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The influence of workplace ethics training on leader decision-making

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Abstract: This study explored the influence of ethics training on leader decision-making and was guided by two research questions: How do leaders perceive that ethics training influenced their decision-making and how can leaders enhance the effectiveness of ethics training to positively influence decision-making? The focus was on leaders' experiences in large publicly traded companies. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach and narrative inquiry design. To gather data, open-ended interview questions were used. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data by looking for themes in the data that offered insight into the research questions. Three major themes emerged: ethics training increases ethical awareness, ethics training reinforces existing values, and to make ethics training more effective, the training must be more interactive. Findings revealed workplace ethics training did not have a major influence on the ethical behaviour and decision-making of leaders, but it did help to increase their ethical awareness.

Keywords: ethics training; impact of ethics training; ethics training programs; business ethics; ethics evaluation; ethical decision-making.

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Biographical notes: Sibylla Meine Andrean is a 1985 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point where she received her Bachelor of Science in Engineering. She spent over 20 years in the Army as a Military Police Officer. After military retirement, she spent 14 years as an Adjunct Professor at the Sorrell College of Business at Troy University teaching various business ethics and social responsibility courses. She received her Master of Science in administration from Central Michigan University and Doctor of Business Administration from the University of Phoenix.

1 Introduction

The business community continues to be plagued with corporate ethics scandals and unethical decision-making (Nguyen et al., 2022). Unethical behaviour is an ongoing dilemma that continuously affects the business community (Irshaidat and Borgebund, 2021). Corporate ethics scandals have plagued organisations for decades and have had a negative impact on their reputation and profitability. In the 2020 Association of Certified Fraud Examiners' *Report on Occupational Fraud and Abuse*, unethical behaviour in the

workplace was reported to account for over 5% of the annual revenue losses in a typical organisation. This equates to a loss of more than \$4.5 trillion globally each year.

Concern about ethics is not a recent phenomenon but one with a long and varied history. In the 1990s, the US economy was thriving. Government spending and debt were reduced, marginal tax rates were lowered, energy prices declined, and the Internet technological revolution began. By the year 2000, the US economy began to slow down and GDP declined for the first time in ten years (Mostaghimi, 2004). In response, leaders began to employ unethical means to increase profits. According to Hannah and Zatzick (2008, p.361), the corporate scandals plaguing organisations in the early 2000s were “the largest dollar value fraud, accounting manipulations, and unethical behaviour in corporate history”. The unethical decisions made by leaders of these organisations had a negative impact on reputation and profitability by causing corporate scandals and corporate collapses while causing investors to lose billions of dollars. For example, Enron lost \$90 billion in shareholder value, AIG lost \$70 billion in shareholder value, and Tyco lost \$40 billion in shareholder value because of the ethical lapses in their leadership (Cadbury, 2006). With the ever-increasing headlines of fraud and corruption in the news, corporate leaders felt the pressure to focus more on their business ethics practices (Natalija et al., 2020).

High-profile examples of unethical decisions and corporate scandals in companies such as Enron, WorldCom, MCI, and Tyco culminated in the passing of the Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) Act of 2002, which required reforms in US business practices (Weber and Wasieleski, 2013). Though the reform enacted by SOX that required organisations to include ethics training for employees was a positive step, SOX failed to mandate that organisations evaluate their ethics training programs to determine their effect on leader decision-making (Weber, 2007). According to He and Ho (2011), organisations spend billions of dollars a year on ethics training. Since developing and enforcing ethics training programs can be costly and time-consuming, it is important for organisational leaders to analyse training effectiveness to understand whether the money invested is having a positive impact on leader decision-making.

Recent studies have shown that unethical decision-making is still part of the ethical landscape. Though previous studies have focused on ethical decision-making, empirically based knowledge on the influence of workplace ethics training on decision-making remains limited (Lin et al., 2018; Tormo-Carbó et al., 2018). While ethics training and leader decision-making were studied by Nguyen et al. (2022), He and Ho (2011) and Weber (2007), their studies did not specifically relate to how ethics training programs influence a leader’s decision-making process. While studies that addressed the impact of ethics education on ethical behaviour have been inconclusive (Tormo-Carbó et al., 2018), organisational leaders have expressed that there is a definite need to evaluate the impact of organisational ethics training on organisational ethics climate (Johns, 2018; Swisher, 2018).

