

Ethical Tone Transmission Across Decentralized Organizations

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Abstract

Decentralized organizations distribute authority across business units, regional offices, project teams, subsidiaries, and operational locations, allowing decisions to be made closer to local conditions. Although decentralization can improve responsiveness and managerial flexibility, it can also complicate the transmission of organizational ethical expectations. Statements issued by senior leadership may lose clarity, credibility, or behavioral relevance as they pass through multiple managerial levels and locally differentiated work environments. This study examines ethical tone transmission across decentralized organizations through a simulation-based analytical framework. Four hypothetical ethical communication conditions are compared: centralized ethical messaging without systematic local reinforcement, centralized messaging supported by local managers, cross-unit dialogue combined with managerial reinforcement, and an embedded ethical communication system incorporating consistent leadership behavior, local interpretation, speak-up mechanisms, and recurring control feedback.

A synthetic analytical sample of 480 observations, with 120 simulated cases per condition, is used exclusively for methodological demonstration. Ethical tone transmission represents the primary outcome, while leadership consistency, local-manager reinforcement, psychological safety, ethical climate clarity, and behavioral alignment are examined as associated constructs. Simulated ethical tone transmission increases from 2.44 under centralized messaging alone to 4.29 under an embedded ethical communication system.

The analysis suggests that ethical expectations are transmitted more effectively when formal statements are reinforced through observable managerial conduct, locally relevant interpretation, cross-unit dialogue, and credible escalation mechanisms. The paper argues that decentralization does not inherently weaken ethical culture; rather, risk emerges when ethical governance remains centralized in language but fragmented in practice. All numerical findings are synthetic and should be interpreted as testable propositions rather than evidence collected from actual organizations.

Keywords: ethical tone; decentralized organizations; ethical leadership; ethical climate; organizational culture; managerial reinforcement; psychological safety.

1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly distribute operational authority across geographically dispersed business units, regional offices, subsidiaries, project teams, professional groups, and digitally connected work structures. Decentralization can improve responsiveness because employees and local managers are

allowed to make decisions closer to customers, suppliers, communities, and operational conditions. Yet the same organizational arrangement creates a governance challenge: ethical expectations established at headquarters must remain meaningful when decisions are made far from senior leadership.

A formal code of conduct may be uniform across the organization, but the interpretation of fairness, reporting responsibility, commercial pressure, conflicts of interest, customer treatment, and managerial accountability can differ substantially across locations. Ethical governance therefore depends not only on whether senior executives articulate appropriate principles but also on whether those principles are transmitted consistently through multiple organizational levels.

The concept of ethical tone is closely related to leadership behavior and organizational climate. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison conceptualized ethical leadership through social learning theory, emphasizing that leaders influence conduct both as moral persons and as managers who communicate, reward, and reinforce ethical standards. Employees do not rely exclusively on policy language when interpreting organizational values. They observe who is promoted, which targets receive priority, how managers respond to misconduct, whether difficult concerns are welcomed, and whether stated principles survive commercial pressure. In decentralized organizations, these observations frequently occur at the local level rather than through direct interaction with senior executives.

Research on the trickle-down effects of ethical leadership supports this multilevel perspective. Mayer and colleagues demonstrated that senior-level ethical leadership can influence employee conduct through supervisory leadership, while Schaubroeck and colleagues showed that ethical leadership can become embedded across organizational levels. These findings have particular relevance for decentralized structures because they indicate that ethical influence is transmitted through relationships rather than through formal statements alone. A chief executive may establish a strong ethical position, yet employees may experience a very different ethical environment when their immediate manager emphasizes performance at any cost, discourages questions, or applies standards inconsistently. Conversely, strong local leadership can translate broad organizational principles into practical guidance that employees can apply to context-specific dilemmas.

