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# Overcoming the Counterproductive Workplace Behavior with the Power of Sustainable Leadership: The Role of Ethical Climate

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## Abstract

In recent years, the impact of leadership approaches on employee behaviors and organizational processes has become a prominent topic in organizational behavior studies. This growing interest stems from rapid changes and increasing competition in the business world, which have highlighted the critical role of leaders in organizational performance. Additionally, in an era where ethical values are prioritized and employee well-being is directly linked to organizational success, understanding how leadership styles influence these factors has gained significant attention. This study investigates the role of ethical climate in the relationship between sustainable leadership and counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). Sustainable leadership is analyzed as the independent variable, CWB as the dependent variable, and ethical climate as the mediating variable. The population consists of white-collar employees in Istanbul, with data collected from 327 participants through convenience sampling. Analyses were performed, including validity and reliability tests, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis. The results indicate that sustainable leadership positively impacts ethical climate and negatively affects CWB. Furthermore, ethical climate has a significant negative effect on CWB. Mediation analysis using Hayes Process Macro reveals that ethical climate partially mediates the relationship between sustainable leadership and CWB. These findings underscore the importance of fostering an ethical climate and implementing sustainable leadership practices to minimize counterproductive behaviors and enhance organizational well-being.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Leadership, Ethical Climate, Counterproductive Work Behavior.

**JEL Codes:** Q56, O15, M10, M12, D23

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## Introduction

Since the emergence of the human relations approach to management, initiated by the Hawthorne studies, the field of management has witnessed increasing scholarly attention, toward exploring diverse leadership frameworks. These include situational leadership, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, autocratic leadership, participatory leadership, ethical leadership, authentic leadership, responsible leadership, change leadership, and positive leadership, which aim to define leadership practices and examine the influence of leadership behaviors on employee outcomes and organizational performance (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018). Among these frameworks, sustainable leadership has emerged as a pivotal concept, gaining prominence as an essential approach for achieving long-term organizational success in today's rapidly evolving and competitive business landscape. This growing interest is reflected in recent studies, which indicate an upward trend in publication and citation performance related to sustainability literature, underscoring its increasing global relevance and scholarly focus (Baysal & Yangil, 2023).

Sustainable leadership, as a distinct perspective, prioritizes stakeholder and societal well-being while creating enduring value through the integration and balance of economic, environmental, and social objectives (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). This approach departs from traditional leadership paradigms by emphasizing a person-centered perspective and a resource-based view. Its holistic nature not only underscores the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental priorities but also emphasizes the pressing need to address the complex challenges facing organizations through sustainable leadership strategies. Given the decisive influence of leadership behaviors on employee attitudes and actions, exploring the intersections of sustainable leadership with other organizational dynamics is vital for effectively preventing and managing counterproductive work behaviors (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018).

Employees occasionally engage in behaviors that diminish, rather than contribute to, organizational value. These behaviors, collectively referred to as counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), encompass a wide range of actions, from theft and abuse of sick leave to workplace violence, and are influenced by various circumstances (Ones & Dilchert, 2013). CWBs are broadly defined as intentional actions by employees that harm their organizations or colleagues. In the modern business landscape, where effectiveness and efficiency are paramount, CWBs present a significant challenge for organizations (Spector et al., 2006). These behaviors, which include absenteeism, workplace deviance, and sabotage, not only undermine organizational performance but also erode trust among employees (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Fox et al., 2001). The reasons behind CWBs are multifaceted, stemming from individual personality traits as well as organizational factors, such as leadership style, ethical culture, and perceptions of justice (Dalal, 2005; Ferris et al., 2009). Addressing the multidimensional nature of CWBs requires an in-depth examination of both individual characteristics and the organizational conditions that enable such behaviors. Within this framework, leadership style and ethical climate emerge as critical elements with the potential to mitigate or exacerbate these detrimental behaviors (Dalal, 2005; Martin & Cullen, 2006).

Similar to how the climate of a geographical region provides a general impression of that area—such as its weather, humidity, or vegetation—an organization's ethical climate offers employees a collective sense of its ethical standards and practices. Defined by Victor and Cullen (1988), ethical climate refers to employees' shared perceptions of what constitutes ethical behavior within their organization. Essentially, ethical climate is a component of organizational culture, and ethical climate theory suggests that an organization's ethical environment profoundly shapes employee attitudes and behaviors, including counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). A strong ethical climate promotes fairness, accountability, and transparency, which collectively decrease the likelihood of workplace misconduct (Martin & Cullen, 2006). Although numerous studies have investigated the role of ethical climate in mitigating CWBs, the interaction between sustainable leadership and ethical climate in addressing these behaviors has received limited scholarly attention. This underexplored area highlights the need for a comprehensive perspective that examines how sustainable leadership, as a forward-looking approach, aligns with an organization's ethical climate to address counterproductive work behaviors effectively. Recognizing this gap, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding by integrating these two concepts into a unified framework.

Theoretical contribution of this research uniquely contributes to the theoretical discourse on leadership by addressing the limited exploration of sustainable leadership's interaction with ethical climate. By framing sustainable leadership within the context of ethical climate, the study provides a novel perspective on how leadership practices can shape organizational culture and mitigate counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). Unlike existing studies, this research bridges two critical areas—sustainable leadership and ethical climate—offering a unified framework that expands the boundaries of organizational behavior literature.

From a practical standpoint, the study emphasizes actionable strategies for leaders to adopt sustainab-

le practices that reinforce ethical climates. These insights are pivotal for reducing CWBs and enhancing organizational effectiveness. Leaders are provided with a framework to align their strategies with ethical principles, ensuring long-term success and resilience. This contribution becomes particularly relevant in navigating the challenges posed by remote work dynamics, diverse workforce expectations, and the increasing importance of social responsibility in business practices.

By doing so, it aims to expand the academic literature while offering practical insights for organizational leaders and researchers seeking to foster ethical and sustainable workplaces, particularly in light of recent challenges and transformations brought about by new working models driven by digitalization. Recent studies, such as KPMG's 2021 Global CEO Survey, reveal that leaders are increasingly leveraging digital tools to create people-centric workplaces, embedding environmental, social, and governance principles into their strategic frameworks. Moreover, research highlights how digitalization enables remote work and flexible organizational models, which require a redefinition of leadership paradigms to maintain employee engagement and productivity (PwC, 2021). These insights underscore the need for adaptive strategies that align with sustainable leadership principles in navigating the digital transformation of workplaces. These transformations have significantly reshaped the paradigms of leadership in the business world, underscoring the critical importance of ethical and sustainable approaches. According to KPMG's 2021 Global CEO Survey, which analyzed data from 1,325 CEOs across 11 major markets, contemporary leaders are increasingly prioritizing a people-centric future by embedding environmental, social, and governance principles into their strategic frameworks. This emphasis on sustainability aligns with the broader goals of fostering long-term organizational resilience and adaptability. Furthermore, PwC's COVID-19 and Leadership Insight report highlights the transformative effect of the pandemic on remote working models, emphasizing the necessity for leaders to redefine their methods of team interaction. Transparent communication and equitable decision-making processes have been identified as pivotal in not only enhancing employee motivation but also in cultivating a robust ethical climate that aligns with sustainable leadership principles. The insights from these reports significantly amplify the importance of this study by highlighting the urgent need for sustainable leadership frameworks that address contemporary organizational challenges. By integrating the strategic imperatives outlined in these reports, this research contributes to the academic and practical understanding of how leaders can adapt to evolving business environments while maintaining ethical integrity.

