

# Ethical Leadership in Transition: A Generational Divide in a Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

There is limited research on understanding the generational differences in leadership perspectives. These differences lead to misunderstandings between leaders and stakeholders within business contexts, especially regarding ethics in leadership. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the post-Soviet region is experiencing a transition in socially preferred leadership behaviors. Through inductive methods of analysis, this study in post-Soviet Kazakhstan reveals how an individual's upbringing and exposure to different ideologies shaped their personal ethical framework, which then informs their leadership behaviors. The findings indicate older leaders in Kazakhstan often exhibit consequentialist ethics through autocratic or transactional leadership behaviors that were favored during the Soviet era. Conversely, younger leaders generally demonstrate a deontological ethical framework embodying democratic or transformational leadership behaviors. Drawing on habitus and social learning theories, the discussion centers on how generational differences in ethical leadership perspectives are reflective of a person's respective era of upbringing. This study contributes to the understanding of ethical leadership by addressing the cultural and historical influences on generational differences, a perspective often overlooked in Western-centric research. Implications for business leaders, educators, and policymakers are discussed. Future research, including the need for longitudinal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and investigations into emerging perspectives across multiple contexts, are offered.

## Keywords

ethical leadership, central Asia, cultural transformation, qualitative, generational differences

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## Introduction

Ethical leadership has garnered significant attention in recent research, particularly in exploring its various outcomes and the factors that moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and these outcomes (Banks et al., 2021). Among the various antecedents to leadership behaviors, generational diversity has emerged as a one such factor, influencing how leadership is conceptualized and practiced (Arsenault, 2004). However, the significance of generational differences in leadership ethics, particularly in understudied and transitioning regions, such as post-Soviet Central Asia, has received limited scholarly attention.

In the past 35 years, Central Asia has undergone profound cultural shifts, transitioning from Soviet control to independent nation-states. This period of independence has

been marked by efforts to reconcile and integrate traditional cultural values with modern global influences. These changes have created a generational divide within the workforce, with the older generation, shaped by Soviet ideologies, contrasting sharply with the younger generation, influenced by post-independence globalization and democratization. This divide is particularly evident in Kazakhstan, where younger leaders are beginning to redefine leadership practices, introducing ethical frameworks that

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challenge those rooted in Soviet-era norms. However, little is known about how these generational differences manifest in ethical leadership or how they affect organizational dynamics in a region characterized by rapid change and cultural hybridity.

Existing research on ethical leadership has mainly concentrated on Western contexts, often assuming a universal understanding of ethical principles (Brown et al., 2005; Den Hartog, 2015). However, ethical leadership is influenced by cultural factors, shaped by individual values, beliefs, and socio-historical contexts (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Prilleltensky, 2000). This study aims at a significant gap in the literature by examining ethical leadership through the lens of generational differences in Kazakhstan, a unique setting that blends Soviet legacy, Islamic traditions, and global influences. In doing so, it questions the notion of a single, universal model of ethical leadership and underscores the importance of cultural diversity in this field of research.

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to the scholarship on leadership ethics by investigating how historical, cultural, and generational factors shape perceptions of ethical leadership. It introduces the idea of an ethical leadership bifurcation, which illustrates the existence of at least two distinct ethical frameworks operating simultaneously—one based on Soviet-era pragmatism, and another influenced by post-independence ideals of fairness and transparency. The findings of this study offer practical insights for leaders managing multi-generational teams and contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership ethics in transitional societies.

The primary research question guiding this study is as follows: How do Kazakhstanis from two different generations describe ethical leadership in Kazakhstani business organizations? To explore this, the study is framed by two sub-questions: (1) How do Kazakhstanis born and raised during the Soviet Union era describe ethical leadership? (2) How do Kazakhstanis born and raised in an independent Kazakhstan describe ethical leadership? Using an inductive, qualitative approach, this study allows for rich, nuanced descriptions of ethical leadership across generations, offering new perspectives on leadership in Kazakhstan.

## Review of the Literature

### *Kazakhstani People and Culture*

Kazakhstan, the ninth largest country in the world and a former Soviet Socialist Republic, represents a unique cultural and historical context that is relatively unfamiliar to much of the Western world. Before the Soviet era, which began in 1917, Kazakhstan was characterized by a predominantly nomadic lifestyle. Kazakh clans relied on the land and livestock for their livelihood, dwelling in portable yurts and migrating seasonally (Levi, 2007). This traditional way of life was profoundly altered during the Soviet period

(1917–1991), when Kazakhstan underwent significant cultural transformation as a result of Russian colonization. The establishment of permanent settlements, educational institutions, and the imposition of the Russian language led to a substantial erosion of traditional Kazakh culture (Michaels, 2007).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a turning point in Kazakhstan's history, bringing about newfound independence and a revival of cultural identity alongside rapid economic development (Sahadeo & Zanca, 2007). Today, Kazakhstan's population of approximately 20 million people reflects a diverse cultural and religious landscape, with Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity being the most prominent religions. However, the transition to independence has not been without challenges. The economic disparity between affluent and impoverished segments of society has widened, reflecting the uneven distribution of the benefits of economic growth (Gang & Schmillen, 2017).

