

Professional Learning, Leadership Development and Ethical Leadership for Job Motivation

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ABSTRACT

Professional learning is central to workplace capability, yet its motivational effects are often examined separately from leadership development and ethical leadership. This systematic literature review integrates evidence on professional learning, workplace learning mechanisms, leadership development and ethical leadership in relation to job motivation and public service motivation, with particular attention to Malaysian public-sector settings. A structured Scopus AI-assisted search produced 147 records. After duplicate removal, DOI eligibility checks, DOI verification and thematic relevance screening, 110 DOI-verified publications from 2007 to 2026 were retained. The synthesis shows that professional learning builds competence, mentoring and coaching support learning transfer, leadership development creates visible developmental pathways and ethical leadership shapes the climate in which learning is translated into sustained work motivation. Public service motivation remains distinct from generic job motivation and provides a context-sensitive outcome for public organisations. The review proposes a learning-centred framework in which professional learning and leadership development operate through workplace learning processes within an ethical leadership climate, while institutional context acts as a boundary condition. The framework provides a basis for future empirical testing and for aligning learning, leadership development and motivation policy in the Malaysian public sector.

Keywords: Professional learning, Workplace learning, Leadership development, Ethical leadership, Job motivation, Public service motivation, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional learning is a core mechanism through which employees update knowledge, strengthen competence and adapt practice to changing organisational demands. In public organisations, these learning processes are closely linked to service quality because employees must translate formal training, on-the-job learning and developmental support into sustained performance. Malaysian public institutions face this challenge while pursuing digital transformation, governance reform and workforce capability development. Job motivation therefore needs to be examined not only as a human resource outcome but also as a consequence of how learning is designed, supported and transferred into everyday work [1]-[6].

This review centres professional and workplace learning while retaining leadership development and ethical leadership as connected developmental conditions. Professional learning includes continuing professional education, on-the-job development and structured learning activities that strengthen competence and confidence [4]-[6]. Workplace learning extends this perspective to mentoring, coaching, psychological safety and the social conditions through which employees apply learning in practice [17]-[26]. Leadership development provides formal and informal pathways through which employees prepare for greater responsibility, while ethical leadership influences whether the workplace is experienced as fair, trustworthy and supportive of responsible action [7]-[15]. These streams are frequently studied separately even though employees encounter them as interconnected features of the same work environment.

The central gap is therefore not the absence of evidence on learning, leadership or ethics. Existing reviews tend to concentrate on discrete domains such as employee engagement [29], ethical leadership [43] and the boundary conditions of public service motivation [68]. What remains limited is an integrated account of how professional learning is transferred into motivation at work. A development programme may strengthen technical competence but produce little motivational benefit when employees see no opportunity to apply new capability or progress into meaningful roles. Likewise, mentoring and leadership development are less likely to support sustained motivation where psychological safety is weak or leaders are perceived as inconsistent in ethical conduct. A learning-centred synthesis is therefore needed to explain how capability development, workplace learning conditions and leadership climate combine within public-sector institutions.

The review addresses three objectives. First, it synthesises evidence on professional learning, workplace learning mechanisms, leadership development and ethical leadership in relation to job motivation and public service motivation. Second, it examines the theoretical mechanisms that connect learning and developmental conditions to motivational outcomes, with emphasis on self-determination theory, public service motivation theory, social learning perspectives and institutional theory. Third, it develops an integrated framework that positions professional learning and leadership development as developmental inputs, mentoring and coaching as workplace learning processes, psychological safety as an enabling condition, ethical leadership as a contributor to ethical climate and institutional context as a boundary condition for learning transfer and motivation.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 explains the systematic review protocol, search process, eligibility criteria, DOI verification and thematic synthesis. Section 3 presents findings across professional learning, workplace learning mechanisms, leadership development, ethical leadership, motivation and institutional context before integrating these streams into a learning-centred conceptual framework. Section 4 concludes with implications for professional learning policy, leadership development and future empirical research. This study also contributes to three of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs): SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), through its focus on professional learning, workforce motivation and ethical leadership in public-sector organisations.