## Conceptual Framework/Theory

### Sustainable Leadership

As previously mentioned, the concept of sustainable leadership has evolved through diverse scholarly contributions, each offering distinct perspectives on its definition and scope. Among these contributions, Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory stands out as a foundational element of sustainable leadership. Additionally, recent studies such as those by Jones et al. (2018) emphasize the evolving role of stakeholder theory in addressing global sustainability challenges, particularly in integrating diverse stakeholder needs into leadership practices. The theory asserts that organizations should consider the interests of all stakeholders—not just shareholders—in their decision-making processes. By incorporating stakeholder theory, the primary purpose of leadership has expanded beyond generating profit to include maximizing the expectations of all stakeholders and fostering a more inclusive and sustainable approach to leadership. In addition to stakeholder theory, Elkington's (1997) Triple Bottom Line framework has significantly shaped the sustainable leadership paradigm. This framework emphasizes that organizational success should be evaluated based on economic, social, and environmental performance. By encouraging leaders to adopt a more comprehensive perspective on organizational performance, the Triple Bottom Line framework aligns closely with the principles of sustainable leadership. Recent empirical findings by Wuest et al. (2021) emphasize the relevance of the Triple Bottom Line framework in smart manufacturing technologies. The study demonstrates how integrating economic, environmental, and social perspectives has led to measurable sustainability outcomes in the manufacturing sector. This research highlights the transformative potential of sustainability-oriented innovations and their alignment with organizational goals for long-term impact. Together, these theoretical contributions underscore the holistic and forward-thinking nature of sustainable leadership as a critical framework for addressing contemporary organizational challenges.

Another concept that has significantly contributed to the development of sustainable leadership, and closely aligns with its perspective, is responsible leadership, introduced by Maak and Pless (2006). This concept emphasizes the relational dimension of leadership, advocating for leaders who are accountable to a broad range of stakeholders and who incorporate ethical considerations into their decision-making processes. Further expanding on this concept, Pless and Maak (2011) highlight the importance of ethical decision-making and a commitment to sustainability as pathways to a sustainable future. They argue that sustainable leadership necessitates a compre-

hensive understanding of the interconnectedness between business practices and their societal impacts. Additionally, Shrivastava (1995) underscores the critical role of organizations in ensuring ecological sustainability, advocating for leadership approaches that integrate environmental responsibility into their strategic objectives. By emphasizing the need for leaders to balance organizational goals with environmental stewardship, responsible leadership has made a substantial contribution to shaping the principles of sustainable leadership.

Another notable contribution to the development of sustainable leadership is Bass's (1985) Transformational Leadership approach. Transformational leadership centers on inspiring and motivating employees to surpass performance expectations and embrace change. While the framework does not explicitly focus on sustainability, it shares key commonalities with sustainable leadership, particularly in its emphasis on vision and long-term organizational goals. By fostering an environment where employees are encouraged to innovate and align with a shared vision, transformational leadership lays a foundation that aligns closely with the principles of sustainable leadership.

Stubbs and Cocklin (2008) define sustainable leadership as a strategic decision-making approach that integrates economic performance, environmental responsibility, and social equity. Similarly, Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) describe sustainable leadership as a holistic framework that balances immediate organizational goals with broader societal and environmental responsibilities. Yangil (2016) adds to this perspective by characterizing a sustainable leader as a visionary who prioritizes the transfer of resources to future generations. In a complementary view, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize that sustainable leadership involves the preservation and development of human and material resources over time. In essence, sustainable leadership represents an approach where leaders consider not only the immediate outcomes but also the long-term implications of their decisions on economic, social, and environmental systems. These leaders prioritize questions such as "What will this decision bring to us, society, and nature in the long run?" over "What will we gain now?"

Metcalf and Benn (2013) further explore the evolution of leadership competencies necessary for sustainability, emphasizing the importance of developing skills to navigate complex sustainability challenges. Eccles et al. (2014) provide empirical evidence linking corporate sustainability practices to improved financial performance and enhanced corporate reputation. Visser and Courtice (2011) bridge theory and practice by offering actionable insights into how leaders can effectively integrate sustainability principles into organizational strategies.

**Ethical Climate**

The term "ethical climate" was first introduced by Victor and Cullen (1987: 51), who defined it as "the shared perception of what is correct behavior, and how ethical situations should be handled in an organization." In their subsequent work, they refined the definition, describing ethical climate as "the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content" (Victor & Cullen, 1988: 101). While the wording differs slightly, both definitions underscore the critical role of organizations in shaping employees' ethical behaviors. Building on these definitions, Martin and Cullen (2006) described ethical climate as typical organizational practices and procedures with ethical content, shaped by the organizational culture and dominant moral philosophies. They further noted that ethical climate is dynamic, evolving as organizational values and practices adapt over time. Barnett and Schubert (2002) emphasized the collective nature of ethical climate, portraying it as a shared understanding of the validity of organizational procedures and practices, which fosters moral satisfaction among employees. Expanding this concept, Kaptein (2011) highlighted the influence of ethical leadership and accountability mechanisms in shaping the ethical climate. He argued that ethical climate is the product of organizational norms, practices, and policies that promote or inhibit ethical decision-making among employees. Recent studies, such as Kerse (2021), have expanded on this by investigating the relationship between ethical leadership, organizational trust, and extra-role service behaviors, particularly highlighting the significance of person-organization fit in fostering a positive ethical climate. This perspective integrates the role of leadership and organizational systems in establishing an ethical framework within organizations. Schwepker (2001) explores the practical implications of ethical climate, defining it as employees' shared perceptions of the ethical work environment, including norms, expectations, and practices related to ethical decision-making. This broader definition underscores the relationship between ethical climate and critical organizational outcomes, such as employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. Together, these definitions highlight the multifaceted nature of ethical climate and its influence on both individual and organizational performance. Furthermore, recent empirical research by Menes and Haguisan III (2020) highlights how ethical climate positively influences job satisfaction and organizational commitment, particularly in service industries such as hospitality, emphasizing its vital role in enhancing organizational outcomes.

