

Ethical Leadership and Business Practices: A Case Study of Small Businesses in Eastern Turkey Amidst Challenges

**Joel Nickell, Jeffrey Moore,
Taner Yildirim, & Ayham Almahlh**

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Joel Nickell,

Consortium for Global Education, Research Fellow

Jeffrey Moore, PhD

Anderson University, College of Business

Taner Yıldırım, PhD

Fırat Üniversitesi, College of Humanities and Social Science

Ayham Almahlh

Abstract

In recent years, Turkey's economy has faced a series of challenges, including an economic crisis, high inflation rates, and natural disasters. In times of crisis, the temptation to compromise ethics for immediate survival can be strong. However, maintaining strong business ethics has been proven to yield better results in the long run. This study focuses on the ethical landscape of small businesses in Eastern Turkey, aiming to understand how ethical practices are established, sustained, and impact society. By analyzing the experiences of business owners and managers, this research seeks to offer insights that can be replicated for the betterment of the country.

Keywords: Small Business, Eastern Turkey, Ethical Practices.

INTRODUCTION

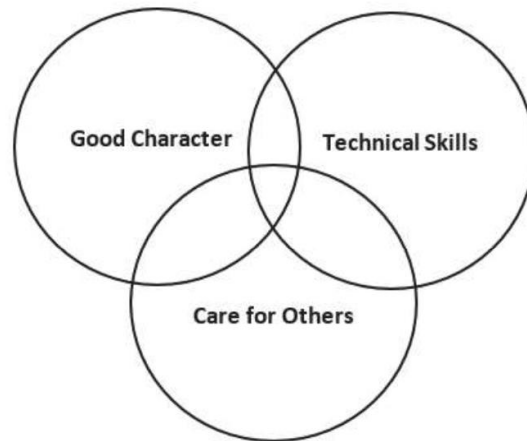
Turkey has encountered significant economic turbulence, marked by an economic crisis (Shlimon & Kazem, 2021) and soaring inflation rates. At the end of 2021, its inflation rate reached a record of 36.08% (Özer, Grubişic, Küçüksakarya, 2023). To make matters worse, the country experienced devastating earthquakes. While such crises can encourage ethical compromises, evidence suggests that upholding business ethics is a strategic advantage (Zheng, Luo, Wang, 2013). During times of crises', it can be tempting to abandon one's ethics for the sake of immediate survival, but business ethics have proven to outperform businesses with poor ethics (Zheng, Luo, Wang, 2013). Furthermore, a disregard for ethics can contribute to societal decline, as history has shown. Murphy (2005), quotes a Roman author saying: "our moral decline made us unable to "endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them." The objective of this study is to investigate the ethical practices of small businesses in Eastern Turkey, exploring their establishment, perpetuation, and societal effects. This research aims to facilitate the dissemination of valuable findings that could contribute to Turkey's progress.

Ethics is an integral aspect of effective management, fostering employee loyalty and trust. Ethical business leaders serve as role models, guiding their teams to create a culture of respect, trust, and accountability. Ethical business conduct extends to employee treatment, customer interactions, and social responsibility. The link between ethical leadership and successful outcomes is well-established, particularly in fostering teamwork and motivating employees to excel. Friedman & Friedman (1988) said, "ethics is at the heart of good management". Employees are seen to be more loyal and trusting of good and ethical managers (Elçi, Kitapçi, & Ertürk, 2007). Moore & Hanson present the ideal ethical Moroccan business

leader as having good character, adequate technical skills, and a care for others (see Figure 1), (Moore & Hanson, 2017).

Figure 1

BUSINESS ROLE MODEL ATTRIBUTES



If the manager is not ethical then employees will seek their own interests (Tyler, 2005). Turkey has witnessed financial success from entrepreneurs who create a culture of ethical upstanding within their companies. Employees who buy into the company’s vision seek not only the good of the company, but also the good of their country (Uygur, Spence, Simpson, & Karakas, 2017). These ethically aware entrepreneurs see their financial success as a way to give back and improve their country for the greater good (Uygur, Spence, Simpson, & Karakas, 2017). Thousands of schools in Turkey and abroad have been started by these entrepreneurs (Yavuz, 2003; Yılmaz, 2005).

