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ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6884-3504>

Leading with integrity: How moral leadership drives employee job satisfaction

Dr. Ciurea Maria: University of Petrosani, Romania

Epifanio G. Rico Jr., EdD: Divine Word College of Laoag, Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, Philippines.

Keneth V. Reyes, PhD: Divine Word College of Laoag, Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, Philippines.

Edly A. Agbisit, PhD: STI, Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, Philippines.

Marilou B. Sales, EdD: School Division City of Batac, Batac City, Ilocos Norte, Philippines.

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ABSTRACT

The study was intended to measure the effect of moral leadership of middle- and lower-level managers at Divine Word Colleges in Region I, Philippines, on job satisfaction. To strengthen the study, theories of moral leadership were presented, and related literature and studies were reviewed. The study employed a descriptive assessment and a correlational research design, using Pearson's r to determine the relationship between moral leadership and job satisfaction. The study found that the moral leadership of middle- and lower-level managers of Divine Word Colleges in Region I, Philippines, in terms of integrity, trust, ethical relationship, and honesty, is high, and that moral leadership correlates significantly with employees' job satisfaction. Thus, the study's hypothesis is accepted.

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Introduction

Businesses today operate in an increasingly competitive environment. Staying competitive requires more than investing in new technologies or improving employees' technical skills. While these are essential, organizations must also pay close attention to employees' job satisfaction. When job satisfaction is overlooked, employees may become less motivated, perform below their potential, and produce lower-quality work, all of which can weaken an organization's competitive advantage (Mardanov, 2021; Zakaria et al., 2020).

Job satisfaction is influenced by more than compensation and incentives. It is also shaped by how managers lead, interact with, and treat their employees. When employees perceive unfair treatment or injustice, their morale and satisfaction tend to decline. Likewise, unethical behavior by managers can negatively influence employees' attitudes, performance, and commitment. A sustained decline in job satisfaction can have serious consequences for organizational

effectiveness and long-term success. As a result, the moral conduct of managers has become an important area of organizational research (Bulinska-Stangrecka & Bagienska, 2021; Amoah et al., 2021). Previous studies have extensively examined the relationship between moral leadership and employee performance, highlighting fair treatment and ethical role modeling as key dimensions of effective leadership. These studies suggest that leaders who demonstrate fairness and ethical behavior foster greater employee well-being, loyalty, and trust in management, which ultimately contribute to improved job performance and organizational sustainability (Uluturk et al., 2023; Fang et al., 2026; Sebastiao et al., 2026).

Despite the growing body of research on moral leadership, relatively few studies have explored its influence on employees' job satisfaction within higher education institutions. This gap provided the basis for the present study, which aims to examine the effect of lower-level managers' moral leadership on employees' job satisfaction in academic institutions.

This paper is organized into five sections. The first presents the introduction and background of the study. The second reviews the related literature and theoretical foundations. The third describes the research methodology. The fourth presents and analyzes the findings, while the fifth discusses the results and presents the study's conclusions.

Literature review

Understanding morality and ethics

Before discussing morality, it is important to distinguish it from ethics, as the two terms are often used interchangeably despite having different meanings. This distinction also explains why the present study uses the term **moral leadership** rather than **ethical leadership**, a term more commonly found in the literature. While both concepts are closely related, morality refers to a prescribed code of right and wrong behavior, whereas ethics is the philosophical study and evaluation of those moral principles. Understanding this distinction provides a clearer foundation for examining leadership from the perspective of moral conduct.

Morality is generally classified into two forms: **descriptive and normative**. Descriptive morality refers to an individual's personal beliefs about what is right or wrong based on actual practices, experiences, and values. Since these judgments are rooted in personal opinion rather than universally accepted standards, different individuals may hold different views of what is morally acceptable (Schiffman, 2014). In contrast, normative morality refers to a code of conduct that rational individuals are expected to follow under given conditions (Werhane, 2019; Gert, 2025). It consists of moral standards that prescribe appropriate behavior and distinguish right from wrong (Fieser, 2002). These standards are grounded in reason and natural law, which are considered universally accessible to human beings regardless of written laws or cultural differences (Cameron, 2013; ten Have & Neves, 2021; O'Connor, 1961; McLeod, 1999). For example, even in the absence of legal prohibitions, reason itself recognizes that killing is morally wrong.

Although closely connected, morality and ethics serve different purposes. Morality refers to the accepted standards or rules that guide human behavior, while ethics is the philosophical discipline that examines, explains, and evaluates those standards. Rather than simply declaring whether an act is right or wrong, ethics seeks to understand *why* an action is morally acceptable or unacceptable and provides a framework for making sound moral judgments. Different ethical theories offer different criteria for evaluating actions. For example, Immanuel Kant argued that the morality of an action depends primarily on the person's intention or motive, regardless of its consequences. In contrast, John Stuart Mill's utilitarian theory evaluates actions according to whether they produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

The distinction between morality and ethics becomes clearer when considering acts such as stealing. From a moral perspective, stealing is inherently wrong because it violates accepted moral standards. Ethics, however, examines the

circumstances surrounding the act before making a moral judgment. Questions such as the person's motive, intended purpose, and the consequences of the action become relevant. For instance, stealing food to save a starving family or stealing medicine to save a dying person raises ethical considerations that require deeper analysis. Such evaluation does not necessarily declare the act morally acceptable but may lessen the degree of moral blameworthiness or influence how responsibility is assessed (Chaddha & Agrawal, 2023; Shea, 2022; O'Connor, 1961; McLeod, 1999).

