



RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A BUILDING BLOCK FOR ETHICAL TRANSFORMATION AND TOXICITY REMEDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Saltiel K.C. MATABOGE

Dept Education Leadership and Management, University of South Africa, South Africa
Ematask@unisa.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7805-9123>

Abstract

The objective of this conceptual paper is to explore relational leadership as a fundamental building block for ethical transformation and a remedy for toxicity in higher education institutions. It mitigates the contention that leadership approaches profoundly shape institutional culture, influencing inclusivity, decision-making, and ethical governance. The study is guided by the critical question: *How does relational leadership foster ethical transformation while addressing toxic leadership dynamics in higher education?* A qualitative approach is adopted, utilizing an intensive literature review of scholarly books and peer-reviewed articles as primary data sources. An interpretive paradigm is selected to analyse leadership dynamics, emphasizing the role of trust, collaboration, and ethical engagement in mitigating toxic behaviors such as authoritarianism, favouritism, and exclusionary practices. Findings reveal that relational leadership fosters accountability, transparency, and stakeholder empowerment, which are essential for institutional transformation. However, the study highlights challenges such as resistance to change and entrenched toxic leadership cultures. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by advocating for relational leadership as a sustainable solution for ethical governance. Nonetheless, limitations include reliance on secondary data, necessitating empirical validation through case studies and field research.

Keywords: Relational leadership, Ethical transformation, Toxicity mitigation, Higher education governance, Institutional culture

Introduction

Kotula and Małagocka (2025) established that the principal aim of higher education in the contemporary millennium is to cultivate critical thinking, foster innovation, and augment social responsibility among students. These ideas are essential for empowering individuals to tackle complex global challenges and effectuate a positive influence on society. The achievement of these esteemed objectives may be significantly hindered by detrimental leadership within educational institutions (Lašáková & Remišová, 2015). Toxic leadership cultivates an antagonistic environment that stifles creativity, hinders open communication, and leads to increased turnover rates among educators and personnel, ultimately impacting student advancement and institutional reputation (Octavian, 2023; Iqbal et al., 2025). Furthermore, such leadership may perpetuate systemic imbalances, obstructing efforts to promote inclusive and equitable educational experiences. Higher education institutions must recognise the detrimental effects of toxic leadership and prioritise relational leadership practices that foster collaboration, trust, and ethical conduct (Myers, 2025). By doing so, institutions can more efficiently align with their goals and endeavour to actualise the revolutionary potential of higher education in this millennium through dependable and ethical leadership models.

Relational leadership is a leadership paradigm that prioritises human connections, trust, ethical engagement, and cooperation in organisational decision-making processes (Crosweller, 2024). It diverges from traditional hierarchical leadership models by fostering inclusivity, participatory governance, and mutual accountability. Relational leadership in higher education is crucial for institutional transformation by cultivating a culture that emphasises ethical engagement, diversity, and well-being, while simultaneously addressing harmful leadership practices such as authoritarianism, favouritism, and micromanagement. This conceptual study seeks to investigate

relational leadership as an essential basis for ethical transformation and a remedy for toxicity in higher education institutions. Universities, as complex organisations, require leadership techniques that promote collaboration, openness, and equity, allowing faculty, staff, and students to thrive in a supportive academic environment (Salendab, 2025).

Conventional leadership methods rooted in inflexible hierarchies and power relations sometimes foster toxicity inside academic institutions, stifling innovation, curtailing faculty involvement in decision-making, and engendering exclusionary and disengaged cultures (Hubbard et al., 2025). Relational leadership emphasises collaborative decision-making, ethical accountability, and a commitment to fostering a supportive workplace culture. This leadership paradigm encourages higher education institutions to transition from transactional governance systems to collaborative, people-centered, and ethics-driven models (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). Relational leadership sometimes encounters implementation obstacles because of entrenched neoliberal and managerialist principles that emphasise efficiency, performance metrics, and hierarchical control rather than participatory governance and ethical involvement (Kataeva et al., 2025).

