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## Difficult Interpersonal Situations in Leadership as Arenas of Ethical Leadership and Learning

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*Leadership in the Finnish social and health care field has changed significantly since the beginning of the 21st century. Its principles have become closer to those of business organizations, which demand cost-effectiveness. Superiors are expected to achieve more with dwindling personnel resources. This may have led to unethical leadership, which has negative effects on workplace wellbeing and coping at work. The purpose of this study was to chart the experiences of master's degree students in leadership (N=54) regarding difficult leadership situations and what they learned from them. All the students had a bachelor's degree and at least three years of work experience. The data were collected as narratives written as part of a course on personnel leadership, which were then analyzed using deductive content analysis. Ethical leadership in difficult personnel situations was seen as good communication skills and treating all subordinates as equals. Through their own example, ethical leaders created a work environment where all felt understood and respected. The respondents also learned how to recognize features of unethical leadership through their experiences. Further research should focus on superiors' experiences of leadership, which factors lead to unethical actions and how unethical leadership can be avoided.*

**Keywords:** communication, ethical leadership, interaction, learning through work, unethical leadership

### Introduction

Healthcare has not been a desirable field in Finland in years, as nurses' job satisfaction and willingness to stay in their field were found to have decreased as early as 2015 (Hahtela et al. 2015). According to an Autumn 2020 study conducted by the labor union Tehy among its members (n=2750), the pandemic has further weakened nursing staff's commitment to their work, as 88% of respondents working in specialized health care were considering changing professions and nearly half were actively planning it. Nursing has become considerably less attractive as a profession, as 64% of the respondents would no longer choose it (AulaResearch 2020).

Employee wellbeing is influenced by leadership, the superior's way of acting in various situations and whether they trust their subordinates. A superior who is active, keeps their subordinates informed, gives feedback and support and provides a clear direction for the workplace community increases employee wellbeing and trust. Employees also expect supervisors to be benevolent towards all and a member and defender of the workplace community (Vidman and Stömberg 2021).

Ethical leadership is connected to good leadership and has been found to have a positive effect on employee self-direction. This can be used to lessen the work

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burden and improve physical work conditions. By emphasizing individuality, it is in fact possible to make the individual think of the organization's goals as their own (Islam et al. 2019, pp. 6, 10). One factor decreasing workplace wellbeing can be the superior having too many subordinates. As their number grows, interactions between subordinates and their superior decrease, both in quantity and quality. The positive effects of ethical leadership decrease the more subordinates the superior has. The effect can be seen in employee performance (Thiel et al. 2018).

Happy employees motivate each other to perform better. This improves performance and decreases employee turnover and work-related stress. When ethical leadership has positive results, it encourages superiors to continue leading in an ethical fashion. Important motivators for ethical leadership are one's internal satisfaction and increasing the workplace community's work satisfaction (Barkhordari-Sharifabad et al. 2018).

This article discusses difficult situations in personnel leadership in the social and health care field from the perspective of ethical leadership and the possibilities of learning from such situations.

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Ethical Leadership*

Qualities of good leaders are seen to be honesty, flexibility, self-confidence, approachability and the abilities to communicate, delegate and improve cooperation by teaching and training (McKibben 2017). Sapienza (2005) found similar results in her study of good leadership experiences. An influencing leader can activate everyone's good qualities and encourage the creation of a good workplace environment. The leader works as a role model in the workplace community and is caring but firm. Giving feedback is one of the leader's duties, but it should consist not only of criticism, but also thanks for well-performed work. Good feedback motivates and inspires the personnel to perform their duties well and possibly even better (Sapienza 2005).

The leader's role and personality are seen as having a significant effect on the workplace community's development and growth. Ethical management increases wellbeing for the personnel and the manager. Work satisfaction also increases organizational growth and development (Barkhordari-Sharifabad et al. 2018). Solving conflicts within the workplace community is an important part of ethical leadership. Conflicts can include disagreements, differences of opinion or competition (McKibben 2017). Conflicts can be caused by many things, such as misunderstandings, insufficient communication, silence, refusal to share information or a lack of respect. Other reasons can include disagreement over needs, goals and wishes (Yeung et al. 2014).

Faults that have led to grievances must be recognized and analyzed. The involved parties should be invited to a meeting and be encouraged to settle the matter (Sapienza 2005). Conflicts emphasize the differences between employees, but also increase mutual respect, encourage discussion and improve understanding