Ethical climate theory suggests that the ethical environment within an organization plays a pivotal role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. Victor and Cullen (1988) identified five distinct types

of ethical climates, each reflecting different ethical priorities within organizational settings: Instrumental Climate: Characterized by self-interest and the pursuit of personal gain, often emphasizing outcomes over ethical considerations. Caring Climate: Focuses on the well-being and interests of others within the organization, fostering a sense of collective responsibility. Independence Climate: Encourages employees to rely on their individual moral judgment and personal ethical standards when making decisions. Law and Code Climate: Highlights adherence to external legal standards and professional codes of conduct as guiding principles for behavior. Rules Climate: Emphasizes strict compliance with internal organizational policies and procedures to guide ethical behavior. These climate types provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how ethical values are prioritized, operationalized, and manifested within organizations. They also serve as a basis for analyzing how organizational ethics influence employee conduct and decision-making processes.

In summary, an ethical climate functions as the moral compass of an organization, shaping how ethical issues are perceived, interpreted, and addressed within the organizational context. It plays a critical role in guiding employees' actions and decisions by providing a shared ethical framework. By cultivating a positive ethical climate, organizations can encourage ethical behavior, improve employee well-being, and establish a robust ethical foundation for sustainable success. Despite the extensive research and growing interest in ethical climate, significant gaps remain in the theoretical understanding of how ethical climates operate within organizations. These gaps, as highlighted by Parboteeah et al. (2024), continue to challenge the advancement of comprehensive theories on ethical climate in organizational settings. Addressing these gaps presents an opportunity for future research to further refine and expand the conceptualization of ethical climate.

**Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB)**

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) has been conceptualized in various ways by scholars, each highlighting different dimensions of this complex phenomenon. CWB is an umbrella term encompassing employee actions that harm an organization either by directly disrupting its operations or damaging its assets, or by negatively affecting other employees, thereby reducing their efficiency and productivity (Fox et al., 2001). Spector et al. (2006) define CWB as intentional acts carried out by employees with the potential to harm their organization or its members. Similarly, Robinson and Bennett (1995) describe CWB as deviant workplace behaviors that violate organizational norms, specifying that these behaviors may target either individuals within the organization or the organization itself. A critical aspect shared across these definitions is the intentionality behind CWBs. Unlike unintentional mistakes or accidents, these behaviors are deliberate actions. Employees engage in CWBs willingly and consciously, with the intent to cause harm or, at the very least, without taking steps to avoid behaviors they know will have harmful consequences. This deliberate nature distinguishes CWBs from other forms of workplace issues, making them a particularly challenging problem for organizations to address effectively.

On social media platforms that share engaging and thought-provoking content about work and workplaces, you may have encountered a scenario where an employee, following a moment of extreme frustration, destroys their desk, smashes their computer, shouts angrily, and storms out. Perhaps you have even witnessed such behavior in person or experienced it firsthand. While these instances may represent exaggerated examples, they illustrate the potential for individuals to harm their work environment, colleagues, or the organization itself to varying degrees. These actions, whether minor or significant, that negatively impact the workplace or its members are broadly categorized as counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). The motivations behind such behaviors can stem from a multitude of factors. To effectively address CWBs, it is essential to delve into their underlying causes, exploring the situational and emotional triggers that often drive employees to engage in such actions.

Mount et al. (2006) examined counterproductive work behavior (CWB) through the lens of personality traits, particularly conscientiousness and agreeableness. Their findings suggest that such behaviors are not solely triggered by external factors but may also arise from individuals' inherent predispositions shaped by personal characteristics. From a psychological perspective, Bandura (1999) introduced the concept of moral disengagement, offering an explanation for how individuals rationalize harmful actions. This perspective highlights the internal conflict employees may experience when reconciling their behaviors with their moral values, shedding light on the complex interplay between cognition and ethics. More recently, Lim (2021) explored the manifestation of CWB in digital environments, such as cyberloafing or disengagement in remote work settings. This expansion underscores the need to adapt traditional understandings of CWB to the challenges of the digital workplace, where physical boundaries are no longer defining factors. Recent research by Costin, Roman, and Balica (2023) highlights how remote work conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic have led to increased employee burnout and professional job stress, emerging as significant predictors of counterproductive work behavior in digital environments. Adding a cultural dimension, Yang and Diefendorff (2009) demonstrated how societal norms shape the prevalence and types of CWB. For

example, in collectivist cultures, individual-focused CWBs like gossip may be discouraged, while organization-focused behaviors such as absenteeism might be more tolerated when maintaining group harmony is prioritized.

What unites these definitions is the shared acknowledgment that counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is inherently human in nature. It often stems from feelings of frustration, resentment, or disillusionment experienced by employees within their organizational environments. Such behaviors can manifest as silent protests, subtle expressions of dissatisfaction, or misguided efforts to regain a sense of control over their circumstances. This perspective encourages a deeper examination of these actions, urging us to look beyond their surface manifestations. By doing so, we can identify the unmet needs, unresolved conflicts, or systemic injustices that drive these behaviors. Understanding CWB through this lens highlights the importance of addressing not only individual actions but also the broader organizational factors that contribute to their occurrence.

**Relationships Among Concepts and Prior Research**

Sustainable leadership, ethical climate, and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) are dynamic and interrelated factors that significantly influence organizational performance and employee behavior. Understanding the interactions among these variables provides valuable insights into reducing CWBs and mitigating other adverse effects on organizational outcomes. Baysal and Yangil (2023) highlights that sustainable leadership, through fostering an ethical climate, has shown to effectively mitigate counterproductive behaviors while promoting organizational alignment and employee well-being. For instance, Aryati et al. (2018) highlight that ethical leadership, a core element of sustainable leadership, plays a pivotal role in shaping ethical climates. Leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior establish organizational norms that influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, Demirtaş and Akdoğan (2015) found that ethical leadership positively impacts dimensions of work commitment, including vigor, dedication, and absorption. Recent findings suggest that Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs) and Counterproductive Workplace Behaviors (CWBs) represent two opposing ends of workplace behavior but are influenced by the same organizational contexts. Ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping these behaviors, guiding employees toward more constructive and aligned actions within the organization (Fan, Wider, & Chan, 2023). This perspective underscores the critical role of leadership in creating environments that either mitigate or exacerbate such behaviors. Moreover, studies by Pagliaro et al. (2018) and Schminke et al. (2007) reveal that a positive ethical climate characterized by transparency, trust, and fairness increases the alignment of employee behavior with organizational values while reducing the occurrence of CWBs. Ethical climates not only suppress CWBs but also encourage prosocial behaviors such as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB). For example, Bellora-Bienengräber et al. (2022) demonstrate that ethical leadership fosters an atmosphere of accountability and justice, addressing the root causes of CWBs. Furthermore, ethical leadership practices embed core values within the organization, while the ethical climate operationalizes these values as enforceable norms. This integration creates a cohesive and positive work environment, enhancing employee engagement and strengthening organizational resilience (Gwamanda & Mahembe, 2023).

