



## Ethical Leadership and Governance Quality: Exploring Public Trust and Citizen Participation in Cambodian District Administration

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose of the study:** This study aimed to develop an ethical leadership model for Cambodian district administration and to determine how ethical leadership characteristics inspire and sustain good governance, particularly in relation to honesty, concern for citizens, participation, accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and administrative competence.

**Methodology:** A qualitative case study design was used. Purposive sampling was used to select 25 district administration officials ( $\geq 5$  years' service). Data were collected through face-to-face, open-ended interviews (audio-recorded using a digital audio cassette recorder) and document review. The interview guide was adapted from the Ethical Leadership Scale. Khmer transcripts were thematically analyzed using constant comparison and two-cycle coding.

**Main Findings:** Key themes were honesty, concern for people, ethics infrastructure, ethics training, citizen participation, access to information, transparency, accountability, rule of law, competency, and autonomy. Most participants perceived leaders as dishonest (88%) and unconcerned with public interest (80%). All participants emphasized ethics infrastructure, information access, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law (100%). Competency was viewed positively (88%). Ethics training (32%) and autonomy (16%) appeared less frequently but were still identified as important enabling factors.

**Novelty/Originality of this study:** This study contributes to social science literature by examining ethical leadership as a social mechanism that shapes citizen trust, participation, institutional legitimacy, and governance quality within Cambodian district administration. By integrating leadership theory, governance theory, and social trust perspectives, the study provides a contextual understanding of how ethical leadership influences state–society relationships in a developing-country setting.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Most individuals understand the value of leadership in any situation [1]. According to Rubin et al. [2], the belief that leaders are a necessary component of organizational change, efficiency, and effectiveness is supported by the scholarly investigation of organizational leadership. Despite any doubts regarding its significance, Bass and Steidlmeier [3] contended that leadership is crucial because it affects any organizational setting. They added that leadership is often regarded as the single most critical factor in the success or failure of

institutions. According to Connell and Bligh [4], organizational leaders have a significant impact on how their organizations operate; this suggests that leadership is essential to an organization's survival. A dynamic, ethical, and successful leader is even more important. According to Wart [1], a healthy mechanism for innovation and creativity, a sense of direction and vision, alignment with the environment, a resource for creating a vibrant organizational culture and climate, and the provision of higher quality and efficient goods and services are all made possible by effective leadership.

According to several academics, a growing number of individuals are worried about the morality and actions of their public servants [5]-[7]. These phenomena occur in the framework of the local administration system in Cambodia, where local residents are dissatisfied and upset with the moral behavior and governing abilities of elected and appointed officials [8]. As the public expected, district administration authorities have failed to enhance sustainable socioeconomic growth and public service delivery [8]-[10]. Trust has been damaged as a result of this inability to live up to expectations [11]. Since 1993, the Cambodian government has worked tirelessly to modify and alter the system of government in order to promote liberal democracy and a market economy. In order to put these new laws into effect, numerous administrative orders were issued. To fulfill significant duties in the public sector, new organizations and institutions were established. Cambodian authorities should be commended for their efforts and leadership in implementing the reforms, considering the magnitude of the problems.

Making sound policy judgments and carrying them out requires ethical behavior in government or any other institution. It is essential to advancing good governance in the government. The successful development of public goods and services is unlikely without ethical government [7]. He went on to say that effective and democratic government depends on ethical governance. The writer also pointed out that good government, which gets the right things done right, cannot be achieved by men and women who lack ethical or moral values or fail to govern or manage based on those values. To put it another way, a government cannot offer its constituents effective governance if its many branches lack moral leaders.

According to Northouse [12], leaders help establish and reinforce organizational values, highlighting the importance of ethics to leadership. By virtue of its importance, strong local governance supported by high ethical and transparent norms is essential for strengthening democracy in developing countries [13]. Participation, accountability, openness, and responsiveness are all essential components of good government. These attributes are only present when morally upright and successful people assume leadership positions in various government organizations.

Concern over unethical behavior, especially corruption, in government has become a troubling issue for international organizations worldwide, especially in developing nations like Cambodia. As a result, there has been a special call to eradicate corruption and promote ethical practice in public administration [14], [15]. It seems that ethical leadership has a significant impact on promoting good governance at all governmental levels. Due to the high rate of misconduct and corruption that prevents public officials from maintaining good governance, there is an urgent need for ethical leadership in Cambodia, particularly at the district administration level [8]-[10].

Ethical leadership is not merely an administrative concern but also a social phenomenon that shapes relationships between government institutions and citizens. In contemporary social science, leadership is increasingly viewed as a mechanism that influences social trust, civic engagement, collective action, and public confidence in institutions. When public officials demonstrate ethical behavior, citizens are more likely to participate in governance processes, comply with regulations, and develop trust toward public institutions.

From a social perspective, governance quality is strongly influenced by interactions between state actors and society. Ethical leadership contributes to the development of social capital by fostering transparency, accountability, and public participation. Conversely, unethical behavior may weaken social cohesion, reduce public trust, and increase citizens' perceptions of institutional injustice. Therefore, understanding ethical leadership within district administration is important not only for improving administrative performance but also for strengthening democratic governance and social development.

Although previous studies have examined ethical leadership and governance in public administration, limited attention has been given to how ethical leadership functions as a social mechanism influencing citizen-government relationships in Cambodia. This study addresses this gap by examining ethical leadership through the lens of social trust, citizen participation, and governance legitimacy within district administration.

Government institutions cannot have excellent governance if public officials lack moral integrity [8], [10], [15]. Ethically, district administration officials can use the authority granted to them to make policy decisions that are focused on improving social justice, advancing human, social, and economic advancements, and supporting and bolstering institutions for the sustainability of democratic governance. Ethical leadership can lead to system transformation to make ethics and practice crucial for good governance outcomes, given that the district administration system in Cambodia is beset by corruption [15]-[18].

