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COMMENTARY

# Proactive development of ethical leader identity

Chia-hao Hsu and Bradley Brummel

University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA
**Corresponding author:** Chia-hao Hsu; Email: chsu21@uh.edu

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Mitchell et al. (2026) proposed that hyperpersonalizing human resource (HR) practices emphasize leaders' individual achievements and specialties, thereby encouraging them to internalize success as stemming from their own abilities. By contrast, depersonalizing HR practices frame accomplishments as group efforts, leading leaders to attribute positive outcomes to collective contributions. Although we agree that organizational HR systems are the right place to look to understand how organizations get the leaders and cultures they have, we believe that these HR practices focus on selecting and developing leaders to appreciate their unique skills and attributes without encouraging the destruction that comes from narcissistic leadership. We argue that a more effective approach to accomplishing the goals of the focal article would be to focus on shaping leaders' ethical identity. Our response expands the discussion by moving beyond reducing narcissism to highlight how HR practices can cultivate ethical leader identity.

## From avoidance to proactive development

By placing this work within the frame of narcissism, Mitchell et al., draw on powerful stories and frustration about negative experiences with leaders. However, most organizational leaders are not clinically narcissistic, and importing the language of personality disorders into workplace settings brings unnecessary baggage to the goal of organizational change. Although we acknowledge that the research on narcissism in the workplace is mostly done using subclinical measurements and arguments about the full spectrum of the trait, this subtlety is not easy to communicate. Using the label of narcissism in selection or development decisions risks pathologizing normal employees and applying tools designed for diagnosis rather than workplace behavior. We therefore suggest avoiding the narcissism label when describing a problematic leader's self-serving behaviors in organizational settings.

More importantly, leadership development should not be framed as only preventing self-serving behavior. The focal article emphasizes depersonalized HR practices to avoid narcissistic leaders. Yet avoiding narcissism is not the same as cultivating ethical identity: the former reflects a reactive orientation that reduces unethical behavior and minimizes harm, whereas the latter is proactive, promoting ethical actions that prioritize group needs, collective achievements, and responsible decision-making. This highlights constructive outcomes beyond damage control and clarifies how leaders define themselves, how others grant legitimacy, and how leadership is enacted in practice. Organizations expect leaders to contribute positively through proactive and often difficult decisions rather than merely avoiding harm. Thus, shifting from avoidance to

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cultivating ethical leader identity offers a more comprehensive foundation for leadership development.

## Ethical leader identity

Although the construct of ethical leadership has received considerable attention, there is no single definition or set of behaviors for what it means for a leader to possess an ethical leader identity. In other words, the literature shows the kinds of things ethical leaders do, but it is less clear how ethics becomes central to "who I am" as a leader. Others have also highlighted this gap, noting the need for closer integration of ethics into leader identity research (Eubanks et al., 2012).

Several related literatures provide useful building blocks. Ethical leadership research describes ethical leaders as those who demonstrate fairness, integrity, and concern for others, and who use these values to guide behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Leader identity research emphasizes that leadership is a social process of claiming and granting roles (DeRue & Ashforth, 2010). Moral identity research shows that moral values can be internalized into the self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Sanders et al., 2018). Together, these perspectives suggest that ethics can form a foundation for leadership identity, but they stop short of defining what ethical leader identity entails.

We propose that ethical leader identity involves both the internalization of ethics into the leader's self-concept and the articulation of clear boundaries regarding what a leader will and will not do. As Howard and Korver (2008) suggest, ethical codes provide this clarity, which is essential given that "what counts as ethical" is often interpreted differently across contexts and personal values. Leaders claim identity by making their commitments transparent; followers grant legitimacy when those commitments are seen as credible and practicable. In this way, ethical leader identity can be understood as the integration of ethical values into a leader's sense of self, reinforced by clear boundaries and validated in social interaction.

Given that organizations have their own unique cultures and systems, each organization can define what ethical leader identity means in its context. A leader's ethical commitments in one setting may not directly apply in another with different job demands or industry norms. For example, a military leader who prioritizes the lives of followers may reflect an appropriate ethical identity in that context, but the same emphasis may not be translated into business organizations. Organizations are therefore encouraged to shape the meaning of ethical leader identity in ways that align with their culture, values, and work contexts.

## Developing ethical leader identity

Organizations should consider how leadership identity is constructed and the role ethics plays in that process. Integrating ethical codes into identity development frames leadership as a responsibility rather than a privilege of power. Leaders can benefit from drafting personal codes that articulate the values, principles, and boundaries guiding their decisions. Although Howard and Korver (2008) discuss ethical codes at the individual level, the same logic applies to leadership identity: Clarity around values provides a foundation for responsible leadership.

