the administration of public institutions, from a classical philosophical perspective to contemporary trajectories [1]. Ethics has become an all-time measure of how power and authority are exercised in the distribution and redistribution of public resources, and in serving the common good [2] [3]. For earlier thinkers such as Max Weber, ethics was the only rationalizing agent that would guide the exercise of authority and ensure rule-based administration of the public service, thereby promoting discipline and efficiency [4]. For Aristotle and Emmanuel Kant, virtue and sense of duty were to set the foundation for the administration of public service that would result in good governance. These philosophical foundations have influenced modern debates on ethical behaviour in public service, including accountability, integrity, and fairness. Contemporary lagomarchy in the administration of public service debates on how practitioners' acceptable moral standards should reflect honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness, and the acceptable ways of making and enforcing decisions on the allocation of limited resources [5].

The growing view that ethical leadership should entail promoting normatively appropriate conduct, reflected in personal behaviour, decision-making processes, and communication, is evident [6]. Ethics scholars pinpoint that an ethical leader should be a moral person and a moral manager [7] [8]. The former implies a leader's personal conviction to do what is right. At the same time, the latter entails the leader's ability to develop and share a vision that followers adopt to successfully realize the intended goal [6] [8]. In the absence of these two, a leader makes decisions that are not informed by the established rules, and there is a greater likelihood that the subordinates who watch and learn vicariously can replicate the same. An immoral person and an immoral manager become a power-hungry demagogue characterized by dishonesty, dictatorship, selfishness, and irresponsibility [9]. Unethical leadership is generally translated into the mismanagement of public institutions, resulting in poor stewardship, dishonesty in public service delivery, a lack of social justice, and abuse of public office [10] [11]. An ideal ethical leader, therefore, is characterized by strong ethical character, a passion for doing what is right, inclusiveness toward stakeholders, fairness, and a principled decision-making approach that values ethical wisdom.

The relevance of ethical leadership has intensified due to persistent outcry over the maladministration and unethical conduct of public leaders, which have resulted in the mismanagement of public resources, embezzlement, non-compliance with legal and institutional frameworks, and negligence, accompanied by a deterioration in public trust in public institutions [12]. The situation remains unabated since public institutions wield significant administrative, social, and economic power. So their ethical disposition significantly shapes public policy by influencing the regulation, distribution, and redistribution of public resources [13]. From the analysis of the major corporate scandals involving prominent politicians and bureaucrats around the world such as the Water Gate scandal of 1972 that resulted to the resignation of the United States president Nixon and other top of-

ficials, to rampant embezzlement of public funds by top officials in countries such as Venezuela, Malaysia, and Russia to mention just a few, the quest for ethical leadership cannot be quenched. In Africa, scandals associated with unethical leadership from top government officials in countries such as South Africa, Sudan, Equatorial-Guinea, Gabon, and Egypt, among others, have shamefully forced them out of office [11] [14].

In Africa, corruption indices and national audit reports indicate bad governance as a consequence of unethical practices by public leaders over the years. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Economics and Public Administration [15], cultural and historical factors such as colonial legal frameworks that created a culture of non-responsiveness and lack of accountability, lack of transparency, mistrust of public officials, miscommunication of ethical values and principles, and repugnant laws and regulations that are not competent enough to pin down the criminals are the reason behind unethical leadership. The Mo Ibrahim Index Report of 2022 shows that more than half of African countries have deteriorated in observance of the rule of law and participation, especially in Sudan, Somalia, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, and others [16]. The African Governance Report (2021), explains public riots against poor governance in some African countries, driven by challenges such as corruption, poor leadership, and poverty. Unethical behaviour tends to erode public trust, undermine institutional performance, and erode leaders' legitimacy.

Despite the initiatives to reinvigorate ethics in the public service, unethical behaviour among leaders persists. Ethics campaigns, establishing a code of conduct, public service charters, distributing leaflets, and conducting public awareness campaigns are among the initiatives of the Public Service Ethics in Africa Project of 2000 [17]. Holding summits and conferences, such as the South Africa Moral Summit of 1998, which brought together the country's religious and other leaders to sign a Code of Conduct and adopt a humanitarian ethics pledge commonly known as "ubuntu," shows the determination to pressure for ethical leadership. The institutionalization of Codes of conduct, expressed through disciplinary codes, values, and principles of operations to guide day-to-day performance, is preached at most public service institutions in Africa. Values such as disinterestedness, justice, accountability, dedication, transparency, and integrity are promoted.

Puzzling, however, despite the national and international governance frameworks, anti-corruption conventions and pledges, and endless public sector reforms, unethical behaviour persists. Research reveals that unethical leadership phenomena are more systemic, deeply rooted in organizational culture, institutions, mechanisms, processes, and structures [2]. In Kenya, the national audit report shows fiscal indiscipline manifested by inaccurate, incomplete, and uncertain payments; unsupported payments; ineffective audit committees that met less than the required number of times; and a lack of value for money in public organiza-

tions' audit reports [18]. In Ghana, a similar report reveals irregularities in the management of public resources, including unaccounted revenue, unpaid payment vouchers, unretired imprest, and payroll irregularities, all of which reflect dishonest and poor governance [19].

In Tanzania, several initiatives are in place to ensure ethical leadership in the administration of public service. Among them are ratification of international instruments and standards of good governance, such as the United Nations Convention against corruption (ratified 2005) and the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions ISSAIs (2010-present). The country has also adopted the Public Service Code of Ethics and Conduct, the Public Service Act, 2002, the Public Service Regulations, 2003, the Public Leadership Code of Ethics Act, Cap 398, and the Tanzania Integrity Framework, all of which aim to improve ethics in public administration.

Despite the efforts, the CAG audit report on the performance of public institutions has uncovered alarming mismanagement of public resources, associated with the abuse of public officials' power and unethical behavior [20]. This poor governance has led to the waste of billions of dollars [21]-[24]. Underperformance, political patronage, weak institutions, and a lack of integrity characterize Tanzania's public service delivery as well. The Transparency International report [25] indicates that Tanzania scored 40 out of 100 in the Corruption Perceptions Index, while Mwaipopo [26] revealed that about 33% of Tanzanian citizens perceived an increase in corruption. The same report says that 75% of citizens fear reporting corruption incidents due to retaliation. The implementation gap stifles efforts to reinvigorate integrity and accountability, calling for content-specific solutions to address this gap.

