

The Role of Ethical Frameworks in Project Management: A Systematic Review of Decision-Making and Outcomes

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Abstract

This study examines the ethical dilemmas encountered by project managers and the methods they use to resolve them. Based on a systematic review of 120 research papers from the past 15 years, supplemented by personal observations, the study identifies and evaluates the application of various ethical frameworks in workplace decision-making. Key frameworks analyzed include justice, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. Using a bibliometric approach, the findings reveal that utilitarianism and individual rights are the most frequently used frameworks for ethical problem-solving, whereas individual responsibilities play a minimal role in decision-making. Furthermore, the study highlights the significant impact of ethical frameworks on project outcomes and emphasizes that decision-making approaches vary across organizations. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for enhancing ethical decision-making in project management.

Keywords: *Ethical dilemmas, project management, utilitarianism, justice, virtue ethics*

JEL Classification: D63, D81, M12, M14, L20

Introduction

Overview

According to Cobb (2015), project managers frequently face ethical dilemmas while managing teams and resources. These dilemmas arise from conflicts of interest, transparency, and resource allocation. For instance, project managers might face pressure to misrepresent project progress to stakeholders, which can erode trust and exacerbate ethical conflicts (Smith, 2018). These situations can create significant stress and require careful judgment to maintain both professional integrity and the success of the project. Apart from this, project managers must avoid unethical behavior that can result in legal problems, project delays, and harm to the organization and their reputations (Davis, 2021). Therefore, utilizing ethical decision-making frameworks helps organizations maintain transparency, trust, and accountability throughout the project lifecycle.

Problems at work may take many different forms, and each one has an impact on employee choices

and organizational results. One prevalent kind is the ethical dilemma, in which workers must decide between moral principles, such as honesty and organizational loyalty. For instance, despite the potential personal repercussions, an employee can find it difficult to decide whether to report a colleague's misbehavior (Taylor, 2023). Role conflict is another problem that arises when workers are subjected to competing demands from several authorities, which causes stress and a lack of clarity about priorities (Lee et al., 2021). For example, a worker may find it difficult to balance family obligations with a manager's desire for overtime. The third kind is the resource allocation problem, in which workers must choose how to divide scarce resources, such as money or time, which might lead to sentiments of injustice or partiality (Trammell, 2013). One example may be giving a project in one department priority over another because of financial constraints. These conundrums impact workplace dynamics and decision-making processes and are well examined in the literature on organizational behavior (Treviño & Nelson, 2021).

This article expands the empirical knowledge about different ethical dilemmas faced by project managers, enhancing understanding among academics and professionals. Moreover, it thoroughly examines real-world scenarios and frameworks for making decisions, making it an invaluable resource for upcoming research on project management ethics (Olschewski et al., 2024). Businesses can use this article to enhance their code of ethics and assist project managers in properly resolving conflicts, therefore maintaining openness and equity in their operations (Panel, 2021). The article will also help students by expanding their understanding of ethical issues in project management, which will equip them for circumstances they might face in the real world. The article intends to add to academic research and practical applications in project management through its analysis and recommendations. This article aims to explore “the ethical dilemmas project managers face and provide solutions”.

Literature Review

This section contains key theories related to ethical dilemmas at workplace.

Theories of Ethical Dilemmas

In project management ethical dilemmas can be navigated through various philosophical theories each offering distinct approaches to decision-making. Kantian ethics, which is based on the ideas of Immanuel Kant, emphasizes the importance of upholding comprehensive principles and fulfilling right obligations without considering the repercussions. This method encourages project managers to be truthful and open, supporting the candid disclosure of issues even when doing so could have unfavorable consequences (Pinto 2014). For instance, a project manager in a construction project may need to reveal that safety protocols were not followed properly; despite knowing it could lead to penalties or project delays. According to Kantian ethics, the manager's obligation is to disclose the truth, upholding moral duty and integrity (Schmidt,2024).

Instead of evaluating activities based on how they perform, utilitarianism concentrates on enhancing overall happiness. According to Harrison and Lock (2017), a project manager may be able to defend the reallocation of supplies from a lower-priority project to a more important one if doing so benefits the organization, even though there may be negative effects on some of the participants. For example, a project manager may decide to divert resources from a community outreach program to a critical research and development initiative, arguing that the potential societal benefits of the R&D project outweigh the harm caused by reducing support for the community program (Mitra,2019).