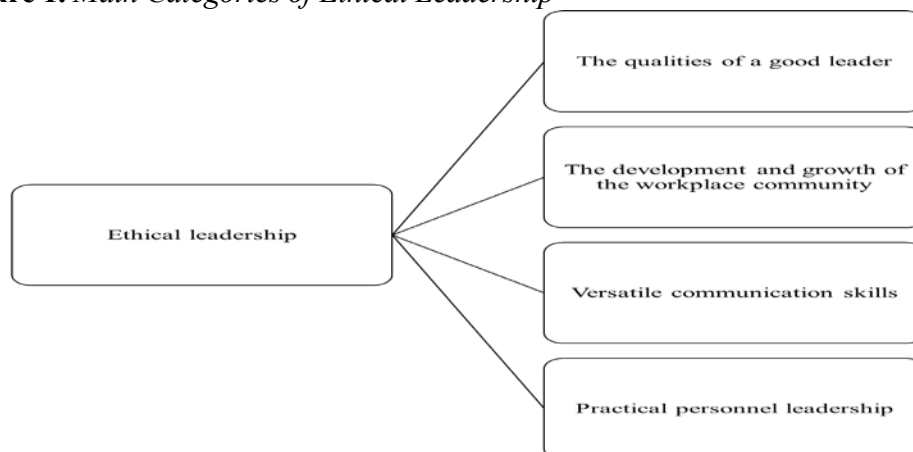
between different roles (McKibben 2017). A communication model received from a superior influences their subordinates and ideally creates a communication channel, in which the subordinate wants to play an active role (Islam et al. 2017). Another important leadership quality is including subordinates in discussions instead of dictating from above (Mannix et al. 2015).

Ethical leadership has a positive effect on information sharing by emphasizing honesty and selflessness. It prevents immoral behavior, the withholding of information and the undesired consequences of negative emotions. The superior's own example in everyday activities is an important motivator to their subordinates (Zhao and Xia 2019). If there is a conflict between the organization's values and the superior's personal values, the superior must act in accordance with the organization's values and impart behavior consistent with the organization's values to their subordinates, even if their values might also differ from those of the organization. However, acting contrary to one's own ethical values may cause dissatisfaction and frustration (Barkhordari-Sharifabad et al. 2017).

An ethical superior is just, listens to their subordinates' ideas and concerns and is willing to give them a chance to influence decision-making. They also clarify responsibilities, expectations and performance goals and act in a human-oriented fashion by caring for, respecting and supporting their subordinates. Other features of ethical leadership are trustworthiness and consistent speech and action. Supervisors advance ethics by explaining and elaborating on the workplace community's ethical rules and by rewarding ethical behavior. As trustworthy, honest, friendly and considerate people, ethical leaders are capable of making just decisions based on ethical values, which enable a good work environment for all parties (Freire and Bettencourt 2020). Subordinates wish for justness particularly in personnel leadership; shifts and holidays should be distributed fairly, and all should have access to training (Barkhordari-Sharifabad et al. 2017).

An ethical leader is a person who creates a workplace atmosphere where ethical behavior is expected and valued. Acknowledging ethical problems and maintaining high ethical standards is thus easier. Creating an ethical atmosphere at the organizational level has a positive effect on both the expected and discretionary behaviors of employees. Expected behavior is professional behavior that derives from commonly-created norms and clearly-defined duties such as job descriptions and responsibilities (Zhang et al. 2019).

In conclusion, an ethical leader must have the qualities of a good leader, versatile communication skills, practical skills in personnel leadership and the ability to enable the workplace community's development and growth (Figure 1). These formed the main categories of ethical leadership used in this study.

**Figure 1.** *Main Categories of Ethical Leadership*

### *Unethical Leadership*

Unethical leadership can be understood as behavior that is the opposite of ethical leadership, such as lacking respect, shouting and berating. An unethical leader can be insulting and is incapable of handling conflicts. Subordinates working under a bad leader are less industrious, which weakens both personnel and economic resources (Sapienza 2005). As conflicts have an immediate effect on customer work, positive solutions are necessary, as they are the only way of advancing safe and efficient work. Solving conflicts also builds positive relationships between colleagues and supervisors (McKibben 2017). Unethical behavior increases employee frustration, as it increases work demands and can lead to increased superficial action and decreased positive moods (Valle et al. 2018).

Blair et al. (2017) found a connection between narcissism and unethical leadership in their study. An unethical leader's behavior included unidirectional communication, unjust use of power, manipulative communication and false change leadership. Tafolli and Grabner-Kräuter's (2020) study found that ethical and responsible leadership decreased corruption within an organization. Unethical leadership can also manifest in undervaluing a person's professional skills, such as when a subordinate is ordered to perform tasks below their competence level, or when central professional duties are removed from them or replaced with simpler or less pleasant tasks (Meriläinen et al. 2019). This too is an unjust use of power towards subordinates.

Workplace bullying is a factor lowering employee wellbeing that supervisors should confront quickly, as it weakens the positive effects of ethical leadership. Workplace bullying also hinders effective leadership. Supervisors should intervene in workplace bullying early to avoid it weakening the employees' ethical values (Ahmad et al. 2020). Failing to confront workplace bullying lessens work wellbeing and can increase employee turnover.

