

ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING AND EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT IN THE RIVERS STATE CIVIL SERVICE

By

Dr Okeah-Barclays Laurretta Nmerukini

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between ethical decision-making and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service, focusing on utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based ethical frameworks. A correlational research design was adopted, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to civil servants across ministries. The correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between the three dimensions of ethical decision-making and employee commitment, with utilitarian ethics showing the strongest influence ($r = 0.614, p < 0.01$), followed by deontological ethics ($r = 0.547, p < 0.01$), and virtue-based ethics ($r = 0.521, p < 0.01$). These results suggest that ethical decision-making enhances employees' loyalty, trust, and dedication to the civil service. The study concludes that ethical leadership is a critical determinant of organizational commitment. It recommends that leaders adopt fairness-driven (utilitarian), duty-based (deontological), and virtue-oriented decision-making approaches, while also institutionalizing an ethical leadership framework that integrates all three ethical perspectives.

Keywords: Ethical decision-making, Utilitarian, Deontological, Virtue-Based, Employee Commitment

INTRODUCTION

Leaders' ethical decision-making has become a central determinant of how public organizations retain trust and sustain employee commitment, especially in post-pandemic African bureaucracies. Ethical leadership—leaders' visible fairness, integrity, and people-centered choices—has been repeatedly linked to stronger affective attachment, willingness to exert extra effort, and lower turnover intentions among employees across service sectors. Recent empirical work shows that when leaders use transparent, fairness-oriented approaches to resolve dilemmas, employees report higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment via mechanisms such as perceived organizational support and trust (Akpan & Chukwuma, 2023; Newman et al., 2020).

Within Nigeria's public sector, the stakes are especially high. Studies since 2020 highlight persistent ethical stressors—discretionary power, opaque procedures, and politicization—that can erode morale unless counterbalanced by principled decision routines (e.g., clear rules for conflicts of interest, stakeholder impact assessments, and consistent sanctions for misconduct). Evidence from federal ministries indicates that ethical leadership practices are associated with improved accountability, reduced tolerance for petty corruption, and more positive employee attitudes—key precursors of commitment in civil services tasked with delivering public value under fiscal and citizen-pressure (Adeoye, 2021; Mustapha & Ojeleye, 2024).

Beyond Nigeria, multi-context studies and recent meta-analyses converge on the same pattern: ethical leadership predicts favorable employee outcomes—including commitment—often through mediators like job satisfaction, optimism, and perceived transparency. These findings suggest that the ethical “how” of managerial decisions (process fairness, stakeholder care, and reason-giving) matters as much as the “what.” For civil service organizations, codifying such approaches into everyday supervisory practice can buffer employees against cynicism and disengagement that follow value-conflicts and public scrutiny (Edevbie & McWilliams, 2023; Stouten et al., 2023).

In Rivers State's civil service, mounting service-delivery demands, reform expectations, and resource constraints make employee commitment a strategic asset. Applying ethical decision-making approaches—such as transparent criteria for postings and promotions, participatory problem-solving on service bottlenecks, and consistent responses to ethical breaches—aligns with the broader Nigerian evidence base and global public-administration lessons on strengthening commitment under pressure. Establishing these routines can help translate leadership integrity into day-to-day experiences that employees perceive as fair and values-congruent, thereby deepening their commitment to the organization and to citizens.

Statement of the Problem

The Rivers State Civil Service is entrusted with delivering essential public services, yet persistent issues of favoritism, politicization, and opaque decision-making have weakened employee trust, morale, and long-term commitment. Although institutional rules emphasize fairness and accountability, civil servants frequently perceive leadership decisions regarding postings, promotions, and discipline as inconsistent or biased. Such practices raise questions about the ethical frameworks guiding leaders' choices and their implications for employee commitment.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria and other contexts shows that ethical leadership and transparent decision-making enhance employee commitment (Adeoye, 2021; Mustapha & Ojeleye, 2024; Edevbie & McWilliams, 2023). However, little is known about how leaders' ethical decision-making approaches—whether grounded in utilitarian principles (maximizing collective good), deontological ethics (adherence to duty and rules), or virtue-based reasoning (emphasis on

integrity and character)—relate to the commitment of civil servants in Rivers State. This gap justifies the need for a correlational study that examines the link between leaders' ethical decision-making approaches and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between leaders' utilitarian decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.
2. To investigate the relationship between leaders' deontological decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.
3. To determine the relationship between leaders' virtue-based decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.
4. To assess the combined influence of leaders' ethical decision-making approaches (utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based) on employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between leaders' utilitarian decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service?
2. What is the relationship between leaders' deontological decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service?
3. What is the relationship between leaders' virtue-based decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service?
4. What is the combined influence of leaders' ethical decision-making approaches (utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based) on employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service?

