

## Ethical Leadership and Its Role in Conflict Management: A Study of Ethiopian National Sports Federations

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of ethical leadership on conflict management within Ethiopian national sports federations, addressing gaps in the literature on sports organizations.

**Method:** This research employed a mixed-methods, particularly embedded research design, which combines the quantitative data from 296 administrators and qualitative insights from 15 administrators. In this study, four hypotheses were tested examining the roles of leader integrity, fairness, role modeling, and communication about ethics in conflict management.

**Results:** The data from the quantitative method were analyzed with a confidence level of 95% by using SPSS version 28. Multiple linear regression analysis confirmed that all four factors (leader integrity, fairness, role modeling, and communication about ethics) significantly impact conflict management, with role modeling ( $\beta = 0.889$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), followed by communication about ethics ( $\beta = 0.488$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), leader integrity ( $\beta = 0.316$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and fairness ( $\beta = 0.273$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Qualitative data were analyzed with NVivo, and the findings supported the quantitative results by highlighting how ethical leadership develops trust, transparency, and association, thereby reducing conflicts arising from resource distribution and employee disagreements. This result also underlined the importance of ethical leadership in Ethiopian national sports federations.

**Conclusion:** This study highlights the importance of ethical leadership in mitigating conflicts within these sport federations. Therefore, training in ethical leadership and communication is recommended to enhance conflict resolution and promote organizational unity.

**Keywords:** Communication about ethics; Fairness; Leader integrity; Role modeling.

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## Introduction

Leadership strategies are often based on the personal characteristics of individuals (Hassan et al., 2016). Ethical leadership is defined as emphasizing moral values, integrity, and fairness in decision-making and interpersonal interactions (Sari & Lestari, 2025). Such leaders are critical during conflict management, as they positively influence organizational dynamics (Kuenzi et al., 2019).

Ethical leaders act as role models, setting behavioral standards for their organizations to follow (Al Halbusi et al., 2024). They encourage transparent communication, which is important for resolving conflicts before they intensify and disrupt the organization (Alay, 2024; Caldeira & Infante-Moro, 2025). By maintaining ethical principles, administrators build a foundation of trust and respect, creating an environment where conflicts are less likely to occur (Soeari et al., 2022). When organizational ethics are associated with leadership down, conflicts between teams become less frequent (Cakir et al., 2023).

The main approach of ethical leadership is promoting a responsible culture. Leaders who encourage accountability make team members feel responsible for their actions and decisions (Kuenzi et al., 2019). For example, when a fault is made, an ethical leader emphasizes learning and solution rather than blame, which deters counterproductive characteristics like dishonesty or unfair treatment that can increase conflicts (Zhu et al., 2024). Thus, organizations led ethically tend to be more cooperative and cohesive, reducing future conflicts (Al Halbusi et al., 2024).

The conflict resolution methods of ethical leaders emphasize fairness and inclusivity, ensuring all parties are heard (Bohm et al., 2022; Cakir et al., 2023). This approach not only resolves the immediate problem but also strengthens long-term team relationships. Eventually, integrating ethical leadership into

conflict management strategies increases team dynamics and improves overall organizational performance (Hussein et al., 2022).

The prevailing body of literature shows several basic gaps that this study seeks to address. Firstly, most studies on ethical leadership and conflict management focus on Western organizational settings or contexts (Banks et al., 2021; Lonati & Van Vugt, 2024). However, leadership is extremely influenced by cultural and operational contexts, meaning findings from one region may not apply globally (Lonati & Van Vugt, 2024). Therefore, there is a notable lack of research on this topic in developing nations like Ethiopia.

Secondly, there is a notable lack of adequate studies on this topic about sports organizations. According to Banks et al. (2021), the concept of leadership and its application vary significantly across different organizations. Ethiopian national sports federations possess unique cultural and operational dynamics that are often overlooked in existing literature (Tadesse et al., 2024).

These federations face persistent conflicts among employees, athletes, and coaches, which act as roadblocks to effective governance and performance. Many federations lack administrators who maintain ethical principles, leading to unresolved conflicts that damage organizational integrity. Problems in governance, resource allocation, and athlete development are common, despite Ethiopia's strong athletic history (Garmamo et al., 2024).

The purpose of this study was to fill these gaps by investigating how ethical leadership impacts conflict management within sports organizations. As a result of the previously mentioned gaps in research, this study develops the following hypotheses.

Ha1: Leader integrity significantly impacts conflict management.

Ha2: Fairness significantly impacts conflict

management.

Ha3: Role modeling significantly impacts conflict management.