This distinction also raises the question of whether ethics can absolve a person of moral responsibility. The answer depends on the circumstances. Ethical analysis may either eliminate or mitigate moral responsibility after a careful evaluation of the facts. According to Abun (2014), four elements should be examined when evaluating the morality of an action: motive, means, ends, and consequences. If all four elements are morally sound, the action may be considered morally justifiable. However, if one or more of these elements are morally deficient, the act remains wrong, although the degree of moral responsibility may be reduced depending on the circumstances. Ethics, therefore, serves as a guide for understanding and evaluating moral responsibility rather than replacing morality itself.

Unlike morality, which provides clear standards of right and wrong, ethics is the philosophical discipline that studies moral principles and their application. It seeks to explain why people ought to perform certain actions and avoid others by examining motives, purposes, methods, and consequences. Through this process, ethics recognizes that actions are often more complex than they initially appear. An act that seems entirely immoral may, after careful analysis, be judged less blameworthy or morally justified under exceptional circumstances (Fletcher, 2017; Johnson, 2021).

Ultimately, ethics is not a collection of moral rules but the systematic study of moral principles. Morality, on the other hand, encompasses three closely related concepts: moral standards, which guide human behavior; moral responsibility, which relates to one's conscience and accountability; and moral identity, which reflects an individual's capacity to distinguish and choose between right and wrong (All About Philosophy, n.d.). These shared moral principles enable individuals to live and work together harmoniously. Without commonly accepted moral standards to guide behavior, societies and organizations would struggle to maintain order, trust, and long-term stability (Cohen, 2016; Chaddha & Agrawal, 2023).

Understanding leadership

Leadership has been defined in various ways, reflecting scholars' diverse perspectives on how leaders influence individuals and organizations. One of the earliest and most widely accepted views describes leadership as a process of influence. Bennis (1959) defined leadership as the process through which an individual influences subordinates to behave in a desired manner. Similarly, Hollander and Julian (1969) viewed leadership as the influence within the relationship among two or more individuals. Roach and Behling (1984) further expanded this perspective by defining leadership as the process of influencing an organized group to achieve its goals. Unlike earlier definitions that emphasized influence alone, they argued that leadership should direct influence toward the attainment of organizational objectives rather than personal interests.

Another influential perspective is transformational leadership, originally proposed by Burns (1978) and later refined by Bass (1985, 1998), Avolio (1988), Bass and Avolio (1994), Bennis and Nanus (1985), and Tichy and Devanna (1986). From this perspective, leadership is the ability to inspire followers to accomplish more than they initially believed possible (Krishnan, 2005). Transformational leaders encourage followers to exceed ordinary expectations by fostering commitment, growth, and a shared sense of purpose. Bass (1985) identified four key dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence refers to leaders who serve as role models by demonstrating integrity, high ethical standards, and a compelling vision for the future. Inspirational motivation involves communicating meaningful goals that encourage followers to become fully committed to the organization's mission. Intellectual stimulation challenges followers to question assumptions, think critically, and develop innovative solutions to problems. Individualized consideration

recognizes that each follower has unique needs and therefore requires personalized coaching, mentoring, and growth opportunities (Abun, 2004). Burns (1978) further emphasized that transformational leaders inspire exceptional performance by aligning followers' personal values with the organization's mission and values.

These perspectives suggest that leadership is never exercised in isolation but always involves influencing others toward a common purpose. However, some scholars argue that leadership extends beyond influence alone. Prentice (1961) asserted that leadership is fundamentally the accomplishment of goals through the direction of human effort. From this perspective, influence is not an end in itself but a means of guiding individuals toward achieving organizational objectives. Despite differences in emphasis, these definitions converge on the idea that leadership is the process of influencing people to pursue and accomplish a shared vision, mission, or set of goals. Effective leaders establish a clear direction, communicate that direction effectively, equip followers with the necessary knowledge and resources, and align individual aspirations with organizational objectives (Steinmann et al., 2018; Maran et al., 2022; Zuo, 2023).

Because leadership depends on followers, it is inherently relational rather than individualistic. Organizational success is achieved not only through financial resources, technology, or physical infrastructure but also through a leader's ability to influence, motivate, and inspire people to perform at their highest potential. In today's workplace, employees are motivated not only by compensation but also by how they are treated, respected, and valued by their leaders. Leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and genuine concern for their employees foster stronger commitment, trust, and engagement. Consequently, effective leadership must be grounded in moral principles that guide leaders' decisions and behaviors (Koleva et al., 2015; Huhtala et al., 2021; Mohi Ud Din & Zhang, 2023).

Supporting this view, Hester and Killian (2010) argued that leadership is fundamentally about relationships and that shared moral values sustain enduring relationships. They proposed that leadership is inherently value-based, with moral principles serving as the foundation of effective leadership behavior. According to these authors, leaders who understand and internalize their moral beliefs and values are better equipped to align their decisions and actions with their responsibilities. This moral awareness enables leaders to bring their beliefs, values, and purpose into both self-reflection and organizational practice, thereby strengthening trust and credibility.

Similarly, Brooks (2007), as cited by Hester and Killian (2010), emphasized that individuals are shaped through their relationships with others. Although organizations and communities contribute significantly to personal growth, they should not be viewed as more important than the individual. Rather, individuals and organizations continuously influence and shape one another. Brooks identified three important insights. First, success is not achieved solely through personal intelligence or determination. Second, personal identity develops through relationships rather than in isolation. Third, human beings are inherently relational and find meaning and purpose through living and working with others. These observations reinforce the idea that effective leadership extends beyond influence and goal attainment; it is fundamentally rooted in moral relationships that cultivate trust, collaboration, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to organizational success.