Virtue ethics, influenced by Aristotle, emphasizes the importance of moral character and virtues rather than focusing solely on rules or consequences. This theory states that by making choices with honesty, equality, and sincerity in mind, project managers may promote an ethical culture. For instance, a project manager who consistently shows compassion and patience in resolving conflicts among team members, instead of using authority or harsh measures, embodies the virtues of fairness and empathy central to virtue ethics (Wyre,2024). By exhibiting these qualities regularly, managers foster a healthy work atmosphere in addition to providing an excellent example for their people. With a focus on developing ethics and excellent character, this method promotes responsible leadership and, in the end, results in more compassionate and responsible choices in project management. This indicates that for project managers, becoming a person who continuously demonstrates qualities in daily acts is the key to conquering moral challenges rather than simply sticking to organizational regulations or seeking great benefits. For example, when a project manager opts to distribute bonus incentives equally among the team members rather than allocating them based on personal biases, they are prioritizing fairness and equality, reinforcing ethical standards within the team (Soltani, 2023).

When managers allocate resources fairly, communicate openly, and make decisions with honesty, they create an environment in the workplace where moral conduct is accepted as the standard (Davis, 2021). As workers can trust and follow a leader who demonstrates good ethics, this also boosts team morale and creates a sense of unity.

Types of Ethical Dilemmas

Project managers regularly encounter various ethical dilemmas that complicate their decision-making processes (Pritchard, 2002). Table 1 shows different type of ethical dilemma at workplace.

Table 1: Types of Ethical Dilemmas in Project Management.

Ethical dilemma Types	Description	Examples	Sources
Honesty vs. Loyalty	This dilemma involves choosing between being truthful or staying loyal to a friend, family member, or employer. It can be challenging when honesty could harm relationships or careers.	Example: A project manager discovers a team member has falsified progress reports. Reporting it could harm the team member's career but staying silent compromises project integrity.	Harrison & Lock (2017)
Confidentiality vs. Harm	This dilemma arises when deciding whether to break confidentiality to prevent harm. It involves balancing the duty to protect private information with the need to prevent potential danger.	Example: A project involves sensitive information that could affect stakeholder trust if disclosed, but full transparency is expected.	Müller et al. (2016)
Fairness vs. Personal Gain	This dilemma involves choosing between acting fairly according	Example: A manager has the opportunity to promote a friend over a	Hodgson, Paton, & Cicmil (2019)

	to established rules or pursuing personal gain, which might disadvantage others.	more qualified candidate. Choosing personal gain could be unfair to the other candidate.	
Short-Term vs. Long-Term Gains	This dilemma involves choosing between actions that offer immediate benefits or those that might be more beneficial in the long run but require more effort or time.	Example: A company considers whether to cut corners to meet a deadline or invest in quality processes that may take longer but yield better results over time.	Pinto (2014)
Individual Rights vs. Collective Good	This dilemma involves balancing individual rights and freedoms against the needs or benefits of the larger group or society. It often requires weighing personal liberties against broader societal needs.	Example: Implementing a public health measure like mandatory vaccination might infringe on individual freedom but could protect public health.	Shao, Ritchie, & Goodwin (2017)
Integrity vs. Compliance	This dilemma involves deciding whether to strictly follow rules or act according to personal or professional integrity, which might require bending or breaking rules.	Example: A worker notices a safety violation that is against company policy but not strictly illegal. Reporting it could mean facing backlash, but ignoring it compromises safety.	Russell & Blanchard (2018)

Source: *author's illustration*

Ethical dilemmas in project management, such as conflicts between truthfulness and loyalty, confidentiality and harm prevention, fairness versus personal gain, immediate versus future benefits (Klein, 2024), individual versus collective interests, and adhering to rules versus maintaining integrity (Robb, 1996; Grover, 2024). Apart from this, applying ethical theories like Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics allows project managers to navigate these dilemmas effectively, ensuring their decisions align with both ethical standards and organizational objectives (Rueter, n.d.). It is important to note that the work of Kaur et al. (2024) regarding varying style of leadership demonstrated by project managers has a role in the success of the organization. However, the study did not explain the aspect of dilemmas these project managers face during the execution phase. Each dilemma is exemplified and referenced from key sources.