Good governance is about upholding people's human rights and utilizing the common wealth to enhance their well-being without discrimination against any individual or group of people [15], [17], [18]. District administration professionals with a strong ethical foundation understand the moral implications of leadership and are ethically capable of advancing good governance through the formulation and execution of sound policies that

improve the welfare of the populace [15]. The people at the grassroots level will perceive and experience a district administration that is committed to serving the public interest when such leaders are in a position to steer its activities. The study will help to raise awareness about the importance and the need for ethics and practice for good governance, and encourage public servants to be ethical in the management of public affairs.

This study will contribute to the body of knowledge on ethical leadership and good governance in public administration, specifically in district administration and throughout Cambodia. One reason for the lack of understanding about the critical role that ethical leadership could play in improving good governance in Cambodian district administration could be the dearth of sufficient literature on the necessity of ethical leadership in public organizations. It will be a useful tool for educating public servants, developing institutional leaders, encouraging moral leadership in the public sector, and boosting government capability for the common good.

Existing studies have primarily focused on administrative effectiveness and anti-corruption mechanisms, while limited research has explored how ethical leadership influences social trust, civic participation, and citizens' perceptions of governmental legitimacy at the local level. Consequently, the social dimensions of ethical leadership in Cambodian district administration remain insufficiently understood. Addressing this gap is important because governance outcomes are shaped not only by administrative structures but also by the quality of interactions between public institutions and citizens. Therefore, this study examines ethical leadership as both an administrative and social mechanism for promoting good governance in Cambodia.

The fundamental purposes of this qualitative case study were twofold: (1) to explore an in-depth understanding of the ethical leadership construct and how it could inspire and sustain good governance in the district administration in Cambodia; and (2) to examine the ethical leadership characteristics and some essential factors that make it inevitably vital for fostering good governance in a public organization, particularly in the district administration.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Academic research on ethical leadership is still in its infancy [19]. It has touched on several theoretical foundations and is studied as part of the larger subject of leadership [12], [19]. Because of this, several theoretical frameworks with various but related ethical leadership principles were employed in this study. The two main leadership theories that supported this research were transformative leadership by Burns [20] and servant-leadership by Greenleaf [21]. Additionally, utilitarianism, deontology, virtue character, and justice as fairness were the ethical theories that served as the conceptual foundation for the study. It is impossible to overstate the significance of ethics in leadership. This is justified since effective governance is promoted by leadership, which is an essential catalyst. Leaders who uphold ethical standards are able to base their choices and actions mostly on public-beneficial policies. Without a strong ethical component, no government leadership paradigm can effectively advance good governance.

The results of this qualitative case study could successfully address the leadership issue in the public sector in Cambodia. The public's welfare and common good are the reasons behind the establishment of government. People with moral integrity who are dedicated to ethical leadership must hold positions of influence in government in order to fulfill this crucial role. Public officials must act morally and ethically to achieve good governance in the public sector. The people's declining faith in government is a result of public officials' loss of moral rectitude [15]. This study is noteworthy because of the betrayal of confidence and trust.

This study has the potential to encourage and result in social change in Cambodia at all levels of government, not just local administration. When morally upright public authorities steer public affairs, social and economic development will be largely ensured. Public authorities are advancing and maintaining democratic governance when citizens are able to obtain information and engage in democratic processes, when district administration is transparent and responsible, and when the rule of law is paramount.

The purpose of this study was to provide district administrators and other public officials with information about the significance of ethical leadership in attaining and upholding good governance. The findings and suggestions of the study may aid public officials in comprehending the importance of moral leadership in public administration and in advancing good governance. The goal of the study was to use ethical and successful leadership in Cambodian local government administration as a means of bringing about social transformation. In the end, it might add to the corpus of information required to comprehend the importance of moral leadership and its function in advancing and maintaining good governance in the public sector.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODS

### 3.1. Research Design

The qualitative tradition served as the foundation for this study's research design. According to Creswell [22], a qualitative case study approach allows a researcher to fully comprehend the topic under investigation. Due to a lack of sufficient, methodical research, the potential of ethical leadership as a workable and successful

leadership style is still largely unknown [23]. According to Leedy and Ormrod [24], a qualitative case study is a good way to learn more about a phenomenon that is not well understood. Interviews and document analysis were used to get the data. Twenty-five carefully chosen individuals were interviewed in person. The material gathered for this study was examined using thematic data analysis. With all of this knowledge about different types of qualitative research, the study concluded that a qualitative case study would be appropriate. The authors firmly believe that this research will add to our understanding of ethical leadership and how it can advance good governance.

### 3.2. Research Participants

The study's population consisted of 150 government officials of a local government in southern Cambodia. Accessibility and proximity were taken into consideration when choosing this group. For this case study, a single local government was chosen in order to determine the factors that influence ethical leadership with regard to promoting good governance in the district administration in Cambodia. The knowledge gathered from this specific case study can be used in the study of other municipal administrations and, in fact, the other two tiers (national and sub-national) of government.

For this study, a purposeful sampling strategy was adopted. This sampling strategy is common in a qualitative study [22]. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select a sample size of 25–35 district administration officials who had been employed by the system for at least five years and who could supply the data required to address the subject under study. Twenty-five civil service employees who were not in leadership positions and had worked in the system for at least five years were the study's participants. Nonetheless, the case study's findings can be used as a resource by all local governments and, in fact, by every public servant in the nation. As a case study, it might offer a framework for examining the same issues in comparable contexts [25].

### 3.3. Research Instruments and Data Collection

The conceptual framework of ethical leadership in the context of advancing good governance in district administration serves as the foundation for this study. The goal of this study is to better understand how the ethical leadership construct might support good governance and, consequently, improve service delivery in district administration in Cambodia. Data for a case study in a qualitative research approach is typically gathered from several sources. According to McNabb [25], the majority of these data are available in narrative form. According to Yin [26], documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participation-observation, and physical artifacts are the six main sources from which case study researchers may obtain their evidence or data. In order to determine whether the local district's leadership style fosters or hinders good governance, this study conducted participant interviews and looked at the district's supporting documentation. The data collected from these sources was carefully examined and documented.