Despite these challenges, Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the most economically advanced nations among the Central Asian former Soviet republics. The government's ambitious "Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy" aims to elevate the country to the ranks of the world's top 30 most developed nations by the mid-21st century. This socio-economic and cultural backdrop is essential for understanding the context in which ethical leadership is conceptualized in Kazakhstan. The generational divide in leadership ethics, which this study explores, is deeply intertwined with these historical and cultural shifts. These cultural shifts contribute to the shaping of personal ethical frameworks.

### *Developing a Personal Ethical Framework*

The development of a personal ethical framework is a complex, lifelong process that begins in early childhood and is influenced by various social, cultural, and psychological factors. Kohlberg's (1971) theory of moral development is foundational in understanding this process. Kohlberg (1971) proposed six stages of moral development, starting with the Punishment-Obedience stage, where individuals learn to obey rules through fear of punishment. As individuals progress to the Individual Instrumentation and Exchange stage, they begin to understand concepts of fairness and reciprocity. The Interpersonal Conformity stage follows, where moral behavior is shaped by the desire to adhere to social norms and maintain relationships. Law and Order marks the fourth stage, in which individuals base their ethical judgments on societal laws and rules. In the fifth stage, Social Contract and Individual Rights, individuals recognize cultural differences in moral conduct and prioritize mutual respect and the greater good. Finally, in the Universal Ethical Principles stage, ethical decisions are guided by self-chosen principles that transcend specific laws or norms.

While Kohlberg's model offers valuable insights into the structured development of moral reasoning, it has been critiqued for its urban, Western-centric perspective (Crain, 2000) and its androcentric bias (Gilligan, 1977). Moreover, the model's rigidity in stage progression overlooks the situational and cultural variations that can influence moral judgments (Hetherington & Parke, 2003). Despite these critiques, Kohlberg's model underscores the learned and developed nature of moral frameworks, which are central to understanding ethical leadership.

Building on this foundation, Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus offers a more culturally nuanced perspective on how individuals develop their ethical frameworks. Habitus refers to the deeply ingrained dispositions, values, and behaviors that individuals acquire through their life experiences, particularly in their formative years (Rooney et al., 2021). These dispositions shape how individuals perceive the world and make decisions, including ethical decisions in leadership (Rooney et al., 2021).

Complementing Bourdieu's theory, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory is still relevant for understanding leadership today (Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022). This theory emphasizes the role of social interactions, observation, and modeling in the development of ethical norms. According to social learning theory, individuals learn ethical behaviors not only through direct instruction but also by observing the actions and consequences of others, particularly those they view as role models. This process of ethical learning is continuous and is shaped by the social and cultural environments in which individuals are immersed.

For the purposes of this study, the ethical frameworks of Kazakhstani leaders are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors. The Soviet era, with its emphasis on collectivism and state control, likely influenced the habitus of older generations, fostering a set of ethical norms distinct from those of the younger, post-Soviet generation (Grachev & Bobina, 2006). Meanwhile, the rapid globalization and cultural exchange following Kazakhstan's independence have exposed younger leaders to diverse ethical ideologies, potentially reshaping their moral frameworks through processes described by social learning theory.

Understanding how these generational differences in ethical frameworks have developed provides critical context for analyzing the divergent conceptualizations of ethical leadership in Kazakhstan. This study leverages these theories to explore how the formative years of leaders in Kazakhstan influence their ethical decision-making and leadership styles, possibly shedding light on the broader implications for leadership in transitioning societies.

### *Generational Differences in Leadership Styles*

The study of leadership has undergone significant transformation, evolving from traditional theories that focused

primarily on the inherent traits of leaders to more contemporary approaches that emphasize situational factors and the dynamics of followership (Avolio et al., 2009). Early leadership theories, such as trait theories, posited that certain inherent characteristics distinguished effective leaders from others. However, as research progressed, behavioral theories emerged, shifting the focus to specific behaviors that could be associated with effective leadership (Northouse, 2016). This evolution in leadership thought culminated in the development of contingency theories, such as Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) situational leadership theory, which underscore the critical role of situational factors in determining the most effective leadership style.