Elements of moral leadership

Trust

Trust is a fundamental element of moral leadership and has been defined in various ways across disciplines. In its simplest sense, trust refers to the confidence placed in another person. The *Merriam-Webster Concise School and Office Dictionary* (1991) defines trust as a duty imposed in faith or confidence or as a condition that exists within a relationship. Similarly, trust can be understood as the belief that a person is reliable, honest, competent, and dependable. These definitions suggest that trust is inherently moral because it is built on qualities such as honesty, integrity, consistency, and dependability. Individuals earn the trust of others when their actions consistently reflect these moral characteristics.

Trust is essential for developing healthy and productive working relationships. Dunne (2024) argued that trust is the foundation of every successful workplace relationship. When employees trust their leaders and leaders trust their employees, stronger relationships develop, enabling more effective communication, collaboration, and teamwork. In an environment characterized by trust, employees feel comfortable expressing their ideas openly and honestly. At the same time, leaders can focus on organizational goals rather than constantly monitoring or questioning their employees' intentions. However, trust does not develop automatically. It is a reciprocal process that grows through mutual respect and consistent interactions. Trust flourishes when both leaders and employees demonstrate integrity, honesty, authenticity, sincerity, and trustworthiness, and when leaders genuinely support employees in achieving both organizational and personal goals (Russell, n.d.; Liu et al., 2022; Men et al., 2022).

The significance of trust becomes even more evident when it is absent. Low levels of trust often indicate underlying problems in leadership or employee relationships, including a lack of honesty, integrity, or transparency. When individuals lose confidence in one another, communication deteriorates, collaboration weakens, and the overall work environment suffers. Ultimately, low trust can undermine organizational performance and long-term sustainability. Covey (2009) described trust as the force that makes the world "go round" and argued that modern organizations are experiencing a widespread crisis of trust. He challenged leaders to consider three important questions: Is there a measurable cost to low trust? Is there a tangible benefit to high trust? Moreover, how can leaders intentionally build trust within their organizations? According to Covey, the consequences of low trust are substantial. He cited findings from the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners indicating that the average American company loses approximately 6% of its annual revenue to fraud, underscoring the high financial costs of distrust and unethical behavior. Research has similarly demonstrated that many hidden organizational costs are linked to environments characterized by low trust (Covey, 2009).

Beyond organizational settings, trust is also a fundamental concept in social relationships. Kosfeld and Fehr (2005) suggested that human beings possess a natural tendency to trust others, arguing that this inclination is rooted in the neurobiological structure and functioning of the human brain. While biological factors may influence trust, Hardin (2002) emphasized that trust is equally a social phenomenon that develops through relationships among individuals and groups. According to Hardin, trust plays a central role in interactions within families, communities, organizations, companies, and even nations. It provides a useful framework for understanding both interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Similarly, Searle (1995) regarded trust as a social construct that exists alongside other concepts such as control, confidence, risk, meaning, and power. From this perspective, trust naturally emerges within relationships among individuals and social groups, contributing to the stability of social systems.

These perspectives underscore the indispensable role of trust in maintaining social order and organizational effectiveness. Trust enables cooperation, strengthens relationships, and supports the functioning of social institutions. Without it, relationships weaken, communication breaks down, and organizations may become dysfunctional. Braynov (2002) argued that the absence of trust can eventually lead social systems to paralysis or even collapse.

The importance of trust also begins early in human development. Erikson's psychosocial theory proposes that the foundation of trust is established during the first two years of life. During this stage, positive experiences foster feelings of security, confidence, optimism, and trust, whereas negative experiences contribute to insecurity and mistrust. These early experiences shape an individual's future capacity to develop healthy relationships and influence emotional well-being throughout life (Orenstein & Kaur, 2026; Pitula et al., 2018).

From an economic perspective, trust also has measurable value. Resnick (2006) argued that trust can be reflected in increased profits and reduced transaction costs. Customers who repeatedly purchase a product or service demonstrate trust not only in the product itself but also in the individuals and organizations responsible for delivering it. Such trust encourages customer loyalty, increases sales, and contributes to long-term organizational success. Similarly, Braynov

and Sandholm (2002) proposed in their economic modeling theory that the optimal level of trust in any transaction should correspond to the other party's trustworthiness. Appropriate levels of trust promote efficient market transactions, whereas insufficient trust may result in missed economic opportunities, and excessive trust may expose individuals and organizations to unnecessary risks and exploitation (Jia et al., 2022; Trcek, 2018).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight trust as a foundational element of moral leadership. Whether viewed from moral, organizational, social, psychological, or economic perspectives, trust strengthens relationships, promotes cooperation, and enhances organizational effectiveness. Leaders who consistently demonstrate honesty, integrity, fairness, and concern for others cultivate trust, creating workplaces where employees feel respected, engaged, and committed to achieving shared organizational goals.

Integrity

Integrity is a fundamental element of moral leadership, yet it is a concept with multiple meanings depending on its context. It can be applied to both persons and objects. When used in relation to objects, integrity refers to wholeness, completeness, or the absence of damage or corruption. When applied to individuals, however, integrity describes a moral quality of character. The idea is derived from the notion that just as an object retains its integrity when it remains whole and uncorrupted, a person demonstrates integrity when they remain morally sound and uncorrupted by wrongdoing or unethical behavior (Cox, 2008; Cox, 2025). Thus, the concept of integrity encompasses two closely related meanings: **wholeness** and **moral soundness**. Thomas More, as cited by Nilsen (2005), used the term *integrity* to refer to wholeness, while its modern moral meaning emphasizes uprightness, honesty, sincerity, and adherence to sound moral principles.