#### 3.3.1. Interview Technique

Interviews are one of the most important ways to collect data for a case study [26]. Face-to-face interviews, focus group interviews, and telephone interviews are several methods that can be used to gather data for a case study [22], [27]-[29]. The telephone is popular among researchers [28]. To start finding possible volunteers, this study got in touch with the contact person at the study site. Data for this study were gathered using an individual, face-to-face method. All of the study's participants were chosen from a single province and district administration due to financial and temporal limitations.

Interviews conducted over the phone are becoming more and more common [28]-[30]. According to Carr and Worth [30], a telephone interview is a strategy for obtaining data that allows interpersonal communication without a face-to-face meeting. Compared to taking notes, tape recording allows the interviewer to acquire an accurate and verbatim transcript of the interview [28]. A digital audio cassette recorder was used to capture every interview. Additionally, notes were made for this investigation, especially of certain important data.

Twenty-five government officials who were specifically chosen from the district administration where the study was performed were interviewed. For reasons of confidentiality, the district administration's name was kept secret. After questioning 25 people, there was evidence of duplication and repetition, indicating saturation of ideas, as no new material was emerging. The initial desired sample size was between 25 and 35. Every interviewee was an informed and seasoned district administration official with at least five years of experience working in the district administration system in Cambodia. Strategically, codes ranging from P-01 to P-25 were used to represent the participants; accordingly, in order to conceal the exposure of the participants' identities, detailed descriptions, including their official roles, were not included in the study.

#### 3.3.2. Interview Questions

The depth of information a researcher gathers in qualitative studies, especially case studies, usually depends on how the questions are phrased. Open-ended, unstructured questions are typically appropriate for producing the detailed information required for qualitative research [22], [31]. For the interviews, open-ended

questions were used, allowing the participants to freely share their opinions on the topics. In order to obtain more thorough and detailed information from the respondents, a probing strategy was employed during the interviews. The interview questions were designed to be pertinent to the study questions. An ethical leadership scale was developed by Brown et al. [32]. For this study, a modified version of the questionnaire was used. This change was required in order to get relevant data that addressed the research questions.

The open-ended interview question format was designed to provide participants sufficient freedom to openly express their opinions; some questions were modified to improve the interviewees' clarity. All interviews were asked the same questions, albeit it was occasionally challenging to keep the same sequence. When needed, a probing technique was employed during the interviews to get further information from the participants. Every participant was interviewed in person for every interview. Before the interview began, each participant signed a consent form and was informed of their right to withdraw for any reason. The interviews were all audiotaped and conducted in the official language of Khmer. The interviews' verbatim comments on the audiotaped materials were transcribed in accordance with transcription process guidelines [33]. After reviewing their transcribed interview responses, the participants were asked to let me know if their viewpoints had been overlooked or misrepresented. They all had the phone numbers of the authors. Some of them did make a call to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions.

### **3.3.3. Documentation Examination**

Another source of data for this study was a document inquiry. McNabb [25] maintained that the examination of documents for data collection in a case study is typically for complementing information obtained by interviews or observation, despite Yin [26] arguing that documents should comprise primary data sources in a qualitative case study. Documents from the local government were reviewed in order to find information that illustrates how the organization's administrative principles and guidelines promote moral leadership. Investigations were conducted into the district administration officials' norms and regulations, and the constitution.

## **3.4. Strategy for Data Analysis and Interpretation**

A methodical and rigorous strategy is necessary for a high-quality study to support its conclusions. The criteria for evaluation must be in line with the philosophical paradigm and must seek to inform the research method; a specific approach or process does not necessarily guarantee the quality of research [34].

### **3.4.1. Coding Strategy**

Thematic analysis is the main method of qualitative data analysis used in this study. The researcher can organize the data into codes and then categories (themes) using this qualitative analytic technique [22]. According to Saldaña [35], there is no one ideal method for analyzing qualitative data. The information gathered for this study was arranged into electronic file documents, each of which had a backup produced and identifier names for ease of recognition.

This study began data analysis after participant interviews were completed. Before starting to transcribe the spoken document into a written document, the recorded interviews were carefully listened to multiple times. Once the transcription was complete, the writers checked the accuracy by reading the transcribed document and listening to the audio tape once more. Words, phrases, or ideas that were associated with ethical leadership traits that support good governance and were essential for coding were noted by the authors. The first codes were created by the authors using words, phrases, and concepts that summed up and encapsulated the key concepts or features in the raw data that corresponded with traits of moral leadership that guide successful governance. The original codes served as the basis for the themes or categories that were used to generate meaning and interpretation.

Comparing the coded data allowed for the identification of correlations and discrepancies as well as the grouping of similar data into themes. The characteristics of moral leadership in connection to sound governance influenced the ideas that arose from this approach. Since the disparate coded data offered no fresh perspectives on the topic under investigation, they were seized, assessed, and discarded.

### **3.4.2. Data Interpretation**

Interpreting data entails characterizing and interpreting the conclusions drawn from the data. According to Creswell [22], qualitative case study data analysis entails a thorough description and analysis of multiple data points in order to establish evidence for a deeper comprehension of the case. The applicability of the validity notion in a qualitative investigation has recently been the subject of discussion among several experts in qualitative research techniques [36], [37].

The final analysis of research data typically results in the creation of a narrative report or discussion that convincingly conveys the intricate tale of the data and demonstrates the reliability of the analysis [38]. The authors of this research narrative report aimed to document respondents' varied perspectives on ethical leadership as a way to improve good governance in the district administration in Cambodia. The narrative account examines and

summarizes the data's findings and connects them to the research questions and conclusions from the literature study on ethical leadership in the context of advancing good governance.

### 3.5. Ethical Considerations

Since human subjects were used in the study, ethical considerations had to be taken into account even if the goal of the research was not to examine humans per se. Protection from harm, informed consent, and the right to privacy are among the four categories of ethical dilemmas in research that scholars have identified [39], [40]. According to Conger [40], protection from harm means that researchers should not subject study participants to any unjustified bodily or psychological suffering. The basic rule is that the risks involved shouldn't be higher than those associated with regular daily life [40]. According to Babbie [39] and Conger [40], the researchers are required to disclose any material that could lead to humiliation, low self-esteem, or the possibility of losing one's work or life. Some human participants in this study were interviewed to provide their opinions regarding local government leadership; the hazards involved were deemed to be no higher than those associated with daily life. The participants received assurances that their participation would not be used against them.

