

Development and validation of a comprehensive scale of sustainable ethical leadership in Iran's higher education system

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ABSTRACT

Higher education leaders play an important role in promoting ethics and sustainable development in society, so they are expected to engage in "sustainable ethical leadership". Ethical leadership and sustainable leadership are intertwined concepts that are necessary to achieve success and sustainability. The purpose of the current research was to develop and validate a scale to measure "sustainable ethical leadership" in Iran's higher education system. For this purpose, the theoretical foundations and literature of internal and external researches in the field of ethical leadership and sustainable leadership were examined with a six-step approach of systematic review of the background, and based on that, the competencies, functions and consequences of "sustainable ethical leadership" was extracted and a tool was designed. In the next stage, this tool was implemented among 334 faculty members of Shiraz University and University of Technology who were selected by stratified random sampling method. The content validity of the tool structure was measured using item analysis and first- and second-order confirmatory factor analysis, and its reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Validation results showed that the "Sustainable Ethical Leadership" scale had a suitable fit. In the variable of "sustainable ethical leadership", competences, functions and consequences with a factor load (0.94), (0.98) and (0.95) were significant explanations of this variable and their validity was confirmed. Other results indicated the validity and reliability of this scale. The sustainable ethical leadership scale can be a valid tool to evaluate the degree of orientation of university managers to ethical dimensions and sustainable development at the same time.

Keywords: ethical leadership, sustainable leadership, higher education, sustainable ethical leadership.



Introduction

One of the most serious problems in today's organizations is weak ethical behavior and a lack of ethical leadership (Plinio et al., 2010). Ethical leadership have become the foundation of ethical organizations (Pushpa, 2012), so organizations are expected to promote ethical leadership throughout their hierarchy (Mayer et al., 2009). Ethical leadership is the process of influencing people in a way that aligns with principles and ethical values (Knights, 2022). Higher education is responsible for the development of students, including ethical development. According to Hanson (2009), ethical issues encompass most decisions in higher education, making ethical leadership in higher education particularly important.

Today's leaders must not only promote ethical behavior but also be forward-thinking, adaptable to change and crisis, environmentally aware (Holst, 2021), and committed to sustainable development. Higher education institutions are expected to play a crucial role in fostering sustainable development through education, learning, research, and knowledge transfer (Osmond et al., 2013).

While ethical leadership influences organizational success, sustainable goals are also crucial in the new global order. It is anticipated that ethical leadership and sustainable practices will lead to sustainable success in this new global context (Alay, 2024). Ethical leadership and sustainability leadership are intertwined concepts necessary for achieving success and sustainability (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Freeman and Stewart (2006) argue that sustainable leadership focuses on justice and ethics, aiming to benefit all people globally now and in the future.

Ethical leadership and sustainable leadership share many characteristics. Thomas and Rowland (2013) suggest the need for a unique type of leadership called "sustainable ethical leadership." Ethical leadership encompasses various components, with different scales available to measure it. Sustainable leadership also has different scales, with various dimensions and perspectives. Historically, ethical leadership has been viewed from a western perspective. This perspective has often overlooked social and organizational factors influencing perceptions of ethical leadership (Heres & Lasthuizen, 2010).

Given the complexity of ethical leadership influenced by culture and the need for new tools due to criticisms of existing scales, there is a need to develop a new scale for ethical leadership. This research aims to construct and validate the "sustainable ethical leadership" scale in higher education by identifying its subscales and items.

Methodology

Research Design: This research is a part of applied design, and its method is descriptive of a methodological type (Polit & Hungler, 1999). The research variable is the "sustainable ethical leadership" of faculty heads. This research consists of two main steps. In the first step, the "sustainable ethical leadership" scale is designed through a systematic background review method, and in the second step, the validity and reliability of the designed scale are calculated.

Methodology Step 1: Systematic Review of the Background to Build the Scale: Research Question: What are the subscales and items of the "sustainable ethical leadership" scale? To build the scale of "Sustainable Ethical Leadership" of academic managers, a six-step approach of systematic review of the background (Klewitz & Hansen, 2014) was utilized, including: 1- identifying keywords, 2- creating criteria for inclusion and exclusion of articles, 3- searching in the background, 4- extraction of lists A-B-C, 5- descriptive analysis, and 6- thematic analysis. A systematic review is an organized search based on predetermined rules and criteria. The statistical population of this step includes all research studies resulting from quantitative and qualitative studies in the field of ethical leadership and sustainable leadership published from 1986 to 2024.