Neoliberalism and Managerialism as Driving Imperatives in Universities

Neoliberalism and managerialism have emerged as prevailing philosophies influencing the governance and leadership of higher education institutions worldwide (Manning, 2017). Neoliberalism in higher education denotes the implementation of market-oriented policies, wherein institutions operate as business organisations vying for resources, rankings, and funding (Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024). This paradigm frequently commodifies education, positioning staff and students as service providers and consumers instead of engaged members of a knowledge-centric community. Neoliberalism advocates for individualism, competitiveness, and financial viability, undermining collaborative and ethical leadership methods, which frequently results in heightened stress, job insecurity, and diminished collegiality among academic personnel (Tiikkainen & Virtanen, 2025).

Closely linked to neoliberalism, managerialism refers to the application of corporate management techniques in university governance, prioritizing performance metrics, bureaucratic control, and hierarchical leadership structures (Shahab et al., 2025). Managerialism reduces academic autonomy and shared governance by centralizing decision-making authority within top university administrators while sidelining faculty and student voices in institutional affairs. In such environments, relational leadership struggles to take root due to rigid bureaucratic structures, excessive focus on rankings, and a culture of performativity that undermines ethical engagement and collaborative leadership. Thus, in the United Kingdom, university funding is increasingly tied to research output, student satisfaction scores, and employability metrics, forcing academics to prioritize performance indicators over meaningful teaching and engagement (Hosseini et al., 2025). The pressure to meet institutional targets often leads to toxic work environments, increased burnout, and faculty disillusionment, making it difficult to establish relational leadership structures that emphasize well-being, ethics, and collaboration. Similarly, in Australia, the corporatization of universities has resulted in excessive workloads, casualization of academic labour, and a decline in democratic governance structures within institutions (van Vuuren, 2025). These managerialist tendencies limit the agency of academic leaders who wish to implement relational leadership models, as their focus is frequently redirected toward administrative tasks, financial sustainability, and compliance with external performance indicators.

Manifestation of Neoliberal and Managerialist Trends in Higher Education and Their Root Causes

Neoliberalism and managerialism influence higher education institutions via corporate governance frameworks, performance-oriented funding methods, the casualization of academic labour, and the erosion of shared governance (Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024). These trends cultivate a competitive atmosphere characterised by short-term production objectives and exclusionary leadership behaviours, both of which contribute to toxic workplace conditions. The primary causes of these challenges can be attributed to government policies that emphasise market-driven education, financial constraints, global rankings, and institutional goals to attract international students and research funding (Jha, 2025).

In the United States, institutions are increasingly adopting corporate leadership paradigms, often selecting senior administrators from business rather than academic backgrounds (Chen et al., 2025). This change reinforces hierarchical decision-making, limiting faculty influence on institutional decisions and leading to dissatisfaction and disengagement. In Germany, the adoption of performance-based funding and research excellence initiatives has led to hierarchical governance frameworks that prioritise competition over collaboration, obstructing the development of ethical and relational leadership practices (Cantwell et al., 2025). An exemplary example of the adverse consequences of managerialism and neoliberal policies is the widespread implementation of temporary academic contracts and the rise of insecure employment in universities. In institutions with

inadequate job security for teachers, the ability for effective leadership and participatory governance is considerably compromised. The increased focus on administrative compliance, budget cuts, and performance management further erodes ethical leadership practices, fostering toxic cultures that prioritise institutional reputation over academic well-being (Nair & AB, 2025).

Despite these challenges, several universities have successfully implemented relational leadership styles as an alternative to neoliberal and managerialist imperatives. Higher education institutions in Norway, for example, promote collegial governance, academic freedom, and participatory decision-making, which fosters relational leadership (Gardner-McTaggart, 2025). Similarly, in the Netherlands, universities have introduced collaborative leadership models that enable academics and administrators to work together on institutional projects that promote ethical involvement, openness, and inclusivity (Chasokela & Mpofu, 2025). These examples demonstrate that, while neoliberal and managerialist influences continue to shape higher education governance, relational leadership remains a viable alternative for promoting ethical reform and lowering toxicity in academic environments.

