



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF LAW, GOVERNMENT
AND COMMUNICATION
(IJLGC)

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ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND PUBLIC SECTOR GOVERNANCE: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF MALAYSIAN CIVIL SERVANTS

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 25.05.2026

Revised date: 07.06.2026

Accepted date: 02.08.2026

Published date: 10.09.2026

To cite this document:

Tajudin, D. H. A., Nizam, F. N. A., & Zawawi, A. A. (2026). Ethical Leadership and Public Sector Governance: An Empirical Study of Malaysian Civil Servants. *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, 11(45), 36-51.

Abstract:

Ethical leadership has become increasingly important in the public sector amid ongoing concerns about governance and integrity, and declining public trust. This study examines the determinants of ethical leadership among public servants in Northern Malaysia, focusing on empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture. Guided by Transformational Leadership Theory, this study conceptualises empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture as key mechanisms shaping ethical leadership behaviour among public servants. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed to examine the influence of these individual and organisational determinants on ethical leadership practices within the Malaysian public sector. Data were collected from 166 public servants in Kedah using structured questionnaires. Ethical leadership was measured using the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS), while the independent variables were assessed using established and adapted measurement instruments. The findings indicate that the overall level of ethical leadership among public servants is high. Correlation analysis revealed that empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture were all positively and significantly associated with ethical leadership. However, multiple regression analysis identified organisational culture as the strongest and most significant predictor of ethical leadership practices. Although personal integrity and peer influence showed positive relationships, their effects became insignificant when other variables were controlled. These findings indicate that organisational culture exerts a stronger influence on ethical

leadership than individual-level characteristics, highlighting the critical role of institutional values and organisational environments in fostering ethical conduct within the Malaysian public sector. This study contributes to ethical leadership literature by extending empirical evidence from the Malaysian public sector, demonstrating the relative influence of organisational and individual determinants of ethical leadership, and offering practical insights for governance reform, integrity enhancement, and leadership development within public institutions.

DOI: 10.35631/IJLGC.1145003

Keyword:

Empathy, Ethical Leadership, Peer Influence, Personal Integrity, Organisational Culture



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Ethical Leadership and Integrity

Ethical leadership has become a central concern in public administration as governments continue to face rising scrutiny over governance failures, corruption, abuse of power, and declining citizen confidence. These problems are especially apparent in developing countries, including Malaysia, where ethical misconduct among public officials continues to undermine institutional trustworthiness and the effective delivery of public services. As expectations for transparency, accountability, and responsible governance continue to rise, strengthening ethical leadership has become increasingly important for renewing public confidence and reinforcing institutional legitimacy. Ethical leadership encompasses leadership behaviour grounded in honesty, integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability, where leaders place the interests of employees, organisations, and society above personal gain (Kirk, 2024; Darby, 2024). Beyond demonstrating ethical conduct in their own decisions and interactions, ethical leaders are supposed to influence and reinforce ethical behaviour among followers via consistent communication, role modelling, and principled leadership practices (Brown et al., 2005; Ughulu, 2024).

Despite growing scholarly interest in ethical leadership, much of the existing literature has concentrated on its outcomes, including organisational commitment, staff trust, job satisfaction, and ethical organisational climate, rather than the factors that give rise to ethical leadership itself (Villirilli, 2021; Ethico, 2023; Chrein, 2024). As a result, relatively little is known about how individual characteristics and organisational conditions interact to shape ethical leadership within public-sector organisations. Although previous research has acknowledged the significance of integrity, empathy, and organisational values in encouraging ethical conduct (Brown et al., 2005; Ughulu, 2024), these determinants have largely been examined in isolation. Such an approach delivers only a partial understanding of how ethical leadership develops in organisational settings.