The transmission problem is intensified by communication distance. Decentralized organizations often rely on policy documents, online training, corporate messages, compliance portals, and periodic leadership communications to create consistency. These mechanisms are necessary, but they may produce what can be described as ethical signal attenuation when messages become less specific or credible as they travel away from their original source. Employees may understand that integrity is officially valued while simultaneously believing that local commercial objectives are more important in practice. Simons' concept of behavioral integrity is relevant here because trust depends heavily on perceived alignment between managerial words and actions. Where employees observe contradictions, formal ethical messaging may lose influence even when it remains frequent.

Against this background, the present study examines ethical tone transmission across decentralized organizations through a simulation-based framework. No empirical organizational dataset has been supplied, and the manuscript therefore does not claim completed field research. Synthetic observations are used to demonstrate how different organizational communication architectures could be compared analytically while avoiding fabricated claims concerning actual employees or firms. The central proposition is that ethical tone travels most effectively when senior leadership communication is

reinforced by local managerial conduct, cross-unit dialogue, psychological safety, and systems that convert abstract principles into recurring behavioral expectations. Decentralization is therefore treated not as an ethical weakness in itself but as a condition requiring deliberate mechanisms for maintaining value consistency across organizational distance.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Ethical Tone Transmission Across Different Communication Architectures

The primary objective is to examine how effectively ethical tone may be transmitted under different decentralized organizational communication arrangements. Four conditions are distinguished: centralized messaging without systematic local reinforcement, centralized messaging combined with local-manager reinforcement, cross-unit dialogue with repeated reinforcement, and an embedded ethical communication system. This progression recognizes that ethical communication can differ not merely in frequency but in organizational depth.

The objective focuses on whether employees receive a coherent ethical signal across organizational levels. A statement from senior leadership may establish broad expectations, but ethical transmission is stronger when local decisions, performance discussions, resource allocation, recognition systems, and disciplinary responses remain consistent with that message. The analysis therefore treats tone as an organizational process rather than as a single executive communication event.

2.2 To Assess Local Leadership, Ethical Climate, and Psychological Safety

A second objective is to examine the roles of local managerial reinforcement, ethical climate clarity, and psychological safety in translating organizational values into daily behavior. Local managers frequently determine how broad corporate principles are interpreted within particular operational environments. Their behavior can make ethical expectations practical and credible or reduce them to symbolic statements.

Psychological safety is included because ethical communication cannot function effectively when employees believe that raising concerns will damage their reputation or career. Ethical tone transmission therefore requires not only top-down communication but credible bottom-up channels through which questions, dissent, and misconduct concerns can travel upward without unreasonable interpersonal risk.

2.3 To Evaluate Behavioral Alignment Across Decentralized Units

The third objective is to assess whether stronger ethical tone transmission may be associated with greater alignment between organizational expectations and unit-level behavior. Behavioral alignment concerns the degree to which employees perceive that ethical standards influence actual decisions concerning customers, colleagues, suppliers, reporting, performance targets, and conflicts of interest.

The study therefore distinguishes between message recognition and behavioral institutionalization. An organization may achieve high awareness of its code of ethics without ensuring that the code influences operational judgment. The managerial objective is to understand which communication and governance conditions may help transform ethical language into consistent decentralized practice.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Ethical Leadership and the Transmission of Organizational Values

Ethical leadership research provides the principal theoretical foundation for understanding tone transmission. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison defined ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and relationships and the promotion of such conduct through communication, reinforcement, and decision making. Their social-learning perspective indicates that employees learn expected conduct by observing credible role models, particularly leaders who possess legitimate authority and organizational visibility.

Brown and Treviño subsequently reviewed the ethical leadership literature and emphasized the distinction between ethical leadership and related constructs such as transformational, authentic, and spiritual leadership. Ethical leadership is especially relevant to decentralized organizations because it places direct emphasis on moral management: communicating expectations, rewarding appropriate conduct, disciplining misconduct, and making ethics visible within ordinary management processes.

Treviño, Weaver, Gibson, and Toffler's study of ethics and compliance management similarly showed that organizational ethics programs are more effective when formal systems are supported by broader organizational culture. Formal codes and compliance procedures therefore cannot be examined independently of leadership behavior. Employees interpret whether an ethics program is genuinely supported by observing how management responds when ethical values conflict with performance pressures.