The First Stage: Specifying the Keywords: In this step, based on the available theoretical and research bases related to "sustainable ethical leadership," 6 keywords were identified: characteristics of ethical leadership, consequences of ethical leadership, sustainable development, characteristics of sustainable leadership, consequences of sustainable leadership, sustainable ethical leadership, and guiding words of university and higher education.

The Second Stage: Creating Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Articles. At this stage, two criteria were considered for the review of articles: first, the date of the topic (articles from 1986 to 2024), and second, the validity of the sources (articles from databases such as Scopus, Elsevier, Science Direct, ProQuest, Sage, Noormags, Civilica, and SID).

The Third and Fourth Stages: Searching in the Background and Extracting Lists A, B, and C. During this stage, articles were divided into three lists based on their relevance to the research subject: A (related topics - 170 studies), B (somewhat related - 92 studies), and C (unrelated - 101 studies).

The Fifth Stage: Descriptive Analysis: In this stage, researches providing essential information on competencies, functions, and consequences of ethical leadership and sustainable leadership were identified.

Findings

To calculate the construct validity of the "Sustainable Ethical Leadership" scale, first and second order confirmatory factor analysis was used. The results showed that in the variable "sustainable ethical leadership", variables of competences, functions and consequences with factor loadings (0.94), (0.98) and (0.95) are significant explanatory of this variable; In the competency variable, knowledge, skill and attitude variables with factor load (0.84), (0.91) and (0.91) are significant explanatory of this variable; In the variable of functions, the variables of leadership, planning and organization with factor load (0.96), (0.94) and (0.91) are significant explanatory of this variable; In the consequences variable, environmental, social, economic and institutional variables with factor loadings of (0.96), (0.85), (0.88) and (0.89) are significant explanatory of this variable and their validity was confirmed. The high level of χ^2/df , CFI, NNFI, NFI, GFI, AGFI and the low level of RMSEA indicates that the model has goodness-of-fit.

Conclusion

Today's societies need a special type of ethical leadership called "sustainable ethical leadership"; the need to deal with "sustainable ethical leadership" in the higher education system as the driving force of society is more important than other organizations. Therefore, in this study, the scale of "sustainable ethical leadership" was designed and validated in the higher education system. This scale includes three subscales of competencies (knowledge, skill and attitude), functions (planning, organization and leadership) and consequences (economic, social, institutional and environmental). Competencies include knowledge (global awareness, interdisciplinary knowledge), skills (innovation and creativity, systemic thinking, appropriate communication skills, complexity management, diversity management, expertise and tact in doing) and attitude/value (trustworthy, being moderate, people orientation, accepting criticism, concern for sustainability, courage, diligence, inclusive style, flexibility, integrity, patience, belief in God, belief in resurrection, belief in comprehensive supervision, legalism, forbearance, commitment and responsibility, positivity, humility, justice).

Functions include planning (providing a long-term vision, role modeling, managing unpredictable situations, promoting awareness in the field of sustainable development), organizing (succession, networking, creating discipline) and leadership (empowering, clarifying issues, ethical management of rewards, adapting to the changing environment, involving people, making conscious and ethical decisions). The consequences include environmental consequences (protecting the environment, creating relationships based on sustainable development, positive organizational image, achieving sustainable development from an environmental approach), institutional/organizational (a pioneer in creating a new organizational structure, job satisfaction, motivation, organizational commitment, organizational trust, increasing performance, welfare), cultural/social (extra-social behavior, reducing deviant behaviors, fulfilling social responsibility, achieving sustainable development from a social approach, ethical competence, ethical organizational culture based on sustainable development) and economic (economic success, achieving sustainable development from an economic approach). "Sustainable Ethical Leadership Scale" can be a valid tool to evaluate the degree of orientation of university managers to ethical dimensions and sustainable development at the same time.

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