The need to address this gap is especially clear in the Malaysian public sector, where ethical leadership is widely recognised as a keystone of good governance, accountability, and institutional integrity, yet empirical evidence remains limited (Rahim & Ahmad-Zaluki, 2018; Wook et al., 2023). Drawing on Transformational Leadership Theory, this study views ethical leadership as a product of both individual moral qualities and organisational environments that cultivate and reinforce ethical values and behaviours (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Brown et al., 2005). However, few studies have examined the combined influence of individual determinants, namely sympathy and personal integrity, together with organisational determinants, specifically peer influence and organisational culture, within an integrated theoretical framework. This gap is even more pronounced in Northern Malaysia, where research involving public-sector organisations remains scarce. Accordingly, the present study considers the influence of empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture on ethical leadership among public servants in Kedah. By doing so, it expands existing knowledge on ethical leadership in the Malaysian public sector and delivers further insight into the organisational and individual mechanisms that shape ethical leadership practices.

Table 1: Dimensions of Ethics and Integrity Overall Score

Dimensions of Ethics and Integrity Levels	Score	Level %
Vision and Goals	3.97	79.47%
Legal Compliance, Policies, and Rules	3.82	76.33%
Leadership	3.80	76.05%
Whistleblowing	3.70	74.07%
Measurement, Research, and Assessment	3.68	70.67%
Confidential Advice and Support	3.66	73.65%
Corporate Social Responsibility	3.65	72.95%
Ethics Training and Education	3.63	72.67%
Infrastructure	3.59	71.88%
Ethical Communication	3.59	71.73%
Organisational Culture	3.51	71.07%
Disciplinary and Reward Measures	3.55	70.99%
Total Score/Level	3.71	73.67%

Source: Wook et al. (2023)

Recent evidence reported by Wook et al. (2023) suggests that ethical integrity practices within the Malaysian public sector are generally at a satisfactory level, notably in areas related to organisational vision, legal compliance, and leadership. Nevertheless, comparatively weaker performance in organisational culture, together with disciplinary and reward mechanisms, indicates that formal ethical policies are not always reflected in day-to-day organisational practices. This disconnects spotlights the continuing challenge of embedding ethical behaviour,

accountability, and integrity into the routine functioning of public institutions. Against this backdrop, ethical leadership becomes increasingly important, as leaders play a central role in reinforcing organisational values and supporting a culture of moral governance. Building on these concerns, the present study considers the influence of sympathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture on ethical leadership among public servants in Northern Malaysia.

Underlying Theory: Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory offers a valuable perspective for understanding ethical leadership because it emphasises morality, integrity, and leaders' ability to influence followers towards higher ethical standards. Rather than focusing solely on organisational performance, the theory highlights how leaders inspire followers to embrace shared values, strengthen ethical awareness, and pursue collective goals that benefit both individuals and organisations (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Brown et al., 2005). As noted by Cherry (2024), transformational leadership is characterised by a reciprocal process in which leaders and followers elevate one another's motivation, moral reasoning, and commitment. Within organisational settings, this leadership approach has also been associated with stronger employee engagement and lower levels of unethical behaviour through the development of a compelling organisational vision (Ahmad et al., 2020). Central to the theory are the Four I's of transformational leadership—idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration—which collectively foster trust, accountability, empathy, and ethical decision-making (Bass et al., 2006). These dimensions encourage leaders to serve as ethical role models while creating an environment that supports responsible behaviour and shared organisational values. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated positive associations between transformational leadership and ethical behaviour, organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and workplace integrity, alongside reductions in unethical practices (Huang et al., 2021). In addition, transformational leaders contribute to the development of ethical organisational cultures by reinforcing moral standards, shaping peer norms, and embedding ethical expectations within everyday organisational practices (Schein, 2010).

Ethical Leadership

Guided by Transformational Leadership Theory, this study conceptualises empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture as complementary mechanisms through which ethical leadership is developed and reinforced. Empathy reflects leaders' individualised consideration towards followers, while personal integrity embodies idealised influence through ethical role modelling. Peer influence represents the social environment that reinforces ethical norms, whereas organisational culture provides the institutional context that supports ethical values and responsible leadership practices. Collectively, these individual and organisational mechanisms provide the theoretical foundation for examining ethical leadership among Malaysian public servants.