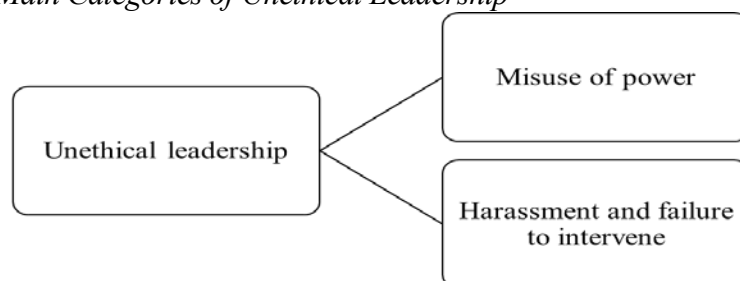
Einarsen et al. (2007) have defined unethical leadership as destructive leadership, which can be divided into three types of leadership styles. A tyrannic destructive leader only advances the interests of the organization and does it at the

expense of the employees. A supportive-disloyal leader supports employees in a way that is disloyal to the organization. The final form of destructive leadership is derailing leadership, which hurts both the employees and the organization.

Hoffren and Laulainen (2018) tested Einarsen et al.'s (2007) theory in the context of the Finnish social and health care field. Of the forms of destructive leadership, they found absent and passive leadership and leadership that fits the supportive-disloyal type. They did not discover tyrannic or derailing leadership but found that destructive leadership is entirely possible in the Finnish social and health care field, particularly because of the years-long structural changes in the field.

In conclusion, unethical leadership can be divided into *misuse of power* and *harassment and failure to intervene* (Figure 2), which formed the main categories of unethical leadership used in this study.

**Figure 2.** Main Categories of Unethical Leadership



### *Experiential Learning*

Supervisors and subordinates can learn even from difficult experiences in personnel leadership. According to Kolb (2015), the theory of experiential learning is formed out of several assumptions. Ideas and thoughts are not unchanging, but something that is always reforming through experiences. It is believed that two people can never truly share the same thoughts, as they are formed by the individual's experiences. The individual's mind is never a "blank slate", as they always have some preformed notion of the relevant topic. Experiential learning is thus re-learning (Kolb 2015).

Personal experience is the center point of learning. The conclusions and validities derived from it are used as comparison for public discussion. When the individual shares their experience with others, it is shared both concretely and conceptually. The individual works in interaction with others, in which feedback received from others acts as the ground for goal-oriented action and its assessment. The individual is constantly creating operational models and testing them in this fashion (Kolb 2015).

Experiential learning can be understood as everyday learning, which does not require preset goals, but has happened and happens in various situations through reflection, experimentation and learning from colleagues and supervisors (Hagar and Halliday 2009, Nikolova et al. 2014). Everyday learning is suddenly realizing things in various unforeseen situations.

In her study of change in leadership, McGill (2017) interviewed 19 health care leaders. One important assisting factor in the development of leadership the respondents mentioned was learning from experience and reflection. Professional education forms the basis for one's development into a leader, but learning from experiences in which one has to take risks and leave one's comfort zone was seen as important in a leader's development. Challenges should be received bravely, even if they appear threatening (McGill 2017).

Gallagher and Tschudin (2009) describe one's growth into an ethical leader as consisting of three main elements of learning: adopting a multi-professional approach to gaining professional knowledge, receiving feedback on one's skills and developing intellectual and moral skills (Gallagher and Tschudin 2009). Experiential learning is part of an individual's continuing development. Experientiality is part of everyday life as the individual reforms their thinking and learning, constantly developing them further. Reflection gives new perspectives on processing experiences.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this study is to chart difficult experiences in personnel leadership faced by master's degree students in leadership in the social and health care field and what could be learned from them. The study questions are:

1. What are difficult experiences in personnel leadership like?
2. What has been learned from the difficult experiences in personnel leadership?

The aim is to produce new information on what kinds of situations the respondents considered difficult experiences in personnel leadership from the perspective of ethical leadership and how they discussed unethical leadership in their learning experiences.

### *Target Group*

The study's target group are master's degree students in leadership in the social and health care field (N=54), all of whom have at least three years of professional experience in the field. This work experience is required for those applying for a master's degree at a university of applied sciences in Finland. Nurses made up 65% of the respondents, while 35% were bachelors of social services, bioanalysts, physiotherapists and radiographers. Women made up 87% of the respondents (n=30).

### *Data Collection*

The material was collected in 2016-2017. The assignment was presented to the students both orally and in writing in class, during which the assignment's

structure and electronic submission method were explained to them. The students submitted the task through an electronic platform, whose materials could be accessed only by the teacher in charge. The students were asked to write a narrative according to the following instructions:

*Describe a workplace experience related to personnel leadership you found difficult. What did you learn from the experience you described?*

The following additional instructions were given:

*Write a narrative with a beginning, middle and end. You may change names and places to ensure no one is exposed. You do not need to share your own role. The event must, however, be something that genuinely happened and was witnessed by you, whether as a subordinate, superior, bystander or participant.*

### *Data Analysis*

The teacher in charge printed the narratives and removed identifying details so the data could be analyzed. The narratives (n=30) formed a data set 42 pages long. The narratives were written using the Arial font with a line spacing of 1.5. The narratives of difficult experiences in personnel leadership were analyzed through theory-based content analysis, whose theoretical framework was formed by the theory of ethical leadership that emerged from the literature review (Figure 1). The learning experiences were analyzed through theory-based content analysis, using the theory of unethical leadership that emerged from the literature review (Figure 2).