Recent literature emphasizes the potential of sustainable leadership to cultivate an ethical climate by embedding values such as fairness, inclusivity, and social responsibility into organizational practices (Babalola et al., 2021; Demirtaş & Akdoğan, 2015). Uzun and Güngör (2024) provide evidence from the higher education sector, demonstrating that academic leadership practices reinforcing ethical climates not only enhance organizational justice but also significantly reduce CWBs. This leadership approach not only promotes ethical standards but also aligns organizational culture with broader societal expectations. Khokhar and Rehman (2017) explored the relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and counterproductive work behavior (CWB) within this framework. Their findings revealed a significant relationship between ethical leadership and employee performance, where CWB partially mediates the link between ethical leadership behavior and performance outcomes. This suggests that while ethical leadership enhances employee performance, mitigating CWBs remains a critical factor in maximizing its effectiveness. Kul (2023) explore the role of green transformational leadership in enhancing ethical climates and sustainability efforts, thereby reducing workplace conflicts and fostering a more cohesive work environment.

Despite the growing body of literature on sustainable leadership and ethical climates, the mechanisms through which sustainable leadership influences ethical climates and their subsequent effects on counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) remain insufficiently explored. Specifically, sustainable leadership fosters ethical climates by embedding fairness, accountability, and inclusivity, which serve as foundational values for guiding employee behavior by establishing clear ethical norms and expectations. These values not only influence individual actions but also shape collective behavior patterns, creating an environment where ethical conduct becomes the

standard and counterproductive behaviors are naturally discouraged. For instance, a positive ethical climate may mediate the relationship by amplifying the constructive impact of sustainable leadership on reducing CWBs. Alternatively, ethical climates could moderate this relationship by strengthening or weakening the extent to which sustainable leadership mitigates negative workplace behaviors. Recent studies further highlight these dynamics: Huang et al. (2021) demonstrate that transformational and ethical leadership styles are effective in reducing CWBs through enhanced employee engagement. while Gulbahar et al. (2023) reveal that a strong ethical climate can mitigate the impact of negative personality traits, such as narcissism, on CWBs, underscoring the importance of ethical leadership in fostering such climates. Additionally, the findings of Barattucci et al. (2021) emphasize that ethical climates, when combined with distributed leadership, enhance organizational identification, leading to improved work outcomes and reduced CWBs. To address this gap, the present study examines the role of ethical climate as a potential mediating or moderating variable in the relationship between sustainable leadership and CWBs, drawing on recent theoretical and empirical advances in organizational behavior research.

## Research Model and Hypotheses

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- *What is the direct relationship between sustainable leadership and CWBs?*
- *What is the direct relationship between sustainable leadership and ethical climate?*
- *Does ethical climate mediate the relationship between sustainable leadership and CWBs?*

By addressing these questions, the research seeks to contribute to the expanding discourse on leadership and ethics. Additionally, it aims to provide practical insights for organizations on how to design leadership practices that promote ethical and sustainable workplace cultures. In line with these objectives, the research model and hypotheses have been developed and are presented as follows:

*H1: Sustainable leadership negatively affects counterproductive work behaviors.*

*H2: Sustainable leadership positively affects the ethical climate.*

*H3: Ethical climate negatively affects counterproductive work behaviors*

*H4: Ethical climate mediates the relationship between sustainable leadership and counterproductive work behaviors.*

## Method

This study was designed as a quantitative research project, utilizing scale-based data collected through face-to-face interviews. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Istanbul Gelişim University Ethics Committee on August 16, 2024 (Meeting No: 2024-12, Decision No: 2024-12-06). Given the association of sustainable leadership with individuals in managerial and decision-making roles, specific guidelines were established to identify participants capable of accurately evaluating the sustainable leadership process. This methodological approach was intended to minimize potential misunderstandings and ensure data integrity. To enhance the reliability of the responses, participants were provided with detailed explanations during the data collection process. Efforts were made to maintain consistency in responses and to address any ambiguities that could affect the quality of the data.

For data analysis, SPSS v24 software was employed to perform preliminary tests and descriptive statistical analyses. Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted using IBM AMOS v24 to validate the measurement models and ensure the robustness of the constructs.

### Population - Sample

Sustainable leadership, ethical climate, and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) are universal concepts that transcend specific groups, sectors, or organizational settings. Consequently, the research sample was approached from a holistic perspective, without imposing strict limitations. However, due to the integral role of sustainability and ethics in public administration—where community needs, environmental concerns, and long-term societal impacts are central—certain exclusions were applied to align the sample with the study's scope and objectives. Employees from public institutions, state-owned enterprises, and private organizations serving the public interest were excluded from the sample. Instead, the research focused on employees, specialists, mid-level managers, and senior managers working in private enterprises. This approach ensured the alignment of the sample with the study's aim of investigating sustainable leadership, ethical climate, and CWBs within the context of private sector organizations.

Data were collected from a total of 327 white-collar employees in Istanbul. For this study, convenience sampling was employed, a widely used non-probability sampling technique extensively discussed in the literature (e.g., Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). This method was selected due to

its practicality, cost-effectiveness, and accessibility, particularly under the resource constraints faced during the research process. Convenience sampling enables researchers to efficiently collect data from readily available and willing participants, making it a suitable approach when time, budget, or logistical limitations are present. As highlighted by Etikan et al. (2016), this method is particularly advantageous in exploratory research, where the focus is on gaining preliminary insights rather than achieving generalizability. Similarly, Creswell and Creswell (2017) emphasize the simplicity and speed of the data collection process afforded by convenience sampling, attributes that were critical for the feasibility of our study.

The demographic data of the research sample are summarized in Table 1. A total of 327 participants contributed to the study, consisting of 53.5% females (n = 175) and 46.5% males (n = 152). Regarding age distribution, the majority of participants were between 26-35 years (33.9%) and 36-45 years (33.9%), followed by 18-25 years (17.5%) and 45+ years (14.7%).