Ethical leadership is commonly understood as a leader's capacity to demonstrate morally appropriate behaviour through decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and day-to-day actions while encouraging followers to uphold comparable ethical standards (Treviño et al., 2014). Rather than merely behaving ethically, leaders are expected to create organisational environments where ethical expectations are communicated clearly, reinforced consistently, and embedded within everyday practices. Such leadership is characterised by integrity,

honesty, compassion, accountability, and trustworthiness, all of which shape both leadership behaviour and organisational decision-making (Resick et al., 2013). Consistent adherence to these values strengthens followers' trust, confidence, and organisational commitment (Avolio et al., 2014). Ethical leadership therefore extends beyond visible behaviour, as it is grounded in an internal moral framework that guides judgement, interpersonal interactions, and leadership conduct (Mahsud et al., 2010). It also contributes to the creation of meaningful work environments by fostering ethical organisational practices and reinforcing moral responsibility across the workplace (Zhu et al., 2011). Caldwell et al. (2025) further contend that leaders' personal values and ethical beliefs shape their identity as ethical leaders, influencing how they respond to ethical dilemmas and navigate complex organisational situations.

Determinants of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is shaped by a combination of individual and organisational factors that influence leaders' values, behaviour, and ethical decision-making. Among the determinants most frequently discussed in the literature are empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture. Empathy enables leaders to recognise and respond to the needs of others, strengthening employee well-being, engagement, and workplace relationships (Mehra et al., 2024). Beyond interpersonal understanding, it also reflects moral responsibility and emotional sensitivity, particularly when leaders are required to make difficult decisions during periods of uncertainty or crisis (Ciulla, 2010). Personal integrity represents another fundamental attribute of ethical leadership, as leaders who consistently demonstrate honesty, fairness, and strong moral principles are better positioned to influence ethical behaviour within their organisations (Brown et al., 2005). Consistent with this view, Yazdanshenas et al. (2024) and Astiwardhani et al. (2024) reported that integrity-based leadership contributes positively to both employee and organisational performance.

In addition to individual characteristics, the organisational environment also plays an important role in reinforcing ethical leadership. Peer influence shapes ethical behaviour through collaboration, role modelling, and shared workplace norms that encourage knowledge sharing, teamwork, and mutual accountability (Edelmann et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Organisational culture further strengthens these processes by establishing values, expectations, and behavioural standards that guide both leaders and employees. Organisations that consistently promote integrity, fairness, and accountability are more likely to cultivate ethical conduct throughout the workplace (Kaptein, 2008). Likewise, ethical organisational cultures reinforced through shared values, open communication, and responsible organisational practices encourage leaders to remain committed to ethical decision-making and principled leadership (Neubert et al., 2009; Mayer et al., 2010).

Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted to investigate the influence of empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture on ethical leadership among public servants in Northern Malaysia. The study involved 166 public servants from various government agencies in Kedah. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that participants possessed relevant public-sector experience across different administrative grades, ranging from N40 officers to JUSA A officials. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising established measurement instruments. Ethical leadership was assessed using the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) developed by Brown et al.

(2005), while empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture were measured using instruments adapted from previous studies on workplace empathy (Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2020; Roy, 2023), peer influence within organisational settings (De Clercq et al., 2021), and organisational climate and relational environments (Boyatzis et al., 2020). Prior to the main survey, a pilot study was undertaken to assess the clarity and reliability of the research instrument. The results produced Cronbach's Alpha coefficients ranging from 0.809 to 0.950, indicating good to excellent internal consistency across all constructs and supporting the reliability of the measurement instrument. Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and the levels of the study variables. Subsequently, Spearman's rank-order correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among the variables and determine their predictive influence on ethical leadership.

Table 2: Measurement Of Reliability Test Results

Variables	Cronbach Alpha
Ethical Leadership	0.773
Empathy	0.742
Personal Integrity	0.678
Peer Influence	0.627
Organisational Culture	0.688

Source: Researchers' data

Table 2 presents the reliability analysis of the measurement instruments used in this study. The results indicate acceptable to good internal consistency across all constructs. Ethical leadership recorded a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.773, while empathy demonstrated acceptable reliability with a value of 0.742. Personal integrity ($\alpha = 0.678$) and organisational culture ($\alpha = 0.688$) were slightly below the recommended 0.70 threshold but remained acceptable for exploratory research. Peer influence recorded the lowest reliability value ($\alpha = 0.627$), which is still considered acceptable in social science research, particularly for shorter or adapted scales. Overall, the findings confirm that all constructs were sufficiently reliable and suitable for further statistical analysis.

