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Ethical leadership among Ostrobothnia Police Department officers

Officers' experiences, needs and challenges

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ABSTRACT:

I denna magisteravhandling undersöker jag etiskt ledarskap inom polismyndigheten, med särskilt fokus på befälens erfarenheter vid Österbottens polisinsättning. Syftet med studien är att belysa hur etiskt ledarskap förstås, hur det tillämpas i praktiken samt vilka utmaningar som uppstår i det dagliga arbetet på ledningsnivå. Särskild uppmärksamhet ägnas åt utbildningsbehov, förekomsten av tystnadskultur samt hanteringen av etiska problem.

Etiskt ledarskap utgör en grundläggande del av god förvaltning, särskilt inom polismyndigheten, där beslutsfattandet ofta har långtgående konsekvenser för både individer och samhället i stort. Befäls agerande spelar en avgörande roll i hur organisationens värderingar och hur etiska principer tar sig i uttryck i det operativa arbetet. Tidigare forskning visar att etiskt ledarskap inte uppstår spontant, utan kräver medvetna insatser, organisatoriskt stöd och kontinuerlig utveckling.

Undersökningen genomfördes som en kvantitativ-kvalitativ enkätstudie riktad till befäl vid Österbottens polisinsättning. Enkäten bestod av både slutna och öppna frågor och syftade till att kartlägga erfarenheter, uppfattningar och behov kopplade till etiskt ledarskap. Det insamlade materialet analyserades genom både statistiska metoder och kvalitativ innehållsanalys.

Resultaten visar att befälet betraktar etiskt ledarskap som en mycket viktig och integrerad del av deras yrkesroll. Samtidigt framkommer att det organisatoriska stödet för etiskt beslutsfattande ibland upplevs som otillräckligt. Respondenterna uttrycker ett behov av mer praktiskt inriktad utbildning i etiska frågor och efterlyser fler möjligheter till kollegiala samtal. Ett återkommande tema är förekomsten av en tystnadskultur, där etiska problem inte alltid lyfts fram eller hanteras öppet. Detta kopplas bland annat till bristande psykologisk trygghet och rädsla för negativa konsekvenser.

Utifrån studiens resultat kan det konstateras att etiskt ledarskap inom polismyndigheten förutsätter ett starkare strukturellt stöd, regelbunden utbildning samt en öppen och förtroendefull samtalskultur. Befäl förväntas fungera som etiska förebilder, men för att möjliggöra detta krävs tydliga strukturer och ett starkt stöd från organisationens högsta ledning. Studien kan fungera som ett underlag för vidare utveckling av ledarskapsutbildningen inom polismyndigheten och bidra till att stärka en etiskt hållbar organisationskultur i polisen på bred front.

KEYWORDS: ethical leadership, police organization, silence culture, psychological safety, public administration, decision-making, leadership

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1 Introduction

The choice of topic was never difficult for me. Nevertheless, during the first few months it was not entirely clear to me where my focus would be. I oscillated between focusing on personnel management and its ethics and what kind of tools a supervisor needs to think, function and work ethically correctly. I only made the decision at the very end. Then I decided to focus on the latter and to make the survey questions in accordance with that orientation. This thesis stems from my personal and longstanding interest in ethical leadership. Particularly within the context of the police organization. My interest in this subject has developed through more than twenty years of professional experience in the police force. I also wrote my bachelor's research on the same topic in 2022.

Ethical leadership plays a vital role in public administration and management. Within police organizations, both decisions and omissions can have far-reaching consequences for individuals and society. Consequently, public trust in law enforcement is closely associated with perceptions of ethical leadership, institutional transparency and accountability.

The importance of ethical leadership in public administration and management has grown steadily in recent decades, particularly within police organizations, where officers exercise significant power. The public expects not only legal compliance from the police organization but also legitimacy, fairness and morally sound conduct (OECD, 2020; Poliisi, 2024). Scandals and allegations of misconduct, as well as growing societal diversity, have further increased the pressure on police organizations and to integrate strong ethical values into their leadership practices.

Every decision made and every action taken influences not only the internal working climate but also public trust in the police authority in Finland. With this research, I have sought to combine my professional experience with a scholarly inquiry into how ethical leadership can be developed and strengthened within the Finnish police organization. In

my research I have chosen to focus on officers (police leadership) within the Ostrobothnia Police Department.

I hope this research will contribute not only to academic understanding but also offer practical value to the development of ethical leadership within the Ostrobothnia Police Department. Potentially also across the broader Finnish police organization. Through this research, I aim to combine my professional experience with academic inquiry to explore how ethical leadership can be strengthened within the Finnish police organization. This study focuses specifically on police officers in leadership roles within the Ostrobothnia Police Department.

This master's thesis builds on my previous bachelor's thesis, *Ethical personnel leadership: Tools for ethical awareness in personnel issues within the police organization* (Stråka, 2022). I explored in my earlier research the fundamental concepts of ethical leadership and identified practical tools for promoting ethical thinking among supervisors and managers. Whereas that research took a broader approach, this thesis focuses more specifically on police leadership roles within the organization. This research constitutes a continuation of my earlier work, delving deeper into the themes of ethics and ethical leadership. This thesis places special emphasis on how ethical leadership is perceived, what kinds of support are needed and how it can be developed in practical terms within the Finnish police organization. I also believe that the insights gained from this research may prove relevant for other hierarchical organizations in Finland.

I would also like to warmly thank the officers of the Ostrobothnia Police Department who took the time to respond to my survey. Your willingness to share your experiences and reflections has been invaluable to my research. I am especially grateful for the detailed and honest free-text responses that many of you provided. Your reflections have added depth and nuance to this research and have significantly enriched the analysis. Your contribution has been essential in shedding light on issues surrounding ethical leadership within the Ostrobothnia Police Department.

Although this study was conducted within the Ostrobothnia Police Department, I am convinced that its findings are relevant not only for leadership within the national police organization in Finland but also for other hierarchical public institutions.

My research is based on a wide range of theoretical and empirical sources to create a comprehensive understanding of ethics and ethical leadership within the police authority. I have been taken many central theories on psychological safety from Edmondson (1999, 2019) and Newman et al. (2017), while organizational ethics and values have been discussed based on for example OECD (2020), Snellman (2015) and Sydänmaanlakka (2012).

Öblom (2020) has been very important for the contextual reality of the police authority. References such as Demmke (2020) and Kayas (2023) have been used to put the results from an international perspective. GRECO, the Council of Europe's anti-corruption body, has on several occasions highlighted the importance of ethical leadership and internal control systems within law enforcement agencies (GRECO, 2023, pp.14-15). As such, GRECO constitutes an important source for my research. By integrating classical ethical theory with contemporary studies of control, organizational culture and moral courage, my thesis aims to provide both depth and relevance in my analysis.

My research draws on empirical data collected through a survey, alongside an extensive review of relevant literature, academic articles and other sources addressing ethics, ethical leadership and the organizational dynamics of policing. My study explores ethical leadership within the Ostrobothnia Police Department, focusing on how officers perceive and apply ethical principles in their professional practice. My research combines and weaves together theoretical perspectives from, among others, Snellman (2015), OECD (2020) and Öblom (2020) with empirical finding from the survey conducted among officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department.

The findings of my study indicate a strong ethical commitment among officers within the Ostrobothnia Police Department. However, the organizational support for ethical leadership is often perceived as insufficient. Strengthening the ethical climate and

leadership within the police officers requires a holistic approach that considers both individual and structural factors. My research suggests that ethically sustainable leadership can be further developed through clear normative frameworks, continuous training, safe reporting mechanisms and role modelling from leadership.

Ethical leadership is a crucial component of public administration, particularly in institutions such as the police authority, where decision-making affects not only the internal work environment but also public trust in the rule of law (Snellman, 2015, p. 336). In a constantly changing society, with growing demands for transparency and accountability, police officers must be not only competent decision-makers, but also role models for ethical integrity. Ethical leadership plays a central role in all public institutions. Especially in the judiciary, where integrity and trust are essential for upholding justice and preventing corruption. Ethical leadership is especially crucial within the police authority, where officers must balance their obligations to both the public and the state, promoting professionalism, responsibility and trust (Snellman, 2025, p.336).

According to the publication *Values in Everyday Life* (Ministry of Finance, 2001, p.7), ethical values are regarded as essential components of both decision-making processes and everyday actions within Finnish public administration. These values include impartiality, responsibility, openness and quality in the performance of duties. Civil service ethics require that public officials carry out their responsibilities without yielding to personal or external interests. They must always act in accordance with the public interest (Ministry of Finance, 2001, p.8).

For the police authority, ethical leadership entails that decisions must be made with fairness and objectivity in mind. By doing so, the basis for maintaining and reinforcing public confidence is secured. Therefore, leadership in the police organization must be anchored in strong ethical foundations. Officers should ensure that all employees and policemen act according to shared values and ethical standards. As Öblom (2020, pp. 30-35) point out, ethics and ethical leadership go beyond compliance with laws, regulations and internal norms. It also involves the ability to lead, as an example, to foster an

environment where ethical dialogue is encouraged. It also involves managing situations which legal requirements and moral values may be in tension (Öblom, 2020, pp. 30–35). Studies demonstrate that ethical leadership contributes to building trust within organizations. This by proving employee satisfaction and mitigating reputational threats (Sørengaard & Langvik, 2022, pp. 475–481).

While Finland has historically enjoyed high levels of public trust in the police authority, international assessments, such as those conducted by GRECO, have highlighted areas in need of improvement. Anti-corruption initiatives and the establishment of more structured ethical advisory systems remain key areas of focus (Poliisi, 2024). Despite the generally strong confidence in law enforcement, studies show that ethical misconduct does in fact occur, even within organizations regarded as ethically well-functioning (OECD, 2020; Lumiala & Collin, 2023).

I have found out through my research that organizational structures, leadership behaviours and institutional culture all influence the degree to which ethical principles are applied in daily work. There is a continued risk that ethical leadership is treated as an abstract ideal rather than a concrete, operational element integrated into leadership and decision-making processes. In my view, ethics and ethical leadership are becoming more and more important. These are not just nice words. Investing in ethical awareness and leadership capabilities is a long-term investment that benefits both individuals and institutions. As explained by Demmke (2024) in his course *Ethics and Ethics Management* at the University of Vaasa, morality refers to traditions, values and belief systems—what we perceive as right or wrong in a cultural or social context. Ethics, by contrast, deals with the systematic reflection on, and justification of, moral judgments, decisions, and behaviour. Demmke traces the roots of ethics to a long philosophical tradition, beginning with classical thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and Kant and extending to contemporary scholars and organizations such as Treviño (1986), Huberts (2014), and the OECD (2020).

The challenge for police organizations is, in essence, twofold: first to equip leaders with the knowledge and tools and support needed to make ethically sustainable decisions under pressure and second to institutionalize ethics as a visible and active part of the organizational culture. As Demmke (2024) also emphasizes, ethics is not only about determining what is right. It's also about understanding and justifying why we consider something right or wrong (Demmke, lecture material 2024).

1.1 Purpose and research questions

Police organizations are built on fundamental principles such as the legitimate use of power, legal certainty, and public trust. Still, ethical failures and misconduct continue to occur, challenging both the internal ethical climate and the public's confidence in the institution. Although ethical leadership is widely seen as essential to professional conduct, its everyday implementation is often constrained by established organizational routines and cultural norms.

Challenges such as insufficient ethics training, a prevailing culture of silence, and ethical dilemmas in complex leadership situations highlight the need for deeper exploration. These issues have motivated my decision to focus on this topic.

This study draws on a set of theoretical perspectives that help make sense of ethical leadership in a police context. I have relied on the work of Öblom (2020) and Demmke (2020, 2024), whose research provides important insights into how ethics and leadership interact in hierarchical public organizations. Their ideas on moral courage, silence and the ethical responsibilities of leaders form a central part of this thesis. In addition, I have found support in the OECD's (2020) work on public integrity and Edmondson's (1999, 2019) theory of psychological safety. These perspectives help to understand how organizational conditions and culture influence ethical behaviour. Finally, GRECO's (2023) assessments bring in a broader European policy perspective, highlighting the importance of structural support and anti-corruption frameworks within law enforcement.

More specifically, the purpose is to examine how officers within the Ostrobothnia Police Department experience ethical leadership, while also identifying practical tools and organizational needs related to ethical decision-making. The study further seeks to understand how structural and cultural conditions shape the practice of ethical leadership in everyday policing.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

Question 1. How is ethical leadership understood and applied within the officers in Ostrobothnia Police Department?

This question explores how respondents interpret ethical leadership and how ethical principles are reflected in their daily policing and supervisory responsibilities.

Question 2. What challenges and needs do officers encounter in relation to ethical leadership in their everyday work?

This question seeks to identify common obstacles and sources of pressure in ethically demanding situations, as well as the kinds of support officers feel are needed.

Question 3. What forms of support and development are seen as necessary to strengthen ethical leadership among officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department?

The third question focuses on practical suggestions from respondents for how ethical leadership could be improved—for instance, through ethics training, peer dialogue, or organizational reforms.

1.2 Limitations

This research is situated within a specific organizational and geographical context, focusing on ethics and ethical leadership in the Ostrobothnia Police Department in Finland. It is limited to officers in supervisory roles within this department. While this narrow focus may reduce the generalizability of the findings to other regions or units,

the depth of inquiry allows for valuable insights into how ethical leadership functions in practice. With appropriate consideration of contextual differences, these insights may also offer useful perspectives for other police departments in Finland—and perhaps even for other hierarchical public organizations.

The study concentrates on leadership-level experiences and does not include perspectives from non-commissioned officers or civilian personnel. As a result, the viewpoints of subordinates regarding ethical leadership are outside the scope of this research. The emphasis remains on how leaders perceive and apply ethical principles in their work.

Thematically, the study centres on leadership behaviours, values, and norms related to ethics. It gives particular attention to concepts such as psychological safety, moral courage, the culture of silence, and the organizational conditions that affect ethical decision-making. The research does not examine individual cases, legal investigations, or specific incidents of misconduct.

Methodologically, the study is primarily qualitative in nature, supported by quantitative elements. Data were collected through a questionnaire that included both closed questions and open-ended responses. The aim is descriptive and exploratory: to identify patterns, perceptions, and paradoxes rather than to establish causal links.

