

Virtue Ethics as a Predictor of Leadership Archetypes and Follower Dynamics: A Conceptual Model of Ethical Influence

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Abstract: Ethical leadership literature has always stressed the significance of virtues, follower dynamics and moral influence (Johnson, 2020; Gentry & Fleshman, 2020; Hyacinth, 2014), but these areas of study are rarely linked within a comprehensive theoretical framework (Ciulla, 2020; Chugh & Kern, 2016). This conceptual paper provides a paradigm that links virtue ethics, leadership archetypes, and follower typologies to explain how ethical or unethical climates are created in organizations (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Johnson, 2020; Hyacinth, 2014). The model is built on a literature review of virtue ethics, Light and Shadow leadership archetypes, and follower typologies, and assumes that fundamental virtues (prudence, courage, justice, and temperance) predict leadership archetypes and subsequent follower conduct (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Gentry & Fleshman, 2020). Light leaders develop Realists and Loyalists who support the organization as well as give constructive dissent (Hyacinth, 2014), whereas Shadow leaders produce Spectators, Sycophants, and Traitors who promote ethical decay (Hyacinth, 2014; Jennings, 2012; Johnson, 2020). The strategy also recognized psychological safety and moral bravery as important organizational objectives (Bedi et al., 2016; Jiménez, 2022). This integrated paradigm provides a basis for further empirical testing and has practical implications for leadership development and the construction of an ethical culture.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics, Ethical Leadership, Follower Typologies, Organizational Ethics, Leadership Archetypes

1. Introduction

Ethical leadership has become a central concern for organizations seeking to maintain integrity, psychological safety, and long-term sustainability (Bedi et al., 2016). Scholars increasingly argue that ethical influence is not merely a matter of compliance or personal preference but a foundational requirement for organizational health. Leadership failures, whether they are bad decision-making, moral disengagement, or follower dependency, can undermine trust and foster settings in which unethical behavior becomes the norm (Jennings, 2012; Johnson, 2020).

Although there is a rich literature on leadership styles, virtue ethics, and follower behavior, these topics are generally studied in isolation. The study of leadership tends to focus on conduct or situations, but virtue ethics is about developing character (Ciulla, 2020; Hackett & Wang, 2012). Meanwhile, followership research suggests how leaders can influence subordinates' behavior (Hyacinth, 2014). What is lacking is an integrated model that explains how virtues shape leadership archetypes, how these archetypes produce different sorts of followers, and how these interactions impact organizational ethical results (Chugh & Kern, 2016; Ciulla, 2020).

This paper addresses that gap by proposing a conceptual model which connects virtue ethics, leadership archetypes, and follower typologies. The model is designed to explain how climates (ethical or unethical) emerge and how leaders can cultivate environments that support moral courage, psychological safety, and organizational integrity (Bedi et al., 2016; Jiménez, 2022).

Research Question: How do core virtues predict leadership archetypes, and how those archetypes shape follower typologies and organizational ethical outcomes?

Contribution: This paper contributes an integrated conceptual model that combines virtue ethics, Light and Shadow leadership archetypes, and follower typologies into one explanatory framework. It also provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and practical guidance for leadership development.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Virtue Ethics in Leadership

Virtue ethics is interested in developing stable moral dispositions which inform action in a variety of settings (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Gentry & Fleshman, 2020). Scholars of leadership have identified many attributes as critical to ethical influence: wisdom, courage, justice and temperance (Hackett & Wang, 2012). These characteristics help to develop excellent judgment, moral courage, fairness, and the management of emotions, all of which are necessary to deal with the complex nature of organizational settings.

Prudence enables leaders to consider decisions rather than react (Hutton, 2022). Courage enables leaders to maintain high standards of ethics when under pressure (Johnson, 2020; Batson & Thompson, 2001). Justice is the virtue of right relations and action and constancy (Gentry & Fleshman, 2020). Temperance is the equilibrium of emotions and the restraint of harmful drives (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Johnson, 2020). These qualities together form the basis for ethical leadership.

2.2 Leadership Archetypes: Light and Shadow

Leadership conduct can be defined in terms of two archetypes: Light and Shadow. Light leaders have integrity, technical knowledge and dedication to developing others (Afshar Jahanshahi & Kalaycioglu, 2025; Johnson, 2020; Gini & Green, 2013). They empower their followers, foster independent thinking and create spaces where disagreement is a healthy kind of interaction (VanVactor, 2012; Hyacinth, 2014).

Shadow leaders, by contrast, depend on charm, control, and dependency-enhancing actions (Conger, 1990; Wann, 2021). They tend to focus on short-term performance rather than long-term sustainability, encouraging settings where followers are made to believe they must satisfy expectations “at any cost” (Jennings, 2012; Johnson, 2020). Such leaders may unwittingly promote ethical shortcuts, discourage dissent, or foster disengagement.

2.3 Followership Typologies

Follower behavior varies significantly based on the leadership environment. Four primary follower types are related to this model:

Realists/Loyalists: Highly engaged individuals who support the leader while offering constructive dissent (Hyacinth, 2014). Committed followers who align with organizational goals and maintain high ethical standards.

Spectators: Passive individuals who avoid involvement and rarely raise concerns (Hyacinth, 2014).

Sycophants: Highly deferential followers who prioritize pleasing the leader over ethical considerations.

Traitors: Disconnected followers who may undermine the leader due to distrust or frustration (Hyacinth, 2014; Johnson, 2020).