The importance of knowing Turkish business ethics is not just helpful for Turks, but also for anyone doing business with Turks. If you are doing business with another country and you are ignorant of their ethical systems, then it allows great risk of damaging your company’s

reputation and trust within your stakeholders (Oumlil & Balloun, 2009: 457). As the world increases in globalization it will be even more important to know non-Western ethical systems.

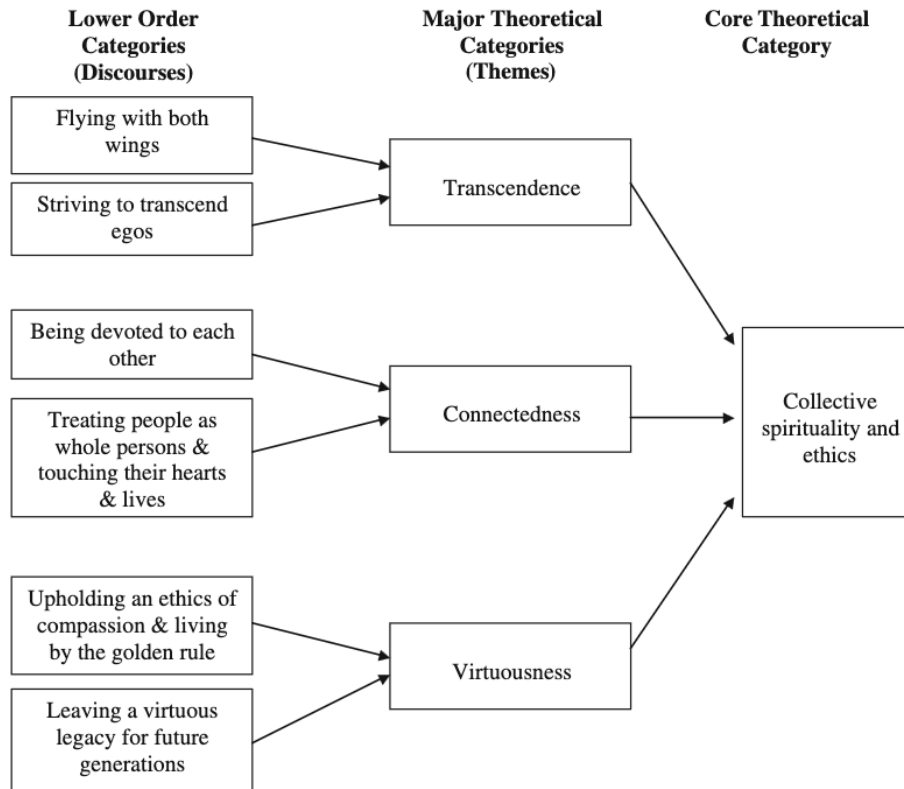
Cultural Perspective

Turkey is uniquely located between Europe and the Middle East. Its major city, Istanbul, is the only city in the world that is on two continents (Europe and Asia). This unique positioning has resulted in an influx of Western culture to a traditionally labeled middle eastern country. This has made Turkey often seen as one of the most modern middle eastern countries. Traditionally it has had a better economy with its Turkish Lira stronger than most of its Middle Eastern currencies' counterparts.

Despite Turkey's strong economy and western influence, its culture is still very different from a traditionally Western countries' culture. While Turkey was officially founded as a secular state, several signs demonstrate that religion continues to be a core value in the country which greatly affects its workplaces. The Turkish national flag has the Islamic symbol on it. Turkey's population is 99% Muslim (US State department, 2018). It is mandatory for every Turkish child to attend Islamic religion classes from elementary until high school. The state heavily funds the Presidency of Religious Affairs, (Diyanet) which is a state institution mandated to "promote and enable the practice of Sunni Islam" (US State department, 2018). It funds every imam (Muslim priest) in the country and even sends imams abroad. Its budget was over 2 billion Turkish Lira in 2016 (Öztürk, 2016). The Diyanet writes every Friday sermon that every imam across the country and abroad reads at their mosque. These facts show that Islam has a major effect in the culture of the country and even the identity of the Turkish person that most Western countries lack (Waxman, 1997). One study showed that every participant felt accountable to God and their success in this life directly affects their eternal life. At the same time, they still sought modern

technology and sciences to further their businesses. This principle was described as “Flying with both wings” see Figure 2 (Karakas, Sarigollu, Kavas 2014).