Relational leadership offers a solid foundation for ethical reform in higher education; nevertheless, its implementation is usually hampered by entrenched neoliberal and managerialist expectations. The commodification of education, performance-oriented governance models, and centralised decision-making frameworks create harmful academic environments that inhibit the growth of relational leadership principles (Tholen, 2024). Global trends indicate that organisations that practise shared governance, participatory decision-making, and ethical leadership can effectively handle these challenges (Downe et al., 2016). According to the study, higher education institutions must take proactive steps to counteract negative leadership trends by advocating for relational leadership models that value diversity, trust, and ethical participation. This study intends to provide insights into how universities might transition to collaborative, ethically responsible, and people-centered leadership frameworks for long-term institutional transformation by examining case studies and best practices from advanced education systems around the world.

The objective of this conceptual paper is to explore relational leadership as a fundamental building block for ethical transformation and a remedy for toxicity in higher education institutions.

The critical question: How does relational leadership foster ethical transformation while addressing toxic leadership dynamics in higher education?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Relational leadership offers a fundamental framework for fostering ethical transformation and addressing toxicity within higher education organisations. This leadership style underscores the importance of relationships and cooperation among stakeholders, including academics, staff, and students. Relational leadership fosters ethical practices and decision-making by prioritising open communication and mutual respect (Lapatoura, 2025). This method aligns with the values of ethical leadership, which highlight honesty, justice, and accountability in leadership conduct (Skiba, 2024). The relational leadership paradigm also tackles the prevalent issue of toxic leadership dynamics, characterised by authoritarian attitude, a deficiency of empathy, and ineffective communication. Relational leaders can mitigate the adverse effects of toxic behaviours by fostering a culture of trust and collaboration, thereby enhancing the organisational climate. This transition is essential for enhancing teacher and student engagement, resulting in improved educational outcomes. Moreover, relational leadership fosters the establishment of ethical guidelines and practices that align with the institution's objectives and values. Relational leaders can foster a shared dedication to ethical transformation inside the organisation by demonstrating ethical conduct and promoting accountability. Ultimately, ethical leadership is perceived as a remedy for the social injustices that arise within universities, facilitating the creation of a more inclusive, inventive, and principled academic atmosphere (Kyambade et al., 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

How Relational Leadership Fosters Ethical Transformation

Mansoor et al. (2025) assert that relational leadership is a leadership style that prioritises the significance of relationships and collaboration among individuals within an organisation. In higher education, relational leadership fosters ethical transformation by emphasising trust, respect, and transparent communication. This technique encourages leaders to engage substantively with academics, staff, and students, cultivating an inclusive culture and collaborative decision-making (Ayyaswamy et al., 2025). Relational leaders that emphasise the cultivation of positive relationships can foster a shared dedication to ethical practices and principles, essential for navigating the challenges of contemporary educational institutions (Awashreh, 2025).

Moreover, relational leadership promotes ethical transformation by encouraging leaders to model ethical behaviour and champion accountability (Lu et al., 2025). When leaders demonstrate integrity and honesty in their actions, they set a standard for others to follow. This ethical behaviour modelling aids in alleviating toxic leadership dynamics that usually thrive in environments characterised by fear, mistrust, and poor communication (Akande et al., 2025). By fostering a culture of ethical behaviour, relational leaders can mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership, such as burnout and disengagement among educators and staff (Lopes et al., 2025). Furthermore, relational leadership fosters the development of ethical norms and practices aligned with the institution's mission and values, so reinforcing a commitment to ethical transformation.

Mitigating Toxic Leadership Dynamics

Toxic leadership can harm organisational culture and employee morale in higher education institutions (Matos et al., 2018). These dynamics frequently manifest as authoritarian decision-making, a lack of empathy, and inadequate communication, resulting in a culture of fear and disengagement (Djamali et al., 2025). Relational leadership addresses these toxic dynamics by encouraging open communication and collaboration among all stakeholders. Relational leaders can foster a sense of belonging and involvement inside an organisation by creating an environment in which employees feel safe to express their problems and ideas. This strategy not only fosters trust, but also inspires professors and staff to take responsibility of their roles and responsibilities, resulting in improved organisational performance (Kayyali, 2025).