2 Literature review

To date, very few studies have been conducted to explore ethics training conducted in the workplace and its influence on decision-making (Knowles, 2021; Natalija et al., 2020; Stevens, 2019; Van Scotter and De Déa Roglio, 2020). Corporate ethics scandals span decades of American history and are not limited to any single industry or profession.

Weber (2015) concluded that these widely known ethical breaches have taken a variety of forms, have involved different levels of the organisation hierarchy, and thus have required specialised responses from regulators to correct and control behaviour.

Such breaches resulted in enactment of laws to reform US business practices. For example, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977 was created after a series of US Securities and Exchange Commission investigations revealed hundreds of companies had issued bribes to foreign officials to obtain government contracts. Continuing ethics failure situations resulted in additional crisis-triggered government regulation occurred years later, after the savings and loan scandals of the mid-to-late 1980s. The government responded by issuing the Federal Sentencing Guidelines in 1991, which provided a formula, including a culpability score, calculating the civil penalty imposed on a firm convicted of illegal actions. In the aftermath of corporate scandals beginning in 2001, stakeholders began demanding that Congress hold business leaders and elected officials to a higher standard of behaviour (Cascini et al., 2012). A June 2013 Gallup poll revealed that only 19% of those polled had either “a great deal or a lot of confidence in big business” (p.2). Restoring confidence in US business practices requires a higher level of personal morality and private ethics. It also requires a change in corporate ethics and public policy (Flynn, 2008).

In response to public outcry over the ever-increasing corporate scandals, former Senators Paul Sarbanes and Michael Oxley drafted a law to help alleviate the fraudulent activity that was occurring in US companies (Cascini et al., 2012). The Bill had overwhelming support in Congress passing 423-3 in the House (US House of Representatives, 2002) and a 99-0 vote in the Senate (US Senate, 2002). SOX signed into law by President George W. Bush on July 30, 2002 required reforms in US business practices by imposing ethical behaviour standards on both publicly traded companies and the audit for publicly-traded companies (Rockness and Rockness, 2005).

One of the reforms enacted by SOX required organisations to provide ethics training for employees but did not require organisations to evaluate the efficacy of such programs to investigate their influence on decision-making. Medeiros et al. (2017) concluded that organisations are meeting the stipulations of SOX by conducting ethics training, but they are not evaluating the ethics training programs to ensure they are positively affecting the organisation’s ethical climate and leader decision-making.

The literature review identified differences of opinion regarding ethics training and its influence on decision-making. Webb (2014), Susong (2013), Swisher (2018) and Jones (2015) concluded that ethics training was one of the most effective components in influencing decision-making while studies by Elboushi (2010), Russell (2015) and Johns (2018) concluded that their studies suggested minimal change in performance, behaviour, or decision-making after participating in ethics training.

The review of relevant studies conducted on ethics training and decision-making is inconclusive and suggests that further research is warranted. In approximately 60% of the studies, participants felt there was minimal change in performance, behaviour, or decision-making after participating in ethics training while in 40% of the studies, participants believed they had better ethical reasoning skills as a result of ethics training. Inconsistencies in the studies may be related to the nature and type of ethics training received since methods of ethics training were not consistent. The various forms of ethics training ranged from online PowerPoint presentations to elaborate scenario-based ethics training. Some studies did not reference the type of ethics training that the participants received; however, improved ethical reasoning skills were reported in studies where

participants were fully involved in more extensive ethics training programs. Overall diverging conclusions in studies reviewed supported the need for further research on ethics training as it relates to decision-making.

To understand how ethics training influences leader decision-making, it is important to understand the concepts, ideas, and theories that guided this study. The first theory that provided the conceptual framework for the study was Kohlberg's cognitive development theory (Schinkel and de Ruyter, 2017). A major tenet within Kohlberg's cognitive development theory is that people make decisions based on cognition at three different levels of ethical thinking: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. As an individual progresses through the levels, each level requires greater maturity than the previous level; additionally, an individual's ability to cope with ethical issues does not develop all at once but occurs through a series of stages. Kohlberg concluded during his research that an individual's capacity to deal with ethical issues can be developed later in life and that development can be affected by education.