Recent developments in leadership theory have further expanded our understanding by moving away from a strong figurehead leader to highlighting the importance of relational and transformational leadership styles (Rudolph et al., 2021). These approaches prioritize the development of healthy interpersonal relationships, the motivation of followers, and the inspiration of a shared vision (Groves & LaRocca, 2011). Additionally, the role of ethical leadership has gained prominence, with research emphasizing the importance of integrity, transparency, and ethical decision-making in fostering trust and enhancing organizational effectiveness (Brown et al., 2005).

Over time, the concept of ethical leadership has also evolved, with increasing recognition of the ways in which generational differences influence perceptions of ethics and leadership. As new generations enter the workforce, their distinct values and expectations shape how they conceptualize ethical leadership (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Research suggests that generational differences significantly impact individuals' perceptions of ethical leadership, with each generation bringing unique perspectives to the intersection of ethics and leadership (Goswami et al., 2021).

*Ethical Theories in Leadership: Consequentialism and Deontology.* In examining the differences in ethical leadership across generations, this study relies on two key ethical frameworks: consequentialism and deontology. These frameworks offer unique yet complementary viewpoints on how leaders assess the morality of their choices.

Consequentialism, also known as teleological ethics, judges the morality of actions based on their results or consequences (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2023). Within this framework, an action is considered ethical if it yields the greatest benefit or reduces harm for the largest number of people. Leaders who adopt a consequentialist perspective tend to focus on achieving goals, efficiency, or the welfare of others, sometimes rationalizing ethically questionable actions to attain favorable outcomes. For example, a business leader might prioritize profit maximization if it results in job creation or the sustainability of the organization. Consequentialism is not inherently linked to any specific political system; both democratic and authoritarian leaders can

utilize this reasoning. For instance, democratic leaders might enact broad social policies based on consequentialist principles, while authoritarian leaders could use them to justify decisions aimed at maintaining national stability or fostering economic growth.

On the other hand, deontology assesses the morality of actions based on adherence to universal principles, duties, or moral rules, irrespective of their outcomes (Alexander & Moore, 2024). This principle-based approach draws on intrinsic values such as fairness, justice, and respect for individuals. Leaders who follow deontological ethics emphasize ethical consistency and procedural integrity. For instance, a leader might ensure fairness in resource distribution despite the potential inefficiencies it may cause. Like consequentialism, deontological reasoning is not tied to any one political system; leaders in both democratic and authoritarian contexts can embrace these principles.

*Generational Implications for Leadership Ethics in Kazakhstan.* Consequentialism and deontology are particularly relevant in understanding the generational divergence in leadership within Kazakhstan. The older generation, whose formative years were shaped by the Soviet-era ideologies (Zhumashov, 2023), likely hold to leadership behaviors aligned with consequentialist ethics. Consequentialist leaders typically focus on outcomes—like organizational stability or efficiency—rather than the ethical processes involved, sometimes justifying their hierarchical and rigid leadership styles as necessary for achieving larger goals (Grachev & Bobina, 2006). This tendency reflects the Soviet-era focus on collective progress, often at the cost of individual autonomy and inclusivity (Murzaeva & Akçali, 2013).

In contrast, the younger generation, which has grown up in a post-independence context shaped by globalization and democratization, tend to display deontological ethics in their leadership (Narayanan, 2022). They place a higher value on fairness, transparency, and adherence to ethical principles. This generational shift is influenced by exposure to global leadership trends, participative approaches, and international education, such as MBA programs (Narayanan, 2022). Younger leaders are increasingly focused on ethical leadership that synthesizes organizational goals with moral integrity, seeing it as vital for building trust and promoting inclusivity within their teams (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021).

By incorporating consequentialism and deontology into the examination of generational differences, this study explores how ethical frameworks influence leadership behaviors in business organizations, moving beyond simplistic links to specific political systems or leadership styles. This understanding lays the groundwork for investigating the evolving nature of ethical leadership within Kazakhstan's distinct cultural and historical framework.

## Method

### *Research Paradigm and Approach*

To explore the intricate, culture-specific aspects of ethical leadership across different generations in Kazakhstan, this study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in a constructivist paradigm. A constructivist perspective posits that reality is subjective and socially constructed, making it particularly well-suited for research that seeks to uncover nuanced, context-dependent understandings (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Given the limited research on ethical leadership within non-Western contexts, particularly in post-Soviet regions, a qualitative approach was chosen to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the emic perspectives of Kazakhstani leaders. It is important to note that qualitative research often does not strive for generalizability; rather, it seeks to provide deep, contextually rich insights into specific phenomena, focusing on the uniqueness of individual experiences and settings (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This approach allows for the emergence of rich, thick descriptions and insights that are essential for understanding how ethical leadership might be conceptualized within this unique cultural context.

