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Leadership and good governance practices in the public sector: The case of district administration in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

The lack of leadership research in the public sector has left a gap in the literature. Sub-national administrations in Cambodia struggle with leadership in governance; even after reforms in 1993, the nation still lacks sound governance and the corresponding socioeconomic development. The fundamental purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate an ethical leadership paradigm and determine whether it may inspire and sustain good governance in district administrations in Cambodia. The design of a case study aids in understanding complex social phenomena, particularly the nature of the case under consideration, and in producing knowledge about an individual, a group, and an organization. The theoretical frameworks for this study included utilitarian, deontological, and virtue ethics theories. The research focused on how Cambodian district administration officials worked to promote and sustain good governance through ethical leadership. Face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with 25 district administration officials (DAOs), carefully selected from the target district administration. The data were analyzed by identifying themes through constant comparison, including honesty, concern for people, citizen engagement, accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. The results showed Honesty, concern for people, ethics infrastructure, ethics training, public involvement, access to information, openness, responsibility, rule of law, competency, and autonomy were among the main themes. Most participants said leaders were dishonest (88%) and indifferent about the general good (80%). All DAOs ranked ethics infrastructure, information availability, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law as top priorities (100%). Competency was rated well (88%). Ethics training (32%) and autonomy (16%) were less commonly mentioned, but they were nevertheless acknowledged as significant enabling characteristics. Ethical leadership has the potential to improve good governance in Cambodia's district administration system and throughout the administrative hierarchy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

People understand that leadership is necessary in every circumstance. According to the academic analysis of organizational leadership supports [1], leaders are essential to organizational success, efficiency, and transformation. Bass and Steidlmeier [2] asserted that leadership is crucial since it affects any organizational environment, notwithstanding any doubts about its significance. They also said that leadership is often seen as the most important factor in an institution's success or failure. According to O'Connell and Bligh [3], organizational leaders significantly influence how their businesses operate, suggesting that effective leadership is essential to an organization's success. Above all, a vibrant, moral, and effective leader is required. Effective leadership enables a healthy mechanism for innovation and creativity, a sense of purpose and vision, environmental alignment, a resource for establishing a dynamic organizational culture and climate, and the delivery of better, more effective goods and services [4].

1.1 Background of the Study

According to various researchers [5], [6], [7], an increasing proportion of people are concerned about their public representatives' morality and actions. According to Transparency Cambodia [8], these phenomena occur within Cambodia's local administration system, where local inhabitants are dissatisfied with the moral behavior and governing abilities of elected and appointed officials. As expected, district administration authorities have failed to improve long-term socioeconomic growth and public service performance. The failure to meet expectations has harmed trust [9]. Since 1993, the Cambodian government has worked relentlessly to adjust and change the political system in order to foster liberal democracy and a market economy. Several administrative orders were made to implement these new legislations. New organizations and institutions were formed to carry out important public-sector functions. Given the gravity of the issues, Cambodian authorities should be applauded for their efforts and leadership in implementing reforms.

In government or any other organization, ethical behavior is essential to making and carrying out effective policy decisions. It is essential to the advancement of effective administration. The development of public goods and services is unlikely to be successful in the absence of moral governance. CDRI [9] further stated that ethical governance is necessary for democratic and effective government. CDRI [9] further warned that men and women who lack ethical or moral values, or who fail to govern or manage in accordance with such beliefs, cannot establish a good government that does the right things. Put another way, a government cannot effectively rule its citizens if its numerous branches lack moral leaders. Northouse [10] emphasizes the importance of ethics in leadership by stating that leaders support, create, and uphold organizational principles. Establishing democracy in developing nations requires strong local governance supported by moral and open values [11]. Successful government requires participation, accountability, transparency, and responsiveness. These qualities are evident only when successful, morally pure people assume leadership roles in various government agencies.

Concerns about unethical behavior in government, particularly Corruption, have become a global issue, particularly in developing countries such as Cambodia. As a result,

there has been a renewed appeal to abolish Corruption and improve ethical practice in public administration [12], [13]. Ethical leadership appears to play an important role in supporting effective governance at all levels of government. Because of the high rate of misconduct and Corruption that prohibits public officials from providing good governance, Cambodia urgently needs ethical leadership, particularly at the district administration level [8], [14].

1.2 Statement of Problems

If public leaders lack moral integrity, government institutions will be unable to function properly. District administration officials (DAOs) can ethically use their positions to make policy decisions that promote social justice, human rights, economic advancement, and the long-term stability of democratic governance. Given Cambodia's corrupt district administration system [15], [16], [13], [17], ethical leadership has the potential to alter the system, making ethics and practice crucial for good governance results.

According to [16], [13], and [17], effective governance entails protecting people's human rights and using common resources to improve their well-being without discriminating against any individual or group. District administration professionals with a strong ethical foundation understand the moral implications of leadership and are ethically able to advance good government by developing and implementing sound policies that benefit the public [13]. When such leaders are in a position to direct their actions, grassroots-level people will perceive and experience a district administration committed to serving the public good. The study will raise awareness of the importance and necessity of ethics and practice in good governance, and encourage public servants to be ethical in their administration of public affairs.