To develop a successful ethics training program, it must be grounded in theoretical frameworks that include both ethics and training literature. The second theory that provided the conceptual framework for the study was Kirkpatrick's four level evaluation model. It is one of the most widely accepted and influential training evaluation models (Phillips and Stone, 2006). The model has four levels and follows a goal-based evaluation approach that focuses on:

- a ensuring learning compliance
- b maximising the value of training
- c aligning training with strategy
- d demonstrating the value of training to organisations (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Each level builds on the previous level and influences the next level. Kirkpatrick's (2007) model is a logical framework to follow when developing a successful method to evaluate the effectiveness of ethics training in organisations and the impact it is having on leader decision-making.

3 Methodology

The study involved gathering data from the experiences of leaders in large publicly-traded companies in the United States to answer the following research questions: How do leaders perceive that ethics training influenced their decision-making? And how can leaders enhance the effectiveness of ethics training to positively influence decision-making? A qualitative, narrative inquiry design was deemed the most appropriate because determining the influences on an individual's actions is difficult to measure using any other research design. This method can help determine how and why an individual made a decision and understand the reasons for making that decision.

3.1 Population and sample

The inclusion criteria for the sample were:

- a had to be a leader in a large, publicly traded company for at least two years

- b participated in two or more ethics training classes in the past three years
- c be at least 21 years old.

Participants were recruited using LinkedIn, a social networking site that is specifically designed for the business community. Within the LinkedIn site are professional association group pages.

A convenience sample of 5 to 15 leaders was proposed for the study, but data saturation occurred with seven participant interviews. Two additional interviews were conducted to ensure there were no new relevant data. No new relevant data were collected in the last two interviews bringing the studies participants to 9. Of the nine participants, two were women and seven were men. Their ages ranged from 48 to 63 years. Average years of leadership experience was 31 years and participants had an extensive educational background, including one with a bachelor's degree, six with master's degrees, and two with doctoral degrees. Six of the participants were in Fortune 500 companies. Of the nine participants, seven were White, one was Hispanic, and one was Asian. There were no noticeable differences across age, ethnicity, or gender.

3.2 Data collection

Open-ended interview questions were the primary tool used to collect data from the participants. The focus of the open-ended interview questions was to explore how leaders perceived workplace ethics training influenced their decision-making. The questions were:

- 1 What has influenced your ethical decision-making the most?
- 2 Can you please describe how the ethics training you have received on the job influenced your decision-making?
- 3 What type of ethics training was conducted and how satisfied are you with the quality of the ethics training received?
- 4 What/If any changes should be made to the company's ethics training program to make it more effective?
- 5 How did the training impact you either personally or professionally?
- 6 Did your company conduct a pre or post-evaluation training assessment to evaluate your ethical decision-making?

All interviews were recorded on an MP3 digital recording device. After the interview, the data were manually transcribed into an MS Word document. After transcription, the accuracy of the data was confirmed by listening to the recorded sessions while reading the transcriptions. A copy of the interview transcript was sent to each participant within two days of the interview for them to verify its accuracy and to provide any additional comments.

3.3 Data analysis

The MS Word documents that were transcribed from the MP3 recordings of the interviews were then imported into NVivo 12 Pro software for organisation and initial

theme reporting. One of the most advanced organisation and sorting tools in qualitative research is NVivo, a qualitative analysis software tool that organises, sorts, and finds insights in qualitative data. NVivo 12 Pro can quickly help the researcher discover key topics and themes and then with the coding and categorisation of all the data received (Woods et al., 2016). As themes began to emerge from the shared experiences of the participants, it was possible to interpret the data and explain how the categories and patterns connected to each other and brought meaning to the studied phenomenon.

Data collected from the transcribed interviews were then analysed to provide a deeper analysis of the text. According to Renz et al. (2018), in a qualitative analysis, the researcher systematically codes and classifies text to find patterns and themes that will provide a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In this study, thematic content analysis was applied to qualitative data collected during the interview process. According to Riessman (2008), thematic content analysis is the most common and straightforward method of narrative analysis and in thematic content analysis, the participants and the content are the exclusive focus. The researcher looks for themes in the data that offer valuable insight into the research questions. In analysing the data collected for this study, the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. Braun and Clarke (2006) identified six phases of analysis in their thematic analysis:

Phase 1 Familiarising yourself with your data.