The right to privacy concept, which mandates that researchers respect participants' right to privacy [40], was another ethical consideration. Bradley [41] identified anonymity and confidentiality as two facets of the right to privacy. Confidentiality principles require that no identifiable information about research participants be disclosed to anybody other than those who are directly participating in the project. Conversely, the idea of anonymity requires that participants maintain their anonymity throughout the duration of the study. The secrecy concept was used in this study as the right to privacy. The participants received assurances that their names and answers would be kept completely private and that their identities would be represented in the study using codes to prevent identification.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Data Coding and Recurrent Themes

In qualitative data analysis, amorphous data is gathered, arranged, and condensed into themes using a coding process. The analysis is then presented in a narrative [22]. To create "meaning and explanation," the collected data from the documents and interviews were meticulously classified and put together in accordance with the emerging patterns [35].

This study required several cycles or levels of data coding. The raw data's cycles of codification are displayed in Tables 1 and 2 below. Phrases and ideas that encapsulated the qualities of moral leadership that guide good governance were extracted from the raw data. The developing ideas were continuously contrasted and subsequently categorized into themes or groups that exhibited similarities and patterns that clarified meaning. There were inconsistent coded data, which were thoroughly examined before being eliminated, as they didn't offer any insightful information regarding the topic under study.

Table 1. Phrases/concepts from the raw data (first cycle coding)

Coded Concepts/Phrases from Interviews	Coded Concepts/Phrases from Documents
Honesty, Trustfulness	Discipline
Concern for People	Integrity
Altruism, Public Interest	Dishonesty
Selflessness	Bribery
Showing Good Examples	Abuse of Office
Reward and Discipline Measure	Corruption
Codes of Conduct	False Claims
Just Wage	Financial Embarrassment
Good Salary	Disobedience of Lawful Order
Fraudulent, Dishonesty, Corruption	
Information Access	
Involvement	
Participation	
Local Government Autonomy	
Stewardship	
Accountability	
Competency	
Open Administration	
Transparency	
Ethics Training	

## Rule of Law

Table 2. Emerging themes and patterns (second cycle coding)

Interviews and Documents: Coded Categories/Themes and Emerging Patterns

Honesty, Concern for People, and Corruption  
 Ethics, Infrastructure, and Ethics Training  
 Participation and Access to Information  
 Accountability, Transparency, Rule of Law, and Competency  
 Autonomy

The themes developed and analyzed in the study were derived from the coded categories. The themes that emerged captured the salient concepts expressed in the data, which were identified with characteristics of ethical leadership that ensure good governance.

From the data analysis, relevant themes that are significant and captured elements that are important to the subject matter were identified. The themes identified portrayed the relevant elements of ethical leadership that are capable of ensuring good governance in local government and, in fact, in all levels of government in Cambodia. The themes are shown in Table 2 above, and the frequency of each is identified in Table 3. Although ethics training and autonomy maintained low frequency in contrast to others, they were chosen because of their importance in understanding and promoting the subject under study. Ethics training is vital for fostering ethics practice and ethical leadership sustainability in any organization, particularly in the public sector.

Table 3. Themes' code frequency: Support from participants

Themes	25 Participants' Level Support
Honesty	25
Concern for People	25
Ethics Infrastructure	25
Ethics Training	8
Citizens' Participation	24
Access to Information	25
Transparency	25
Accountability	25
Rule of Law	25
Competency	22
Autonomy	4

The 25 research participants' support for honesty, concern for others, ethical training, information access, transparency, rule of law, competency, and autonomy is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

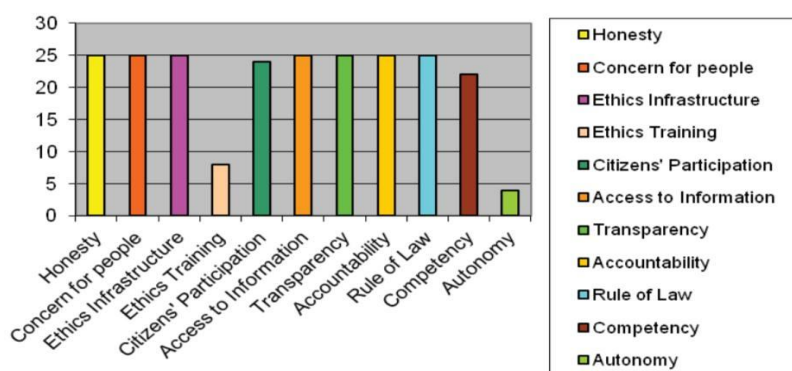


Figure 1. Themes' Frequency in Chart Format

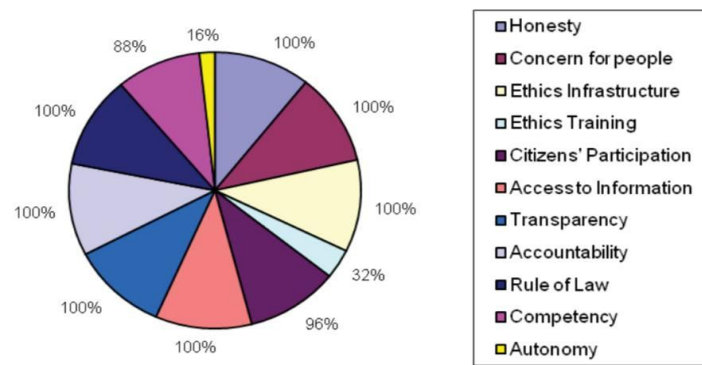


Figure 2. Themes' Percentage-Based Frequency

**4.2. Honesty, Concern for People, and Corruption**

Any organization's ability to deliver excellent governance under authentic leadership is primarily dependent on the moral or ethical character of its officers. Every participant stressed how important honesty is to any real leadership. They held the view that people's trust and faith in their leaders and government can be greatly increased by their honesty. P-20 claims that:

*...In leadership, honesty is crucial. If a leader is to win the people's trust and confidence, they must be sincere and straightforward. By employing public finances to provide the populace with amenities like portable drinking water, a good and affordable healthcare system, an affordable education system, a good housing system, and a good transportation system, a leader can guarantee effective governance.*

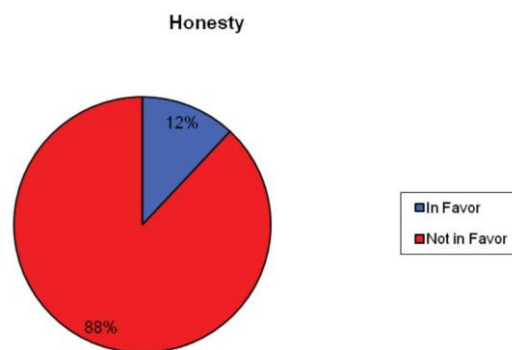


Figure 3. Participants' Opinions of The Honesty of District Administration Officials

The participants' opinions regarding the honesty of the district administration officials are shown in Figure 3. Three participants, or 12% of the survey participants, thought the district administration officials were honest, whereas 22 participants, or 88% of the participants, thought they were primarily dishonest. It appears that the majority of those in leadership roles in district administration and other governmental levels are dishonest persons. The majority of the district administration officials, according to the participants, act and behave dishonestly.

All of the participants thought that in order to effectively provide excellent governance, competent and effective leaders need to care about their followers. Having the interests of the people in mind will allow the officials to use their resources and authority to advance agendas that serve the interests of the people as a whole rather than those of a specific group or individual.

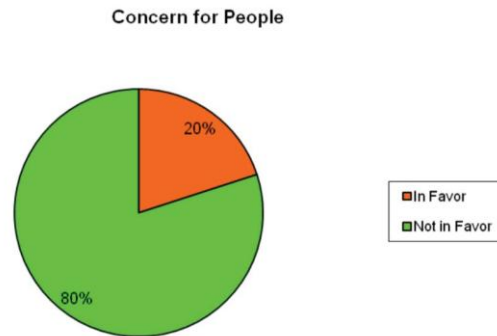


Figure 4. Participants' Opinions on the Concern of The District Administrative Officials For The People

As shown in Figure 4, a total of 20 participants, or 80% of the sample, thought that local politicians were unconcerned with the public interest, whereas 5 participants, or 20% of the sample, thought that they were. All participants, however, concurred that in order for public officials to be able to commit to meaningful and efficient governance, they had to genuinely care about people. People's interests are given top priority in the administration of good and ethical leaders because they are aware of the ethical implications of leadership.

#### 4.3. Ethics Infrastructure

Only in an organization with a strong sense of ethics and practice can good governance be achieved. The workplace environment where ethical behavior is crucial can be influenced by ethical leaders. Understanding how crucial ethical behavior is to fostering good governance, moral leaders must create and uphold an ethics infrastructure that includes, but is not limited to, a code of conduct, an ethics coordination body, supportive public service conditions, an efficient legal framework, and an efficient accountability system.

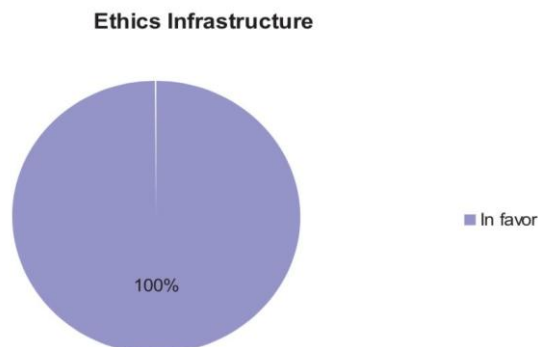


Figure 5. Views of Participants Regarding The Significance of Ethical Infrastructure in Fostering Moral Behavior in The District Administration

Figure 5 shows that all 25 participants, or 100% of the sample, agreed that ethical infrastructure is crucial for fostering a positive atmosphere for moral behavior in governmental organizations. While some of the system's ethical infrastructure components were acknowledged by the respondents, several noted that their lack of enforcement renders them ineffective.

The norms, values, and regulations of the public service must guide the leaders' activities; they must provide an example of proper behavior consistent with public service ethics. Considering P-01,

*...To demonstrate to others the value of ethics and practice, a good leader must set a good example. You can imagine the kind of legacy a leader is leaving for the company when he does not set a positive example....*

#### 4.4. Ethics Training/Education

The results also revealed ethics training as a noteworthy topic. This issue was chosen because it is crucial for promoting ethical behavior in an organization, not because it appears frequently in the data environment. People can be instilled with ethical ideals and given the tools they need to make moral decisions through ethics training, which is an essential and strategic approach. Several respondents emphasized the significance and necessity of

ethical training for all employees of the local council, including those in leadership roles and other staff members (P-02; P-10; P-19; P-21; & P-24).

According to P-21,

*“Public servants will be able to make moral decisions and act morally if they receive ethics and morality training, in my opinion.” P-24 observed, “to raise awareness of the significance of ethical behavior, the District Administration is planning seminars, workshops, training, and campaigns. I think ethics education will improve systemic practices.”*

Officials who receive ethics training are more equipped to understand norms and regulations and make moral decisions when faced with moral quandaries. The idea that breaking ethical norms or regulations is unacceptable within the company is reinforced through ethics training. The leadership's dedication to ethics and practice largely determines how well an organization's ethical infrastructure works to foster ethics and practice. According to the study's findings, the district administration system in Cambodia requires ethical leadership to promote a positive atmosphere for moral behavior.

#### 4.5. Citizen Participation and Access to Information

Among the themes extracted from the study data was citizens' involvement in the decision-making process and in choosing their leaders through a voting system during political elections. They stated that there have been no political elections to choose the chairman of the district councils.