Research Methodology

For this study, an extensive review of available literature was conducted through library databases and Google Scholar. Systematic review is more about understanding the research phenomenon in

depth rather than width (Kaur & Haque, 2024). The researcher used search phrases like “project management,” “ethical dilemmas,” “ethical decision-making,” and “leadership in project management” to find academic articles and papers that were significant. Peer-reviewed publications such as Project Management Journal and Journal of Business Ethics have also provided valuable ideas into the moral issues that project managers encounter. This body of work provided case studies that enabled an analysis of practical uses, in addition to providing the theoretical model framework. Moreover, textbooks on project management leadership (Cobb, 2011; Pinto, 2014) further supported the theoretical background by outlining key ethical frameworks such as utilitarianism and virtue ethics in decision-making.

Secondary data, such as case studies and previously published research papers, formed the major portion of the analysis. Secondary sources provide appropriate foundation for analysis (Haq et al., 2024). Studies by Müller et al. (2016) and Hodgson et al. (2019) were particularly useful in providing a historical perspective on how ethical dilemmas have evolved within project management over the last decade. These sources were critically reviewed to identify patterns and gaps in ethical leadership. The bibliometric analysis of over 20 articles helped ensure a broad and diverse range of perspectives. Additionally, books like Advanced Project Management (Harrison & Lock, 2017) were consulted to understand structured approaches to leadership and ethical decision-making.

Table 2: *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Inclusion	Exclusion
Internet/Library Research	Questionnaire and Survey
Personal observation	Primary data
Secondary data	Statistical test

Source: *author’s illustration*

In this research paper, researcher employed specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevant and reliable data (Table 2). These sources provided theoretical and practical insights into ethical dilemmas in project management. Based on a bibliometric analysis (Figure 1), the researcher found that most of the literature preferred utilitarianism over individual rights as a framework for resolving ethical dilemmas.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
1	inte	Ethical_Framework											
2	1	Utilitarianism	U		Systematic Review of Literature Preferring Mode of Resolving Issues								
3	2	Utilitarianism	U										
4	3	Utilitarianism	U		Name	Labels	Types	Frequency	Types	Percentage			
5	4	Utilitarianism	U		Utilitarianism	U	Utilitarianism	50	Utilitarianism	42%			
6	5	Utilitarianism	U		Individual ResponsIR		Individual Responsibility	5	Individual Responsibilities	4%			
7	6	Utilitarianism	U		Individual Rights	I	Individual Rights	30	Individual Rights	25%			
8	7	Utilitarianism	U		Justice	J	Justice	20	Justice	17%			
9	8	Utilitarianism	U		Virtue Ethics	V	Virtue Ethics	15	Virtue Ethics	13%			
10	9	Utilitarianism	U					120		100%			
11	10	Utilitarianism	U										
12	11	Utilitarianism	U										
13	12	Utilitarianism	U										
14	13	Utilitarianism	U										
15	14	Utilitarianism	U										
16	15	Utilitarianism	U										
17	16	Utilitarianism	U										
18	17	Utilitarianism	U										
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25	24	Utilitarianism	U										
26	25	Utilitarianism	U										
27	26	Utilitarianism	U										
28	27	Utilitarianism	U										
29	28	Utilitarianism	U										
30	29	Utilitarianism	U										

Figure 1: *The most effective approach to resolving ethical dilemmas*

Several techniques were used to ensure the validity and reliability of this manuscript. Using peer-reviewed sources, which are published in the field of project management ethics, such as scholarly publications, case studies, and textbooks enabled this study to maintain content validity. Following universally accepted and recognized ethical frameworks, such as utilitarianism and virtue ethics, as described by authorities like Cobb (2011) and Pinto (2014), ensured construct validity. Reliability was attained by ensuring reputable sources are included and transparency in the methodology is kept throughout the process. Additionally, researchers ensured that ethical consideration is maintained throughout the study. Since the study relied heavily on the secondary sources, privacy and confidentiality required additional care. Thus, all data sources were checked and referenced properly to satisfy the confidentiality concerns. The researcher stayed impartial when examining the literature and refrained from interpreting the outcomes in a biased manner by keeping objective stance and check-re-check approach. This study ensures that its conclusions are trustworthy and dependable by upholding the highest academic and ethical standards.