The stated challenges reveal an underlying ethical leadership challenge. Despite the existence of legal frameworks, they seem to be weak in influencing practitioners' moral conduct, revealing a significant institutional gap. Whereas the improvement is only modest, its seemingly sluggish and insufficient nature fails to bring satisfactory transformation in the administration of public service. This underscores the need to rethink ethical leadership in the public service by conducting an integrated analysis that captures underlying individual behaviour and structural dynamics, generating empirical insights to strengthen the ethical conduct of public leaders.

The study's main objective was therefore to rethink public leaders' ethics in relation to good governance in Tanzania. In so doing, the study identified and documented ethical practices and effects that influence good governance within public institutions, using data from Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to illustrate the case. Specifically, the study had the following specific objectives:

1. To analyze the implementation of ethical leadership practices within MDAs in Tanzania.
2. To determine the effects of unethical conduct on governance outcomes in Tanzania.

2. Theoretical Review

The study is guided by institutional theory, which emphasizes the importance of structures and functions in decision-making. Institutional theory assumes that formal rules, informal rules, norms, and organizational culture are key in shaping behaviour. From this theoretical lens, March and Olsen [27] argue that behaviour in organizations is guided by the logic of appropriateness in decision-making, which determines what is right or wrong. Institutionalism elevates regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive aspects as central pillars in influencing ethical conduct (Scott, 2013). According to Scott [28], the regulatory pillar comprises rules, regulations, policies, guidelines, directives, and their enforcement mechanisms that guide decision-making in the public service. The establishment of anti-corruption regulations, audit systems, legal frameworks, and codes of ethics is an institutional mechanism that pushes leaders to behave ethically. The normative pillar identified by Scott [28] highlights the roles of norms, standards, values, and professional ethics in fostering ethical leadership. This pillar emphasizes ethical leadership as a moral manager who embodies values of integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, and fairness. The cultural cognitive pillar concerns how leaders leverage their cognitive abilities, cultural norms, and contextual factors to interpret and apply formal rules and regulations in decision-making. It explains why two leaders can interpret and apply the same rule differently, leading to different outcomes. This theoretical disposition has guided the assessment of the implementation of ethical leadership practices within MDAs in Tanzania and their effects on the administration of public service.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Evolution of Ethics in the Administration of Public Service

Classical philosophical foundations are established, and canonical ethical values that guide public administration today remain, though some have advanced. Aristotle, one of the earliest thinkers, emphasized virtue ethics as a guide to leaders' character and moral judgment as early as the 4th century. Immanuel Kant preached deontological ethics, emphasizing universal moral principles, duty, and the observation of rules in the 18th century. By the end of the 18th and 19th centuries, the administration of public services was guided by the maximization of the good for the majority of societal members, that is, utilitarian values advanced by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

From then on, the emphasis shifted to administrative responsibility. Thinkers such as Herman Finer [29] emphasized external accountability achieved through strict external control, including harsh oversight and legislative measures. On the contrary, Friedrich [30] opined that internal moral responsibility, guided by professional standards and individual judgment, was more relevant. This controversy shed new light on the fact that ethical leadership is a combination of institutional controls and personal integrity. Escalation of unethical conduct among public leaders, despite existing frameworks, led to the work of Rohr [31] who insisted on

embedding ethical principles in countries' constitutions, and later to Cooper [32] who further argued for the institutionalization of ethics in decision-making structures. Generally, these empirical insights sought to establish whether ethical conduct could be achieved through strict control and oversight or through internal conviction, professionalism, and individual judgment.

From public offices to society, Frederickson (1997) moved ethics for ethics' sake, but called for ethical leadership that would bring social justice and the desired outcomes for society. This viewpoint was facilitated by the general shift from traditional public administration to new public management, which emphasized results, outputs, compliance, and customer satisfaction. Advancements in communication technology then facilitated information sharing, compelling strategic and system-wide approaches to the adaptation of ethical principles in the administration of public service [3] [33].

Since the 2000s, more studies have emphasised the role of ethical leadership in mitigating unethical practices in the public service. The increase in unethical conduct among public servants, including top officials, characterized by private accumulation of profit, mismanagement of resources, and abuse of public office, despite existing frameworks, brought the need to address the moral conduct of leaders. Globally, ethical leadership is associated with positive outcomes such as responsive policies, public trust, and performance, whereas the opposite leads to policy failure.

Recent scholarship also demonstrates that political systems have sought to devise mechanisms to counteract unethical behaviour. These include adopting the client services charter, customer orientation, code of conduct, whistleblowing mechanisms, disciplinary code, and transparent procurement mechanisms [34]-[36]. Additionally, there is growing awareness that the successful implementation of these mechanisms should be approached systematically rather than in isolation.

3.2. Ethical Leadership Implementation in Tanzania

Whereas some Tanzanian scholars adopt a structural-functional approach to the analysis of ethical leadership in the public service, others adopt a behavioural approach. A behavioural approach reveals persistent unethical challenges among public leaders despite deliberate efforts to address them. Abdi *et al.* [37] pinpoint corruption, mismanagement of public funds, and laxity as major ethical challenges of Tanzania's public administration. Behavioural malfunctions such as corruption and bribery pose significant challenges to ethical conduct among public leaders in Tanzania. Studies such as the one by Hoseah [38] have examined the prevalence and impact of corruption in the public sector. The research reveals that corruption hampers effective service delivery, erodes public trust, and undermines the legitimacy of public institutions. Behavioural optimists also insist on changing behaviour through training. Ethics training and awareness programs have emerged as essential tools for promoting ethical conduct among public leaders in Tanzania. Gbervbie *et al.* [39] shed light on the significance of ethics train-

ing and its impact on the behaviour and performance of public leaders, while [39] investigated the effects of ethics training on public leaders in Tanzania. They found that ethics training plays a crucial role in enhancing public leaders' knowledge and awareness of ethical principles. Through structured training programs, public leaders gain a deeper understanding of ethical values, ethical decision-making processes, and the importance of ethical conduct in their roles.