Figure 2



Another study showed Turks’ religiosity improved their mental toughness, mindfulness, and political skill in the workplace. It shared how important it was to promote religious friendly environments in the workplace (Wang, Chi, Erkılıç, 2021). For Western companies, a religious friendly workplace is going to look different than a Middle Eastern company’s religiously friendly workplace. One clear difference is having a specific room for Muslims to conduct their

daily prayers. This is one of many differences that Western companies must learn to have effective businesses and partnerships in the Middle East.

An important cultural element that we used in our survey is the Ahi system. The Ahi system was brought forth in the Ottoman empire that started among tradesman for the purpose of honest relationships and building their society (Baz, 2015). One study summarized the basic mission of Ahkism as “to achieve perfect communities by training excellent individuals, serve humanity and the people...” The Ahi system “institutionalized over time... to organize the relationship between producer and consumer in best way and to make honesty dominant over business life” (Uyar & Erdoğan, 2005). The foundation of the organization was ethics and the organization “raised upon it” (Karatop, Karahan, & Kubat, (2011). The Ahi organization was so successful and respected that one study called it “the greatest and most organized non-governmental organization instituted in the Ottoman state” (Ülger, Ülger (2005).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research inquiry for this case study centers around the question, "How does manager ethical behaviors impact Eastern Turkish small business? Our supporting questions follows: “How do we establish and sustain ethical practices? Queries that explore the 'how' facets naturally lend themselves to the development of theories and models aimed at understanding and potentially resolving the issues or challenges being investigated (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Yin, 2003).

The grounded theory case study methodology boasts a distinctive capacity, merging elements such as a) real-life observations, b) interviews, and c) archival records, thereby yielding insights that can be extrapolated to broader contexts (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). Notably, the

contextual backdrop and the artifacts within the work environment assume pivotal roles in furnishing significance to the outcomes. Our overarching aim is to employ the research findings to shape a dynamic model (Yin, 2003) that encapsulates the process of fostering and embedding ethical values. This study is fundamentally underpinned by a constructionist epistemological perspective, wherein the collective interpretation – and thereby the values – are engendered by the members of the organization (Crotty, 2003). Our methodology for data collection and analysis gravitates toward qualitative techniques, conducive to unearthing the collective organizational beliefs, values, and norms inherent in the workforce. Qualitative methods meticulously deconstruct data, aggregating or "abstracting" it through thematic analysis (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach minimizes individual viewpoints, while accentuating the collective stance. In essence, we elevate data to a level where the perspectives of the participants harmonize.

Data Collection

In the realm of qualitative research, data can be harnessed through interviews, observations, and artifacts. Our observational data collection transcended mere observation of individual or group behaviors; it encompassed informal interactions with employees. Furthermore, we noted artifacts, including company communication and cultural elements that shape the ambience of the workplace (photographs, displayed values, exhibit cases, etc.).

These interviews were carried out on-site in a private setting to afford frontline participants a sense of confidentiality and to eliminate extraneous disturbances. Participants were duly informed of the voluntary nature of these interviews, with the freedom to withdraw at any point. Our interview structure encompassed semi-structured, open-ended questions designed to

delve into the 'how' and 'why' of issues, allowing us to clarify and pursue emergent themes until we reached data saturation.

This was a qualitative study with 14 questions on the conducted surveys. Twenty surveys were distributed to small business owners or managers. None of the participants managed more than 20 employees, while most managed under 10. Only one of the manager participants was a woman. The surveys were either given to the managers and the manager filled out the surveys on their own time or they were interviewed directly. The age range of participants vary from mid 30s to mid 60s. All the participants were Turkic people (Turks, Kurds, or Zazas) except for three Arab refugees (2 Syrians and 1 Iraqi). The participants worked in a variety of business sectors: government education, medical professionals, tradesmen, realtors, salesmen, food industry, etc. All the participants reside and work in Elazığ, Turkey.

