

NEUROLEADERSHIP AS A TOOL FOR COMBATING UNETHICAL BEHAVIOUR IN  
THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC SECTOR: ADDRESSING HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND  
LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

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*Abstrak*

*This paper is a narrative review exploring how an understanding of how brain function underlying leadership behaviour and decision making -neuroleadership- can be utilised to address unethical behaviour, including nepotism, corruption and fraud, in the South African public sector, aggravated by various circumstances, one of which is historical trauma from the apartheid era. Notwithstanding countless legislative efforts to curb unethical practices, South Africa continues to experience widespread corruption in its public sector, particularly within municipalities. We suggest unresolved historical trauma as further fuelling unethical practices among leaders who feel disadvantaged by previous political systems. This paper investigates how neuroleadership principles, including self-awareness, emotional regulation and social cognition have the potential to address these behaviours. The findings are that neuroleadership offers a novel strategy for studying and teaching ethical leadership in the South African public sector by enhancing among others, emotional regulation and bias awareness, with the potential to address the severe challenges municipalities face, such as financial mismanagement, and procurement irregularities. Integrating neuroleadership into ethics training programs for public officials is recommended to promote emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility, while addressing underlying historical traumas is suggested to help mitigate unethical behaviour and foster more inclusive leadership practices.*

**Keywords:** *Neuroleadership, Ethics, Trauma, Public sector*

**PENDAHULUAN**

The South African public sector has struggled to maintain ethical standards since the advent of democracy in 1994. Corruption and maladministration persist, with significant consequences for public service delivery, particularly for municipalities. Reports by the

Auditor General indicate that more than 60 municipalities were deemed dysfunctional in 2021 due to poor governance, corruption, and political instability (Hendrickse, 2023). Highlighting the pressing need for novel approaches to leadership, addressing both ethical behaviour and the historical factors contributing to current governance challenges.

The persistent ethical challenges in South Africa's public sector, have had a significant impact on the private sector as well. Corruption in public institutions not only reduces public trust but also weakens private sector confidence. As corruption in municipalities continues, businesses could also find themselves forced into corrupt practices when attempting to secure government contracts, contributing to a cycle of unethical behaviour, stifling equitable service quality and service delivery. The private sector, particularly in industries heavily reliant on public procurement, faces significant risks. Corrupt practices such as bribery, nepotism, and state capture blur the lines between public and private responsibilities, as seen during the Zuma years of state capture. This was prominently highlighted in the report by former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela, which detailed how the Zuma-Gupta network exploited state companies for personal enrichment (Madonsela, 2018). This period revealed the complicity of major corporations in corrupt practices aimed at securing favourable treatment from the state, further entrenching unethical conduct across sectors. State capture, in particular, illustrates how deep-seated public sector corruption can lead to widespread private sector involvement, damaging both the economy and the moral fabric of the business community (Hendrickse, 2023; Hub, 2023).

In addition, public sector corruption exacerbates operational costs for businesses, with companies often having to navigate complex bureaucratic systems complicated by bribery and maladministration. This results in distorted market dynamics, where honest businesses struggle to compete against those willing to engage in unethical conduct, further

weakening the overall economic environment (Daily Maverick, 2022). In view of South Africa's history of apartheid, unresolved trauma has the potential to fuel unethical leadership behaviour. Many leaders, having experienced systemic marginalisation, now find themselves in positions of power where they might feel entitled to engage in corrupt practices as a form of reparation or compensation for past disadvantages (Mlambo and Maserumule, 2024). Neuroleadership, which integrates neuroscience into leadership practices, offers an avenue to address both unconscious biases and emotional regulation, potentially providing a transformative solution to these issues and resultantly address ethical conduct and governance issues in the public sector.

