

## Closing the Leadership-Service Delivery Divide: Ethical Leadership Imperatives in KwaZulu-Natal Municipalities

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the role of ethical leadership in addressing the persistent challenges of service delivery in KwaZulu-Natal municipalities. Using a qualitative methodology, interviews were conducted with municipal officials, councillors, traditional leaders, and community members, and the data were analysed thematically using NVivo software. The study reveals that the lack of ethical leadership, as evidenced by corruption, nepotism, and poor governance, is a primary cause of service delivery failures. Participants highlighted the importance of moral integrity, community engagement, and consistent ethical conduct for restoring public trust. The data indicate that ethical lapses are often normalised within municipal operations, allowing misconduct to persist unchallenged. Ethical leadership, therefore, is not merely a moral aspiration but a governance necessity in the context of democratic local government. A culture of ethical awareness and institutional integrity must be nurtured and inculcated at all levels of municipal administration. The findings call for a cultural shift in leadership practices and a renewed commitment to ethical governance across all tiers of local government.*

**Keywords:** Ethical leadership; Municipalities; Public service delivery.

### Introduction

KwaZulu-Natal municipalities have become frequent flashpoints for service delivery protests, which reflect deeper issues in local governance, especially the failure of ethical leadership. The breakdown in service delivery is not simply a result of technical incompetence but also rooted in a crisis of values and accountability.

Communities have grown increasingly disillusioned with elected representatives and officials who fail to fulfil their mandates due to self-interest and corruption. These frustrations have manifested in violent demonstrations, the destruction of public infrastructure, and strained relations between citizens and councillors and municipal officials. Despite robust constitutional and legal frameworks, implementation continues to falter, mainly due to unethical leadership practices. Ethical leadership helps distinguish employees and organisations, shaping workplace engagement and influencing perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour (Sarwar et al., 2020). According to Özsungur (2020), unethical leadership can lead to significant organisational and corporate failures, including issues such as bribery, corruption, and high employee turnover. Brown et al. (2005:120) defined ethical leadership as “the practice of modelling normatively acceptable behaviour by one’s actions and interactions with others, as well as encouraging followers to adopt similar behaviour through decision-making, two-way communication, and reward”. Other researchers describe unethical leadership as a moral hazard where a leader breaches established ethical standards or codes of conduct (Sarwar et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2019). While existing literature suggests that ethical leadership in government can enhance governance quality, promote effective public service delivery, and foster ethical values within public institutions (Downe et al., 2016), many public service organisations have yet to integrate ethical leadership into their operations fully. In many cases, senior leaders prioritise personal interests over the public good (Bailey, 2018; Bonner et al., 2016).

Ethical leadership is commonly understood through three key dimensions: fairness, power-sharing, and transparency. Fairness involves principled decision-making, honesty, and accountability, where leaders act with integrity and treat others with equal respect (Brown et al., 2005; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Power-sharing emphasises involving subordinates in decision-making, empowering them with a voice and greater autonomy (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2009; Yukl, 2006). Transparency entails clear communication of roles, expectations, and goals, which helps reduce uncertainty and enhances followers’ understanding of their contributions to organisational success (Brown et al., 2005; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Together, these elements reflect a broader ethical leadership framework, which includes a leader’s personal integrity, their ability to instil ethical values in followers, and the strength of the leader-follower relationship (Treviño et al., 2000). Previous studies have concentrated mainly on qualitative and pedagogical approaches led by practitioners and consultancies, resulting in a weak and fragmented theoretical foundation (Atapattu & Huybers, 2022; Fischer & Döring, 2022; Ismail et al., 2019). This research aims to address that gap by examining the impact of ethical leadership within municipalities. This paper examines the ethical dimensions of municipal leadership and their impact on service delivery in selected municipalities within KwaZulu-Natal. The study aims to understand the perceptions of various stakeholders regarding ethical leadership and propose reforms that are grounded in local realities. Ethical leadership is examined not only as a theoretical construct but as a lived experience that directly impacts governance outcomes and public trust.