Ha4: Communication about ethics significantly impacts conflict management.

## Materials and Methods

### Study design

This study used a mixed-methods approach, specifically an embedded design. In this design, quantitative and qualitative methods are combined within a single study. The quantitative method served as the primary approach, while the qualitative method played a secondary, supportive role. This design provides a richer understanding of the research problem.

### Population and Samples

The research population included all 35 Ethiopian national sports federations. For the quantitative part, the stratified random sampling technique was used. To determine the sample size, the researcher used the online Rau Soft sample size calculator with a confidence level of 95% and a 5% margin of error. By using this sample size calculator, 296 samples were determined. For the qualitative method, 15 administrators were selected by using the purposive sampling method.

### Data Collection Tools

Two main instruments were used for data collection. First, standardized questionnaires were administered. The ethical leadership scale was adapted from Brown et al. (2005), and the conflict management scale used was Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (Rahim, 2002). Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the qualitative sample. The interview guide included open-ended questions.

### Data Collection

The questionnaires were distributed both in person and online via Google Forms. A pilot test was conducted with 30 administrators to ensure clarity. The interviews were conducted privately, recorded with consent, and lasted approximately 30-40 minutes each.

### Data Analysis

Data cleaning and screening were performed first. This included checks for normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. Missing values were handled using series mean imputation. For the quantitative data, SPSS version 28 was used for descriptive statistics, reliability tests (Cronbach's alpha), and multiple linear regression analysis. For the qualitative data, interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. Thematic analysis was conducted through a process of coding the responses and then extracting key themes that emerged from the data.

### Results

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of 296 participants. After being briefed about the study, each participant was asked to sign a voluntary consent form. They were predominantly male (68.6%), with females comprising 31.4%. A majority of participants were married (66.9%), while 33.1% were single. Regarding education, nearly one-third had postgraduate qualifications (32.4%), 16.9% held a diploma, and half held a bachelor's degree (50.7%). The distribution across position levels shows 48.3% in low-level positions, 25.3% in middle-level positions, and 26.4% in top-level manager roles. Remarkably, all administrators (100.0%) reported having at least six months of work experience.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants (n=296)**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
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<b>Gender</b>	Female	93	31.40%	31.40%
	Male	203	68.60%	100.00%
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	198	66.90%	66.90%
	Single	98	33.10%	100.00%
<b>Education</b>	Bachelor's Degree	150	50.70%	50.70%
	Diploma	50	16.90%	67.60%
	Postgraduate	96	32.40%	100.00%
<b>Position Level</b>	Low-level manager	143	48.30%	48.30%
	Middle-Level Manager	75	25.30%	73.60%
	Top-Level Manager	78	26.40%	100.00%

The Shapiro-Wilk test outcomes (Table 2) show the normality of ethical leadership and conflict management data, with significance values ranging from .139 to .925, in which all  $p > 0.05$ . Therefore, all variables are normally distributed. This finding helps to use regression and structural equation modeling for this research.

**Table 2. Normality of ethical leadership (leader integrity, fairness, role modeling, and communication about ethics) and conflict management data.**

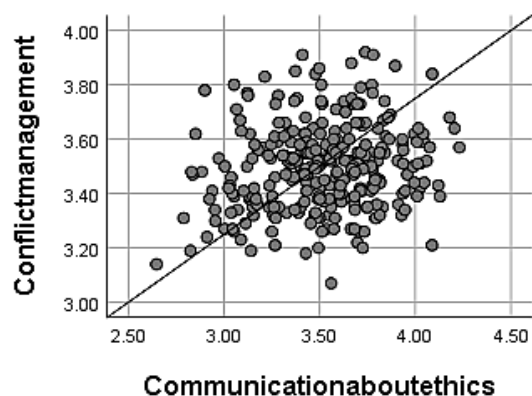
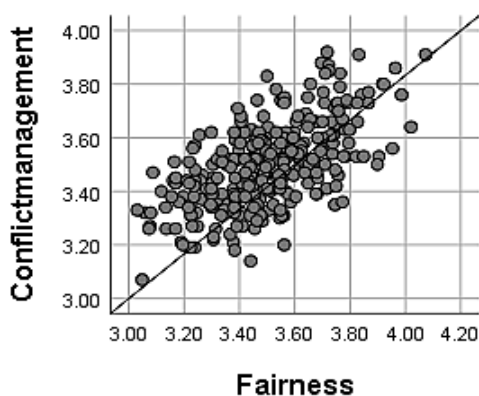
**Table 2.** Normality of ethical leadership (leader integrity, fairness, role modeling, and communication about ethics) and conflict management data.

