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Ubuntu and Ethical Leadership in Fragile States: Towards A Hybrid Framework for Organisational Governance

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Abstract: **Objective:** This article develops a conceptual framework that integrates Ubuntu with Western ethical traditions, compliance-based accountability, and organisational resilience theory. **Prior Work:** Fragile states pose profound ethical dilemmas for leaders who must reconcile national interests, humanitarian obligations, and institutional mandates amid volatility and weak governance. Existing ethical leadership models, largely rooted in Western duty-based traditions, presuppose institutional stability and often fail to capture the relational realities of fragile contexts. By contrast, African communitarian ethics, particularly Ubuntu, foreground human dignity, relational accountability, and communal responsibility, yet lack operational clarity for institutional governance. **Approach:** Through a critical synthesis of literature on ethical leadership, fragile states, and defence diplomacy, the framework positions ethical leadership as both principled and pragmatic. **Results:** It advances theory by bridging traditions and extending accountability beyond binary compliance-versus-values approaches, while reframing resilience as ethically grounded adaptation. **Value:** The article contributes to scholarship by offering a culturally resonant yet globally relevant conceptual model of ethical leadership. Practically, it provides guidance for leaders in fragile states and volatile organisational environments, positioning ethical leadership not only as a moral imperative but also as a strategic resource for legitimacy and resilience.

Keywords: ethical leadership; fragile states; accountability; resilience; governance

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1. Introduction

Leadership in fragile states is marked by dilemmas that test accountability, legitimacy, and resilience. In contexts where institutions are weak, corruption is pervasive, and humanitarian crises are persistent, leaders must navigate decisions that balance national imperatives with communal expectations. Defence diplomacy, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as South Sudan, exemplifies these challenges. Defence Attachés and organisational leaders alike are required to act as both strategic representatives and moral agents, reconciling institutional mandates with ethical obligations under conditions of uncertainty.

Existing scholarship on ethical leadership has emphasised integrity, transparency, and moral courage, yet much of this literature presupposes stable institutional environments. Similarly, studies of defence diplomacy have focused on strategic functions such as alliance-building and soft power projection, while neglecting its ethical dimensions. This dual gap underscores the need for a framework that integrates ethical traditions with fragile-state practice, and that is transferable to organisational leadership in volatile business contexts.

Ubuntu, as an African communitarian ethic, offers a distinctive lens for addressing these dilemmas. By foregrounding relational accountability and human dignity, Ubuntu challenges the individualistic assumptions embedded in Western models (Andanda & Düwell, 2024; Chipango & To, 2024; Gwagwa et al., 2022; Mabele et al., 2022; Marovah & Mutanga, 2024; Mnqayi et al., 2025; Ngondo & Klyueva, 2022; Bhuda, & Marumo, 2022; Uppathampracha & Liu, 2022). However, while culturally resonant, Ubuntu lacks operational clarity for institutional governance and organisational accountability. Bridging Ubuntu with Western duty-based traditions, compliance mechanisms, and resilience theory provides an opportunity to conceptualise a hybrid ethical leadership framework that is both principled and pragmatic.

This article, therefore, develops a conceptual framework for ethical leadership in fragile states, grounded in Ubuntu and integrated with organisational ethics and resilience theory. By synthesising literature across traditions and contexts, the study contributes theoretical originality and practical guidance. It positions ethical leadership not only as a normative ideal but also as a strategic resource for sustaining legitimacy and resilience in complex environments.

2. Literature Overview

Fragile states present leadership dilemmas that are insufficiently addressed in existing scholarship. Much of the ethical leadership literature presupposes stable institutions, predictable governance systems, and enforceable accountability mechanisms conditions rarely present in fragile contexts such as South Sudan. Defence diplomacy literature similarly prioritises strategic functions while overlooking the ethical tensions leaders face when balancing national interests, humanitarian obligations, and institutional mandates. This gap underscores the need for a more integrated ethical lens that addresses the relational, institutional, and adaptive dimensions of leadership in volatile environments.

The conceptual framework proposed in this article integrates diverse traditions and perspectives to address the ethical leadership dilemmas faced in fragile states and volatile organisational environments. It is built on four interrelated pillars: Ubuntu ethics, Western duty-based traditions, accountability mechanisms, and resilience strategies. Together, these elements form a hybrid ethical leadership framework that is both principled and pragmatic.

Ubuntu, as an African communitarian ethic, foregrounds relational accountability, human dignity, and communal responsibility. It situates leadership within networks of interdependence, as indicated by Chigangaidze and Chinyenze (2022) emphasising that “a person is a person through other persons.” In fragile contexts where institutions are weak, Ubuntu provides cultural resonance and legitimacy by prioritising solidarity and moral responsibility. However, Ubuntu alone lacks operational clarity for institutional governance, necessitating integration with other traditions.

Ubuntu’s philosophical foundations lie in indigenous African governance traditions that emphasise consensus-building, restorative justice, and communal well-being (Chipango & To, 2024; Marovah & Mutanga, 2024; Ojem & Marumo, 2026; Okeke, 2025; Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). Its core expression “a person is a person through other persons” captures a relational worldview in which leadership is understood as a moral responsibility to uphold dignity and social harmony. In fragile-state environments, where formal institutions may be weak or distrusted, Ubuntu, as suggested by Samuel (2023), provides cultural legitimacy by aligning leadership practice with community expectations of fairness, empathy, and shared responsibility. However, Ubuntu’s relational orientation requires integration with

duty-based ethics and accountability mechanisms to ensure operational clarity within hierarchical and bureaucratic structures such as defence organisations.