## Literature Review

### *Service Delivery and Local Governance*

The inclusion of local authorities in the United Nations Habitat II Summit in Istanbul marked a significant milestone, as they were acknowledged not only as the 'strongest partner close to the citizens' but also formally recognised as a level of government (Hoffschulte, 2008, p. 109). Service delivery at the local government level is a cornerstone of South Africa's democratic dispensation, enshrined in the Constitution and various legislative frameworks (Mlambo & Maserumule, 2024; Reddy, 2016). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996), serves as the legal foundation for political governance at the national, provincial, district/metropolitan, and municipal levels. The Local Government Transition Act of 1993 (LGTA) was intended as a temporary framework to facilitate the democratisation and transformation of local government in post-apartheid South Africa, rather than serving as its final structure (Pycroft, 2000). The White Paper on Local Government (1998:15) provided a detailed explanation of the role of developmental local government, emphasising municipalities' responsibility to collaborate holistically with local communities and civic groups to enhance their quality of life. Municipalities are expected to deliver basic services, including water, electricity, sanitation, housing, and waste management, in a manner that is efficient, equitable, and sustainable.

In the context of local government, service delivery refers to the provision of municipal goods, services, and activities intended to improve the quality of life within local communities. This includes both tangible services, such as public housing, roads, water, sanitation, and public transport and intangible services, which, while essential, may not be visibly apparent, such as sewage and drainage systems and public safety regulations (Ndudula, 2013). Barichievy (2003) argues that municipal councils should strive to foster a more participatory local democracy, where decision-making responsibilities are shared with the broader community. However, numerous challenges, including mismanagement, political interference, and lack of capacity, have plagued service delivery efforts, especially in rural and peri-urban municipalities. Research consistently highlights the inability of municipalities to meet service expectations because of governance and leadership failures. Citizens often experience poor service quality, delayed projects, and non-responsive municipal officials. These systemic issues are exacerbated by financial misappropriations and inadequate planning, which leave municipalities in a perpetual state of crisis. Consequently, public confidence in local government is diminishing, eroding the democratic legitimacy of municipal institutions. Addressing these challenges requires an interrogation of the ethical foundations upon which municipal governance is built.

### *Ethical Leadership*

Ethical leadership is increasingly being recognised as an essential component of effective public administration and governance. It has also recently gained attention as a leadership style that fosters moral conduct, emphasising its role in encouraging ethical behaviour among employees (Brown et al., 2005). It involves a commitment to values such as integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, and a strong

orientation towards the public good. Ethical leaders influence organisational culture and behaviour by modelling appropriate conduct and consistently enforcing ethical standards. Ethical decision-making models suggest that leaders play a crucial role in guiding and influencing the ethical choices of organisational members (Schwartz, 2016). Ethical leaders uphold truth, transparency, and accountability as core principles, forming the foundation for appropriate standards in implementing CSR strategies and activities (Hossain et al., 2024). In municipal contexts, ethical leadership determines how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, and how officials interact with the communities they serve. Studies by Brown and Treviño (2006) suggest that ethical leadership is associated with higher employee morale, increased public trust, and a reduction in instances of corruption. When leaders lack an ethical foundation, they are more likely to engage in maladministration, nepotism, and the abuse of power. Ethical leadership thus acts as both a preventive and corrective mechanism for governance failures. By embedding ethics into leadership structures and processes, municipalities can begin to reverse the negative trends that currently undermine service delivery. Furthermore, Van der Waldt (2016) argues that ethical leadership is essential for effective service delivery yet remains one of the most neglected components in municipal management. He identifies fear of victimisation and lack of whistleblower protection as key reasons why unethical behaviour goes unreported, resonating with the fear expressed by staff in your findings.

### *The South African Context*

The legacy of apartheid, while politically dismantled, continues to shape the socio-political landscape of municipalities throughout South Africa (Siddle & Koelble, 2016). Many local governments grapple with limited capacity, entrenched corruption, and a weak culture of accountability (De Visser, 2010; Reddy, 2016). In KwaZulu-Natal, political factionalism and cadre deployment have further undermined the effectiveness of municipal leadership, where appointments are frequently based on political loyalty rather than merit or ethical integrity (Piper & Anciano, 2020; Mettler, 2021). These practices have led to widespread issues, including poor financial management, inadequate planning, and persistent service delivery backlogs (SALGA, 2019). The decline in ethical standards is also evident in the high turnover of municipal managers and the frequent occurrence of legal disputes over procurement irregularities (Kuye & Mafunisa, 2003; Auditor-General South Africa, 2023). While national interventions under Section 139 of the Constitution have been implemented, they are often reactive and fail to tackle systemic problems (Powell, O'Donovan & De Visser, 2014). Addressing these challenges requires a proactive approach that includes investment in ethical leadership development, institutional reforms, and strengthened public oversight mechanisms (Mafunisa, 2020; Nengwekhulu, 2021).