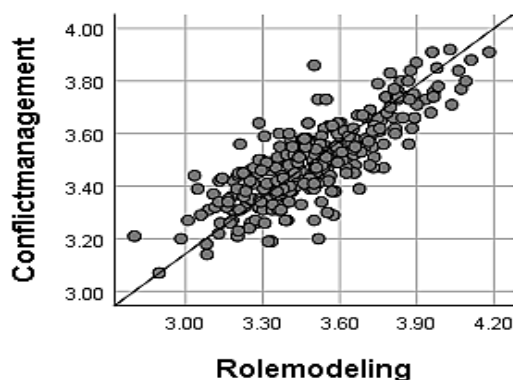
Tests of Normality						
Variables	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Communication about ethics	0.041	296	.200*	0.993	296	0.191*
Fairness	0.032	296	.200*	0.996	296	0.566*
Leader integrity	0.024	296	.200*	0.997	296	0.925*
Role modeling	0.036	296	.200*	0.995	296	0.402*
Conflict management	0.036	296	.200*	0.992	296	0.139*

\*:  $p > .05$

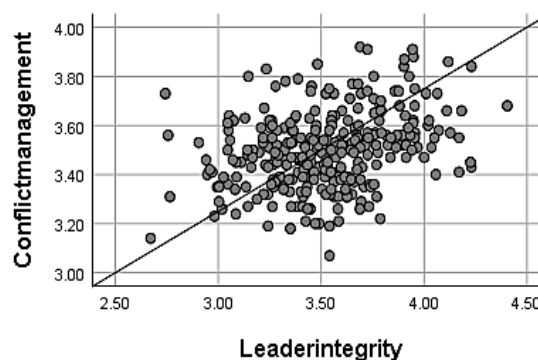
**Figure 1. Scatter plots for the linear relationships between ethical leadership and conflict management data.**

**Figure 1:** Scatter plots for the linear relationships between ethical leadership and conflict management data.





Multiple linear regression



was run to predict the impact of ethical leadership (communication about ethics, fairness, leader integrity, and role modeling) on conflict management within Ethiopian national sports federations (beta = 0.316,  $t = 8.985$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) (Table 3). As this table shows, the  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$  ( $p = 0.000$ ) demonstrates that leader integrity significantly impacts conflict management in these federations. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (Ha1) was accepted, and leader integrity significantly impacts conflict management in the Ethiopian national sports federations. The standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.316) shows a moderate effect size, suggesting that administrators who show integrity, characterized by constant adherence to moral principles, honesty, and trust-building behaviors, contribute meaningfully to effective conflict management. The collinearity statistics (tolerance = 0.356, VIF = 2.811) confirm no multicollinearity, which undermines the result's validity. In the situation of Ethiopian sports federations, this result shows the critical role of leader integrity in nurturing a harmonious organizational environment.

Additionally, this table (Table 3) demonstrates that fairness significantly impacts conflict management (Beta = 0.273,  $t = 10.781$ ,  $p =$

0.000). The  $p$ -value ( $0.000 < 0.05$ ) approves statistical significance, supporting the hypothesis (Ha2) that fairness significantly impacts conflict management within these sports federations. Due to this case, hypothesis 2a is accepted. The standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.273) indicates that fairness in leadership and management enhances conflict management effectiveness in the Ethiopian national sports federations.

On the other hand, role modeling has a significant and strong positive impact on conflict management (beta = 0.889,  $t = 27.973$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The  $p$ -value ( $0.000 < 0.05$ ) approves statistical significance, strongly supporting Ha3 that role modeling significantly impacts conflict management. The coefficient (B = 0.454), which is unstandardized, indicates that a one-unit increase in role modeling increases conflict management by 0.454 units, holding other variables constant. The high standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.889) predicts that role modeling is the strongest predictor in the model. This result highlights that administrators who model positive behaviors significantly impact conflict management within Ethiopian sports federations.

The multiple regression analysis (Table 3)

results also reveal that communication about ethics has a significant positive impact on conflict management (Beta = 0.488,  $t = 16.208$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The  $p$ -value ( $0.000 < 0.05$ ) reveals statistical significance, supporting (Ha4) that communication about ethics significantly impacts conflict management. The standardized

coefficient (Beta = 0.488) confirms a moderate effect size, indicating that communication about ethics suggests that clear and constant communication concerning ethical standards and expectations significantly improves conflict resolution among administrators and employees in these sport federations.