To effectively deal with toxic leadership dynamics, institutions can use a range of astute mitigation strategies. Thus, having clear channels for feedback and communication allows teachers and staff to express their concerns while also contributing to a culture of accountability and openness (Hosseini et al., 2025). As a result, holding frequent town hall meetings or using anonymous feedback platforms can facilitate open communication between leadership and employees. Similarly, investing in leadership development programs that focus on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making can assist leaders in navigating complex interpersonal dynamics and cultivating a healthy corporate culture (Ravikumar & Muralidharan, 2025). As a result, creating mentorship programs that connect experienced leaders with emerging leaders can promote constructive feedback and professional development, reducing toxic behaviour inside the business.

Complementary Ethical Leadership Theories

In conjunction with relational leadership, the synergistic ethical leadership theories of Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership can be effectively utilised in higher education institutions to foster ethical transformation and alleviate toxic leadership dynamics. Servant Leadership, as defined by Xiu (2025), emphasises the leader's essential role as a servant, addressing the needs of others and fostering a culture of collaboration and trust. This model aligns with relational leadership, since it prioritises the growth and well-being of teachers, staff, and students. Through the application of servant leadership principles, educational leaders can cultivate an atmosphere where individuals feel valued and motivated, hence enhancing engagement and commitment to ethical conduct (Udin et al., 2025). Transformational leadership is a supplementary paradigm that emphasises inspiring and motivating followers to attain exceptional outcomes through a shared vision and dedication to ethical principles (Kyambade et al., 2025).

Transformational leaders foster innovation and creativity, cultivating an environment where individuals are motivated to take risks and contribute to the organization's goals. By integrating transformational and relational leadership concepts, educational leaders may cultivate a dynamic and adaptive organisational culture that emphasises ethical change and addresses toxic leadership dynamics (Bawany, 2019). Thus, relational leadership is crucial for fostering ethical transformation and alleviating toxic leadership dynamics inside higher education institutions (Riza et al., 2025). By prioritising connections, transparent communication, and ethical behaviour, relational leaders can cultivate a culture of trust and collaboration that mitigates the harmful effects of toxic leadership. Implementing effective mitigation strategies, such as establishing feedback channels and investing in leadership development, can enhance the efficacy of relational leadership. Additionally, integrating other ethical leadership theories, such as Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership, can create a robust framework for promoting ethical practices and fostering a positive corporate culture (Miao & Nduneseokwu, 2024).

Impact on Operations and Investment Returns

Relational leadership has emerged as a critical idea for encouraging ethical transformation and fighting toxic behaviour in higher education organisations. This leadership style promotes collaboration, trust, and mutual respect among stakeholders, which can have a significant impact on operational effectiveness and investment

returns (Govender & Bussin, 2020). Relational leadership can improve staff engagement and retention by fostering a positive corporate culture, resulting in enhanced productivity and innovation (Chandel et al., 2025). Furthermore, institutions that employ relational leadership approaches are better equipped to navigate hurdles and adapt to changing settings, resulting in more sustainable operations. This adaptability may attract investment as stakeholders value ethical governance and social responsibility in corporate decision-making (Alhamis, 2025). Similarly, relational leadership encourages open communication and transparency, hence lowering the dangers associated with toxic organisational cultures. By proactively addressing harassment and discrimination, institutions can reduce future legal liabilities and strengthen their reputations, resulting in higher positive investment returns (Singh et al., 2025). The application of relational leadership in higher education promotes ethical practices, operational efficiency, and investment outcomes. As organisations strive for greatness, using this leadership style can serve as a critical strategy for long-term success.