Analysis

To navigate the qualitative data, we drew upon Strass and Corbin's (1990) three-step coding approach, renowned for its rigorous analytical procedures. In the realm of open coding, we disassembled interview data into phrases. In axial coding, we meticulously sorted and resorted related data, grouping them into overarching categories and subcategories that encapsulated content or meaning. Subsequently, we engaged in selective coding, pinpointing the central or core category. This step also entailed comprehending the relationships between categories. When constructing process models, this phase could elucidate the sequential flow of activities that culminate in the phenomenon under scrutiny. Each of these steps was meticulously documented with coding notes, meticulously tracing each progression and eventual conclusions.

As a product of our thorough analysis, we formulated an initial model encapsulating the pivotal organizational values and behaviors imperative for effective leadership. To validate this

model, we subjected our findings to participant scrutiny through a member check, ensuring that the conclusions remained rooted in organizational perspectives, devoid of researcher bias (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

FINDINGS

This study was driven by a twofold inquiry: probing into the impact of ethical management practices in small businesses in Eastern Turkey, and understanding the process of instilling and upholding ethical practices. In the course of this exploration, ethical leadership emerged as a pivotal determinant.

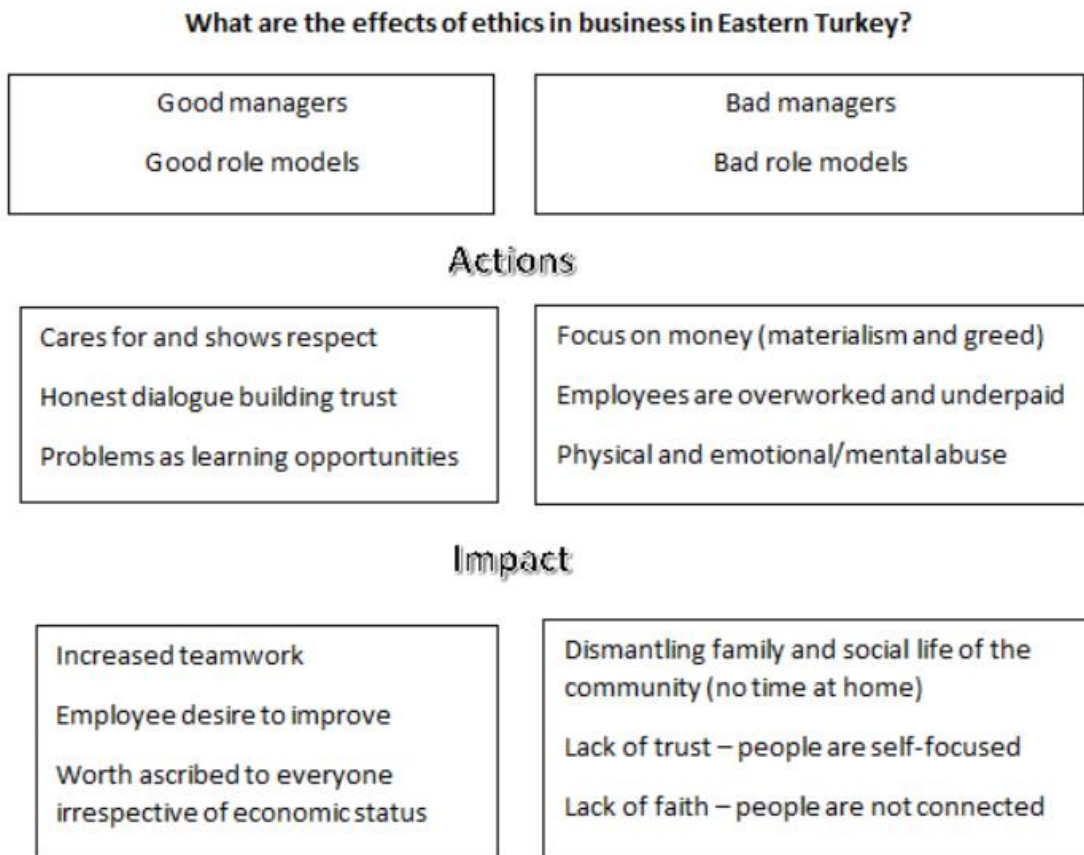
Impact of ethical management practices: Role models

Notably, the influence of ethical role models manifested as a crucial factor, fostering a climate of trust, collaboration, and motivation within the employee cohort. In contrast, leadership that accentuated materialism and monetary gains engendered adverse consequences, resulting in overburdened personnel, strained family dynamics, and a decline in trust levels. Challenges surfaced in the form of economic pressures and the sway of the media, while historical values and faith exerted a positive influence on the practice of ethics.