**Table 3. Multiple linear regression analysis summary of the impact of ethical leadership (communication about ethics, fairness, leader integrity, and role modeling) on conflict management.**

Multilinear regression analysis summary of the impact of ethical leadership (communication about ethics, fairness, leader integrity, and role modeling) on conflict management.

	Standardized Coefficients		Collinearity Statistics		
	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Communication about ethics	0.488	16.208	.000	0.486	2.06
Fairness	0.273	10.781	.000	0.685	1.46
Role modeling	0.889	27.973	.000	0.435	2.297
Leader integrity	0.316	8.985	.000	0.356	2.811
Communication about ethics	0.488	16.208	.000	0.486	2.06

*Note: Dependent Variable: conflict management*

The reliability analysis of the 10-item ethical leadership scale (communication about ethics, fairness, role modeling, and leader integrity) confirmed acceptable internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.753, meeting the conventional threshold for scale reliability. The

indistinguishable standardized alpha value indicates constant measurement properties unchanged by item variance, signifying that all items meaningfully contribute to measuring the latent variable (ethical leadership).

**Table 4. The reliability test (internal consistency) of ethical leadership data**

The reliability test (internal consistency) of ethical leadership data

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized		
Cronbach's Alpha	Items	The N of Items
0.753	0.781	10

The reliability analysis of the 20-item conflict management scale gave strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .801, and closely matches the standardized alpha of .804, representing excellent reliability and above the conventional threshold of .70. The

consistency between raw and standardized values approves the scales' strengths across different statistical expectations, while the high reliability realized with 20 items determines both inclusive and minimal measurement error.

**Table 5. The reliability (internal consistency) test of the conflict management data**

The reliability (internal consistency) test of the conflict management data

Reliability Statistics
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Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized		
Cronbach's Alpha	Items	N of Items
.801	.804	20

The discriminant validity analysis between the Total Composite Score of Conflict Management (TCSCM) and the Total Composite Score of Ethical Leadership (TCSEL) tells a statistically significant positive Pearson correlation ( $r = .554, p < .05$ ). While this shows a meaningful correlation between the constructs, the magnitude of the correlation

( $r < .85$ ) determines that they share less than 31% of their variance ( $r^2 = .307$ ). This moderate-strength relationship provides empirical support for the discriminant validity of the measures, suggesting that TCSCM and TCSEL are related but different fundamental constructs within the study sample.

**Table 6. Discriminant validity of ethical leadership and conflict management data**

Discriminant validity of ethical leadership and conflict management data

		Correlations	
		TCMD	TCSEL
TCSCM	Pearson Correlation	1	<b>.554**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	296	296
TCSEL	Pearson Correlation	<b>.554**</b>	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	296	296

\*\* $p > .05$  Note: TCSCM (total composite score of conflict management), TCSEL (total composite score of ethical leadership)

The convergent validity of the total Composite Score of Ethical Leadership (TCSEL) is fitted as proved by statistically significant positive correlations with almost all components of the construct (Ethical Leadership). The total composite score of ethical leadership shows moderate to strong relationships with Fairness item 2 ( $r = .525, p < .05$ ), Leadership items (Lea1:  $r = .586$ ; Lea2:  $r = .592, p < .001$ ), Role modeling items (Rm1:  $r = .444$ ; Rm2:  $r = .518, p < .05$ ), and Ethical Conduct items (El1:  $r = .511$ ; El2:  $r = .457, p < .50$ ). While correlations with communication items were weaker but still significant (Com1:  $r = .205, p < .05$ ; Com2:  $r = .140, p = .016$ ), the non-significant correlation with Fairness item 1 (Fa1:  $r = .120, p = .023$ ) suggests this specific item may help

less consistently to the total composite score of ethical leadership. In general, the outline of moderate/strong correlations confirms that TCSEL effectively converges with core dimensions of ethical leadership.

Also, the correlation analysis done using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Statistics between transformed composite conflict management (TCMD) items and all items (Cm1 to Cm20) demonstrates good convergent validity for the conflict management scale, as evidenced by significant positive correlations between the transformed composite score (TCMD) and all individual items (Cm1 to Cm20) ranging from 0.245 to 0.618 (all  $p < 0.05$ ). Suggesting particularly high alignment with the total score.