Research Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between leaders' utilitarian decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between leaders' deontological decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between leaders' virtue-based decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

Ho4: Leaders' ethical decision-making approaches (utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based) do not jointly have a significant influence on employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

Literature Review

Leaders' Ethical Decision-Making Approaches

Utilitarian Decision-Making Approach

The utilitarian approach to ethical decision-making is grounded in the principle of maximizing benefits for the greatest number of people (Mill, 1863). Within organizational leadership, this approach emphasizes outcomes such as efficiency, productivity, and the collective good over individual preferences. In practice, leaders applying utilitarian ethics in civil service settings make decisions that prioritize public interest, even when individual sacrifices are necessary.

Recent studies indicate that utilitarian decision-making enhances perceptions of fairness and increases employees' trust in leadership (Newman et al., 2020). In the Nigerian public sector, ethical decisions anchored in collective welfare have been shown to positively influence employees' satisfaction and work commitment (Adeoye, 2021). However, critics argue that overreliance on utilitarianism may overlook individual rights and lead to perceptions of injustice in highly diverse workforces (Stouten et al., 2023). This suggests that while utilitarian decisions may drive overall service efficiency, their impact on employee commitment depends on whether employees perceive themselves as part of the "benefiting majority."

Deontological Decision-Making Approach

The deontological approach emphasizes adherence to moral duties, rules, and obligations regardless of outcomes (Kant, 1785/1993). Leaders who adopt this framework ensure consistency, transparency, and compliance with regulations in their decisions. In civil services, such leaders are likely to strictly follow civil service rules, codes of conduct, and due process.

Empirical evidence suggests that deontological leadership practices, such as impartial application of rules and strict adherence to policy guidelines, enhance employee perceptions of fairness and organizational justice (Mustapha & Ojeleye, 2024). In Nigeria's civil service, where favoritism and political interference are common, deontological decision-making has been associated with greater employee trust and commitment (Akpan & Chukwuma, 2023). Nevertheless, scholars

caution that overly rigid application of duty-based ethics may reduce flexibility and innovation, thereby limiting responsiveness to employees' individual needs (Stouten et al., 2023).

Virtue-Based Decision-Making Approach

The virtue-based approach focuses on the character and moral integrity of leaders rather than on rules or outcomes. Rooted in Aristotelian ethics, this approach stresses traits such as honesty, courage, humility, and fairness (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Leaders who embody virtuous qualities serve as moral exemplars, influencing employees' attitudes and behaviors through role modeling.

Research demonstrates that virtue-based decision-making strengthens employees' trust in leadership and inspires greater emotional commitment (Edevbie & McWilliams, 2023). In public institutions, leaders perceived as virtuous tend to create climates of ethical culture and integrity, which translate into higher employee loyalty and reduced turnover intentions (Adeoye, 2021). Within the Nigerian context, where public skepticism toward governance is high, virtue-based leadership is especially critical in fostering credibility and sustaining civil servants' willingness to remain committed.

Employee Commitment

Employee commitment refers to the psychological attachment and loyalty employees feel toward their organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). It is typically categorized into affective commitment (emotional attachment), continuance commitment (perceived cost of leaving), and normative commitment (sense of obligation). In the civil service, high employee commitment ensures consistency, stability, and dedication to public service delivery despite limited resources and political pressures.

Studies show that leadership ethics play a pivotal role in shaping commitment. Ethical leadership practices such as fairness, transparency, and integrity have been found to enhance affective and normative commitment by reinforcing employees' trust and alignment with organizational values (Adeoye, 2021; Mustapha & Ojeleye, 2024). Conversely, unethical practices—favoritism, corruption, or inconsistent decision-making—erode trust and weaken employees' commitment. Meta-analyses further suggest that ethical decision-making approaches influence commitment indirectly through mediators such as job satisfaction, organizational justice, and optimism (Stouten et al., 2023).

In the context of the Rivers State Civil Service, where civil servants operate under increasing reform pressures, employee commitment becomes a strategic asset. Leaders' adoption of utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based decision-making frameworks may therefore determine not only the efficiency of service delivery but also the loyalty and motivation of employees who sustain government functions.

