


Organizational Ethics and Middle Management: A Case Study in the Retail Industry

ÉTICA ORGANIZACIONAL Y MANDOS MEDIOS: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO EN LA INDUSTRIA DEL RETAIL

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Abstract

Purpose: To analyze the perceptions of individual ethics, middle management ethics, and organizational ethics of employees at a retail supermarket, to understand how these perceptions vary by demographic and job characteristics.

Methodology: Data were obtained from a survey designed and validated for this study. Contingency tables were used to cross-reference demographic and job-related variables with perceptions of individual ethics, middle management ethics, and organizational ethics among employees at a retail supermarket. Statistical significance was assessed using Fisher's exact test.

Results: Employees' ethical perceptions are concentrated in the low and lower-middle categories, with no representation in the upper-middle or high categories. Gender, education, seniority, and income significantly influence perceptions, while younger, less educated, and lower salaries employees report more negative evaluations.

Implications: The findings highlight the need for interventions to address ethical deficiencies, including ethical training, leadership development, and support for marginalized groups in this type of organization.

Originality: This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the ethical perceptions of workers in the retail industry, providing empirical evidence for the design of specific interventions to strengthen organizational ethical culture.

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Resumen

Propósito: Analizar las percepciones de la ética individual, la ética de los mandos medios y la ética organizacional de empleados para comprender cómo estas percepciones varían según las características demográficas y laborales.

Metodología: Los datos fueron obtenidos a partir de una encuesta diseñada y validada para este estudio y aplicada al contexto de un supermercado. Se utilizaron tablas de contingencia que cruzaron variables demográficas y laborales con las percepciones de la ética individual, la ética de los mandos medios y la ética organizacional de los empleados de un supermercado minorista. La significancia estadística se evaluó mediante la prueba-exacta de Fisher.

Resultados: Las percepciones éticas de los trabajadores se concentran en las categorías baja y media-baja, sin representación en las categorías media-alta o alta. El género, la educación, la antigüedad laboral y los ingresos influyen significativamente en las percepciones, mientras que los empleados más jóvenes, menos educados y con menores ingresos informan evaluaciones más negativas.

Implicaciones: Los hallazgos destacan la necesidad de intervenciones que permitan abordar las deficiencias éticas, incluida la capacitación en ética, el desarrollo del liderazgo y el apoyo a los grupos marginados en este tipo de organización.

Originalidad: Este estudio proporciona un análisis integral de las percepciones éticas de trabajadores de la industria del *retail*, proporcionando evidencia empírica para el diseño de intervenciones específicas para fortalecer la cultura ética organizacional.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethical conduct in organizations is fundamental and of great importance to work culture, employee satisfaction, and the overall performance of any company (Roy et al., 2024; McConatha et al., 2022; Inegbedion et al., 2020). Organizational ethics lays the foundation for trust, accountability, and sustainable growth in companies (Malik et al., 2023). This becomes even more relevant in today's changing economic context, where organizations are under increasingly rigorous scrutiny from a range of stakeholders demanding greater transparency and ethical accountability (Böhm et al., 2022; McIntosh et al., 2021).

While there is increasing emphasis on the importance of organizational ethics, challenges remain in integrating ethical principles into the very fabric of all levels of the workplace (Pembi & Ali, 2024; Lescano-Duncan, 2019; Ameen et al., 1996). Research has shown that perceptions of organizational ethics can vary based on respondents' demographic and job attributes, such as gender, age, education, income, and seniority (Jooss et al., 2024; Al Halbusi et al., 2023; Al Halbusi et al., 2021; Kum-Lung & Teck-

Chai, 2010). These factors influence not only individual experience but also the differences in the perception and application of ethical standards across groups (Ahmed & Khan, 2023; Kamila & Jasrotia, 2023; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Addressing these disparities will be critical to fostering an inclusive and ethically responsible workplace.

This study aims to contribute to the field of organizational ethics by analyzing employee perceptions in three dimensions: personal ethical values, the influence of middle management ethical values, and organizational ethics. The study identifies potential areas for improvement by analyzing perceptions based on the demographic and job characteristics of the participants. The results are relevant to align organization's ethical framework with their business objectives. Understanding employees' ethical perceptions can support the development of targeted interventions in ethical training, leadership development programs, and policies aimed at assisting marginalized groups (Brown & Treviño, 2014). Insights from this study can provide valuable guidance needed to overcome structural and cultural barriers that hinder the creation of a strong ethical work environment.