The focus is placed on internal dimensions of leadership and organizational culture, rather than on external influences such as media narratives or political discourse. While ethical guidelines and codes are addressed, they are not treated as legal texts but rather as indicators of the prevailing ethical climate and leadership culture. The purpose is to draw attention to the lived experiences, concerns, and needs that may inform future research and contribute to the ongoing development of ethical leadership within the Finnish police system.

2 Ethical Leadership and Organizational Performance

This chapter examines core theoretical perspectives on ethical leadership, with a particular emphasis on public administration and policing. Ethical leadership is discussed in relation to values, principles, and behaviours that shape both individual leadership practices and broader organizational functioning.

2.1 Definitions and Dimensions of Ethical Leadership

One of the most widely used definitions of ethical leadership is offered by Brown, Treviño & Harrison (2005), who describe it as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making” (p. 120). This definition has become a foundation for many subsequent studies and has also led to the development of the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS), designed by Brown and Treviño (2006) to measure how ethical leadership is perceived in organizational contexts. While this framework has gained widespread acceptance, it is not without criticism. Fischer, Banks, Gooty & Stock (2021, pp. 3–5) argue that the concept of ethical leadership often lacks clarity and may be too broadly defined to be analytically useful. According to them, the field tends to portray ethical leadership in overly idealized terms and overlooks contextual complexity. They call for a more critical and refined approach that better distinguishes ethical leadership from overlapping constructs such as authentic or servant leadership. Including these critical voices allows for a more balanced understanding of both the strengths and the limitations of the current research field.

Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009, p. 1276) describe ethical leadership as a style where leaders promote fairness, honesty, and care. Ethical leaders set the tone for open, respectful cultures. In police work, this requires going beyond legal compliance and fostering a workplace rooted in human rights and justice.

Thapa (2019, pp. 2) identifies three key dimensions of ethical decision-making: obedience, care, and reason. He also references Ferrell et al. (2011, as cited in Thapa, p. 233), who emphasize the interaction between individual values, organizational culture, and opportunity.

Drawing on Goleman's leadership theory, Thapa (2019, p.244) suggests that visionary, affiliative, and coaching styles tend to promote ethical work climates, while authoritarian approaches can hinder ethical growth. This highlights the connection between leadership style and moral culture.

The GLOBE study describes ethical leadership as the capacity to motivate and empower others toward collective success (Larsson, Lundin & Zander, 2021 p.10). Similarly, Yukl (2002, as cited in Larsson et al., 2021) frames leadership as a collaborative process built on consensus and facilitation, stressing that ethical leadership is not an isolated trait, but a relational practice.

Coaching-based leadership is one perspective that aligns closely with ethical principles. According to Ristikangas & Ristikangas (2010, p. 22), coaching emphasizes individualized support, goal setting, and uncovering latent strengths. While coaching in police work must account for hierarchical realities, the principles of trust and mutual respect can help create conditions for ethical engagement.

The GLOBE study defines ethical leadership as the ability to influence, motivate and to enable others to contribute to organizational success (Larsson, Lundin & Zander, 2021, p.10). Yukl (2002, as cited in Larsson et al., 2021) also emphasizes leadership as a process of consensus-building and facilitation. These views underline that ethical leadership is not merely an individual trait, but also a collective and relational process.

In this study, respondents themselves described ethical leadership as strongly connected to values such as fairness, transparency and role modelling. These perspectives align

closely with Brown and Treviño's (2006) definition of ethical leadership as value-based behaviour communicated through example and ethical clarity. As such, both theoretical and practitioner views emphasise consistency, moral guidance and trust as defining elements.

2.2 Ethics and Morality in Public Sector Leadership

Demmke and Moilanen (2011, pp. 10-13) contend that effective ethical governance goes beyond formal codes; it requires systematic training, ongoing evaluation, and an open environment where value conflicts can be addressed transparently. These aspects become even more relevant in times of organizational change, where pressure for efficiency may sideline ethical reflection.

Leadership ethics, in this view, must be a strategic focus, especially for those in supervisory roles who are expected to act as moral role models. Therefore, ethics should be embedded not only in development strategies but also in everyday practices (Demmke & Moilanen, 2011, pp. 20-23).

As public sector institutions evolve toward more performance-oriented structures, ethical complexity increases. Snellman (2015, p. 337) notes that such reforms introduce new challenges, including value clashes, integrity dilemmas, and misuse of power. In this environment, ethics management becomes both a support system for moral reasoning and a mechanism for safeguarding legitimacy (Snellman, 2015, p. 339).

2.3 Institutional Integrity and the Role of Leadership

According to the OECD (2020, pp. 11-24), public integrity is a foundational element for societal development. An effective integrity system depends on both political and administrative commitment, clear responsibility structures, risk-based strategies, and a pervasive ethical culture.

Public sector leaders are expected to model ethical behaviour by prioritizing public interest, acting with integrity, and actively working to prevent conflicts of interest (OECD, 2020, pp. 11-13). Ikola-Norrbacka (2010, pp.45-46) highlights that ethical leadership is defined by alignment with core values such as accountability, justice, and transparency, qualities that are especially crucial in hierarchical systems like policing.

Snellman (2015, pp. 337-339) further emphasizes the importance of internalizing ethical values through open dialogue and ongoing reinforcement. Without active leadership engagement, ethical codes risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Ethical leadership requires clear ethical guidelines and active dialogue within the organization to ensure that ethical values are internalized rather than remaining superficial.

2.4 Ethical Leadership in Police Authority

Findings from the 2022 Police Barometer suggest that nearly 40% of Finnish citizens suspect that unethical behaviour may occur within the police (Ministry of the Interior, 2023, p. 43). This underscores the importance of ethical leadership as a driver of public trust. At the same time, international assessments such as those conducted by GRECO have noted that Finland has historically enjoyed high levels of public trust in the police authority.

These two findings may seem to point in different directions. On the one hand, international assessments like those from GRECO show that Finland has historically had high levels of trust in the police. On the other hand, national survey data reveal that around 40% of citizens believe that unethical behaviour might occur. This isn't necessarily a contradiction. People can trust the police as an institution while still being aware that problems may happen in individual cases. It shows that trust and concern can exist at the same time and that strong ethical leadership is needed to make sure that public confidence stays justified.

My research explores how officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department understand and apply ethical leadership, as well as the systems in place to support ethical behaviour. Kasslin-Pottier (2009, pp. 45–47) argues that sustainable leadership must be grounded in a values-based framework that becomes part of everyday organizational life. Ethics, in this context, must be practiced, not just declared.

The OECD (2020, pp. 15–18) defines ethics as “the consistent alignment with and adherence to shared values and norms to prioritize public interest over private gain.” Ethical leaders, therefore, serve not just as administrators but as role models. Öblom (2020, pp. 30-35) supports this view, suggesting that ethical leadership involves guiding others while exemplifying moral responsibility through one’s actions.

2.5 Value Conflicts and Leadership Ethics

Recent studies by the Finnish Ministry of Finance have examined how civil servants perceive ethical values and face value conflicts in their work. Moilanen (2017, pp. 15–17) found that while values such as impartiality, legality and openness are highly regarded. Their practical application is often context-dependent and can lead to tensions. A more recent survey by Haverinen and Ilpala (2025, pp. 22–24) confirms that ethical challenges remain common in the public sector, especially when values collide or when operational pressures undermine ethical reflection. These findings highlight that value conflicts are not always the result of individual failure but may stem from systemic ambiguity or institutional priorities that are hard to reconcile in practice.

Public sector values tend to be both enduring and adaptable. Viinanmäki (2008, pp. 3–5) identifies legality, objectivity, fairness, and transparency as the core principles anchoring ethical leadership in public administration. He outlines three styles of value-based leadership: strong (systematic and consistent), fluid (ad hoc and reactive), and weak (inconsistent or lacking altogether). Leaders in public institutions often face value-based tensions, such as balancing efficiency with justice or navigating individual versus collective priorities (2008, pp. 84-104).

Ethical leadership involves ongoing reflection on what is morally right, meaningful, and valuable. Sirviö (2011, pp. 10-11) links leadership ethics to classical philosophical traditions, including Kantian duty ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics—emphasizing traits like justice, courage, and wisdom. These foundations are vital for trust-building and ethical consistency in leadership.

2.6 Organizational Culture and Ethical Climate

The surrounding culture of an organization plays a key role in shaping how ethical leadership functions. Öblom (2020, pp. 10-16, 54-57, 60-70) points out that factors such as peer influence, resource limitations and occupational stress can complicate ethical decision-making. At the same time, support mechanisms like reflective tools, structured decision models and emotional analysis may help reinforce awareness and moral clarity.

Demmke (2020, pp. 7–9) observes that contemporary ethics policies frequently place excessive emphasis on individual responsibility. Thereby neglecting institutional shortcomings. This observation is particularly pertinent within police authorities, where the line between personal accountability and structural responsibility for upholding ethical standards is often indistinct.

Victor & Cullen (1988, pp. 101-102) describe ethical climate refers to the shared understanding of what constitutes ethical behaviour and how ethical issues are managed within an organization. When fairness, transparency and accountability define the ethical climate. It becomes easier to prevent misconduct and build trust.

Wheelan (2017, pp. 67–68) asserts that successful teams establish norms that promote performance, quality and shared responsibility. Such norms provide not only behavioural guidelines but also psychological safety and group identity. In police organizations, these norms can support ethical behaviour by setting clear expectations and reinforcing a shared sense of purpose and accountability within teams.

Psychological safety, a shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks, is another key factor. Aakko (2024, pp.69-71) shows that psychological safety promotes open communication and ethical behaviour in police teams. Strengthening this aspect of organizational culture supports ethical norms and trust.

Group structure plays a critical role in shaping ethical climate. According to Kaufmann & Kaufmann (2005, pp. 296–297), group structure refers to the relatively stable patterns and expectations among members, including roles, norms, power dynamics and communication networks. These structural characteristics create predictability in behaviour. This can either support or hinder ethical leadership. Both formal and informal norms guide behaviour, especially in situations of ethical uncertainty serve as behavioural guidelines that reduce uncertainty and define what is acceptable within a group (Kaufmann & Kaufmann, 2005, pp. 299–300). In hierarchical organizations such as the police authority, these norms may contribute to either silence or courage when facing ethical dilemmas.

Furthermore, Amundsen & Pinto (2009, pp. 336-337) argue that the public sector is constantly navigating a tension between legal compliance and public expectations for fairness, responsibility and transparency. They emphasize that ethics in public service must be understood both from the perspective of individual moral reasoning and the institutional frameworks that shape behaviour. Ethical leadership, in their view, encompasses integrity as a spirit of service and the consistent application of values in practice.

According to Wheelan (2017, pp. 26–27), organizational cultures that encourage high performance can improve team effectiveness. She outlines principles such as defining clear organizational goals, encouraging innovation and valuing teamwork over individual achievements. In law enforcement, a similar approach may help establish an ethical

climate by fostering clear expectations, encouraging innovation in policing strategies, and rewarding team collaboration. Particularly in complex ethical decision-making.

Trust serves as a cornerstone of a values-driven culture, enabling open dialogue and collective responsibility. Ristikangas & Ristikangas (2010, pp. 164–185) argue that trust develops through open interaction and shared expectations of goodwill, stability and mutual benefit. They introduce the concept of "communicative trust" as a key element that enables ethical dialogue and reduces harmful silence within organizations. In environments where trust is lacking, communication becomes distorted. Energy is spent interpreting others' intentions rather than solving problems. Especially in hierarchical settings like police authority, building this form of trust requires active engagement and responsibility for transparent communication from all members of the organization.

2.7 Ethical Leadership in Practice

Thylefors (2015, pp. 55-58) highlights the ethical complexity of leadership in human service organizations. Where decisions often involve morally charged dilemmas and sensitive interpersonal dynamics. Leading ethically, in this setting, demands the courage to act on principle—even when such decisions are unpopular.

Osifo (2018, pp. 122-124) draws attention to the risks posed by informal power structures, such as "old-boy networks," which may compromise transparency and weaken accountability. Addressing these dynamics is essential for maintaining ethical integrity and public trust.

Brown (2019, pp. 30-31) argues that in organizations marked by systemic discrimination or fear-based leadership, meaningful engagement cannot take root without cultural transformation. Ethical leadership, therefore, must begin with deeper cultural reform rather than relying solely on formal policy.

In sum, ethical leadership is not a separate function within an organization; it is a central driver of long-term trust, legitimacy, and success. Within the police authority, leadership shapes the ethical climate by ensuring that value-driven decisions are not optional but expected at every level.

3 Practical Perspectives on Ethical Leadership in the Ostrobothnia Police Department

While the previous chapter outlined theoretical foundations of ethical leadership, this chapter turns to practical perspectives within the context of Ostrobothnia Police Department in Finland. Drawing on empirical material from a survey conducted among officers as well as applied literature, this chapter explores how ethical leadership is experienced, practiced and challenged in daily police work.

This discussion highlights specific tools that support ethical leadership. Also the critical role of officers as role models and the importance of psychological safety. It also addresses key challenges such as fear, the culture of silence and organizational dilemmas that may hinder ethical behaviour. Lastly the chapter emphasizes the significance of ethical culture and leadership practices in navigating complex ethical decisions in a high-stakes, hierarchical environment. Drawing on empirical material from the survey conducted within the Ostrobothnia Police Department, as well as applied literature, this chapter explores how ethical leadership is experienced. Practiced and challenged in daily police work.

The discussion also highlights specific tools that support ethical leadership, the critical role on officers as ethical role models and the importance of psychological safety. It also addresses key challenges such as fear, the culture of silence and organizational dilemmas that may hinder ethical behaviour. Lastly, this chapter emphasizes the significance of ethical culture and leadership practices in navigation complex ethical decisions in a high-stakes and hierarchical environment.

3.1 Tools for Ethical Leadership

Clear guidelines and consistent value-based work play a crucial role in supporting leadership that aligns with ethical principles. Ongoing ethics training, strong role models,

and a healthy organizational climate all contribute to a working environment where ethical behaviour is expected and reinforced. Survey responses from the Ostrobothnia Police Department, alongside relevant literature, highlight the need for decision-making support and transparent channels for reporting ethical concerns.

Leading ethically depends not only on personal moral conviction but also on the systems that support and reinforce such behaviour. Aakko (2024, pp. 79–80) points out that in healthcare settings. The integration of value-driven frameworks helps ensure that daily decisions reflect core organizational priorities.