Strong enforcement and an appropriate organizational culture are also considered among the best ways to inculcate ethical leadership in the public service. Hope and Kempe [40] note that, whereas the country has multiple frameworks and codes, their enforcement is constrained by weak enforcement, poor organizational culture, and institutional incapacity. Amid the existence of codes of ethics and conduct and integrity frameworks, Njama [41] also finds that public servants in local authorities in Tanzania are haunted by conflicts of interest, a lack of motivation, and maladministration that hinder their effective implementation. Similar findings, including the provision of adequate incentives, were provided by [42]. These findings focus on non-structural aspects of building ethical leadership. By fine-tuning actors' behaviour, enforcing established codes of conduct, and coordinating ethics-promotion structures, ethical leadership will be elicited.

The structural-functional approach assesses the ethical framework's effectiveness in shaping ethical leadership in the public service. Nkyabonaki [43] assessed the effectiveness of Tanzania's public service Code of Ethics and Conduct and found that, although the code aims to shape human behaviour, it is not achieving this due to the interwoven ecological dynamics that hinder the process. Poor adherence to the code makes it mythical rather than instrumental. The approach also addresses structural incapacity that fails to meet the established standards and procedures. Mosha, Bakari & Munisi [44] found that disciplinary management becomes ineffective due to the poor structuring of disciplinary authorities. When an immediate employer becomes a disciplinary authority, the principles of natural justice are likely to suffer as a chain of unethical consequences escalates.

Similarly, Odeh [45] examines the significance of ethical frameworks that delineate the expected behaviour, values, and responsibilities of public leaders in their roles and interactions with stakeholders. By adhering to established frameworks, public leaders are better equipped to make decisions that prioritize the public interest and to demonstrate a commitment to ethical values such as integrity, transparency, and accountability.

The role of legal and institutional frameworks in promoting ethical conduct among public leaders in Tanzania is also widely recognized in the literature. Kihongosi and Sarwatt [46] conducted a comprehensive study examining the legal and institutional mechanisms for combating corruption and promoting ethical leadership in Tanzania. Their research shed light on the critical importance of effectively enforcing existing laws and establishing robust anti-corruption institutions to ensure ethical conduct among public leaders.

Studies on ethical leadership across sectors also acknowledge the role of ethics

in shaping organizational outcomes. Ethics is key to ensuring efficiency in administration and adherence to established legal frameworks and standards. Public service institutions deliver effectively and efficiently when they embrace ethical values such as transparency, fairness, participation, reduced public complaints, and trust-building. A similar observation is made by Kasuwi [47] who stress the need for ethical standards and codes of conduct to guide the behaviour of public leaders in Tanzania. These standards provide a framework for ethical decision-making and set clear expectations for public leaders' conduct. Pew Research Centre [48] also notes that ethical standards and frameworks serve as a reference point for public leaders, helping them navigate complex situations and make choices that prioritize the public interest. These studies presume that ethical leaders are responsible for establishing and fostering a culture of integrity and responsible decision-making within public institutions.

Unethical conduct has profound effects on transparency and accountability within governance systems. It undermines the fundamental principles of good governance and erodes public trust and confidence in government institutions. Nandeesh's [49] work provides valuable insights into the detrimental impact of corruption on transparency. Corruption and unethical behaviour erode public trust by creating the perception that government officials prioritize personal gain over the public interest. When public leaders engage in embezzlement, bribery, or other forms of unethical conduct, it compromises the integrity of governance structures. As a result, transparency, crucial to open and accountable governance, is severely compromised.

Unethical conduct has profound, detrimental effects on Tanzania's economic development. Numerous studies have highlighted the link between corruption and economic growth, underscoring the significance of ethical behaviour in promoting sustainable development [50]. When public leaders engage in corrupt practices, such as favouritism in contract awards or the misappropriation of public funds, it significantly hampers economic progress and undermines the efficient allocation of resources. One of the primary ways unethical conduct affects economic development is by diverting resources from crucial development projects. Corruption siphons off funds that should be allocated towards infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and other essential sectors. As a result, the availability of resources for public welfare is significantly reduced, impeding progress and hindering the country's overall development [51].

Unethical conduct in governance has wide-ranging and detrimental social consequences. Kihongosi and Sarwatt [46] conducted a study examining the relationships between corruption and unethical behaviour, and their impact on social dynamics in Tanzania. Their research underscores the role of corruption in perpetuating social injustices, hindering equitable resource distribution, and exacerbating poverty levels within the country. One of the key social consequences of unethical conduct is the hindrance of equitable distribution of resources. Kihongosi and Sarwatt (2020) argue that corruption and unethical behaviour divert re-

sources from their intended purposes, resulting in a skewed allocation. It leads to increased poverty rates, as essential services and resources are not effectively distributed to those who need them most. The marginalized and vulnerable segments of society, such as low-income communities and rural areas, bear the brunt of this inequitable distribution, further exacerbating social inequalities.

Political instability is a significant consequence of unethical governance practices, particularly in Tanzania. Research conducted by Gray [52] emphasizes the detrimental effects of corruption on political systems and democratic processes. Their study sheds light on how unethical behaviour undermines the legitimacy of political institutions, ultimately contributing to political instability in the country. Corruption erodes the trust and confidence that citizens place in their government. When public leaders engage in unethical conduct, such as bribery, embezzlement, or nepotism, it undermines the principles of fairness and equality. The perception of widespread corruption erodes the public's faith in governance systems, leading to disillusionment and frustration among citizens. As a result, it can trigger public protests, civil unrest, and even political crises.