By virtue of its importance, this study will have its niche in adding to the body of knowledge on ethical leadership and good governance in public administration, particularly in district administrations across Cambodia. One explanation for the lack of understanding of the crucial role ethical leadership can play in strengthening good governance in Cambodian district administration is the scarcity of literature on the importance of ethical leadership in public organizations. It is intended to fill a gap and serve as an effective instrument for teaching public servants, producing institutional leaders, supporting moral leadership in the public sector, and increasing government competence for the greater good.

1.3 Purposes of the Study

The primary purposes of this study were twofold: (1) to gain a thorough understanding of the ethical leadership construct and how it could inspire and sustain good governance in Cambodia's district administration; and (2) to investigate the ethical leadership characteristics and some key factors that make it inevitably necessary for fostering good governance in a public organization, particularly in the district administration.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the purposes of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How ethical are Cambodian DAOs in their behaviour and performance?
2. How do Cambodian district administrators encourage ethical practices in their organizations?
3. How does ethical leadership affect effective governance in the district administration in Cambodia?

1.5 Theoretical Framework of the Study

Research on ethical leadership is still in its early stages [18]. It has touched on several theoretical foundations and is being investigated as part of the broader leadership topic [18], [10]. As a result, numerous theoretical frameworks containing various, yet related, ethical leadership concepts were used in this study. Iles and Macaulay's [19] transformative leadership theory and Burns [20] servant-leadership theory served as the foundations for this research. The ethical theories that served as the conceptual underpinning for the study were utilitarianism, deontology, virtue-character, and justice as fairness. It is impossible to stress the importance of ethical leadership. This is warranted because successful governance is facilitated by leadership, which serves as an important catalyst. Leaders who follow ethical standards base their decisions and actions primarily on public-benefit policies. No government leadership paradigm can effectively advance good governance unless it has a robust ethical component.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Firstly, the findings of this study could help to solve the issue of leadership in Cambodia's public sector. Government was established for the public's benefit and the common good. People with moral integrity and a commitment to ethical leadership must hold positions of influence in government in order to fulfill this critical function. Good governance in the public sector requires public officials to operate morally and ethically. According to [13], people's deteriorating trust in government stems from public officials' lack of moral rectitude. This study is notable because of the breach of faith and trust.

Secondly, this research has the potential to stimulate and result in social change in Cambodia at all levels of government, not just the local level. When morally upright public officials direct public affairs, social and economic development are greatly enhanced. Public authorities advance and preserve democratic governance when residents can get information and participate in democratic processes, when district administration is transparent and accountable, and the rule of law is upheld.

Thirdly, the goal of this study was to educate district administrators and other public officials on the importance of ethical leadership in achieving and maintaining effective governance. The study's results and recommendations may help public officials better understand the relevance of moral leadership in public administration and advance good governance. The study's purpose was to examine the role of ethical and effective leadership in the sub-national administration in Cambodia in promoting social transformation.

Finally, it may contribute to the body of knowledge needed to understand the significance of moral leadership and its role in developing and preserving good governance in the public sector, especially the district administration.

2. METHODS

2.1 Type of Research

The research design for this study was based on the qualitative tradition. According to [21], a qualitative case study approach enables a researcher to examine the topic under consideration thoroughly. The potential of ethical leadership as a viable and successful leadership style remains largely unknown due to a lack of adequate, methodical research [22]. According to [23], a qualitative case study is an effective technique for learning more about an underappreciated phenomenon. Data were collected through interviews and document analysis. In-person interviews were conducted with twenty-five carefully chosen DAOs. Thematic data analysis was used to assess the materials acquired for this investigation. With this understanding of several qualitative research methods, the study decided that a qualitative case study would be acceptable. The researchers are confident that this research will contribute to our understanding of ethical leadership and its potential to promote good governance.

2.2 Research Setting and Respondents

The survey included 150 DAOs from the district administration in southern Cambodia. When selecting this group, accessibility and proximity were important considerations. For this case study, a single local government was chosen to examine the characteristics that influence ethical leadership in fostering good governance in the district administration in Cambodia. The knowledge gained from this case study can be applied to the study of other district administrations, as well as to the other two levels of government (national and sub-national).

This study employed a purposeful sampling technique. This sample method is common in qualitative research [20]. A conscious sampling technique was used to select 25-35 DAOs who had been with the system for at least 5 years and could provide the data needed to address the subject under consideration. The survey included twenty-five civil service personnel who had worked in the system for at least five years but were not in leadership roles. Nonetheless, the case study's conclusions can serve as a resource for all local governments and every public employee in the country. As a case study, it may provide a framework for investigating similar challenges in similar settings [24].

2.3 Research Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

This study is based on a conceptual framework of ethical leadership in the context of developing good governance in district administration. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how ethical leadership can support good governance and, in turn, improve service delivery in the district administration in Cambodia. A case study in a qualitative research approach is often based on data acquired from multiple sources. According to [24], the majority of this information is available in narrative form. McNabb [25] identifies six primary sources from which case study researchers might gather evidence

or data: “documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participation-observation, and physical artifacts” (p. 83). This study interviewed participants and reviewed the district’s supporting documents to assess whether the local district’s leadership style promotes or inhibits good governance. The information gathered from these sources was thoroughly reviewed and documented.