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory case study design to investigate the relationship between ethical leadership and service delivery in depth in KwaZulu-Natal municipalities. The research was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm,

which values the subjective experiences and contextual knowledge of participants. Through this lens, the study aimed to uncover the lived realities of municipal officials, councillors, traditional and community members who are affected by governance failures. A case study design was chosen for its ability to provide a rich, detailed understanding of complex social phenomena within their real-life context. This approach allowed for in-depth exploration of how ethical or unethical behaviours manifest in local government structures. Moreover, qualitative methods enable researchers to capture nuances that may be overlooked in quantitative studies, such as emotions, values, and relational dynamics. By focusing on specific municipalities facing governance challenges, the study aims to generate insights that are both contextually grounded and potentially transferable to similar settings. The research design thus supports the goal of producing practical recommendations for ethical reform in municipal leadership.

### *Study Area*

KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is administratively structured into one metropolitan municipality and ten district municipalities, which are further subdivided into 43 local municipalities. Participants were purposively selected for this study based on known governance issues, geographic diversity, and accessibility for fieldwork and reflect the spectrum of service delivery contexts in the province. By selecting municipalities with distinct demographic and administrative profiles, the study was able to compare the influence of leadership ethics across different contexts. Accessibility and willingness of participants to engage in open dialogue were also key considerations in selecting the research sites. This strategic sampling ensured that the findings were not only relevant but also reflective of broader trends within KwaZulu-Natal. The goal was to provide a balanced view of ethical leadership challenges and potential solutions across diverse municipal settings.

### *Participants and Sampling*

A total of 25 participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. These included municipal officials such as managers and directors, elected councillors, community leaders, and traditional authorities. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to target individuals with specific knowledge and experience related to ethical leadership and service delivery. Snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants through referrals, particularly where trust was a barrier to initial access. Diversity in gender, age, and role was also considered to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Most participants had more than five years of involvement in municipal governance or community advocacy. Interviews were conducted in both English and isiZulu to accommodate language preferences and improve data quality. Ethical consent procedures were strictly followed, and participants were assured of their anonymity and the voluntary nature of their participation. This sampling approach enhanced the richness and authenticity of the data collected. Each chosen municipality had experienced some form of administrative intervention, protest action, or audit disclaimer in the past five years.

### *Data Collection*

Data collection was conducted over a period of three months, utilising semi-structured interviews as the primary method. Interviews allowed for flexible yet focused engagement with participants, enabling them to share their experiences, perceptions, and suggestions regarding ethical leadership in their municipalities. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Interview questions covered themes such as leadership behaviour, ethical dilemmas, governance practices, and community involvement in decision-making. The interviews were conducted in locations preferred by the participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Transcription was done verbatim, and where necessary, translations were cross-checked to ensure accuracy and preserve meaning. Field notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal cues, context, and preliminary observations. This qualitative approach facilitated a deep exploration of complex issues that are often difficult to quantify or measure through structured instruments.

### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data, using NVivo 11 software to support coding and theme development. The process began with open coding to identify key phrases, concepts, and recurring topics across the interviews. Axial coding was then used to group related codes into broader categories that reflected patterns in the data. Finally, selective coding helped identify central themes that linked the categories to the research questions. The iterative nature of the analysis allowed for the refinement of themes as new insights emerged from ongoing data review. NVivo enabled systematic organisation and visualisation of data, which enhanced analytical rigour. The themes were grounded in participants' narratives, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences. Researcher bias was mitigated through peer debriefing and triangulation with document reviews. The analysis ultimately produced eight dominant themes that illustrate the complex relationship between ethical leadership and service delivery.

### *Trustworthiness*

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, various strategies were employed to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, where participants were allowed to verify and clarify their statements. Prolonged engagement in the field enabled the researcher to establish rapport and gain a deep understanding of the context. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research settings, participant profiles, and data collection processes. Dependability was ensured through detailed documentation of the research process, including coding logs and reflective journals, which facilitated thorough analysis and ensured the accuracy of the findings. Confirmability was supported by an audit trail and regular peer debriefings, which validated the consistency of interpretations. These measures collectively enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to conducting fieldwork, and informed consent was strictly adhered to throughout the

study. Anonymity and confidentiality were upheld, and data were securely stored to protect participant identities.