4. Materials and Methods

The study was guided by a constructivist philosophy that assumes truth is not just 'out there', but needs to be studied and constructed. It presupposes a research design that intends to examine details in breadth and depth to uncover the truth. The study adopted an exploratory case study design, using a qualitative approach, to examine the implementation of ethical conduct among public leaders in Tanzania's public service and its consequences. The interpretivist approach was selected because it seeks to describe and best understand the meaning rather than the frequency of certain phenomena. Also, the interpretivist approach allows the study to interpret the meanings others have of the world; hence, multiple realities are constructed through lived experiences and interactions with others.

The study utilised multiple cases purposely selected from Ministries, Departments, and Agencies located in Dar es Salaam and Dodoma (specifically 15 MDAs). The selection of cases was made using the most similar cases selection criteria, focusing on organisations in the public service operating under similar legal and administrative frameworks to facilitate meaningful triangulation of information. Only organizations expected to provide rich information on ethical leadership and public leaders' conduct were purposefully selected. Other criteria included the organisation's strategic role in public administration, the presence of established management structures, and experience in implementing ethical frameworks and statutory ethics oversight institutions. Each case study was given the same amount of fieldwork time. The interviews were conducted with management in each selected MDA, including leaders at the principal officer rank and above (mostly directors of human resources and administration), who were assumed to speak to the conduct of leaders in their respective organisations and in Tanzania in general. Thus, each interview corresponded to a case.

The study conducted in-depth interviews and documentary review to collect both primary and secondary data. This enabled the study to probe beyond the constructed questions to obtain in-depth clarification of information that could not have been achieved using a survey or questionnaire. Qualitative interviews were therefore chosen as the most appropriate means of gathering the data. Interviews were classified into two groups: personal (one-on-one) and telephone (researcher-administered by phone). A total of 15 interviews were conducted, and one lasted 1 to 2 hours. Secondary data were obtained through a documentary review utilizing several reports from MDAs and the National Audit Office of Tanzania. **Table 1** below summarises the total number of interviews conducted for this research.

Table 1. Interviewees.

Ordinary MDAs	9
MDAs Regulators	6
Total	15

The data analysis was conducted stepwise. The raw data collected were transcribed and imported into NVivo 12 before actual analysis began. The software enabled the formation of themes and subthemes, which were grouped and coded accordingly. All recorded interviews were transcribed and imported into the software, and iterative coding followed. The transcripts were read multiple times, and codes were assigned to meaningful text segments. The related codes were then grouped into categories, themes and subthemes. Data were then organised into coding matrices and word-frequency queries to enable identification and comparison across cases. Where conflicting interpretations were found, they were deliberately examined and incorporated into the analysis to ensure both convergence and divergence in the findings.

The study also addressed ethical considerations. The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy authorized the conduct of the research pursuant to a letter with reference number AD.125/550/01d/46 and a contract executed on 28th March 2025 between the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (hereinafter referred to as “the Employer”) and Dr Ambiliasia Mosha (hereinafter referred to as “the Principal Investigator”). Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant MDAs. Additionally, participants were informed of the study’s purpose, the discretion to decline any question they were not willing to answer, and the ability to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were also upheld and communicated to participants before the interviews commenced.

5. Presentation of Findings

5.1. The Implementation of Ethical Leadership Practices within MDAs in Tanzania

Tanzania is among the countries making good progress in governance, though

some cases suggest otherwise. Progressively, Tanzania's public service has a structured governance framework guided by legal and institutional mechanisms that subject it to the rule of law and constitutionalism. One of the foundations for good governance and ethical leadership is the constitution. This provides for the rule of law and establishes all institutions responsible for a well-functioning public service. To mention a few, there are: the Ministers (Discharge of Ministerial Functions Act), Cap 299, the Public Service Act, 2008, the Public Service Standing Orders, 2009, the Code of Conduct for the Public Service, and others. There are also integrity institutions such as the National Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan under the State House. The Ethics Division under the President's Office—Public Service Management (PO-PSM) specifically mandates that all Ministries, Departments and Agencies, Local Government Authorities, and Regional Secretariats suppress malpractices and promote ethical leadership. Other institutions established by specific laws include the Prevention and Combating of Corruption Bureau, responsible for preventing and combating corruption; the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA), responsible for ethical procurement in the public service; and others. Thus, all institutions under the public service are governed by the Constitution and specific laws that might differ from one institution to another.

We have a comprehensive system for promoting ethical conduct, especially integrity, in the public service. The Tanzania Constitution, public ethics codes of conduct, public service regulations, public service standing orders, and other directives issued from time to time are well-structured and capable of providing direction to public servants. The problems lie with the enforcement, however. There are tendencies toward laxity or 'business-as-usual' that create a cumulative pathology of laxity (Interview, 19th May, 2026, Dodoma).

These findings tell a lot about the determination of the Tanzania's government towards good governance and responsive public service. The existence of legal and institutional frameworks ensures uniformity and consistency of service across. Despite ignoring existing regulations and guidelines, as observed, this laxity contagion persists, especially among leaders and other practitioners in the public service, who learn vicariously when they see offenders go unpunished. The tendency to transfer offenders from one duty station to another intensifies contagion. It creates a relaxed attitude among unethical leaders, leading them to believe that the severest punishment they can face is being transferred to another station.

There are commendable initiatives, however, in enforcing the codes (Interview 26th May, 2026, Dar es Salaam). The establishment of the court specifically to deal with public funds embezzlement cases, that is, the High Court Corruption and Economic Crimes Division established under the Economic and Organised Crime Control Act of 2016, is a positive move. Likewise, disciplinary actions taken from time to time, including fining, reduction in rank and salary, and even imprisonment, demonstrate the effectiveness of the instruments.

Similarly, the study also investigated the level of awareness of codes of ethics

and governance guidelines among public leaders. The majority of the respondents from MDAs (80%) agreed that their leaders are aware of the ethical codes of conduct and good governance guidelines. This means the status is satisfactory, though with some scepticism. Leaders are appointed after basic qualifications are met, including the ability to read, comprehend, and apply the guidelines that will guide their leadership. As stated earlier, the government has made commendable efforts to institute legal and institutional frameworks to guide public leaders. The question is whether appointed and serving leaders have time to acclimatise to the said guidelines.