Inspiring Change by Ethical Leadership

Ethical and relational leadership styles significantly influence the motivation for change in higher education institutions by fostering a culture of trust, accountability, and diversity. Relational leadership prioritises significant relationships, collective decision-making, and collaboration, hence promoting ethical practices (Cleveland & Cleveland, 2025). When leaders prioritise connections and ethics, they foster institutional cultures that counteract detrimental leadership dynamics, enhance well-being, and elevate overall institutional performance. A fundamental aspect of relational leadership is its ability to empower educators and personnel by valuing their viewpoints and contributions (Webb, 2021). The integration of ethical leadership with relational models fosters transparency and collaborative problem-solving, aligning institutional objectives with social justice and professional ethics (Hosseini et al., 2025). This collaboration helps prevent problems like favouritism, micromanagement, and authoritarian decision-making, which often lead to alienation and elevated turnover rates. Relational leadership models foster a culture of mutual respect and ethical accountability, thereby inspiring creativity and facilitating genuine institutional transformation.

To successfully execute relational and ethical leadership, higher education institutions must participate in leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and institutional regulations that foster ethical behaviour. Establishing transparent communication channels, delineating clear ethical values, and guaranteeing leader accountability are essential strategies for sustaining positive organisational change (Sabharwal, 2025). Adopting ethical and relational leadership strategies revitalises higher education institutions, fostering dynamic environments for learning, development, and diversity, so ensuring enduring institutional success and cultivating a progressive academic climate.

Method

Data Collection

This study employs a qualitative technique, relying on an extensive literature assessment of academic books and peer-reviewed publications as main data sources. This methodology is suitable for examining the intricacies of relational leadership and its function in promoting ethical transformation while reducing toxicity in higher education institutions. Qualitative research facilitates a comprehensive examination of leadership theories, institutional obstacles, and the intricate dynamics among leadership styles (Coker, 2024). The literature review functions as a thorough analytical instrument for synthesising current research on relational, servant, and transformational leadership models, highlighting their influence on institutional ethics, faculty involvement, and leadership efficacy. The study reveals patterns, trends, and gaps in leadership discourse through the analysis of scholarly perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings. It examines how detrimental leadership behaviours, including authoritarianism, favouritism, and micromanagement, adversely impact institutional trust and workplace well-being. Research on toxic leadership provides essential insights into the detrimental impacts of ineffective leadership techniques, such as diminished morale, faculty disengagement, and opposition to change (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Data Analysis

An interpretive paradigm is utilised to examine and contextualise relational leadership dynamics, emphasising the meaning-making process and lived experiences of stakeholders in higher education institutions. This paradigm corresponds with the study's qualitative methodology, emphasising subjective interpretations, institutional contexts, and varied stakeholder views (Omodan, 2024). The interpretive paradigm elucidates how relational leadership promotes ethical practices, institutional inclusion, and shared governance through a focus on meaning-making. The study investigates the interaction of relational leadership with other leadership styles, such as servant

leadership and transformational leadership, to mitigate toxicity and foster a collaborative institutional culture. This approach elucidates the emergence, persistence, and disruption of toxic leadership behaviours in institutional reform. Leadership dynamics are perceived as fluid constructions shaped by institutional contexts, power dynamics, and leadership methodologies. This viewpoint improves the study's capacity to elucidate the intricacies of leadership efficacy and its ramifications for ethical change in higher education (Trevisan et al., 2024)

Findings

The dialogue indicated that relational leadership serves as a catalyst for ethical reform in higher education by fostering trust, collaboration, and inclusivity. Institutions that emphasise relational leadership exhibit enhanced professional relationships, improved institutional culture, and heightened ethical accountability (Rao et al., 2025). Leaders who engage substantively with teachers, staff, and students cultivate a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing dedication to institutional objectives and ethical standards. This technique promotes collaborative decision-making, guaranteeing that diverse perspectives aid in institutional progress and sustainability. A significant finding is that relational leadership mitigates detrimental leadership behaviours, including authoritarianism, favouritism, and ineffective communication, which can result in disengagement and burnout. Toxic leadership can create a detrimental work climate, diminishing morale and trust among faculty and staff. Institutions employing relational leadership strategies, including open communication, mentorship programs, and ethical leadership training, report less conflict and heightened involvement (Yadav et al., 2025). Relational leadership mitigates the systems that enable toxic practices to endure by fostering an environment where individuals feel acknowledged and valued.