Condit and Caudill (1999) defined integrity as the consistency of one's actions, values, principles, methods, expectations, and outcomes. From an ethical perspective, integrity is reflected in honesty, truthfulness, and faithfulness in the alignment between what one believes and how one behaves. The term itself originates from the Latin word *integer*, meaning "whole" or "complete." Accordingly, integrity represents an inner sense of wholeness that arises from consistency between one's moral values and outward actions. Rather than describing the condition of an object, integrity in this sense refers to the moral character of a person whose behavior consistently reflects deeply held ethical principles.

Philosophers have long explored the meaning of integrity in relation to character and moral life. A central question is what it means to be a person of integrity. Cox (2008) suggested that two fundamental ideas are essential to understanding integrity. First, integrity is a person's internal relationship with oneself, reflecting unity and consistency of character. Second, integrity is closely connected to moral action, implying that genuine integrity places substantive moral constraints on behavior. Integrity, therefore, is not simply an image projected to others but a quality that is demonstrated through action. It requires consistency between one's inner values and outward behavior. In other words, what people observe externally should faithfully reflect what exists internally. Actions should express one's values, beliefs, and principles, making integrity visible through everyday decisions and conduct (Mejia & Garces-Florez, 2025; Russel, 2012). A person's integrity can therefore be evaluated by examining whether their actions consistently align with their professed moral values.

Contemporary discussions of integrity generally focus on five related perspectives: **self-integration**, **maintenance of identity**, **standing for something**, **moral purpose**, and **virtue** (Resnik & Elliott, 2025; Darr et al., 2022). The concept of self-integration emphasizes maintaining the self as whole and free from internal conflict. Frankfurt (1987) argued that individuals of integrity achieve harmony among their desires and acts of will. He explained that human desires exist within a hierarchy. First-order desires involve wanting particular things, whereas second-order desires involve wanting certain desires to guide one's actions. Likewise, first-order volitions concern immediate choices, while higher-order volitions reflect deliberate decisions about which desires should govern behavior. According to Frankfurt,

individuals with integrity successfully integrate these different levels of desire and volition so that their actions are free from internal contradiction and reflect a unified moral self.

Another perspective views integrity as the maintenance of one's identity through steadfast commitment. Rather than emphasizing desires alone, this approach highlights loyalty to one's promises, convictions, relationships, ideals, responsibilities, and principles (Cox, 2005). Individuals demonstrate integrity by remaining faithful to commitments that define who they are. Williams (1973) described these as **identity-conferring commitments**—the deeply held commitments that shape a person's character and sense of self. Abandoning such commitments, according to Williams, is equivalent to abandoning one's identity because these commitments provide the foundation upon which a person's moral character is built.

Although this perspective emphasizes consistency and commitment, it has limitations. Commitment alone does not necessarily constitute a moral virtue because individuals may remain firmly committed to goals or beliefs that are themselves unethical. As Williams (1981) noted, a person may consistently act according to personal motives, interests, and commitments without those commitments being morally good. This raises important questions regarding the moral quality of one's commitments. Caze and Levine (2003) therefore argued that integrity should also be understood as a virtue—a quality of character that motivates individuals to act in morally desirable ways rather than merely to act consistently with personal preferences.

Recognizing these limitations, Calhoun (1995) proposed understanding integrity as a **social virtue**. From this perspective, integrity is expressed not only through consistency with one's beliefs but also through one's responsibility toward others and the broader community. Individuals of integrity stand by their well-considered judgments because they believe those judgments deserve serious consideration within the community. They do not abandon their convictions for personal gain, social pressure, or convenience. Instead, they remain committed to what they sincerely believe is right and beneficial not only for themselves but also for others. Integrity, therefore, involves moral courage, accountability, and a willingness to defend ethical principles even when doing so is difficult.

Halfon (1989) further expanded the concept by arguing that integrity also involves **moral purpose**. According to Halfon, individuals of integrity are dedicated to living morally and possess the intellectual responsibility to understand what a moral life requires. Their decisions are guided by a sincere commitment to pursuing what is ethically right rather than what is merely personally beneficial. Such individuals demonstrate both moral conviction and intellectual honesty in their ethical deliberations. Nevertheless, some scholars contend that defining integrity solely in terms of moral purpose is overly restrictive, as important human values such as love, friendship, loyalty, and personal commitments also contribute significantly to judgments about integrity.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that integrity is a multidimensional concept encompassing self-integration, consistency between values and actions, commitment to one's moral identity, the courage to stand for what is right, dedication to the common good, and the pursuit of moral purpose. A person of integrity demonstrates consistency between words and actions, remains faithful to sound moral principles, and acts in ways that promote both personal authenticity and the well-being of the wider community. Ultimately, integrity is not simply about maintaining consistency; it is about ensuring that one's consistency is grounded in ethical principles and reflected in responsible moral action.

Ethical relationship

Martin Buber described two types of relationships: **I–It** and **I–Thou (I–You)**, which distinguish between ethical and unethical relationships by distinguishing between insincerity and genuine human connection (Scott et al., 2009). In an **I–It** relationship, one person becomes the subject while the other is treated as an object for personal gain or manipulation (Buber, 1958). Such relationships create power imbalances, exploit others for self-interest (Ni, 2014), and limit the

other person's independence and freedom (Moss, 2015). According to Moss (2015), this contradicts the essence of a true relationship, which is built on mutual connection rather than distance.