2.3.1 Interview Technique

Interviews are among the most significant approaches for gathering information for a case study [25]. There are various ways for gathering data for a case study, including face-to-face interviews, focus or group interviews, and telephone interviews [26], [27], [28], [29]. According to [28], researchers enjoy using the telephone. To begin the search for potential DAOs, this study contacted the study site’s contact person. The data for this study were collected individually, face-to-face. Due to funding and time constraints, all DAOs in the study were drawn from the same province and the district administration. Phone interviews are becoming increasingly common. Trochim and Donnelly [30] define a telephone interview as “a strategy for obtaining data which allows interpersonal communication without a face-to-face meeting” (p. 512). Unlike taking notes, tape recording allows the interviewer to obtain an exact and verbatim transcript of the interview [28]. All interviews were recorded using a digital audio cassette recorder. Additionally, notes were taken for this inquiry, particularly for specific important data.

Given its importance, 25 DAOs, specifically selected from the district administration where the study was conducted, were interviewed. The name of the district’s administration was kept hidden for security concerns. After questioning 25 DAOs, evidence of duplication and repetition emerged, indicating that ideas had been saturated and that no new material was emerging. The initial targeted sample size was between 25 and 35. Every DAO was knowledgeable and seasoned, with at least 5 years of experience in the district administration system in the Cambodian context. Strategically, codes ranging from DAO-01 to DAO-25 were used to represent the DAOs in order to obscure the individuals’ identities; full descriptions, including their official roles, were excluded from the study.

2.3.2 Interview Questions

The amount of information a researcher collects in qualitative studies, particularly case studies, is generally determined by the phrasing of the questions. Open-ended, unstructured questions are commonly used to generate the detailed information needed for qualitative research [27], [30]. Open-ended questions were used during the interviews, allowing DAOs to express their ideas freely about the issues. A probing method was used during the interviews to elicit more comprehensive information from DAOs. The interview questions were created to be relevant to the research questions. Fontana [32] developed the ethical leadership scale (ELS). For this investigation, a modified questionnaire was used. This adjustment was required to collect meaningful data that addressed the research questions.

The open-ended interview question approach was intended to provide DAOs with the latitude to express themselves; some questions were adjusted to increase clarity. All

1 DAOs were asked the same questions, albeit it was occasionally difficult to maintain the same order. During the interviews, a probing strategy was used as needed to get further information from the individuals. Every DAO was interviewed in person during each session. Before the interview, each DAO completed a consent form and was told of their right to withdraw at any time. All of the interviews were audiotaped and conducted in Khmer, the official language in Cambodia. The verbatim comments made during the interviews on the audiotaped materials were transcribed in compliance with the transcribing process requirements. After examining their transcribed interview responses, this study invited the DAOs to let the researchers know if their perspectives had been neglected or distorted. They all had the researchers' phone numbers. Some of them called to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions.

2.3.3 Documentation Examination

Document inquiry was also used to gather data for this investigation. Leedy and Ormrod [24] asserted that inspecting documents for data collection in a case study is often used to supplement information collected through interviews or observation, despite McNabb [25] arguing that documents should be treated as primary data sources in a qualitative case study. The related district administration documents were analyzed for evidence demonstrating how the organization's administrative principles and rules support moral leadership. The district administration's rules and regulations, as well as the constitution, were investigated.

2.4 Strategy for Data Analysis and Interpretation Procedures

A planned and rigorous strategy is required for a high-quality investigation to justify its findings. The evaluation criteria must be consistent with the philosophical paradigm and serve to inform the research method; a specific methodology or process does not guarantee research quality [33].

2.4.1 Coding Strategy

1 This study's primary qualitative data analysis method is thematic analysis. Using this qualitative analytic technique, the researcher can group the data into codes and subsequently into categories (themes). Fossey et al. [34] state that there is no single best method for analyzing qualitative data. The information collected for this study was organized into electronic files, each with a backup and an identifier for easy identification.

Following the completion of the DAO interviews, data processing proceeded. Before transcribing the spoken document into a written document, the recorded interviews were carefully reviewed several times. After finishing the transcription, the researchers double-checked its accuracy by reading the transcribed document and listening to the audio tape again. The researchers noted words, phrases, or thoughts related to ethical leadership attributes that promote good governance and are necessary for Coding. The researchers established the first codes by employing words, phrases, and concepts to summarize and encapsulate the essential aspects in the raw data that corresponded to moral leadership traits

influencing good governance. The initial codes served as the basis for the topics or categories used to establish meaning and interpretation.

Comparing coded data enabled the identification of correlations and discrepancies, as well as the grouping of related data into themes. The qualities of moral leadership in relation to healthy governance affected the ideas that emerged from this method. The coded material was seized, analyzed, and deleted because it offered no new insights into the topic under examination.

2.4.2 Data Interpretation

Data interpretation requires characterizing and explaining the data's results. Greenleaf [21] defines qualitative case study data analysis as the complete description and analysis of data points to establish evidence for a deeper understanding of the case. The relevance of validity in a qualitative investigation has recently been discussed by various qualitative research professionals [35], [36].