## LITERATURE

### **Corruption and governance challenges in South Africa**

Corruption remains a critical challenge for governance in South Africa, adversely affecting the public sector's ability to deliver services effectively. The entrenched nature of corruption in South African public administration stems partly from the country's historical legacy of apartheid and colonialism, which fostered governance systems prone to mismanagement and unethical practices (Koelble, 2017; Pillay, 2004). South Africa has established a comprehensive legislative framework designed to combat corruption, particularly in local governments and municipalities. Key pieces of legislation include the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) of 2003, which ensures sound financial governance in municipalities by promoting transparency, accountability, and financial discipline (Manyaka and Nkuna, 2014). Additionally, the Public Service Act of 1994 and the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act of 2004 play critical roles in addressing corruption by criminalising corrupt practices and establishing procedures for addressing financial misconduct (Nkosingiphile, 2022). Furthermore, the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act of 2000 sets out principles for good governance, promoting ethical behaviour and transparent public administration in municipalities (Mlambo and Maserumule, 2024).

The Constitution of South Africa (1996) also enshrines principles of transparency, accountability, and good governance, particularly in Chapter 10, which mandates that public administration be governed by high standards of professional ethics (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Section 195 of the Constitution obligates public officials to be accountable and transparent while performing their duties, and this extends to local governments responsible for quality service delivery (Van Wyk, 2011). Despite this robust legislative framework, enforcement remains a significant issue, with inadequate oversight, political interference, and weak institutional capacities allowing corruption to persist (Hendrickse, 2023). The persistence of corrupt activities, particularly in local governments and municipalities, reflects the insufficient enforcement of these mechanisms (Mlambo and Maserumule, 2024; Rispel et al., 2016). Previously, the high level of political patronage, often linked to the ruling party's dominance, exacerbated these governance challenges by creating a culture of impunity while weakening accountability systems (Koelble, 2017; Naidoo, 2013).

Moreover, corruption in South Africa's public sector has direct consequences for the country's socioeconomic development. It diverts resources intended for public welfare, exacerbating inequality and impeding service delivery, especially in essential sectors such as health and education (Manyaka and Nkuna, 2014; Rispel et al., 2016). Public opinion surveys and academic studies alike have documented a growing sense of frustration among citizens who perceive widespread corruption as a significant barrier to achieving social justice and improving living standards (Lodge, 1998; Masenya and Mthombeni, 2023). Efforts to address these issues are further complicated by the politicization of anti-corruption enforcement, which undermines the effectiveness of regulatory bodies and allows corrupt practices to persist (Naidoo, 2013; Pillay, 2014).

### **Ethical leadership**

Ethical leadership is a multidimensional concept emphasizing moral principles and values as guides to behaviours and decision-making processes of leaders within the public sector. This leadership style

is characterised by leaders acting with integrity and fairness, and actively promote ethics within organisations. Studies show that ethical leadership enhances organisational culture by fostering an ethical climate, which, in turn, builds trust among employees and raises overall organisational performance (Alkhadra et al., 2023). Ethical leaders inspire ethical behaviour by reinforcing organisational social capital and ensuring employees align their personal values with the organisation's ethical framework, thereby contributing to enhanced job satisfaction and performance (Oladimeji and Abdulkareem, 2023; Abdi and Hashi, 2023). Furthermore, the ethical leadership model in the public sector has been linked to reducing unethical behaviours and improving organisational commitment, which is crucial for sustainable service delivery (Khaltar and Moon, 2020). In essence, the development of an ethical organisational culture under ethical leadership has a significant impact on trust-building and elevating both employee morale and organisational performance (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009). Fundamentally, ethical leadership involves a commitment to moral values and ethical conduct. Leaders who embody ethical leadership are expected to model behaviours that reflect integrity, accountability, and transparency, thereby setting a moral example for their followers (Tamunomiebi and Orianzi, 2019; Mohi Ud Din and Zhang, 2023). This modelling is crucial as it influences the ethical climate of the organisation, encouraging employees to engage in ethical behaviour themselves (Onan et al., 2022; Avey et al., 2012). Research indicates that ethical leaders can significantly impact their followers' moral actions through emotional connections, thereby fostering a sense of responsibility and ethical awareness among team members (Avey et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2018).