Phase 2 Generating initial codes.

Phase 3 Searching for themes.

Phase 4 Reviewing themes.

Phase 5 Defining and naming themes.

Phase 6 Producing the report.

4 Results

Phase 1 All of the transcribed participant interviews were re-read and initial coding ideas on each interview were noted. The nine transcribed interviews were then imported into NVivo 12 Plus. Each participant was assigned a case in NVivo 12 Plus and case classifications were entered for each participant. Case classifications included gender, age, ethnicity, education level, region of country, leadership experience, industry, organisation size, Fortune 500 ranking, and leadership position.

Phase 2 Nodes were developed based on each of the interview question answers, which were then coded in NVivo 12 Plus. The codes were short phrases that assigned a summative attribute to the relevant data resulting in 25 initial codes. The initial codes generated were:

- a core values
- b following values
- c upbringing
- d religious beliefs

- e existing values
- f reinforces rules
- g code of ethics
- h doing the right thing
- i highlight compliance
- j reminder of rules
- k decision-making impact
- l guidance on policy
- m ethical leadership
- n consequences
- o training impact
- p post-evaluation training
- q online training
- r interactive training
- s training effectiveness
- t classroom training
- u good trainer
- v evaluate training
- w training changes
- x pre/post-test
- y training purpose.

Phase 3 Once all of the interviews were coded, they were collated into potential themes. Themes captured the participants' reoccurring opinions and experiences as they relate to the research questions. To be considered a theme, a majority of the participants had to share a similar code, meaning there was a similar experience or opinion found in their interview data. Table 1 provides the initial themes.

Phase 4 Once the initial themes were created, the initial themes identified in phase 3 were reviewed and modified to ensure the themes created were supported by the data collected. Those themes not supported by the data were removed. The next step was to ensure the themes that remained were coherent and distinct. Themes that were not coherent and distinct from one another were removed. The modified themes were:

- a reinforces existing values
- b increases ethical awareness
- c upbringing influences behaviour
- d interactive training.

Phase 5 An ongoing analysis continued to refine the themes and generate precise names for each theme to ensure the data collected had direct linkage to the research questions. Once the themes were clearly identified, compelling statements from the participant interviews were selected to support each theme.

Phase 6 Three major themes and one sub-theme emerged from the data analysis. Themes 1 and 2 were used to answer the first research question of how leaders perceive that ethics training influenced their decision-making and theme 3 was used to answer the second research question of how leaders can enhance the effectiveness of ethics training to positively influence decision-making. The themes are included in Table 2.

Table 1 Initial themes

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Number of references</i>
Reinforces values	18
Ethical awareness	17
Training effectiveness	16
Upbringing	14
Changes to program	12
Interactive training	11
Evaluate training	10
Pre or post-evaluation training assessment	9
Frequency of training	7
Duration of training	7
Reminder to do the right thing	6
Training impact	6
Training design	6

Table 2 Themes and sub-themes identified

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Sub-theme</i>
1 Increases ethical awareness	
2 Reinforces existing values	1 Upbringing influences values
3 Make training more interactive	

4.1 Discussion of findings

4.1.1 Theme 1: increases ethical awareness

As seen in Table 2, the first major theme to emerge from the nine participant interviews was how workplace ethics training influenced them. The prevailing theme was that continual ethics training served to remind them of what was important and increased their ethical awareness. Eight of the nine participants stated that ethics training did not really change the way they made decisions, but it did help them to identify ethical dilemmas and examine the implications of their decisions. This finding is consistent with Elboushi's (2010) study which showed that 12 of the 15 managers interviewed reported experiencing a minimal amount of change in performance, behaviour, or decision-making after participating in ethics training. Elboushi (2010) explained that as a result of ethics training, the managers may not have changed the way they made decisions, but they had more ethical awareness.