Regarding the first facet of inquiry (depicted in Figure 3), several salient discoveries came to light. The profound significance of adept managerial wisdom stood out as a resounding revelation. An ethical manager not only assumes the role of a commendable role model but also exhibits genuine concern and respect for others. Such managers foster an environment characterized by transparency and trust, thereby nurturing a collaborative milieu. Their impact further extends to cultivating enhanced teamwork among their staff, and they actively fuel their employees' drive for improvement. Conversely, the detrimental impact of managers fixated on monetary gains and materialistic pursuits was starkly evident. Such managerial practices

invariably translated into overburdened and undercompensated employees, which, in turn, unraveled into the disintegration of familial units and a pervasive erosion of relational trust.

Figure 3



The narratives collected during the study, as encapsulated in Table 1, paint a vivid picture of these dynamics. The assertion that "managers are role models" resonates deeply, underscoring the profound ripple effect of managerial conduct. This sentiment was further corroborated by the practice of transparently addressing issues, as underscored by the quote "we meet constantly and never cover up problems." Additionally, the ethos of equality and shared learning was notably embraced, as illuminated by the statement, "we meet together and learn from everyone, everyone is treated equally."

TABLE 1
What are the effects of ethics in business in Eastern Turkey?

Ethical role model	Representative Quotes
<p>Good Leadership Ethical role model</p> <p>Actions: Cares & shows respect</p>	<p>Managers are role models, if they're good then workers are good if they're bad then they're bad. If the boss is good then the employees are good.</p> <p>Managers need to show they care for their employees needs/wants and try to fulfill them. Apply the rules and rights to the employees. Give them their rights and benefits because we are like family.</p>
<p>Honest & builds trust</p>	<p>The foundation of our work is to be honest. If you are honest and truthful to your customers and employees then they will be honest to you. You need to have an honest heart and mind. Whatever is in your heart and mind, that will guide your actions. If you do not act honestly then you will lose trust from your employees and customers.</p>
<p>Problems as learning opportunities</p> <p>Impact: Increased teamwork</p>	<p>We meet constantly and never cover up problems. We take suggestions from employees seriously even from entry level employees. We are comfortable to share anything with each other. Even ethics outside of our occupation are important to us.</p> <p>We always need to be careful and attentive, I need to give my patients ethical treatment. With time I get tired but as we work together and learn each other (employees and managers) the work gets easier because we know everyone's strengths and weaknesses.</p>
<p>Employee desire to improve</p>	<p>But for people who want to grow, we become more experienced and improve ourselves then we can be more ethical.</p> <p>We also tell our employees to welcome people when they come in and be polite when they leave regardless of whether or not they buy anything. We teach our employees to help whoever comes into the door.</p>
<p>Worth ascribed to everyone irrespective of eco. status</p>	<p>We teach our employees to never raise the price of a book that is set. Some places when they see a rich person or a foreigner then they may say a higher price. We always say the same price.</p>
<p>Negative Leadership Non-ethical role model</p> <p>Actions:</p>	<p>If the boss is bad then the employees can't be good or efficient.</p> <p>People are becoming blind by money</p>

Focus on money (materialism & greed)	Bosses are going blind by money as time goes on
Employees are overworked and underpaid	Right now our personnel number is low, low salary, high performance expectation, and high stress level job
Physical and emotional/mental abuse	Employees are not comfortable at the workplace, The employee deserves his/her salary (for example they may get paid very little or below min wage), physical or mental abuse (would cause their motivation to decrease), these all negatively impact the ethics and make them cold to working and being good employees
<u>Impact:</u>	We don't spend enough time with our family or friends and our ethics get worse
Dismantling family and social life (no time at home)	Trust is no more. Instead of getting help from your family or friends, you go to the bank for a loan.
Lack of trust – people are self-focused	In a smaller area, we found something similar to this between 6-7 shops. It was good until they invested the money poorly and then it went bankrupt. Now trust is broken. Ottomans had a good system, trust was good, but now it's terrible, Dads don't trust their own sons.
Lack of faith – people are not connected	