Grojean and colleagues further argued that leaders shape organizational climate through what they attend to, model, reward, and reinforce. This perspective is directly applicable to ethical tone transmission because decentralized employees often infer organizational priorities through local leadership behavior rather than from headquarters communication alone.

3.2 Trickle-Down Ethical Leadership and Local Managerial Reinforcement

Multilevel ethical-leadership research demonstrates that ethical tone can travel through organizational hierarchy. Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, and Salvador found evidence for a trickle-down model in which top-management ethical leadership influences supervisory ethical leadership and subsequently employee behavior. This framework provides a direct explanation for why local managerial reinforcement is important in decentralized organizations. Employees may rarely interact with senior executives, but they regularly observe the ethical judgments of their immediate supervisors.

Schaubroeck and colleagues extended this argument by examining the embedding of ethical leadership within and across organizational levels. Their work indicates that ethical leadership becomes more influential when employees receive consistent signals from several layers of leadership. Consistency is therefore important because contradictory messages can weaken the credibility of the organization's ethical position.

Walumbwa and Schaubroeck also connected ethical leadership with employee voice and psychological safety. Ethical leaders can create conditions in which employees are more comfortable raising concerns, questioning questionable practices, and contributing information that managers might otherwise overlook. This bottom-up communication capacity is particularly significant in decentralized organizations because senior leadership cannot directly observe every local practice.

Mayer and colleagues' research further links ethical leadership with reduced misconduct. The implication is that transmission should be assessed not merely through employees' recall of ethical messages but through whether ethical expectations shape actual local conduct. Where immediate supervisors reinforce organizational principles, employees receive a repeated signal that values have practical consequences.

3.3 Ethical Climate, Behavioral Integrity, and Organizational Consistency

Ethical climate research provides another important perspective. Victor and Cullen conceptualized ethical work climate as shared perceptions concerning the criteria organizations use when addressing ethical issues. Different units within the same decentralized organization may develop distinct ethical climates when local leadership, incentives, peer behavior, and operational pressures differ. Consequently, a single organization-wide code does not guarantee a homogeneous ethical environment.

Kaptein's corporate ethical virtues model similarly emphasizes organizational conditions that support ethical behavior, including clarity, congruency of supervisors and senior management, feasibility, supportability, transparency, discussability, and sanctionability. These dimensions closely correspond with ethical tone transmission. Clarity ensures that expectations are understood, congruency concerns consistency between leadership levels, discussability supports dialogue, and sanctionability determines whether misconduct has meaningful consequences.

Simons' theory of behavioral integrity adds a credibility dimension. Employees assess whether managerial words and deeds correspond. When leadership publicly emphasizes integrity but rewards managers solely for numerical performance, the message conveyed by behavior can override formal ethical language. In decentralized organizations, this problem can be amplified because unit-level incentives and leadership practices may differ substantially.

Weaver, Treviño, and Cochran's research on integrated and decoupled corporate social-performance and ethics practices also highlights the importance of institutional integration. Ethics systems that exist separately from everyday operations risk becoming symbolic. Ethical tone is more likely to persist across organizational distance when it is integrated with performance management, reporting processes, leadership development, decision criteria, and accountability mechanisms.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Simulation Conditions

The study uses a simulation-based comparative design. No employees, managers, organizations, or ethics officers were surveyed. Synthetic observations were generated exclusively to demonstrate how alternative ethical communication architectures could be examined in a future empirical study.

The synthetic analytical sample contains 480 observations equally distributed across four conditions. The first represents centralized ethical messaging without systematic local reinforcement. The second combines centralized messaging with explicit reinforcement by local managers. The third adds cross-unit dialogue and recurring opportunities to discuss ethical dilemmas. The fourth represents an embedded system in which ethical expectations are reinforced through leadership behavior, performance processes, speak-up mechanisms, local discussion, and feedback from monitoring or compliance activities.