The findings of the present study also support those reported by Russell (2015) and Johns (2018). Russell (2015) explored the decision-making process of ten public-school superintendents. He summarised that ethics education, ethics training, and a code of conduct or ethics did not have a perceived influence on the ethical decision-making of the superintendents. He found that the major factor that influenced the superintendents' decision-making process was their professional experience. Johns (2018) explored the relationship between online ethics training and ethical decision-making and concluded that there was a weak correlation between online ethics training and levels of ethical decision-making.

The results of the current study contradict the results of studies conducted by Webb (2014) and Susong (2013). Webb (2014) investigated the outcomes of ethics training program within municipal governments. He concluded that the participants had better ethical reasoning skills because of their ethics teachings. Susong (2013) conducted a study to determine how the ethics courses offered in business degree programs aided managers in making ethical decisions in the workplace. She concluded that the ethics taught in business degree programs in conjunction with continuous ethics training in the workplace helped managers make ethical decisions.

Inconsistencies in the studies may be related to the nature and type of ethics training received. In the aforementioned studies, methods of ethics training were not consistent. The various forms of ethics training ranged from online PowerPoint presentations to full blown scenario-based ethics training. Though some of the studies did not reference the type of ethics training the participants received, improved ethical reasoning skills were reported in the studies where participants were fully involved in extensive ethics training programs.

4.1.2 Theme 2: reinforces existing values

The second major theme that emerged from participant interviews is that workplace ethics training helped reinforce existing values. The majority of the study participants indicated that comprehensive ethics training was an important factor in reinforcing and strengthening their personally held values. The basis of a person's personally held values come from many different influences, such as family, religion, and life experiences (Lawrence and Weber, 2014). The participants provided insight on how they thought workplace ethics training helped strengthen their own personally held values. This study contradicts the results of a study conducted by Russell (2015). Russell (2015) explored the factors that influenced public-school superintendents' decision-making process. He found that ethics education and training had little to no perceived impact on their ethical decision-making, which is guided by their personal and professional values. Russell concluded the number one influence on the superintendents' personal and professional values was their professional work experience. He concluded that the superintendents' behaviour was based on what they learned from their prior work experiences.

This study supports findings by Laird-Magee et al. (2015) and Warren et al. (2014). Laird-Magee et al. (2015) conducted a study with future business leaders in undergraduate degree programs. Their focus was on determining whether training can be designed to enhance self-awareness of personal values. One of their findings was that ethics training can help enhance and strengthen personally held values, which are what help guide ethical decision-making behaviours. Their study supports that training

programs that include personal values identification and integration can enhance other ethics training-related activities.

Warren et al. (2014) investigated whether formal ethics training programs were merely cosmetic. Their study concluded that in organisations with comprehensive ethics training programs, perceptions of values are reinforced and when training programs focused on shared values they help to set an organisational standard of acceptable behaviour. Warren et al. (2014) also suggested that organisations with comprehensive ethics training programs can further reinforce values and rules by employing scenarios that detail real ethical dilemmas.

4.1.2.1 Sub-theme 1: upbringing influences values

The first major sub-theme to emerge from the nine participant interviews was the most significant influences on ethical behaviour. Ethics is the conception of right and wrong relating to behaviour. According to Lawrence and Weber (2014), the notion of right and wrong behaviour can come from many different influences, such as religious beliefs, childhood upbringing, family, friends, schools, life experiences, ethical teachings, codes of ethics or conduct, media, the Internet, and others. These influences and learning experiences help to shape a person's ethical behaviour and act as a moral compass to help guide moral behaviour. Six of the nine participants stated that the greatest influence on their ethical behaviour was their personal morale philosophy that was instilled in them during their upbringing.

This study supports studies conducted by Henderson (2016) and Jones (2015). Henderson (2016) explored how different factors affected the moulding and nurturing of ethical leaders. He specifically explored what influenced the decision-making process of leaders. The major finding of the study was that all of the participants stated childhood experiences and upbringing were the major personal influence on their ethical behaviour. Jones (2015) reported similar findings in a study with the intent of exploring how senior leaders in Fortune 500 companies integrated ethics into their daily business decisions. He found that 80% of the study participants reported that values developed during their upbringing were the foundation of their ethical behaviour.