Moreover, Aakko (2024, p. 82) stresses the value of practical training programs that motivate leaders to act as role models. Activities like workshops, ethical dilemma discussions and scenario-based exercises can build emotional resilience and strengthen decision-making capacity in ethically challenging situations. Given the similar pressures and structures faced by officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department, such approaches would likely be just as effective in law enforcement settings.

3.2 The Role of Police Officers as Ethical Role Models

Police officers play a crucial role in setting the ethical tone within police organizations. Their conduct directly affects the work climate, internal trust and employees' sense of psychological safety. Sirviö (2011, p. 25) points out that ethical leaders act as role models by clearly demonstrating values that are both important and expected within the organization. Credibility increases when leaders' actions align with their stated values (Sirviö, 2011, p. 27).

In hierarchical organizations such as the police authority, leadership style can either enable or inhibit open communication. O'Donovan and McAuliffe (2020, p. 241) highlight that supervisors who consistently model ethical values and create space for dialogue promote a psychologically safe environment. Brown and Treviño (2006, p. 597) also stress that leaders who openly address mistakes help creating an environment for

learning and ethical growth. This is particularly relevant in the police force, where mistakes can have serious consequences.

Responses from the survey conducted for my study among officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department indicate that 92.6% of participants agreed that ethical leadership is an important part of police work. However, nearly half (48.2%) reported that they rarely or never encounter ethical challenges in their daily tasks. Despite this, 46.2% of supervisors stated that they have observed unethical behaviour within the organization in the past two years. These results may reflect a gap between ethical ideals and daily practices in policework.

The OECD Public Integrity Handbook (2020, pp. 93–95) encourages all levels of the organization to foster a culture of openness, transparency and accountability. Survey results conducted for my study showed that 44.5% of the officers at the Ostrobothnia Police Department consider the ethical atmosphere to be good, while 37% were neutral and 3.7% described it as poor.

Sydänmaanlakka (2012, pp. 117–120) identifies four key leadership styles in his concept of intelligent leadership: directing, coaching, participating and delegating. In the context of the police authority, ethical leadership involves adapting these styles based on employee needs and situational demands. Coaching and participative leadership promote openness and reflection, while directive and delegative styles may be more appropriate in urgent or high-stakes decisions.

Ristikangas & Ristikangas (2010, p. 22) describe professional coaching as a close, mutual relationship designed to help unlock the coacher's potential. While this approach offers valuable insights for leadership, it does not directly transfer to supervisory practice within hierarchical organizations such as the police authority. The leader is not an external, neutral party but a full member of the group. This affects the dynamics of the relationship. Even so, coaching principles play a significant role in shaping developmental leadership, especially in recognizing and supporting both individual and team growth.

Kasslin-Pottier (2009, p. 133) warns that managers may develop an idealized self-image that overestimates their ethical competence. This underscores the need for continuous self-reflection and receptiveness to feedback. The OECD (2020, pp. 93–95) emphasizes the role of leaders in encouraging open discussions of ethics and in promoting accountability.

Organizational culture evolves through collective actions. Leaders and officers share responsibility for cultivating a uniform, value-based leadership culture that strengthens ethical awareness and sustainability across the organization. Osifo (2018, pp. 122–124) warns that informal power structures such as "old-boy networks" can erode transparency and compromise ethical legitimacy. In police organizations, this risk is especially pronounced as officers' behaviour strongly influence how ethical norms are understood and enacted in daily work.

Psychological safety, defined by Edmondson (1999, p. 354) as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking is essential in high-responsibility environments such as the police organization. Research shows that these environments promote responsibility, innovation and ethical behaviour (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 39). In the police, this means fostering a culture where employees can raise ethical concerns without fear of retaliation.

Responses from the survey conducted for my study shows that 68% of officers felt they had received support when managing ethical dilemmas in leadership roles. Nevertheless, 19% expressed a need for clearer guidelines and additional training. The data also showed that 65.4% of officers turn to colleagues for input when facing ethical challenges, highlighting the value of collaboration and mutual reflection. Managerial self-awareness is another key aspect of ethical leadership. Kasslin-Pottier (2009, p. 133) notes that leaders often perceive their actions through the lens of their own values. This may result in blind spots situations where ethical shortcomings go unnoticed due to self-

justification or biased reasoning. This concept is further developed by Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011, p. 51), who describe blind spots as unconscious biases that cause individuals to act unethically without being aware of it. Continuous ethical self-development and openness to critical feedback are thus essential. Edmondson (2019, p. 17) adds that psychological safety develops when leaders acknowledge mistakes, foster open communication and lead by example.

In addition, leaders have a legal and ethical responsibility to address in misconduct, including bullying and harmful work environments (Kasslin-Pottier, 2009, pp. 52–53). Timely and consistent action sends a clear message that unethical behaviour is unacceptable and plays a key role in protecting employee well-being.

An increasingly discussed issue in the public sector is "ethical strain"—the tension professionals experience when they must balance ethical ideals against limited resources (Kasslin-Pottier, 2009, p. 74). In police organizations, where ethical dilemmas are frequent, it is essential that leaders have access to the resources, structures, and training needed to manage such pressures.

Today's expectations for leadership go beyond technical expertise. Kasslin-Pottier (2009, p. 117) emphasizes that leaders should also demonstrate ethical maturity and personal integrity. This is particularly true for the police organization, where leadership directly impacts institutional credibility and public trust.

3.3 Courage, Fear and Culture of Silence

Courage is a core element of ethical leadership. Especially within hierarchical institutions like the police. Fear of sanctions, career consequences or losing the trust of colleagues can discourage individuals from addressing unethical behaviour. Berlin & Isberg (2023, p. 10) note that such fear reflects a lack of psychological safety, which is a critical foundation for a healthy ethical culture.

Öblom (2020, pp. 18-25) emphasizes that ethical leadership demands moral courage, which is shaped by both personal characteristics and organizational support. Brown

(2019, pp. 22–23) notes that the growing need for courageous leadership in today's rapidly changing world. In interviews with experienced leaders, a common answer to what leadership requires today was: "We need braver leaders and braver cultures." Brown (2019, p. 23) also notes that many leaders struggle to define the specific abilities behind courageous leadership. Although some initially viewed courage as a personality trait. Most ultimately acknowledged that courage consists of concrete behaviours. She found that although few leaders could clearly define what fosters courage, many could identify behaviours and cultures that undermine it. It can be things like fear-based management and lack of trust.

The Finnish Police Code of Ethics has recently been updated to include courage as one of its guiding values. Courage is defined as acting professionally even in challenging situations, taking responsibility and being willing to learn from mistakes. Survey responses from the Ostrobothnia Police Department indicate a desire for stronger, more courageous leadership and decision-making.

According to Brown (2019, pp. 26–31), courageous leadership is built on four key capacities:

1. Embracing vulnerability rather than avoiding it
2. Living in alignment with one's values
3. Promoting trust through a culture of openness
4. Standing up for what is right, even under pressure

Brown underscores that courage is not inborn, but rather something developed through practice. She argues that many leaders avoid confronting the human side of courage because it is emotionally demanding. True courage requires acknowledging fears, insecurities and vulnerabilities. These are aspects leaders often shy away from. In line with this, Öblom (2020, p. 73) stresses that ethical leadership must be made tangible and actionable. Leaders should not only talk about ethics but embody them through consistent, value-driven actions. For example, incorporating leadership profiles with ethical performance indicators into evaluations can be a concrete step toward embedding ethical courage institutionally.

Moral courage also includes confronting unethical practices, defending ethical principles and resisting undue pressure. Kidder (2005, pp. 9–10) defines moral courage as "the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face ethical challenges with firmness and self-confidence." In police work this includes calling out misconduct, supporting whistleblowers and upholding public trust under difficult circumstances.

The OECD (2020, pp. 22–24) recommends that leaders demonstrate ethical courage by standing up to corruption and protecting employees who report misconduct. Hierarchies, while often necessary for order and clarity, can suppress open dialogue when authority is overemphasized. Edmondson (2019, p. 15) warns that in cultures that overly value authority, psychological safety can be undermined and making it difficult for subordinates to express dissenting views.

To address these issues, leaders can:

- Acknowledge their own mistakes and model vulnerability
- Actively seek input and feedback from team members
- Create safe spaces for open, judgment-free dialogue

Survey data from the Ostrobothnia Police Department reinforces the importance of these actions. While 68% of respondents felt supported in making ethical decisions, 19% still expressed a need for clearer guidance and more training. Notably, 65.4% of officers reported that they consult colleagues when facing ethical dilemmas, highlighting the importance of collective reflection.

Psychological safety is not just about interpersonal comfort—it also enables ethical behaviour. Edmondson (2019, p. 17) asserts that it arises when employees feel safe to take interpersonal risks and are not punished for honest mistakes. Within the police organization, where high-stakes decisions are common, this safety is essential for transparency and growth. However, 65.2% of officers in the survey noted that a lack of managerial willingness to address unethical actions remains one of the biggest barriers to resolving ethical challenges. In this context, the leader's role as an ethical role model becomes even more critical. Sirviö (2011, pp. 25, 27) argues that a leader's credibility

depends on the consistency between expressed values and observable actions. When leadership behaviour diverges from ethical principles, the organization's moral legitimacy is at risk. This dynamic is especially significant within the police authority. Where leadership behaviour directly shapes how ethical norms are understood and applied.

3.4 Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is key to how ethical leadership is expressed and sustained. Kasslin-Pottier (2009, pp. 130–131) defines organizational culture as the result of shared learning and historical experience, including both visible elements, such as structures and values and hidden assumptions, beliefs and emotions. These deeper cultural layers often govern behaviour and decision-making more strongly than formal policies.

One reason changes initiatives often fail is that they do not sufficiently address these underlying cultural elements (Kasslin-Pottier, 2009, p. 131). Ethical transformation demands that values extend beyond policy documents to shape informal norms and everyday interactions. This view is supported by the OECD (2020, pp. 93–95), which stresses that leaders must promote openness, inclusion and a clear ethical foundation throughout the organization.

According to Edmondson (2019, p. 17), psychological safety is built on respectful communication, appreciation of diversity and a non-punitive approach to mistakes. Key practices include:

- Actively listening to employee concerns and opinions
- Welcoming feedback and critical questions
- Providing constructive responses without fear of punishment

Newman et al. (2017, p. 525) link inclusive leadership to greater psychological safety. In contrast, authoritarian or inconsistent leadership can erode team trust and openness. In

police organizations, where the actions of supervisors significantly shape workplace norms, these dynamics are particularly impactful.

Effective communication is essential for cultivating a strong ethical culture. The OECD (2020, pp. 22–24) underscores the need for mechanisms that support open dialogue, protect whistleblowers and provide clear avenues for reporting ethical concerns.

Öblom (2020, pp. 10–16) argues that ethics should not remain rhetorical but must be visible in daily practices. Ethical awareness means recognizing dilemmas and assessing possible responses. Within police organizations, where decisions are often made under pressure, ethical competence must be practiced and reinforced consistently.

Research has shown that ethical leadership directly influences both organizational climate and performance. Thapa (2019, p. 2) asserts that ethical leadership builds trust, fosters a positive work environment, and enhances organizational effectiveness. He further outlines three core ethical dimensions in decision-making: the ethics of obedience, care and reason (Thapa, 2019, p. 17).

Thapa (2019) also references Ferrell et al. (2011, as cited in Thapa, 2019, pp. 20–23), who emphasize that ethical choices are shaped by personal values, organizational culture, and available opportunities. Goleman's six leadership styles, as presented by Thapa (2019, p. 24), illustrate how visionary, affiliative and coaching approaches tend to support ethical norms. While authoritarian styles may hinder them. Viewed this way, ethical leadership is closely linked to organizational performance and long-term sustainability.

In a comprehensive literature review, Kayas (2023, pp. 5–6) concludes that overly rigid control structures can damage employee trust, reduce commitment and limit ethical initiative. these findings highlight the need to balance ethical leadership with psychological safety and strong managerial support.

In summary, ethical leadership must be consciously practiced at all levels of the organization. Within the police authority, where decision-making often occurs under intense pressure a strong ethical compass. A supportive organizational culture are essential for ensuring just and responsible leadership.

3.5 Ethical dilemmas in Police Leadership

Police officers and supervisors often face ethical dilemmas that require balancing formal rules with context-sensitive judgment. External influences, such as media scrutiny or political pressure, can further complicate these situations (Öblom, 2020, pp. 45–50).

A prominent theme in the survey at the Ostrobothnia Police Department was a perceived lack of fairness within the organization. Several managers reported difficulties related to the fair allocation of workloads and salary setting, both of which have the potential to erode employee morale and trust. Such issues have a direct effect on psychological safety and the ethical climate of the workplace.

The OECD (2020, pp. 94–95) underscores the importance of addressing inequality and ensuring procedural fairness to maintain a healthy ethical environment. When employees perceive unfairness or bias, they are less likely to engage in ethical discussions or report problematic behaviour. In contrast, transparency and equitable treatment promote a culture where ethical reflection is possible.

Survey responses highlighted several situations where officers had to navigate competing values. Such as loyalty to colleagues versus accountability or strict legal compliance versus flexible problem-solving. These examples show that ethical leadership goes beyond abstract principles—it requires sound judgment in complex, often high-pressure situations.

The dilemmas identified in the survey also point to a need for clearer structures to support ethical decision-making. Respondents noted a lack of structured forums for discussing ethical issues, as well as limited guidance when dealing with novel or unclear

situations. This highlights a gap between policy-level expectations and operational realities.

Organizational support, such as ethics training, peer dialogue and reflective leadership is essential. As Öblom (2020, pp. 54–57) notes, ethical leadership in practice is shaped by both organizational pressures and personal integrity.

In conclusion, ethical dilemmas in policing are inevitable due to the complex and often unpredictable nature of the work. However, with the right support systems, training and leadership culture, police supervisors can navigate these challenges in a way that upholds both professional standards and public trust.

4 Ethics and Leadership in Police Education in Finland

As part of my research on ethical leadership in the Ostrobothnia Police Department, I conducted a survey to examine how ethical principles are applied in day-to-day leadership. To better understand the norms and values shaping police leadership, it is useful to provide an overview of how ethics is integrated into Finnish police training.

This chapter examines the ethical content in the Finnish police education system at different levels: the basic police training program, the in-service supervisory training courses, the Bachelor of Police Service program and the Master of Police Service program. Analysing all stages offers insight into the ethical expectations placed on police personnel from early training to advanced leadership roles.