The theory-based content analysis consists of four different principles of ethical leadership, which are: qualities of a good leader, the workplace community's development and growth, versatile communication skills and practical personnel leadership. The learning experiences are expressed as experiences of unethical leadership, in which the respondents have reflected on the difficult experiences and recognized unethical leadership as misuse of power and harassment and failure to intervene in various forms.

In theory-based content analysis, the researcher can start by picking phenomena that describe either a main or subcategory and place them in a predefined analytical framework. The researcher can use a loose analytical framework and place various classifications formed through the principles of inductive content analysis within it (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, pp. 128–129). This analysis was begun by searching for reduced expressions connected with the main categories. The main categories of the analytical framework are principles of ethical leadership and learning experiences of unethical leadership formed based on theory, as described above. The original expressions, which were sentences or partial sentences, were reduced and then placed into main categories. The reduced expressions were then classified as subcategories through inductive content analysis. Table 1 is an example of this process.



**Table 1.** *An Example of Analysis: The Qualities of a Good Leader*

Main category	Original expression	Reduced expression	Subcategory
The qualities of a good leader	...to know how to stop to discuss...	Giving others time	Approachability
	...to know how to stop... to listen...	Being available to subordinates	
	The superior should be near	Visibility in the workplace community	
	...should be present...	Presence	
	...someone you can come and talk to...	Easy to approach	
	...should be able to explain why things are done in a certain way...	Justifying decisions	Internalizing values
	...showing an example of how we do things...	Teaching modes of operation	
	...difficult to understand values...	Internalizing ideology	
	...admitting mistakes...	Taking responsibility	
	...keeping people informed and asking how they're doing	Not hiding information	Good communication skills
	...the ability to discuss things constructively...	Views things objectively	
	...handled the discussion with the subordinate professionally	Professional communication	
	Needs to handle even difficult things	Daring to take responsibility	Resoluteness
	...there should have been much more resources for instruction	Incomplete instruction	Training and instruction
...no clear program of training	Lack of training model		

### *The Study's Ethical Background and Reliability*

The study was conducted following good scientific practice (TENK 2021). The study received appropriate permission from the university in which it was conducted. The respondents were informed of their participation's voluntariness and anonymity and of the study's purpose, aims and progress. They also received an explanation of the data storage procedures used in the study and how the results would be disseminated. Some of the respondents (N=54) could not share a single difficult experience in personnel leadership, which is why they only submitted thirty narratives. The study was conducted using good scientific practices such as honesty, diligence and sincerity. The theoretical framework is based on earlier studies of the topic.

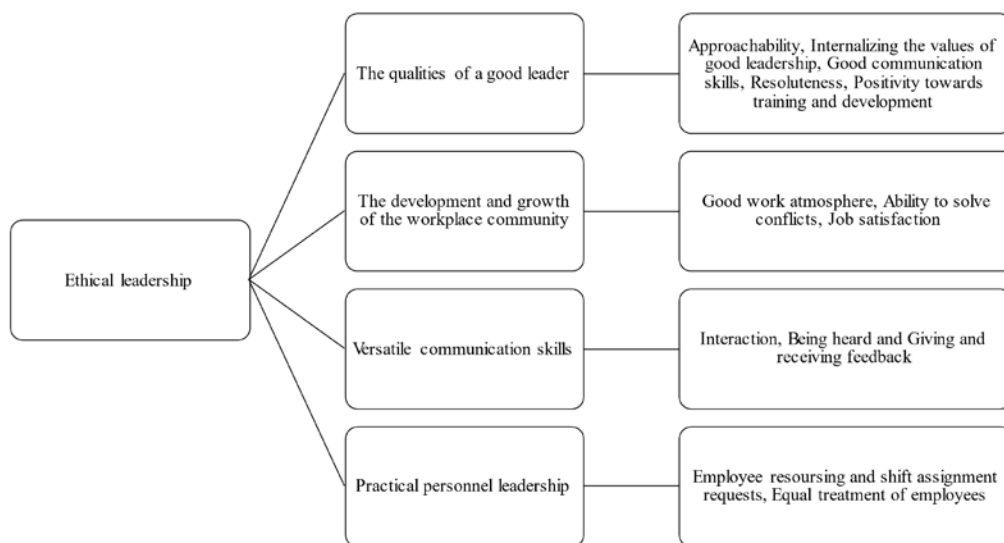
The study's reliability was increased by having the data analyzed by two researchers and by describing the phases of the analysis as accurately as possible. The research process and its results have been reported accurately and openly. The narratives that were studied have been stored in an appropriate fashion and all quotations taken from them are authentic. The discussion section compares the results to earlier studies and existing theoretical knowledge.

## Results

### *Ethical Leadership*

The main categories of ethical leadership derived through theoretical examination are *the qualities of a good leader, the development and growth of the workplace community, versatile communication skills* and *practical personnel leadership*. The difficult experiences of personnel leadership were examined through the method of deductive content analysis by defining the concept of ethical leadership and its main categories through the literature review. The data were then classified under the main categories, after which the data were collected into subcategories (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** *The Categories of Ethical Leadership*



### *The Qualities of a Good Leader*

The respondents described the qualities of a good leader as *approachability, internalizing the values of good leadership, good communication skills, resoluteness* and *positivity towards training and development*. In the narratives of difficult experiences, approachability was seen as a wish for the leader's presence in the workplace community and willingness to grant time to subordinates. Their presence was particularly desirable in situations of change, which often cause insecurity regarding the future and one's job in the workplace community. Internalizing values was seen as the superior's ability to ensure new workers were familiarized with the workplace's modes of operation and internalized the ideology mandated by the organization.