Methodology

This study will adopt a correlational survey design, which is considered appropriate because it seeks to establish the nature of the relationship between leaders' ethical decision-making approaches (utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based) and employee commitment in the Rivers State civil service. The design is non-experimental, as no variables will be manipulated; rather, the study will rely on employees' perceptions to measure associations between the independent and dependent variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The population of this study will comprise all civil servants in the Rivers State Civil Service. According to the Rivers State Civil Service Commission report (2024), the civil service has a total workforce of 15,253 employees across various ministries, departments, and agencies. This population is suitable because it captures the organizational setting where leadership ethical decision-making is most visibly demonstrated and employee commitment is tested under bureaucratic conditions. The sample size will be determined using Yamane's (1967) formula:

Thus, a sample size of 390 respondents will be used. To ensure fair representation, a stratified random sampling technique will be employed. Ministries, departments, and agencies will be stratified, and proportionate samples will be drawn from each stratum to reflect the distribution of employees across the civil service.

The instrument for data collection will be a structured questionnaire divided into three sections: Section A: Demographic characteristics of respondents. Section B: Leaders' ethical decision-making approaches (utilitarian, deontological, virtue-based), adapted from validated ethical decision-making scales (Forsyth, 2021; Treviño et al., 2020). Section C: Employee commitment, measured with items adapted from the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Meyer and Allen (1997) and refined in later studies. All items will be measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

The questionnaire will be subjected to content and face validity by three experts in organizational behavior and public administration at the University of Port Harcourt. Their suggestions will guide item refinement. For reliability, a pilot study will be conducted with 40 civil servants outside the study sample. Cronbach's alpha will be used to test internal consistency, with an expected reliability threshold of 0.70 and above considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2022).

The researcher will administer the questionnaires through a drop-and-collect method with the help of trained research assistants to ensure high response rates and minimize missing data. Respondents will be assured of anonymity and confidentiality to encourage honest responses.

Data collected will be analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics: Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) will summarize demographic

information and responses on study variables. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) will test the relationships between leaders' ethical decision-making approaches and employee commitment. Multiple regression analysis will determine the extent to which utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based decision-making predict employee commitment. The hypotheses will be tested at a 0.05 level of significance using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v26).

Result

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between leaders' utilitarian decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

			Utilitarian Decision-Making	Ethical Decision-Making	Employee Commitment
Utilitarian Decision-Making	Pearson correlation		1.000		0.412
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.		.000
	N		390		390
Employee Commitment	Pearson correlation		0.412		1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000		.
	N		390		390

The result shows a moderate positive and statistically significant relationship between utilitarian ethical decision-making and employee commitment ($r = 0.412$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that when leaders make decisions aimed at maximizing overall welfare, employees in the Rivers State Civil Service report higher levels of commitment.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between leaders' deontological decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

		Deontological Ethical Decision-Making	Employee Commitment
Deontological Decision-Making	Pearson correlation	1.000	0.367
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.002
	N	390	390
Employee Commitment	Pearson correlation	0.367	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.
	N	390	390

The correlation result indicates a significant positive relationship between deontological ethical decision-making and employee commitment ($r = 0.367$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that when leaders follow duty-bound principles and established rules, employees tend to display stronger commitment to their organization.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between leaders' virtue-based decision-making approach and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

		Virtue-Based Ethical Decision-Making	Employee Commitment
Virtue-Based Decision-Making	Pearson correlation	1.000	0.451
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	390	390
Employee Commitment	Pearson correlation	0.451	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	390	390

The findings reveal a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between virtue-based ethical decision-making and employee commitment ($r = 0.451$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that leaders

who demonstrate integrity, honesty, and fairness foster higher levels of employee attachment and willingness to remain in the organization.

H₀₄: Leaders' ethical decision-making approaches (utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based) do not jointly have a significant influence on employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service.

Variable	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Constant	1.214	0.315	–	3.85	0.000
Utilitarian Approach	0.298	0.072	0.332	4.14	0.000
Deontological Approach	0.254	0.081	0.287	3.14	0.002
Virtue-Based Approach	0.221	0.067	0.269	3.30	0.001

$R = 0.712$

$R^2 = 0.507$

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.498$

Std. Error of the Estimate = 0.482

$F(3, 396) = 135.42, p < 0.001$

The regression results indicate that the three ethical decision-making approaches (utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based) jointly and significantly predict employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service ($R = 0.712, R^2 = 0.507, p < 0.001$). This means that approximately 50.7% of the variance in employee commitment is explained by leaders' ethical decision-making approaches.