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through a purposeful and stratified sampling method, involving 24 participants from Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan (see Table A1 in Appendix). Purposeful sampling was employed to ensure that the study included participants who could provide diverse and relevant insights into the research questions, consistent with recommendations for qualitative research in culturally specific contexts (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were recruited through personal and professional networks, complemented by snowball sampling to access individuals who might otherwise have been difficult to reach (Creswell, 2014). Astana was chosen as the research site not only for its practicality and accessibility, as the researcher was based there, but also because it serves as a microcosm of broader trends in Kazakhstan. As the country's capital, Astana reflects both Soviet-era influences and contemporary globalization, making it an ideal context for this study (Charmaz, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, Sahadeo & Zanca, 2007).

The sampling strategy focused on capturing a balance of participants across different generational cohorts and organizational levels. Specifically, participants were selected based on whether they were raised during the Soviet Union era (i.e., born approximately pre-1985) or after Kazakhstan gained independence (i.e., born approximately post-1990). This generational focus was critical for examining how historical and cultural contexts influence ethical leadership perspectives. To reflect the socio-political distinctions

highlighted in prior research, the study defined the older generation as those born before 1985, whose formative years were shaped by Soviet ideologies, and the younger generation as those born after 1990, whose values were shaped by rapid globalization and Kazakhstan's independence (Bandura, 1977; Bourdieu, 1977). Participants were also stratified by organizational level, including nine executives, seven middle managers, and eight lower-level employees. This stratification ensured a diverse range of perspectives, from senior-level strategic decision-makers to participants who were directly influenced by senior-leadership practices (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

To narrow the sample, participants were recruited from for-profit business organizations. Eligible participants were native Kazakhstanis, employed by organizations based in Kazakhstan, and had held their current positions for at least 1 year. These criteria were designed to ensure that participants had sufficient experience and insights into the ethical leadership practices within their organizations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The chosen sample was intended to explore broader societal and organizational trends in Kazakhstan. The generational distinctions reflect the nation's transformation from a Soviet republic to an independent state, with older participants representing Soviet-era leadership and younger participants representing post-Soviet leadership approaches. By capturing these diverse perspectives, the study contributes a nuanced understanding of ethical leadership that likely extend beyond the sample to reflect broader national and generational dynamics in Kazakhstan.

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants, aligning with the constructivist approach of the study. This interview format allowed participants to express their thoughts freely while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into specific areas of interest. The semi-structured format provided the flexibility needed to explore participants' perceptions of ethical leadership and generational differences, ensuring that the data collected were rich and contextually grounded.

Interviews were guided by a set of seven open-ended questions, designed to elicit participants' understanding of ethics and ethical leadership, as well as their perceptions of generational differences in these areas. The questions included the following: "What does the word 'ethics' or 'ethical' mean to you?" and "What were some key moments and who were some key people that shaped your ethical principles?" among others. Probing questions were employed as necessary to go deeper into the participants' responses and to ensure the collection of thick, descriptive data. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant's consent to ensure accuracy in data capture and transcription.

### Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using an inductive approach grounded in the principles of grounded theory, as

outlined by Charmaz (2014). The analysis process began with the transcription of the audio-recorded interviews, which produced detailed textual data for subsequent analysis. NVivo software was used to facilitate the coding and analysis process, ensuring systematic and organized handling of the data.

The analysis involved multiple stages of coding: open coding, focused coding, and thematic coding. Open coding allowed for the initial identification of significant concepts and themes inductively within the data. Focused coding then refined these codes into more cohesive categories, while thematic coding involved the synthesis of these categories into overarching themes that directly addressed the research questions (Charmaz, 2014).

Throughout the analysis process, the study employed a recursive and iterative approach. Memos were used extensively to document the researcher's reflections, observations, and emerging insights. These memos played a crucial role in maintaining reflexivity, allowing the researcher to acknowledge and account for potential biases and to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the data rather than in preconceived notions.

A key aspect of the data analysis was the use of constant comparative analysis, a method that involves continuously comparing different segments of data to identify similarities and differences. This iterative process of comparison was instrumental in refining the emerging themes and patterns, ultimately leading to a more nuanced understanding of the generational differences in ethical leadership within the Kazakhstani context (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Trustworthiness and Ethical Issues

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, the study adhered to several principles of validity and reliability, including confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability (Miles et al., 2014). Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, accompanied by a comprehensive cover letter that outlined the study's objectives, the researcher's role, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances regarding data privacy and confidentiality (Webster et al., 2014). These ethical protocols were essential for maintaining an environment of trust, where participants felt comfortable sharing their honest and candid perspectives.