## **Findings**

The data analysis produced eight prominent themes that represent the lived experiences and perceptions of participants regarding ethical leadership and its impact on service delivery. Participants repeatedly emphasised that unethical behaviour in municipal leadership was not isolated, but widespread and normalised across institutions. Many described how bribery, nepotism, favouritism in appointments, and the misuse of public funds had become standard practices. These unethical practices severely compromised the delivery of essential services, generating deep mistrust between citizens and government representatives. In particular, participants expressed frustration with the lack of consequences for those engaging in corrupt behaviour, reinforcing a culture of impunity. The findings also highlighted the damaging effects of political interference, weak accountability systems, and the marginalisation of community voices. Several participants stressed the need for stronger oversight mechanisms and independent monitoring bodies to ensure that ethical standards are upheld. The themes collectively suggest that without a significant cultural and institutional shift toward ethical governance, service delivery failures will persist.

### ***Lack of Ethical Conduct in Leadership***

The most dominant theme that emerged from the data was the widespread lack of ethical conduct among municipal leaders. Participants described numerous instances where leaders prioritised personal gain over public interest, often manipulating procurement processes and awarding tenders to friends and political allies. For instance, one leader noted, *"It is an ideal often referred to in theory, but the practical application can sometimes be overshadowed by politics and resource constraints."* [female senior]. This reflects a gap between understanding and application, suggesting that ethical leadership, while acknowledged, is not consistently prioritised in day-to-day governance.

This lack of integrity created an environment in which corruption thrived, and service delivery suffered. Interviewees lamented how ethical guidelines existed on paper but were rarely followed or enforced in practice. Some municipal staff confessed to feeling disempowered and afraid to report unethical behaviour due to fear of victimisation or losing their jobs. This climate of fear and silence perpetuates unethical conduct, as there are minimal deterrents or accountability structures. Research by Pillay (2004) underscores the prevalence of unethical behaviour and corruption in local government, noting that personal enrichment and political patronage often supersede the public good, undermining governance and service delivery. Mafunisa (2000) similarly emphasises that ethical leadership is often lacking in the South African public sector, with weak enforcement of codes of conduct contributing to a culture of impunity. Participants consistently linked the ethical failures of leaders to poor service delivery outcomes, such as incomplete infrastructure projects, unequal access to

resources, and deteriorating public amenities. The overall sentiment was that until ethical behaviour becomes a leadership imperative, service delivery will remain compromised. In addition, Reddy (2016) found that political loyalty often overrides ethical standards in local government decision-making, leading to nepotism and corruption, which directly impacts the quality and equity of public services. These studies corroborate the concerns raised by participants and reinforce the argument that without a firm commitment to ethical leadership and institutional accountability, municipal service delivery will continue to suffer.

### ***Political Interference and Instability***

Another significant concern raised was the constant political interference in administrative functions and decision-making processes. Participants reported that councillors and political parties often interfered in tender processes, staff appointments, and even operational decisions meant to be handled by technical officials. This interference undermines the principle of professional administration, introducing bias and inefficiency into service delivery processes. As one respondent put it, "*Political interference can corrupt leadership.*" The issue of political interference in administrative processes is well-documented in South African local governance literature and strongly supports the concerns raised by participants in the study. De Visser (2009) and Piper and Anciano (2020) highlight how political meddling, primarily through cadre deployment, compromises administrative autonomy and results in the appointment of individuals based on political loyalty rather than technical competence. This directly undermines the principles of merit-based governance and contributes to institutional inefficiency. The instability caused by political infighting also leads to high turnover among municipal managers, chief financial officers, and technical directors, further disrupting continuity and accountability. Several participants expressed concern that political leaders prioritised short-term gains and loyalty to party structures over the long-term development needs of communities. In cases where administrators resisted unethical directives, they were often sidelined, demoted, or replaced or threatened with disciplinary actions. The blurring of lines between politics and administration creates confusion, weakens institutional effectiveness, and fosters a culture of non-compliance. Without clearly defined boundaries and respect for administrative autonomy, municipalities will struggle to operate ethically and deliver services efficiently.