The structure of the article is as follows: it begins with a description of the methodology, followed by the presentation and analysis of the results across three dimensions. Next, the discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature and organizational practices. The article concludes with practical recommendations aimed at significantly enhancing ethical standards within organizations.

CASE STUDY CONTEXT

In the retail and commerce sectors, ethical values require constant oversight by leaders and supervisors due to the sector's specific nature, which makes ethical violations relatively easy to occur. Supermarkets, in particular, represent an environment in which both employees and customers can engage in behavior that violates ethical principles.

Lider Express supermarket, the subject of this case study, is part of the Walmart chain, whose presence in Chile dates to 1957, when the first supermarket in the country and in Latin America opened under the Almac brand. This innovative format, which included free parking, a wide assortment of products, and cashiers at the checkout, allowed the company to excel in customer service and service quality (Walmart Chile, n.d.). In Chile, Walmart operates under five business formats: Lider (large supermarkets), Lider Express (smaller convenience stores), Super Bodega aCuenta (focused on wholesale purchases), Central Mayorista (focused on wholesale customers), and Lider.cl (e-commerce platform).

Walmart Chile has a code of conduct that applies across all its business units. This code reflects the company's commitment to integrity and ethical values in its operations. Furthermore, the company has an Ethics Department responsible for promoting and ensuring compliance with an ethical culture throughout the organization. The Ethics Department provides guidance in decision-making and guarantees a confidential and anonymous process for reporting violations of the code of conduct (Walmart Chile, n.d.).

Among the basic principles that Walmart Chile establishes for its employees are the following: acting with integrity and encouraging others

to do the same; adhering to the law at all times while being honest and fair; respecting and promoting diversity by avoiding any form of discrimination; avoiding conflicts of interest; seeking guidance from management or the Ethics Department when faced with questions regarding the code of conduct or complex ethical situations; reporting truthfully and promptly any suspected violation of the code of ethics; and cooperating in ethical investigations, maintaining confidentiality and disclosing the facts objectively and without bias.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative and descriptive study examines the relationships and differences among key variables within the work environment of the Lider Express supermarket in Chillan. The methodology incorporates data collection through a structured questionnaire, complemented by statistical analyses, including contingency tables and F-tests, to identify patterns, associations, and significant differences among employee groups.

Population and sample

The sample used is non-probabilistic, since the subgroup was not selected randomly, but was adapted to the specific characteristics of the study (Kim, 2022). It is important to acknowledge that not all eligible employees participated in this study. Some decided not to participate, while others were on medical leave and/or work permits. For these reasons, the final sample consisted of 73 employees (Table 1).

The sample includes employees in four job categories: (1) Store operator: they represent the largest group within the supermarket. Their function is multifunctional, since they do not have a specific task assigned; (2) Security: responsible for ensuring the internal security of the company; (3) Treasurers: responsible for managing the flow of money in the supermarket checkout area, including counting cash at the beginning and end of the workday, and; (4) Others: responsible for handling and organizing the products stored in the supermarket warehouse.

Table 1. Sample characterization.

Variable	Categories	n	%
Gender	Female	41	56.2%
	Male	32	43.8%
Age (years)	18 – 24	20	27.4%
	25 – 34	26	35.6%
	35 – 44	17	23.3%
	45 – 54	9	12.3%
	Over 54	1	1.4%
Education	Elementary	5	6.8%
	Incomplete Secondary	1	1.4%
	Complete Secondary	30	41.1%
	Incomplete Professional Technical	24	32.9%
	Complete Professional Technical	13	17.8%
	Up to 6 months	23	31.5%
Work seniority	Between 6 and 12 months	17	23.3%
	Between 12 and 24 months	12	16.4%
	More than 24 months	21	28.8%
Position	Store operator	55	75.3%
	Security	3	4.1%
	Treasury	10	13.7%
	Other	5	6.8%
Net income	US\$ 163.00 – US\$ 325.00	19	26.0%
	US\$ 325.00 – US\$ 542.00	36	49.3%
	US\$ 542.00 – US\$ 759.00	15	20.5%
	More than US\$ 759.00	3	4.1%

Source: own elaboration.

Instrument

The data were obtained using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire. Validity was tested by a panel of four experts in psychology, human behavior, organizational development, and business administration. The teaching experience in professional ethics of one of the specialists guaranteed the quality and relevance of the instrument in terms of its content and application.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts: 1) *General characterization of the respondent* – This section contained questions regarding gender, age, seniority, and the position held. It aimed to gather basic demographic and work-

related information from the participants. 2) The second part corresponded to the ethical value dimension. It was subdivided into three sections, comprising a total of 22 assertions. The first addressed respondents' individual knowledge about ethical values and values within the company. The second section included a series of descriptions of everyday work situations, designed to assess the influence of middle management on employees. It presented statements depicting ethical and unethical behaviors, examining their impact on employees. The third section evaluated employees' perception of the organization's ethical scope.