Moreover, ethical leadership is linked to various positive organisational outcomes. Studies have shown that ethical leadership enhances job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and employee engagement (Onan et al., 2022; Tamunomiebi and Orianzi, 2019). By establishing clear ethical standards and expectations, ethical leaders create an environment where employees feel safe to express their concerns and voice their opinions, which is vital for promoting a culture of openness

and trust (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009; Avey et al., 2012). This is particularly important in today's complex and often ambiguous work environments, where ethical dilemmas frequently arise.

The implications of ethical leadership extend beyond individual behaviour to encompass broader organisational practices. Ethical leaders are instrumental in shaping organisational policies and practices that prioritise ethical considerations in decision-making processes ("Ethical Leadership and Its Implication on Decision-Making in Organisations: A Literature Review", 2024; ADIM, 2019) (Tamunomiebi and Orianzi, 2019). They are also responsible for implementing training and development programs that reinforce ethical standards and equip employees with the tools necessary to navigate ethical challenges (Ahmed, 2024; "From Ethical Principles to Practice: the Growing Importance of Moral Leadership in Education", 2023). This proactive approach not only mitigates the risk of unethical behaviour but also enhances the organisation's reputation and stakeholder trust (Tamunomiebi and Orianzi, 2019; Aryal, 2024).

However, the practice of ethical leadership is not without its challenges. Leaders must navigate the complexities of ethical decision-making, balancing competing interests and values often shaped by their personal and collective experiences, both positive and negative. In the South African context, historical trauma, rooted in the country's legacy of apartheid, plays a significant role in shaping leaders' decision-making processes. The effects of such trauma, passed down through generations, can lead to a sense of powerlessness and heightened sensitivity to socio-economic disparities, which in turn influence ethical choices (Adonis, 2016). Leaders who have been exposed to historical and intergenerational trauma may find themselves facing internal conflicts that stem from these experiences, often struggling to balance their professional obligations with the lingering impacts of the past (Atwoli et al., 2013). This trauma shapes not only their personal values but also their approach to leadership, particularly in matters of social justice and equality (Adonis, 2018).

Moreover, trauma-informed decision-making among South African leaders can manifest in either hypervigilance, which may foster ethical rigidity, or in avoidance behaviours, where difficult decisions are deferred, further complicating governance processes (Koortzen and Oosthuizen, 2012). These dynamics illustrate how deeply historical experiences can shape ethical frameworks, often leading leaders to prioritize certain values, such as equity or reparation, in response to the traumas they or their communities have endured (Keet, 2021). Leaders' behaviour, thus, is frequently influenced by their efforts to reconcile the demands of their roles with the ongoing impact of collective and personal historical trauma, making ethical decision-making a complex, emotionally charged process (Treviño et al., 2003) (Kalshoven et al., 2016). Furthermore, ethical leadership can sometimes lead to unintended consequences, such as followers justifying unethical behaviour under the guise of loyalty to the organisation (Kalshoven et al., 2016). Therefore, it is essential for ethical leaders to remain vigilant and continuously reflect on their practices to ensure that they uphold ethical standards and foster a genuinely ethical organisational culture.

### **Historical and intergenerational trauma**

Historical trauma is described as the collective emotional and psychological wounds acquired due to significant negative events of colonisation, slavery, genocide, or systemic oppression. This type of trauma is often collective in nature, which transmits through successive generations and leaves a continuing mark of devastation and disorganisation in the lives of the communities affected. (Bombay et al., 2014; Oré et al., 2016; Evans-Campbell, 2008). As such, the systematic oppression of majority Black South Africans through the apartheid regime similarly left an indelible mark on communities affected by its policies. The concept of historical trauma is effective in working with Indigenous peoples because the psychological experiences due to colonisation and forced assimilation have been perpetual. Research has documented that historical traumas created in Native American communities through residential schooling and land dispossession have led to ongoing mental health problems, substance use disorders, and social fragmentation (Woods et al., 2023; Cowan, 2020). These historical traumas manifest not only in individual psychological distress

but also in collective community challenges, including loss of cultural identity and intergenerational cycles of trauma (Woods et al., 2023; Bookman-Zandler and Smith, 2024).