### ***Weak Institutional Accountability***

Weak institutional accountability was identified as a significant factor that enabled unethical leadership and poor service delivery. Participants highlighted that internal audit units, municipal public accounts committees (MPACs), municipal disciplinary boards and other oversight bodies often lacked the independence or resources to perform their duties effectively. Reports of misconduct were frequently ignored or downplayed, and officials found guilty of wrongdoing were rarely sanctioned. This lack of consequences emboldens unethical behaviour and signals to others that such conduct is tolerated. Moreover, performance management systems were often poorly implemented, with senior officials not being held accountable for missed targets or budget irregularities. Participants called for more vigorous enforcement of existing

policies and the establishment of independent watchdogs to oversee municipal operations. There was a consensus that when oversight mechanisms are weak or compromised, public resources are misused, and service delivery deteriorates. Effective accountability structures must, therefore, be a central component of any strategy aimed at promoting ethical leadership and governance.

### *Low Public Trust and Engagement*

Repeated instances of unethical leadership have significantly damaged the relationship between municipalities and the communities they serve. Participants reported that many residents no longer trust local officials and have lost faith in participatory processes such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and budget meetings. Communities often feel that their voices are not heard and that public consultations are superficial exercises rather than genuine opportunities for engagement. As a result, there is growing apathy and disconnection between citizens and their local governments. Several community leaders noted that service delivery protests were not just about infrastructure but about deeper feelings of betrayal and marginalisation. The erosion of trust also affects citizens' willingness to pay for services, further weakening municipal revenue and performance. As Reddy (2016) and Van der Waldt (2014) observe, a lack of faith in municipal governance often results in communities withholding payments for services, which exacerbates fiscal stress and hinders service delivery further. This cycle of mistrust and poor performance creates a feedback loop of decline. Participants emphasised the need to rebuild this trust through transparency, consistent ethical behaviour, and inclusive governance practices. Without restoring public confidence, even well-intentioned service delivery initiatives are likely to be met with scepticism or resistance.

### *Traditional Leadership's Mixed Role*

In 2024, the KZN Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) announced that traditional leaders, or amakhosi, would be included as ex officio members in municipal executive committees. Traditional leaders play a complex and sometimes contradictory role in municipal governance in KwaZulu-Natal. While some traditional authorities have worked collaboratively with municipalities to improve service delivery, others have been accused of obstructing development projects or using their positions to benefit personally. Participants indicated that the dual governance structure, comprising municipal councils and traditional leadership, creates tension and confusion, especially in rural areas. The lack of clear role definitions often leads to power struggles that delay or derail service delivery projects. In some cases, traditional leaders act as gatekeepers, controlling access to land or community participation in projects. At the same time, their deep-rooted legitimacy and influence can be valuable assets for community mobilisation and accountability. Several participants called for better integration of traditional leadership into municipal planning processes, with clearly defined roles and ethical guidelines. A cooperative and ethical partnership between traditional and municipal leadership could significantly enhance governance and service outcomes.

### *Ethics Training and Awareness*

A recurring recommendation from participants was the need for systematic ethics training for both political and administrative officials. Many officials, particularly newly elected councillors, lack awareness of ethical principles and the practical implications of ethical governance. Participants suggested that ethical conduct is not innate but must be cultivated through training, mentorship, and ongoing professional development. Current induction programmes for councillors were described as inadequate, often focusing more on procedures than on ethical responsibilities. Training must go beyond compliance and aim to instil a values-based approach to leadership. Furthermore, ethical guidelines should be embedded in performance management systems and monitored regularly. Several participants advocated for the establishment of ethics officers within municipalities who can provide guidance and support when ethical dilemmas arise. Building ethical competence across the institution is essential for creating a culture where integrity is the norm, not the exception.

### *Community Perceptions of Fairness*

Fairness, or the lack thereof, was another central theme that emerged from the interviews, particularly in relation to the distribution of services. Participants noted that specific communities received preferential treatment in service delivery, often due to political affiliations or personal connections with municipal leaders. This perception of bias fosters resentment and fuels social divisions, especially in contexts where resources are scarce. Community members expressed frustration over unequal access to housing, water infrastructure, and job opportunities associated with municipal projects. In some cases, entire wards were reportedly sidelined due to opposition party support or strained relations with leadership. Fairness in governance is a cornerstone of ethical leadership, and its absence undermines the legitimacy of municipal institutions. Participants emphasised the importance of transparent criteria for project selection and resource allocation. Ensuring that services are distributed based on need rather than political considerations is key to restoring equity and cohesion in municipalities.