The final analysis of research data often yields a narrative report or discussion that clearly conveys the data's intricate story and supports the analysis's trustworthiness [37]. The writers of this research narrative report sought to chronicle respondents' diverse viewpoints on ethical leadership in order to develop good governance in the district administration in the Cambodian context. The narrative account evaluates and summarizes the data's findings, linking them to the research questions and to the literature review's conclusions on ethical leadership in the context of advancing good governance.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Because human subjects were involved in the study, ethical considerations had to be considered, even if the research's purpose was not to explore humans in general. Scholars have recognized four categories of ethical concerns in research: protection against harm, informed consent, and the right to privacy [38], [27]. According to [23], protection from harm implies that researchers should not subject study participants to unjustifiable physical or psychological distress. The primary criterion is that the hazards involved should not exceed those encountered in normal daily living [23]. The participants were reassured that their involvement would not be used against them.

Another ethical consideration was the right to privacy, which requires researchers to protect participants' privacy [23]. [29] defined anonymity and confidentiality as two components of the right to privacy. Confidentiality standards necessitate that no identifiable information about research participants be shared with anyone other than those actively involved in the project. In contrast, the concept of anonymity requires participants to remain anonymous during the investigation. This study employed the notion of secrecy to represent the right to privacy. The DAOs were assured that their names and answers would be kept strictly confidential and that their identities would be protected in the study through codes to prevent identification.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Results of Data Coding and Recurrent Themes

A coding method is used in qualitative data analysis to collect, organize, and compress nebulous data into themes. The analysis is then presented as a narrative [21]. To provide “meaning and explanation,” the collected data from the documents and interviews were systematically sorted and organized according to emergent patterns [34].

This investigation necessitated multiple cycles or stages of data coding. Tables 1 and 2 show the raw data codification cycles. The raw data were analyzed to identify phrases and ideas that embody the moral leadership attributes that influence good governance. The emerging concepts were constantly compared and then classified into themes or groupings that shared commonalities and patterns that explained meaning. There were inconsistencies in the coded data, which were thoroughly scrutinized before deletion because they did not provide meaningful information on the topic under investigation.

Table 1. Phrases/concepts from the raw data (first cycle coding)

Coded Concepts/Phrases from Interviews	Coded Concepts/Phrases from Documents
Honesty, Trustfulness	Discipline
Concern for People	Integrity
Altruism, Public Interest	Dishonesty
Selflessness	Bribery
Showing Good Examples	Abuse of Office
Reward and Discipline Measure	Corruption
Codes of Conduct	False Claims
Just Wage	Financial Embarrassment
Good Salary	Disobedience of Lawful Order
Fraudulent, Dishonesty, Corruption	
Information Access	
Involvement	
Participation	
Local Government Autonomy	
Stewardship	
Accountability	
Competency	
Open Administration	
Transparency	
Ethics Training	
Rule of Law	

Table 2. Emerging themes and patterns (second cycle coding)

Interviews and Documents: Coded Categories/Themes and Emerging Patterns
Honesty, Concern for People, and Corruption
Ethics, Infrastructure and Ethics Training
Participation and Access to Information
Accountability, Transparency, Rule of Law, and Competency
Autonomy

The classified categories served as the foundation for the study’s themes and analyses. The themes that emerged captured the key notions conveyed in the data, which were linked to ethical leadership attributes that promote good governance.

The data analysis revealed key themes and captured components pertinent to the topic matter. The identified themes represented the key aspects of ethical leadership capable of ensuring good governance in local government and at other levels of government in

Cambodia. The themes are displayed in Table 2 above, and their frequencies are shown in Table 3. Although ethics training and autonomy were less common than others, they were chosen for their usefulness in understanding and promoting the issue under study. Ethics training is critical for promoting ethical practice and ethical leadership sustainability in any company, especially in the public sector.

Table 3. Themes' code frequency: Support from participants

Proposed Themes	Participants' Level Support (n=25)
Honesty	25
Concern for People	25
Ethics Infrastructure	25
Ethics Training	8
Citizens' Participation	24
Access to Information	25
Transparency	25
Accountability	25
Rule of Law	25
Competency	22
Autonomy	4

3.2 Results of Emerging Themes, Patterns and Insights

3.2.1 Honesty, Concern for People, and Corruption

The moral or ethical character of an organization's officials is critical to its ability to provide great governance under true leadership. Every DAO emphasized the need for honesty in genuine leadership. They believed that honesty could significantly increase people's trust and confidence in their leaders and governments. The DAO-20 claims that:

... honesty is essential for effective leadership. If a leader wants to gain the trust and confidence of the people, he or she must be genuine and forthright. A leader can ensure effective government by using public funds to provide essential services such as portable drinking water, affordable healthcare, education, housing, and transportation...

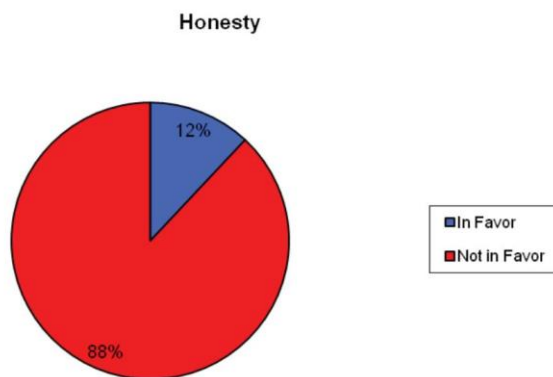


Figure 1. DAOs' perception of the honesty

Figure 1 depicts the DAOs' perspectives on the honesty of local government officials. 22 DAOs (88% of the survey DAOs) believed sub-national officials were primarily dishonest, while 3 DAOs (12%) believed they were honest. It appears that the majority of

those in leadership positions in district administration and at other levels of government are dishonest. According to DAOs, the majority of sub-national government officials are dishonest in their activities and conduct.