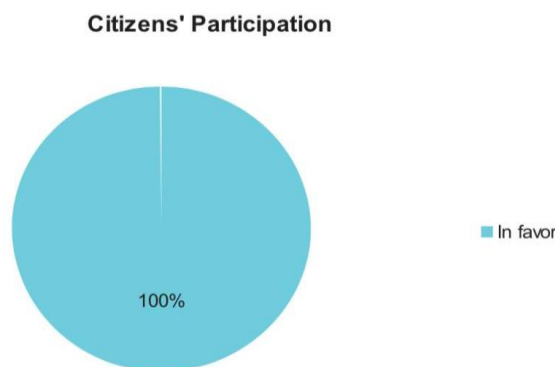


Figure 6. Views of Participants on People's Involvement in Fostering Good Governance in The District Administration

As shown in Figure 6, every single one of the 25 interviewees, or 100% of them, thought that citizen participation in elections and decision-making was crucial for advancing good governance at the local level. The participants thought that democratically elected council members would better represent the interests of the public than those appointed.

Numerous participants contended that the absence of district council elections has a detrimental effect on the growth of democracy and democratic government at the local level. P-04 said:

*...The attainment of good governance in the local government system is negatively impacted by the state's lack of local council elections. It is implied that the locals are not given the chance to choose their own leaders. Elections are essential to democracy and democratic governance, as you are aware....*

The fact that Cambodia hasn't held district council elections in a while worried the respondents.

*Ensuring democracy and good governance at the local level is the goal of the existing district administration system. To put it briefly, democracy is not practiced here. Without elections, how is democracy possible?" (P-08).*

According to the statistics, one of the key components of good governance that ethical leadership will ensure is access to information. According to the respondents, improving democratic government requires that the public have access to information about how council officials conduct their work.

According to P-07,

*“Since democracy is direct administration by and for the people, it is essential that people have access to information about what is happening in their district.”*

In a democratic system of governance, citizens are entitled to information about their district administration so they can understand the actions of their representatives. One benefit of having access to information is that it makes it possible for citizens to monitor the actions of their district administration representatives, which is essential for maintaining good governance. The participants’ opinions on the significance of information access for effective governance in district administration are displayed in Figure 7.

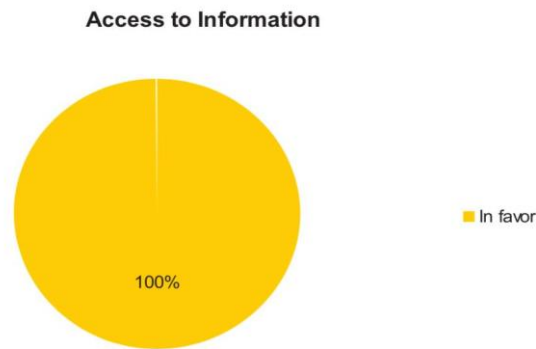


Figure 7. Views of Participants on Information Accessibility in Relation to the District Administration’s Good Governance

All 25 participants, or 100%, agreed that information access is essential for good governance, as seen in Figure 7. In response to the question of whether the public has access to information within the council, many respondents said that while some information is provided, the public is not privy to the crucial details on how the district administration operates.

P-07 observed,

*“That is when individuals visit the district administration; they are provided with filtered and incomplete information; in my opinion, this is not information access. I believe that people ought to be fully informed about the district administration. The governance of our district is quite secretive.”*

According to some participants (P-01, P-06; & P-25), the traditional rulers are the only ones who receive information.

#### 4.6. Transparency, Accountability, Rule of Law, and Competency

The results of the study showed that in order to guarantee effective governance in local government administration, as well as in other levels of government, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law were necessary. According to the participants, ethical leadership has the ability to ensure and maintain accountability, transparency, and the rule of law for good governance in Cambodia’s district administration system.

All of the participants agreed that promoting good governance, especially in the public sector, requires transparency as a way to hold public officials responsible and fight corruption. The public and press must have access to government business, meetings, budgets, financial statements, and the decision-making process in order for there to be transparency.

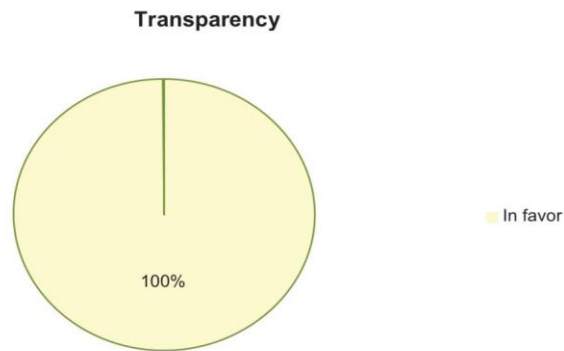


Figure 8. Views of Respondents Regarding The Significance of Openness in Relation to The Advancement of Good Governance in The District Administration

As shown in Figure 8, all 25 participants, or 100%, agreed that ethical leadership will promote transparency in the council and that transparency is essential to achieving good governance. P-03 emphasized the necessity of openness in the district administration, saying:

*...Since district administration is not a person's personal property, Council members must handle district administration matters openly and transparently. The public has a right to know how the authorities are using the authority and resources entrusted to them. The district government is owned by the locals, not by the officials...*

Transparent public servants are also held accountable. They are transparent in managing public affairs and routinely update the public about the district administration operations, capital project spending, and administrative operations.



Figure 9. Participants' Perceptions of The Significance of Accountability in Relation to The Accomplishment of Good Governance in The District Administration

All 25 participants, or 100%, agree that accountability is essential for fostering good governance, as seen in Figure 9. They felt that the necessary accountability for democratic administration could only be fostered by moral leaders. Accountability and transparency are intimately linked, and it is challenging to have one without the other (P-19). Public authorities are responsible for informing, justifying, and explaining to the public what they have done or not done with the resources entrusted to them. Citizens must be able to hold public officials accountable for their acts in order to guarantee strong democratic governance, and this may not be possible if a democratic voting system is not used to choose council members. Instead of the people, the appointed officials will answer to the person who appointed them (P-09).