"The superior should be someone you can come to talk to about things that trouble you."

“The most important thing during the change was the role of the head nurse, who stood by their staff until the end.”

Related to internalizing values is the superior’s ability to justify decisions related to the workplace community’s modes of action. One narrative described instructions that prohibited employees from interacting outside of official meetings. This had a detrimental effect on their sense of being valued as professionals and members of the workplace community.

“The employees repeatedly said that they felt unappreciated as professionals.”  
 “They must be able to explain why things are done the way they are to commit employees to common goals...”

Good communication skills were seen as one of the qualities of a good leader. The abovementioned approachability is related to communication skills, but this subcategory relates particularly to openness, in which the superior does not hide information from their subordinates. This inspires trust regarding the superior’s work for the good of the workplace community. Through openness the superior also presents himself as honest to the employees. These are important qualities, particularly when the organization is in the midst of change.

“An as open as possible work environment, keeping everyone informed and asking how everyone is doing lowers resistance to change.”  
 “The time of blind obedience is over, these days you should be able to talk about things constructively.”

Resoluteness was seen as particularly desirable when faced with difficult subjects. Early intervention can stop escalation and help retain employees. This can be difficult if the superior does not yet know all the members of the workplace community well, which can make it difficult to raise certain topics. Through resoluteness supervisors can, however, show that they care about their subordinates’ lives and wellbeing.

Training and familiarizing new employees or students with the workplace was seen as pleasant and sharing information as rewarding in the narratives, as long as there were sufficient resources. The purpose of familiarization is to show the work’s good sides and how pleasant and functioning the workplace is. The respondents saw situations where employees could not internalize the organization’s ideology despite discussions as difficult. In these situations, the students believed the familiarization and guidance phase should have been longer, which would have enabled the employee to internalize the desired ideology.

### *The Workplace Community’s Development and Growth*

The subcategories formed under the main category of workplace community’s development and growth were *good work atmosphere*, *ability to solve conflicts* and *job satisfaction*. According to the respondents, a good work atmosphere is influenced by the chemistry between employees and an open work environment. It

is the superior's duty to create an atmosphere that is open and tolerant of all employees. All have the right to be themselves within the workplace community. Many of the narratives showed how important the employees' team spirit is. It gives the strength to manage difficult situations and to celebrate good things as a community.

"...afterwards we were happy about how well we handled the challenging situation together."

"...collegiality and team spirit in the workplace community can carry its members through difficult times."

"...taking care of your own personnel's wellbeing."

The narratives of difficult experiences in personnel leadership emphasized the superior's ability to resolve conflict situations. The conflicts mentioned were generally disagreements between employees. Workplace communities often have one or more strong personalities, who can easily take space from others. They may have earned authority among their colleagues, which is why others often bend to their will. Supervisors do not always learn of conflicts, because instead of being direct, employees may choose to discuss matters surreptitiously among themselves.

"The group had a clear pecking order and employees were criticized for things like their appearance or sexual orientation."

"...they can't talk about matters openly so they talk about what others have or haven't done behind their back."

The superior must always intervene in improper behavior, particularly when it concerns something other than assessing an employer's work performance. The superior must also intervene in all personnel problems within the workplace community. In these situations, the superior must remain impartial and objective. The narratives also mentioned a situation where the employee who was a target of inappropriate behavior did not want others to interfere in the matter. In this situation, the superior felt that they had no avenue for intervening in the matter. If the target does not wish for intervention, the topic may be addressed on a general level within the workplace community.

"...sometimes there's a situation where a member of the workplace feels mistreated.

"Sometimes the leader needs to make administrative decisions or change agreed-on practices, if the situation calls for it."

Work satisfaction is strongly tied to work atmosphere. The level of work satisfaction can be seen in the effects of change on the workplace community. Changes must be justified well to ensure employees understand why certain decisions have been reached. The respondents believe that the responsibility for work satisfaction lies with the entire personnel. Even one person who quarrels with others has a strong effect on work satisfaction and the work atmosphere. This can usually be solved through the creation of common ground rules and having the superior know their subordinates and their ways of acting.

“The line must be drawn somewhere when it comes to behavior, and commonly created ground rules help with that.”

“Supervisors should however have an understanding of who can be given more power at the workplace.”

“A good work atmosphere consists of many things for which the entire personnel are responsible.

### *Versatile Communication Skills*

The subcategories formed for the main category of versatile communication skills were *interaction*, *being heard* and *giving and receiving feedback*. Interaction between superior and subordinate is important to ensure openness and the ease of work. The narratives focused specifically on situations where employees were not listened to enough. Employees have the best information on how to best conduct practical work in units and how they could potentially be developed. In situations of change, employees should be included in planning.