Based on the findings, participants offered a range of recommendations aimed at strengthening ethical leadership and improving service delivery. These included revising recruitment processes to prioritise merit and integrity, rather than political affiliation. Participants also called for the establishment of independent anti-corruption units with the power to investigate and sanction unethical behaviour. Institutional reforms such as strengthening audit committees and ensuring the independence of oversight bodies were also emphasised. Community-driven accountability mechanisms, such as citizen forums and participatory budgeting, were seen as essential for enhancing transparency and trust. Participants suggested that national and provincial governments must provide more substantial support and oversight without undermining local autonomy. Ethics training, mentorship programs, and leadership development initiatives were also widely recommended. Ultimately, ethical reform must be embedded in both the structures and cultures of municipalities to ensure long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

## Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the significant relationship between ethical leadership and the quality of service delivery in KwaZulu-Natal municipalities. Ethical failures are not just moral issues; they are directly responsible for governance breakdowns that affect the day-to-day lives of citizens. When leaders engage in corruption, ignore rules, or prioritise personal interests, the impact is tangible: unfinished infrastructure, unreliable utilities, and growing public dissatisfaction. Participants consistently described ethical leadership as a missing cornerstone in the local government system, where rules exist but are not enforced, and accountability is often circumvented. This aligns with global and national research indicating that ethical governance fosters transparency, trust, and improved performance. The interviews revealed that ethics is not only about avoiding wrongdoing, but also about modelling values, engaging with communities honestly, and upholding fairness in decision-making. Without ethical foundations, even well-resourced municipalities fail to deliver, proving that technical solutions alone are insufficient. Therefore, the restoration of ethical leadership must be a strategic focus for policymakers, municipal councils, and civic actors seeking to rebuild functional and trustworthy local governance.

The interplay between political interference and ethical decay is particularly noteworthy and problematic. The study highlighted how political instability and factionalism lead to weakened administrative systems and short-term thinking, which compromise service delivery. When political leaders override municipal processes or influence appointments, they create parallel systems of power that foster favouritism and undermine professionalism. This disrupts internal controls and leads to the marginalisation of ethical staff, many of whom operate in fear or silence. As political agendas take precedence, ethical imperatives become sidelined, leading to the misuse of public funds and loss of institutional credibility. This dynamic not only weakens public trust but also creates an unstable environment where service delivery becomes inconsistent and politically motivated. Ethical leadership, in contrast, requires a balance between political vision and administrative integrity, ensuring that decisions are made transparently and in the best interest of the public. Addressing political interference thus becomes a precondition for building a robust ethical culture within municipalities.

Another critical insight from the findings is the need to integrate community engagement into ethical leadership frameworks. Ethical leadership is not solely a top-down process; it requires a strong relationship between leaders and the communities they serve. The erosion of public trust has left many citizens feeling alienated, leading to disengagement or, in extreme cases, violent protest. When leaders fail to communicate openly or consult meaningfully with residents, decisions appear arbitrary, and public confidence erodes. However, where ethical leaders prioritise engagement, listen to diverse voices, and provide clear feedback, communities are more likely to co-operate and support municipal efforts. Participants emphasised the need for ethical responsiveness; leaders must not only act with integrity but must also be visibly fair, inclusive, and attentive to local concerns. This involves redesigning

public participation platforms to be more accessible, representative, and action-oriented. Rebuilding ethical relationships with communities is not optional; it is a foundational requirement for stable and effective service delivery.

The role of traditional leadership, as revealed in the study, adds another layer of complexity to the concept of ethical governance in KwaZulu-Natal. Traditional leaders wield considerable influence in many rural areas and can be key development partners, but their roles must be clearly defined and subject to ethical standards. Some traditional leaders reportedly supported unethical practices or acted as power brokers, undermining transparency and contributing to elite capture. Others were described as ethical stewards who mediated community interests and promoted accountability. This duality suggests that traditional leadership must be strategically integrated into municipal governance through formal agreements, capacity building, and ethical education. Failing to engage traditional leaders ethically can result in parallel structures that compete with municipalities for legitimacy and authority. Conversely, aligning their roles with ethical governance principles can enhance service delivery and community support. Municipalities must therefore engage traditional leadership proactively, ensuring collaboration is guided by transparency, mutual respect, and accountability.