2.METHOD

This study adopts a systematic literature review design to identify, screen and synthesise scholarly evidence on professional learning, workplace learning, leadership development, ethical leadership and job motivation. The systematic approach was selected because the review seeks transparent coverage of several connected constructs while retaining a theory-building objective. The protocol therefore combines structured literature identification, explicit eligibility screening, DOI verification and thematic synthesis rather than statistical pooling of effect sizes. The review is framed as a systematic synthesis of a defined Scopus-derived corpus rather than an exhaustive multi-database mapping of all available literature.

Literature was identified through Scopus AI, an artificial-intelligence-assisted discovery interface built on the Scopus abstract and citation database. Fourteen thematic queries covered continuing professional development and learning motivation, mentoring and coaching, leadership development and succession planning, ethical leadership and ethical climate, job motivation and public service motivation, institutional theory, talent management and Malaysian public-sector contexts. Search outputs were exported in BibTeX format and consolidated for screening. Eligibility required a scholarly publication indexed in Scopus, publication between 2007 and 2026, direct relevance to at least one review construct or pathway and a DOI that could be independently verified. Duplicate records, records without a DOI, records with a DOI that failed verification and records with limited direct relevance after full-text thematic assessment were excluded. The final search and verification cycle was completed on 14 September 2026. Scopus AI was used as a bounded literature-discovery route. Its use therefore defines the scope of the evidence base rather than establishing exhaustive coverage across multiple bibliographic databases. The DOI requirement was applied to support bibliographic verification and auditability, not as a proxy for methodological quality or scholarly importance.

The combined export yielded 147 records. Title and DOI deduplication removed four records, leaving 143 unique candidates. Sixteen records did not contain a DOI and were excluded from the DOI-verified corpus, leaving 127 records for verification. Each DOI was resolved through doi.org. Where direct resolution was impeded by publisher-side restrictions, the DOI was checked against Crossref registration metadata. Two records failed verification, leaving 125 verified candidates. A further fifteen records were excluded after full-text thematic assessment because their contribution to professional learning, workplace learning, leadership development, ethical leadership or job motivation was indirect relative to more relevant evidence. The final corpus therefore comprised 110 DOI-verified publications. Screening proceeded sequentially at record level and full-text level. A rotating dual-independent screening procedure was used across the three reviewers. Each candidate record was assessed independently by two reviewers at both screening stages, with reviewer pairs rotated across batches so that all three reviewers participated in primary screening. Disagreements on eligibility or thematic relevance were

referred to the third reviewer for adjudication, followed by consensus where necessary. Final inclusion required an agreed decision after adjudication. Candidate records were checked for duplication, DOI eligibility and construct relevance before full-text thematic assessment against the review objectives.

Of the final corpus, 70 records (63.6%) were published in or after 2021. The evidence base spans 2007 to 2026 and contains journal articles, book chapters and conference proceedings indexed in Scopus. The retained sources were read and coded into eight analytic sub-themes: professional learning and continuing professional development, workplace learning mechanisms, leadership development and succession planning, ethical leadership foundations, ethical leadership in Malaysia, job motivation and public service motivation, institutional context and workplace learning transfer, and the integrated framework. The synthesis compared convergent findings, boundary conditions and theoretical mechanisms across these sub-themes. Figure 1 presents the publication-year distribution of the final corpus. Because the corpus contains heterogeneous study designs and publication types, evidence appraisal was based on three cross-cutting criteria: directness to the review question, evidential role and convergence with other retained evidence. Direct empirical studies were given greater interpretive weight when substantive relationships were synthesised. Reviews were used to corroborate patterns, while chapters and proceedings were used mainly for theoretical interpretation, contextualisation or identification of research gaps. The synthesis distinguished direct evidence, mechanism evidence and contextual evidence. Direct evidence linked a review construct with learning or motivational outcomes. Mechanism evidence explained pathways such as competence, trust, psychological safety, autonomy or knowledge sharing. Contextual evidence informed boundary conditions such as governance, organisational routines, talent systems or national setting. This evidential appraisal improves transparency across heterogeneous sources but is not equivalent to a design-specific risk-of-bias assessment.