### Findings

#### Foundations of Ethical Norms

Participants consistently highlighted that ethical norms in Kazakhstan are established during childhood, with parents and teachers playing crucial roles. Assel (all participant

names are pseudonyms) noted, “My ethics were formed from my parents, first of all, because they lay the foundation of my personality.” This emphasizes the significant role of family in instilling core ethical values, such as respect for elders. Aslan echoed this sentiment, stating, “My parents always told me to show respect to someone who is older than you.” Teachers further reinforced these values in school, creating a dual system of moral influence.

Marlen offered insight into the cultural mechanism of shame as a behavioral guide, mentioning, “We’re afraid to be shamed, and they use that fear. That’s a big factor in determining people’s actions, ethics, and thoughts.” These findings illustrate that ethical norms in Kazakhstan are deeply rooted in personal relationships and immediate social environments, with limited reliance on universal ethical standards or societal exemplars. This reliance reflects the cultural and historical context of Kazakhstan, where familial and relational influences dominate ethical development.

### *Leadership Styles Across Generations*

Older participants described leadership practices that are deeply rooted in hierarchy and authority, often emphasizing control and consistency as key components of leadership. In contrast, younger leaders are increasingly embracing transformational and participative approaches, shaped by global leadership trends and their educational experiences. Aliya noted, “It’s becoming more and more such leaders,” pointing to the rise of leaders who focus on collaboration and purpose. Dana added, “When we have people who think about [the purpose of their job], I think we can bring up more leaders. Ethical leaders.” Daniel captured this generational shift well: “This is changing from irrational [thinking] to rational, from father figure to professional CEO and professional manager...this is culturally changing.” While younger professionals see these styles as outdated, older leaders often defend them as necessary for maintaining structure and achieving results, especially in environments where decision-making power is centralized. These insights underscore how younger leaders are reshaping the concept of leadership by prioritizing transparency, inclusion, and ethical values.

### *Generational Divergence in Ethical Leadership*

A significant theme in the findings, and central to this paper, is the generational divide in perceptions of ethical leadership, influenced by the differing socio-political environments in which the two groups were raised. Older participants, molded by Soviet-era collectivist ideologies, often leaned towards consequentialist ethics, placing greater importance on outcomes rather than processes. Ruslan, reflecting on his older colleagues, noted, “Old ethics is what are left after the Soviet Union. Some people here...are working for [Company] about 30 or 40 years.” This

comment underscores the persistence of Soviet-era leadership styles, where the end often justified the means.

Conversely, younger participants tended to embrace deontological ethics, focusing on fairness, transparency, and adherence to principles. Zara characterized the leadership styles of older CEOs as unethical and unprofessional, saying, “In the beginning, I was asking, ‘Is it okay, normal, that the company CEO can use a loud voice?’ I would say it’s unethical, but others would say that it’s normal.” Her critique illustrates the conflict between the authoritarian methods of older leaders and the participative, values-driven approaches preferred by younger professionals. This generational gap mirrors the broader cultural shift in Kazakhstan towards ethical leadership as a core principle.

### *Bridging the Generational Divide*

Tensions between older and younger leaders emerged as a significant theme. Younger participants often criticized older leaders for maintaining authoritarian practices, while older leaders perceived younger professionals as inexperienced or overly idealistic. Zara reflected on these dynamics, noting, “Kazakhstani leaders all came from the Soviet Union, right? They still hold onto these perspectives...they pass them down to their employees, and those employees teach others. So, it feels like there is no change.” Despite these tensions, some participants described collaborative efforts to bridge the generational gap. Jon highlighted mentorship programs in private companies to promote mutual understanding, while Madina expressed hope in the rise of “new Kazakhs” who could help address these divides. These efforts indicate that while differences persist, there is potential for generational synergy within organizations.

### *Sectoral and Organizational Dynamics*

Some participants discussed the differences in leadership styles between sectors in Kazakhstan, observing that private companies tend to adopt progressive and participative approaches more rapidly than state-owned enterprises. Jon remarked, “Private companies are changing faster,” highlighting the impact of globalization and the influence of international management practices. In contrast, public-sector organizations were characterized as “extremely conservative,” maintaining well-established hierarchical and transactional leadership models. Some participants attributed these differences to factors such as limited exposure to emerging global trends and the persistence of bureaucratic structures within public organizations. Daniel linked the private sector’s changes to education and cultural exposure, stating, “Younger leaders are driving this change. They are introducing international practices into local companies through MBA programs and global networks.” These comments illustrate the varying rates of leadership evolution across sectors, with the private sector serving as a testing

ground for innovative strategies, while the public organizations lag due to structural and cultural inertia.

### A Complex and Evolving Landscape

The findings highlight the intricate nature of ethical leadership in Kazakhstan, influenced by generational differences, historical contexts, and sector-specific dynamics. Younger leaders express optimism about the gradual shift towards transformational leadership styles, whereas older leaders tend to adhere to pragmatic methods grounded in consequentialist ethics. Daniel captured this transition effectively, stating, “We are moving from personal praise for the leader to a more professional focus on achieving organizational goals.” This changing environment emphasizes the importance of mentorship, open dialogue, and education to bridge generational divides and promote ethical leadership practices that align with modern standards.

### Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to explore the generational differences among Kazakhstanis in business concerning their conceptualization of ethical leadership. The findings revealed a distinct bifurcation in ethical leadership perspectives, rooted in the divergent ethical dispositions nurtured by different cultural and historical environments. This phenomenon, termed the *ethical leadership bifurcation*, underscores the influence of generational experiences on leadership styles and ethical frameworks in Kazakhstan. Theoretical insights from Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of habitus and Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory provide a foundation for understanding this bifurcation.

#### Ethical Disposition Based on Habitus

Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus, which refers to the ingrained dispositions shaped by life experiences, offers a lens through which to examine the generational differences in ethical leadership observed in Kazakhstan. The study identified a clear distinction between Soviet-style leadership, characterized by autocratic, transactional, and consequentialist approaches, and post-Soviet-style leadership, which tends toward democratic, transformational, and deontological values (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002; Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2010; Puffer & McCarthy, 2011).

Older leaders, whose formative years were shaped during the Soviet era, exhibited a habitus reflecting the values and leadership styles prevalent during that time. These leaders often perceive their autocratic and transactional approaches as both effective and ethically appropriate within the context of Kazakhstani business, consistent with the norms of the Soviet system (McCarthy et al., 2010). In contrast, younger leaders, raised in an independent Kazakhstan, display a

habitus influenced by democratic and transformational leadership values. These individuals tend to be more open to global influences, which have shaped their ethical dispositions and leadership styles toward a more participative and values-driven approach (Rooney et al., 2021).

#### Ethical Disposition Learned from Others

Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory complements the concept of habitus by providing an explanatory framework for how individuals acquire their ethical values and leadership behaviors. The study’s findings underscore the significant role of social learning in the development of ethical leadership perspectives. Individuals primarily learn ethical norms from parents, teachers, peers, and personal experiences, aligning with Bandura’s assertion that behavior is learned through observation and emulation (Den Hartog, 2015; Gan, 2018; Mayer et al., 2009; Moore et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018).

For those raised in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, parents and teachers—many of whom were themselves raised during the Soviet era—initially imparted ethical values and behaviors consistent with Soviet norms. However, the influence of globalization, the internet, and social media has exposed younger generations to a wider array of ethical ideologies and leadership philosophies, challenging and reshaping their ethical frameworks. While parental and educational influences remain foundational, these additional societal factors have facilitated the adoption of more globalized and contemporary ethical perspectives among younger leaders.

#### Soviet-Nurtured Leadership

The Soviet Union exerted profound influence over Kazakhstani society, shaping the ethical frameworks and leadership styles of those who came of age during its rule. The Soviet system emphasized collectivism, state control, and adherence to a unified ideology, with little tolerance for individual entrepreneurship (McCarthy et al., 2010; Michaels, 2007). These societal norms were instilled through education, state-controlled media, and socialization processes, creating a distinct habitus that continues to influence older leaders in Kazakhstan.

Leaders nurtured within the Soviet system developed an ethical framework that reflects the values of that era—autocracy, transactionalism, and a focus on achieving objectives, often at the expense of individual autonomy or ethical considerations. This framework has persisted among many older leaders, who view their leadership style as both effective and ethically justified within the context of their upbringing.

#### Post-Soviet-nurtured Leadership

In contrast, the post-Soviet generation of leaders in Kazakhstan has been shaped by a dramatically different socio-

political environment. The country's transition to independence in 1991 brought significant cultural shifts, including constitutionally establishing it as a democracy, economic privatization, and greater constitutional freedoms for individuals (Grachev & Bobina, 2006; McCarthy et al., 2010). These changes created new opportunities for leadership development, particularly among those exposed to global influences through education, media, and international business practices.

The younger generation of leaders, who were raised in an independent Kazakhstan, have developed ethical frameworks that differ markedly from those of their Soviet-era predecessors. These leaders have embraced democratic and transformational leadership principles, influenced by their exposure to global leadership practices. The study's participants highlighted the role of international education, media, and cultural exchange in shaping their ethical perspectives, often citing sources such as TED Talks, YouTube videos, and Western leadership literature as influential in their leadership development.