On the superior’s part, interaction should be timely, and information should move quickly. The narratives see no good sides to withholding information. Both written and oral communication should be considered carefully. “Reading between the lines” is always a risk of written communication. Oral communication allows for discussion and clarification, if necessary.

“I feel that information should all be shared at the same time and properly and then go over it with subordinates instead of dropping bad news piecemeal.”

“When writing a note it’s really important to consider how you put your words and what can be read between the lines.”

The feeling of being heard is important to employees, both in positive and negative matters. This means supervisors should reserve time for listening to their subordinates talk about their situations. The narratives expressed a desire for the subordinate to be present and listening within the workplace community. The way the superior communicates their own message to their subordinates is also significant.

“...the superior is present, listening, and when necessary, carrying the employees.”

“...an open atmosphere and being heard are keys to a functioning workplace community”

“The superior must consider carefully how they transmit their message to the employees.”

Only one of the narratives of difficult experiences in personnel leadership discussed giving and receiving feedback. Supervisors must be capable of receiving and even regularly asking for feedback on their own actions. This should be considered a way of improving oneself rather than an insult.

### *Practical Personnel Leadership*

The narratives of difficult experiences in personnel leadership often discussed personnel resources and following requests on shift assignments. They depicted situations where employees had requested shifts the employer could not assign, because they did not follow good shift design practices. The employer has a duty to protect the employee by ensuring their work stamina and sufficient time for rest. The superior must explain to the employee the kinds of parameters that have been set for assigning shifts and why they have been reached.

Shift assignment requests may cause difficult situations to supervisors, as not all requests can be met because of the lack of resources. Today many workplaces have constant or partial overtime or substitution prohibitions, which further complicates the use of resources. Often supervisors would like to take additional resources but are forbidden to do so by their superiors.

“...was unhappy with the planned shifts, thought about them often and counted others’ night shifts, ....”

“...the team leader is between ‘a rock and a hard place’ and so are superiors, regardless of their level.”

The functioning of the workplace must be organized with existing resources as well as possible. If an employee expresses unhappiness with their shifts or feels they are treated unequally, the matter should be discussed with the superior. Especially in cases where shifts are changed to cover sudden illnesses, it is important that the person designing the shift lists knows their personnel resources. This helps avoid situations where tasks are assigned improperly or where individual employees are made to shoulder too much.

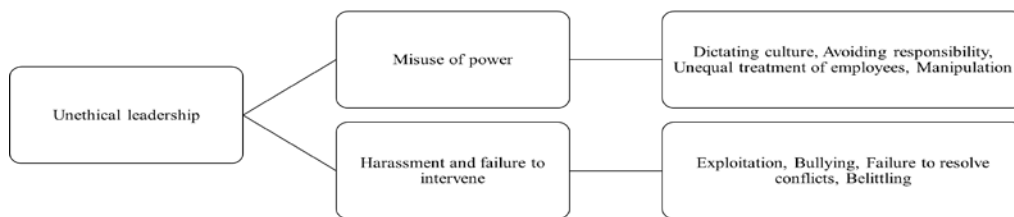
“...because of an absence, an employee from outside our team had reassigned work based on the leader’s instructions.”

“Someone who knows personnel resources should be on-call or reachable.”

The equal treatment of employees as a value of ethical leadership is relevant to work management. To earn the employees’ trust, supervisors should treat all employees equally and consistently. Equal treatment is often connected to sharing work assignments, approving shift requests or granting vacation days. It is the duty of the superior to take responsibility for their actions and decisions. When decisions are made in a consistent fashion, they are easy to justify to employees and there should be no doubts of preferential treatment.

### **Learning Experiences from the Perspective of Unethical Leadership**

The main categories of the learning experiences were created based on the theory’s facets of unethical leadership. The two classes are *misuse of power* and *harassment and failure to intervene* (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** *Learning Experiences as Experiences of Unethical Leadership*

### *Misuse of Power*

The respondents' narratives of difficult experiences in personnel leadership showed how organizations that dictate to their employees make them feel unappreciated as professionals. The employees are not allowed to participate in making decisions, nor are they allowed to interact. Interaction and discussing matters relevant to the workplace community are everyday parts of work. If supervisors forbid this, they show the employees that they do not care about them, as they do not allow them to influence decisions related to their work.

“The workplace community’s guidelines forbid employees from interacting outside of team meetings.”

“Work is not meaningful if the employee is ignored when making decisions.”

These situations have taught that a dictating culture is not efficient. The employee should not merely accept things but should be able to question decisions. Supervisors must be capable of discussing matters in a constructive fashion and justifying decisions. The experiences also showed that supervisors cannot avoid responsibility for decisions. They must stand behind their decisions instead of e.g., blaming others. Difficult matters should be discussed as early as possible to prevent their escalation into major problems. The superior must conduct these discussions instead of giving the responsibility to a third party.

“The responsibility was shifted somewhere else.”

“They could have consulted occupational health and asked for advice on how to go forward with the matter.”