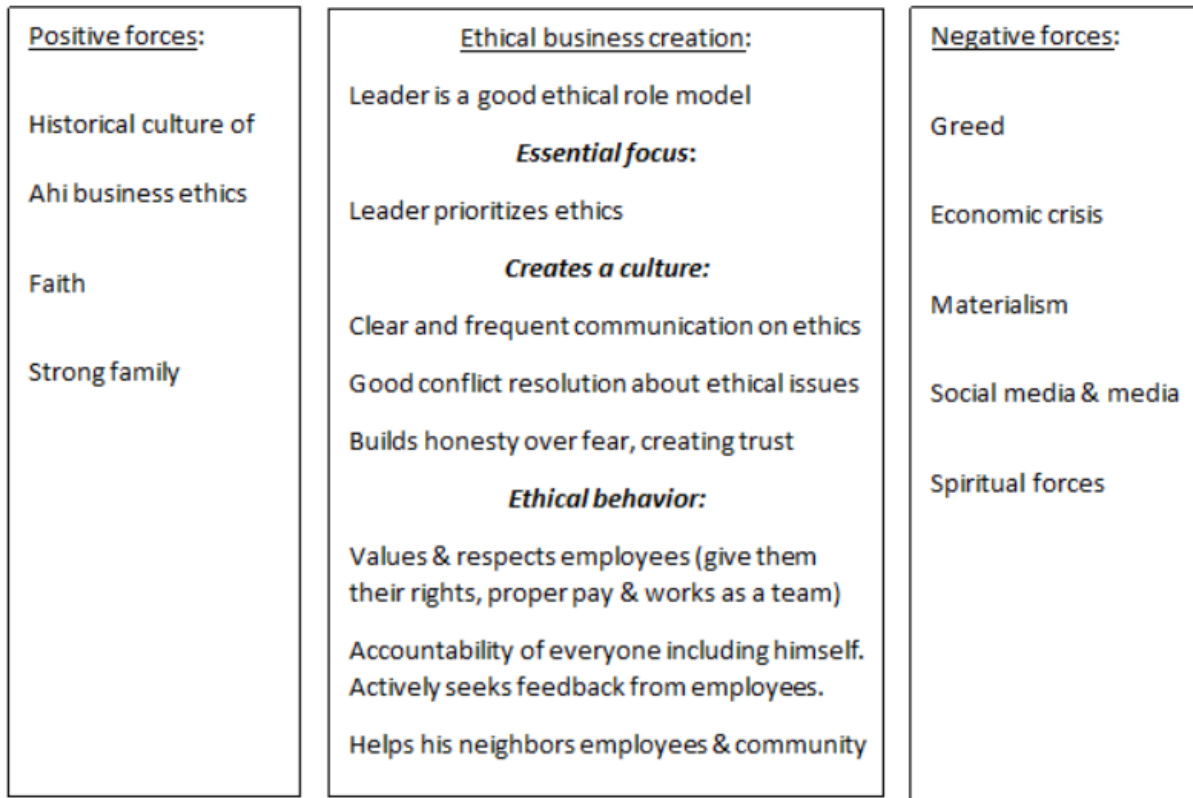
A somber undercurrent was unearthed – the alarming number of managers who exhibited a reluctance to provide their employees with their due rights, encompassing minimum wage and benefits. The dark allure of financial gains seemed to blind these managers to ethical considerations. Two poignant quotes from the participants (Table 1) succinctly encapsulate this reality. “Right now our personnel number is low, low salary, high performance expectation, and high stress level.” The second, “We don’t spend enough time with our family or friends and our ethics get worse” unveils the human toll extracted by these unscrupulous practices.

Establishing and sustaining ethical practices

How do you create and sustain an ethical business? Foremost is the presence of a competent and principled leader. The leader assumes the crucial role of championing ethics within the organizational framework. This commitment is reflected in the establishment of a culture characterized by open and effective communication, alongside a foundation of trust that invariably fosters a climate conducive to ethical conduct. This intricate process, as delineated in Figure 4, is influenced by an array of factors that either bolster or undermine the ethical fabric of the workplace.