4.1.3 Theme 3: make training more interactive

The third major theme to emerge from the participant interviews was to enhance the effectiveness of ethics training by making it more interactive. When asked what or if any changes should be made to their company's ethics training programs to make them more effective, there was one major change that was reported by most of the participants. Of the nine participants, six replied that scenario-based online ethics training was good, but there should be some face-to-face small group interaction to make it more engaging.

Results of Romious' (2015) study confirmed that there should be some type of face-to-face ethics training. He explored ethics training and workplace experiences among MBA professionals. One of his major findings was that MBA professionals could recognise and resolve ethical issues because of their face-to-face ethics training classes. Bradshaw (2013) stated that if organisational leaders want their employees to exercise personal responsibility for the ethical conduct of the organisation, they must ensure that their employees are fully engaged in the learning process.

According to Bayley (2012), ethics training programs must move from a reactive context to a more proactive and active learning context. Active learning is a pedagogy that includes discussions on ethical dilemmas that cause the participants to feel cognitive conflict. Participants are compelled to challenge the ethical perspectives of their fellow training participants as well as their own ethical thinking. This type of training is very effective in increasing participants' cognitive moral development levels according to Rest and Thoma (1986) who compared 40 training programs for their effect on cognitive moral development. The 23 training programs that included active learning discussions had increased cognitive moral development. The 17 training programs without discussions on ethical dilemmas that caused the participants to feel cognitive conflict had decreased cognitive moral development.

To further evaluate ethics training program effectiveness, the study participants were asked what type of pre- or post-evaluation training assessments were conducted to evaluate their ethical decision-making. All of the participants replied that there were no pre- or post-evaluation evaluations or assessments done to evaluate their ethical decision-making. According to Weber (2007), SOX did not mandate that organisations evaluate the efficacy of their ethics training programs; therefore, the evaluation of training effectiveness is not conducted in most organisations. This finding coincides with previous literature findings.

Many organisations do not invest the necessary resources to evaluate training to ensure it is achieving organisational goals. Rehman et al. (2011) conducted a study to measure the training effectiveness in public sector program management and found that there were poor mechanisms in place to evaluate training and use the evaluation results. To ensure training effectiveness, it is essential to conduct post-training evaluations (Karim et al., 2012; Pineda-Herrero et al., 2011; Rehman et al., 2011). Post-training evaluations will help leaders design better training programs by correcting and improving on existing training needs and methods (Karim et al., 2012).

After reviewing the relevant studies conducted on ethics and decision-making, the evidence is inconclusive. In approximately 60% of the studies analysed, participants felt there was minimal change in performance, behaviour, or decision-making after participating in ethics training. In the other 40% of the studies analysed, participants believed they had better ethical reasoning skills as a result of the ethics training. Inconsistencies in studies may be related to the nature and type of ethics training received. Most studies analysed did not refer to the method and design of ethics training in which the participants were involved. Of the studies that identified the type of ethics training employed, all offered different approaches. The Ethics and Compliance Initiative (2018) data showed that improving the quality of ethics training has a positive impact on an organisation's ethical culture. As the quality of ethics training programs increases, so too does the strength of ethical culture. It can be concluded that ethical leadership is necessary to help members of the organisation achieve high ethical standards and that high ethical standards result in strong ethical climates which in turn positively influence ethical decision-making (Schwartz, 2013).

4.2 *Implications*

The findings in the study were consistent with the theories that provided the conceptual framework of the study. The findings under Theme 1: increases ethical awareness and Theme 2: reinforces existing values are consistent with a theory used as the conceptual

framework for the study. One of the most widely studied theories of ethical decision-making is Kohlberg's cognitive development theory (Schinkel and de Ruyter, 2017). Harvard psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, was one of the first to conduct research to determine that an individual's ability to cope with ethical issues can be developed later in life and that education can have an effect on its development. A major tenet within Kohlberg's cognitive development theory is that people make decisions based on cognition at three different levels of ethical thinking: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. As an individual progresses through the levels, each level requires greater maturity than the previous level; additionally, an individual's ability to cope with ethical issues does not develop all at once but occurs through a series of stages. Kohlberg concluded during his research that an individual's capacity to deal with ethical issues can be developed later in life and that development can be affected by education (Velasquez et al., 1987).