Table 1. Demographic Data of the Research Sample

| Variable | | Count | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Female | 175 | 53.5 |
| | Male | 152 | 46.5 |
| **Age** | 18-25 | 57 | 17.5 |
| | 26-35 | 111 | 33.9 |
| | 36-45 | 111 | 33.9 |
| | 45+ | 48 | 14.7 |
| **Education** | High School - College | 28 | 8.6 |
| | Associate | 35 | 10.7 |
| | Bachelor's | 177 | 54.1 |
| | Postgraduate | 87 | 26.6 |
| **M. Status** | Single | 155 | 47.4 |
| | Married | 172 | 52.6 |
| **Tenure in Current Institution** | 0-5 years | 176 | 53.8 |
| | 5-10 years | 69 | 21.1 |
| | 11-15 years | 45 | 13.8 |
| | 15+ years | 37 | 11.3 |
| **Work Experience** | 0-5 years | 97 | 29.7 |
| | 5-10 years | 68 | 20.8 |
| | 11-15 years | 76 | 23.2 |
| | 15+ years | 86 | 26.3 |

In terms of educational background, the majority of participants held a bachelor's degree (54.1%), while 26.6% had a postgraduate degree. Smaller portions had completed an associate degree (10.7%) or high school (8.6%). Regarding marital status, 52.6% of participants were married, while 47.4% were single. When considering tenure within their current institutions, 53.8% of participants reported working for 0-5 years, followed by 21.1% with 5-10 years, 13.8% with 11-15 years, and 11.3% with more than 15 years. In terms of overall professional experience, 29.7% had 0-5 years, while 26.3% reported over 15 years, 23.2% had 11-15 years, and 20.8% had 5-10 years of experience. These demographic results illustrate that the sample comprises a diverse group of participants in terms of education level, marital status, tenure, and professional experience. This diversity provides a robust basis for analyzing the relationships explored in the study and enhances the generalizability of the findings within the context of the private sector.

## Measures

**The Organizational Ethical Climate Scale,** developed by Çalışkan (2022), is designed to evaluate organizational ethical climate perceptions across various sectors, including universities, healthcare, and industry. The scale has been validated as a reliable and robust instrument through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. It comprises two main dimensions: "Ethical Climate for Rules" and "Ethical Climate for Behaviors," measured by a total of nine items. The two-factor structure of the scale aligns with the theoretical foundations of ethical climate theories proposed by Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988). These theories emphasize that ethical climates stem from shared perceptions of organizational practices and procedures, influencing both decision-making processes and employee behaviors. This strong theoretical alignment enhances the scale's practical usability in assessing ethical climates within diverse cultural and operational contexts. Additionally, the scale is specifically tailored to reflect the cultural and organizational characteristics of Turkish institutions. This design consideration ensures cultural compatibility and enhances the validity of the responses, making the scale particularly suitable for the target audience in the Turkish context.

**The Sustainable Leadership Scale,** originally developed by McCann and Holt (2011), was adapted into Turkish by Yangil and Şahin (2019) to ensure cultural relevance and accuracy within the Turkish context. This scale adopts a multidimensional approach to leadership, focusing not only on current organizational performance but also on the long-term sustainability of environmental, social, and ethical practices. The scale comprises four key dimensions: Ethical-Social Responsibility, Change, Innovation-Profitability, and Culture-Human Resources. The adaptation process

involved rigorous validation procedures, including exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, which confirmed the scale's reliability and validity for the Turkish workforce. By tailoring the scale to the cultural and organizational characteristics of Turkey, the adaptation ensures that it captures the nuances of sustainable leadership practices specific to this context. The inclusion of this scale in the present study provides a robust measurement tool that aligns the theoretical framework of sustainable leadership with the practical realities of Turkish organizations. This alignment facilitates a more accurate evaluation of sustainable leadership behaviors and their impact on organizational dynamics.

The original **Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) scale,** developed by Spactor et al. (2006), consisted of 33 items and five sub-dimensions: sabotage, withdrawal, abuse, stealing, and production deviance. This scale was translated into Turkish by Öcel (2010), who conducted validity and reliability analyses. Öcel reported that the Turkish version exhibited a four-factor structure (abuse, stealing, withdrawal, and sabotage), comprising 32 items and demonstrating satisfactory psychometric properties for measuring CWBs in Turkey. In a subsequent pilot study, Tüfekçi (2016) utilized Öcel's (2010) adaptation of the scale and found that certain items, particularly in the abuse and sabotage sub-dimensions, were perceived as sensitive and not answered appropriately by participants. Consequently, 8 items from the abuse sub-dimension, 6 from stealing, and 2 from sabotage were removed. Given the present study's focus on white-collar employees in Turkey, a comprehensive review of relevant Turkish studies was conducted. Based on this review, items from the sabotage sub-dimension were excluded to ensure participant objectivity and maintain the validity of the findings. The final version of the scale used in this study includes 14 items across the abuse and withdrawal sub-dimensions. The CWB scale has been adapted and applied in various Turkish contexts. For instance, Akbas Tuna and Boylu (2016) revised the scale, excluding 13 items, and reported a three-factor structure (mistreatment, theft, and withdrawal) with 19 items. Similarly, Demircioğlu and Özdemir (2014) validated a version consisting of 28 items across three sub-dimensions: abuse, stealing, and withdrawal, in educational organizations. Ödemiş (2011), however, utilized the scale as a single-dimensional construct. These findings indicate that while the CWB scale has been widely used across sectors in Turkey, certain items have required modification during the adaptation process to align with the specific cultural and contextual characteristics of the target sample.

## Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of the scales and their subdimensions, which have been extensively examined in previous studies, were reassessed in this research to ensure their applicability within the current context. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha (α), a widely used measure of internal consistency in the social sciences. The analysis revealed that the reliability coefficients of the scales exceeded 0.70, a threshold commonly accepted as an indicator of strong internal consistency and reliability (Akgül & Çevik, 2005). Cronbach's Alpha is a statistical measure that evaluates the extent to which items within a scale consistently measure the same underlying construct, thereby providing evidence of the scale's internal reliability (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The findings from this study confirm that the scales are both reliable and valid for assessing the constructs of interest within the sample and research context.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Values of the Scales Used in the Study

| Scales and Dimensions | Cronbach's Alpha (α) Value | Number of Items |
|---|---|---|
| Sustainable Leadership Scale | .971 | 15 |
| Ethics - Social Responsibility | .929 | 3 |
| Change | .897 | 3 |
| Innovation - Profitability | .881 | 4 |
| Culture - Human Resources | .945 | 5 |
| Counterproductive Work Behavior Scale | .922 | 14 |
| Abuse | .896 | 8 |
| Withdrawal | .866 | 6 |
| Ethical Climate Scale | .935 | 9 |
| Ethical Climate - Rules | .902 | 5 |
| Ethical Climate - Behaviors | .908 | 4 |

The Sustainable Leadership Scale demonstrated exceptional internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.971 across its 15 items, indicating excellent reliability in measuring the construct. Its subdimensions also exhibited strong reliability scores: Ethics - Social Responsibility (α = 0.929), Change (α = 0.897), Innovation - Profitability (α = 0.881), and

Culture - Human Resources (α = 0.945). These values confirm that the scale effectively captures the multidimensional nature of sustainable leadership with high internal consistency.

The Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) Scale also showed excellent reliability, with an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.922 across its 14 items. The subdimensions Abuse and Withdrawal exhibited reliability scores of 0.896 and 0.866, respectively, confirming the scale's robustness in measuring different types of counterproductive workplace behaviors. Similarly, the Ethical Climate Scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's Alpha of 0.935 across 9 items. The subdimensions Ethical Climate - Rules (α = 0.902) and Ethical Climate - Behaviors (α = 0.908) also exhibited strong reliability, further validating the scale's effectiveness in assessing the ethical dimensions of organizational climate. These findings collectively confirm that all scales employed in this study are reliable and robust measurement tools, capable of accurately capturing the intended constructs within the research context.

In conclusion, the Cronbach's Alpha values for all scales and their respective subdimensions exceed the generally accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency and reliability. These results affirm that the scales used in this study are robust and effective tools for accurately measuring the intended constructs. This high level of reliability enhances the validity and credibility of the findings, ensuring that the study provides a solid foundation for analyzing the relationships among the variables.

To evaluate the validity of the research scales, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS software. The scales were initially examined individually at the second-order level to assess their construct validity, ensuring that the observed data align with the theoretical constructs being measured. The results of the fit indices for the research scales are presented in detail in Table 3.

Table 3. Fit Indices Results for the Research Scales

| Scale | ΔX2/df | GFI | CFI | TLI | NFI | RMSEA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sustainable Leadership (SL) | 3.659 | .886 | .957 | .947 | .942 | .090 |
| Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB) | 3.630 | .890 | .927 | .910 | .903 | .090 |
| Ethical Climate Scale (EC) | 3.640 | .945 | .970 | .958 | .959 | .090 |

The fit indices obtained from the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicate that the research scales demonstrate an acceptable level of validity and reliability. For the Sustainable Leadership Scale, the results show a $\chi^2$/df ratio of 3.659, a GFI (Goodness of Fit Index) value of 0.886, a CFI (Comparative Fit Index) of 0.957, a TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index) of 0.947, an NFI (Normed Fit Index) of 0.942, and an RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) value of 0.090. Similarly, the Counterproductive Work Behavior Scale produced satisfactory results, with a $\chi^2$/df ratio of 3.630, a GFI of 0.890, a CFI of 0.927, a TLI of 0.910, an NFI of 0.903, and an RMSEA of 0.090. The Ethical Climate Scale also demonstrated adequate fit indices, with a $\chi^2$/df ratio of 3.640, a GFI of 0.945, a CFI of 0.970, a TLI of 0.958, an NFI of 0.959, and an RMSEA of 0.090. In conclusion, the CFA results confirm that all three scales meet the acceptable thresholds for model fit, as established in the literature (Munro, 2005; Schreiber et al., 2006; İlhan & Çetin, 2014). These findings validate the appropriateness of the scales for use in the current research context. (Çalışkan, 2022: 44).

Following the examination of the goodness-of-fit indices for the research scales, the measurement model's overall fit indices were evaluated at the second-order level for the entire model. The results of the analysis are summarized in Table 4, showing that the model's fit indices fall within acceptable thresholds.

Table 4. Results of the Fit Indices for the Research Model

| ΔX2/df | GFI | CFI | TLI | NFI | RMSEA | RMR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2.195 | .810 | .927 | .921 | .875 | .061 | .097 |

The chi-square/degree of freedom ($\Delta X^2$/df) ratio was calculated as 2.195, which is below the commonly recommended threshold of 3, indicating a good model fit. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) was reported as 0.810, slightly below the ideal value of 0.90, yet still within a tolerable range for complex models.

The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) values were found to be 0.927 and 0.921, respectively, both exceeding the commonly accepted cutoff of 0.90, signifying a good fit. The Normed Fit Index (NFI), while slightly lower at 0.875, remains close to the acceptable range for exploratory models.

The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was reported as 0.061, which falls within the acceptable range of ≤0.08, indicating an adequate fit. However, the Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) value of 0.97 is above the desired threshold of ≤0.08, suggesting some room for improvement. In summary, the results demonstrate that the overall measurement model exhibits acceptable levels of fit based on the indices presented, supporting the validity of the proposed structure. Further refinements could enhance the model, particularly addressing the RMR value. (Hu and Bentler, 1999)

Composite Reliability (CR) values for all constructs are above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating high internal consistency (Sustainable Leadership: 0.973, Counterproductive Work Behavior: 0.914, Ethical Climate: 0.925). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are also above 0.50, meeting the criterion for convergent validity (Sustainable Leadership: 0.901, Counterproductive Work Behavior: 0.848, Ethical Climate: 0.860). The square root of AVE for each construct, which is represented on the diagonal of the correlation matrix, exceeds its correlations with other constructs, providing evidence of satisfactory discriminant validity. Specifically, for the Servant Leadership (SL) construct, the square root of its AVE (√AVE = 0.949) is greater than its correlations with Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) (-0.465) and Ethical Climate (EC) (0.658). Similarly, for the CWB construct, the square root of its AVE (√AVE = 0.921) is higher than its correlations with SL (-0.465) and EC (-0.486). Lastly, for the EC construct, the square root of its AVE (√AVE = 0.927) surpasses its correlations with SL (0.658) and CWB (-0.486). These results confirm that each construct is distinct and demonstrates strong discriminant validity. The Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) for each construct is less than or equal to its AVE, supporting the discriminant validity of the model. For instance, the MSV for Sustainable Leadership is 0.433, which is lower than its AVE of 0.901. Similarly, for Counterproductive Work Behavior, the MSV is 0.236, below its AVE of 0.848, and for Ethical Climate, the MSV matches the AVE at 0.433. The Maximum Reliability (MaxR(H)) values further confirm the robustness of the constructs, as all values are above 0.90 (Sustainable Leadership: 0.978, Counterproductive Work Behavior: 1.278, Ethical Climate: 0.927).