The research demonstrates that relational leadership is most efficacious when integrated with other leadership theories, such as Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership. Servant Leadership ensures that leaders emphasise the well-being of teachers, staff, and students, fostering a culture of ethical accountability. Transformational Leadership enables institutional members to embrace change, innovation, and ethical decision-making (Bossi & Bossi, 2025). Institutions that adeptly incorporate these leadership techniques cultivate an environment where ethical transformation is embedded in the organisational culture. Thus, the statistics suggest that neoliberalism and managerialism hinder relational leadership in higher education. Performance-driven frameworks, bureaucratic constraints, and competitive ranking pressures often prioritise efficiency over ethical engagement. Nevertheless, institutions that endure these obstacles, like those in Norway and the Netherlands, demonstrate that relational leadership thrives within governance structures that promote democratic decision-making and academic independence. Relational leadership is a crucial tool for fostering ethical transformation and reducing toxicity in higher education. Institutions employing this strategy see increased faculty involvement, reduced workplace toxicity, and an elevated commitment to ethical standards (Abid et al., 2025).

Discussion- Conclusions

How Relational Leadership Fosters Ethical Transformation

Mansoor et al. (2025) define relational leadership as a leadership style that prioritises the importance of relationships and collaboration among employees within a company. In higher education, relational leadership fosters ethical transformation by emphasising trust, respect, and transparent communication. This technique encourages leaders to establish genuine connections with academics, staff, and students, thereby cultivating an inclusive culture and collaborative decision-making (Ayyaswamy et al., 2025). Relational leaders that emphasise the cultivation of positive relationships can foster a shared dedication to ethical practices and principles, essential for navigating the challenges of contemporary educational institutions (Awashreh, 2025). Moreover, relational leadership promotes ethical transformation by encouraging leaders to model ethical behaviour and champion accountability (Lu et al., 2025). When leaders demonstrate integrity and honesty in their actions, they set a standard for others to follow. This ethical behaviour modelling alleviates toxic leadership dynamics that generally thrive in environments characterised by fear, mistrust, and poor communication (Akande et al., 2025). By fostering a culture of ethical behaviour, relational leaders can mitigate the adverse effects of toxic leadership, such as burnout and disengagement among educators and staff (Lopes et al., 2025). Furthermore, relational leadership fosters the development of ethical norms and practices aligned with the institution's mission and values, so enhancing a commitment to ethical transformation.

Mitigating Toxic Leadership Dynamics

Toxic leadership adversely affects organisational culture and employee morale within higher education institutions. These dynamics often manifest as authoritarian decision-making, a deficiency of empathy, and ineffective communication, culminating in a culture of fear and disengagement (Djamali et al., 2025). Relational leadership mitigates these detrimental dynamics by fostering open communication and collaboration among all

stakeholders. Relational leaders may foster a sense of belonging and engagement inside an organisation by creating an environment where individuals feel safe to express their problems and ideas. This approach fosters trust and motivates professors and staff to assume responsibility for their roles, leading to enhanced organisational performance (Kayyali, 2025). Institutions can utilise many clever strategies to effectively address toxic leadership dynamics.

Consequently, establishing explicit channels for feedback and communication allows educators and personnel to articulate their concerns, so fostering a culture of transparency and accountability (Hosseini et al., 2025). Consequently, regular town hall meetings or anonymous feedback mechanisms facilitate transparent communication between leadership and personnel. Investing in leadership development programs that emphasise emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and ethical decision-making can assist leaders in managing intricate interpersonal dynamics and cultivating a healthy organisational culture (Ravikumar & Muralidharan, 2025). Consequently, establishing mentorship programs that link seasoned leaders with emerging leaders can foster constructive feedback and professional growth, thereby reducing toxic behaviours inside the business.