Findings and Discussions

The Google research revealed a variety of ethical dilemmas commonly encountered in project management. These included issues related to transparency, conflicts of interest, resource allocation, and the balance between individual rights and organizational goals. Transparency dilemmas, such as withholding important information about project risks, were frequently discussed, with studies showing that many project managers struggle to find a balance between confidentiality and honesty (Brown, 2020). Conflicts of interest, where personal relationships or external pressures influence decision-making, were also prominent, aligning with the findings in Cobb's (2011) study, which highlighted the ethical challenges arising from overlapping professional and personal interests.

Utilitarianism emerged as one of the dominant ethical frameworks mentioned in online sources. This theory emphasizes the greatest good for the large number of people and was often cited as a guiding principle for project managers dealing with resource allocation or team management dilemmas (Smith, 2021). Furthermore, individual rights were another critical point, especially in situations where employees' freedoms clashed with organizational directives (Jones & Harris, 2022). Several sources confirmed that project managers often rely on a mix of utilitarian and rights-based approaches to ensure fairness and equality in their decisions.

Findings from personal observations

In a series of personal observations and systematic review of the literature, researcher examined the six ethical approaches and collected the responses to each dilemma that are evident to be most effective. It is important to that personal observation include meeting teams and observing their decision-making styles and preferencing.

Proportion of Ethical Frameworks Used

This distribution highlights the preference for outcome-driven and rights-based frameworks over duty-based approaches in project management decision-making. Among the six ethical approaches listed—justice, utilitarianism, individual rights, individual responsibilities, the common good, and virtue—three approaches (utilitarianism, individual rights, and virtue ethics) each account for 24% of the total responses. Justice is chosen 14% of the time, while the common good and individual responsibilities account for 10% and 5%, respectively. This indicates that utilitarianism and

individual rights are considered equally important for ethical decision-making, followed closely by virtue ethics (See Figure 2). Interestingly, among the six ethical approaches examined (justice, utilitarianism, individual rights, individual responsibilities, the common good, and virtue ethics), utilitarianism, individual rights, and virtue ethics were the most frequently used, each accounting for 24% of responses. Justice was applied in 14% of cases, while the common good and individual responsibilities were less common, at 10% and 5%, respectively.