Table 5. Convergent and Discriminant Validity of the Constructs

| Constructs | CR | AVE | MSV | MaxR(H) | SL | CWB | EC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SL** | 0.973 | 0.901 | 0.433 | 0.978 | 0.949 | | |
| **CWB** | 0.914 | 0.848 | 0.236 | 1.278 | -0.465*** | 0.921 | |
| **EC** | 0.925 | 0.860 | 0.433 | 0.927 | 0.658*** | -0.486*** | 0.927 |

*** p < 0,01

The results of the correlation analysis, presented in Table 6, reveal significant relationships between the study's primary variables: Sustainable Leadership (SL), Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB), and Ethical Climate (EC). The mean scores and standard deviations for each variable indicate that respondents reported moderate levels of Sustainable Leadership (M = 3.515, SD = 1.0994) and Ethical Climate (M = 3.8206, SD = 1.0498), while the mean score for Counterproductive Work Behaviors was relatively low (M = 1.953, SD = 0.91775), reflecting the overall low prevalence of such behaviors in the sampled organizations.

The correlation between Sustainable Leadership

Table 6. Correlation Analysis Results

| Scales | Std. Dev. | Mean | SL | CWB | EC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sustainable Leadership (SL) | 1.09941 | 3.5151 | - | | |
| Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB) | .91775 | 1.9533 | -,410* | - | |
| Ethical Climate (EC) | 1.04981 | 3.8206 | .601* | -.425* | - |

*p<0.05, **p<0.01

and Ethical Climate was positive and strong (r = 0.601), suggesting that higher levels of sustainable leadership practices are associated with a more positive ethical climate in organizations. This finding highlights the critical role of leadership in shaping ethical organizational environments. Conversely, the relationship between Sustainable Leadership and Counterproductive Work Behaviors was negative and moderate (r = -0.410), indicating that as sustainable leadership practices increase, counterproductive work behaviors decrease. This supports the notion that ethical and sustainability-focused leadership can mitigate harmful workplace behaviors. Similarly, a negative and moderate correlation was observed between Ethical Climate and Counterproductive Work Behaviors (r = -0.425). This result suggests that a stronger ethical climate is linked to lower levels of counterproductive behaviors, emphasizing the importance of fostering ethical norms and values in organizations.

The hypothesis tests were conducted using the PROCESS Macro for SPSS, which is a widely recognized tool for mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis. This approach allows for the precise examination of direct, indirect, and total effects, while also providing bootstrapped confidence intervals to assess the significance of the relationships. The hypothesis testing results indicate significant relationships between the variables in the study, confirming the proposed theoretical model. First, Sustainable Leadership was found to positively influence Ethical Climate (β = 0.6008, p < 0.01), demonstrating that leadership practices focused on sustainability contribute to the development of a stronger ethical climate within organizations. This relationship is further validated by the confidence interval (LLCI = 0.4904, ULCI = 0.6570), which does not include zero, supporting the robustness of this finding.

Additionally, Sustainable Leadership was shown to have a significant negative effect on Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB) (β = -0.4097, p < 0.01). This result suggests that the implementation of sustainable leadership practices reduces undesirable workplace behaviors. The confidence interval for this path (LLCI = -0.4251, ULCI = -0.2589) also supports this conclusion. Similarly, Ethical Climate demonstrated a significant negative effect on Counterproductive Work Behaviors (β = -0.4245, p < 0.01), indicating that fostering an ethical organizational climate can significantly mitigate harmful workplace behaviors. The confidence interval for this relationship (LLCI = -0.4575, ULCI = -0.2847) further confirms its validity. The mediation analysis reveals that Ethical Climate partially mediates the relationship between Sustainable Leadership and Counterproductive Work Behaviors. While the direct effect of Sustainable Leadership on Counterproductive Work Behaviors remains significant (β = -0.2020, p < 0.01), the indirect effect through Ethical Climate is also significant (β = -0.1400, p < 0.01). This finding highlights that a portion of the impact of Sustainable Leadership on Counterproductive Work Behaviors operates through the development of an Ethical Climate. The total effect, combining both direct and indirect pathways, is significant as well (β = -0.3420, p < 0.01). The mediation effect is further supported by the bootstrap confidence intervals for the indirect effect (LLCI = -0.2209, ULCI = -0.0578), which do not include zero. Results emphasize the critical role of Sustainable Leadership in reducing Counterproductive Work Behaviors, both directly and indirectly through the mediation of Ethical Climate. Furthermore, the

Table 7. Hypothesis Analysis Results

| Scales | Std. Dev. | Mean | SL | CWB | EC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sustainable Leadership (SL) | 1.09941 | 3.5151 | - | | |
| Counterproductive Work Behaviors (CWB) | .91775 | 1.9533 | -.410* | - | |
| Ethical Climate (EC) | 1.04981 | 3.8206 | .601* | -.425* | - |

Table 8. Mediation Analysis Results

| Mediation | Direct Effects | Indirect Effects | Total Effects | Boot LLCI | Boot ULCI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SL - EC - CWB | -.2020*** | -.1400*** | .3420*** | -.2209 | -.0578 |

*** p < 0.01

Table 9. Overview of Hypothesis Test Outcomes

| Hypothesis | Result |
|---|---|
| **H1:** *Sustainable leadership negatively affects counterproductive work behaviors.* | **Accepted** |
| **H2:** *Sustainable leadership positively affects the ethical climate.* | **Accepted** |
| **H3:** *Ethical climate negatively affects counterproductive work behaviors* | **Accepted** |
| **H4:** *Ethical climate mediates the relationship between sustainable leadership and counterproductive work behaviors.* | **Accepted** |

findings underline the importance of cultivating an Ethical Climate within organizations to effectively address negative workplace behaviors and promote a healthier work environment.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the mediating role of ethical climate in the relationship between sustainable leadership and counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). The findings reveal that sustainable leadership significantly reduces CWBs by fostering a strong ethical climate. This underscores the importance of leadership practices that prioritize ethical values, as they not only improve organizational well-being but also enhance employee performance. These results highlight the broader implications of ethical climate as a key mechanism through which sustainable leadership can effectively address workplace challenges.

The correlation analysis conducted within the study revealed significant and positive relationships among the variables, highlighting their interconnectedness. Furthermore, regression analysis confirmed that sustainable leadership has a significant effect on counterproductive work behaviors, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1 (H1). These findings indicate that sustainable leadership practices effectively reduce counterproductive work behaviors, consistent with previous studies in the literature (Battal, 2024; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Hu, Dong, Li, & Wang, 2023). The significance of these findings lies in their ability to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation. By showcasing how sustainable leadership influences ethical climates to mitigate CWBs, this study provides actionable insights for organizational leaders aiming to foster ethical workplaces. Furthermore, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by empirically validating the mediating role of ethical climate, an area that has been underexplored in prior research. This advancement in understanding equips practitioners with evidence-based strategies to enhance employee well-being and organizational performance while addressing workplace misconduct. By fostering an ethical climate, sustainable leadership can mitigate undesirable workplace behaviors, contributing to improved organizational well-being and employee performance.