Therefore, unlike intergenerational trauma, historical trauma refers only to the passing on of the effects of trauma from generation to generation. This happens when the unaddressed trauma encountered by a particular generation impacts the psychological health and behaviours of the following generations. For instance, children of trauma survivors might display heightened susceptibility to mental health disorders, ineffective coping strategies, and challenges in establishing healthy interpersonal relationships (Cowan, 2020; Spiel et al., 2022). The impact of trauma passed down through parental generations can lead to changes in family dynamics, shifts in parenting behaviours, and a decrease in overall functioning of the family, further promoting trauma across generations (O'Neill et al., 2018; Hoffman et al., 2023). These impacts further permeate society as the same individuals take up employment in our public institutions at various levels of leadership.

The mechanisms of intergenerational trauma are complex and may involve both psychogenic and biological factors. Studies have shown that epigenetic changes-gene expression altered by environmental stressors-may play a role in the biological intergenerational transmission of trauma (Bombay et al., 2014; Yehuda and Lehrner, 2018). Furthermore, the social and cultural environments in which family's function can affect the manner in which trauma is both processed and passed down through generations. Elements such as community support, cultural resilience, and collective healing methods can act as either protective factors or aggravating influences (Bookman-Zandler and Smith, 2024; Cai, 2022). The relationship between the constructs is that historical trauma constitutes collective psychological injury originating from major injurious events, while intergenerational trauma involves a transmission of such an effect over successive generations. This suggests that traumatic experiences should not be thought of as primarily individual-level experiences but as one collective, intergenerational experience that shapes the identity, behaviour, and mental health status of an entire community.

## Neuroleadership

Neuroleadership refers to the application of neuroscience principles to leadership development, focusing on decision-making, emotional regulation, and behaviour change. It is viewed from an angle of how to improve organisational output and personal leading skills. As an emerging interdisciplinary field in the Global South, it integrates neuroscience with leadership practices to address various organisational challenges. It has demonstrated its' effectiveness in enhancing ethical leadership by raising awareness of unconscious biases and promoting cognitive flexibility (Rosa, 2023). Research indicates that understanding how the brain works may provide important insights into how leaders can develop emotional intelligence, flexibility, and effective decision-making skills in their organisations (Aithal and Satpathy, 2024; Tyagi et al., 2024). For example, research indicates that particular regions of the brain, including the frontal lobes, play a vital role in executive functions such as self- regulation and planning, both of which are fundamental to successful leadership (Balconi et al., 2019). Additionally, the field of neuroleadership highlights the significance of emotional regulation and interpersonal interactions, as these elements considerably influence the efficacy of leadership and the dynamics within teams (Gkintoni et al., 2022).

Moreover, neuroleadership promotes the use of neuroscientific knowledge in developing evidence-based programs for the development of leaders. This will not only enhance the ability of the existing leaders but also enable the selection of future leaders by analysing their neurological attributes (Robertson et al., 2017). The integration of neuroscience into the selection and development of leaders gives rise to critical ethical concerns centered on the eventuality of reductionism-the simplification of complex human behaviours into neural activities (Robertson et al., 2017; Lindebaum, 2013). Therefore, it is paramount to take a balanced approach, one that weighs scientific insights against their ethical consequences, to ensure the responsible application of methodologies from neuroleadership (Lindebaum, 2013).

However, its relevance is particularly pronounced in environments with pervasive unethical behaviour, as experienced in the South African public sector. The challenges faced by South African

municipalities are alarming. A staggering 70% of municipalities are unable to deliver basic services effectively due to internal corruption, including procurement irregularities and mismanagement of funds (Chili et al., 2023). These issues are exacerbated by political interference and the appointment of unqualified individuals in key leadership positions (Mbandlwa et al., 2020) (Mbandlwa et al., 2020).

Neuroleadership includes not only the development of personal competencies for leadership but also covers organisational culture and behaviour. It has implications for leaders interested in understanding the neuroscientific basis underlying motivation and engagement to create a facilitatory atmosphere for teamwork and innovation. Tyagi (2024) and Joy (2024) propose the SCARF model as a helpful guide for leaders seeking to understand and appeal to employees' needs. The model provides focus on five major elements in social-emotional triggers: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness. It also identifies that in building a supportive workplace using the neurological needs of individuals, there will emerge a culture of resilience and flexibility, as identified by Joy (2024); with implications for good governance and quality service delivery in the public sector.