This section provides theoretical and contextual grounding for interpreting the survey responses. This overview is essential for understanding the expectations placed upon police officers during their education and how those expectations relate to the ethical challenges and leadership experiences described by respondents in the survey.

The curricula clearly show that ethics and ethical leadership are recurring themes across all levels of Finnish police education.

In the basic police education program, ethics is recognized as a core competency that each police cadet is expected to develop. Students are expected to act in accordance with police values, take responsibility for their actions, and promote justice, equality and respect in all situations (Poliisiammattikorkeakoulu, 2024c, pp. 7–8). Ethical considerations are woven throughout the curriculum, with teaching guidelines emphasizing responsibility and value-driven conduct in all modules.

Ethics and leadership are further emphasized in the specialist training for students at the bachelor's level. In the course *Poliisitoiminnan hallinto ja johtaminen*. Students learn to apply ethical leadership principles in practical managerial roles. The course focuses on

decision-making, responsibility and leadership in both routine and high-pressure situations (Poliisiammattikorkeakoulu, 2024b, p. 11).

At the master's level, ethical leadership is examined in greater depth. In the course *Toiminnan ja käyttäytymistapojen kehittäminen sekä johtamisen etiikka*, participants are expected to build a personal foundation for ethical leadership. Also to strengthen their capacity for ethical reflection and understand how leadership ethics affect the broader organization. (Poliisiammattikorkeakoulu, 2024a, p. 14).

These educational efforts show that ethics is not just an aspirational value, but a defined learning objective throughout Finnish police education. The aim is to ensure that police personnel, from new recruits to senior officers, develop both professional competence and a strong ethical compass.

The police website provides detailed information on the Police Code of Ethics. Ethics forms a cornerstone of police leadership and is essential for upholding the rule of law, public trust, and effective governance. The Code of Ethics provides a fundamental value framework for police leadership. Organizational guidelines on gender equality, equal treatment, and anti-corruption are also provided (poliisi.fi).

This research chapter complements the survey findings by examining how ethical principles are introduced and reinforced throughout police education. To deepen the understanding of the norms and values that shape leadership in policing, it is relevant to include an overview of how ethics is embedded in Finnish police training.

4.1 The Finnish Police Code of Ethics

The Police Code of Ethics puts the core values of the Finnish state into practice. It guides police officers in both every day and complex decision-making scenarios (Polisen, n.a.; Prime Minister's Office, 2020). The code is based on eight principles: legality, justice,

transparency, exemplary conduct, impartiality, community, value-based leadership and responsible use of resources (Polisen, n.a.).

Ethical leadership means not only following these principles but embodying them in daily work. As Deputy Police Chief Heidi Nuoritalo states, the code does not offer ready-made answers but helps officers understand their rights and responsibilities and apply police values in practice. The Code of Ethics complements the Police Code of Conduct by reinforcing leadership's duty to promote ethical culture across all levels of the organization (poliisi.fi).

4.2 The Role of Ethics in Police Education in Finland

Ethics is integrated as a horizontal theme throughout the basic police education in Finland (Polisen, n.a.-a). Rather than being treated as a separate or optional topic, ethical reflection is incorporated into various aspects of training. It is all from legal instruction and operational tactics to communication and leadership development. This broad integration reflects the recognition that police officers frequently encounter morally complex situations where legal guidelines alone are not sufficient. Ethical competence is essential in moments where police must choose between conflicting values, or when they face dilemmas involving discretion, loyalty or public visibility.

To support this, the Police University College in Tampere emphasizes both normative understanding and applied ethical reasoning from the early stages of education. Case-based learning, scenario exercises and discussions around real-life dilemmas are used to help police cadets internalize ethical principles. It also develops their own reasoning processes.

However, academic research has raised important questions about the actual effectiveness of ethics training. Scholars such as Treviño, Weaver, and Brown (2006) and Demmke (2020) note that training and ethical codes often have limited impact unless supported by strong leadership, structural reinforcement and an organisational culture that values integrity. In fact, training tends to be most effective for those who already

believe in its purpose. Its influence on sceptical or resistant individuals remains contested.

Despite this, ethics education remains a vital foundation. It creates a shared language for moral reflection and introduces key expectations for professional conduct. The ethical oath that all the Finnish police take at the beginning of their careers reinforces this by committing them to uphold the law, respect human rights and act in ways that sustain public trust—both on and off duty (poliisi.fi). Yet, as the rest of this study shows, the translation from ethical ideals to leadership practice requires more than curriculum design. It also demands ethical role models, feedback systems and institutional accountability in daily operations.

4.3 The Police's Core Values

The core values of the Finnish police; justice, courage and reliability, serve as more than symbolic ideals. They are intended to act as guiding principles for both individual behaviour and leadership practice throughout the organisation (Polisen, n.a.-b). Justice in this context refers to impartiality and transparency in all police actions, especially when engaging with citizens and applying authority. It requires that decisions be based on law and fairness, not on personal preference or external pressure.

Courage is understood not only as physical bravery or operational readiness but also as moral strength. It includes the willingness to raise concerns, admit mistakes and confront unethical behaviour. Even when doing so involves risk or discomfort. This value is particularly central to leadership. Police officers are expected to model ethical courage in their decision-making and interpersonal conduct. The police officers must be seen as consistent and dependable in their actions. This means acting in accordance with laws and ethical norms.

However, as research has shown, the presence of formal values alone does not guarantee ethical behaviour (Huberts, 2014, pp. 108-112). Their practical impact

depends on whether they are internalised and reinforced through leadership, feedback and daily interaction. Ethical leadership, therefore, plays a central role in ensuring that core values are not merely stated but lived.

4.4 Equality and Equal Treatment

Equal treatment and non-discrimination are central in the ethical framework of the Finnish police organization. The police organisation explicitly prohibits all forms of discrimination and harassment. It is including those based on gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. These commitments are not only formalised in internal policy but are also supported by practical mechanisms for addressing reported incidents. Clear procedures exist for investigation and follow-up. The handling of complaints is intended to be transparent and fair.

Tasks and responsibilities are assigned based on competence and role-related requirements, not on demographic characteristics. This approach supports both meritocracy and inclusiveness. Professional development opportunities are encouraged equally for all employees and specific attention is given to career progression among underrepresented groups. According to the Police Equality and Equal Treatment Plan 2024–2026, efforts are also made to ensure that leadership development, recruitment and supervisory training reflect these values (Polisen, n.a.-c).

A national working group has been tasked with monitoring implementation and proposing improvements. However, achieving genuine equality requires more than formal plans. As academic literature on organisational justice suggests, perceptions of fairness are closely tied to how policies are enacted in daily practice. Ethical leadership is crucial in this regard. Supervisors must actively promote inclusion, respond to concerns and model respectful conduct. The existence of formal structures is only meaningful when supported by consistent action and a workplace climate that encourages openness, dialogue and mutual respect.

4.5 Anti-Corruption and Ethical Responsibility

The Finnish police organizations anti-corruption policy covers both financial and ethical misconduct. Economic corruption includes bribery, fraud and misuse of public funds, while ethical corruption may involve favouritism, clientelism or nepotism without monetary exchange. The organisation maintains a formal zero-tolerance stance. It is reinforced by regular training, risk assessment mechanisms and secure reporting channels (Polisen, n.a.-d). These systems are designed to ensure that all employees, regardless of rank, can report suspected misconduct without fear of retaliation. Anonymous reporting options and whistleblower protections are also in place to increase trust in the process.

Oversight structures include internal audit units, regular inspections and ethical advisory bodies that monitor compliance and recommend improvements. These elements are intended to promote transparency and accountability. Particularly in areas involving discretionary decision-making and leadership conduct. Continuous improvement of oversight mechanisms is a key part of the Finnish police organizations strategy to uphold ethical integrity.

However, as studies have shown, anti-corruption policies are not effective by default. As Demmke (2020, pp. 7–9) argues, policies that focus solely on individual responsibility may overlook the broader systemic and organisational conditions that enable misconduct. Ethical leadership plays a vital role in translating policy into practice. Leaders must model ethical standards, address misconduct consistently and foster a culture where integrity is valued in action, not just in words.

Moreover, as the Ministry of Finance (2001) has highlighted, civil servant ethics are a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. In institutions such as the police, where individuals exercise authority that directly impacts citizens' rights and freedoms, the moral credibility of the organisation is inseparable from the ethical conduct of its

personnel. Therefore, the fight against corruption must be both structural and cultural, combining preventive systems with values-based leadership.

4.6 Ethics in Practice - Connection to Leadership

Drawing on both theoretical perspectives and empirical findings from this study, ethical leadership in policing involves much more than adherence to formal codes. It means navigating legal, professional and public expectations in environments that are often high-pressure and ambiguous. Leaders must be able to respond clearly and consistently while maintaining transparency and a commitment to core ethical principles. This requires not only personal integrity but also institutional support, such as safe feedback channels, supervisory backing and time for reflection.

Survey responses from respondents in my study showed that ethical guidelines, while necessary, are often perceived as abstract or difficult to apply in real-world situations. Many respondents pointed to the importance of visible leadership, peer support and ethical role modelling as key factors in transforming written principles into everyday behaviour. This aligns with research by Fischer et al. (2021), who argue that ethical leadership theories risk becoming overly idealised if they fail to consider the practical, contextual constraints that influence behaviour. Ethical conduct, according to this view, emerges not only from moral conviction but from the presence of supportive structures that allow such conviction to guide decision-making.

When implemented meaningfully, ethical guidelines can strengthen the ethical climate of a police organisation and contribute to long-term trust between the police and the public. But as the findings from this study suggest, their impact depends heavily on how leadership at all levels integrates them into daily routines, discussions and actions. Ultimately, ethics in practice is shaped not just by training or documentation, but by what is prioritised, rewarded and normalised in the organisation's culture.

5 Method

To explore how ethical leadership is practiced and perceived by officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department, I conducted a survey targeting those in leadership roles. The questionnaire included 26 questions focused on ethics in decision-making, training, organizational culture, conflict resolution, and access to support and resources. It combined closed-ended (structured) and open-ended (qualitative) questions, allowing for a mixed-methods approach.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that all responses would be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes. Free-text responses were anonymized. Quotations were selected to avoid identifying individuals, roles or specific situations. My study follows the ethical guidelines of the University of Vaasa and conforms to standard principles for ethical conduct in social science research.

The design of the questionnaire was based on theoretical frameworks related to ethical leadership and public integrity. Key sources of inspiration included Snellman (2015), the OECD (2020), Öblom (2020), and GRECO (2023, pp. 14–15). GRECO's evaluation of Finland highlights that even in countries with low corruption, challenges remain in operationalizing ethical leadership, particularly within the police authority. The survey addressed issues such as:

- How often respondents faced ethically challenging situations
- What norms guided their decision-making (e.g., law, ethical codes, personal values)
- Their perceptions of the ethical climate in the organization
- Whether they had witnessed unethical behaviour and how it was addressed
- Their access to training, reporting mechanisms, and institutional support

The survey also asked whether respondents had ever felt pressured to act against their ethical beliefs. This links to the concepts of moral courage (Wennberg & Norberg, 2007, p. 61) and the expectation that leader's model ethical standards (OECD, 2020, p. 17).

Additional questions focused on desired forms of support, such as mentoring, training, or clearer guidelines. These align with theories of leadership development and capacity-building (Öblom, 2020, pp. 62–64). Combining individual experiences with organizational structures provided a multidimensional basis for understanding how ethical leadership works in practice.

The survey was distributed via email to all 47 officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department. Respondents were given three weeks to participate. Two reminders were sent during this period. This helped increase the response rate. In total, 27 responses were received, yielding a response rate of approximately 57%. This response rate is considered sufficient for gaining representative insights into ethical issues within the organization.

5.1 Research Strategy

The choice of a mixed-methods design was motivated by the complex nature of ethical leadership, which involves both measurable trends and deeper, experience-based insights that benefit from open-ended responses. The combination of theoretical perspectives and empirical survey data provided a broader understanding of how ethical principles are put into practice in everyday leadership.

The research is descriptive and exploratory in nature, focusing on identifying challenges, needs, and areas for improvement. A thorough literature review was conducted prior to the survey to strengthen the credibility of the interpretation and analysis.

5.2 Selection

The target group consisted of officers in formal leadership roles within the Ostrobothnia Police Department. This group was chosen because they are directly involved in applying ethical leadership in their everyday duties. The survey was sent to 47 officers, of whom

27 responded. A 57% response rate is generally seen as sufficient for this kind of research and allows for a reliable analysis.

5.3 Data Collection

The data were collected using a web-based questionnaire with 26 questions. The survey was conducted using Webropol, a secure and accessible platform I became familiar with during my studies at the University of Vaasa.

Webropol was chosen due to its accessibility, data protection compliance, and its frequent use in public administration research. The survey addressed respondents' experiences with ethical leadership, their training needs, views on organizational culture, and approaches to handling ethical dilemmas. Both closed and open-ended questions were included, enabling both quantitative and qualitative insights.

As noted earlier, the survey was open for three weeks. Two reminders were sent during this period. The accompanying email emphasized that participation was voluntary and that all responses would be treated confidentially.

5.4 Analysis method

Structured (quantitative) responses were analysed through descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. This approach offers an overview of how common views or experiences were among respondents.

Open-ended responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The aim was to identify recurring themes, categories and patterns related to ethical leadership, organizational support and barriers to ethical behaviour. The coding was done manually, step by step, to keep the analysis focused and consistent with the study's objectives. Particular attention was paid to validity and reliability throughout the analytical process.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Prior to launching the survey, written approval was obtained from the Ostrobothnia Police Department. Participants were informed via email about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation and the confidentiality of their responses. Participation was considered as giving informed consent.

All data were handled in accordance with data protection regulations and the University of Vaasa's ethical guidelines. This includes respect for individual rights, accuracy in analysis and transparency in the reporting of findings.

Special care was taken to ensure the anonymity of respondents, especially when citing free-text answers. No details that could reveal individuals' positions, workplaces, or specific events have been disclosed. Quotations were chosen only to highlight key themes connected to ethical leadership.

6 Results and Analysis of the Survey

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the survey results from officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department. The survey was distributed via email to all 47 officers in leadership positions and 27 responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 57.4%. The purpose is to examine how ethical leadership is applied in practice, identify key challenges and understand how respondents perceive the ethical climate in their organization.