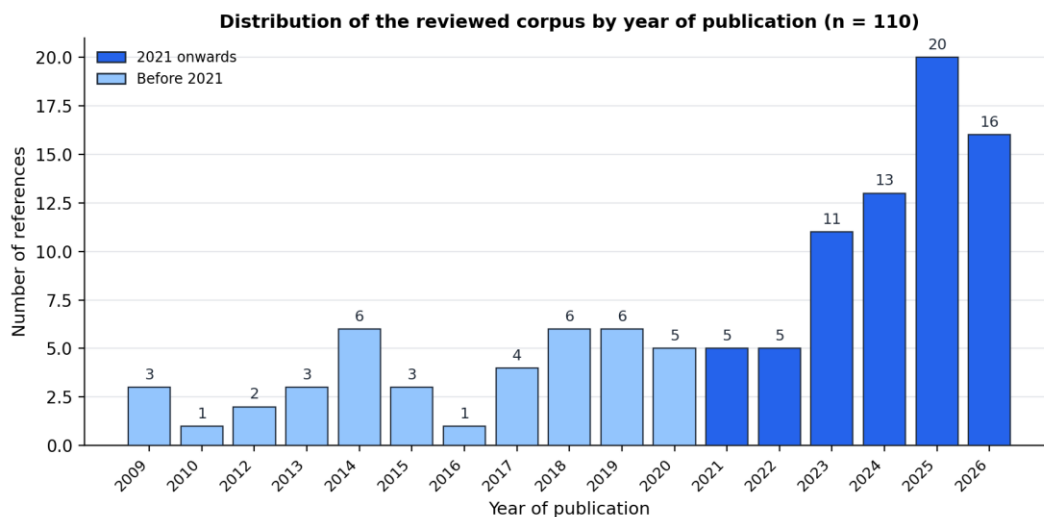


Figure 1. Distribution of the reviewed corpus by year of publication (n = 110).

Table 1. Distribution of DOI-verified evidence across review sections (non-exclusive; corpus n = 110)

Section	Focus	n
Intro & Method	Background, systematic review protocol and eligibility process	10
3.1	Professional learning and continuing professional development	6
3.2	Workplace learning: mentoring, coaching and psychological safety	8
3.3	Leadership development as workplace learning	16
3.4	Ethical leadership as a workplace learning climate	22
3.5	Ethical leadership and workplace learning in Malaysia	6
3.6	Job motivation and public service motivation	28
3.7	Institutional context and workplace learning transfer	13
3.8	Integrated professional and workplace learning framework	11
Unique corpus	DOI-verified publications retained in the review	110

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Professional Learning and Continuing Professional Development

Professional learning is the primary developmental input in this review because it strengthens employee competence before motivational effects emerge. Ibrahim et al. [4] found that continuous professional education predicted leadership development capacity among university staff, linking structured learning with self-efficacy and leadership readiness. Margam and Pandey [5] similarly emphasised continuous professional development in public-facing service occupations, while Withana et al. [16] showed that web-based platforms extend the reach and consistency of employee development. In the South African public service, Mokgolo, Dikotla and Chigo [6] reported that sustained learning and development were associated with improved service outcomes, although effectiveness depended on alignment with role-specific needs. Read together, this evidence positions professional learning as a capability-building process whose motivational value depends on transfer into meaningful work.

Workplace application is therefore central. Eisele et al. [17] showed that personal development plans supported motivation when employees experienced them as genuinely developmental rather than administrative. Hale, Norgate and Traeger [18] found that action learning combined with organisational development generated benefits beyond individual participants because newly acquired capability was transferred back into teams. The evidence suggests that formal learning is most likely to support job motivation when employees have opportunities to apply new knowledge, see a credible development pathway and receive organisational support for transfer. This interpretation provides the bridge from professional learning to the workplace learning mechanisms examined next.