Studies have shown that neuroleadership adopts concepts from neuroscience into the leadership approach, focusing on areas like decision-making processes and problem-solving abilities. (Gkintoni et al., 2022; Medina-Vicent, 2019; Akşahin et al., 2023). For instance, the application of transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) to the orbitofrontal cortex has been found to enhance decision-making and cognitive impulse control, which is imperative in leaders when they are to decide on something with a high level of pressure (Ouellet et al., 2015) (Ouellet et al. 2015). Moreover, working memory is crucial to granting cognitive control and impulse regulation, which are important in making proper decisions. Brooks et al. (2017); Hinson et al. (2003) and Diamond et al. (2013) provide that, understanding these neurological functions helps leaders manage their mental resources effectively to maximise their capabilities of decision-making in high-pressure situations (Yousaf and Rehman, 2017) . Additionally, neuroleadership has been applied to emotional

intelligence training, helping leaders improve their emotional regulation, which in turn positively affects team dynamics and performance (Balthazard et al., 2012) (Balthazard et al., 2012). Neuroleadership also aids in developing trust within teams by leveraging insights into brain activity associated with social relationships and communication, promoting higher levels of collaboration and innovation (Zak, 2017).

Despite its potential, neuroleadership faces several challenges. One of the primary concerns is the complexity of linking brain activity to specific leadership behaviors. While neuroscience provides valuable insights, leadership is also deeply contextual, influenced by organizational culture and social dynamics, making it difficult to isolate the neurological basis for effective leadership (Lindebaum, 2013). Moreover, ethical concerns have been raised regarding the potential misuse of neuroscientific tools in leadership, especially in employee evaluations or predictive models of leadership potential, which may risk marginalizing individuals who do not fit certain neural profiles (Senior and Lee, 2013).

Given this context, neuroleadership offers a new perspective on improving leadership effectiveness as it can play a pivotal role in shaping more ethical leadership practices, especially by addressing historical grievances that may be influencing current unethical behaviour. In the context of the South African public sector, where corruption and fraud are rampant, neuroleadership can serve as a valuable tool in addressing unethical behaviour.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Neuroleadership in addressing historical trauma and unethical behaviour**

Unresolved trauma in leaders can significantly influence unethical behaviour, impacting their decision-making and leadership styles. Trauma, especially collective trauma, can shape leadership values through intergenerational transmission, affecting behaviours in both subtle

and overt ways. As highlighted by Tcholakian et al. (2019), collective trauma, such as genocides or wars, leaves a lasting imprint on cultural rituals, family narratives, and community events, which can profoundly influence leader values and ethical standards. Leaders who have inherited unresolved trauma from previous generations may unconsciously project these experiences into their leadership roles, leading to maladaptive behaviours like authoritarianism, emotional disengagement, or ethical breaches (Tcholakian et al., 2019). This is further supported by studies showing that trauma can lead to identity shifts and maladaptive coping strategies, which in turn influence unethical decision-making (Almeida et al., 2022; Stovall-McClough and Cloitre, 2006). These leaders may either adopt harmful leadership practices as a defence mechanism or struggle with empathy, which is critical for ethical leadership (Sakran et al., 2012; Sam, 2021). Moreover, trauma's influence on leadership extends beyond individual leaders to affect entire organizations, creating environments where unethical behaviour may thrive due to the leader's unresolved psychological conflicts (Effelsberg et al., 2014).

Neuroleadership offers a science-based framework for understanding how past experiences, such as historical trauma, shape leaders' unconscious biases and emotional responses. In South Africa, unresolved trauma from the apartheid era may drive leaders to justify unethical practices, including fraud and embezzlement, as compensation for previous systemic injustices (Ndlovu and Mutambara, 2023). By focusing on emotional regulation and bias mitigation, neuroleadership can help leaders become more self-aware, making them better equipped to resist the temptation of engaging in unethical behaviours. For example, research has shown that ethical leadership can reduce corrupt practices by promoting accountability and emotional intelligence (Kim, 2023). In the South African public sector, where financial mismanagement is rampant, neuroleadership could guide leaders toward

more transparent and accountable decision-making, mitigating the risk of unethical behaviour that stems from emotional responses to past injustices (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022).