The analysis draws on both quantitative and qualitative data and is informed by prior research, including OECD (2020), Öblom (2020), Snellman (2015), Brown & Treviño (2006), and Berlin & Isberg (2023). The analysis is grounded in both quantitative and qualitative data and is related to previous research, including OECD (2020), Öblom (2020), Snellman (2015), Brown & Treviño (2006), and Berlin & Isberg (2023).

6.1 Officers' Views on Ethical Leadership

Most respondents held the rank of commissioner and had substantial experience in leadership roles. Over 57% had served for more than ten years, and many were working in criminal investigation, a field marked by complex ethical decisions. This professional background offers important context for understanding how they interpret and respond to ethical challenges in their work.

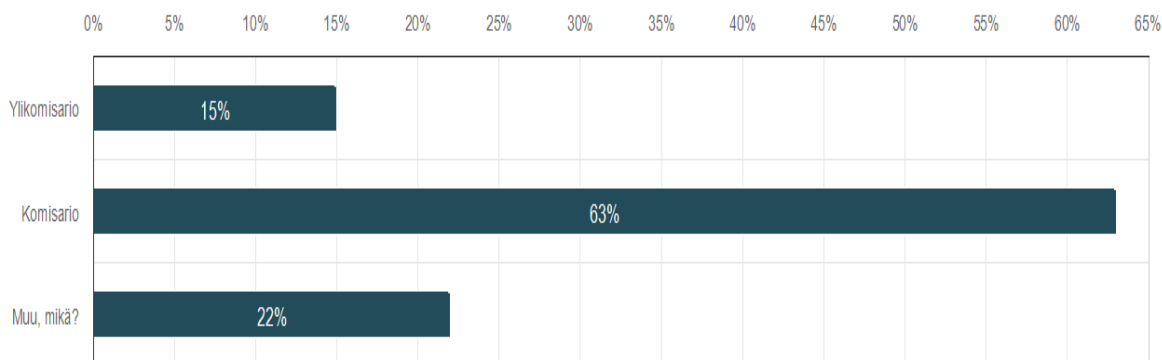


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by position, presented as percentages. Source: Webropol survey.

When asked to reflect on ethical leadership, respondents offered diverse yet converging views. Many described ethical leadership as the ability to lead by example, demonstrate consistency between words and actions and treat employees fairly. Respondents frequently mentioned the importance of transparency, accountability and the willingness to admit mistakes. Several officers emphasised that ethical leadership is closely tied to psychological safety. That subordinates should feel safe to speak openly without fear of retaliation or marginalisation.

These responses align with definitions offered by scholars such as Brown, Treviño & Harrison (2005), who describe ethical leadership as normatively appropriate conduct that is reinforced through two-way communication and ethical decision-making. However, a few responses revealed uncertainty about how ethical principles should be applied in high-pressure operational contexts, particularly when time is limited or information is incomplete. This reflects what Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) describe as "ethical blind spots," where well-intentioned individuals overlook the ethical dimensions of their choices.

Overall, the responses suggest that while police officers value ethical leadership, its realisation in daily practice is shaped by leadership culture, situational demands and organisational support. This was reflected in several open-ended comments. One police

officer wrote, "Esimerkillä johtaminen ja tasapuolinen kohtelu ovat tärkeitä" (Leading by example and treating others fairly are important) [Author's translation]. Another highlighted psychological safety by stating, "Eettinen johtaja luo turvallisen ilmapiirin, jossa voi puhua avoimesti" (An ethical leader creates a safe atmosphere where one can speak openly) [Author's translation]. These comments reinforce the idea that ethical leadership is not only about formal principles but about fostering trust and consistency in everyday interactions.

6.2 Perceived Access to Ethical Support

Survey results showed that 61.5% of respondents had received ethics training. Yet only 7.7% indicated a need for further support. This may suggest either that existing resources are sufficient, or that some officers are hesitant to express uncertainty. Several open-ended responses point to a culture where ethical ambiguity is not openly addressed—a concern also highlighted by the OECD (2020, pp. 23–27), which emphasizes the importance of transparency and supportive learning environments.

GRECO (2023) likewise underlines the need to operationalize ethical leadership through structured training, clear reporting channels and internal support. Similar concerns emerged in this study, with respondents mentioning a lack of managerial follow-through and fear of consequences as key barriers to ethical decision-making.

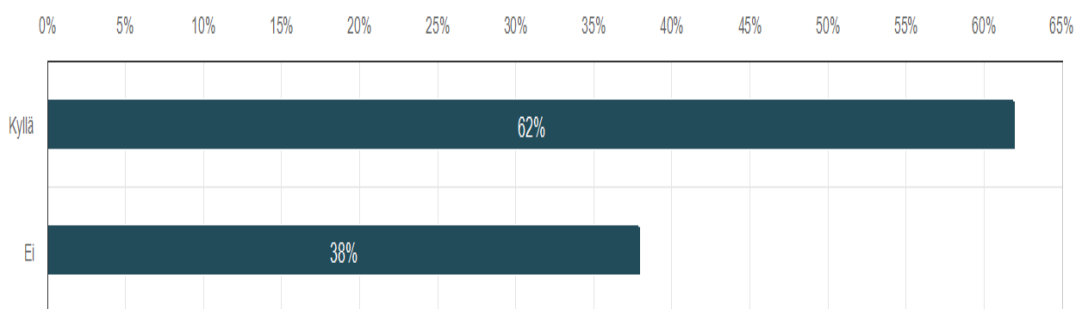


Figure 2. Respondents' participation in ethical training. Source: Webropol survey.

6.3 The Role of Ethics in the Organization

A large majority of respondents (92.6%) viewed ethical leadership as central to police work. Nevertheless, many noted that ethical issues are discussed too rarely and that there are few structured opportunities for reflection. This aligns with Snellman's (2015, p. 345) call for the creation of "ethical learning environments."

One recurring theme in both the survey and national reporting is a culture of silence. Several respondents observed that commanders at times avoid addressing ethical concerns. This pattern also appears in the 2022 Police Barometer, where 40% of Finnish citizens expressed the belief that unethical behaviour is likely within the police (Ministry of the Interior, 2023, p. 41). Additionally, resource constraints and staff shortages were identified as factors that may undermine ethical conduct (pp. 22–23).

Free-text responses in the survey further support this view. Officers described facing ethical pressure in decision-making, especially in situations shaped by time constraints, insufficient managerial support, or conflicting priorities. These internal accounts echo public concerns. When citizen perceptions of unethical practices align with employees lived experiences, it underscores the urgency of strengthening ethical leadership structures and support within the organization.

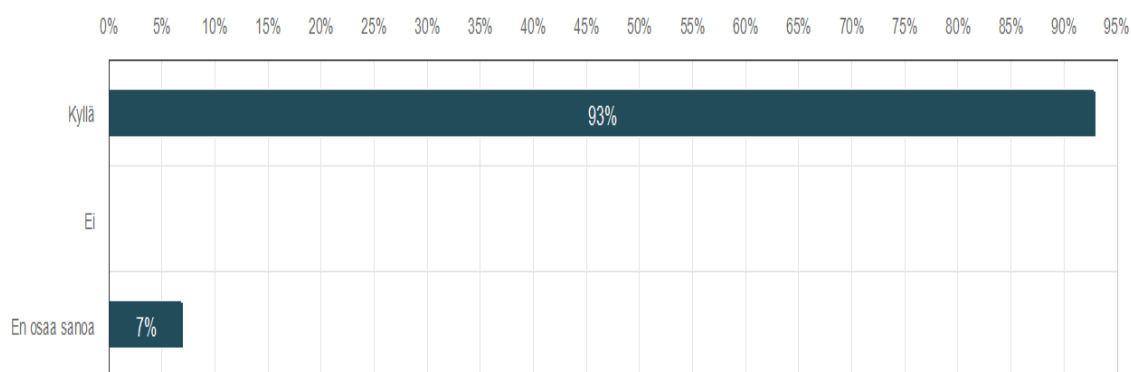


Figure 3. Perceived importance of ethics in the police organization. Source: Webropol survey.

6.4 Influence on Decision-Making

More than half of the respondents (52%) reported witnessing unethical behaviour in the past two years, including incidents of discrimination, abuse of authority and a lack of accountability. Several expressed doubts about the organisation’s willingness to address such problems. One respondent noted: *“Johto välttelee reagointia, kun asiat muuttuvat herkiksi”* (Management avoids acting when things get sensitive) [Author’s translation].

These concerns are echoed by international assessments such as the OECD (2020, pp. 67–70) and GRECO (2023, pp. 27–29), which underline the importance of strong internal control mechanisms, clear whistleblower protections, and consistent ethics training.

This raises a fundamental tension. According to the 2022 Police Barometer, 40% of Finnish citizens suspect that unethical behaviour or corruption may occur within the police organisation. At the same time, international evaluations such as those from GRECO (2023) consistently highlight the Finnish police as one of the most trusted public institutions in Europe. This apparent contradiction may be explained by the distinction between institutional trust and perceptions of ethical risk. Citizens may trust the police in terms of competence, general fairness and legal compliance, while remaining aware that misconduct can occur. From an organisational perspective, such dual perceptions

point to the need for maintaining a strong ethical climate internally, not only to prevent violations, but to sustain the public trust that already exists.

Ethical decision-making is also shaped by group norms and team interactions. As Wheelan (2017, pp. 67–68) points out, high-functioning teams cultivate shared expectations around responsibility, quality, and openness. These informal norms can function as an ethical compass, particularly in uncertain situations. In the police context, reinforcing team-based ethical standards may reduce pressure on individual leaders by embedding responsibility into everyday collaboration.

6.5 Occurrence and Handling of Irregularities

As already mentioned, over half of the respondents (52%) had observed unethical behaviour within the past two years, including discrimination, misuse of power, and lack of accountability. Many respondents expressed scepticism about the organization's response to these incidents. One noted: "Management avoids acting when things get sensitive." This runs counter to OECD (2020, pp. 67–70) and GRECO (2023, pp. 27–29), which recommend stronger internal controls, whistleblower protections and systematic ethics training.

Although all respondents were familiar with existing channels for reporting unethical conduct, many questioned their actual effectiveness. One officer wrote: *"Kaikki eettiset asiat otetaan käsittelyyn, paitsi ne, jotka koskevat johtoporrasta."* *"All ethical issues are addressed – except those that involve the leadership."* [author's translation]

This sentiment signals a lack of confidence in the neutrality of the system. As Victor and Cullen (1988) argue, an ethical climate deteriorates when employees believe that misconduct is handled selectively. Maintaining trust requires more than formal mechanisms—it also depends on whether ethical issues are addressed consistently, regardless of rank or position.

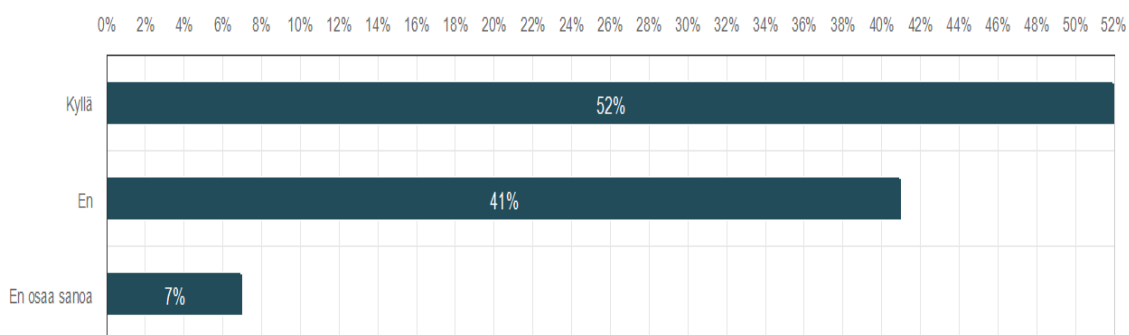


Figure 4. Observations of unethical conduct at work during the past two years. Source: Webropol survey

6.6 Courage, Fear and Culture of Silence

Fear of sanctions, career setbacks, or backlash from colleagues was frequently cited as a reason for avoiding action in ethically difficult situations. Berlin and Isberg (2023, p. 10) highlight psychological safety as a foundation for an ethical organizational culture. Similarly, Öblom (2020, pp. 25-30) emphasizes that ethical courage stems not only from individual disposition but also from the surrounding organizational structures.

Several respondents expressed frustration and fear when dealing with ethical concerns. One officer wrote: *“Vaikka tosiasialliset eettiset ongelmat toisi esille, mitä monesti olen tehnyt – niin eipä sillä ole mitään merkitystä– minä olen väärässä ja johtoporras aina oikeassa.”*

“Even if actual ethical issues are brought up, as I have done many times, it makes no difference – I am wrong, and the leadership is always right.” [author’s translation]

Statements like this suggest an organizational climate where moral courage is not consistently supported. Edmondson (1999) points out that psychological safety is vital for creating conditions where employees feel secure in raising concerns. Ristikangas & Ristikangas (2010, pp 25-30) further argue that communicative trust is key to uncovering

issues that might otherwise remain hidden. Without this trust, silence becomes the path of least resistance.

Effective communication is another hallmark of ethical team culture. According to Wheelan (2017, p. 65), teams that foster inclusive communication allow all voices to be heard, regardless of position or rank. This inclusiveness helps ensure that diverse perspectives are considered—an essential condition for ethical reflection in law enforcement contexts, where hierarchical dynamics are strong and groupthink may take hold.

6.7 Ethical Dilemmas in Practice

My survey highlighted several recurring dilemmas:

- Balancing efficiency targets (e.g., statistics) with legal safeguards
- Loyalty to colleagues versus responsibility to citizens
- lack of clear guidance from superiors
- Ethical judgment in setting priorities

One respondent remarked: "Investigation times and resolution percentages determine everything". This illustrates the dominance of performance metrics over long-term ethical sustainability, an issue also raised by Snellman (2015) and the OECD (2020).

Respondents also pointed to role conflicts, particularly when official directives clash with personal ethical judgement. One respondent explained: *"Jos minut määrätään tekemään jotain muuta kuin minun perustehtävää – teen mitä määrätään. Onko se eettisesti oikein? Ei ole, mutta näin virkamies on pakko toimia."* "If I'm ordered to do something other than my primary duty – I do as order. Is it ethically, right? No, but as a civil servant I have no choice." [author's translation]

Kaufmann and Kaufmann (2005, p. 298) define role conflict as a situation where demands from different sources are contradictory or ambiguous. In such cases,

supervisors may feel torn between their duty to follow institutional procedures and their responsibility to uphold ethical standards in service to the public.