The Likert scale provided five response options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Each response has a score, which is associated with whether the statement is positive or negative, facilitating the quantification and subsequent analysis of the data.

Statistical analysis

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistical tools. This has helped identify patterns and relationships among the study variables. Contingency tables were used to explore relationships between categorical variables. Contingency tables allowed the joint distribution of the variables to be seen and possible associations among the variables analyzed. The tabular representation enabled significant patterns in the data to be seen quite easily and thus formed a very good basis for further inferential analysis (Peña-Acuña et al., 2024).

Fisher's exact test was conducted to identify significant differences across groups. Tests have been used to determine the statistical significance of the classification in the contingency tables, taking into account the presence of empty cells. It has been most helpful in comparing various groups and assessing whether the observed differences are statistically significant (Sureiman & Mangera, 2020). The data analysis was conducted using RStudio version 4.4.2, ensuring that all

calculations were accurate and that the results were clearly presented. The resulting statistics, derived from the conducted tests, were interpreted in view of previously determined significance levels $\alpha = 0.05$ and $\alpha = 0.10$ to enable well-substantiated conclusions regarding the proposed hypotheses.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents the distribution of individual ethical values by demographic and employment characteristics. Each category has a rather different distribution across groups. This is quite reasonable as no case falls into either the middle-high or high categories. As age increases, the perceived importance of individual ethical values decreases, shifting from a low to a medium-low level. The middle-low category is predominant across all age groups; however, the share diminishes greatly in older age groups, representing only 1.4% for those over 54 years of age. Individuals who have advanced through higher stages of education tend to show a progression in ethical values. Individuals with complete secondary education dominate the middle-low category (41.1%), while those with incomplete higher education also make a substantial contribution (27.4%). Those with complete higher education exhibit a smaller proportion in the low category (4.1%) compared to other groups.

Table 2. Individual Ethic Values by Demographic and Employment Characteristics.

Variable	Categories	Individual Ethic Values			
		Low	Middle-Low	Middle-High	High
Gender	Female	4.1%	52.1%	-	-
	Male	5.5%	38.4%	-	-
Age (years)*	18 – 24	6.8%	20.1%	-	-
	25 – 34	1.4%	34.2%	-	-
	35 – 44	-	23.3%	-	-
	45 – 54	1.4%	11.0%	-	-
	Over 54	-	1.4%	-	-
Education**	Elementary	-	6.8%	-	-
	Incomplete Secondary	-	1.4%	-	-
	Complete Secondary	-	41.1%	-	-
	Incomplete Higher Education	-	27.4%	-	-
	Complete Higher Education	4.1%	13.7%	-	-
Work seniority	Up to 6 months	4.1%	27.4%	-	-
	Between 6 and 12 months	2.7%	20.1%	-	-
	Between 12 and 24 months	2.7%	13.7%	-	-
	More than 24 months	-	28.8%	-	-
Position	Store operator	5.5%	69.9%	-	-
	Security	-	4.1%	-	-
	Treasury	2.7%	11.0%	-	-
	Other	1.4%	5.5%	-	-
Net income	US\$ 163.00 – US\$ 325.00	2.7%	23.3%	-	-
	US\$ 325.00 – US\$ 542.00	4.1%	45.2%	-	-
	US\$ 542.00 – US\$ 759.00	1.4%	19.2%	-	-
	More than US\$ 759.00	1.4%	2.7%	-	-

Note: * significant at 90% probability; ** significant at 95% probability, according to Fisher's exact test. Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3 depicts the influence of middle management ethical values by demographic and employment characteristics. Age has a general decline in the low category as age increases, peaking in the youngest group, 18–24 years, at

19.2%. This trend continues into the middle-low category, although the highest representation is seen in the 25–34-year-olds at 16.4%. Those over 54 years have very little representation in either category.

Table 3. External Influence by Demographic and Employment Characteristics.