Table 1: Proposed Simulation Design and Ethical Tone Transmission Framework

Research Component	Operational Specification
Research design	Simulation-based four-condition comparative study
Total synthetic observations	480
Observations per condition	120
Condition 1	Centralized ethical message only
Condition 2	Centralized message + local-manager reinforcement
Condition 3	Cross-unit dialogue + local reinforcement
Condition 4	Embedded ethical communication system
Primary outcome	Ethical tone transmission
Associated constructs	Leadership consistency, ethical climate clarity, psychological safety, local managerial reinforcement, behavioral alignment
Illustrative scale	Five-point maturity/perception scale
Analytical technique	Descriptive comparison and one-way ANOVA
Dataset status	Entirely synthetic
Human participants	None

4.2 Construct Operationalization

Ethical tone transmission is conceptualized as the degree to which organizational ethical expectations remain recognizable, credible, and behaviorally relevant across decentralized units. A future empirical scale could measure consistency of ethical expectations, perceived alignment between headquarters and local management, confidence concerning expected conduct, and perceived applicability of ethical standards to local decision making.

Leadership consistency represents the perceived alignment between senior leadership statements and local managerial behavior. Local-manager reinforcement captures the frequency and credibility with which immediate supervisors discuss ethical expectations, respond to dilemmas, and incorporate integrity into performance conversations.

Psychological safety represents the extent to which employees believe they can ask difficult questions, report concerns, admit mistakes, or challenge questionable practices without unreasonable interpersonal or career risk. Ethical climate clarity measures whether employees understand which

ethical criteria should guide decisions. Behavioral alignment represents whether observable unit-level conduct corresponds with stated organizational expectations.

4.3 Analytical Procedure and Ethical Position

Synthetic observations were generated around progressively differentiated theoretical means. Individual-level variation was retained within each condition to avoid suggesting complete uniformity. A one-way analysis of variance was then used to demonstrate whether ethical tone transmission differed across the four simulated communication environments.

The resulting illustrative ANOVA produced $F(3, 476) = 292.23, p < .001$. This statistic is a feature of the deliberately constructed synthetic dataset and must not be interpreted as empirical evidence that the same effect exists in actual organizations.

No human participants, employee records, whistleblowing reports, compliance investigations, performance evaluations, or identifiable organizational information were analyzed. Consequently, no institutional ethics approval or organizational consent is claimed. Future empirical studies should treat employee ethics data as sensitive organizational information and should provide strong confidentiality protections, particularly where participants discuss retaliation, misconduct, or leadership inconsistency.

5. Analysis

5.1 Ethical Tone Transmission Across Organizational Conditions

The simulation demonstrates substantial differences in ethical tone transmission across the four communication conditions. The centralized-message-only condition produces the lowest mean transmission score at 2.44. This result illustrates the possibility that formal leadership communication has limited influence when employees receive little local reinforcement.

When centralized messaging is reinforced by local managers, the simulated mean rises to 3.16. Cross-unit dialogue combined with reinforcement produces a stronger mean of 3.77, while the embedded ethical communication system achieves the highest simulated score at 4.29.

The progression suggests that ethical tone becomes increasingly durable when it moves from communication toward institutionalization. A corporate message can establish expectations, but regular local interpretation, open dialogue, observable leadership consistency, and credible consequences help convert ethical statements into shared behavioral understanding.