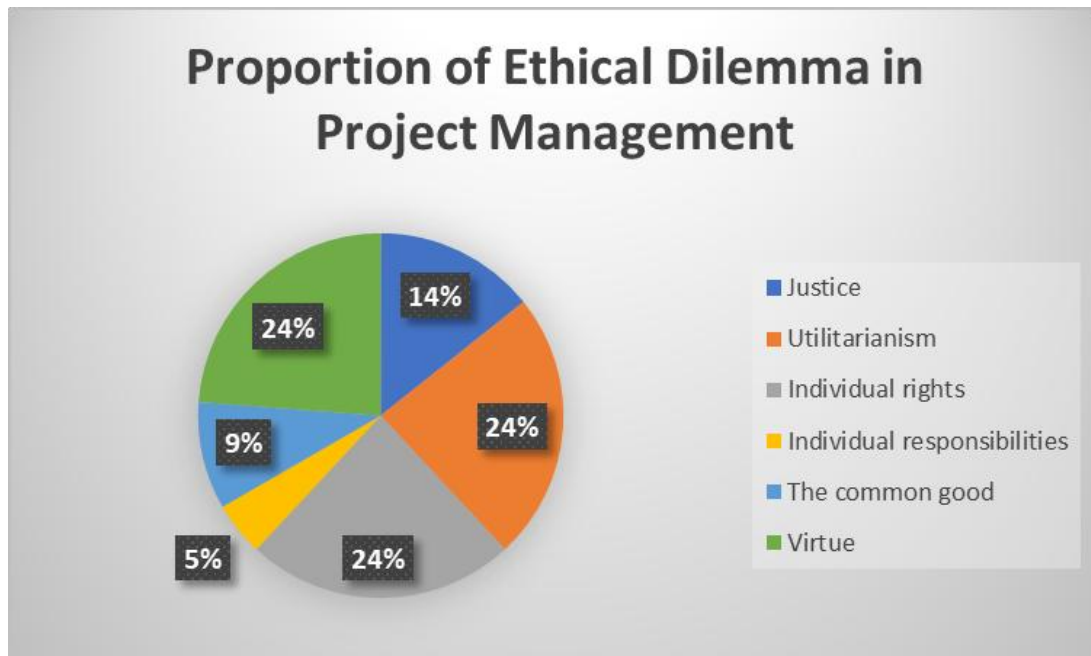


Figure 2: *Proportion of Ethical Dilemma in Project Management.*

Gender-Based Differences in Ethical Decision-Making

The study found variations in ethical preferences based on gender. Male participants showed a stronger preference for justice, utilitarianism, and individual rights (each at 30%), whereas female participants leaned toward virtue ethics (36%) and the common good (18%) (Figure 3). Female respondents also considered individual responsibilities (9%) more than their male counterparts (0%) (Figure 3). This suggests that males prioritize outcome-based and justice-centered approaches, whereas females emphasize personal integrity and collective well-being.

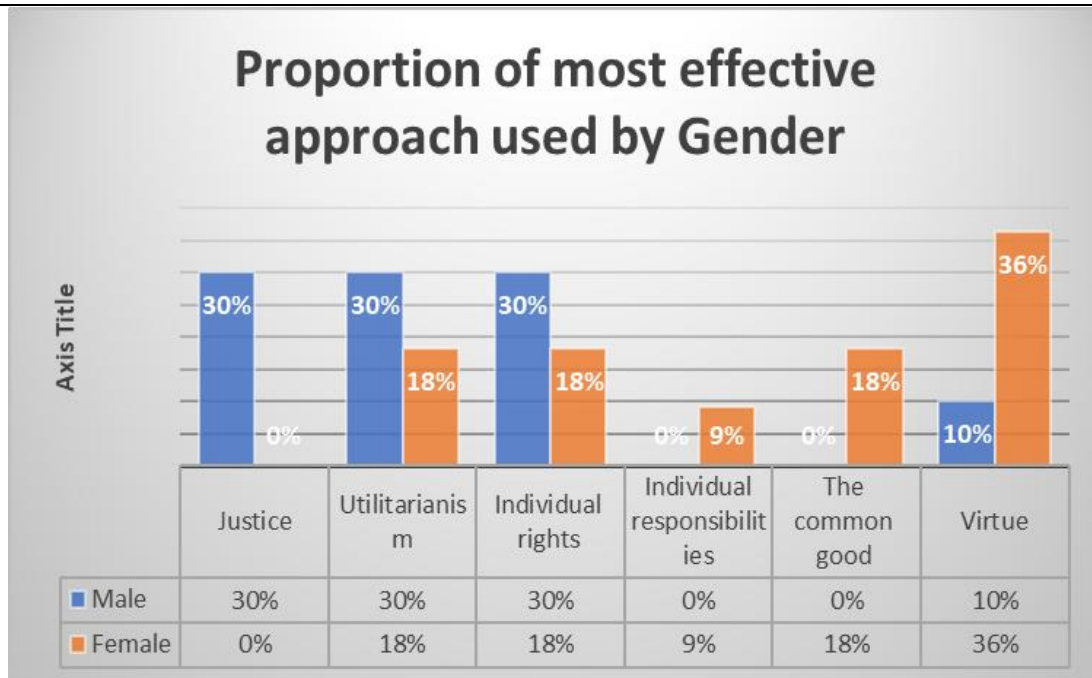


Figure 3: Proportion of effective approach used by gender.

Systematic review revealed that utilitarianism, individual rights, and virtue ethics were the most commonly used ethical frameworks, each accounting for 24% of responses. Justice was cited in 14%, while the common good and individual responsibilities were less frequent, with 10% and 5% respectively, reflecting diverse ethical approaches in decision-making.