Training and professional development in ethics emerged as a practical yet underutilised tool for strengthening leadership capacity. Many officials assume leadership positions without formal exposure to ethical standards, decision-making frameworks, or conflict-of-interest protocols. Ethics training should not be treated as a one-time induction but as an ongoing developmental process embedded in performance assessments and organisational culture. Participants called for mentorship models in which senior officials with ethical values guide new leaders, thereby creating a supportive environment for ethical decision-making. Furthermore, training should address real-world scenarios, equipping officials to handle ethical dilemmas, resist political pressure, and prioritise public welfare. Institutionalising ethics through codes of conduct, regular workshops, and performance-linked accountability mechanisms is essential. This type of proactive investment can shift the culture from one of reactive compliance to one of proactive ethical leadership. Ultimately, cultivating ethical competence is both a moral responsibility and a strategic necessity for improving municipal performance.

The study's findings reaffirm that institutional reform must be accompanied by ethical transformation. Weak accountability systems, inadequate oversight, and poor enforcement mechanisms allow unethical behaviour to flourish unchecked. Reforms should include strengthening internal audit units, granting absolute independence to municipal public accounts committees, municipal disciplinary boards, and protecting whistleblowers. Additionally, community-based monitoring systems can serve as practical tools for enhancing transparency and enforcing ethical conduct. Civil society organisations, the media, and academic institutions also play a crucial role in fostering ethical awareness and promoting accountability. However, these reforms will only be effective if there is political will and sustained leadership commitment at all levels. Ethical leadership is not about perfection, but about consistently aligning with values,

maintaining transparency, and serving the public. When these principles are institutionalised, municipalities become more resilient, efficient, and trusted by the communities they serve.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study concludes that the leadership-service delivery divide in KwaZulu-Natal municipalities is primarily an ethical crisis that requires urgent and systemic intervention. Ethical leadership is the linchpin that connects governance structures to public needs and trust. Without it, even the most well-designed policies and service delivery plans will fail to meet their objectives. The research has shown that corruption, political interference, lack of accountability, and poor public engagement are all symptoms of a deeper ethical dysfunction. Ethical leadership must be viewed not merely as a personal trait but as an institutional practice that is embedded in recruitment, training, decision-making, and community relations. Addressing the ethical deficit in municipalities will require both top-down reforms and bottom-up civic engagement strategies. A cultural shift is needed, one that normalises integrity, transparency, and fairness in every aspect of municipal life. Only by fostering a shared commitment to ethics can municipalities hope to overcome their service delivery challenges and regain public confidence.

The following recommendations are proposed to address these findings. Firstly, municipalities should institutionalise mandatory ethics training programs for both political and administrative officials. These programs should be continuous, practical, and tailored to local governance contexts. Secondly, recruitment and promotion systems must be reformed to emphasise merit, qualifications, and ethical conduct over political loyalty. Thirdly, oversight bodies such as audit committees, municipal disciplinary boards, and MPACs must be empowered and resourced to operate independently, with clear mandates and protective mechanisms in place. Fourthly, municipal leaders must prioritise inclusive community engagement, ensuring that participatory platforms are meaningful, well-publicised, and accessible to marginalised groups. Fifthly, partnerships with traditional leaders should be formalised and regulated through clear ethical frameworks and accountability structures. Sixthly, whistleblower protection laws and enforcement mechanisms must be strengthened to encourage reporting and deter unethical behaviour. Finally, national and provincial governments must play a supportive role by enforcing minimum ethical standards while allowing municipalities the autonomy to innovate and reform.

In sum, closing the leadership-service delivery divide is both an ethical and developmental imperative. It requires courageous leadership, citizen participation, and systemic reform. Municipalities that succeed in embedding ethical values at the core of their operations will not only improve service delivery but also restore the legitimacy of local government. The transformation must be intentional, sustained, and collaborative, involving all stakeholders in the governance ecosystem. Ethical leadership is not a panacea, but it is a powerful starting point for creating municipalities that are accountable, responsive, and capable of serving the people

with dignity and justice. KwaZulu-Natal, and South Africa more broadly, must embrace this imperative if it is to fulfil the promises of its democratic constitution.

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