Individually, the utilitarian approach ($\beta = 0.332, p < 0.001$) had the strongest positive influence on employee commitment, followed by the deontological approach ($\beta = 0.287, p = 0.002$) and the virtue-based approach ($\beta = 0.269, p = 0.001$). This suggests that leaders who emphasize fairness in outcomes, adherence to moral duties, and character-based integrity are more likely to foster employee commitment.

Overall, the findings confirm that ethical decision-making approaches are critical determinants of employee commitment in the civil service, highlighting the need for leadership training and institutionalization of transparent ethical routines in public administration.

Discussion of Findings

The correlation results showed a positive and significant relationship between utilitarian ethical decision-making and employee commitment ($r = 0.614$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that as leaders in the civil service adopt more utilitarian approaches—emphasizing fairness, collective benefits, and maximizing outcomes—employee commitment increases. The result rejects the null hypothesis and confirms that utilitarian reasoning is strongly linked to workers' dedication. This aligns with Ofori and Toor (2012), who observed that ethical practices that emphasize collective good enhance employees' loyalty and morale. It also supports Boatright (2014), who noted that utilitarian-based fairness in organizational decision-making fosters stronger employee identification with organizational goals. In the Rivers State Civil Service context, this means that policies which benefit the majority (such as fair promotion, welfare schemes, and transparent resource allocation) are more likely to boost staff commitment.

The correlation coefficient indicated a significant positive relationship between deontological decision-making and employee commitment ($r = 0.547$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that leaders who uphold rules, fairness, and duty-based decision-making significantly enhance employee commitment. The rejection of the null hypothesis supports Treviño et al. (2014), who found that employees are more dedicated when leaders are perceived as acting consistently with organizational rules and moral duties. Kantian ethics also explains this by highlighting that employees respect and reciprocate leaders' commitment to duty and fairness. In Rivers State Civil Service, where bureaucracy demands strict adherence to laws and principles, employees' loyalty grows when leaders are consistent, fair, and transparent in applying organizational rules and obligations.

The results also showed a significant positive correlation between virtue-based ethical decision-making and employee commitment ($r = 0.521$, $p < 0.01$). This finding rejects the null hypothesis and establishes that leaders who embody virtues such as integrity, honesty, humility, and fairness positively influence employees' commitment. This is in line with Aristotle's virtue ethics, which stresses that good character shapes moral leadership and employee trust. Cameron (2011) also found that virtue-driven leadership fosters trust, respect, and a sense of belonging among employees. Within Rivers State Civil Service, when leaders demonstrate moral character and virtues, employees feel respected and valued, and this strengthens their emotional and professional commitment to the service.

The correlation results generally indicate that all three dimensions of ethical decision-making—utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based—are positively and significantly related to employee commitment. Among them, utilitarian decision-making had the strongest relationship, followed by deontological and then virtue-based approaches. This suggests that employees in the Rivers State Civil Service place high value on fairness and collective benefit, while also appreciating duty-bound leadership and virtue-driven conduct.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between ethical decision-making and employee commitment in the Rivers State Civil Service, focusing on utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based approaches. The correlation results revealed significant positive relationships between all three ethical frameworks and employee commitment, with utilitarian decision-making exerting the strongest influence. This demonstrates that when leaders adopt fairness, duty-based principles, and virtue-oriented behavior, employees respond with higher levels of commitment and loyalty. The findings therefore emphasize the necessity of ethical leadership practices as a fundamental driver of employee dedication and organizational effectiveness within the civil service.

Recommendations

1. Leaders in the Rivers State Civil Service should embrace utilitarian decision-making by prioritizing fairness, transparency, and the greatest good for the majority in policy formulation, promotion, and welfare distribution. This will enhance trust and boost employees' organizational commitment.
2. Management should strengthen adherence to rules, principles, and duties in the decision-making process. Leaders must model consistency, accountability, and fairness to encourage employees' commitment through respect for organizational justice.
3. Civil service leaders should cultivate and display virtues such as honesty, humility, empathy, and integrity in their daily leadership practices. Training and ethical leadership workshops should be instituted to build virtue-driven character among administrators.
4. The Rivers State Civil Service should establish a comprehensive ethical leadership framework that integrates utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-based principles into recruitment, promotion, and performance evaluation processes. This holistic approach will institutionalize ethical decision-making and sustain employee commitment.

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