All of the DAOs agreed that good and effective leaders should care about their followers in order to provide effective governance. Having the people's interests in mind allows officials to use their authority and resources to advance agendas that benefit the public as a whole rather than pursuing personal or particular-group interests.

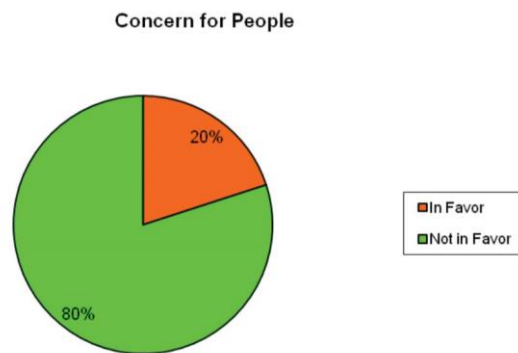


Figure 2. DAOs' perception of the concern of sub-national officials for the people

As shown in Figure 2, 20 or 80% of DAOs stated that local officials are unconcerned about the public interest, whereas 5 or 20% believed that sub-national officials care about the people's interests. However, all DAOs agreed that public officials must genuinely care about people in order to commit to meaningful and successful governance. Good and ethical leaders prioritize the interests of the people in their administration because they grasp the ethical implications of leadership.

3.2.2 Ethics Infrastructure

Good governance is only conceivable and achievable in organizations with a strong ethical foundation and practice. Ethical leaders have the power to shape the workplace climate in which ethical activity is prioritized. Recognizing the significance of ethical practice in promoting good governance, ethical leaders must establish and enforce an ethics infrastructure, which includes, but is not limited to, good leadership examples, codes of conduct, ethics coordination bodies, supportive public service conditions, an effective legal framework, and an effective accountability mechanism.

As shown in Figure 3, all 25 DAOs interviewed agreed on the importance of the ethical infrastructure's role in fostering ethical practice in government organizations. DAOs acknowledged the presence of some parts of ethical infrastructure in the system, but many pointed out that those elements are ineffectual due to a lack of enforcement.

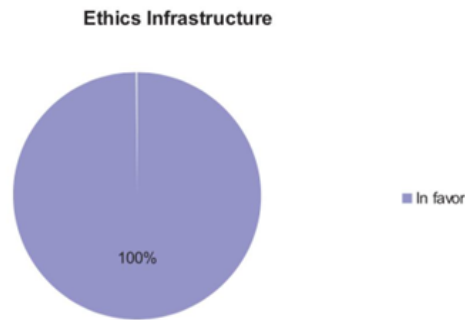


Figure 3. DAOs' opinions about the importance of ethical infrastructure in engendering ethical practice in the district administration

The leaders' activities must be guided by the norms, principles, and regulations of the public service; they must lead by demonstrating appropriate behavior in accordance with public service ethics. Based on DAO-01,

...Effective leadership involves setting a positive example and emphasizing the value of ethics and practice. A leader's failure to set a positive example can have a lasting impact on the organization...

3.2.3 Ethics Training / Education

Another key theme that emerged from the data was ethics training. This theme was chosen not because of its frequency in the data collection, but because of its significance in supporting ethical activity in an organization. Ethics training is an important strategy for instilling ethical ideals in individuals and equipping them with the skills to make ethical decisions. Several respondents emphasized the need for ethical training for all local council personnel, including those in leadership roles and other staff members (DAO-02; DAO-10; DAO-19; DAO-21; and DAO-24). DAO-21 stated: *"I believe that ethics and morality training will assist public officials in developing healthy moral principles, allowing them to make ethical decisions and act appropriately"*.

DAO-24 stated that *"to raise awareness about the value of ethical practice, the district administration organizes seminars, workshops, training, and campaigns. I believe that ethical training will improve systemic practice."* Ethics training makes employees aware of norms and regulations and equips them to make sound decisions when confronted with an ethical quandary. Ethics training reinforces the notion that breaking ethical norms or rules is unacceptable in the organization. The effectiveness of ethics infrastructure in creating a climate for ethics and practice in any organization depends primarily on leadership's commitment to ethics and practice. According to the study's findings, ethical leadership is required to create a positive atmosphere for ethical practice in Cambodia's district administration system.

3.2.4 Citizen Participation and Access to Information

The survey data revealed topics such as citizens' involvement in electing their leaders through a voting system during political elections and in decision-making processes. They stated that no political elections to elect the district council chairman had taken place.

Citizens' Participation

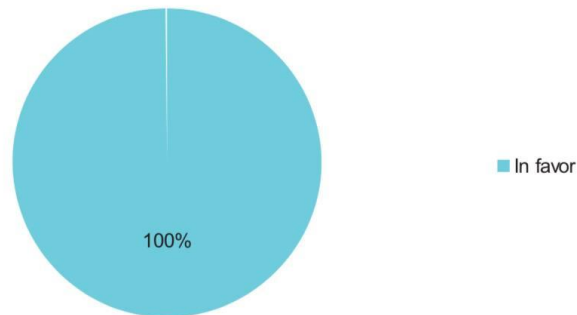


Figure 4. DAOs' perception about citizens' participation for promoting good governance in the district administration

As Figure 4 shows, 25 (100%) of the DAOs interviewed agreed that people's participation in election and decision-making processes is critical for promoting effective governance at the grassroots level. DAOs believed that democratically elected council leaders would better reflect the interests of the people than those appointed by the council.