### *The Ethical Leadership Bifurcation and Divergent Expectations*

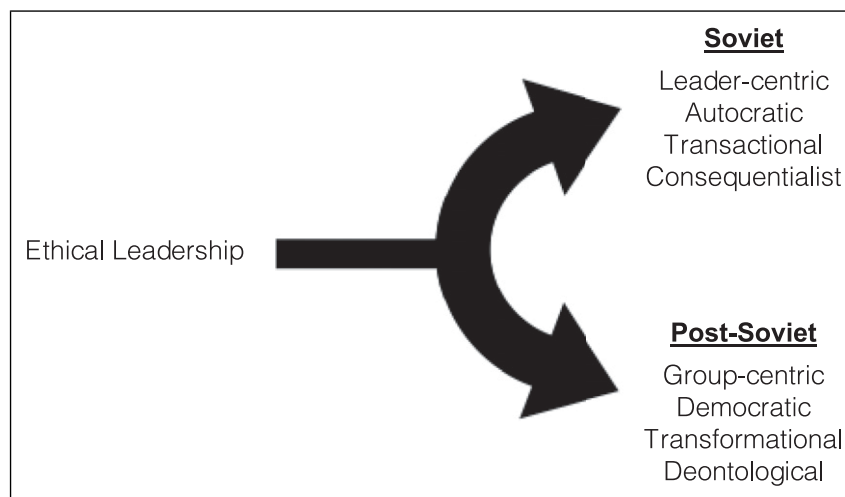
The ethical leadership bifurcation observed in this study has given rise to distinct sets of expectations among individuals in Kazakhstan, based on their generational experiences. Those nurtured within the Soviet context tend to have expectations aligned with Soviet-style leadership, characterized by consequentialist ethics and a focus on achieving objectives, often through autocratic means. In contrast, the participants raised in post-Soviet Kazakhstan generally expected leadership to be more democratic, transparent, and consistent with the deontological principle of judging actions independent of the consequences (Figure A1).

This dynamic has led to misunderstandings and misalignments between the generations, as each group views ethical leadership through the lens of its own ethical disposition. The Soviet-era leaders' preference for consequentialist ethics often clashes with the post-Soviet leaders' emphasis on deontological principles, resulting in differing perceptions of what constitutes ethical leadership. The study's findings are consistent with existing literature that highlights the tension between autocratic and transformational leadership styles in post-Soviet contexts (Grachev & Bobina, 2006; Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2010; Puffer & McCarthy, 2011; Sommer et al., 2000).

### *Bridging the Bifurcation*

Bridging the generational divide in ethical leadership perceptions is a significant challenge, as the study participants expressed limited optimism about the potential for achieving consensus. Some participants suggested that tolerance and endurance might be necessary strategies for navigating the differences in ethical leadership styles until generational turnover naturally leads to change. However, the persistence of Soviet-style leadership across generations, influenced by social learning and cultural continuity, raises questions about how long this bifurcation might endure.

The study highlights a complex dilemma in defining ethical leadership within the Kazakhstani context. While there is a general desire for ethical leadership, the widespread acceptance of ethically questionable practices as normal within leadership roles complicates efforts to establish a unified standard. The findings suggest that ongoing dialogue, education, and cross-generational learning are essential for bridging the ethical leadership divide and promoting practices that align with contemporary ethical standards.



**Figure A1.** The Ethical Leadership Bifurcation Model

## Implications, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

### Implications

To mitigate generational tensions in leadership, organizations can promote cross-generational dialogue through mentorship programs and structured forums. These initiatives would enable senior leaders to mentor younger professionals while also gaining new insights from them. Leadership training can focus on adaptive strategies, helping leaders reconcile the older generation's emphasis on results with the younger generation's priorities of transparency and fairness.

To improve organizational culture, companies can create ethical guidelines that reflect generational viewpoints, merging outcome-driven practices with principle-based values. Promoting collaboration between generations on projects can also harness the strengths of both groups, with seasoned leaders offering strategic guidance and younger leaders bringing creativity and digital skills. In the private sector, the participative styles of younger leaders may enhance innovation (Saedikiyi et al., 2024), whereas in the public sector, the hierarchical approach of older leaders might still be essential for managing bureaucratic processes.

Finally, organizations can take proactive steps to tackle ethical dilemmas by establishing decision-making frameworks to assist leaders in navigating complex situations without falling into unethical practices. Additionally, promoting generational inclusivity through diversity training and flexible workplace policies can enhance multi-generational teams, turning generational differences into a source of synergy instead of conflict (Anning-Dorson, 2021). By implementing practical measures, organizations can adapt to changing leadership values while promoting ethical practices that align with international standards.

### Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in a single city—Astana—which limits the generalizability of the findings across other regions of Kazakhstan. Astana's unique cultural influences, particularly due to its proximity to Russia and historical Russian migration during the Soviet era, may not reflect the broader cultural dynamics in southern Kazakhstan or other parts of the country (Sahadeo & Zanca, 2007).