Table 2: Simulated Ethical Outcomes Across Decentralized Communication Conditions

Ethical Communication Condition	Ethical Tone Transmission	Leadership Consistency	Ethical Climate Clarity	Psychological Safety	Behavioral Alignment
Centralized message only	2.44	2.55	2.71	2.48	2.52
Central + local-manager	3.16	3.28	3.36	3.10	3.22

Ethical Communication Condition	Ethical Tone Transmission	Leadership Consistency	Ethical Climate Clarity	Psychological Safety	Behavioral Alignment
reinforcement					
Cross-unit dialogue + reinforcement	3.77	3.81	3.89	3.75	3.73
Embedded ethical communication system	4.29	4.36	4.31	4.22	4.34

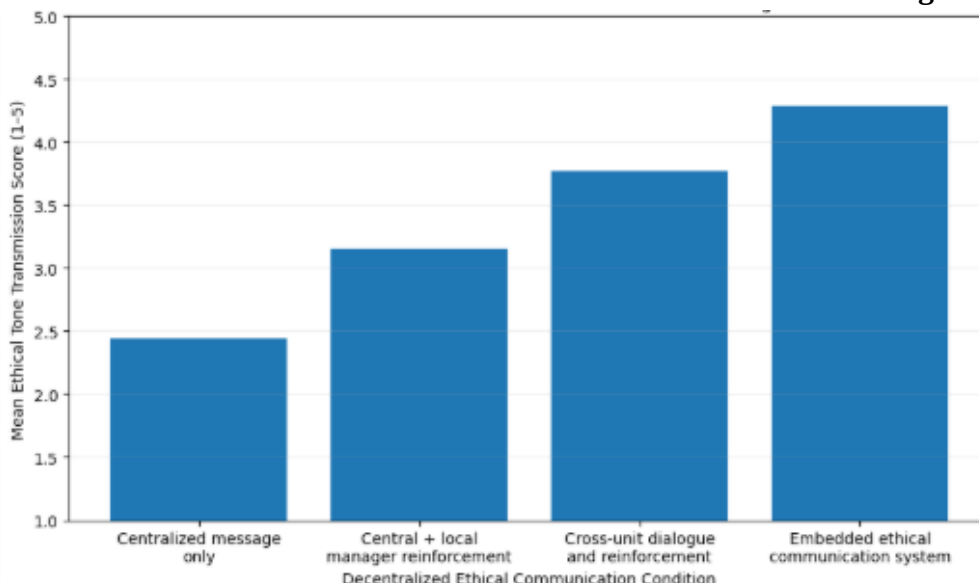
5.2 Statistical Interpretation and Transmission Mechanisms

The illustrative one-way ANOVA indicates substantial differentiation among the four simulated conditions, $F(3, 476) = 292.23, p < .001$. Since the conditions were deliberately constructed around increasingly mature ethical communication systems, the result should be treated as a demonstration of analytical procedure rather than confirmation of a real organizational effect.

The subsequent increase associated with cross-unit dialogue suggests that ethical transmission may benefit from horizontal as well as vertical communication. Employees in decentralized units face locally specific dilemmas, and cross-unit discussion allows ethical principles to be interpreted through a broader organizational perspective rather than isolated local practice

5.3 Graphical Interpretation

Graph 1: Simulated Ethical Tone Transmission Across Decentralized Organizations



Key Finding: Simulated ethical tone transmission strengthens progressively when centralized ethical expectations are supported by local managerial behavior, cross-unit dialogue, and embedded organizational reinforcement.

The graphical pattern demonstrates that merely increasing the number of ethical messages is not the central mechanism represented by the model. The more advanced conditions differ qualitatively because they create repeated points of behavioral confirmation.

A future empirical study should therefore measure message frequency and message credibility separately. Frequent ethical communication accompanied by contradictory incentives could generate weaker effects than less frequent communication supported by consistent leadership behavior.

6. Discussion

6.1 Ethical Tone Must Travel Through Leadership Relationships

The simulated findings support a relational view of ethical tone transmission. Senior leadership remains important because executives establish priorities and communicate organization-wide standards. However, most decentralized employees experience the organization through immediate supervisors, unit leaders, and local operational systems.

Mayer and colleagues' trickle-down model provides a strong explanation for this pattern. Senior ethical leadership can influence employees indirectly by shaping supervisory behavior. The implication is that decentralized organizations should treat ethical leadership capability at middle and local management levels as a governance requirement rather than assuming that corporate communications will transmit automatically.