In contrast, an **I–Thou (I–You)** relationship recognizes both individuals as equal subjects who respect, accept, and support one another (Buber, 1947). Rather than serving one person's interests, both individuals benefit and grow together. Twardowski (2015) identifies the characteristics of genuine relationships: both partners take responsibility for their own happiness, avoid controlling or changing one another, maintain a balanced power dynamic, communicate honestly and openly, and prioritize the relationship through mutual consideration and cooperation.

Based on Buber's framework, an ethical relationship is one among equal persons characterized by honesty, fairness, justice, respect, unconditional acceptance, and freedom from manipulation. These principles apply not only to personal relationships but also to professional settings, including employer–employee relationships (Tweed et al., 2023; Brough & Simmons, 2023).

Honesty

Honesty is a moral virtue, although its meaning may vary across individuals. In this context, honesty refers to a commitment to truth and reality. Biddle (2013) defines honesty as refusing to fake reality or pretend that facts are different from what they are. Similarly, Hsieh (2002) describes honesty as the virtue of refusing to falsify or distort facts, whether through lies, deception, or withholding important information. As a moral virtue, honesty reflects integrity, truthfulness, straightforwardness, and the absence of cheating or lying, contributing to the development of strong moral character.

Because honesty is part of moral character, it is also a personal disposition. Borghini (2017) explains that an honest person willingly reveals relevant truths without pretense. This disposition is cultivated over time until honesty becomes a stable habit and an integral part of one's character rather than a behavior imposed by external rules.

Honesty is closely linked to authenticity. As David Hume, cited by Borghini (2017), argued, honesty is inseparable from one's identity and sense of self. It is an intrinsic value that guides actions and reflects a deeply rooted mindset. Likewise, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016) describes virtue as a well-established character trait that shapes a person's reasons for action. Borghini (2017) further emphasizes that self-honesty is essential to authenticity because only those who honestly confront themselves can live in ways that are true to who they are.

Kierkegaard, as cited by Evans and Robert (2013), extended this view by arguing that honesty involves not only avoiding deception of others but also resisting self-deception. He maintained that genuine honesty is demonstrated when a person's life reflects what they profess, making honesty essential for authentic living and personal growth.

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction refers to how employees feel about their work and the extent to which they like or dislike their jobs. It results from the fulfillment of both physical and psychological needs, as reflected in theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's motivation theory. While physical needs are relatively easy to identify, psychological needs vary among individuals, making job satisfaction a complex and multifaceted concept. It encompasses not only favorable working conditions but also meaningful, significant, and challenging work. However, factors beyond the job itself also influence satisfaction, making it difficult for a single definition to capture all contributors to employee motivation and effectiveness (Schleicher et al., 2004).

Research by Schleicher et al. (2004) found that employees with similar job satisfaction ratings may demonstrate different levels of job performance because individuals value different aspects of their work. As a result, despite

extensive research, a definitive model explaining the relationship between job satisfaction and performance remains elusive.

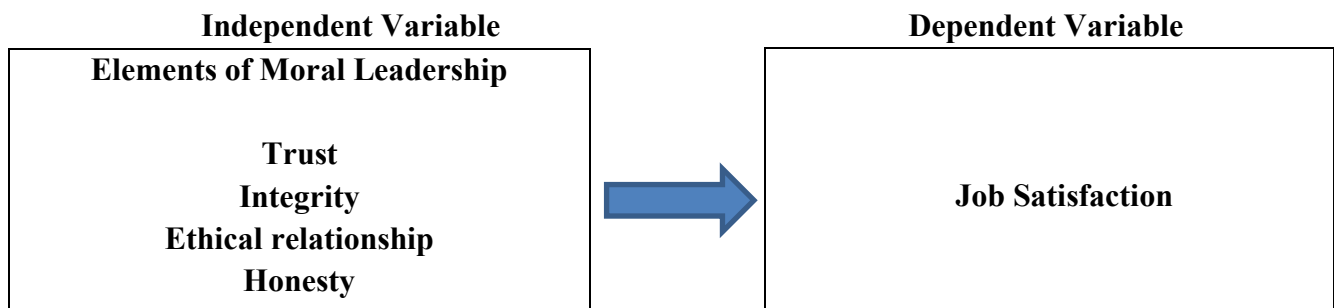
Scheid (2010) emphasized that, although job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity are complex, managers should actively address them by focusing on how employees are treated and the nature of their work. Regular employee feedback and satisfaction surveys can help identify sources of dissatisfaction and improve motivation.

Both tangible and intangible factors contribute to job satisfaction. While benefits influence satisfaction, leadership behavior and interpersonal treatment also play significant roles. Voon (2010) argued that effective leadership styles enhance employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity. Similarly, Xiao (2008) found that employees' work values are closely related to job satisfaction, which in turn strengthens organizational commitment.

Integrity has also been linked to job satisfaction. Narasimhan and Lawrence (2011) found that employees who perceive consistency between their leaders' words and actions—referred to as behavioral integrity (BI)—experience more positive workplace outcomes. However, they noted that the mechanisms through which behavioral integrity influences these outcomes remain insufficiently understood.

Conceptual framework

The study examines how moral leadership affects employees' job satisfaction, as shown in the figure below. This study identifies four elements of moral leadership: integrity, honesty, trust, and an ethical relationship with employees. The study attempts to measure each element or dimension and how each affects job satisfaction.