6.8 Sources of Ethical Guidance and Responsibility

Most respondents (76.9%) reported relying primarily on their personal values when facing ethical challenges, while 65.4% indicated that they turned to colleagues for informal discussions. In contrast, only 15.4% reported using the organisation's formal ethical guidelines when making decisions. This low usage suggests that such resources may not be widely known, easily accessible, or perceived as useful in real-world situations. Some respondents noted that they were unfamiliar with the guidelines, while others described them as too general to apply in practice.

These findings support Öblom's (2020, pp. 64–67) argument that ethical responsibility in policing is often internalised as an individual concern rather than recognised as a collective or institutional matter. When the burden of ethical decision-making falls solely on individual discretion, the role of structured support systems may be diminished. This individualisation risks weakening shared accountability and can lead to inconsistencies in leadership practice.

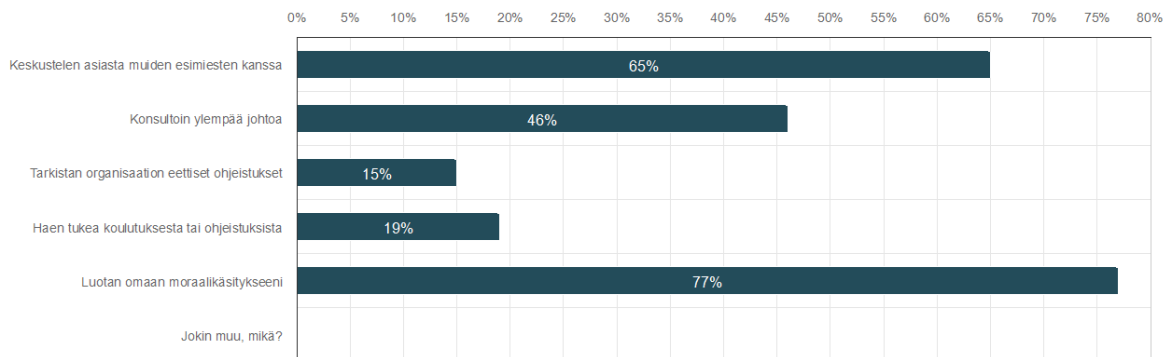


Figure 5. Methods for resolving ethical dilemmas. Source: Webropol survey.

To strengthen ethical consistency, organisations need to actively support ethical behaviour through leadership education. Otherwise, the gap between written guidelines and real-time decision-making is likely to persist. Particularly in complex, time-sensitive environments such as the police organization.

The low number of respondents who reported using internal ethical guidelines, only 15.4%, raises important questions about the practical role of such tools in daily decision-making. While codes of ethics exist on paper, their perceived usefulness appears limited. This may point to issues of accessibility, contextual relevance or lack of integration into leadership routines. As Öblom (2020) argues, ethics in the police organization is often seen as a personal responsibility rather than an institutionalised process. If ethical codes are to be effective, they must be embedded in education, supported by leadership and clearly linked to operational realities.

6.9 Free-Text Reflections: Ethical Landscape in Practice

The anonymized free-text responses reveal the emotional and practical complexity of ethical leadership. All quotations have been selected in accordance with the University of Vaasa's ethical guidelines, ensuring that individuals cannot be identified.

Culture of Silence and Leadership Signals:

Several respondents emphasized how leaders' actions—or inactions—communicate powerful ethical messages. One noted: *"Jos pomo kääntää katseensa pois, viesti on selvä"* ("If the boss looks away, the message is clear"). Others voiced frustration over their limited influence: *"Minä hoidan oman tonttini, mutta en voi sille mitään, miten johtoporras hoitaa omaa tonttiaan"* ("I take care of my area, but I can't affect how management takes care of theirs") and *"Yritetty on, mutta mitään ei muutu"* ("We've tried, but nothing changes"). These reflections resonate with the findings of GRECO (2021, pp. 16–17) and OECD (2020, pp. 78–80), which stress the importance of trust in leadership and the existence of reliable, safe channels for reporting concerns.

Perceived Structural Injustice:

Several responses pointed to perceived unfairness in responsibility and compensation. One officer remarked: "*Vaativimmat työtehtävät, mutta huonoin palkka*" ("*The most demanding tasks, but the lowest pay*"), while another commented: "*POHA työllistää paikallispoliisia yhtä paljon kuin rikolliset*" ("*The National Police Board burdens local police as much as the criminals*"). Demmke (2017, pp. 6–7) describes this phenomenon as institutional moral fatigue—where repeated experiences of injustice diminish motivation and erode ethical commitment.

Need for Training and Feedback:

Some respondents emphasized gaps in support and development. Comments such as "*The courage of managers to tackle old issues is missing*" and "*The recognition of unethical behaviours in education would be useful*" reflect a clear demand for systematic ethics training. These insights are consistent with recommendations from the OECD (2020, p. 53) and GRECO (2021, p. 21), which call for continuous ethics education and value-based leadership development.

Conclusion

Taken together, the free-text responses suggest that ethical challenges in policing are less about lacking knowledge and more about lacking courage, supportive structures, and leadership engagement. Respondents expressed a strong will to act ethically—but also highlighted the need for reinforcement through leadership consistency, clear norms, and constructive feedback. This aligns with Demmke's (2017, pp. 10–11) view that ethical leadership must be rooted in both personal integrity and institutional commitment.

7 Towards Development: Practical Recommendations and Structural Reflections

The following chapter shifts the focus from analysis to development. Based on the responses gathered in the survey, it presents suggestions from officers on how ethical leadership can be strengthened in practice. These are not only practical ideas, but they also reflect a deeper concern for how ethics is supported, discussed, and lived within the police organization. Alongside these suggestions, several contradictions and tensions became visible in the material. They point to a gap between principles and practice, as well as to the difficulties of navigating ethical leadership in a demanding and hierarchical environment. By bringing together proposals, challenges and paradoxes, this chapter aims to offer a clearer understanding of what is needed to move ethical leadership forward in a sustainable way.

7.1 Practical Suggestions for Strengthening Ethical Leadership

Respondents offered a range of concrete suggestions for how ethical leadership could be reinforced in everyday work. Several emphasized the need for structured opportunities to reflect on ethics as part of leadership responsibilities. The following proposals were commonly mentioned:

- Creating regular forums for ethical discussion and reflection
- Introducing mandatory ethics training grounded in real-life situations
- Improving access to safe and transparent reporting mechanisms
- Ensuring that police management takes visible and consistent action in response to ethical violations
- Dedicating work time for ethical reflection as part of routine operations

These recommendations reveal a shared understanding among officers that ethics should not remain a theoretical topic but needs to be embedded in daily routines and supported at all organizational levels. One respondent summed it up concisely: “Ethics is a continuous learning process.” This perspective is echoed in Snellman’s (2015)

argument that ethics should be viewed as a practical and evolving skill. Ethical competence, much like professional expertise, requires repetition, feedback and reflection.

Sirviö's (2011, pp. 30–32) five principles of ethical leadership; respect for human dignity, justice, responsibility, honesty and transparency, offer a relevant lens through which to interpret these suggestions. While these values are broadly acknowledged, the responses indicate that they are not yet fully integrated into everyday leadership practices. This gap underlines the need not only for further training. It is also for leadership cultures that model and reinforce ethical conduct.

7.2 Improving Ethical Guidelines and Decision-Making Support

Only 15.4% of respondents indicated that they regularly use the organization's ethical guidelines in daily decision-making. This low figure suggests that the guidelines are either poorly known, inaccessible, or perceived as disconnected from the realities of police work. These findings align with Öblom's (2020, pp. 64–67) emphasis on the importance of converting abstract ethical principles into practical tools.

Respondents proposed several ways to improve decision-making support:

- Develop user-friendly ethical action plans tailored to typical leadership challenges
- Create digital tools offering step-by-step guidance for complex ethical situations
- Increase the visibility of existing guidelines through internal communication, leadership meetings, and workshops

A recurring theme in the open responses was uncertainty about what could be raised without negative consequences and how feedback would be received. This aligns with Kayas' (2023, pp. 10–11) description of "internalized monitoring," where individuals begin to self-censor due to fear of repercussions, even in organizations that claim to value openness.

Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires more than updated documents. What officers called for was hands-on support: training, dialogue, and clear routines that allow for open and trust-based ethical reflection.

This concern reflects a broader issue raised by Fischer et al. (2021, pp. 3–5), who argue that much of the ethical leadership literature lacks conceptual precision and tends to idealize leadership without fully acknowledging contextual constraints. In complex environments like the police organization, where ambiguity and pressure are constant, overly abstract guidelines risk being seen as disconnected from real-world needs.

7.3 Paradoxes and Tensions in the Findings

The survey result revealed several paradoxes that illustrate the complexity of ethical leadership within a police context. These tensions point to the difficulties leaders face in aligning principles with action.

First, 92.6% of respondents stated that ethical leadership is very important. At the same time, nearly half had witnessed unethical conduct that went unaddressed. This suggests that awareness of values does not necessarily lead to action, particularly in environments where psychological safety is weak or managerial engagement is lacking.

Second, although 61.5% had received ethics training, many still expressed a need for further support. This highlights the fact that one-off training sessions are not enough. Ethical competence develops over time, through practice, feedback and ongoing dialogue.

Third, some respondents described the overall ethical climate as positive, while others reported repeated exposure to ethical lapses. This tension may reflect what Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011, pp. 5–7) describe as "ethical blind spots", cases where individuals or organizations fail to recognize their own ethical shortcomings due to habituation or unexamined norms.

Demmke (2020, pp. 9–11) argues that ethics policies in public administration often place too much emphasis on individual responsibility while neglecting broader structural

issues. Without addressing these systemic factors, ethical expectations risk becoming rhetorical rather than fully embedded in the daily functioning of public institutions.

This gap between principle and practice is not unique to the police organization. As Fischer et al. (2021, pp. 3–5) point out, much of the ethical leadership literature presents overly idealized models that may not fully account for the contextual challenges leaders face. These models often overlook organizational pressures, cultural norms, and ambiguous expectations that complicate the ability to act ethically in real time.

In summary, the paradoxes identified in the material serve as a reminder that ethical leadership requires both personal integrity and structural commitment. As Fischer et al. (2021, pp. 3–5) point out, overly idealized understandings of ethical leadership risk underestimating the contextual and organizational challenges leaders face. Closing the gap between stated values and actual behaviour will require deliberate efforts at multiple levels; individual, cultural and institutional, grounded in both critical reflection and practical tools.

8 Organizational Tensions and Ethical Practice

This chapter revisits the findings from Chapter 6, placing them in the broader context of organizational and leadership dynamics within the police force. Rather than viewing ethical challenges in isolation, it considers how personal responsibility, institutional culture and structural limitations interact in shaping ethical leadership.

Lawton et al. (2012, pp. 72–74) describe organizational culture not as something an institution possesses, but as part of its very identity. Formed through both formal frameworks and the informal routines of daily life. This perspective resonates with several of the survey responses, where officers pointed out that ethical leadership does not occur in a vacuum; it is deeply influenced by the surrounding environment, which can either reinforce or undermine ethical behaviour.

A recurring concern was the mismatch between the ideals of ethical leadership and the practical realities officers face. Lönnroth (2020, p. 63) notes that public organizations often respond to ethical problems with technical fixes, overlooking the relational nature of organizational life. My data reflects this tension: instead of stricter control mechanisms, respondents called for tools that encourage dialogue, reflection, and flexible leadership.

The risk of over-monitoring was also raised. Kayas (2023, pp. 8–9) observed that growing digital surveillance can erode psychological safety and increase mistrust within teams. In the same vein, Tursunbayeva et al. (2021, pp. 4–6) argue that so-called “people analytics” systems may unintentionally curb ethical agency and heighten fear of mistakes. These concerns echoed through several free-text responses in the survey, where respondents described control-focused approaches as distancing and counterproductive to genuine ethical reflection.

8.1 Ethical dilemmas in everyday leadership

Respondents affirmed that ethical leadership is central to their role. Many saw themselves as role models within the organization. At the same time, they described structural barriers that complicate ethical decision-making—including time constraints, vague instructions from superiors, and tensions between loyalty and responsibility. These conditions reflect what Edmondson (2019, pp. 14–15) and Öblom (2020, pp. 44–45) have emphasized: that psychological safety and a supportive organizational culture are critical for fostering ethical awareness and reflection.

One notable paradox also emerged. While most participants placed high value on ethics, several indicated that they rarely encountered ethical dilemmas in their work. This apparent contradiction may point to a normalization of ethically sensitive situations or to a lack of critical engagement with such issues. Karam et al. (2018, pp. 134–136) suggest that leadership styles heavily influence how fairness is perceived—and that this, in turn, affects whether and how ethical conflicts are recognized and addressed in practice.

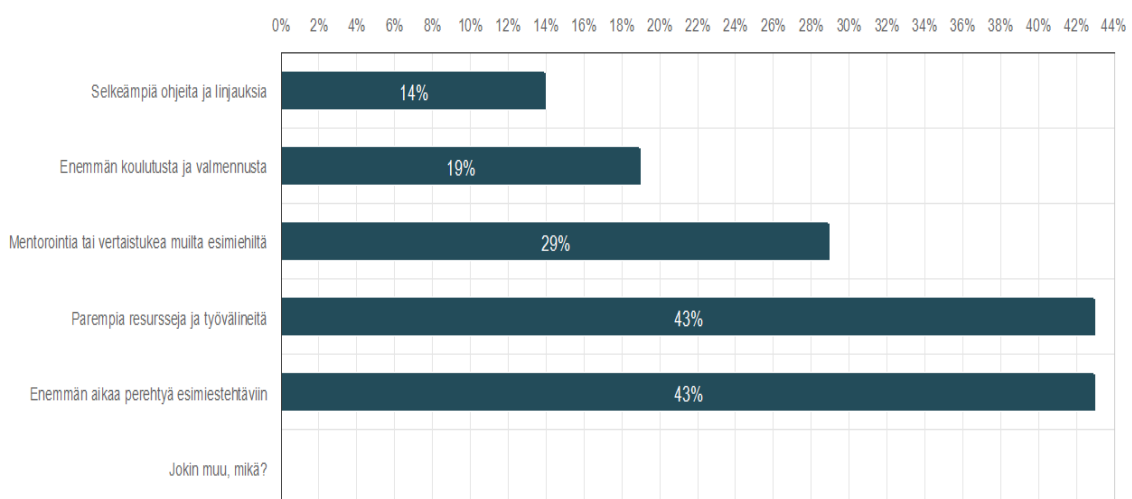


Figure 6. Types of support respondents would like more of in their supervisory roles. Source: Webropol.