It is correct to say that the presence of these legal instruments and the well-functioning of the public service so far indicate that about 80% of leaders are aware of the ethical codes of conduct and good governance guidelines. However, some scenarios bring optimism to the subject matter as reported,

Some of the leaders do not want to learn. I will explain this in two points. One, high-level leaders have assistants who feed them with almost every piece of technical information they want to know. If you find a leader without personal effort to make time to read the laws and guidelines, that's it. Such leaders are easily misled and susceptible to making unethical decisions. Two, leaders who get their posts out of favour never bother to learn because they believe they have a protection system, even when they mess up (Interview, 21st May, 2026, Dodoma).

Another issue concerns the political will to raise awareness of the guidelines and institutional frameworks for public leaders. An initiative must be taken to establish minimum requirements for appointment to a leadership role, including knowledge of all relevant guidelines governing the leadership post. Induction seminars after appointment, plus individual initiatives to search for and attend training, are crucial.

Regarding the status of ethical conduct among public leaders in Tanzania, the study did not intend to gather statistical data on the actual number or percentage of ethical and unethical leaders, but instead gathered participants' opinions on the general perception of the observable actions and behaviour that show adherence to ethical guidelines and good governance principles.

Generally, all leaders in the public service are guided by the specific legal frameworks mentioned earlier, including the constitution. These shape them to be ethical leaders and demonstrate ethical conduct. The laws and institutional frameworks set the dos and don'ts and impose sanctions on offenders. There is also a well-structured, transparent, and objective process for selecting public leaders. The existence of vetting procedures, swearing-in and induction courses, the requirement for asset declarations, and on-the-job training and seminars are all geared toward developing ethical leaders.

There is noted improvement in Tanzania's public service in terms of adherence to established legal frameworks. Most public institutions have established clear

and transparent governance structures, accompanied by reporting mechanisms, transparency and complaints procedures, action plans, performance management frameworks, and disciplinary procedures. These are transforming the public service into a responsive and accountable system that facilitates service delivery, as reported,

Sincerely, there are ethical regulations, though their implementation is problematic in most public institutions. In my office, for instance, there is a directory for risk and quality management that ensures close follow-up on ethical conduct and good governance. Our Boss never tolerates delays; he warns on the first occurrence, but if it recurs, prepare for disciplinary measures. This builds a culture of responsibility among everyone here, from the lowest-ranking official to the highest-ranking official (Interview, 27th May, 2026, Dodoma).

The presence of training was also lauded as one of the mechanisms boosting ethical conduct among public leaders, though it is less valuable than other mechanisms. It was said that the presence of regular training and induction courses helps leaders acclimatize and fit in quickly to their new roles, and avoid obvious unethical mistakes. Participants argued that,

Internal leadership courses organised by our institution are very helpful in shaping the ethical standards of public leaders. External induction courses arranged by the President's Office, Public Service Management and Good Governance, also help remind one another of the existing ethical codes of conduct and to obey them. They also help us have a shared understanding of the dos and don'ts for public servants. They remind leaders of their individual and public service responsibilities (Interview, 26th May, 2026, Dodoma).

Despite this, there are scenarios of unethical leadership, as revealed from time to time by regulatory institutions and legal instruments. Flaws in the governance frameworks cause some of these, that is, the processes, mechanisms and practices. For instance, whereas procedures for getting public leaders and discipline are stipulated, the processes are sometimes bent, as reported,

There are problems with the vetting process for getting leaders. The internal vetting process normally proposes prospective leaders on merit. However, this is sometimes disregarded, and higher-level central authorities appoint leaders from elsewhere. This sometimes leaves questions as to whether a strict vetting procedure was undertaken (Interview, 24th May, 2026, Dodoma)

It was yet reported,

There are well-crafted disciplinary procedures, but they are implemented on a patrimonial basis nowadays. This is partly due to the leaders' appointments being made in this way. It is hard to punish a person whom you hired out of favouritism and cronyism (Interview 23rd May, 2026, Dodoma).

In another case, it was reported that,

Sometimes, the enforcement of laws and regulations resulting in unethical behaviour is caused by individual behaviour and character. Some people are naturally selfish, thieves, or those who always seek personal gain over public interest. That is why corruption, nepotism, and embezzlement of public funds are so rampant nowadays (Interview 25th May 2026, Dodoma).

Flaws in the mechanisms for implementing established legal frameworks also cause poor governance. This is caused by the adopted organizational culture, which is interwoven with individual behaviour and personality. One of the participants elaborated,

Personally, I know there are enough guiding principles, including laws and regulations, but our leaders ignore them. For instance, when organization leaders A are punished rather than according to the existing laws, they are transferred to organisation B. This tendency is common in our country, unlike in others, where such offences are punished by termination or by leaders stepping down on their own (Interview, 24th May, 2026, Dodoma).

The two quotations above express a lack of accountability among leaders vested with the power to manage the public service, including the authority to appoint and discipline. It is associated with taking the wrong decisions or even inaction when it was expected to act. Transferring an underperforming or criminal leader to another organization is associated with a lack of accountability. It is not a solution to the problem but an extension of the same, tarnishing the image of public service.

The Controller and Auditor General, and the Prevention and Combating of Corruption Bureau's reports reveal bad governance and unethical conduct among public service leaders. Some of the outspoken challenges, such as grand corruption, mismanagement of public funds and other public resources, patrimonialism and nepotism, are related to a lack of integrity, dishonesty, accountability, and transparency.

5.2. Effects of Unethical Conduct on Governance

Unethical conduct and poor governance lead to low productivity, as unethical leaders cannot perform to the required standard. One reason is that unethical conduct and poor governance undermine decision-making. The study found that when leaders ignore integrity and accountability and disregard codes of ethics and conduct, they become unresponsive. Responsiveness entails making accurate and timely decisions in response to the need or issue at hand. Prolonged problems, accumulation of unattended files, unresolved issues among public clients, and unbecoming delays were mentioned as symptoms of poor governance in the under-studied cases (Interview, May 21, 2026, Dodoma; Interview, May 19, 2026, Dodoma).