Complementary Ethical Leadership Theories

In conjunction with relational leadership, the ethical leadership theories of Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership can be effectively utilised in higher education institutions to foster ethical transformation and alleviate toxic leadership dynamics. Servant Leadership, as defined by Xiu (2025), emphasises the leader's fundamental role as a servant, addressing the needs of others and fostering a culture of collaboration and trust. This model aligns with relational leadership, since it prioritises the growth and well-being of teachers, staff, and students. Through the application of servant leadership principles, educational leaders can cultivate an atmosphere where individuals feel valued and motivated, hence enhancing engagement and commitment to ethical conduct (Udin et al., 2025). Transformational leadership is a supplementary paradigm that emphasises inspiring and motivating followers to attain exceptional outcomes through a shared vision and dedication to ethical principles (Kyambade et al., 2025).

Transformational leaders foster innovation and creativity, cultivating an environment that encourages individuals to take chances and contribute to the organization's goals. By integrating transformational and relational leadership principles, educational leaders can cultivate a dynamic and adaptive corporate culture that emphasises ethical change and addresses toxic leadership dynamics. Thus, relational leadership is crucial for fostering ethical transformation and alleviating toxic leadership dynamics inside higher education institutions (Riza et al., 2025). By prioritising connections, transparent communication, and ethical behaviour, relational leaders can cultivate a culture of trust and collaboration that mitigates the adverse effects of toxic leadership. Implementing effective mitigation strategies, such as establishing feedback channels and investing in leadership development, can enhance the efficacy of relational leadership. Moreover, integrating complementary ethical leadership theories, such as Servant Leadership and Transformational Leadership, can create a robust framework for promoting ethical practices and fostering a positive corporate culture (Miao & Nduneseokwu, 2024).

Impact on Operations and Investment Returns

Relational leadership has emerged as a significant paradigm for fostering ethical transformation and addressing toxicity in higher education institutions. This leadership approach prioritises collaboration, trust, and mutual respect among stakeholders, significantly influencing operational efficiency and investment yields. Relational leadership enhances employee engagement and retention by fostering a favourable organisational culture, which subsequently results in heightened productivity and innovation (Chandel et al., 2025). Moreover, institutions employing relational leadership strategies are more adept at navigating challenges and adjusting to evolving circumstances, leading to enhanced sustainability in their operations. This adaptability may draw investment as stakeholders emphasise ethical governance and social responsibility in corporate decision-making (Alhamis, 2025). Similarly, relational leadership fosters open communication and transparency, hence mitigating risks associated with toxic organisational cultures. By effectively addressing harassment and discrimination, institutions can reduce future legal liabilities and enhance their reputations, hence improving positive investment returns (Singh et al., 2025). Relational leadership in higher education promotes ethical standards and enhances operational efficiency and investment outcomes. As businesses strive for excellence, embracing this leadership approach can serve as a crucial strategy for enduring success.

Inspiring Change by Ethical Leadership

Ethical and relational leadership styles encourage transformation in higher education institutions by building a culture of trust, responsibility, and diversity. Relational leadership promotes meaningful relationships, shared decision-making, and cooperation, all of which promote ethical behaviour (Cleveland & Cleveland, 2025). When leaders prioritise connections and ethics, they foster institutional cultures that resist destructive leadership dynamics, enhance well-being, and boost overall institutional performance. One of the most important aspects of

relational leadership is its ability to empower teachers and staff by valuing their viewpoints and contributions. When ethical leadership is paired with relational models, it encourages transparency and collaborative problem-solving, ensuring that institutional goals align with social justice and professional ethics (Hosseini et al., 2025).