Abun (2026)

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Statement of the problems

The study aimed to determine the level of moral leadership among middle- and lower-level managers and its effect on employees' job satisfaction. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of moral leadership of middle- and lower-level managers of Divine Word Colleges in Region I, Philippines, as perceived by the employees in terms of:
 - a. trust
 - b. integrity
 - c. ethical relationship
 - d. honesty
2. What is the job satisfaction of employees of Divine Word Colleges in Region I?
3. Is there a relationship between moral leadership factors and job satisfaction of employees?

Hypothesis of the study

There is a relationship between the moral leadership of middle- and lower-level managers and employees' job satisfaction.

Scope and delimitation of the study

The study covered the Divine Word Colleges in Region I, located in the Northern part of the Philippines. It was limited to the study of moral leadership across four dimensions in the instruments: integrity, trust, ethical relationship, and honesty, as well as employees' job satisfaction. It covered the lower-level managers of the Divine Word Colleges and their employees who are currently working or employed by the colleges.

Methodology

Research design

Since the study was quantitative, it employed a descriptive assessment and a correlational research design to examine the level of moral leadership among middle- and lower-level managers. Descriptive research assesses, determines, and reports the way things are. It does not attempt to go beyond the facts. It involves recording, describing, analyzing, and interpreting existing conditions and phenomena. In other words, it describes the data collected from the research sample, describing “what is” about the data.

Locale of the study

The study was conducted at the Divine Word Colleges in Region I, namely Divine Word College of Bangued, Divine Word College of Vigan, and Divine Word College of Laoag. These three colleges are within Region I.

Population

The study population comprised middle- and lower-level managers and employees of three colleges. 250 employees were selected as respondents in the study. Since the study population was small, a total enumeration was used, including all employees of the three colleges as respondents. Total enumeration was used at the researcher's discretion to meet the study's objective.

Data gathering instruments

The study utilized questionnaires. The researcher constructed the questionnaires and had them assessed for content validity by an expert. They were distributed to employees of three Divine Word Colleges in Region I. The questionnaires consisted of five parts. The first part consists of demographic profiles of employees at the three Divine Word Colleges. The second part is the moral leadership questionnaire. The third part is the employees' job satisfaction questionnaire.

Data gathering procedures

In the process of data gathering, the researcher sent letters to the Presidents of the three colleges in Region I, Philippines, requesting permission to distribute his questionnaires at their colleges. The researcher personally met the Presidents and employees and requested them to answer the questionnaires.

The retrieval of questionnaires was arranged by the President's representative and the researcher, with assistance from employees and faculty of the three colleges.

Ethical consideration

The study ensured ethical compliance in gathering data. The respondents were chosen voluntarily, and informed consent was obtained.

Statistical treatment of data

To be consistent with the study's descriptive research design, the weighted mean and Pearson r were used to analyze the data.

The weighted mean was used to assess the moral leadership level of middle- and lower-level managers in terms of trust, integrity, ethical relationship, and honesty. To measure the relationships between variables, **Pearson's r** was used. The following ranges of values with their descriptive interpretation were used:

Scale	Range of Weighted means	Descriptive interpretation
5	4.21-5.00	Strongly agree/ Very high
4	3.41-4.20	Agree/ High
3	2.61-3.40	Somewhat agree/ Moderate
2	1.81-2.60	Disagree/Low
1	1.00-1.80	Strongly disagree/Very low

Data presentation and analysis

The following are the study's findings. The findings are presented in accordance with the study's statement of the problem.

1. ***What is the moral leadership of lower-level managers of Divine Word Colleges in Region I, Philippines, in terms of:***

a. **Integrity**

Table 1: Moral leadership of middle-lower-level managers in terms of Integrity

No.	Questions	$\bar{X}$
1	Supervisors demonstrate the school's values in their daily activities and behaviors	3.92
2	The supervisors consistently implement the school's policies as stated in the manual, not only for employees but also for themselves.	3.90
3	The supervisors have not been damaged by any accusation of corruption or other ethical issues	4.00
4	The supervisors make decisions purely for the interest of the school as a whole, not for personal interest.	3.89
5	The supervisors are firm in their decisions when they believe it is the right thing to do	3.87
6	The supervisors walk the talk	3.78
7	The supervisors play a role model to their employees when it comes to moral conduct and commitment to duties and responsibilities	3.91
8	The supervisors have always been objective and honest when they are dealing with their employees	3.90
9	The supervisors have not been living double-standard lives.	4.11
10	The supervisors have integrated their moral values into their work and how they deal with employees.	3.92
	Composite Mean	3.92

Abun (2026).

Legend:

4.21-5.00	Strongly agree/ Very high
3.41-4.20	Agree/ High
2.61-3.40	Somewhat agree/ Moderate

1.81-2.60	Disagree/Low
1.00-1.80	Strongly disagree/Very low

As shown in the table, the overall moral integrity of middle- and lower-level managers at the Divine Word Colleges in Region I, Philippines, received a mean rating of 3.92, interpreted as "agree/high." All indicators under this variable were likewise rated high. This suggests that employees perceive their managers as trustworthy and transparent, fostering a workplace built on mutual trust that strengthens employee relationships, retention, and organizational loyalty (Malik et al., 2022; Kaiser & Hogan, 2010; Rai & Koodamara, 2024). The findings also indicate consistency between managers' words and actions, encouraging employees to model the same ethical standards and moral values in their own work (Way et al., 2016).

b. Trust

Table 2: Moral leadership of middle-lower-level managers in terms of trust

No	Questions	$\bar{X}$
1	The supervisors and employees trust each other through an open line of communication	3.78
2	The supervisors stand by their decision, which is in the interest of the organization, even if it is unpopular	3.86
3	The supervisors do not give in to pressure even if they know that it will risk their position	3.71
4	Most supervisors respond in kind when the employees refer problems to them	3.76
5	Most supervisors do not reveal employees' personal secrets to others.	3.83
6	Most supervisors are trusted because a corruption allegation has never tainted them	3.92
7	The supervisors are dependable in defending employees' rights.	3.87
8	Most supervisors are dependable.	3.82
9	The supervisors stick to what is right and good, even if it means that they would be abandoned	3.81
10	The supervisors stand up for what they believe in and defend it, even if it means they will be removed.	3.76
	Composite Mean	3.81

Abun (2026).

