

ETHICS, POWER, AND EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING: EXAMINING HR PRACTICES IN AN OWNER-LED ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Ethical human resource (HR) practices play a critical role in safeguarding employee well-being, particularly during periods of organizational uncertainty and internal inquiry. This research article presents a first-time qualitative account based on the author's lived experience while working in administration and monitoring within a privately owned organization. The organization operated under an owner-led structure in which strategic decisions and HR authority were highly centralized.

The study examines how concentration of decision-making power, absence of procedural clarity, and informal handling of organizational concerns contributed to confusion, psychological distress, and erosion of employee trust. Using organizational justice, psychological safety, and ethical leadership as guiding theoretical lenses, the article analyzes the ethical and emotional implications of HR practices in such contexts. Rather than focusing on legal responsibility, the research emphasizes ethical process and employee well-being. The findings highlight that even in the absence of formal disciplinary action, lack of transparent HR procedures and ethical safeguards can significantly affect employee mental health and professional identity. This study contributes to HR ethics literature by offering an original, experience-based perspective from an owner-led organizational setting.

INTRODUCTION

Human resource (HR) ethics is a central component of organizational functioning, particularly in situations involving uncertainty, internal review, or perceived misconduct. Ethical HR practices are expected to ensure fairness, transparency, respect, and protection of employee dignity. When these principles are compromised, employees may experience psychological distress, loss of trust, and long-term disengagement, even in the absence of formal disciplinary outcomes.

In many privately owned organizations, especially those operating under owner-led structures, HR functions are often informal and centralized. Business owners may assume multiple roles, including strategic leadership, operational control, and human resource authority. While such arrangements can enable

efficiency and rapid decision-making, they also carry ethical risks due to limited procedural safeguards, lack of neutral oversight, and absence of structured grievance mechanisms.

Employee well-being has increasingly become a critical concern in organizational research. Prior studies suggest that prolonged uncertainty, lack of procedural clarity, and limited employee voice are significant contributors to workplace stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. HR processes therefore play a decisive role not only in managing organizational issues but also in shaping employees' psychological experiences.

This research article presents a first-time qualitative analysis based on the author's lived experience while working in administration and monitoring within a privately owned

organization. The organization was characterized by centralized decision-making, where the owner functioned as the primary authority in both managerial and HR-related matters. The article does not seek to establish legal responsibility or evaluate organizational performance outcomes; rather, it focuses on ethical processes and their impact on employee well-being.

1.1 Research Problem

Despite the growing emphasis on HR ethics and employee well-being, limited research has examined how ethical risks emerge in owner-led organizations where HR authority is concentrated in a single individual. In such contexts, internal organizational issues may be handled informally, increasing the likelihood of procedural ambiguity, miscommunication, and perceived unfairness.

The central problem addressed in this study is how the **absence of transparent HR procedures and ethical safeguards**, combined with **concentrated decision-making authority**, can lead to psychological distress and erosion of trust among employees. Specifically, this research explores how informal handling of organizational concerns escalated into confusion and emotional strain for an employee working in administration and monitoring.

By examining this experience through an ethical and well-being lens, the study seeks to highlight gaps in HR practice that may not be immediately visible in outcome-based evaluations. The problem is not framed as intentional misconduct, but as an ethical vulnerability arising from structural and procedural limitations.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine how centralized, owner-led HR decision-making influences ethical processes within organizations.
2. Explore the impact of procedural ambiguity and limited communication on employee well-being.
3. Analyze the author's experience using established theories related to fairness, psychological safety, and ethical leadership.

4. Contribute an original, experience-based perspective to the literature on HR ethics and employee well-being.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three reasons. First, it contributes to HR ethics literature by examining ethical risk in owner-led organizational settings, which are common yet underexplored. Second, it provides insight into the psychological impact of HR processes from an employee perspective. Third, the findings offer practical implications for organizations seeking to protect employee well-being through ethical HR practices.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews existing literature relevant to HR ethics and employee well-being, with particular attention to procedural fairness, ethical responsibility in HR practices, and the psychological consequences of organizational uncertainty. The purpose of this review is not to duplicate prior cases, but to establish a conceptual foundation for analyzing the author's experience within an ethical and well-being framework.

2.1 HR Ethics in Organizational Practice

Human resource ethics refers to the application of moral principles such as fairness, transparency, respect, and accountability in decisions affecting employees. Ethical HR practice requires that organizational concerns be addressed through clear procedures, impartial judgment, and timely communication. Scholars emphasize that HR ethics is not limited to compliance with formal rules but extends to how employees are treated during sensitive situations.