This synergy helps to prevent issues like favouritism, micromanagement, and authoritarian decision-making, which commonly lead to disengagement and high turnover. Relational leadership styles foster a culture of mutual respect and ethical responsibility, which encourages innovation and drives genuine institutional transformation. To effectively adopt relational and ethical leadership, higher education institutions must invest in leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and institutional policies that encourage ethical behaviour. Establishing open communication lines, setting explicit ethical values, and holding leaders accountable are critical strategies for sustaining beneficial organisational change (Sabharwal, 2025). Embracing ethical and relational leadership practices transforms higher education institutions into lively settings for learning, development, and diversity, ensuring long-term institutional success and creating a forward-thinking academic climate.

Conclusion

Relational leadership is a crucial paradigm for fostering ethical transformation and eradicating toxicity in higher education institutions. Relational leadership promotes transparent communication and collaborative decision-making by prioritising cooperation, trust, and mutual respect. This technique promotes active participation of teachers, staff, and students in institutional governance, cultivating a sense of ownership and accountability. Relational leaders inspire individuals to emulate their conduct by exemplifying ethical behaviour and underscoring the significance of integrity, so fostering a culture of transparency and ethical accountability. This cultural transition is essential for mitigating the detrimental impacts of toxic leadership, which often presents as harassment, discrimination, and insufficient support for marginalised groups. When organisations embrace relational leadership, they enhance operational efficacy and foster a community where all stakeholders feel valued and acknowledged.

Furthermore, adopting relational leadership has long-term implications for educational institutions' survival and success, in addition to immediate organisational benefits. Investing in the development of relational leaders enables higher education institutions to build resilient organisations that can adapt to an ever-changing environment. This adaptability is critical for dealing with the myriad challenges that higher education faces today, such as financial constraints, technological advancement, and changes in cultural expectations. Furthermore, businesses that prioritise relational leadership are more likely to receive investment and support from stakeholders that value ethical governance and social responsibility. The commitment to relational leadership not only improves students' educational experiences, but it also strengthens the institution's reputation and long-term viability in the competitive higher education environment. Finally, incorporating relational leadership as a basic part of institutional governance would enable a revolutionary shift towards a more ethical, inclusive, and successful educational environment that aligns with the goals and ambitions of the twenty-first century.

Recommendations

To foster ethical transformation and mitigate toxic leadership in higher education, institutions must prioritise the integration of relational leadership principles within their governance frameworks (Ferrari et al., 2025). Colleges must implement leadership development programs that emphasise emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and inclusive leadership. Training initiatives must prioritise equipping leaders with the competencies necessary to cultivate a culture of trust, collaboration, and transparency. Additionally, mentorship programs must be established to link emerging leaders with seasoned mentors who exemplify relational leadership principles, so assuring the continuity of ethical leadership practices. Institutions should have systematic feedback mechanisms that facilitate transparent communication among leadership, faculty, and students. Establishing anonymous reporting mechanisms, organising regular town hall meetings, and enabling participatory decision-making forums can significantly improve communication and alleviate problems related to toxic leadership behaviours (Senu & Smudde, 2025). Furthermore, implementing ethical governance principles that specify clear expectations for leadership behaviour and accountability mitigates the emergence of authoritarianism, favouritism, and micromanagement tendencies. Universities must have a zero-tolerance policy towards toxic leadership practices while fostering a supportive work environment that prioritises well-being and professional development. Consequently, universities ought to cultivate a culture of ethical transformation by integrating relational leadership principles into institutional policies and everyday practices. To address ethical issues, leaders must align their actions with institutional values and promote interdisciplinary cooperation (Lapatoura, 2025). Institutions can enhance ethical conduct and organisational sustainability by including

relational leadership into performance assessments and incentive structures. Ultimately, employing relational leadership as a foundational paradigm ensures that higher education institutions remain resilient, ethical, and adaptive in addressing leadership challenges and fostering progressive development.

Autobiography

Dr. Saltiel Khololo Collen Mataboge is a Senior Lecturer at the University of South Africa in the Department of Educational Leadership and Management. Research interests encompasses instructional leadership in schools, Transformative leadership and management in schools, school safety, violence, social justice for students in schools, schools' financial management, school governance, mentorship and mentoring. I authored and published several articles regarding contemporary issues in the field of education.

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