The data show that the overall mean rating for the moral leadership of middle- and lower-level managers in terms of trust is 3.81, interpreted as "agree/high." All individual indicators were likewise rated high. This suggests that employees perceive their leaders as honest, consistent, and trustworthy, fostering positive workplace dynamics (Mohi Ud Din & Zhang, 2023; Herttalampi et al., 2021; Guo, 2022). High trust also fosters a psychologically safe environment in which employees can express ideas and opinions without fear of retaliation (Liu et al., 2025; Iqbal et al., 2020; Ardel & Sharma, 2021). Furthermore, it is associated with reduced counterproductive behaviors, such as withholding information and violating workplace rules, and with strengthened organizational commitment (Rai & Koodamara, 2024).

c. Ethical relationship

Table 3: Moral leadership of middle-lower managers in terms of ethical relationship

No	Questions	$\bar{X}$
1	Supervisors always treat their employees ethically and respectfully	3.93
2	Supervisors talk to their employees/subordinates about how to do their job in an ethical manner	3.90
3	Supervisors always treat their employees as persons with dignity	3.94
4	Supervisors relate themselves to the employees in a respectful manner	3.90
5	Supervisors have not been using abusive language to their employees	4.16

6	Supervisors always call their employees privately when they find something wrong with them	3.90
7	Supervisors never insult or scold their employees in front of other employees.	3.82
8	Supervisors treat their employees as equal partners	3.84
9	Supervisors do not have favoritism	3.73
10	Supervisors treat everyone the same	3.89
	Composite Mean	3.90

Abun (2026).

Based on the computed mean, the overall rating for the moral leadership of middle- and lower-level managers in terms of ethical relationships is 3.90, interpreted as "agree/high." All indicators were rated high, with mean scores ranging from 3.73 to 4.16. This suggests that employees perceive their leaders as fair, trustworthy, and genuinely concerned for their well-being, fostering mutual respect, loyalty, and strong interpersonal relationships. Employees feel safe expressing ideas and concerns without fear of retaliation, reflecting confidence in their managers' integrity and leadership (Assefa et al., 2024; Eberlin & Tatum, 2008; Malik et al., 2022). Moreover, managers are viewed as ethical role models who minimize bias, uphold ethical principles, and promote organizational justice (Meng & Guo, 2025; Moliner et al., 2020).

d. Honesty

Table 4: Moral leadership of middle-lower level managers in terms of honesty

No	Questions	$\bar{X}$
1	Most supervisors are straightforward.	3.80
2	Supervisors are transparent with employees about issues that affect their lives.	3.67
3	Supervisors always rely on facts or evidence when they accuse employees of something wrong	3.89
4	Supervisors always act on certain issues when they believe it is the right thing to do	3.83
5	Supervisors have never lied to their employees	3.67
6	Supervisors always implement what they have promised to their employees	3.84
7	Supervisors do not alter the facts even if it means that their position would be at risk	3.78
8	Supervisors are committed to doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong	3.77
9	Supervisors never tell employees to do things that they themselves never do.	3.72
10	Supervisors are dependable at all times	3.70
	Composite Mean	3.77

Abun (2026).

Looking at the table, the overall mean rating for moral leadership in terms of honesty is 3.77, interpreted as "agree/high." All individual indicators were likewise rated high. This suggests that employees perceive their leaders as transparent, principled, and ethical. Such perceptions foster trust and psychological safety, as employees believe their managers act consistently and in the team's best interest. In turn, this promotes organizational loyalty, greater job satisfaction, and a stronger willingness to contribute during challenging situations. Honest leaders also serve as moral role models, encouraging employees to adopt ethical behaviors that align with the organization's values and goals (Mohi Ud Din & Zhang, 2023; Chikeleze, 2025; Choi, 2025; Kaptein, 2019).

2. What is the job satisfaction of employees of Divine Word Colleges in Region I, Philippines?

Table 6: Job satisfaction of employees

No	Questions	$\bar{X}$
1	I am generally satisfied with my current job	3.97
2	In general, I like the work I do	4.10

3	All in all, I like the working environment of the school	3.90
4	I am happy because my supervisors have good human relations	3.83
5	I am happy because the communication channel is open	3.78
6	I am satisfied that all employees are cooperating when it comes to the common activity	3.73
7	I am happy because my work and my accomplishments are recognized	3.73
8	I am happy because I am allowed to set goals and objectives when performing a task given to me	4.01
9	I am satisfied because my job is important to me	4.03
10	I am satisfied because I have learned a lot in my job	4.09
11	I am satisfied because I have enough freedom and authority to carry out my task	4.04
12	I am satisfied because I have security of tenure here in this school	3.95
13	I am satisfied because of the spirit of community in this school	3.92
14	I am satisfied because employees in this school are treated well and respected	3.98
15	I am satisfied because the policies are consistently implemented	3.91
	Composite Mean	3.93

Abun (2026).