In organizations where HR processes are informal or weakly structured, ethical risks increase. The absence of documented procedures and neutral oversight can result in inconsistent decision-making, reliance on assumptions, and limited employee voice. Research indicates that such environments are more likely to generate confusion and emotional strain, particularly when employees are uncertain about expectations or consequences.

Ethical HR practices are therefore essential in protecting employee dignity and maintaining trust, especially during internal organizational disruptions.

2.2 Organizational Justice and Fairness Perceptions

Organizational justice literature focuses on how employees perceive fairness within workplace decisions and processes. Among its dimensions, **procedural justice**, the fairness of decision-making processes, is especially relevant to HR ethics. Studies consistently show that employees are highly sensitive to whether procedures are transparent, unbiased, and allow for participation or explanation.

When employees perceive procedures as unfair or unclear, negative emotional responses often emerge, including anxiety, frustration, and withdrawal. Importantly, research suggests that perceived injustice can have damaging effects even when outcomes are ultimately neutral or non-punitive. This highlights that fairness in process is as important as fairness in results.

In HR contexts, procedural justice plays a critical role in shaping trust toward management and the organization as a whole. Lack of procedural clarity can therefore become a source of psychological distress and ethical concern.

2.3 Employee Well-Being in the Workplace

Employee well-being encompasses emotional, psychological, and mental health dimensions related to work. Contemporary research recognizes that workplace structures, leadership behavior, and HR practices significantly influence employee well-being outcomes. Prolonged uncertainty, lack of communication, and perceived unfair treatment are commonly identified as key stressors.

Studies show that employees experiencing unclear expectations or perceived scrutiny often report heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced engagement. These effects may persist even after organizational issues are resolved, indicating that well-being is shaped by experiences over time rather than isolated events.

From an ethical perspective, organizations have a responsibility to consider how HR processes affect employee well-being. Failure to do so may

result in unintended harm, reduced morale, and long-term disengagement.

2.4 HR Ethics, Well-Being, and Organizational Context

The relationship between HR ethics and employee well-being becomes particularly complex in owner-led organizations, where authority and decision-making are highly centralized. Literature suggests that when HR responsibilities are combined with ownership or leadership roles, procedural safeguards may be weakened, increasing ethical vulnerability.

In such contexts, employees may have limited access to impartial review or formal grievance mechanisms. As a result, perceptions of fairness and psychological safety are more likely to depend on individual leadership behavior rather than institutional processes. This reinforces the importance of ethical awareness and structured HR practices in protecting employee well-being.

2.5 Summary of Literature and Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes a clear link between ethical HR practices, procedural justice, and employee well-being. However, limited research has explored these relationships through first-hand qualitative accounts within owner-led organizational settings. Existing studies often focus on outcomes or policy frameworks, with less attention to lived employee experiences during periods of uncertainty.

This study addresses this gap by offering an original, experience-based analysis of HR ethics and employee well-being, grounded in organizational justice and ethical responsibility.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives: **Organizational Justice Theory**, **Psychological Safety Theory**, and **Ethical Leadership Theory**. Together, these frameworks provide an integrated lens to analyze HR ethics and employee well-being in an owner-led organizational context characterized by centralized decision-making and limited procedural safeguards.

3.1 Organizational Justice Theory

Organizational Justice Theory explains how employees evaluate fairness within organizational decisions and processes. The theory emphasizes that employees are concerned not only with outcomes, but also with the procedures used to reach those outcomes. Among the dimensions of organizational justice, procedural justice is particularly relevant to HR ethics, as it focuses on consistency, transparency, neutrality, and the opportunity for employee voice.

Research consistently demonstrates that perceived procedural injustice is associated with negative emotional and psychological outcomes, including stress, anxiety, and reduced trust. Importantly, procedural injustice can cause harm even when employees are not formally disciplined or sanctioned. This highlights the ethical significance of how organizational concerns are handled.

In this study, Organizational Justice Theory is used to examine how **procedural ambiguity**, limited communication, and absence of formal HR processes contributed to the author's perception of unfairness. The theory provides a foundation for understanding why uncertainty and lack of clarity produced lasting emotional effects, despite the absence of formal punitive action.

3.2 Psychological Safety Theory

Psychological Safety Theory refers to an individual's perception that they can express concerns, seek clarification, or defend themselves without fear of negative consequences. Psychologically safe environments encourage open communication and reduce anxiety, while psychologically unsafe environments promote silence, fear, and emotional strain.