8.2 Prerequisites and Barriers to Ethical Action

Ethical leadership goes beyond adherence to rules. As Lawton et al. (2012, pp. 118–120) and King (2023, pp. 43–68) point out, it rests on personal integrity, moral courage, and the ability to lead by example—even under pressure. Blennberger (2007, pp. 59–62) takes this further by arguing that ethical leadership is not just a professional obligation but a reflection of one’s entire way of life. Several respondents echoed this view, noting that while courage and integrity are essential. They are difficult to sustain without organizational backing.

Ristikangas & Ristikangas (2010, pp. 176–177) emphasize the importance of clearly defined responsibilities and procedures in creating what they call “contractual trust.” Without such structures, employees may be reluctant to act or raise concerns. This becomes especially critical in police organizations, where ethical ambiguity can suppress initiative and discourage moral action.

OECD (2020, p. 53) advocates for continuous ethics education embedded in the daily routines of public institutions. The survey results reflect a similar demand. Respondents requested recurring workshops, dedicated moments for ethical reflection and low-threshold systems of support. Several also called for clearer reporting mechanisms and the appointment of ethics officers, suggestions that align closely with OECD’s (2020, pp. 77–80) integrity framework.

What respondents described as “uncertainty” or “interpretation challenges” may stem from what Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011, pp. 35–38) term *bounded ethicality*—a condition in which context and pressure narrow an individual’s ability to reason ethically. Tools such as peer-based discussion groups, coaching networks and digital platforms for ethical case sharing. These could help make ethical reflection a shared, collective process rather than an isolated burden.

Finally, ethical leadership is often constrained by role ambiguity and excessive workload. Kaufmann & Kaufmann (2005, p. 298) observe that conflicting expectations, vague responsibilities, or unsustainable demands can create internal friction that undermines leadership effectiveness. In police organizations, where leaders are expected to navigate both operational demands and ethical responsibilities, such tensions may result in hesitation or moral fatigue. Clarifying leadership roles and expectations is therefore crucial to building an environment where ethical behaviour can be exercised with confidence and consistency.

8.3 Ethics as an Integral Part of Leadership and Culture

Brown (2019, pp. 232–233) emphasizes that the capacity to accept and process feedback—even when it is uncomfortable—is a cornerstone of ethical leadership. In high-pressure environments like the police organization, this ability supports conflict resolution and helps maintain personal integrity under stress

Emotional intelligence and ethical resilience were also identified by Berlin & Isberg (2023, p. 9) as essential traits. Especially when facing everyday dilemmas such as task distribution or navigating relationships within teams. Several respondents echoed this perspective, acknowledging a generally positive ethical climate but pointing out that limited resources and contradictory demands still create friction in daily work.

Leadership does not develop in isolation. It is continuously shaped by shared team norms and working culture. Wheelan (2017, pp. 79–80, 85) argues that norms promoting productivity, open communication and psychological safety contribute not only to effectiveness but also to a climate where ethical concerns can be raised and addressed. This was reflected in responses that stressed the value of ethical support within teams when dealing with morally complex situations.

Although ethics is formally included in Finnish police education programs (Poliisiammattikorkeakoulu, 2024a; 2024b), many respondents felt they were not fully equipped to handle ethical challenges in practice. This perception is in line with findings from Öblom (2020, pp. 70–73) and the OECD (2020, pp. 63–66), both of whom argue

that ethics should be reinforced through long-term structures—such as leadership assessments, mentoring, and decision-making processes—not just through isolated training modules.

Communication and access to trustworthy reporting channels were frequently raised as areas needing improvement. Inadequacies in these systems may hinder ethical outcomes and reduce trust in leadership. This supports Snellman's (2015, pp. 344–345) call for “ethical learning environments,” where ongoing dialogue and reflection are part of everyday operations.

Despite broad agreement on the importance of ethical leadership, several responses revealed a disconnect between declared values and actual practice. One respondent put it succinctly: *“Eettisyys näkyy arvoissa mutta ei arjessa”* (“Ethics is visible in values but not in daily practice.”) [author's translation]. This remark illustrates a tension where ethical principles may be clearly stated on paper yet inconsistently enacted in the workplace. Such discrepancies risk undermining employee confidence in leadership and can erode the credibility of the organization's ethical culture.

8.4 From Challenges to Development

One of the most consistent findings, both in theory and in the field, is the tension between ethical intent and the realities imposed by organizational structures. Berlin and Isberg (2023, pp. 6–11) show how supportive leadership can strengthen employees' sense of meaning and well-being. This was echoed in several survey responses, where officers called for greater access to ethical discussion forums, mentoring opportunities and more participatory approaches to leadership.

Sirviö's (2011, pp. 30–32) five ethical principles—dignity, justice, responsibility, honesty, and transparency—offer a useful reference point when evaluating leadership practices. Still, as Osifo (2018, pp. 120–125) warns, systemic vulnerabilities such as informal hierarchies and subtle forms of corruption also need to be addressed if ethical leadership is to be sustained.

Transforming organizational culture requires more than formal policy adjustments. As Kaufmann & Kaufmann (2005, pp. 299–300) argue, group norms help shape how behaviour is interpreted and what is seen as acceptable. In the police organization, unwritten expectations, such as prioritizing loyalty over accountability, may inadvertently silence ethical concerns. Therefore, any attempt to strengthen the ethical climate must take both formal codes and informal norms into account.

Respondents consistently expressed a personal commitment to ethical values but also pointed to external pressures and insufficient structural support. Öblom (2020, pp. 60–64) and the OECD (2020, pp. 93–95) recommend structured tools, such as ethical dilemma analyses and guided peer dialogue, to bridge this divide. Ethics education, in this view, should be embedded in everyday operations and supported by a long-term institutional strategy.

A further indication of systemic hesitation is that 52% of the respondent's reported difficulty in raising ethical issues with their superiors. This reinforces Öblom's (2020, p. 54) findings about cultures of silence in public organizations. In such environments, the absence of safe, non-punitive reporting channels becomes a serious obstacle to ethical leadership and accountability.

8.5 Culture of Silence, Psychological Safety and Courage

Psychological safety remains a recurring challenge. As Edmondson (1999, pp. 350–351) defines it, psychological safety involves the freedom to express concerns without fear of punishment. The results of this study suggest that such safety is not yet firmly established within the police organization. At the same time, respondents underscored the importance of moral courage—an emphasis that aligns with Brown (2019, pp. 185–187) and Kidder (2005, pp. 62–64), both of whom view courage as essential for ethical leadership to flourish.

Trust plays an equally foundational role. According to Ristikangas & Ristikangas (2010, pp. 164–165), trust enables individuals to engage with one another in vulnerable ways, based on positive expectations. When trust is lacking, communication becomes guarded and fragmented, with energy diverted to interpreting intent rather than solving problems (Ristikangas, 2010, p. 167). In police organizations, where raising ethical concerns can carry perceived risks, building a communicative trust climate—one that permits transparency and addresses underlying tensions—is crucial (Ristikangas, 2010, pp. 184–185).

Karam et al. (2018, pp. 146–148) show that leadership marked by fairness and empathy fosters openness and engagement. In line with this, my findings suggest that officers need clear ethical expectations. They also need visible support from leadership and ongoing opportunities to reflect to reduce ethical ambiguity and encourage transparent dialogue.

To truly embed ethical leadership in policework, psychological safety and ethical principles must become part of daily operational routines, not peripheral ideals. While most respondents view ethical leadership as central to their role, they also point to significant challenges in managing dilemmas related to fairness, decision-making and equal treatment. Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate organizational strategy that includes continued ethics education. Also, clearer guidelines and targeted efforts to counter inequality and unethical practices are needed.

Lawton et al. (2012, p. 122) caution that even ethically minded individuals can be steered toward unethical behaviour if organizational culture rewards loyalty over accountability or discourages dissent. This highlights the need for an environment that supports openness, encourages questions and recognizes moral courage as a professional asset. As Wheelan (2017, pp. 88–89) notes, collaborative teams are more likely to experience mutual trust, stronger communication and productive conflict resolution. In police organizations, where leadership involves not only directing tasks but also managing interpersonal tensions and moral uncertainty, these qualities create space for ethical

awareness to grow. By fostering such team dynamics, the organization can reduce silence and enable moral agency in ethically complex situations.

Finally, this study suggests that some ethical challenges may not even be recognized as dilemmas, or they are dealt with informally bypassing formal structures of ethical leadership. This may reflect limitations within the organizational culture itself. Where courage and psychological safety are not yet strong enough to support open ethical discourse. Prior research supports this interpretation. Edmondson (2019, pp. 350–351) and Öblom (2020, pp. 50–61) both argue that an open, reflective culture is essential for ethical leadership to be more than just a stated value, it must be a lived reality.

8.6 Paradoxes and Blind Spots in Ethical Decision-Making

One of the clearest insights emerging from this study is the presence of paradoxes and ethical blind spots in how leadership is both understood and enacted. While 92.6% of respondents identified ethical leadership as crucial, nearly half stated that they rarely encounter ethical dilemmas in their daily work. However, this claim appears contradictory when viewed alongside the free-text responses and contextual data. This reveals that ethical challenges do arise—though they may not always be recognised as such by the individuals experiencing them.

This gap reflects what Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011, pp. 5–7) describe as ethical blind spots: moments when people act against their values without being fully aware. Organizational expectations, habitual routines and peer dynamics may blur ethical dimensions, making questionable decisions appear normal or justified.

Both Demmke (2020, pp. 9–13) and Mackenzie (2002, pp. 2–4) argue that compliance-driven ethics programs can obscure deeper cultural issues. When ethics becomes procedural rather than reflective, leadership risks losing its moral orientation. This critique was mirrored by several respondents. They pointed out that although ethics

education was offered, it was not consistently integrated into everyday leadership practices.

Likewise, King (2023, pp. 69–94) and Lawton et al. (2012, p. 122) remind us that silence and loyalty may be rewarded over accountability, even among otherwise principled professionals. Creating an ethical organizational culture therefore requires more than formal tools; it depends on leadership that models openness, reflection and courage. The findings here suggest that ethical leadership must be lived and experienced collectively embedded in both values and actions.

8.7 Technology, Control and Trust

The growing use of digital systems introduces new challenges to ethical leadership. While technology may enhance transparency, it can also foster feelings of surveillance and mistrust. Several respondents expressed concern that monitoring systems—though well-intentioned—create an atmosphere of control rather than support. These views align with Kayas (2023, pp. 8–9) and Tursunbayeva et al. (2021, pp. 4–6), who show that technology-led performance management can reduce psychological safety and undermine autonomy.

Although ethical values may be clearly communicated by leadership, the way digital tools are used can send mixed messages. Overemphasis on control may signal mistrust, which dampens ethical initiative and inhibits dialogue. Sydänmaanlakka (2012, p. 117) advocates for a more adaptive and empowering leadership approach—one that prioritizes human connection and emotional intelligence alongside procedural clarity.

Rather than relying on technology solely for monitoring, organizations could use digital platforms to foster learning and ethical reflection. Examples include interactive case discussions, ethics mentoring tools and real-time dashboards for ethical decision-making (OECD, 2020, pp. 78–80). Respondents also requested training on digital dilemmas: data ethics, surveillance boundaries, and algorithmic fairness. As the public sector moves

toward AI-driven systems, ethical competence must evolve in tandem (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011, pp. 72–74).

Leadership must also be aware of how technological systems affect group dynamics and morale. Transparent communication about the purpose and limits of digital tools can reduce anxiety and build mutual responsibility. In this sense, ethical leadership in a digital age call not only for technical skills, but for trust-building and empathetic engagement (Sydänmaanlakka, 2012, pp. 116–118).

As Berlin & Isberg (2023, pp. 7–9) argue, the point is not to replace human trust with digital systems—but to reinforce it. Ethical governance in technologically advanced environments must still be grounded in human values, meaning-making and shared reflection.

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated that ethical leadership within policework is not simply a matter of individual values or institutional directives. It is shaped by the interplay of personal integrity, organizational norms, structural barriers and emerging technologies. To strengthen ethical leadership, the Finnish police authority must continue investing in participatory leadership models, psychological safety, long-term ethics education and a reflective culture that actively supports open dialogue and moral courage.

9 Discussion and Conclusions: Towards Sustainable Ethical Leadership

This final chapter integrates the empirical findings of the study with the theoretical concepts presented throughout the thesis. It also proposes practical recommendations for strengthening ethical leadership within the police authority. With a particular focus on officers serving in the Ostrobothnia Police Department.

Survey results show that ethical values such as fairness, respect and openness are central to how many respondents perceive their leadership roles. These values reflect the core ideas of value-based leadership described by Sydänmaanlakka (2012, p. 122) and the OECD (2020, pp. 93–95). However, the presence of a silence culture and limited psychological safety poses barriers to putting these ideals into practice.

One particularly important observation concerns the gap between how respondents view themselves—as ethical role models—and their actual willingness to intervene in ethically problematic situations. This tension supports Kasslin-Pottier’s (2009, p. 133) argument about idealized managerial self-images and underscores the value of self-awareness and reflective leadership. It also aligns with Lawton et al. (2012, pp. 76–77), who warn that even well-meaning ethical codes can be undermined when informal norms favour loyalty or passivity over responsibility.

Broader public perceptions echo these concerns. According to the Police Barometer (Ministry of the Interior, 2023, p. 41), nearly 40% of citizens believe unethical conduct may exist within the police organization. These attitudes highlight the significance of visible ethical leadership. Not only for internal organizational health, but also for maintaining public trust.

Respondents expressed a strong desire for more practical tools and support in handling ethical dilemmas. Suggestions included regular forums for ethical reflection, targeted workshops, mentoring initiatives and decision-making aids. These ideas correspond closely with the proposals by Öblom (2020, pp. 70–73), who calls for sustained, systematic support for ethical behaviour. As Brown & Treviño (2006, pp. 596–597) argue, ethical competence is not a fixed attribute—it must be actively cultivated and reinforced over time.