Second, the focus on participants from the for-profit business sector may not capture the full spectrum of ethical leadership perceptions across other societal sectors, such as government, education, or non-profit organizations. The norms and pressures in the business environment might differ significantly from those in other sectors, potentially limiting the applicability of these findings to different contexts.

Third, the study employed a non-probabilistic sampling method, specifically purposeful and snowball sampling, which affects the generalizability of the findings. While this approach was suitable for the exploratory nature of this study, it does not allow for the findings to be generalized to the broader population with a high degree of confidence. Future research could benefit from employing probabilistic sampling techniques to enhance the representativeness of the sample and provide a more comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership across different regions and sectors in Kazakhstan.

Fourth, the honesty and openness of participants during the interviews is another limitation. Some participants might have been hesitant to share negative experiences or critiques of their leaders due to cultural norms around respect and honor, potentially affecting the depth and accuracy of the data collected. To mitigate this, efforts were made to build rapport and create a comfortable interview environment, and questions were carefully crafted to minimize feelings of vulnerability.

Fifth, my own biases as a researcher may have influenced the study. Despite maintaining a reflexive stance and striving to prevent my personal understanding of ethical leadership from shaping the participants' responses, the potential for bias cannot be entirely eliminated. Throughout the research process, I was mindful of this and took steps to ensure that my views did not unduly influence the data collection and analysis.

### Future Research Directions

The findings and limitations of this study open several avenues for future research. First, a longitudinal study could be valuable in tracking the rate and nature of the shift away from Soviet-style leadership in Kazakhstani businesses. Such a study would provide insights into the long-term evolution of leadership styles in a post-Soviet context and how these changes impact organizational effectiveness.

Second, future research could explore the impact of language proficiency and exposure to foreign-language media on individuals' ethical dispositions. This is particularly relevant for participants who primarily speak Russian and/or Kazakh and whose ethical frameworks were shaped during the Soviet era. Understanding how linguistic and cultural exposure influences ethical leadership could provide deeper insights into the processes of ethical acculturation in post-Soviet societies. Collaboration between cultural anthropology and organizational psychology could provide deeper insights into ethical acculturation.

Third, while this study focused on Kazakhstan, future research should consider replicating the study in other countries within Central Asia or similar regions. Exploring variations in ethical leadership perceptions across different cultural and historical contexts would help determine whether the ethical leadership bifurcation observed in

Kazakhstan is a broader phenomenon. Additionally, investigating how businesses in other developing countries are navigating shifts from historically dominant leadership ethics to emerging ethical frameworks could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership in transitional societies.

## Conclusion

This study examined the differences in ethical leadership across generations in Kazakhstan, highlighting a distinct divide between the ethical perspectives of older and younger leaders. This divide was shown as being influenced by the unique cultural and historical backgrounds of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, reflecting broader changes in societal values, globalization, and organizational dynamics.

The results emphasize the impact of habitus and social learning on how ethics shape leadership behavior. Older leaders, influenced by the collectivist and hierarchical nature of the Soviet Union, tend to prioritize consequentialist ethics and autocratic leadership behaviors, believing these are essential for meeting organizational goals. In contrast, younger leaders, who have grown up in a more democratic and globalized environment, favor deontological ethics and transformational leadership, focusing on fairness, transparency, and collaboration.

This divide in ethical leadership poses both challenges and opportunities for organizations in Kazakhstan. Generational tensions often arise from differing expectations regarding leadership ethics, with younger leaders advocating for change while older leaders stick to traditional practices. By understanding the ethical leadership bifurcation model, organizations can develop leadership training programs that cater to the specific needs and values of different generational cohorts. Nevertheless, the generational differences opens doors for cross-generational learning and collaboration, leading to innovation and adaptability in leadership approaches.

## Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Biola University (F17-026\_AC). The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

## Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in this study.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Data Availability Statement

Data collected and analyzed during this study are not publicly available due to its sensitive nature, the limited number of participants (24), and the possibility of identifying one or more participants through their unrestricted, in-depth descriptions of their leaders, colleagues, and/or workplace.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Participant Information

No.	M/F	Age	Positional level	No.	M/F	Age	Positional level
1	M	25	Executive	13	F	25	Lower level
2	F	45	Executive	14	F	48	Executive
3	M	25	Mid manager	15	F	55	Executive
4	F	23	Lower level	16	M	54	Lower level
5	M	52	Executive	17	F	24	Lower level
6	M	23	Lower level	18	F	38	Mid manager
7	F	25	Mid manager	19	M	46	Executive
8	F	46	Mid manager	20	F	31	Mid manager
9	M	34	Executive	21	M	48	Mid manager
10	F	60	Mid manager	22	M	45	Executive
11	M	36	Executive	23	M	24	Lower level
12	M	23	Lower level	24	M	32	Lower level