Psychological safety is particularly critical during periods of organizational uncertainty, such as internal reviews or perceived investigations. When employees believe that speaking up may result in blame or reputational harm, emotional distress intensifies. Research links low psychological safety to anxiety, withdrawal, reduced engagement, and emotional exhaustion.

In the context of this study, Psychological Safety Theory explains the emotional

experience of the author during prolonged uncertainty. The absence of reassurance, lack of structured dialogue, and concentration of authority reduced psychological safety. As a result, the author experienced heightened stress, fear, and a sense of vulnerability. This theory helps interpret the impact of HR practices on employee well-being beyond formal outcomes.

3.3 Ethical Leadership Theory

Ethical Leadership Theory focuses on how leaders' behavior, values, and decision-making influence ethical climate and employee outcomes. Ethical leaders are expected to demonstrate fairness, transparency, accountability, and concern for the well-being of others. Leadership ethics become especially significant when leaders hold authority over HR processes.

In owner-led organizations, where leadership and HR authority are often combined, ethical leadership plays a critical role in shaping procedural fairness and employee experiences. The absence of role separation increases ethical risk, as decisions may be influenced by subjective judgment rather than standardized processes.

In this study, Ethical Leadership Theory is applied to analyze the implications of **centralized authority**, where the owner functioned as the primary decision-maker and HR authority. The theory provides insight into how leadership behavior and decision-making style influenced organizational responses, procedural handling, and employee well-being. The focus is not on intentional wrongdoing, but on ethical vulnerability arising from concentrated authority.

3.4 Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

Together, Organizational Justice Theory, Psychological Safety Theory, and Ethical Leadership Theory offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing HR ethics and employee well-being in this study. Organizational justice explains perceptions of fairness, psychological safety captures emotional and mental responses, and ethical leadership addresses the influence of authority and decision-making.

This integrated framework enables a nuanced understanding of how ethical shortcomings in HR processes can lead to psychological distress, even in the absence of formal disciplinary action.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, experience-based research design**. The purpose of the research is to examine HR ethics and employee well-being through an in-depth analysis of lived experience rather than through statistical generalization. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring ethical issues, power dynamics, and psychological impact, which are often difficult to capture through quantitative methods.

The study is positioned as **original, first-time research**, presenting an insider perspective on ethical and emotional consequences of HR practices in an owner-led organizational context.

4.2 Researcher Position and Insider Perspective

The author worked in **administration and monitoring** within the organization for approximately 3.5 years and directly experienced the events analyzed in this study. As an insider, the author had sustained exposure to organizational processes, communication patterns, and decision-making practices.

Insider research allows for deep contextual understanding of organizational dynamics, particularly in situations involving ethical ambiguity and emotional strain. Rather than claiming objectivity, this study emphasizes **reflexivity**, acknowledging that the author's position shapes interpretation while also enabling rich, experience-based insight.

4.3 Data Source and Nature of Evidence

The primary data source for this study is the author's **reflective reconstruction of lived experience**. The analysis relies on chronological consistency, contextual detail, and repeated reflection on key events and interactions.

No internal organizational documents, emails, or official records are reproduced or cited due to confidentiality constraints and the absence

of retained documentation. This study does not aim to verify factual or legal responsibility; instead, it focuses on **ethical process, perception, and psychological impact**, which are valid and widely accepted forms of data in qualitative HR and ethics research.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to this research. Identifying details related to the organization, individuals, and specific events have been intentionally omitted or generalized to preserve confidentiality. The analysis avoids accusatory language and focuses on ethical reflection rather than blame.

The study is framed to respect professional integrity, emphasizing learning and ethical awareness rather than judgment. This approach aligns with ethical standards for qualitative and experience-based research.

4.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance trustworthiness, the study maintains transparency regarding the author's role, data source, and analytical intent. The findings are presented consistently with established theories of organizational justice, psychological safety, and ethical leadership, strengthening analytical credibility.

The goal of this research is **analytical insight**, not generalization. Readers are invited to consider the findings in relation to similar organizational contexts rather than as universally representative outcomes.

5. Organizational Context and Sequence of Events

5.1 Organizational Context

The organization under study was a privately owned enterprise operating under an **owner-led structure**. Strategic authority and final decision-making power were centralized with the owner, who also functioned as the primary authority for HR-related matters. While a managerial layer existed for operational supervision, HR decisions, interpretations, and responses ultimately rested with the owner.