Findings

Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the respondents involved in the study. Most respondents were male (72.3%), while females accounted for 27.7% of the sample. Most respondents were between 40 and 49 years old (34.5%), followed by those aged 30 to 39 years old (30.7%). In terms of race, the sample was predominantly Malay (98.8%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (62.7%), while others held diplomas, master's degrees, and doctorate qualifications. Regarding employment grade, the respondents represented various levels within the public sector, with the largest groups consisting of N41 officers (19.9%), N48 officers (16.9%), N52 officers (16.9%), and N54 officers (16.3%). Regarding work experience, most respondents had served in the public sector for 11 to 15 years (36.1%). Meanwhile, the majority had held leadership positions for less than three years (37.3%) or between 5 and 10 years

(35.5%), indicating that the respondents possessed substantial professional and leadership experience relevant to the study.

Table 3: Demographic Profiles

Profile		Frequencies	Percentage
Gender	Male	120	72.3
	Female	46	27.7
Age	30-39 Years Old	51	30.7
	40-49 Years Old	57	34.5
	50-59 Years Old	37	22.4
	Above 60 Years Old	2	1.2
	Under 30 Years Old	19	11.4
Race	Malay	164	98.8
	Chinese	1	6
	Others	1	6
Educational Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	104	62.7
	Diploma	25	15.1
	Master's Degree	32	19.3
	Doctorate	5	3.0
Grade In KCS	2	1	0.6
	8	1	0.6
	H1	1	0.6
	J9	1	0.6
	JUSA A	1	0.6
	JUSA B	1	0.6
	JUSA C	4	2.4
	KP2	1	0.6
	KP3	3	1.8
	KP39	1	10.6
	KP5	1	0.6
	KP7	1	0.6
	N1	4	2.4
	N2	4	2.4
	N3	1	0.6
	N41	33	19.9
	N41(KONTRAK)	11	6.6
	N44	7	4.2
	N48	28	16.9
	N52	28	16.9
	N54	27	16.3
	N9	2	1.2
	Pembantu Tadbir	1	0.6
	Second Class	1	0.6
	Upper		
	WA9	1	0.6
	YA1	1	0.6

Years Working in the Public Sector	11-15 Years	60	36.1
	16-20 Years	28	16.9
	5-10 Years	34	20.5
	Less Than 5 Years	22	13.3
	More Than 20 Years	22	13.3
Leadership Position	11-15 Years	25	15.1
	16-20 Years	14	8.4
	5-10 Years	59	35.5
	Less Than 3 Years	62	37.3
	More Than 20 Years	6	3.6

Source: Researchers' data

Spearman Correlation Analysis

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used in this study because the data did not meet the normality assumption required for Pearson correlation analysis. As a non-parametric statistical technique, Spearman's correlation is more suitable for analysing relationships between variables when data are not normally distributed (Bocianowski, 2023).

Table 4: Spearman Correlation Analysis between Empathy and Ethical Leadership

Relationship between variables	R-Value	P-Value	Decision
Empathy	0.376	<0.001	H1 accepted

Source: Researchers' data

The findings revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between empathy and ethical leadership ($r = 0.376$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that higher levels of empathy among respondents were associated with higher perceptions of ethical leadership practices. Although the relationship was moderate, the results suggest that empathy remains an important factor in shaping ethical leadership behaviour in public sector organisations. The findings imply that leaders who demonstrate empathy are more likely to exhibit ethical conduct through greater understanding, concern, and sensitivity toward others. However, the moderate correlation also indicates that ethical leadership is influenced by multiple organisational and individual factors beyond empathy alone. Therefore, the findings provide empirical support for H1 and confirm that empathy significantly contributes to ethical leadership among public servants.

Table 5: Spearman Correlation Analysis between Personal Integrity and Ethical Leadership

Relationship between variables	R-Value	P-Value	Decision
Personal Integrity	0.443	<0.001	H2 accepted

Source: Researchers' data

There was also a strong, positive, and statistically significant association between personal integrity and ethical leadership ($r = 0.443$, $p < 0.001$). The results of this study demonstrated that the more individuals demonstrated personal integrity, the more likely they were to be ethical leaders. The strength of the relationship was the highest among all predictors, indicating that personal integrity has a major impact on ethical leadership development. Hence, H2 has been supported and accepted, demonstrating a significant relationship between personal integrity and ethical leadership.