Figure 4

How do you create & sustain an ethical business?



They create a culture of good communication and trust that leads to good ethical behavior. In Figure 4 you see on the sides are positive and negative forces in the culture that influence the workplace. On the negative side, you see greed, an economic crisis, media, and spiritual forces. On the positive side, you see a history of good ethics dating back to the ottoman empire with faith and family. Note this important quote, “the lack of family life caused a depreciation in ethics” (Table 1). One emerging theme was the departure from ancient core values illustrated by the comment:“we are moving away from our religion. We act as if God doesn’t exist. Someone who fears God, would not do these things.”

TABLE 2
How do you create & sustain an ethical business?

Ethical business creation	Representative Quotes
Leader is an Ethical Role Model	
<u>Essential focus:</u> Leader prioritizes ethics	My restaurant is better in ethics because I see them as important. We take our ethics seriously, work attentively, and work honestly.
<u>Creating a culture:</u> Clear and frequent communication on ethics	Everyone needs to be sure of their ethics and we need to constantly remind them. If the employees are lacking in ethics then we need to give them education. Managers and employees need to have open and honest communication.
Good conflict resolution about ethical issues	I apply my own rules and openly share them with my employees and remind them of them in our meetings. If there is a problem then I meet with my employee individually and listen to them and work together to create a solution. If we work hard and the problem is still not fixed, then we will fire them.
Builds honesty over fear, creating trust	We meet constantly and never cover up problems. We take suggestions from employees seriously even from entry level employees. We are comfortable to share anything with each other.
<u>Ethical behavior:</u>	
Values & respects employees (give them their rights, proper pay & works as a team)	Managers need to show they care for their employees needs/wants and try to fulfill them. Apply the rules and rights to the employees. Give them their rights and benefits because we are like family.
Accountability of everyone including himself. Actively seeks feedback from employees.	The workers should not leave the set company ethical principles. Every so often we have quality control around the workplace. We use a control system with several steps to help us do this. We check different people over and over again. We don't leave anyone out. In our meetings we talk about what we can do better and whatever we decide, we put into action.
	If I get good profit then I can be generous and sell cheaper than other people and give support to my customers.

Helps his neighbors employees & community	
Negative pressures on ethics	The biggest reason in our country is the economic crisis. Economically our country isn't stable. This is bad problem that causes mental problems and affects our work in a negative fashion. I know this is bad, but its not something I can help. Its always in my head. I work really hard and earn very little.
Economy	
Greed Materialism	Everything is about money now. People just care about earning money The standard of living has changed. Everyone wants to live a luxurious life. Everyone wants to be rich. Before you just had the rich and they lived like that and no one else really cared to be like that. But now everyone wants to be like that
Social media & media	I think a lot of this (lack of ethics in business) is due to social media economic circumstances, internet, the press, bad moral tv (like propaganda), holes in education.
Spiritual forces	I think Satan has a big influence
Positive pressures on ethics	But the things that were really good was people were more concerned about helping their immediate neighbor than making money. For example, beside my store is a barber. I go to him to get my haircut because he is my neighbor. I could go somewhere else to get a cheaper haircut, but I want to help the man closest to me. They would do that for all their business needs.
Historical culture of Ahi business ethics	
Faith	Constantly education, responsibility, discipline work ethics, religiosity
Customer loyalty	We try to make good relationships with our customers and treat them like family. Positive things for us are consistent customers. They give us support. A couple years ago there was a bad earthquake and we lost our building. Our customers came back when we reopened. They would overpay as a way to help us. If the dessert was 100TL then they would give 200TL. This was a huge help to us

A principled leader focuses ethics as a fundamental priority, continually reinforcing ethical guidelines among the employees. This was articulated by a manager who affirmed, "my restaurant is better in ethics because I see them as important" (Table 2). Ethical managers within

this cultural context function as crucial gatekeepers. In their absence, fundamental ethical decisions, such as ensuring workers' rights encompassing minimum wage and benefits, tend to falter. Conversely, when ethical leadership is manifest, it cultivates a thriving milieu for the workforce. Notably, trust occupies an elevated position in Turkish culture, exerting a profound impact. This is why the presence of a competent manager assumes paramount importance. Trust serves as the linchpin that binds employees to their roles – a foundation that crumbles in the face of managerial hypocrisy, eroding loyalty and trust. Conversely, a trusted manager fosters loyalty and steadfast dedication among the workforce.