There was no formally constituted HR department, written grievance mechanism, or standardized investigation protocol. HR matters were addressed informally through managerial communication and direct owner involvement.

This structural arrangement shaped how organizational issues were interpreted and managed.

The author worked in **administration and monitoring**, a role that involved oversight of administrative processes, coordination between departments, and monitoring of routine operational activities. Although the position did not include direct operational or financial authority, it required close interaction with documentation, reporting flows, and internal coordination, creating perceived proximity to organizational accountability.

5.2 Emergence of the Organizational Issue

The sequence of events began when an external review identified **irregularities related to financial records**. These irregularities were technical in nature and related to inconsistencies between recorded transactions and internal documentation. At the time of discovery, the issue was not formally classified as misconduct, nor was a structured inquiry initiated.

Instead of a clearly communicated process, the issue entered the organization through **informal discussion and managerial concern**. Information regarding the nature and scope of the problem was limited and fragmented. The author was not formally briefed on the issue, expectations, or procedural steps, resulting in early uncertainty.

This lack of procedural clarity marked the first ethical vulnerability in the organizational response.

5.3 Informal Escalation and Communication Breakdown

As awareness of the issue spread within management, informal interpretations began to shape perceptions. Communication occurred through indirect channels rather than structured dialogue. The absence of clear timelines, defined roles, or documented steps led to speculation and assumption.

During this phase, the author perceived a gradual shift in workplace dynamics. Routine interactions became strained, and communication became selective. Despite being directly affected by the uncertainty, the author was not provided an opportunity for formal explanation or clarification.

From an ethical HR perspective, this phase illustrates how **silence and ambiguity** can function as implicit judgment, creating emotional strain without explicit accusation.

5.4 Role of Centralized Authority

As the issue progressed, decision-making authority remained highly centralized. Interpretations, concerns, and responses were shaped primarily by the owner acting in an HR capacity. Without an independent HR mechanism or neutral review, procedural checks were absent.

The concentration of authority limited opportunities for dialogue, appeal, or reassurance. Decisions were perceived as evolving internally without transparent communication. This environment reduced psychological safety and intensified the author's sense of vulnerability.

Importantly, the escalation was not driven by formal disciplinary action but by **informal authority exercised without procedural safeguards**.

5.5 Psychological and Emotional Impact on the Author

Prolonged uncertainty had a significant psychological impact on the author. The lack of clarity regarding status, expectations, and outcomes generated persistent anxiety. The author experienced emotional exhaustion, difficulty concentrating on routine tasks, and concern over professional reputation.

The absence of HR support mechanisms—such as formal communication, counseling, or structured review—amplified emotional strain. The author perceived an erosion of trust, not only in organizational leadership but also in the fairness of internal processes.

This period marked a decline in psychological well-being, demonstrating how ethical shortcomings in process can translate directly into mental and emotional distress.

5.6 Stabilization and Aftermath

Eventually, the organizational issue stabilized, and routine operations resumed. However, the emotional consequences did not immediately subside. Although no formal punitive outcome occurred, the prolonged period of uncertainty had lasting effects on motivation, sense of

belonging, and confidence in organizational ethics.

The author reflected that the most damaging aspect of the experience was not the issue itself, but the **manner in which it was handled**—characterized by informal escalation, lack of transparency, and absence of employee centered HR ethics.

6. Discussion

6.1 Organizational Justice and Procedural Fairness

The findings strongly reflect the principles of Organizational Justice Theory, particularly procedural justice. The absence of transparent procedures, clear communication, and opportunity for employee voice created a perception of unfairness, despite the lack of formal disciplinary action.

Procedural justice literature emphasizes that employees evaluate fairness based on **how** decisions are made rather than **what** decisions are made. In this case, informal escalation, silence, and ambiguity functioned as implicit judgment. The lack of a defined process meant that uncertainty persisted, leading to emotional distress.

This study demonstrates that procedural injustice can emerge not only through explicit sanctions but also through omission such as failure to communicate, clarify, or reassure. The resulting psychological impact highlights the ethical responsibility of HR processes to protect employees from unnecessary harm.

6.2 Psychological Safety and Employee Well-Being

Psychological Safety Theory provides a strong explanation for the emotional and psychological experience described in the findings. The centralized authority structure and absence of neutral HR mechanisms reduced psychological safety, limiting the author's ability to seek clarification or express concern without fear.