Variable	Categories	Influence of Middle Management Ethics			
		Low	Middle-Low	Middle-High	High
Gender	Female	26.0%	30.1%	-	-
	Male	24.7%	19.2%	-	-
Age (years)*	18 – 24	19.2%	8.2%	-	-
	25 – 34	19.2%	16.4%	-	-
	35 – 44	6.8%	16.4%	-	-
	45 – 54	4.1%	8.2%	-	-
	Over 54	1.4%	-	-	-
Education	Elementary	2.7%	4.1%	-	-
	Incomplete Secondary	1.4%	-	-	-
	Complete Secondary	15.1%	26.0%	-	-
	Incomplete Higher Education	20.5%	12.3%	-	-
	Complete Higher Education	11.0%	6.8%	-	-
Work seniority	Up to 6 months	19.2%	12.3%	-	-
	Between 6 and 12 months	15.1%	8.2%	-	-
	Between 12 and 24 months	9.6%	6.8%	-	-
	More than 24 months	6.8%	21.9%	-	-
Position	Store operator	39.7%	35.6%	-	-
	Security	4.1%	-	-	-
	Treasury	2.7%	11.0%	-	-
	Other	4.1%	2.7%	-	-
Net income	US\$ 163.00 – US\$ 325.00	12.3%	13.7%	-	-
	US\$ 325.00 – US\$ 542.00	30.1%	19.2%	-	-
	US\$ 542.00 – US\$ 759.00	6.8%	13.7%	-	-
	More than US\$ 759.00	1.4%	2.7%	-	-

Note: * significant at 90% probability; ** significant at 95% probability, according to Fisher's exact test. *Source: Own elaboration.*

Table 4 shows the distribution of organizational ethics by demographic and employment characteristics. Similar to the analyses of the preceding tables, the categories of

organizational ethics—low, middle-low, middle-high, and high—are represented by data only in the low and middle-low categories, and not in the middle-high and high categories.

Tabla 4. Organizational Ethics by Demographic and Employment Characteristics.

Variable	Categories	Organizational Ethics			
		Low	Middle-Low	Middle-High	High
Gender	Female	17.8%	38.4%	-	-
	Male	16.4%	27.4%	-	-
Age (years)	18 – 24	13.7%	13.7%	-	-
	25 – 34	12.3%	23.3%	-	-
	35 – 44	4.1%	19.2%	-	-
	45 – 54	2.7%	9.6%	-	-
	Over 54	1.4%	-	-	-
Education	Elementary	-	6.8%	-	-
	Incomplete Secondary	-	1.4%	-	-
	Complete Secondary	11.0%	22	-	-
	Incomplete Higher Education	15.1%	17.8%	-	-
	Complete Higher Education	8.2%	9.6%	-	-
Work seniority	Up to 6 months	13.7%	17.8%	-	-
	Between 6 and 12 months	6.8%	16.4%	-	-
	Between 12 and 24 months	5.5%	11.0%	-	-
	More than 24 months	8.2%	20.1%	-	-
Position	Store operator	21.9%	53.4%	-	-
	Security	1.4%	2.7%	-	-
	Treasury	5.5%	8.2%	-	-
	Other	5.5%	1.4%	-	-
Net income	US\$ 163.00 – US\$ 325.00	9.6%	16.4%	-	-
	US\$ 325.00 – US\$ 542.00	16.4%	24	-	-
	US\$ 542.00 – US\$ 759.00	5.5%	15.1%	-	-
	More than US\$ 759.00	2.7%	1.4%	-	-

Note: * significant at 90% probability; ** significant at 95% probability, according to Fisher's exact test. *Source: Own elaboration.*

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal many common patterns in the ranking of individual, middle management, and organizational ethical values across the various demographic and employment characteristics (Al Halbusi et al., 2023). Specifically, there is a high concentration in the low and middle-low categories with no

representation in either the middle-high or high category. The absence would suggest an overarching perception of weak ethical standards or ethical engagements within the organization (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). With respect to individual ethical values, most of the respondents classified ethical values as middle-low, with quite significant differences across different demographic factors. For instance,

females scored higher in this category than males, which could indicate a greater sensitivity to the ethical challenges within the individual setting (Ameen et al., 1996). On the other hand, the decline of low values across age groups might point to the older employees either perceiving higher individual ethical values or becoming more tolerant of the existing condition (McConatha et al., 2022).

The educational level is determinant, and the middle-low category is dominated by people with higher education, especially those who have completed their secondary education or higher. This pattern might suggest that education may improve ethical awareness, leading to more critical evaluations (McIntosh et al., 2021). Work seniority is positively related to middle-low values, since employees with longer tenure may have greater exposure to ethical norms or practices (Al Halbusi et al., 2021).