3.2. Workplace Learning Mechanisms: Mentoring, Coaching and Psychological Safety

Workplace learning occurs through social interaction as well as formal programmes. Kim, Egan and Moon [19] found that managerial coaching predicted favourable work attitudes and performance across public organisations, indicating that coaching functions as a developmental resource rather than a peripheral managerial activity. Arshad, Hassan and Azam [21] likewise showed that managerial coaching supports knowledge sharing through proactive motivation. By contrast, psychological safety is treated here as an enabling condition for workplace learning rather than a learning process in itself. Palanović [20] linked leadership to psychological safety within the job demands-resources model, while Nyberg [22] connected leaders' interest in employee perspectives with psychological safety. The pattern is consistent: mentoring and coaching provide developmental interaction, while psychological safety creates the interpersonal conditions in which employees are more willing to ask questions, experiment and exchange knowledge.

Public-sector evidence reinforces this distinction. Adewuyi and Gbemi-Ogunleye [23] reported a direct relationship between mentoring, staff motivation and organisational goal achievement in Nigerian public tertiary institution libraries. Basher [24] positioned coaching and mentoring within leadership development, while Kyambade et al. [25] showed that socially responsible leadership and psychological safety shape job satisfaction in Ugandan public universities. Pham et al. [26] found that ethical leadership builds social capital among Vietnamese public-university employees through sequential mediation. The shared implication is that mentoring and coaching operate as workplace learning mechanisms, whereas psychological safety supports their effectiveness by lowering interpersonal risk and facilitating knowledge exchange, engagement and developmental participation.

3.3. Leadership Development as Workplace Learning

Leadership development extends professional learning from current-role competence to preparation for greater responsibility. Iddrisu [7] linked leadership traits, trust and employee voice with public-sector potential, while Kim, Ong and Chung [27] showed that training motivation in the South Korean public sector responds to the fit between developmental investment and workforce needs. Ugaddan and Park [28] connected leadership quality with public service motivation through social exchange, while Iddrisu and Mohammed [8] found that employee motivation and engagement mediate the relationship between leadership style and organisational effectiveness. From a workplace learning perspective, leadership development therefore matters because employees interpret learning opportunities partly through the quality of guidance, feedback and developmental signals provided by leaders.

A similar pattern appears in the broader leadership literature. Muridzi and Dhliwayo [29] identified employee engagement as a strategic public-sector performance driver linked to leadership development investment. Hee et al. [30], Ashfaq, Abid and Ilyas [31] and Ahadiat and Dacko-Pikiewicz [32] each reported pathways connecting leadership with engagement, self-efficacy, commitment or work passion. Iddrisu [33] further highlighted the roles of organisational culture, trust and communication, while Obuobisa-Darko and Domfeh [34] showed that observable leader behaviours shape engagement more directly than abstract leadership labels. Leadership

development therefore becomes motivational when learning is translated into credible behaviours that employees experience in everyday work.

Succession planning provides a formal structure for this developmental pathway in Malaysia. Keerio and Ahmad [9] identified implementation as a key constraint in succession planning across Malaysian public universities. Ghazali et al. [35] validated a competency measurement scale linked to succession planning, while Lin et al. [36], Dahlan et al. [37] and Chia, Razak and Ghavifekr [38] documented the need for more systematic leadership succession in higher education. Ahmad, Ngah and Mohamed [39] further linked transformational leadership with succession-planning effectiveness in Malaysian public universities. The evidence places succession planning within the developmental architecture surrounding workplace learning because it connects capability development with visible opportunities for role progression and leadership responsibility. It is therefore treated as an organisational structure that enables workplace learning opportunities rather than as a workplace learning activity in itself.