Bad governance and unethical behaviour among public leaders were also directly and indirectly associated with the escalation of poverty and rampant corruption, which kills the economy and creates social classes and inequality. These two ills undermine the principles of the common good and justice, weaken institutions, and erode public trust.

Bad governance and unethical conduct among leaders systematically cause public policy failures, affect the equal distribution and redistribution of resources, and widen social inequality. Bad governance distorts the legitimate use of administrative authority, betrays the direct collective interest and those under the social contract, and diverts public resources from productive investments meant to support economic growth and human development (interview, 19th May, 2026, Dodoma).

The quotation states that unethical conduct and poor governance undermine distributive justice, resulting in inequality among citizens. When decision-makers act on personal motives, they impoverish the masses, whose incomes continue to drop and become more alienated from enjoying the national cake, which is celebrated by a few elites.

Unethical behavior is also linked to underperformance and lack of motivation among public servants. Public servants work better when they see justice, have expectations, and are valued. None of these can occur when there are unethical behaviors among leaders, such as inequality, injustice, and favouritism. This study found that unethical conduct among leaders affects both procedural and substantive justice, demotivating and demoralising employees. For instance, all employees need to be recognised, treated justly, and have work expectations to aspire to. One of the factors that kills talent and highly demoralises public servants is favouritism, especially when positions are awarded on a patrimonial basis rather than on merit and performance, leading to high employee turnover.

We have excellent people leaving the public service for the private sector simply because they feel undervalued and their contributions are ignored. In worst cases, big talents are considered a threat to management and totally disregarded by unethical leaders who might have as well obtained their positions not by merit but by patronage (Interview, Dar es Salaam, May 27th, 2026).

The quotation above is one among many unethical conduct practices that escalate underperformance and low motivation in the public service. Additionally, procedural injustice, evidenced by inconsistent rule application, is a contributing factor to underperformance and demotivation. The consequences of this malice are perceived unfairness, weakened commitment to the organisational goal, and mistrust.

Unethical behaviour also attracts legal sanctions, including heavy fines and damage to the public service's reputation. Despite efforts like digitising procurement in the public service through ICT-based systems such as the Tanzania National e-procurement System (TANePS) and the Government e-Payment Gate-

way (GePG), unethical practices are still witnessed, inter alia, human-driven misconduct such as manipulation, bid rigging, bribery and kickbacks, and the use of fictitious suppliers, as revealed by Controller and Auditor General reports from time to time. Similarly segregation racially and ethnically contravenes ethical codes and guidelines and are widely experienced in the allocation of positions and opportunities. One participant lamented,

Unethical behaviour, such as corruption, abuse of power, mismanagement of public resources, and other unbecoming practices, affects employee well-being. It deteriorates employee well-being as leaders tend to benefit themselves while the lower-cadre employees remain in misery. This highly demotivates employees and hinders or delays the realization of organizational goals. As public institutions are geared to provide public services, such practices worsen the situation across (Interview, May 28th, 2026, Dar es Salaam).

The effects of unethical behaviour on public trust are another consequence worth attention. Trustworthiness of public leaders, as one of the key indicators of ethical leadership, needs to be nurtured and be observable to citizens. Among the challenges arising from a lack of trust in public leaders are civil unrest, characterised by riots and strikes; unlawful behaviour, characterised by disregard for the rule of law; and chaos. Another consequence is the manifestation of a rebellious character among citizens. This is caused by continuous provocation that reaches the point of intolerance. One respondent argued:

Today, the level of digital technology exposes much more information to the public than before. Online complaint systems and the availability of information about public service practices reveal what ordinary citizens could not see before. The information trends raise awareness and create opportunities to challenge decision-makers. The information and responses received determine whether to trust the leaders and provide support (Interview, 28th May, 2026, Dodoma).

The comment suggests that for a political system to function well, demands and support have to be expected and given priority. When demands are poorly handled, support withers. A lack of trust in the political system removes ownership of decisions, undermines its legitimacy and support, and, in turn, breeds a rebellious character. Continuous provocation escalates grievances that, if left unaddressed, can lead to lower standards of public service and performance, thereby causing customer dissatisfaction.

5.3. Suggested Ethics and Governance Framework

It is important to have a clear framework that serves as a national strategy for ethical leadership and governance in the public service. The following can be suggested as key components:

The inclusion and embracement of patriotism among public leaders inculcate a sense of love for the nation, a central pillar that deters unethical conduct and

poor governance. Patriotism, as an attitude of the mind, informs behavioural competence that limits the escalation of negative personal behaviour. It becomes a catalyst between what is good and what is bad, between the public interest and the person, and between the do and the don'ts. Common training systems should also accompany this to foster a shared understanding and expectations among public leaders. This is instrumental to sharpen the culture-cognitive pillar since professional competence is not directly proportional to leadership competence. It is suggested that leadership training be made compulsory for all leaders.

Additionally, accountability deters unethical behaviour and poor governance, and holds public leaders responsible for their actions. A sense of answerability fosters meticulous attention, ethics, intelligence, objectivity, wisdom, and decision-making accuracy. Whereas Tanzania's public service has instituted measures to foster transparency, accountability, and performance, these measures might not be as effective without leaders' sense of accountability before and after they make decisions in the public interest. The regulatory pillar strengthens accountability, central to the enforcement of ethical standards and frameworks. Compliance is enforceable when litigation establishes duties, rights, and sanctions.

For effective ethical leadership and good governance in Tanzania's public service, a robust decision-making model may be essential. It was suggested that,

Public leaders should follow a precise and formal decision-making model that is standard across the public service. There needs to be careful consideration when deciding between public and personal interests. Not everybody should be allowed to make personal decisions when it comes to matters that have public implications or interests (Interview, 29th May, 20206, Dodoma).