Table 6: Spearman Correlation Analysis between Peer Influence and Ethical Leadership

Relationship between variables	R-Value	P-Value	Decision
Peer Influence	0.379	<0.001	H3 accepted

Source: Researchers' data

There is a moderate positive correlation between ethical leadership ($r = 0.379$) and peer influence ($p < 0.001$). This means that individuals with positive peer influences demonstrate higher levels of ethical leadership than those without them. Although it appears that the strength of this correlation is not as strong in comparison with other variables such as personal integrity and organisational culture, the strong p-value proves that peer influence affects ethical leadership in a significant manner, thus providing enough data support to accept H3; therefore, it proves there is a statistically significant relationship between peer influence and ethical leadership.

Table 7: Spearman Correlation Analysis between Organisational Culture and Ethical Leadership

Relationship between variables	R-Value	P-Value	Decision
Organisational Culture	0.415	<0.001	H4 accepted

Source: Researchers' data

Ethical leadership had a strong, positive relationship to organisational culture. Specifically, for every unit increase in ethical leadership, it was expected there would also be a corresponding increase in the strength of organisational culture ($r = 0.415$). The significance of this finding further underscores the importance of the values, norms, and practices that organisations have in establishing the basis for ethical leadership behaviour amongst employees. Thus, the findings provide strong empirical support for H4 and have therefore accepted it, based on the existence of a statistically significant relationship between organisational culture and ethical leadership.

Multiple Regression Analysis

The multiple regression analysis demonstrated that the overall model significantly explained ethical leadership among public servants. Among the predictors examined, organisational culture emerged as the strongest and most significant determinant of ethical leadership ($\beta = 0.238$, $p = 0.009$), indicating that supportive organisational environments play a critical role in

fostering ethical behaviour and leadership practices. Empathy also showed a significant positive influence on ethical leadership ($\beta = 0.185$, $p = 0.016$), suggesting that leaders with higher levels of empathy are more likely to demonstrate ethical leadership qualities. In contrast, personal integrity ($\beta = 0.132$, $p = 0.143$) and peer influence ($\beta = 0.122$, $p = 0.133$) did not significantly predict ethical leadership when controlling for other variables in the model. These findings suggest that organisational and relational factors may exert a stronger influence on ethical leadership practices than individual attributes alone within the public sector context.

Table 8: Multiple Regression Analysis

Variable	Unstandardised Coefficients	Standardised Coefficients	t-value	P-value	Decision
Empathy	0.149	0.185	2.441	0.016	Significant
Personal Integrity	0.130	0.132	1.472	0.143	Not Significant
Peer Influence	0.119	0.122	1.510	0.133	Not Significant
Organisational Culture	0.245	0.238	2.631	0.009	Significant

Source: Researchers' data

Discussion

The present study sought to examine the determinants of ethical leadership among public servants in Northern Malaysia by investigating the roles of empathy, personal integrity, peer influence, and organisational culture. Overall, the findings demonstrate that ethical leadership is influenced by both individual and organisational factors, although the organisational environment appears to exert a stronger influence than individual characteristics. Among the variables examined, organisational culture emerged as the strongest predictor of ethical leadership, followed by empathy, whereas personal integrity and peer influence did not remain significant after controlling for the other predictors. Collectively, these results suggest that ethical leadership within the Malaysian public sector is shaped primarily by organisational values, shared norms, and institutional practices rather than by personal attributes alone.