Eight of the nine participants in the current study stated that the ethics training they received in the workplace increased their ethical awareness. Increased ethical awareness is a positive learning outcome of workplace ethics training. There is a distinction to be made between trying to re-educate and change people's basic integrity and teaching them how to deal with ethical dilemmas (Sams, 1996). As the results of the current study revealed, eight of the nine participants felt their ethical awareness was increased as a result of their workplace ethics training. The study's findings are consistent with Kohlberg's finding that an individual's capacity to deal with ethical issues can be developed later in life and that development can be affected by education (Velasquez et al., 1987).

To develop a successful ethics training program, the program must be grounded in theoretical frameworks that include both ethics and training literature. The second theory that provided the conceptual framework for the study was Kirkpatrick's four level evaluation model. It is one of the most widely accepted and influential training evaluation models (Phillips and Stone, 2006). The model has four levels and follows a goal-based evaluation approach that focuses on:

- a ensuring learning compliance
- b maximising the value of training
- c aligning training with strategy
- d demonstrating the value of training to organisation (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Each level builds on the previous level and influences the next level.

Kirkpatrick's (2007) model is a logical framework to follow when developing a successful method to evaluate the effectiveness of ethics training in organisations and the impact it is having on leader decision-making. In this study, 33% of the participants' organisations were evaluating level 1 – reaction and level 2 – learning, but none of the organisations were evaluating level 3 – behaviour and level 4 – results. Evaluating behaviour and results is the key to having a meaningful and successful ethics training program (Bradshaw, 2013).

4.3 *Limitations*

Some unforeseen limitations were encountered while conducting the study. The first limitation relates to the lack of diversity within the sample, as most of the participants who volunteered to participate in the study were Caucasian. Of the nine participants, seven were Caucasian and seven were male. This led to most of the findings coming from the Caucasian male perspective, which may or may not be transferable across ethnicities and genders.

Another unforeseen limitation was that eight of the nine participants were former military officers. Military officers receive ethics training at varying stages of their careers. The perceptions and experiences of former military officers may not be transferable to other leaders who have had no military training.

4.4 *Recommendations to leaders and practitioners*

Based on the research questions and the results, there are four recommendations leaders and practitioners might employ to mitigate the problem underlying the study.

- Recommendation 1: Organisational leaders should move beyond compliance and rules-based ethics training. The most prevalent finding in the current research study was that workplace ethics training did not have a major influence on decision-making, but it did help to increase ethical awareness. The majority of the participants stated that ethics training did help them identify ethical dilemmas and examine the implications of their decisions. Therefore, it would be appropriate to focus training on programs that move beyond just increasing ethical awareness and are designed to positively influence decision-making. Previous research has shown that programs that positively influence decision-making are those that focus on the importance of values when addressing ethical dilemmas (Warren et al., 2014). Values-based programs are more effective in fostering and increasing ethical awareness, which leads to improved decision-making skills (Trevino and Nelson, 2017; Warren et al., 2014). By focusing ethics training on specific values, such as integrity and honesty, organisational members are taught to respond to ethical issues based on those values rather than responding in a way that just meets the minimum legal requirements (Warren et al., 2014).
- Recommendation 2: There is support for the recommendation that organisational leaders focus their organisation's ethics training programs on teaching members how to deal with complex ethical dilemmas. The second major theme of the research study was that ethics training reinforces existing values. The study revealed that most of the participants believed workplace ethics training reinforced and strengthened their existing values. It is important that organisational leaders not focus on trying to re-educate and change people's basic moral beliefs, but rather focus on teaching them how to deal with complex ethical dilemmas (Sams, 1996). It is also important to note that this study showed that the most significant influence on the participants' ethical behaviour was their personal moral philosophy, which was instilled in them during their upbringing and childhood and reinforced through workplace ethics training. Warren et al. (2014) suggested that organisations with comprehensive ethics training programs can reinforce values by using scenario-based training that portrays real ethical dilemmas. To help increase ethical awareness, organisational leaders

should focus their workplace ethics training programs dealing with complex ethical dilemmas and issues rather than trying to change long-held personal moral philosophies.