The ranking of middle management ethical values indicates a predominance of low and middle-low influence, with store operators, younger subjects, and employees with the lowest salaries scoring exceptionally high in the low category. These results highlight the role of middle managers in establishing workplace ethical values (Lescano-Duncan, 2019). A higher percentage of females in the middle-low category may indicate that they expect a higher level of ethical leadership (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

Noticeably, employees having more than 24-month seniority fall within the middle-low concentration, possibly because this level represents a bit more critical and subtle thinking or the formation of views with experience. In fact, none of these groups exhibit a predominance in middle-high or high levels of influence, raising a serious concern for effective middle management as regards to promoting an ethical environment (Jooss et al., 2024). A similar pattern appears regarding organizational ethics, since most of the respondents rated their organization in the low or middle-low categories. The same categories are overwhelmingly dominated by store operators, which reflects a very low level of perceived ethical culture at the operational level. Employees in treasury positions assign higher evaluations, possibly showing a division in ethical perceptions between hierarchical

levels (Inegbedion et al., 2020; Foglia et al., 2013). Again, education is important because those with incomplete higher education scored in the low category (Giani et al., 2020). Work seniority and income also contribute to shaping perceptions: longer tenure or higher earnings are associated with a slight shift toward the middle-low category, which would suggest a more favorable view of organizational ethics in these groups (Graham et al., 2022).

The absence of high-scoring categories in the dimensions of individual, middle management, and organizational ethics is both an interesting and concerning finding, as it suggests a widespread perception of weak or insufficiently developed ethical standards in the organization. This lack of high categories suggests: (1) Weak organizational culture in ethics: since the case history indicates the presence of policies and mechanisms for organizational ethics, it can be attributed more to a disconnect between the organization's stated values and actual practices (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). (2) Lack of ethical leadership: The absence of high rankings in middle management ethical values suggests that those in these roles are not acting as role models or are not actively promoting ethical behavior among their teams. This is important because middle managers are essential in strengthening the organization's ethical values at the operational levels (Lescano-Duncan, 2019). (3) Distinction between individual and organizational ethics: even though some employees may have high perceptions of their personal ethical values, this does not necessarily translate into high perceptions of organizational ethics. This implies that employees believe that the organization does not support or reward their personal ethical values (Inegbedion et al., 2020). (4) Consequences for the sustainability and reputation of the organization: The absence of high-level ethical categories can have long-term detrimental effects on the sustainability and reputation of the subject of the study. Customers trust, along with investors and employees, can be undermined by the perception of low ethical standards in a business environment that is becoming increasingly aware of corporate social responsibility (Roy et al., 2024).

Results indicate a need for ethical development throughout the organization but, in particular, in middle management and the operational

staff (Roy et al., 2024). Potential interventions addressing these apparent deficits in ethical culture would include ethical training, leadership development, and clear and transparent communication (Hyatt & Gruenglas, 2023). Further, special attention regarding negative ethical contexts is required from the younger, lowlier remunerated employee, and from an operational level perspective (Rondi et al., 2022).

This study stands apart from existing literature by offering a comprehensive and multifaceted examination of ethical perceptions within a particular retail environment, integrating three essential dimensions: individual, middle management, and organizational ethics. This study diverges from earlier investigations that tend to concentrate on a singular aspect and broader contexts, instead pinpointing distinct patterns informed by demographic and occupational characteristics, thereby providing a more nuanced and practical perspective. Several shortcomings are recognized that could be corrected in future research: (1) self-assessment bias, which can result in social desirability biases. This could be addressed in future research through mixed methods for a deeper understanding of ethical perceptions in these contexts (McConatha et al., 2022); (2) limitations in generalization. Those wishing to venture into this field of study could expand the data collection to other geographical, market, and temporal contexts (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023); and (3) selection bias, which can be addressed through probability sampling that guarantees greater representativeness (Kim, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

In all dimensions in individual ethics, external influence, and organizational ethical values fall into “Low” and “Middle-Low” and do not stand in “Middle-High” or “High.” This trend is likely an indication of some limits in the systemic or workplace development of higher values.

The demographic variables of gender and age exert only a limited influence, and younger respondents are slightly overrepresented in the “Low” category. Higher education and longer job tenure are not associated with higher values because most of the subjects with complete

secondary education and incomplete higher education with shorter job tenure also fall into “Middle-Low.” In turn, operational positions and mid-income brackets prevail in this group, which reflects a probable association of the scope of job responsibilities with the perceived values.

The fact that all the tables do not show higher categories suggests an issue in workplace policies, culture, or leadership practices that can be holding employees back from developing or showing higher individual ethics, external influence, and organizational ethics. The solution for these shortcomings ranges from targeted interventions, including shifting cultural positions, training, and structural adjustments to organizational support for higher ethical and working standards.

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