At the same time, the study reveals that despite widespread ethical awareness, formal mechanisms for upholding these values remain weak. Several participants noted that they hesitate to raise concerns due to fear of retaliation or lack of confidence in leadership. These comments reflect Bazerman & Tenbrunsel's (2011, pp. 5–7) notion of ethical blind spots—situations in which individuals fail to perceive the moral dimensions of their actions. Often because of systemic pressures or unclear norms.

Concerns were also raised about the impact of digital monitoring tools. Some respondents reported that these systems contribute to self-censorship and reduce trust. This is consistent with findings by Kayas (2023, pp. 8–9) and Tursunbayeva et al. (2021, pp. 4–6), who argue that overly rigid control mechanisms can erode psychological safety and limit ethical autonomy. What officers called for instead were leadership approaches rooted in trust, adaptability and dialogue—qualities emphasized in Sydänmaanlakka's (2012, p. 117) model of intelligent leadership.

The findings in my research also lend support to critiques raised by Fischer et al. (2021, pp. 3–5), who argue that ethical leadership is often presented in overly idealistic terms. In real-life contexts such as the police organization, ethical decisions are shaped by organizational pressures, unclear expectations, and cultural norms. These factors can complicate the application of ethical principles. Even when leaders have strong personal integrity. As such, the study reinforces the need for more realistic frameworks that account for the practical constraints faced by leaders in ethically complex environments.

Taken together, these findings suggest that ethical leadership in police organizations should not be treated merely as a personal virtue or a compliance requirement. It should be understood as a broader organizational capacity. One that requires long-term investment, consistent structural support and a working culture that embraces transparency, dialogue and mutual accountability. This perspective echoes the work of Berlin & Isberg (2023, pp. 7–9), who point out that ethical resilience and value-based leadership are key to creating meaningful, sustainable work environments.

9.1 Answers to the Research Questions

Before addressing each of the study's research questions individually, it is useful to briefly restate their purpose. The questions were formulated to explore not only how officers interpret ethical leadership in their own roles, but also the challenges they face and the kinds of support they consider essential for fostering ethical behaviour. Together, they form the analytical core of this study.

1. How do officers at the Ostrobothnia Police Department understand and apply ethical leadership in their daily work?

Most of the respondents view ethical leadership as a central part of their professional identity. They associate it with values such as fairness, transparency and acting as a role model. Ethical conduct, in their view, requires consistency, trustworthiness and respectful treatment of both colleagues and citizens. These interpretations resonate closely with Brown and Treviño's (2006) concept of ethical leadership as value-driven behaviour communicated through example and clarity.

However, the data also point to a gap between ethical ideals and their practical realization. While many officers report having internalized ethical values, their expression is often described as subtle or private—rarely visible or institutionally supported. Ethical conduct is often regarded as a matter of personal conscience, rather than something embedded in the organization's structures. This individualization may reflect a broader organizational culture that fails to formally recognize or reward ethical

actions. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel's (2011) theory of "ethical blind spots" is relevant here: when systems do not support ethical reflection, individuals may overlook or suppress moral considerations altogether.

In this context, a central insight is the disconnection between personal moral ambition and the institutional structures needed to support it. Officers report a sense of ethical responsibility. Often operate without formal guidance, feedback, or encouragement. Thus, ethical leadership emerges not as a systematic practice, but as an informal balancing act, between aspiration and reality, between courage and constraint.

2. What challenges and support needs do officers experience in relation to ethical leadership in practice?

The responses indicate a range of structural and cultural challenges. Among the most frequently mentioned were time constraints, unclear mandates, rigid hierarchies and the lack of designated space for ethical reflection. Ethical dilemmas are described as common, but opportunities to process or discuss them are limited.

A particularly persistent concern is the culture of silence. Officers expressed apprehension that raising ethical concerns could lead to reputational risk or professional consequences. This finding echoes Edmondson's (1999) research on psychological safety. This emphasizes the importance of being able to speak up without fear of retaliation. Several respondents also noted that even when misconduct is observed, management sometimes fails to act, undermining trust and discouraging future engagement.

Many officers expressed a desire for better tools and more structured support for ethical leadership. They called for practical and case-based training, collegial dialogue and systems for ethical consultation that are accessible and trusted. Several commented that current training, when available, tends to be abstract or disconnected from operational reality.

The bureaucratic and efficiency-driven nature of police work also emerged as a source of ethical strain. Officers described situations in which procedural requirements, performance indicators or conflicting responsibilities put pressure on ethical decision-making. Especially when values such as loyalty, impartiality and accountability come into conflict.

3. What kinds of tools, training or organizational structures are considered necessary to strengthen ethical leadership among officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department?

Respondents offered a range of concrete suggestions. A recurring theme was the desire to integrate ethics into everyday routines. Many proposed “ethical moments” during meetings—short, structured reflections on dilemmas faced in practice. This to normalize dialogue and reduce stigma around ethical uncertainty.

Mentorship and peer support also emerged as important development tools. Officers emphasized the value of structured learning across levels of experience, particularly when senior officers can guide colleagues through morally complex scenarios. This type of support is seen not only as a learning tool but also as a means of reinforcing ethical commitment.

The need for more practical and applied training was a strong theme. Officers called for training grounded in real scenarios, where ethical reasoning is exercised and openly discussed. Suggested tools included anonymous online platforms for raising ethical questions, digital case archives and group-based reflection.

At the organizational level, many respondents highlighted the need for clearer ethical guidance and accessible support structures. Several called for the appointment of dedicated ethics advisors—independent from the command structure—who could offer confidential and trusted consultation. This, they argued, would signal that ethics is taken seriously and that concerns will be handled responsibly.

Another recommendation was the formal inclusion of ethical behaviour in performance evaluations for leadership roles. Making ethical leadership a measurable and recognized competency, rather than a vague ideal, would send a strong institutional message. This proposal is consistent with Snellman's (2015) concept of ethical learning environments and the OECD's (2020, pp. 63–66) emphasis on translating values into systems and practice.

Multiple respondents noted the gap between ethical awareness and practical implementation. Hierarchical barriers were often cited as a reason for inaction. As one respondent put it:

"Esimiesten tulee seurata alaistensa toimintaa ja havaitessaan epäeettistä tulee puuttua heti... Esimiesrohkeus on yksi iso haaste."
"Supervisors should monitor their subordinates' actions and intervene immediately when unethical behaviour is observed... Courage in leadership is a major challenge." [author's translation]

These responses affirm that ethical leadership is not merely about moral conviction—it also depends on organizational structures that allow officers to act with integrity. Especially in rigid hierarchies where power dynamics may discourage dissent.

In summary, officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department see ethical leadership as essential to their role, but often feel constrained by cultural, structural and procedural limitations. Their responses point to the need for ongoing support, clearer guidelines, and spaces for ethical reflection. Building a resilient ethical culture requires aligning personal responsibility with institutional readiness—so that acting ethically is not an individual burden, but a shared organizational practice.

9.2 Final Summary and Concluding Thoughts

This thesis set out to explore how ethical leadership is understood, experienced and practiced by officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department. By drawing upon frameworks such as value-based leadership, organizational ethics and psychological

safety and anchoring them in empirical findings, the study sought to offer both conceptual depth and practical relevance.

One of the most important insights is that ethical leadership is not a fixed characteristic. It is a dynamic process shaped by everyday interactions, institutional norms and systemic structures. While officers clearly identify with ethical values and recognize their role as moral exemplars, their capacity to act accordingly is often restricted. Barriers such as insufficient support, lack of space for reflection and fear of consequences limit ethical expression.

Throughout the thesis, contributions from researchers such as Brown & Treviño, Bazerman & Tenbrunsel and policy bodies like the OECD and GRECO have helped frame the systemic complexity that surrounds ethical conduct in public institutions. These perspectives show that ethical leadership cannot be reduced to compliance with codes. It must be cultivated as a living practice.

The responses from officers indicate a desire to move from reactive ethics to a more proactive, integrated leadership style. A leadership style that makes room for uncertainty, critical discussion and growth. They are not asking for rules, but for structures that support courageous decisions. The findings suggest that ethical leadership becomes sustainable when it is embedded not only in leadership rhetoric but in daily decision-making, feedback processes and team culture.

It also became evident that over-monitoring and excessive managerial control, despite their intent, may suppress the very values they seek to uphold. When trust is replaced by surveillance, ethical responsibility may give way to passive compliance.

Ultimately, this research argues that ethical leadership is both a moral duty and a practical necessity. In policework, where decisions can deeply affect public trust, leadership that is fair, transparent and reflective is indispensable. By building leadership

capacity through training, peer dialogue and organizational reform, the police authority can both reinforce internal integrity and strengthen its democratic legitimacy.

This thesis offers only a small contribution to that larger effort, but one grounded in both concern and optimism. The officers who shared their views expressed a clear willingness to improve. With the right support, ethical leadership in Finnish policework can move beyond expectation and become everyday reality.

9.3 Closing Reflections

Looking back on this research journey, one insight has remained consistent: ethical leadership is as much about *who we are* as it is about *what we do*. It cannot be reduced to guidelines or frameworks, even if those are necessary. At its heart, it is relational built on courage, attentiveness and a commitment to act with integrity even when the path is unclear.

The officers who participated in this study were not naïve about the pressures they face. Yet, they demonstrated a sincere ambition to lead with responsibility. They articulated both frustration and hope. They did not ask for praise, but for the conditions that would allow ethical conduct to become part of daily life.

As a researcher and someone with firsthand insight into the field, I was reminded throughout this work that ethics is rarely black and white. It lives in the tensions, the grey zones, and the moments of hesitation. To explore it honestly requires not only analysis, but humility.

Ethical leadership, I now believe more than ever, is not a destination. It is a continuous process that depends on open dialogue, space for reflection and the courage to revise one's course. It demands that we not only talk about values, but create the culture, leadership and systems that allow those values to guide action.

Future Research Directions

Although this study has explored ethical leadership within one regional police department, much remains to be understood. Future research could build on these findings by using qualitative methods—such as interviews or ethnographic approaches—to capture more personal accounts of ethical conflict and reflection.

A comparative design, examining differences between various police districts or between hierarchical levels, could also provide insights into how structure and culture interact to shape ethical climates. Longitudinal studies might track the development of ethical leadership over time. Especially in response to training, leadership transitions, or changes in public trust.

It would also be valuable to investigate the impact of specific interventions—such as mentoring programs, ethics coaches, or digital reflection tools—on actual leadership practice. Further research into the relationship between psychological safety and ethical action could provide organizations with actionable strategies to support ethical resilience.

Final Thoughts

It is my sincere hope that this thesis contributes, in a modest way, to the wider conversation about leadership, trust and public service. The challenges described here are real and complex. But so too is the capacity for ethical growth that this study has revealed. Officers are ready to reflect, to lead and to grow. If the organization is prepared to support them.

Ethical leadership is not a luxury. It is a condition for democratic legitimacy. And in a world where trust in institutions is both fragile and essential, investing in ethics is not optional. It is foundational.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire

Ethical leadership in the police – Survey for officers in the Ostrobothnia Police Department

1. What does ethics mean to you in your daily work?
2. What situations do you experience as the most ethically challenging in your managerial work?
3. To what extent do laws, internal guidelines and your own values influence your decisions?
4. Have you ever experienced pressure to make decisions that go against your own values?
5. How often do you discuss ethics in the management team?
6. How do you experience the ethical climate in your organization?
7. Does unethical behavior occur in your vicinity? How is it handled?
8. Do you know what reporting channels are available in case of suspicion of irregularities?
9. Have you received training in ethical leadership? If so, what type?
10. What tools do you have access to in ethical considerations (e.g. checklists, advice, ethics councils)?
11. What factors prevent you most from acting ethically?
12. What makes it easier for you to make ethically sustainable decisions?
13. How are ethics-related issues addressed by your superior?
14. Is there room for reflection and discussion about ethics in your everyday life?
15. How do you assess management's support in ethical issues?
16. Do you have a mentor or collegial network where you can raise difficult issues?
17. Do you believe that recruitment takes ethical suitability into account?
18. How are ethical considerations integrated into strategy work and goal formulation?
19. What is needed to improve ethical leadership within your organization?
20. Are there procedures for feedback after ethically sensitive decisions or events?
21. To what extent is ethical reflection encouraged in performance reviews?
22. How often do you experience conflicts between ethics and efficiency?

23. How would you describe the relationship between ethics and the work environment?

24. What does courage mean to you in the role of manager?

25. To what extent do you feel confident in speaking up in the event of irregularities?

26. Other views on ethical leadersh

Appendix 2. Suggested Training Plan: Ethical Reflection in Practice

This training plan is developed based on the theoretical framework, literature review, and survey findings of this study. While I do not have formal pedagogical training, the plan is grounded in practical experience from within the police authority. The aim is to support internal leadership training and peer reflection on ethical leadership. It is proposed as a flexible model that organizations can adapt to their own needs.

- **Training Overview**
- **Target group:** Officers within the Ostrobothnia Police Department
- **Scope:** 3 modules of 3 hours each (total 9 hours)
- **Format:** Workshop-based sessions including case analysis and ethical dialogue
- **Frequency:** Annually

- **Module 1 – Ethical Foundations and Dilemmas**

Content:

- Introduction to virtue ethics, duty-based ethics, and consequentialism
- Real-life ethical challenges in policing

Reflection questions:

- What does an ethical dilemma look like in your daily work?
- When do your personal morals come into conflict with organizational expectations?

Case discussion:

- *You learn that an experienced colleague downgrades certain case categories to improve statistical results. What do you do?*

- **Module 2 – Ethical Leadership in Practice**

Content:

- Role modeling, courage, communication, and organizational norms
- Peer influence and peer pressure in hierarchical teams
-

Reflection questions:

- What does it take to speak up about unethical practices?
- How do you show that ethics matter to you in daily leadership?

Case discussion:

- *Your superior gives you a directive that you perceive as ethically questionable. How do you respond?*

- **Module 3 – Promoting an Ethical Climate**

Content:

- Ethical governance tools (OECD, Snellman)
- Ethics councils, designated ethics officers, and ethical decision trees

Reflection questions:

- Are there structures in your organization that hinder ethical behaviour?
- How can you contribute to a safe and open reporting culture?

Case discussion:

- *A younger colleague wants to report suspected favouritism but fears retaliation. How do you support them?*

- **Conclusion**

This training plan aims to enhance both individual ethical competence and collective value-based dialogue. It reflects the recommendations of Öblom (2020), Berlin & Isberg (2023), and OECD (2020), who emphasize the need for structured ethical support, especially in public sector organizations such as the police authority.