The rule of law is another element that surfaced from the data. According to the respondents, upholding the rule of law is essential to guaranteeing moral behavior and effective good governance. They thought that the district administration and the public sector as a whole would effectively enforce the rule of law if moral leadership were there. As seen in Figure 10, all 25 participants, or 100%, concurred that the rule of law is essential to promoting good governance. They believe that upholding the legislation will help to avoid and lessen corruption among district administration officials, which will ensure good governance outcomes.

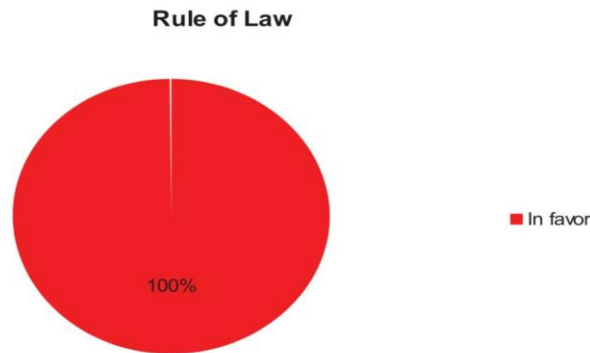


Figure 10. Participants' Perceptions of The Value of The Rule of Law in Fostering Good Governance in District Administration

The participants stated that ineffective rule of law enforcement is a major contributing factor to the overall crisis in governance. According to some participants (P-08; P-17; & P-19), Cambodia is a lawless country where anyone with some connections and/or political and/or financial clout can and does engage in unlawful behavior, including criminal activity, without hesitation, because they have the ability to get around the law.

The information showed how crucial staff competency is to maintaining successful and efficient administration. Incompetent local government employees are less likely than competent ones to deliver effective and efficient services. Due to its incapacity to hire qualified and skilled workers, Cambodia's district administration system has been criticized for being unproductive and inefficient. There have been some improvements in this direction, according to the data.

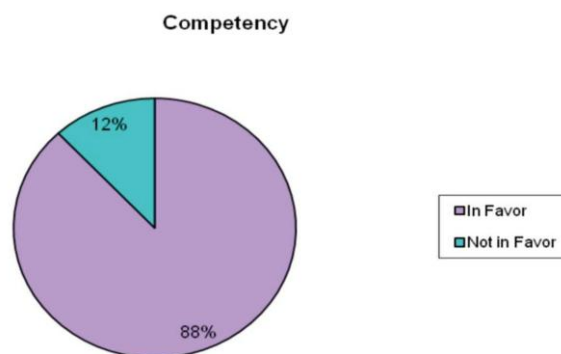


Figure 11. Participants' Opinions of The District Administration Officials' Competency

Figure 11 shows that 22 participants, or 88%, thought the district administration representatives were capable of carrying out their responsibilities, while 3 participants, or 12%, said they weren't. Many of the participants noted that the majority of the district administration officials are highly qualified experts in their respective disciplines. According to some other participants, there has been an improvement in the competency of the district administration officials. They pointed out that while district administration officials were once thought to be incompetent, the council now has competent officials and workers with graduate degrees who are professionals in their fields; they are competent and efficient in performing their official duties (P-01; P-02; P-10; & P-19). Nonetheless, some participants thought that certain officials were incompetent and had obtained their positions through corruption or nepotism (P-08; P-14).

#### 4.7. Autonomy

As previously said, autonomy was chosen since it was pertinent to the topic, even though it was unpopular within the data set. Despite the district administration system's constitutional status as a third-tier government, some participants (P-09, P-10, P-15, and P-19) noted that district administration is viewed as an appendix to government. According to P-19, the constitution does not grant district administration complete authority, allowing administrations to interfere with its operations.

It appears that this setup promotes corruption and, in the end, makes it impossible for the municipalities to offer the public products and services. According to the respondents, if the district administrations were to have moral leadership and sound government, this condition had to be addressed and altered.

Participants' opinions about the topic are typically the basis for their responses to interview questions. Unless they don't offer any insightful information about the topic under study, these people's opinions gathered as data are typically considered reliable. Regarding ethical leadership in connection to fostering good governance, the data collected from the 25 participants through in-person interviews and utilized in this study were regarded as reliable and instructive. The identified components of ethical leadership that support good governance—honesty, compassion, modeling and enforcing ethical behavior, accountability, and openness, among others—that were disclosed in the literature review were in line with their perceptions.

In order to better understand ethical leadership and how it may improve good governance in Cambodia's local government system, this qualitative study was conducted. According to the study, the ethical leadership model could promote democratic governance at the local level of Cambodian district administration.

The first research question investigated the participants' perceptions of the district administration officials' honesty and concern for citizens in connection with their performance of their tasks. According to the participants, achieving organizational goals in any organization—especially public ones—requires the ethical principle of honesty. The results show that many district administration leaders are dishonest and uncaring about the suffering of their constituents. Local politicians are more concerned with using public resources for their own personal gain than with using them to promote the social, economic, and human development of the local populace. The dishonesty and self-centeredness of public officials are closely linked to the governance crisis in the district administration system of Cambodia. Because officials of all ranks and files are skilled at manipulating the system to suit their own interests, district administration posts are seen as extremely profitable. This is not necessarily due to the appealing wages. For instance, because politicians and their supporters view politics as a fast way to become wealthy, every election in Cambodia is always treated very seriously [8]-[11]. People-focused, ethical leaders make moral decisions that significantly and favorably affect others [42], [43]. In order to attain the common good, ethical leaders inspire and encourage their people to strive for greater ethical standards [20].

The findings also suggest that ethical leadership contributes to the development of institutional trust. Social trust is a critical component of democratic governance because citizens are more willing to cooperate with public institutions when they perceive leaders as honest and concerned about public welfare. The prevalence of perceived dishonesty among officials may therefore undermine citizens' confidence in local government and weaken civic engagement.