If an employee has concerns about a colleague’s or a superior’s wellbeing, they may discuss the matter privately with the person in question, but it would also be good to inform a superior. The respondents also wished for professionalism on the superior’s part when handling difficult topics. Discussing things openly in the workplace community lessens needless speculation. Such matters can often remain concerns and topics of discussion within the workplace community, even though they could ask for a superior’s support.

“People tried to make it go away by not talking about it.”

“...the carelessly made inquiry made us feel like they wanted to brush the trash aside and then have us ‘good’ nurses carry on like nothing had happened.”

Bearing responsibility is an important part of leadership, for which the respondents wish to be prepared. The difficult experiences have taught them how a superior can ideally work in such situations. The learning experiences suggested that unequal treatment exposes the workplace community to the creation of a negative atmosphere. If employees feel that a superior gives preferential treatment to certain employees, it reduces the superior’s trust. Employees may fear telling the superior about personal matters in case they share them with others.

“I want to bear responsibility to the end, both in good and bad situations and matters.”

“A superior must be capable of admitting their mistakes.”

“I also learned that trust in your superior is highly important...”

“...the employees’ unequal treatment constantly ruins the atmosphere...”

The superior’s manipulation of employees is a serious breach and likely to break trust in the superior. The superior must guarantee the employee peaceful working conditions and the opportunity to interact with the workplace community without fear of reprisal. One sign of manipulation can be asking to report on other employees’ talks during work. One of the respondents experienced this as a lesson on what manipulation can do to trust.

#### *Harassment and Failure to Intervene*

Harassment and failure to intervene appeared as exploitation, bullying, failure to resolve conflicts and belittling. Exploitation means that employees are afraid to share their opinions because the superior’s authority is so strong. Expressing one’s own views may lead to harassment on the superior’s part. Accusations of bullying usually happen between colleagues, but superiors may also be guilty of it. Bullying can appear in many forms: taunting, being excluded from the workplace community or inappropriate behavior. Superiors should systematically intervene in bullying and never dismiss the matter as interpersonal friction between colleagues.

“For the entire time the shift was at work together, the older employee taunted this younger nurse. ...at which point the older employee became quite mad and started yelling.”

“The nurse also accused others of workplace bullying.”

“If I’m ever in a similar situation as a superior, I hope I have the courage and understanding to intervene.”

“I also learned that one person can cause many challenges to a work unit and take up a large amount of the superior’s time.”

Failure to intervene in conflicts is one of the learning experiences in the narratives of difficult experiences in personnel leadership. Conflicts can be either between two employees or an employee and a superior. If there is no intervention, conflicts often escalate until they are too large to be easily solved. The learning



experiences suggested that such situations should not happen, if superiors have the courage to take responsibility and intervene. Unfortunately, some superiors may believe such situations should be left for the individuals to solve.

“... it started to get personal and words like ‘racism’ and ‘bullying’ started to appear.”  
 “However, the nurse and the superior’s situation wasn’t handled or discussed between them.”  
 “...tells about the inappropriate feedback they’d received to their superior, who just dismissed the matter by saying ‘yeah, that’s just their style of talking’.”

The final learning experience mentioned by the respondents was belittling. Each employee is an important part of the workplace community. Employees should be given the chance of regularly discussing matters related to the workplace community, usually as part of a weekly or team meeting. Even if the superior has nothing to discuss, they should organize the meeting to facilitate communication. Employees generally expect such meetings and make time for them. Cancellations also usually lead to wasted time, as employees cannot easily perform other work in place of the meeting.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover what kinds of contents of ethical leadership master’s degree students with experience in the social and health care field had noticed in difficult experiences in personnel leadership and what they had learned of their experiences. The learning experiences were analyzed from the perspective of unethical leadership.

The results suggest that the respondents appreciate a just superior with good communication skills. They are expected to support the employees in both good and bad situations and to carry them through difficult times. Barkhordari-Sharifabad et al. (2018) note in their study that a superior who shows respect and empathy to their subordinates creates a positive atmosphere to the workplace community and increases staff satisfaction. By creating such an atmosphere, the superior encourages ethical behavior, which becomes expected and appreciated (Zhang et al. 2019).

The respondents wished for superiors to recognize the skills of their subordinates and to give them responsibility as necessary. To ensure equal treatment, supervisors must justify their decisions, so no one is left with doubts. Mannix et al. (2015) reached the same conclusion in their study of ethical leadership in nursing. The justified decisions of superiors required flexibility, adaptability and listening to subordinates’ feedback. Good relations based on trust and encouragement between superiors and subordinates are also important (Mannix et al. 2015).

The results also emphasize the influence of ethical leadership on the creation of workplace atmosphere and the workplace community’s wellbeing. Superiors have a great responsibility for the workplace community’s wellbeing, particularly from the perspective of conflict resolution. The respondents wished for swift and decisive interventions from the superior, as was also found by Sapienza (2005).

According to McKibben (2017), conflict resolution also increases mutual respect and the understanding of employees' differing roles. The responsibility for workplace wellbeing belongs to each employee, with the superior acting as a uniting force.