Many DAOs argued that the absence of district council elections negatively impacts democratic development and grassroots governance. DAO-04 said:

...The absence of local council elections in the state hinders effective governance under the local government system. This implies that locals are unable to vote. For their preferred leaders. Elections play a critical role in democracy and governance...

DAOs expressed concern that there had been no district council elections in Cambodia in a long time. "The existing sub-national authority system was established with the goal of ensuring democracy and good governance at the grassroots level...In sum, democracy is not practiced here. How can democracy exist without elections?" (DAO-08).

Data analysis identified access to information as a critical aspect for good governance, which ethical leadership will ensure. The respondents believed that making information available to the public about how the council's officials do their business was critical to improving democracy. DAO-07 states that "access to information is key in democracy since democracy is the district administration by the people and for the people; it is vital that people have access to knowing what is happening in their district". Citizens under a democratic system of government have the right to access information about their government, allowing them to understand what their representatives are doing. One advantage of access to information is that it allows citizens to monitor the activities of their government officials, which is critical to ensuring effective governance. Figure 7 depicts DAOs' perspectives on the importance of access to information to good governance in district administration.

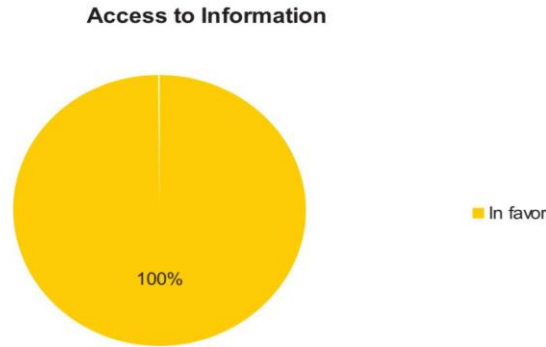


Figure 5. DAOs' opinion regarding information accessibility vis-à-vis good governance in the district administration

As illustrated in Figure 5, all 25 DAOs (100%) agreed that access to information is required for good governance. Regarding whether residents have access to information in the council, a number of respondents answered that some information is provided, but critical information concerning the operation of the council's administration is kept from the public. DAO-07 stated that "when citizens come to district administration, they are given incomplete and filtered information, which, for me, is not access to information. I believe that individuals should be provided with complete information about their district government. Our district administration is quite secretive." According to certain responses, only traditional rulers and the president general of town unions receive some information, not regular citizens (DAO-01, DAO-06, and DAO-25).

3.2.5 Transparency, Accountability, Rule of Law, and Competency

According to the study's findings, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law are required to achieve effective governance in all levels, including the district administration. DAOs believed that ethical leadership can ensure and sustain transparency, accountability, and the rule of law for good governance in the district administration system in the Cambodian context.

All DAOs agreed that openness, which holds government officials accountable and combats corruption, is vital to encouraging good governance, especially in the public sector. Transparency requires that government activities, meetings, budgets and financial accounts, and decision-making processes be transparent to both the public and the media.

As shown in Figure 6, all 25 DAOs, or 100%, stated that transparency is critical for good governance and agreed that the existence of ethical leadership will enhance transparency in the council. DAO-03 emphasized the need for transparency within the council, stating:

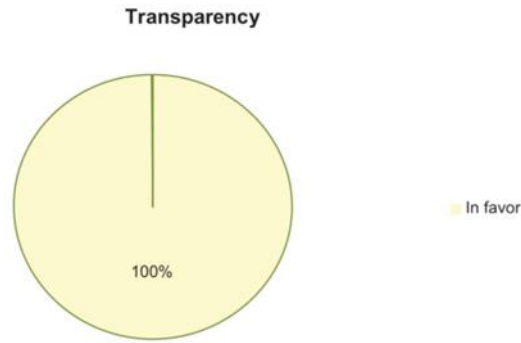


Figure 6. DAOs' view about the importance of transparency vis-à-vis the promotion of good governance in the district administration

...District administration is not personal property, so council officials must maintain transparency and openness when doing district administration operations. Citizens have the right to know how officials use the power and resources provided to them. The district authority is owned by locals...

Transparent public authorities are also held accountable. They are transparent in their approach to public affairs and routinely provide people with information on what is happening in the government, how their money is spent on capital projects, and how the administration operates.



Figure 7. DAOs' impression regarding the importance of accountability vis-à-vis the achievement of good governance in the district administration

Figure 7 shows that all 25 DAOs (100%) agree that accountability is essential to ensuring good government. They thought that only ethical leaders could promote the accountability required for democratic governance. Transparency and accountability are inextricably linked, and one cannot exist without the other (DAO-19). Accountability of public officials requires informing, explaining, or justifying to the public what they have done or failed to accomplish with the resources entrusted to them. To ensure good democratic administration, voters must be able to hold their public officials accountable for their actions, which may not be possible if council members are not elected through a

democratic voting system. The selected officials will be accountable to the one who appointed them rather than to the people (DAO-09).