The significant effect of sustainable leadership on ethical climate supports Hypothesis 2 (H2), demonstrating that sustainable leadership practices positively contribute to the development of an ethical climate. Although no studies in the existing literature directly examine the mediating role of ethical climate in the relationship between sustainable leadership and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), related research offers valuable insights. For instance, Divleli and Ergün (2022) found that ethical climate mediates the relationship between transformational and transactional leadership styles and CWBs in the education sector. Similarly, Demirtaş and Akdoğan (2015) revealed that ethical leadership positively influences ethical climate, reduces turnover intentions, and strengthens emotional commitment. Ansari, Ali, and Malik (2023) identified ethical climate as a mediator in the relationship between responsible leadership and employees' sustainable performance. Additionally, research highlights a positive relationship between transformational leadership and various dimensions of ethical climate, underscoring transformational leadership as a critical determinant of ethical climate, particularly in the education sector (Sagnak, 2010). Hypothesis 3 (H3) was also supported, indicating that ethical climate negatively impacts counterproductive work behaviors. This finding aligns with prior studies emphasizing the role of ethical climate in reducing CWBs (Kılıç, 2014; Gerçek & Kaya, 2017; Chernyak-Hai & Tziner, 2014; Belschak & Den Hartog, 2018). Furthermore, Hypothesis 4 (H4), which proposed the mediating role of ethical climate in the relationship between sustainable leadership and CWBs, was confirmed, highlighting the pivotal role of ethical climate in translating leadership practices into reduced workplace misconduct. This finding suggests that organizational leadership should focus on cultivating an ethical climate as a strategic priority to amplify the positive effects of sustainable leadership. By embedding ethical principles into daily operations and decision-making

processes, leaders can create a workplace environment that discourages misconduct while promoting trust, collaboration, and long-term organizational success. Future research could explore sector-specific applications of these insights to further refine leadership strategies and ethical climate development.

As a result of the present study, the following suggestions are made:

***Redefining Management Priorities: Embracing a Human-Centric Approach***

We recommend that academic researchers shift their focus from traditional profit-oriented business studies to human- and environment-centered topics. This transition will contribute to a deeper understanding of sustainable practices and the long-term benefits of prioritizing societal and ecological well-being in organizational contexts. Mainstream management approaches have traditionally prioritized organizational performance, often neglecting human, societal, and environmental considerations. Alvesson and Willmott (1992) criticized this narrow focus on economic outcomes at the expense of social benefits, describing such paradigms as exclusionary. Similarly, Grey (1994) and Fournier and Grey (2000) emphasized that management literature has historically supported a performance-oriented perspective that overlooks human-centric values. This study directly addresses these critiques by positioning sustainable leadership as a transformative framework that integrates ethical and value-driven principles into management practices. Building on these critiques, this study adopts a broader perspective by exploring the potential of sustainable leadership to integrate value-driven principles into management practices. Sustainable leadership emphasizes the well-being of people, society, and nature, contributing not only to organizational health, workplace harmony, and employee well-being but also to societal and environmental sustainability. Unlike traditional management paradigms, sustainable leadership offers an inclusive model that transcends the sole pursuit of organizational performance. By focusing on ethical leadership and long-term vision, sustainable leadership fosters a balance between achieving organizational goals and upholding human values and environmental stewardship. This approach positions sustainable leadership as not only a strategic necessity but also a moral imperative for organizations seeking to thrive in today's complex and interconnected world. This study aims to underscore the individual and societal benefits of sustainable leadership, highlighting its capacity to align ethical principles with sustainable organizational practices.

***Promote Ethical Leadership Training***

Leaders should participate in regular training programs focused on ethical leadership and sustainable management practices. Such programs are essential for equipping leaders with the tools and perspectives needed to foster ethical decision-making and sustainable practices within their organizations. These programs can include interactive methods such as case studies and role-playing activities to enhance decision-making skills (Thiel et al., 2012; Rest, 1986). Schoemaker (1995) highlights that scenario planning workshops equip leaders to anticipate potential challenges and align organizational strategies with long-term goals. Leaders who recognize and value individual employee contributions can significantly enhance job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Noe et al. (2017) emphasize that integrating micro-learning modules into training programs yields more effective outcomes. These approaches not only impart knowledge but also cultivate an ethical workplace climate.

***Integrate Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Principles into Strategic Leadership***

Embedding environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles into strategic planning is critical for aligning organizational goals with sustainable leadership practices. Leaders should define clear sustainability objectives, monitor their progress, and communicate these goals transparently to stakeholders. According to KPMG's 2021 Global CEO Survey, organizations that prioritize ESG principles are better equipped to adapt to market changes and ensure long-term resilience. Incorporating ESG into leadership training and decision-making frameworks can further strengthen an ethical organizational culture. Shaikh (2022) highlights that ESG strategies not only enhance firm performance but also contribute to stakeholder trust and environmental responsibility, making them indispensable for modern organizational frameworks. This integration ensures that organizations remain competitive while maintaining their commitment to broader societal and ecological goals. Incorporating ESG into leadership training and decision-making frameworks can further strengthen an ethical organizational culture.

***Implement Transparent Communication Mechanisms***

The establishment of an ethical climate relies on leadership practices that prioritize justice, transparency, and accountability (Kaptein, 2008; Treviño et al., 1998). Porter and Kramer (2011) argue that embedding ethical values and transparent communica-

tion within the workplace enhances employee trust, fostering long-term organizational success, nhances organizational resilience, boosts employee motivation and positively impacts overall performance. Critical measures such as developing ethical guidelines, implementing anonymous reporting mechanisms, and providing regular ethical leadership training are fundamental steps in building a sustainable organizational structure. The integration of these concepts becomes particularly significant in the context of sustainable leadership and ethical climate. By embedding these principles into organizational practices, leaders can effectively reduce counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), as supported by prior research (Schminke et al., 2007; Pagliaro et al., 2018).

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account. The sample size of 327 participants was constrained by time and financial limitations, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the research focused exclusively on white-collar employees in Istanbul, which may not fully capture the experiences of employees in other regions, sectors, or demographic groups. Additionally, as the data were collected at a single point in time, the study's design does not allow for clear causal inferences between sustainable leadership, ethical climate, and counterproductive work behaviors. The cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to explore dynamic or longitudinal relationships among these variables. For future research, larger and more diverse samples that encompass various cultural, sectoral, and geographic contexts could enhance the understanding of these relationships. Longitudinal studies could also provide insights into the causal mechanisms and temporal dynamics among sustainable leadership, ethical climate, and counterproductive work behaviors, offering a more comprehensive perspective.

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