The performance of South African municipalities illustrates the gravity of the ethical crisis in the public sector. In a recent study on KwaZulu-Natal municipalities, it was revealed that fraud, bribery, and procurement irregularities are the most common forms of corruption (Ndlovu and Mutambara, 2023). Additionally, municipal audit outcomes continue to reflect regressions in financial management, with recurring instances of fruitless and wasteful expenditure (Sibanda et al., 2020). These indicators demonstrate the systemic nature of unethical behaviour and the urgent need for leadership reform grounded in ethical practices. Municipalities such as those in the Eastern Cape and Gauteng have struggled to maintain service delivery standards due to pervasive corruption and a lack of ethical leadership (Rulashe and Ijeoma, 2022). Neuroleadership could serve as the launching pad for addressing these challenges by equipping leaders with the cognitive tools to make ethical decisions and promote transparency.

## CONCLUSION

### Conclusion and recommendations

Integrating neuroleadership into ethics training programs for public officials can play a pivotal role in promoting ethical behaviour and mitigating corruption in South Africa's public sector. By focusing on enhancing emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility, neuroleadership can equip leaders to better navigate complex ethical dilemmas. Training programs should emphasize emotional regulation and bias awareness, which are crucial in ethical decision-making. This approach would address the unconscious biases and emotional reactions that often underlie unethical behaviour, particularly in environments marked by political patronage and weak governance. For example,

emotional regulation could help public officials manage stress and avoid rash decisions during procurement processes, where corruption often occurs (Gkintoni et al., 2022). Additionally, bias awareness training could foster more equitable decision-making by reducing favouritism or nepotism and promoting fairness in resource allocation (Tcholakian et al., 2019). Addressing historical trauma is equally critical in fostering ethical leadership in South Africa, where unresolved trauma from apartheid continues to influence leadership behaviour. Historical trauma often manifests in defensive or authoritarian leadership styles, which can lead to unethical practices, such as the misuse of power or a lack of empathy towards vulnerable communities (Atwoli et al., 2013). By addressing these deep-seated issues, public sector leaders can develop a more inclusive and empathetic leadership style, which is essential for fostering ethical governance and restoring public trust.

In conclusion, an integration of neuroleadership into ethics training, addressing historical trauma, promoting cognitive flexibility, and enforcing accountability are critical strategies for fostering ethical leadership in South Africa's public sector. Through its focus on emotional regulation, recognition of bias, and cognitive adaptability, neuroleadership can guide leaders to encourage more ethical and open governance, which should improve service delivery and restore citizen's confidence.

### **Directions for future research**

From the review of literature on neuroleadership, ethical behaviour, and the impact of trauma on leadership in the South African public sector, several directions can be proposed for future research. Future studies could focus on how enhancing emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility through neuroleadership training affects ethical decision-making over time. This would help us understand how ongoing education in emotional regulation and bias awareness can gradually reduce unethical practices like corruption in the public sector. These studies could also lead to the development of trauma-informed leadership models that are sensitive to the effects of trauma. Exploring how unresolved trauma influences leadership decisions and behaviour could lead to more effective interventions, such as counselling and emotional support programs, that help leaders heal and lead

ethically. Research comparing leaders who have received neuroleadership training focused on cognitive flexibility with those who have not would be insightful. These studies could reveal how being more open to change and adaptable in thinking helps leaders deal with difficult ethical choices, especially in sectors prone to corruption like procurement. Since public sector corruption often spills over into the private sector, future research could investigate how ethical leadership in government affects corporate governance. This investigation could look at whether stronger ethics in the public sector would encourage better compliance and integrity in private organisations, particularly in sectors where both public and private interests meet, such as public-private partnerships

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