- Recommendation 3: Leaders should evaluate the effectiveness of their organisations' ethics training programs and in order to make their ethics training more effective, it should be more interactive. The majority of the participants in this study reported they were never asked to evaluate the effectiveness of their organisations' ethics training programs. If they had been asked to evaluate their organisation's ethics training programs, they could have provided the organisations with feedback to enhance these programs in an effort to positively influence leader decision-making. Organisational leaders must make evaluation a critical component of their training and development programs to ensure the ethics training programs are positively affecting ethical behaviour and do not just 'check the box' to meet legal obligations (Ncube and Wasburn, 2006). Training is a costly but necessary investment for organisations. Evaluating training is the last stage in the training cycle, but also the most important. Leaders do not want to waste precious time and resources on conducting training that is not effective (Karim et al., 2012). Evaluating the effectiveness of an organisation's training program will help leaders determine whether the ethics training met organisational and learner objectives and whether the training produced the desired change in employee performance.
- Recommendation 4: Organisational leaders should ensure their ethics training programs move from a reactive context to a more proactive and active learning context. The third theme of the research study was to make ethics training more interactive. Most of the participants stated that scenario-based online ethics training was good, but there should be some type of face-to-face small group setting to make it more engaging and interactive. Romious (2015) confirmed that there should be some type of face-to-face ethics training. He explored ethics training and workplace experiences among MBA professionals. One of his major findings was that MBA professionals could recognise and resolve ethical issues because of their face-to-face ethics training classes. Bradshaw (2013) stated that if organisational leaders want their employees to exercise personal responsibility for the ethical conduct of the organisation, they must ensure their employees are fully engaged in the learning process. According to Bayley (2012), ethics training programs must move from a reactive context to a more proactive and active learning context. Active learning is a pedagogy that includes discussions on ethical dilemmas that cause the participants to feel cognitive conflict. Participants are compelled to challenge the ethical perspectives of their fellow training participants as well as their own ethical thinking. This type of training is effective in increasing participants' cognitive moral development levels (Rest and Thoma, 1986).

4.5 Recommendations for future research

The focus of the current research study was on the influence of ethics training and leader decision-making from a Western perspective. A future study could be conducted to explore the influence of ethics training and leader decision-making from a global perspective. The same research could be replicated with leaders from global companies to allow for a deeper understanding of how a global perspective may influence perceptions.

Most of the participants in the study were Caucasian men, which led to most of the findings coming from the Caucasian male perspective. The study could be expanded to explore the influence of ethics training and leadership decision-making across different ethnicities and genders. The study could be replicated with all White female participants, all African American participants, or all Hispanic participants to determine whether the themes generated are similar to those in this study.

Eight of nine participants were former military officers. Military officers may receive different ethics training than their civilian counterparts. It would be interesting to replicate the study to explore how individuals with no military background perceive the influence of ethics training on their decision-making. A civilian participant perspective would add to the current body of knowledge.

5 Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study was to explore how workplace ethics training influences leader decision-making. Two research questions guided this narrative inquiry study: How do leaders perceive that ethics training influenced their decision-making? And how can leaders enhance the effectiveness of ethics training to positively influence decision-making? The findings of the study resulted in three major themes and one sub-theme. The themes identified were training:

- a increases ethical awareness
- b reinforces existing values
- c should be more interactive.

The sub-theme to emerge from the participant interviews in theme 2 was upbringing influences values.

Based on the research questions and the findings, there are four recommendations leaders and practitioners might employ to mitigate the problem underlying the study. The four recommendations are that organisational leaders should:

- a move beyond rules-based ethics training and focus more on values-based ethics training
- b focus their organisations' ethics training programs on teaching members how to deal with complex ethical dilemmas
- c evaluate the effectiveness of their ethics training programs
- d ensure that ethics training programs move from a reactive context to a more proactive and active learning context.

The findings of this study add to the limited body of knowledge regarding the influence of ethics training on leader decision-making. Recent studies have shown that unethical decision-making is still part of the ethical landscape (Knowles, 2021; Natalija et al., 2020; Van Scotter and De Déa Roglio, 2020). There have been very few studies of workplace ethics training and its influence on leader decision-making (Lin et al., 2018; Weber, 2015). The current study was designed to explore the influence of workplace ethics training on leader decision-making. Though several recommendations were

presented that could help organisational leaders improve their organisations' ethics training programs and leader decision-making, it is clear that this is an area ripe for additional research.

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