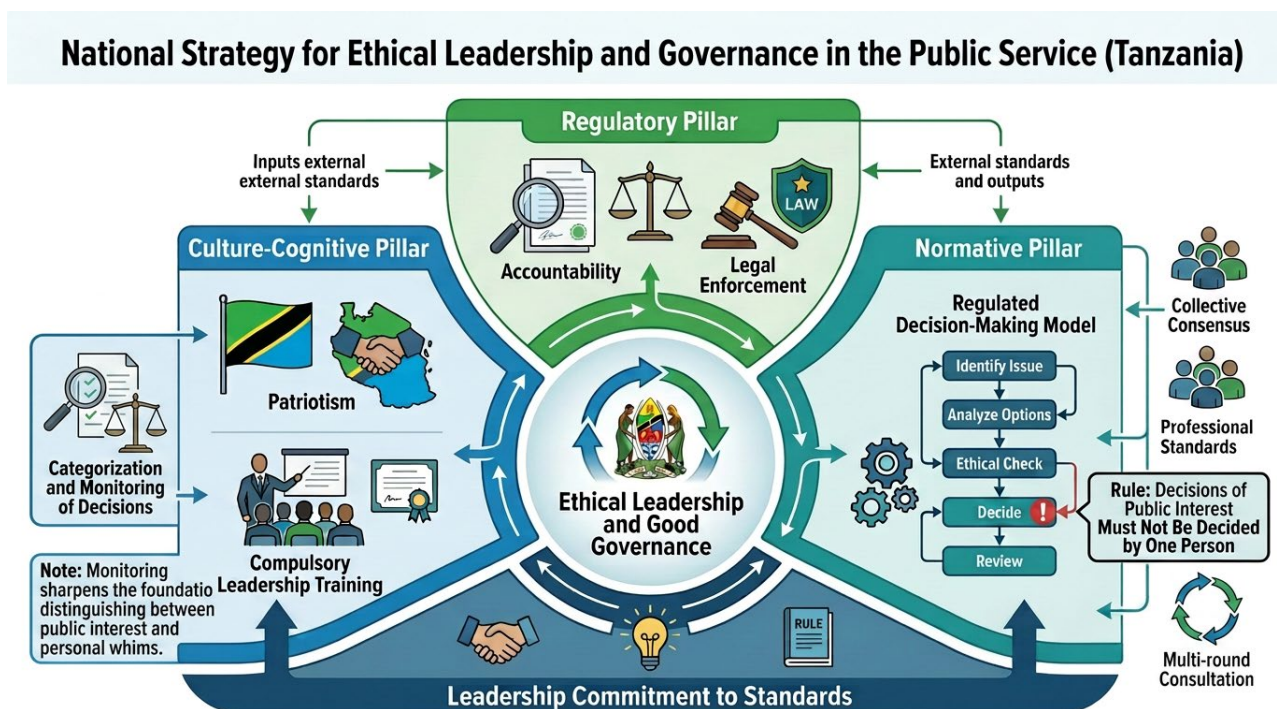
It appears that when decisions of public interest are made out of personal whims and motives, they cost the country handsomely. When these are not well regulated, the culprits do not bear the burden; rather, it falls to taxpayers. It was suggested,

Specifically, there should be a regulated, legally binding mechanism that reviews decisions before they are made. It should be made clear which decisions require multiple rounds of consensus and which can be made without further consultation. Additionally, power and authority should be carefully and precisely determined when deciding who makes which decisions. It is also important to ensure decision makers have the discipline to follow the established decision-making framework (Interview, 29th May, 2026, Dodoma).

Strict categorisation and monitoring of decision-making in the public service strengthen the normative pillar. Monitored decision-making in a context of norms, standards, values, and professional ethics is crucial to ensure public-interest decisions are unbiased and non-malicious.

Three points are made from the above quotation. One, the categorization of decisions that individuals or certain authorities can make without consultation; two, the laws that bind such categorizations and their enforceability; and three,

the presence of decision makers that ensure the former two take place accordingly. The third specifically speaks to leadership's commitment to consistently adhering to standards, without which it becomes hard to exercise ethical leadership and good governance in the public service. **Figure 1** captures this narrative.



Source: Constructed by Authors using AI-assisted visualization, 2026.

Figure 1. Proposed strategy for ethical leadership and governance in Tanzania's public service.

-Currently, there is a significant gap in incentives among public leaders. This creates hatred and a lust for positions and power. It is possible to find public leaders with the same qualifications and responsibilities receiving different incentives across the public service, depending on the sector in which they work. For instance, professionals in most regulatory agencies are highly paid compared to their counterparts in public institutions. Although all salaries are now centralized under the national treasury registrar, the gap in the amount is clearly significant.

All leaders should be placed in one incentive scheme. Additionally, there should be regulations to regulate public leaders' salaries and incentives. The current status demoralizes disadvantaged public leaders and is among the causes of unethical behaviours such as embezzlement and corruption (Interview, 28th May, 2026, Dodoma).

Additionally, there should be both positive and negative incentives as proposed. On the one hand, positive incentives can be categorized by performance level. Among the positive incentives are the national integrity service delivery award issued upon receipt of the report by the Controller and Auditor General, PCCB, and CR-GG, as well as other performance reports recognized. Some of the awards

for best performers can include:

One: Presidential Gold Seal award for exceptional governance performance and ethical leadership, zero major audit queries, innovation, excellence in service delivery, high public trust and strong accountability systems. Among the incentives can include gold-plated trophies, a presidential certificate, national public recognition, priority consideration for additional funding, and a documentary or profile featuring. Two: Presidential Silver Excellence Award to be awarded to recognize great improvement, very good accountability, and effective resource mobilization. Winners should be given silver trophies, presidential excellence certificates, national recognition, and special institutional development grants. Three presidential bronze integrity awards should be provided to institutions with promising reforms, notable improvements, strong compliance culture, and innovation despite resource limitations. Among the incentives are a bronze plaque, a recognition certificate, and public acknowledgement. Four, an innovation in public service award to be provided to institutions that use technology or have implemented reforms such as feedback systems, digital monitoring, smart classrooms, and online service delivery. Five other awards are to be given to lower levels. These should include the Best Regional and District awards, the Integrity Leadership Medal, and the Rapid Improvement awards.