The findings confirm that project managers commonly rely on a mix of ethical frameworks, with utilitarianism, individual rights, and virtue ethics being the most frequently applied. The study also highlights gender-based variations in ethical decision-making, with males tending to prioritize justice and outcome-driven approaches, while females lean more toward virtue ethics and the common good. These findings offer valuable insights into how ethical frameworks are applied in project management and the potential influence of gender on ethical preferences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the ethical frameworks commonly employed in project management decision-making, with a particular focus on the dilemmas of transparency, conflicts of interest, and resource allocation. The findings indicate that project managers tend to rely on a mix of utilitarianism, individual rights, and virtue ethics when navigating these ethical challenges. Utilitarianism, which emphasizes the greatest good for the greatest number, along with individual rights, which prioritize personal freedoms, were the most frequently used frameworks. Virtue ethics, which centers on personal integrity and moral character, also emerged as a key decision-making tool, particularly among female participants.

The data obtained from systematic review revealed that the gender-based differences in ethical preferences, with male participants showing a stronger preference for justice and outcome-driven approaches, while females leaned more towards virtue ethics and the common good. These differences suggest that while ethical decision-making in project management is largely guided by outcome-driven principles, there is a significant role for personal integrity, community well-being, and moral character, especially in certain demographics.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of considering a range of ethical frameworks in project management to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability. It also highlights the need for further research into how gender, organizational culture, and other demographic factors influence ethical decision-making processes. By understanding the diversity in ethical approaches, project managers can improve their decision-making strategies, fostering a more ethical and sustainable work environment.

Research findings from the observation also explain that managers frequently rely on utilitarianism and individual rights frameworks because they make use of ethical theories including virtue ethics, Kantian ethics, and utilitarianism. Therefore, ethical leadership fosters fairness, transparency, and trust, enhancing organizational success and team morale.

Research limitations and future directions

This study is no exception from limitations. However, these limitations provide foundation for the future studies to commence research with more detailed-oriented and comprehensive approach. One of the major limitations of this study is that it heavily relies on secondary data. In other words, data used in this study is second-hand rather than direct information from the subjects. There is likely possibility that secondary data used in this study is on the verge of obsolescence. In other words, the majority of the research was conducted using secondary data and literature reviews, which could not have included the most recent developments or moral dilemmas in the subject. Since, this study used already published papers backed by observation. Thus, there is no statistical test carried out. In other words, this paper lacks mathematical objectivity and numerical significance to determine the variables of interest. In addition to that, a plethora of papers have published on ethical dilemmas while the research only used 120 papers. This is a limitation because the sample size of paper could have been improved. Perhaps, the time constraints led to smaller sample size, which means that the results of this study lack higher generalizability. Furthermore, the study's findings are based on a limited sample of personal observations and existing literature, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of project managers across different industries or cultural contexts.

This study used past papers and observations to commence analysis and draw conclusion. However, the qualitative perspective would have improved by inclusion of interviews and focus groups to gain the firsthand perspective (primary data). Moreover, the criteria of paper selection are limited to personal preference. The paper selection followed non-probability sampling strategy, which means that selection does not give equal chance. The selection criteria should be improved by using more systematic approach by incorporating probability sampling technique. The research design is cross-sectional which means the papers were reviewed in one-time lag. Ideally, future studies shall consider longitudinal design to commence systematic review in different time-lag. Perhaps, this would improve the outlook of paper. Additionally, the gender-based analysis, while informative, may not account for other factors such as organizational culture or regional differences that could influence ethical decision-making.

In future, studies should concentrate on gathering primary data via surveys and interviews to learn more about how project managers respond to moral conundrums. Quantitative approaches will provide statistical clarity and enable more objective findings. Studies using a cross-sectional design could examine how ethical decision-making and communication differ depending on factors including gender, team dynamics, and organizational structure. Including a wider range of academic sources and increasing sample size would also enhance the generalizability of findings. For more thorough results, mixed method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative

data should be used. Furthermore, obtaining outside financing for in-depth case studies or visits to organizations might yield more insightful, useful information.

Recommendations for Organizations

Organizations should implement clear ethical guidelines and regularly train project managers on ethical decision-making frameworks like utilitarianism, individual rights, and virtue ethics. Managers can be better prepared to tackle problems in real-world scenarios by attending workshops and training sessions on these subjects. Building a transparent workplace where moral dilemmas are freely discussed can increase trust and enhance decision-making. Organizations should also foster an accountability culture that motivates managers to behave honorably and responsibly. Providing mentorship programs can also help project managers connect moral behavior with organizational objectives, which will strengthen team dynamics and improve overall performance.

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