The workplace atmosphere was also influenced by the length of a new employee's familiarization and training period, which was considered part of the superior's responsibility. The respondents wished that supervisors would implement a logical protocol of familiarization to ensure an even quality to the process. According to Barkhordari-Sharifabad et al. (2017, p. 5), there can be major differences between the individual's and organization's values and beliefs. In such cases the superior's responsibility in justifying the organization's values to their subordinates is emphasized.

The respondents hoped that superiors would share information quickly and accurately and would listen to employees. They wish to be heard regarding various matters and superiors must have time to listen. Freire and Bettencourt (2020) also claim that it is important for superiors to give employees the chance to influence decision-making and to listen to them.

The equal treatment of employees, following shift assignment requests and managing personnel resources in sudden situations emerged as part of practical personnel leadership. As many workplaces in the social and health care field operate in three shifts, employees often make requests that cannot be fulfilled, which may make them feel treated unjustly. Barkhordari-Sharifabad et al. (2017) mentioned the justness of shift and vacation assignments in their results.

The respondents' learning experiences of difficult experiences in personnel leadership were based on the main categories of unethical leadership, which were the misuse of power and harassment and failure to intervene. These could be recognized in the learning experiences as negative emotions towards the actions of a superior. As superiors misused their power, the employees felt that their work or thoughts on developing the workplace community were not appreciated. The respondents learned that superiors must discuss matters with employees before making decisions and to listen to their ideas, as was also found by Blair et al. (2017) in their study.

An authoritarian culture, where the superior dictates decisions, does not work in modern workplace communities. Superiors must be capable of taking responsibility for their decisions and justifying them to employees. The respondents wish to be superiors who bear their responsibility and can be trusted by employees. According to Gallagher and Tschudin's (2010) study, superiors who bully and belittle their subordinates may be successful leaders from the perspective of e.g., their ability to achieve goals, but their methods are ethically unsustainable.

Personal experience is the central point of learning (Kolb 2015), and learning and reflecting on experience is important to the development of leadership skills (McGill 2017). In this assignment, the respondents reflected on everyday experiences and analyzed what difficult experiences in personnel leadership had taught them. Everyday learning happens as part of work and does not require preset goals (Hagar and Halliday 2009, Nikolova et al. 2014).

The respondents learned from their experiences how important a superior's behavior can be on changes to the workplace atmosphere. The superior must stop potential bullying in the workplace community actively and effectively. The superior cannot be a bully themselves; in this case trust among employees is lost. Permitting workplace bullying lowers the employees' ethical values (Ahmad et al. 2020) and productivity (Sapienza 2005).

According to the results, some respondents had been forbidden from talking together outside of team meetings, which suggests tyrannic leadership, which has been studied by Einarsen et al. (2007). According to their analysis, the tyrannic leader only seeks the organization's advantage at the expense of the employees. Another facet of unethical leadership that arose from the responses was the superior's avoidance of responsibility and shifting blame to others. According to Freire and Bettencourt (2020), an ethical superior's goal is, on the contrary, to clarify responsibilities and goals in their unit. Their words and actions are consistent, and they keep their promises.

### *Limitations of the Study*

The students who participated in the study worked at different workplaces in the social and health care field and had different bachelor's degrees. Their workplaces represented the field broadly, both in the public and private sectors. After gaining their degrees, all had worked in the field for a minimum of three years, but several of them had as much as fifteen years of experience. A small portion of the respondents may have already worked as superiors, but the majority still worked as employees. They were studying for a master's degree in leadership, which is why they were already familiar with various leadership models and were highly motivated to answer the assignment. Both of these factors increase the study's reliability. The students were informed of the possibility of not sharing their narrative for use in this study, but all chose to give their permission. Some of the students did not have a difficult experience in personnel leadership to share, which might suggest their careers had been short.

The received narratives and learning experiences were analyzed through theory-based deductive content analysis, which may have limited the results. The use of inductive content analysis might have produced different results. The data were grouped under main categories of ethical and unethical leadership that arose from the theory. The subcategories were then derived from the data through inductive content analysis. The received narratives and learning experiences could all be placed under the deductive models, but the analysis of qualitative study may give different results depending on the researcher's method of analysis. There is also a question of how reliably the main categories of ethical and unethical leadership could be derived from the theory. In this study, deductive content analysis gave clear results of the execution of ethical leadership and the identifying of unethical leadership.

## Conclusions

The principles of ethical leadership emerge in difficult situations related to personnel leadership. The principles can be seen as the basis for the superior's ethically sustainable actions. The students' difficult experiences in personnel leadership have taught them how they themselves do not wish to act and what superiors' unethical actions are like. The experiences of unethical leadership still show strong hierarchical leadership. The social and health care field has sought to lessen hierarchy in its administration, but the results suggest that participatory leadership should be increased, and workplaces should expand employees' opportunities of influencing matters.

The responses mainly stressed learning from the employee's perspective. A broader study of what superiors learn from difficult experiences in personnel leadership and how they use learning experiences in their work would be interesting. This is related to the concept of learning at work, which has been studied widely, but less from the superior's perspective.

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