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Followership and Leadership Dynamics

Follower Type	Associated Leadership Style	Behavioral Characteristics	Impact on Organizational Ethics
Realists & Loyalists	Authentic / Transformational	Highly engaged; work to support the leader while offering constructive dissent when they disagree (Hyacinth, 2014).	Fosters ethical fortitude; creates a "psychologically safe" environment for speaking up (Jiménez, 2022).
Spectators	"Shadow" / Transactional	Stand on the sidelines; disengaged from tasks; never point out problems or raise objections (Hyacinth, 2014).	Leads to "active bystander" behavior where unethical recurring issues go unaddressed (Johnson, 2020).
Sycophants	"Shadow" / Charismatic	Highly deferential; rarely challenge the leader; often lack technical competency (Hyacinth, 2014).	Encourages "cutting ethical corners" to meet leader expectations at any cost (Jennings, 2012).
Traitors	Dysfunctional / Micromanagement	Subordinates who feel disconnected and may conspire against the leader due to lost patience or lack of trust (Johnson, 2020).	Results in a toxic environment where "destructive impulses" override organizational goals (Johnson, 2020).

These typologies illustrate how leadership behavior shapes follower engagement, ethical awareness, and organizational culture.

3. Conceptual Model Development

3.1 *Virtues as Predictors of Leadership Archetypes*

According to the paradigm, the existence or absence of basic values results in leaders embodying Light or Shadow archetypes (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Johnson, 2020). Those who regularly practice wisdom, courage, justice and temperance are more likely to exhibit ethical fortitude, the capacity to empower followers and to preserve integrity under pressure (Gentry & Fleshman, 2020; Hackett & Wang, 2012). These leaders are Light archetype.

Conversely, a lack of these virtues, for example impulsiveness, fear of dissent, unfairness, or emotional volatility, is predictive of Shadow leadership (Hutton, 2022; Johnson, 2020; Gentry & Fleshman, 2020). Leaders who lack prudence behave impulsively, leaders who lack courage avoid ethical risks, leaders who lack fairness develop positions of favoritism, leaders who lack temperance are harsh or lose their patience. These shortcomings create environments where ethical decay is more probable.

3.2 *Leadership Archetypes as Predictors of Follower Typologies*

Leadership archetypes strongly influence the behavior of followers. Light leaders cultivate Realists and Loyalists through autonomy, professional development support, and psychologically secure workplaces (Hyacinth, 2014; VanVactor, 2012). Followers can voice concerns, question assumptions, and make significant contributions toward company goals.

Shadow Leaders, however, tend to generate Spectators, Sycophants, and Traitors (Hyacinth, 2014; Jennings, 2012; Johnson, 2020). Lack of empowerment causes spectators to withdraw. Sycophants defer too much, putting leader approval ahead of ethical judgment.

Traitors tend to arise when followers become distrustful or alienated by inconsistent or dominating leadership actions.

3.3 Follower Typologies as Predictors of Organizational Outcomes

Follower behavior shapes the ethical climate, psychological safety, and long-term outcomes of the organization. Realists and Loyalists build ethical resilience, inventiveness and collaborative problem solving (Bedi et al., 2016). Spectators and sycophants create ethical blind spots, smother dissent, and increase corporate risk (Hyacinth, 2014; Jennings, 2012). Traitors are a source of toxicity, conflict and breakdown of communications (Johnson, 2020). Thus, follower typologies mediate the link between leadership archetypes and organizational outcomes.

4. Proposed Conceptual Model

The proposed conceptual model integrates the three domains into a single causal chain (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Johnson, 2020; Hyacinth, 2014; Bedi et al., 2016) whereby:

Virtues > Leadership Archetype > Follower Type > Organizational Outcomes

- Virtues (prudence, courage, justice, temperance) > predict >
- Leadership Archetypes (Light vs. Shadow) > produce >
- Follower Typologies (Realists, Loyalists, Spectators, Sycophants, Traitors) > shape >
- Organizational Outcomes (ethical climate, psychological safety, moral courage, burnout, ethical erosion)

The model offers a systematic explanation of the development of ethical and unethical climates and how leaders can develop climates that foster moral bravery and organizational integrity.

5. Implications

5.1 Implications for Leadership Development

The model emphasizes the value of developing virtues as key leadership capabilities. Leadership programs should therefore focus on character development as opposed to only on technical abilities since prudence, courage, justice, and temperance are predictors of ethical impact (Nesbit, 2012; Copeland, 2014; Hackett & Wang, 2012).

5.2 Implications for Organizational Ethics

Organizations must invest in leaders demonstrating Light archetype behaviors to create stronger ethical climates. Policies that incentivize ethical decision-making, allow dissent and incentivize transparency may support such behaviors (Chugh & Kern, 2016; Bedi et al., 2016).

5.3 Implications for Follower Well-Being

Psychological safety and burnout are direct antecedents of follower typologies (Agarwal, 2019; Jiménez, 2022). Well-being is associated with Light leadership contexts, while Shadow situations cause emotional weariness and disengagement. Organizations should monitor follower behavior as a measure of leadership health.

5.4 Implications for Future Research

The model provides a basis for empirical testing. Future research might examine:

- Which virtues predict leadership behavior in organizations (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Gentry & Fleshman, 2020)
- Follower kinds as mediators of ethical outcomes inside organizations
- How organizational interventions move leaders from Shadow archetypes to Light archetypes

6. Conclusion

In this paper a conceptual model is developed of the emergence of ethical climates in businesses, combining virtue ethics, leadership archetypes and follower typologies (Hackett & Wang, 2012; Johnson, 2020; Hyacinth, 2014). The model thus provides a thorough framework for analyzing ethical impact by relating key virtues to leadership conduct and follower dynamics (Ciulla, 2020; Bedi et al., 2016). It provides practical assistance in leadership development and organizational ethics, and a basis for future empirical research.

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