**Table 7. Convergent validity of ethical leadership data**

Convergent validity of ethical leadership data

		Correlations										
		TCS										
		EL	Com1	Com2	Fa1	Fa2	Lea1	Lea2	Rm1	Rm2	E11	E12
TCSE	Pearson	1	.205**	.140*	0.120	.525**	.586**	.592**	.444**	.518**	.511*	.457**
L	Correlation										*	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.016	0.023	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.00	0.000
											0	
	N	296	296	296	296	296	296	296	296	296	296	296

\*\* : strong to moderate relationships **Note:** TCSEL (Total composite score of ethical leadership)

The semi-structured interviews of 15 administrators by thematic analysis of Ethiopian national sports federations generated four key themes equivalent to the study's hypotheses: leader integrity, fairness, role modeling, and communication about ethics. These themes provide insights into how ethical leadership impacts conflict management, complementing the quantitative findings.

### **Theme 1: Leader Integrity as a Foundation for Trust and Conflict Resolution**

Administrators consistently emphasized that leader integrity is crucial for managing conflicts. They described integrity as "walking the talk," where leaders demonstrate trustworthiness. One top-level manager said, "When a leader is transparent and keeps promises, employees trust them to solve disagreements honestly." This trust was seen as vital for resolving conflicts over resources and interpersonal issues

### **Theme 2: Fairness in Promoting Equitable Conflict Resolution**

Fairness emerged as a key element in managing conflicts, particularly in addressing perceptions of injustice. Administrators stated that fair decision-making reduces tensions. A middle-level manager shared, "When we allocated training equipment equitably, disagreements between athletes diminished significantly." Participants highlighted that fairness must be visible in processes like team selection or budget allocation.

### **Theme 3: Role Modeling as a Spark for Organizational Behavior**

Role modeling was the most frequently cited theme. Administrators highlighted that leaders who model calm, solution-oriented behaviors inspire similar actions in their teams. A low-level manager reported, "Our director resolved a heated disagreement by listening patiently and suggesting a compromise, which we now emulate." This modeling was particularly influential within Ethiopia's hierarchical work culture.

### **Theme 4: Communication about ethics as a means for clarity and unity**

Effective communication about ethics was identified as a key tool for preventing and resolving conflicts. Administrators stressed that clearly communicating organizational standards, like honesty and respect, aligns expectations. One top-level manager noted, "Frequently discussing our code of conduct in meetings prevents misunderstandings that lead to disagreements."

### **Discussion**

This study provides concrete evidence that ethical leadership significantly influences conflict management in these sports federations. The findings confirmed all four hypotheses. Role modeling was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.889$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This shows the powerful effect of administrators demonstrating ethical behavior. Administrators who exhibit

calm, solution-focused conflict resolution foster positive behaviors throughout the organization. This aligns with (Febriyanti & Chairun Nisa, 2025), who stated that administrators' actions serve as blueprints for employees.

Leader integrity ( $\beta = 0.316$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and communication about ethics ( $\beta = 0.488$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) were also significant factors, and they also build the trust needed for open negotiation (Sarwar et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2022). Fairness ( $\beta = 0.273$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) was the weakest predictor. Neutral and inclusive decision-making mitigates perceptions of injustice (Febriyanti & Chairun Nisa, 2025; Kalra et al., 2023).

The strength of role modeling may reflect cultural norms in Ethiopia. Hierarchical respect can increase the impact of observed leadership practices. The findings incorporate Western-focused ethical leadership theories, but context is crucial (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021). Ethiopian sports federations operate with limited resources and historical governance challenges (Garmamo et al., 2024).

Qualitative data from interviews supported these findings. For example, administrators reported that transparent communication and impartial treatment alleviate conflicts over resources. The absence of multicollinearity ( $VIF < 3$ ) and adherence to normality assumptions support the robustness of these results.

A limitation of this study is its focus on Ethiopian sports federations, which may affect generalizability. Cultural and organizational settings vary globally (Lonati & Van Vugt, 2024). Therefore, the researchers recommend that Ethiopian sports federations implement training programs to promote ethical leadership qualities, particularly role modeling and communication.

## Conclusion

This research confirms that ethical leadership is

fundamental for effective conflict management in the Ethiopian National Sports Federations. The study confirmed that leader integrity, fairness, role modeling, and communication about ethics significantly improve conflict resolution. Role modeling was the most influential factor.

The alignment of these findings with cultural values highlights the need for context-specific leadership methods. To sustain these benefits, federations should prioritize leadership development. Training should focus on ethical behaviors, especially role modeling and communication. This will help administrators manage conflicts effectively and improve organizational performance. This study fills a critical gap in the literature and provides a basis for future research in different cultural settings.

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## Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest are declared by the authors

## Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board Committee of Addis Ababa University, College of Natural and Computational Sciences, meeting held on 01/01/2025, minute 06/2017/2025. On this basis, the researchers received an ethical clearance letter dated January 03/ 2025, with the number CNCSDo/355/17/2025.

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