The findings illustrate how environments characterized by silence, power imbalance, and uncertainty discourage open communication. As psychological safety diminished, anxiety increased, leading to emotional exhaustion and reduced engagement. This aligns with research indicating that low psychological safety is

associated with stress, withdrawal, and decreased well-being.

Importantly, the study shows that psychological harm occurred even in the absence of overt conflict or punishment. The fear of potential consequences, combined with lack of reassurance, was sufficient to undermine well-being.

6.3 Ethical Leadership and Concentration of Authority

Ethical Leadership Theory helps explain how leadership structure influenced the ethical handling of the situation. In owner-led organizations where leadership and HR authority are combined, ethical responsibility rests heavily on individual decision-makers.

The findings suggest that ethical risk increased due to concentration of authority and lack of procedural safeguards. Without separation of roles or independent oversight, decisions were shaped by informal interpretation rather than standardized ethical practice. This does not imply intentional wrongdoing, but highlights vulnerability arising from structural design.

Ethical leadership requires not only good intentions but also systems that ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability. The absence of such systems contributed to organizational chaos and emotional harm.

6.4 Integrated Interpretation

When examined collectively, the three theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of the experience. Organizational justice explains perceptions of unfairness, psychological safety captures emotional consequences, and ethical leadership addresses structural and decision-making factors.

The interaction of these elements transformed a technical organizational issue into a human-centered ethical problem. This underscores the importance of integrating ethical awareness into HR practices, particularly in owner-led contexts.

6.5 Contribution to HR Ethics Literature

This study contributes to HR ethics and employee well-being literature by offering a first-time, experience-based analysis from an owner-led organizational setting. Unlike outcome-

focused studies, it emphasizes process and emotional impact, highlighting ethical vulnerabilities that may otherwise remain invisible.

The findings reinforce the argument that ethical HR practices must be proactive and employee-centered, even in small or informally structured organizations.

7. Conclusion

This research article presented a first-time qualitative analysis of HR ethics and employee well-being based on lived experience within an owner-led organizational context. The study examined how centralized decision-making authority, informal HR practices, and lack of procedural clarity contributed to psychological distress and erosion of employee trust.

The findings demonstrate that ethical challenges can arise not only from explicit disciplinary actions but also from **how organizational issues are handled**. Silence, ambiguity, and informal escalation functioned as implicit judgment, producing emotional strain despite the absence of formal sanctions. The study reinforces the importance of ethical HR processes that prioritize transparency, fairness, and psychological safety.

By applying Organizational Justice Theory, Psychological Safety Theory, and Ethical Leadership Theory, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how structural and ethical vulnerabilities interact to shape employee experiences. The analysis highlights that employee well-being is deeply influenced by procedural conduct, particularly in organizations where HR authority is concentrated.

8. Implications for HR Practice

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for HR practice, especially in owner-led or informally structured organizations:

1. Need for Procedural Clarity:

Even small organizations should establish basic HR procedures for handling internal concerns, including clear communication of process, roles, and expectations.

2. Importance of Employee Voice:

Employees should be given timely opportunities to seek clarification and express concerns. This

can reduce uncertainty and protect psychological well-being.

3. Separation of Roles Where Possible:

While full HR departments may not be feasible in all organizations, partial role separation or advisory mechanisms can reduce ethical risk associated with centralized authority.

4. Attention to Employee Well-Being:

HR practices should incorporate awareness of emotional and psychological impact, particularly during periods of uncertainty.

These implications emphasize that ethical HR practice is not dependent on organizational size, but on commitment to fairness and transparency.

9. Limitations and Future Research

This study has certain limitations. First, it is based on a single, experience-based account and does not aim for statistical generalization. Second, the absence of organizational documents limits triangulation of events, although this aligns with the study's focus on ethical perception and psychological impact rather than factual adjudication.

Future research could explore similar experiences across multiple owner-led organizations to identify broader patterns in HR ethics and employee well-being. Comparative studies incorporating multiple employee perspectives or mixed methods could further strengthen understanding of ethical risk in centralized organizational structures.

10. Final Remarks

This study underscores that ethical HR practices are fundamental to protecting employee well-being, particularly in contexts characterized by concentrated authority and informal processes. Organizations that neglect procedural fairness and psychological safety risk unintended emotional harm, loss of trust, and long-term disengagement.

By foregrounding lived experience, this research contributes to a more human-centered understanding of HR ethics and highlights the need for ethical awareness in everyday organizational practice.

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