Western ethical traditions, particularly Kantian duty ethics and utilitarian reasoning, as suggested by White (2023), emphasise universal obligations, compliance, and transparency. These traditions provide structure and measurability, offering leaders clear codes of conduct and accountability benchmarks. Yet they presuppose institutional stability and the rule of law, conditions often absent in fragile states. Their integration with Ubuntu ensures that ethical leadership is both principled and culturally grounded.

Accountability in fragile contexts requires a dual approach. Compliance-based accountability offers clarity and measurable indicators, while values-driven accountability sustains legitimacy through relational trust and moral responsibility. Diplomatic and organisational leaders must navigate both dimensions, combining formal codes of conduct with relational practices that resonate with communities. The framework, therefore, positions accountability as multidimensional, balancing institutional integrity with humanised leadership.

Resilience is reframed not merely as survival or adaptation, but as ethically grounded resilience (Grözinger et al., 2023; Henig & Knight, 2023; Maalouf et al., 2025; McKeown et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2024; Shore et al., 2024; Tunçalp, 2025). Leaders in fragile states must adapt to uncertainty while upholding ethical commitments. Resilience strategies include building informal alliances, exercising discretion in resource allocation, and maintaining moral courage under strain. By embedding resilience within ethical leadership, the framework ensures that adaptation is not divorced from legitimacy and moral responsibility.

Figure 1 below depicts the four foundational pillars, namely, Ubuntu, Western ethics, accountability, and resilience, that converge to shape ethical leadership in fragile and volatile environments. Each pillar contributes a distinct dimension: Ubuntu offers relational accountability rooted in communal values; Western ethics provide structure through duty, compliance, and transparency; accountability balances formal compliance with values-driven legitimacy; and resilience reflects ethically grounded adaptation under uncertainty.

At the centre of the framework is Ethical Leadership in Fragile States, representing the synthesis of these traditions. The arrows connecting each pillar to the centre highlight their interdependence and the need for integrated leadership approaches. This framework is designed to guide policymakers, defence practitioners, and

organisational leaders in navigating complex ethical dilemmas with both cultural sensitivity and strategic clarity.



Figure 1. Hybrid Ethical Leadership Framework For Fragile States

Source: Develop for a researcher

3. Discussion

The hybrid ethical leadership framework developed in this article contributes to ongoing debates in business ethics by demonstrating how culturally grounded traditions can be integrated with universal principles to address leadership dilemmas in fragile states and volatile organisational environments. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on relational accountability and human dignity, challenges the individualistic assumptions embedded in much of Western leadership theory. By synthesising Ubuntu with duty-based ethics, compliance mechanisms, and resilience strategies,

the framework advances a more holistic understanding of ethical leadership that is both context-sensitive and globally relevant.

For business practice, the framework underscores the importance of relational legitimacy alongside compliance-based accountability (Chindondondo & Reddy, 2025; Lev et al., 2022; Prencipe, 2025; Tunçalp, 2025). In volatile markets and crisis-prone industries, leaders must balance measurable indicators of governance with values-driven responsibility that sustains stakeholder trust. The Ubuntu dimension highlights the necessity of community-oriented decision-making, which can strengthen corporate social responsibility initiatives and stakeholder engagement. Resilience, reframed as ethically grounded adaptation, positions ethical leadership as a strategic resource for navigating uncertainty, enabling organisations to sustain legitimacy while reconfiguring strategies in response to disruption.

The framework extends ethical leadership theory by bridging Western duty-based traditions with African communitarian ethics. This synthesis enriches normative debates in business ethics by demonstrating that ethical leadership cannot be reduced to compliance or individual moral courage alone. Instead, it requires a multidimensional approach that integrates universal obligations with relational accountability. By reframing resilience as ethically grounded, the framework also advances ethical theory beyond survivalist notions, situating adaptation within a moral horizon that prioritises dignity and legitimacy.

At the societal level, the framework offers guidance for leaders in fragile states and beyond, where legitimacy is often contested, and institutions are weak. By positioning ethical leadership as both a moral imperative and a strategic resource, the model provides a pathway for rebuilding trust in governance and organisational systems. For policymakers and practitioners, the framework highlights the need to embed ethical considerations into resilience strategies, ensuring that adaptation to crises does not compromise accountability or human dignity. In this way, the article contributes to broader debates about the role of leadership in sustaining social cohesion and legitimacy in times of instability.

4. Conclusion

This article has proposed a hybrid ethical leadership framework that integrates Ubuntu, Western duty-based traditions, accountability, and resilience to address the dilemmas of leadership in fragile states. By synthesising these traditions, the

framework positions ethical leadership as both principled and pragmatic, capable of sustaining legitimacy under conditions of volatility and weak governance. The contribution is twofold: theoretically, it extends ethical leadership scholarship by bridging communitarian and universalist traditions; practically, it offers guidance for policymakers, defence practitioners, and organisational leaders seeking to balance compliance with relational legitimacy. Importantly, the framework reframes resilience as ethically grounded adaptation, ensuring that survival strategies remain tethered to moral responsibility and human dignity. Future research should empirically test the framework in diverse fragile-state contexts and explore its applicability to corporate governance and crisis management in volatile industries. Comparative studies across regions and sectors could further refine the model, while leadership development programmes may operationalise its principles for training and practice. By advancing both theory and application, this article underscores the centrality of ethical leadership in sustaining trust, legitimacy, and resilience in an increasingly uncertain world.

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