On the other hand, poor performance should also be recognized. First, poor performers should be categorised as yellow, indicating they are at risk. These are those with declining service delivery, delayed reports, recurring minor audit queries, and rising complaints. Punishment should include advisory notes, technical support, a mandatory improvement plan, and strengthened monitoring and evaluation to curb the problem before it escalates to a crisis. Those with very poor performance shall be categorized in orange. These are serious underperformers with major inefficiencies, weak financial and internal controls and poor project implementation. These can be addressed through official warnings from the supervising ministry and the disciplinary authority, intensive performance reviews, strengthening leadership, and coaching and monitoring. Additionally, temporary restrictions on certain expenditures, as well as mandatory timelines and milestones, shall be implemented. Again, they should be placed in a strict, robust performance recovery program. For critical failures, they should be categorised in red. These are cases of persistent corruption and audit failures, collapse of service delivery, misappropriation of public funds, and severe negligence. Punishments should range from disciplinary and oversight from the parent ministry and disciplinary authority, organization restructuring, disciplinary and criminal proceedings against violators, forensic audit, and strengthening investigation by PCCB, law enforcement bodies, and a special government intervention team.

6. Discussion

This study has revealed the current status of ethical leadership in Tanzania's public service. This has revealed key findings worthy of discussion. Adherence to eth-

ical conduct and legal frameworks, which are key prerequisites for good governance, is a constitutional and mandatory legal requirement for all public leaders in Tanzania. The government had made tremendous strides in governance, establishing structures, institutions, and mechanisms to ensure ethical leadership defines the public service. However, without a commitment to such adherence, ethical leadership among leaders remains a desideratum.

Scott [28] on institutional theory proposed that ethical leadership is a function of a fully functioning regulatory, normative and cultural cognitive pillars. When one lags, others cannot function properly. The regulatory pillar comprises rules, regulations, policies, guidelines, directives, and their enforcement mechanisms that guide decision-making in the public service. The study found that in Tanzania's public service, anti-corruption regulations, audit systems, legal frameworks, and codes of ethics are being established to shape leaders' ethical behaviour. Despite this, there are numerous challenges to adherence. These can be traced to laxity in the enforcement of the rule of law in the public service. The normative pillar, that is, the norms, standards, values, and professional ethics, plays a key role as well. This study revealed high normative standards in Tanzania's public service, ranging from those related to the selection of public leaders through vetting, induction, and training to those that guide their day-to-day operations.

Despite the significance of these pillars, certain shortcomings hamper their full realization. It has been found that, sometimes, public service values such as guiding public leaders to hold public interest rather than private interest at heart are destroyed by ineffective enforcement mechanisms for holding leaders accountable and by personal behaviour. Again, sometimes vetting procedures are tarnished by patrimonial and crony motives, causing a whole circle of ethical failure, that is, from performance to disciplining. As a norm, sometimes underperforming leaders are transferred to other institutions rather than being punished for disciplinary or even criminal offences.

Such unethical conduct among public leaders has a detrimental impact on the rule of law, eroding the effectiveness and credibility of legal and regulatory frameworks. Research by Mgaya and Rwezaura [53] emphasises that when public leaders engage in unethical conduct without facing appropriate legal repercussions, it erodes public trust in the justice system. This erosion of trust can have long-lasting consequences, as citizens may become disillusioned and lose faith in the legal system's ability to uphold justice and fairness [54]. A concern here is that the weakening of the rule of law has broader societal implications, creating an unequal playing field where those with power and influence can act with impunity. At the same time, ordinary citizens face the consequences of their actions. The result can lead to a sense of injustice, sparking social unrest and disillusionment among the population.

The culture-cognitive pillar also becomes prominent in the application of the regulatory and normative pillars. It influences a leader's personal disposition, decision-making ability, adherence to rules and regulations, and accountability. On

the contrary, when the leader's ability is low, it can lead to wrongful and unlawful decisions. Ethics is key to ensuring efficiency in administration and adherence to established legal frameworks and standards. Public service institutions deliver effectively and efficiently when they embrace an ethical culture that fosters transparency, fairness, participation, reduced public complaints, and trust-building. Treviño *et al.*, [48] notes that ethical standards and frameworks serve as a reference point for public leaders, helping them navigate complex situations and make choices that prioritise the public interest. The current scholarship holds that, despite regulatory mechanisms, ethical leadership largely depends on a leader's cognitive capacity and the culture embraced by the individual and the organization at large [55]. Therefore, ethics is essential for establishing a culture of integrity and responsible decision-making within public institutions. The findings concur with the existing literature, which suggests that ethical leadership requires more than mere compliance with established ethical standards; it requires advanced cognitive capabilities that go beyond moral reasoning alone [56].

7. Conclusion

This study has assessed the disposition of public leaders in the selected institutions towards adherence to ethical standards and suggests ways forward. Among the key findings is the notable effort to establish governance mechanisms and the public leaders' adherence to established frameworks. However, the study noted the persistence of ethical challenges stemming from three institutional pillars: the regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars. These continue to serve as a weak link in the efforts and tarnish the public service's pursuit of ethical leadership. The cultural-cognitive pillar that underlies personal capability to act ethically, regardless of the presence or absence of the regulatory and normative pillars, seems imperfect. This pillar creates a laxity-contagion that fosters a 'business as usual' tendency toward following ethical codes of conduct and guidelines, thereby creating a laxity-cumulative effects pathology. The study also highlighted key ethics boosters essential to the public service. These are effective decision-making structures, mechanisms, processes, and personnel, especially for public-interest decisions. The presence of leadership training, mentorship, and induction courses for public leaders will only be meaningful if the vetting process is rightful and lawful. Thus, to sustain ethical leadership among Tanzania's public leaders, there is a need for a broader governance outlook that supports regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions that work synergistically to transform episodic ethical leadership terrain into deeply embedded organizational values and practices.

Funding

The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy funded the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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