Figure 4 delineates the influential dynamics at play, both constructive and detrimental. Among the most potent negative influences are the economic crisis and the media. Participants underlined how media platforms showcase opulent lifestyles, inciting desires that often clash with individuals' actual circumstances. Consequently, individuals resort to shortcuts and compromise ethics in their pursuit of such lifestyles. One participant insightfully noted, "The standard of living has changed. Everyone wants to live a luxurious life. Everyone wants to be rich. Before you just had the rich and they lived like that and no one else really cared to be like that. But now everyone wants to be like that" (Table 2).

Conversely, the positive side of Figure 4 captures a cultural ethos that champions communal solidarity over personal gain. A local store owner's sentiment, "Beside me is a barber. I could go somewhere else to get a cheaper haircut, but I want to help the man closest to me. The Ahi system would do this for all their business needs" (Table 2), encapsulates this ethos. The historical context further enriches this perspective. The Ahi system, driven by the aim to please God and aid neighbors, resonates as a testament to this benevolent approach (Baz, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS

The study's implications extend to both education and family life. Promoting ethical values in Turkish elementary schools can lay the foundation for future generations of ethical business leaders. Recognizing the role of family values and societal pressures in shaping ethical behaviors can aid in fostering a more ethical society and business environment.

Our heart is to share this information with the next generation of business leaders and citizens to promote good business ethics in Turkey. The study showed how important it is for employees and for the community. We believe the best place to start with ethics in Turkey is looking into the elementary grade school curriculums on ethics. Schools are often one of the easiest places to provide character education (Berkowitz, 2002). Turkish schools have sought to teach ethics and values systemically and at different intensities since 2003 (Gündoğdu, Çelik, Yanar, Kahyaoğlu, & Dönük, 2017). Recently there has been a rise in interest and research in this area over the past couple of decades in Turkey (Gündoğdu, Çelik, Yanar, Kahyaoğlu, & Dönük, 2017). We hope our findings could benefit the character education taught in Turkish elementary schools.

One researcher stated the importance of having models of character demonstrated to their students. It is vital for students to see character being lived out by the adults in their lives (Berkowitz, 2014). As a result, it is important to know what ethics are being taught and modeled in the home of Turkish children. One study noted the strong influence family values have on business ethics in Turkey (Akman, 2011). For the next generation of Turkish business leaders to be ethically successful they must be taught in their schools and in their homes. We hope that our findings can also be shared in the homes of the Turkish people to further promote better ethics in the society.

CONCLUSIONS

Ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the ethical landscape of businesses in Eastern Turkey. This study underscores the importance of ethical managers as role models and emphasizes the significance of strong character in driving ethical practices. Despite cultural nuances, the principles of ethical leadership are applicable across businesses, promoting a positive work environment and societal impact.

Ethical managers in this culture function like a bottle neck. If you do not have an ethical manager, then basic ethical decisions will not happen such as giving workers their rights like minimum wage or benefits. If the manager is good, then they create a trusting environment that benefits their employees and community. Trust is one of the main reasons why having a good manager is so important. If the workers see hypocrisy among the manager, then they lose trust and loyalty. But if the employee trusts the manager, then they stay loyal to their job.

Once a good manager is established, he/she establishes and sustains ethical practices in the business. The manager does this by prioritizing ethics and creating a culture of ethics with clear and frequent communication, good conflict resolution, and trust. This culture then leads to key values that champion behaviors in which employees are valued, healthy accountability is established, and the community is improved. These types of businesses are usually influenced from positive sources in the community like the historical culture of Ahkism, their faith, and family.

To deepen the understanding of ethical leadership in Eastern Turkey, future research could explore the impact of cultural influences on business ethics and investigate the efficacy of incorporating ethical education into various levels of the educational system.

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