The rule of law was another recurring element in the data. DAOs believed that the rule of law is essential for ensuring ethical behavior and effective governance in the government. They felt that the presence of ethical leadership would ensure successful rule of law enforcement in the district administration and the public sector as a whole.

Figure 8 below shows that all 25 DAOs (100 percent) agreed that the rule of law is critical to establishing good governance. They believe that following the rule of law will ensure good governance outcomes by preventing and reducing Corruption among DAOs in Cambodia.

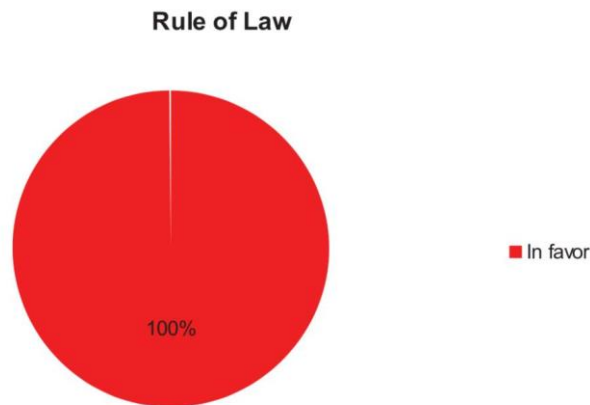


Figure 8. DAOs' impression about the importance of the rule of law toward promoting good governance in the district administration

According to DAOs, the overall governance crisis is primarily caused by a lack of effective implementation of the rule of law. Some respondents stated that Cambodia is a lawless country; anyone with connections and/or political and/or financial clout can and does engage in unlawful behavior, including criminal activity, without hesitation because they can circumvent the law (DAO-08; DAO-17; and DAO-19).

The statistics demonstrated the relevance of people's expertise in ensuring efficient and successful administration. Competent district administration personnel are more likely to provide efficient and effective services than incompetent officers. Cambodia's district administration system has been criticized for being inefficient and ineffectual due to a lack of skilled and qualified workers. The data revealed that there have been some beneficial developments in this area.

As shown in Figure 9, 22% or 88% of DAOs believed that sub-national officials were capable of carrying out their tasks, whereas 3% or 12% believed that authorities were inept. A significant proportion of DAOs noted that most district authorities are skilled experts in their respective disciplines.

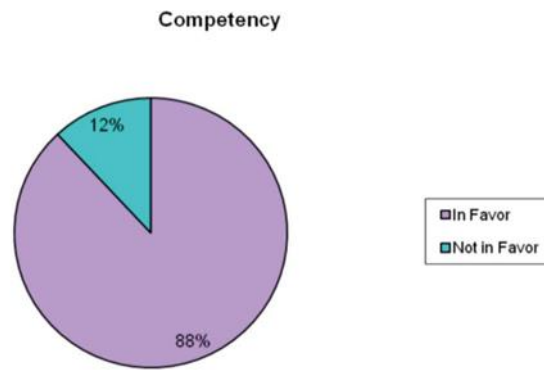


Figure 9. DAOs' view on their competency

In support, some other respondents noted a positive improvement in the competency of local government officials; they noted that in the past, DAOs were considered incompetent, but now the council has competent officials and workers with graduate degrees and who are professionals in their fields; they are competent and efficient in carrying out their official duties (DAO-01; DAO-02; DAO-10; and DAO-19). However, some DAOs stated that some officials were not competent but were appointed through nepotism or Corruption (DAO-08; DAO-14).

3.2.6 autonomy

As previously stated, autonomy was not popular in the data set but was chosen because it was relevant to the subject matter. Some respondents, DAO-09, DAO-10, DAO-15, and DAO-19, noted that, despite the constitutional recognition of the district administration system as a third-tier government, it is viewed as an appendix to government. DAO-19 stated that the constitution does not guarantee district administration complete sovereignty, allowing governments to interfere with its activities. This setup appears to favor Corruption and, as a result, renders councils incapable of providing goods and services to citizens. According to the respondents, this issue must be addressed and altered if district administrations are to provide ethical leadership and excellent governance.

DAOs' responses to interview questions are typically based on their perceptions about the subject. Typically, these persons' perceptions, recorded in the form of data, are considered reliable, provided they do not contribute any important knowledge regarding the subject under consideration. The data from 25 DAOs, collected through personal interviews and used in this study, were deemed credible and instructive regarding ethical leadership in support of good governance. Their perceptions were consistent with the components of ethical leadership that influence effective governance outlined in the literature review: honesty, caring for people, modeling and enforcing ethical practice, accountability, and transparency, among others.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Discussion of the Research Question 1

The first research question inquired about the perceptions of DAOs' honesty and concern for citizens in terms of how they carried out their tasks. The DAOs agreed that honesty is critical and unavoidable in every company, especially in public organizations, to

achieve organizational goals. The data suggest that many municipal politicians lack honesty and concern for citizens' plights. District authorities' primary focus is not on how to use public resources to promote the social, economic, and human development of the local population, but rather on using them for personal gain. The governance crisis in the district administration system in the Cambodian context is significantly associated with public officials' dishonesty and greed. District administration jobs are considered very lucrative businesses, not because of the appealing wages, but because officials at all levels understand how to use the system to their own benefit. For example, every election in Cambodia is treated very seriously because politicians and supporters perceive politics as a quick way to get money. Ethical leaders prioritize people and make judgments and choices guided by moral values that have a significant, beneficial impact on them [39], [40]. Ethical leaders are transformative leaders; they inspire and organize their people to strive for greater ethical standards in order to attain the common good [41].