Managerial selection and development therefore become important. Organizations should evaluate whether managers can discuss ambiguous ethical issues, explain the reasoning behind standards, respond proportionately to mistakes, and distinguish legitimate performance pressure from conduct that violates organizational values.

6.2 Psychological Safety Enables Upward Ethical Transmission

Ethical tone transmission is often discussed as a top-down process, but decentralized governance also depends on information traveling upward. Senior leaders cannot correct local misconduct they do not know about, and local managers cannot learn from recurring ethical difficulties when employees remain silent.

Psychological safety therefore functions as an important part of ethical infrastructure. Employees need credible opportunities to question instructions, disclose mistakes, and report concerns without assuming that doing so will damage their standing. Walumbwa and Schaubroeck's research connecting ethical leadership, psychological safety, and employee voice supports this interpretation.

Speak-up channels alone are insufficient when employees believe reports will be ignored or retaliation will occur informally. Ethical tone becomes credible when concerns receive consistent investigation, feedback, protection, and managerial attention. Decentralized organizations should consequently evaluate not only whether reporting channels exist but whether employees trust them.

6.3 From Centralized Ethical Statements to Embedded Ethical Governance

The strongest simulated condition is the embedded ethical communication system because it integrates ethics with ordinary organizational processes. This finding reflects a broader distinction between symbolic and substantive ethics management. An organization can maintain codes, annual training, and formal policies while leaving performance incentives and local management practices untouched.

Embedded governance requires greater consistency. Ethical expectations should influence hiring and promotion criteria, leadership evaluation, commercial targets, incentive design, disciplinary systems, risk review, internal audit, compliance monitoring, and strategic decision making. Kaptein's corporate ethical virtues framework illustrates why clarity, leadership congruence, discussability, transparency, and sanctionability operate as interconnected ethical conditions.

Decentralization can actually strengthen ethical governance when local managers are given enough discretion to apply principles intelligently while remaining accountable to common organizational standards. The goal should not be identical decisions across every location. Ethical consistency means that different local decisions remain anchored in common principles and transparent reasoning.

7. Conclusion

Ethical tone is frequently associated with senior leadership, but decentralized organizations demonstrate why “tone at the top” is only the starting point of ethical governance. Values articulated by senior executives must pass through several organizational layers before influencing many day-to-day decisions. During this transmission process, messages can be reinforced, translated, weakened, contradicted, or ignored. Effective ethical governance therefore requires attention to how ethical expectations travel rather than simply whether they are formally stated.

The simulation developed in this study illustrates a progressive increase in ethical tone transmission as organizations move from centralized communication toward more embedded forms of ethical governance. Mean simulated transmission rises from 2.44 under centralized messaging alone to 3.16 when local managers reinforce the message, 3.77 when cross-unit dialogue is added, and 4.29 when ethical communication is incorporated into an embedded organizational system. Leadership consistency, psychological safety, ethical climate clarity, and behavioral alignment demonstrate corresponding improvements. These values are entirely synthetic and should not be presented as observations from real organizations.

The analysis suggests that local managers occupy a strategically important position in decentralized ethics systems. They interpret broad principles, allocate resources, respond to mistakes, resolve competing priorities, and determine whether employees experience organizational values as credible. Their conduct can either preserve senior leadership's ethical tone or replace it with a conflicting local tone. Organizations should therefore evaluate ethical leadership throughout the management hierarchy rather than concentrating assessment exclusively on executives.

Future empirical research should test the proposed framework across multinational enterprises, franchises, professional-service firms, universities, healthcare networks, project-based organizations, platform businesses, and geographically dispersed public institutions. Multilevel designs should distinguish organizational, unit, managerial, and employee effects and should examine whether ethical

tone weakens with structural distance from senior leadership. Longitudinal research could further assess whether leadership changes, acquisitions, rapid expansion, remote work, incentive redesign, or misconduct events alter the strength of ethical transmission. Such evidence would improve understanding of how decentralized organizations can preserve flexibility without allowing ethical standards to fragment across units.

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