

Ethical Leadership in Healthcare Professions: Conscience, Ethical Reasoning, and Decision-Making Responsibility in Healthcare Management

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Introduction. Healthcare organizations are highly complex moral environments in which organizational decisions cannot be reduced to purely technical choices but necessarily involve ethical evaluation. Despite growing international attention to ethical leadership, a gap remains in its practical application within healthcare management, particularly regarding transparent decision-making, the management of moral dilemmas, and support for professional responsibility. This contribution aimed to examine ethical leadership as an advanced competency in healthcare governance by integrating theoretical models and practical perspectives.

Methods. A theoretical and argumentative reflection was developed through a narrative review of national and international literature concerning ethical leadership, moral distress, moral courage, and ethical decision-making. Particular attention was given to the ethical leadership model proposed by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison, compassionate leadership and servant leadership frameworks, and contributions from clinical bioethics. The analysis was further informed by Italian organizational experiences, including ethical governance structures developed at the regional level, with specific reference to Emilia-Romagna.

Results. The literature indicates that ethical leadership is associated with outcomes of substantial relevance to healthcare organizations, including greater moral sensitivity, enhanced moral courage, reduced moral distress, increased organizational trust, and improved patient safety. Three core dimensions were identified: conscience as a reflective and responsible space; ethical reasoning as an advanced competency for constructing well-founded decisions; and ethical decision-making as a transparent, accountable, and justifiable process. Leadership also plays a central role in developing ethically enabling organizational environments that support professionals in recognizing and addressing complex moral dilemmas.

Discussion. Ethical leadership represents a strategic lever for healthcare governance by integrating professional responsibility, quality of care, and system sustainability. Leadership models grounded in relational dimensions, including compassionate and servant leadership, may promote psychological safety, dialogue, organizational trust, and quality of care. Implications for nursing practice include developing advanced ethical competencies among professionals in leadership roles and implementing organizational structures that support ethical reflection and responsible decision-making. Future research should evaluate the influence of ethical leadership on organizational, professional, and clinical outcomes across different healthcare settings.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Nursing Management, Ethical Reasoning, Ethical Decision-Making, Moral Distress, Patient Safety

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