4.2 Discussion of the Research Question 2

The second research question examined how DAOs foster an organizational climate conducive to ethical practice. This study question looked at how DAOs worked to create an environment that ensured ethical practice in the council. DAOs stated that the presence of ethical infrastructure would create an environment conducive to ethical practice in local governments. They agreed that leaders' positive examples of following the code of conduct were critical for setting the ethical tone across a company. They believed that when officials led by example, that is, by adhering to the rules and principles of public service ethics in their actions and decisions, it served to convey a strong signal that the administration was committed to ethical practice. Officials may influence people by setting good examples. Fontana et al. [32] discovered that ethical leaders model appropriate behavior and explain the relevance of ethics in order to make ethical practice a salient issue in the business. However, this study found that many district administration officials did not model proper behavior or explain the importance of ethical practice, thereby hindering the development in a conducive climate for ethical practice. When public officials lack integrity and disregard the public service code of conduct in their actions and behavior, they create a hostile climate for ethical practice.

According to the study's findings, establishing an effective code of conduct within the district administration is critical to raising awareness that ethical practice is a priority for the council. The code of conduct defines what is appropriate inside an organization. Where it is efficient and effective, it contributes significantly to establishing an organizational atmosphere conducive to ethical activity. If every organizational member, from the top to the bottom, is aware of the code of conduct and makes honest efforts to behave and act in accordance with its prescriptions, an outsider will quickly realize that ethical practice is the key to the organization's mode of operation. However, code alone cannot build an ethical climate; leaders' commitment to ethical activity must accompany it [42], [6]. It is suggested that low pay in the public sector in less developed countries contributes to bureaucratic Corruption. To explain the link between Corruption and civil service wages, the efficiency wage and fair wage theories were proposed [43], [44].

4.3 Discussion of the Research Question 3

In the third research question, the study sought to examine the potential impact of ethical leadership on good governance. This question sought to investigate the ethical leadership's capacity to enhance good governance in promoting citizen involvement, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law in the district administration. Good governance can only be built and thrive when men and women of integrity hold positions of power in government [7]. The researchers also emphasized the importance of ethical leadership in achieving successful and democratic governance. The participants agreed that ethical leadership could ensure democratic governance. Citizens have the right to know what the government is doing; their rights are based on the inalienable right to know [45]. Corruption in the public sector is relatively low in nations with strong systems of accountability, whereas Corruption in the public sector is considerable in countries with weak institutions of accountability [46].

Accountability is key to improving good government. Accountability and transparency are so tightly intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. Accountability, in essence, demands that public officials answer to the people for their stewardship and subject themselves to scrutiny as needed and appropriate to their position. To build a healthy, ethical government that promotes good governance, individuals of integrity must oversee government affairs. It is widely considered that ethical leadership has the potential to institutionalize ethics and practice while also promoting good governance in the Cambodian district administration system and the public sector in general.

5. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated the crucial role of moral leadership in promoting good governance in a public-sector company in Cambodia. The majority of district administrations were found to be dishonest and uncaring toward the public, which hindered their capacity to uphold moral principles and encourage moral leadership in the DAO's management. The study emphasized the need for morally upright public servants in order to cultivate moral leadership for the advancement of sound and efficient administration. Ethical municipal authorities will use the public resources entrusted to them to advance good governance, including promoting socioeconomic development and democratic values, rather than pursuing their own interests.

The study also emphasized the importance of an ethical infrastructure to foster and sustain an atmosphere conducive to ethical behavior in the council. Ethically focused leadership would foster an environment that enables ethical behavior within the company. The results showed that the district administration's lack of ethical leadership resulted in an inadequate ethical environment. Ethical leaders will use ethical infrastructure to achieve the necessary results because they understand the importance of an ethical environment in promoting ethical practice.

The study also found that moral leadership can support democratic sub-national administration. Good governance will be advanced by DAOs that uphold moral and ethical standards. Such moral leaders will respect and uphold the rule of law, administer an open

and responsible district, and increase citizens' access to information and their active involvement in politics. According to the DAOs, ethical leadership will increase the likelihood of democratic governance in Cambodia at all levels of government, including the sub-national level.

In public organizations where public officials are empowered to oversee public resources, ethical leadership is essential. Men and women of moral character who can instill and encourage moral behavior within the system must assume leadership roles in order to fulfill this precious and crucial duty. Effective and good governance in Cambodian sub-national administration requires ethical leadership.

By virtue of its importance, recommendations for future research were proposed: (1) the shortcomings of this study should be addressed in future research. It is limited in scope because participants were selected from only one province and one district administration in the country's south. The scope was selected with time and financial constraints in mind. A longitudinal study that broadens the scope might produce more significant results; (2) future research might examine district administration to determine how each model promotes or hinders democratic governance at the grassroots level. Democracy and its governance, which are based on ethical leadership, cannot thrive unless they reach the grassroots; and (3) future research should involve politicians to gain their perspectives on ethical leadership as a realistic strategy of promoting democratic governance in the country, as the study interviewed no politicians but only sub-national authorities.

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