As indicated in the table, the overall mean job satisfaction rating among employees is 3.93, interpreted as "agree/high." All individual indicators were likewise rated high. This suggests that employees have a positive attitude toward their work, work environment, and compensation, indicating that their needs and workplace expectations are being met (Fernandez-Macias & de Bustillo Llorente, 2023). High job satisfaction also reflects that employees feel their skills are well utilized, they are fairly compensated, and they are treated well by the organization. As a result, they tend to be more engaged, motivated, and enthusiastic in their work (Sypniewska et al., 2023), leading to lower turnover and absenteeism while enhancing overall organizational productivity (Wartenberg et al., 2023; Weir, 2013).

3. Is there a relationship between the moral leadership of middle-level and lower-level managers and employees' job satisfaction?

Table 7: The relationship between moral leadership and job satisfaction

		JOB SATISFACTION	
Integrity	Pearson Correlation	.399**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N		230
Trust	Pearson Correlation	.390**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N		230
Ethical relationship	Pearson Correlation	.420**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N		230
Honesty	Pearson Correlation	.460**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N		230

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is a significant relationship between moral leadership and job satisfaction. All 4 dimensions of Moral Leadership are positively and significantly related to Job Satisfaction. The correlations are significant at the 0.01 level ($p = .000$), $N = 230$. This result suggests that Moral leadership matters for satisfaction. Employees are more satisfied when leaders are honest, ethical, trustworthy, and have integrity. This is consistent across all 4 dimensions. Honesty is the biggest driver; $r = .460$ is the highest. Of all moral behaviors, employees value "truthfulness, no deception" most.

If leaders are honest even in hard situations, satisfaction rises the most. All dimensions are close in strength $\rightarrow r = .390$ to $.460$. No single dimension dominates. It means employees do not want “just honesty” without trust, or “just integrity” without ethical relationships. They want the whole package.

In summary, Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant, moderate positive relationships between all dimensions of moral leadership and job satisfaction at the 0.01 level ($N = 230$). Honesty showed the strongest correlation, $r = .460$, $p < .001$, followed by ethical relationship, $r = .420$, $p < .001$, integrity, $r = .399$, $p < .001$, and trust, $r = .390$, $p < .001$. This indicates that as leaders demonstrate higher levels of honesty, ethical relationships, integrity, and trust, employees report higher job satisfaction.”

Discussion

The study examined the relationship between moral leadership and job satisfaction. The findings showed that middle- and lower-level managers received high ratings across the four dimensions of moral leadership, while employees also reported high job satisfaction. Pearson's r analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between moral leadership and job satisfaction, indicating that employees who perceive their leaders as honest, fair, ethical, and selfless experience greater happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction at work (Kaffashpoor & Sadegian, 2020; Bao & Li, 2019; Guo, 2020). Moral leadership promotes trust and psychological safety, allowing employees to feel valued and respected (Zhang et al., 2024; Ko et al., 2017), reduces workplace stress and conflict through fairness (Farmanesh et al., 2023; Sorengaard & Langvik, 2022), and strengthens organizational commitment by encouraging employees to align their values with organizational goals (Sypniewska et al., 2023; Bao & Li, 2019). As a result, ethical leaders create positive work environments that enhance employee retention and performance (Arıcıoğlu & Timoroglu, 2025; Montuori et al., 2022).

Among the four dimensions, honesty emerged as the strongest predictor of job satisfaction, highlighting the importance of transparent and consistent leadership. Honest leaders reduce workplace uncertainty through clear communication (Karim & Nadeem, 2019; Murphy, 2020), demonstrate respect by openly sharing information, even when difficult (Kim, 2025), reinforce integrity by aligning words with actions (Guo, 2022), and foster social exchange characterized by trust, loyalty, engagement, and productivity (Muhannaa, 2023; Baquero, 2023).

Theoretical Contributions

The findings support the view that leader virtues—honesty, integrity, trust, and ethical relationships—serve as important psychological resources that satisfy employees' intrinsic needs and strengthen organizational commitment (Guo, 2022; Wang & Li, 2019). The results also reinforce Social Exchange Theory, which explains that employees reciprocate ethical treatment with greater engagement and job satisfaction (Al Dilby & Farmanesh, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025), and Value Congruence Theory, which suggests that moral leadership aligns personal and organizational values, enhancing employees' sense of belonging and workplace satisfaction (Bao & Li, 2019; Guo, 2022).

Practical Contributions

The significant positive relationship between moral leadership and job satisfaction suggests that organizations can improve employee well-being, productivity, retention, and collaboration through ethical leadership, not solely through financial incentives (Kaffashpoor & Sadegian, 2020; Mayende et al., 2025). Accordingly, colleges should strengthen ethical leadership by consistently enforcing sanctions for unethical conduct and regularly orienting managers and employees on the institution's code of conduct.

Conclusion

The study concludes that middle- and lower-level managers at the Divine Word Colleges in Region I, Philippines, demonstrate a high level of moral leadership in integrity, trust, ethical relationships, and honesty, although there remains room for improvement. The Pearson r correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between moral

leadership and employees' job satisfaction, confirming that higher levels of moral leadership are associated with greater job satisfaction. Therefore, the study's hypothesis is accepted.

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Ethical statement: The study ensures compliance with ethical standards. Before it was carried out, an approval letter from the school administrators and informed consent were obtained from the administrators and respondents. The study did not involve human or animal subjects, and the confidentiality of information is secured.

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