DeRue and Ashforth (2010) describe leader identity construction as a dynamic and recursive process of claiming and granting. Leaders claim identity by enacting behaviors, expressing values, and signaling ethical commitments. Others may grant or deny these claims through their recognition, acceptance, or rejection. Ethical codes provide an important basis for this process: They give clarity to leaders' claims, whereas followers evaluate whether those claims align with their own expectations of moral conduct. When claims are granted, ethical leader identity is reinforced; when they are denied, the identity fails to take hold. Over time, this cycle recurs across contexts, requiring leaders to continually refine their commitments. For example, in navigating competing demands, leaders' choices reveal and reshape the ethical codes central to their identity.

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By embedding ethics into this recursive process of claiming and granting, organizations can help cultivate leaders whose identities emphasize accountability, fairness, and collective achievement. Ethical leader identity development, therefore, is not static but an ongoing negotiation between leaders' internal commitments and social validation by others. Similar to the process described in the focal article, these processes can be examined for their influence on these processes.

## HR practices for ethical identity

HR practices such as selection, training, reward systems, and mentoring should be expanded with an explicit focus on ethical leader identity rather than relying only on depersonalizing strategies. Similar to the focal article, these practices can reduce harmful and self-serving behaviors, but we highlight how they also serve a proactive role by cultivating leaders' ethical commitments and encouraging positive ethical actions. This dual focus not only reduces self-serving behavior but also promotes ethical leadership in action. Such practices allow organizations to evaluate candidates' ethical commitments to encourage alignment with organizational values rather than simply screening out destructive behaviors. Selection serves as the entry point where organizations can prioritize integrity and ethical reasoning alongside competence. Leaders whose ethical identities diverge sharply from organizational values may undermine legitimacy and effectiveness.

Training plays a vital role in reinforcing ethical leader identity. Once individuals enter leadership roles, training can help them internalize organizational values and integrate these into their ethical identity. We propose that training should also focus on readiness for ethical leader identity—preparing leaders to align their ethical identity with organizational culture and values, serve their groups, and view leadership as a responsibility rather than a privilege. Such readiness can be supported through ethical dilemmas, structured reflection, and feedback, which encourage leaders to define themselves through responsibility and fairness rather than self-interest.

Training alone is not sufficient for leaders to integrate ethics into their identity without corresponding organizational pay and reward systems. Pay and rewards signal what an organization truly values and reinforce ethical behavior over time. They also sustain commitment, helping leaders continue to act ethically even under pressure. Narrowing the pay gap between leaders and followers communicates that leaders are part of the group rather than set apart from it. This sense of shared membership, combined with the added responsibility of guiding and envisioning, supports leaders in building an ethical identity grounded in fairness and humility. In addition, public acknowledgment and tangible incentives for ethical behavior provide social validation, helping leaders to internalize ethics as part of their identity. We therefore encourage organizations to align HR practices with compensation and reward systems that explicitly recognize ethical behavior as a valued aspect of leadership.

Mentoring further supports ethical identity development. Busch et al. (2024) found that ethics-related mentoring reduced counterproductive work behaviors and increased organizational citizenship behavior by strengthening moral identity and moral self-efficacy. Embedding ethical reflection and feedback into mentoring helps leaders reduce self-serving tendencies and integrate more responsible approaches into their leadership practice.

## But organizations do not exist in isolation

Admittedly, even if HR systems are optimized toward ethical leader identity, unethical leaders who display self-serving behavior may still find opportunities to lead elsewhere, and organizational systems are not always equipped to deal with individuals who use ethical language to justify self-serving ends. We are not suggesting that cultivating ethical leader identity through HR practices is a panacea. Organizations without well-designed practices for building

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ethical leader identity risk becoming havens for self-serving leaders. In such cases, unethical leaders continue their behavior in new settings rather than reducing harm or fostering ethical conduct. These realities highlight the limits of organizational interventions, but they also point to the influence of broader forces outside HR systems. Societal norms and leader development processes play important roles in shaping ethical identity. Societal norms can reinforce ethical leader identity, as leaders who demonstrate transparency, accountability, and concern for others' well-being are increasingly recognized as embodying ethical leadership. From a developmental perspective, leaders' ethical identities evolve over time as they internalize these expectations through mentoring, feedback, and organizational socialization. Organizational culture supports this process by reinforcing particular behaviors as leaders encounter challenges and make decisions, shaping how ethics become central to their identity.

Although no system can eliminate unethical leadership entirely, organizations that integrate ethics into leader identity development take an important step toward cultivating leaders who act with responsibility. Nevertheless, implementing HR practices that both discourage self-serving behavior and promote ethical leader identity can provide a meaningful starting point that isn't just a preventive risk management response to the risk of narcissistic leaders. We would be interested to see whether a culture of HR systems that are designed to say "Narcissists Unwelcome" would be more effective at building the organizational cultures we desire than HR systems that are designed to say "Ethical Leaders Developed Here."

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