The prominence of organisational culture is consistent with previous studies emphasising that ethical environments characterised by trust, accountability, transparency, and shared moral values create conditions that encourage ethical leadership (Kaptein, 2008; Mayer et al., 2009). Rather than relying solely on individual morality, organisational culture establishes behavioural expectations that guide decision-making and reinforce responsible leadership practices. Within the Malaysian public sector, where formal procedures and institutional norms play a central role in administrative decision-making, supportive organisational cultures appear to strengthen ethical conduct by embedding integrity and accountability into everyday organisational practice. This interpretation is also consistent with Transformational Leadership Theory, which proposes that leaders shape ethical behaviour by cultivating shared values, reinforcing organisational norms, and inspiring moral commitment among followers (Bass et al., 2006). The significance of empathy further highlights the importance of interpersonal sensitivity in ethical leadership. Leaders who can understand the needs, concerns, and perspectives of others are better positioned to build trust, strengthen workplace relationships, and promote fairness in organisational decision-making. These observations are consistent with

previous research demonstrating that empathetic leadership enhances employee well-being, ethical conduct, and leader-follower relationships (Muss et al., 2025). From the perspective of Transformational Leadership Theory, empathy reflects the principle of individualised consideration, whereby leaders recognise the unique needs of followers while encouraging ethical growth and responsible behaviour (Bass et al., 2006; Dey et al., 2022).

An interesting outcome of this study is that personal integrity and peer influence, although positively associated with ethical leadership, did not remain significant predictors in the regression analysis. This suggests that their influence may operate indirectly or become less prominent once broader organisational conditions are considered. In other words, personal integrity alone may be insufficient to sustain ethical leadership if organisational systems, shared values, and institutional expectations do not consistently reinforce ethical behaviour. Similarly, peer relationships may encourage ethical conduct, but their influence appears secondary to the broader organisational culture within which leaders and employees operate. These findings challenge the common assumption that ethical leadership depends primarily on individual morality, instead highlighting the importance of organisational systems in shaping ethical behaviour across public institutions. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening ethical leadership requires more than integrity-based compliance programmes. Public-sector organisations should prioritise developing organisational cultures that consistently promote accountability, transparency, fairness, and ethical responsibility, while supporting leadership development initiatives that cultivate empathy and value-based decision-making. By integrating these organisational and leadership strategies, public institutions will be better positioned to strengthen governance, reinforce institutional integrity, and rebuild public trust.

Conclusion

This study extends the ethical leadership literature by providing empirical evidence from the Malaysian public sector, a context that remains relatively underexplored. By examining individual and organisational determinants within a single theoretical framework, the study demonstrates that organisational culture exerts a stronger influence on ethical leadership than individual-level characteristics. These findings also offer practical insights for policymakers and public-sector organisations seeking to strengthen governance, integrity initiatives, and leadership development programmes. The results indicate that ethical leadership is shaped by both individual and organisational factors, with organisational culture emerging as the most influential predictor, followed by empathy. Although personal integrity and peer influence were positively associated with ethical leadership, neither variable remained statistically significant in the regression analysis. This suggests that ethical leadership is sustained less by individual moral qualities alone and more by organisational environments that consistently reinforce ethical values, accountability, and responsible leadership practices. The findings also reaffirm the relevance of Transformational Leadership Theory in explaining ethical leadership within public organisations. Consistent with the theory, ethical leadership develops not only through leaders' personal example but also through their ability to cultivate shared values, shape organisational culture, and encourage collective moral responsibility. Strengthening ethical leadership in the Malaysian public sector therefore requires an integrated approach that combines supportive organisational cultures, empathy-driven leadership development, and institutional mechanisms that reinforce ethical conduct. Such an approach has the potential to enhance governance quality, strengthen institutional credibility, and rebuild long-term public trust in public institutions.

Acknowledgements:	The authors would like to thank all public servants who participated in this study, as well as the respective government agencies in Kedah, for their cooperation and support. Appreciation is also extended to Universiti Teknologi MARA, particularly Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah, for the institutional support provided throughout this research.
Funding Statement:	This research received no financial support.
Conflict of Interest Statement:	The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Law, Government and Communication (IJLGC).
Ethics Statement:	This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee, approval number ERC/74/2025(ST/MR/17). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.
Author Contribution Statement:	All authors made substantial contributions to the development of this manuscript. Dayini Hajar and Farah Nabilah were responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the findings. Azlyn provided overall supervision, contributed to the literature review, critically revised the manuscript, and guided the intellectual development of the study. All authors reviewed, approved, and agreed to the submission of the final version of the manuscript.

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