The second research question examined the degree to which district administration officials ensure an organizational climate that enhances ethical practice. This study question looked at the efforts made by representatives of the district administration to establish a setting that ensured moral behavior in the council. The participants thought that having an ethical infrastructure would encourage local councils to operate ethically. They agreed that setting an ethical tone for ethical behavior throughout an organization required leaders to set a positive example by upholding the code of conduct. They felt that it helped to send a clear message that the administration was dedicated to ethical practice when officials led by modeling appropriate conduct, i.e., adhering to the guidelines and precepts of public service ethics in their decisions and acts. Officials who set a good example have the power to influence others. According to Brown et al. [32], ethical leaders set an example of proper behavior and convey the value of ethics to make ethical behavior stand out inside the organization. However, this study found that many of the district administration's officials did not model the appropriate behaviors or communicate the need for ethical practice to foster a suitable environment for ethical practice. When the public leaders lack integrity and disregard the code of conduct of the public service in their actions and behaviors, they create a negative environment for ethical practice.

According to the study's findings, the district administration must have a strong code of conduct to raise awareness that ethical behavior is a top priority [15]-[18]. An organization's code of conduct outlines acceptable behavior. When it is successful and efficient, it greatly contributes to the establishment of an ethical workplace culture. It won't take long for an outsider to realize that ethical behavior is essential to the organization's way of doing business if every member of the organization, from the top to the bottom, is aware of the code of conduct and makes sincere efforts to behave and act in accordance with its guidelines. But a code by itself cannot create an ethical environment; leaders' dedication to moral behavior is necessary [44], [45]. Bureaucratic corruption is said to be caused by low public-sector wages in less developed nations [46]. The relationship between civil service wages and corruption was explained by theories of efficiency wages and fair wages [47], [48].

The third research question investigated the potential impact of ethical leadership on good governance. This question focused on examining the ethical leadership potential to advance good governance in terms of citizens' participation, transparency, accountability, and rule of law in district administration. Only when honest men and women hold leadership positions in the government can good governance be formed and flourish [7], [15]. This study also pointed out how crucial moral leadership is to achieving efficient and democratic governance. The participants thought that democratic administration could be ensured by moral leadership. Citizens have a

non-negotiable right to know what their government is doing [49], [50]. Nations with strong mechanisms of accountability have relatively low levels of public sector corruption, whereas nations with weak institutions of accountability have high levels of public sector corruption [15], [51].

An essential component of improving good governance is accountability. Transparency and accountability are so intertwined that it is challenging to have one without the other. In essence, accountability is that public servants must answer to the public about their stewardship and submit to scrutiny when necessary and appropriate for their position. It takes morally upright people to manage the district administration's operations to create a strong, moral administration that prioritizes good governance. It is widely accepted that ethical leadership has the power to institutionalize morality and ethics, as well as to advance good governance in the district administration system of Cambodia and the public sector at large.

Citizen participation, transparency, and access to information can also be interpreted as indicators of social inclusion. These governance practices strengthen citizens' sense of belonging and political efficacy by allowing individuals to influence decisions affecting their communities. Consequently, ethical leadership serves not only as an administrative mechanism but also as a social process that promotes democratic participation and strengthens state-society relationships. The findings highlight that ethical leadership has broader social implications beyond organizational performance. Ethical leadership contributes to the development of social trust, civic participation, and institutional legitimacy, which are fundamental elements of social cohesion and democratic governance. When citizens perceive public officials as honest, accountable, and responsive, they are more likely to engage in public affairs and support government initiatives.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that governance quality is shaped not only by formal administrative structures but also by social relationships between public institutions and citizens. Ethical leadership strengthens these relationships by encouraging transparency, participation, and fairness. Consequently, improving ethical leadership may serve as an important strategy for enhancing social development and strengthening democratic institutions in Cambodia. To determine how each model supports or hinders the advancement of democratic governance at the local level, future studies may compare the district administration. Gaining traction at the grassroots level is essential for the growth and prosperity of democracy and its governance, which is based on moral leadership. Since the study only interviewed sub-national authorities rather than politicians, future research may want to involve politicians to learn about their opinions on ethical leadership as a practical way to advance democratic governance in the nation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to gain a thorough understanding of ethical leadership in Cambodian district administration and how it may promote and maintain good governance. The goal of the 1993 local administration reform, which resulted in the nation's present district administration system, was to increase government involvement at the local level. As the focal point for promoting sustainable social, economic, and human development in the community, the grassroots administration is required to advance democratic ideas and goals. Nevertheless, this vision remains unfulfilled. Despite enormous sums of money being poured into the system to support its operations, the local government system has failed to live up to the aspirations and expectations of reformists and the general public. One of the main things that makes the district administration management ineffective is systemic dishonesty and corruption. Local districts in Cambodia are infamous for corruption, which hinders their ability to implement good governance and sustained socioeconomic development at the local level.

The study demonstrated how crucial moral leadership is to promoting good governance in a company, particularly one that is public. The results demonstrated that the majority of local authorities lacked integrity and care for the public, which hindered their capacity to uphold moral behavior and encourage moral leadership in the district management. The study emphasized the necessity of having morally upright public servants to cultivate moral leadership for the advancement of sound and efficient administration. Ethical municipal authorities will use the public resources entrusted to them to advance good governance, which includes promoting socioeconomic development and democratic values, instead of pursuing their own interests.

The study also emphasized how crucial it is to employ an ethical infrastructure to support the atmosphere that is necessary for encouraging and maintaining ethical behavior in the council. Ethically focused leadership would foster an atmosphere that would enable ethical behavior within the company. The results showed that the district's lack of ethical leadership resulted in an inadequate ethical environment. Ethical leaders will use ethical infrastructure to achieve the necessary results because they understand the importance of an ethical environment in promoting ethical practice. In public organizations where public officials are empowered to oversee public resources, ethical leadership is essential. Men and women of moral character who are able to instill and encourage moral behavior within the framework of the system must assume leadership roles in order to fulfill this precious and crucial duty. Effective and good governance in the Cambodian district administration requires ethical leadership. Future research should address the shortcomings of this study. Because participants were selected from just one province and one district administration in the country's southern region, its breadth is constrained.

Financial and time restrictions played a major role in the scope selection. Results from a longer-term study with a wider focus might be more significant.

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