3.4. Ethical Leadership and the Ethical Climate of Workplace Learning

Ethical leadership and ethical climate are related but distinct constructs. Ethical leadership refers to leader behaviour that communicates integrity, fairness and responsible conduct, whereas ethical climate concerns shared perceptions of the standards and practices that guide behaviour within the work environment. Giannakos et al. [10] and Sun and Zhang [40] position ethical leadership as foundational to organisational integrity, while Kim [41] showed that programmes designed to reduce unethical behaviour are more effective when leadership actively supports them. Hakimi [42] and Malik and Khan [43] further connect ethical leadership with organisational commitment. From a learning-centred perspective, ethical leadership matters because leader behaviour helps shape the climate in which employees decide whether it is safe and legitimate to apply judgement, share knowledge and invest effort in developmental activities.

Across the reviewed studies, ethical leadership contributes to a broader ethical work climate without being identical to that climate. Zahari et al. [44] linked ethical culture and leadership with sustainability and governance in public-sector organisations. Hassan, Wright and Yukl [11] showed that ethical leadership in government affects organisational commitment, absenteeism and willingness to report ethical problems. Al-Fayez et al. [45] connected good governance with ethical work climate, while Abdi, Hashi and Latif [46] reported mediated and moderated pathways linking ethical leadership with public-sector performance. The evidence supports a two-level interpretation: ethical leadership operates through observable leader behaviour, while ethical climate reflects the shared workplace conditions through which such behaviour becomes socially reinforced.

Mechanism-focused studies sharpen this distinction. Alhaidan [47] linked ethical leadership with organisational justice and leaders' moral identity, while studies in [48]-[51] connect ethical leadership with ethical decision-making, engagement, corporate integrity and commitment. Bashir and Hassan [52] place ethical leadership within anti-corruption efforts. Guo et al. [53] report comparable effects in education, while Nguyen et al. [54] connect ethical leadership with psychological capital. Limpo and Junaidi [55] and Uluturk, Yilmaz Altuntas and Isik [56] examine ethical leadership alongside public service motivation, with the latter showing a protective role against burnout under high red tape. Zhang, Yang and Zhang [57] and Charoensap et al. [58] link ethical leadership with engagement and work attitudes. Siti-Nabiha and Salleh [59] further situate ethical leadership expectations within Malaysian local governance. Across these studies, ethical leadership contributes to conditions in which learning, responsible discretion and motivational investment are more likely to be sustained.

3.5. Ethical Leadership and Workplace Learning in the Malaysian Public Sector

Malaysia-specific evidence strengthens the relevance of ethical climate to workplace learning. Hamoudah et al. [12] found that ethical climate mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and integrity outcomes in both Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. Said, Alam and Khalid [13] reported a significant relationship between good governance and integrity systems in the Malaysian public sector. Zakaria et al. [60] showed that demographic and organisational factors shape the ethical integrity of local enforcement officers, while Junus [61] identified ethical climate as a driver of integrity development in Malaysia. These studies indicate that the climate surrounding employee learning and judgement is institutionally grounded rather than transferable without regard to local governance conditions.

Sajari et al. [14] identified leadership commitment and organisational culture among the strongest influences on ethics and integrity in the Malaysian public sector. Alam, Said and Abd Aziz [15] similarly showed that integrity systems, internal control systems and leadership practices jointly shape accountability. Viewed through a workplace learning lens, these findings imply that employees do not learn ethical practice from formal instruction alone. They also learn through leader behaviour, organisational routines and the consistency between stated standards and everyday decisions. Ethical leadership therefore functions as an important environmental condition for the transfer of professional learning into responsible and motivated work behaviour.

3.6. Job Motivation and Public Service Motivation as Learning-Related Outcomes

Job motivation is the principal outcome examined in this review, while public service motivation (PSM) is treated as a distinct, sector-specific motivational orientation. Carpenter, Doverspike and Miguel [62] showed that PSM predicts attraction to public employment. Guan et al. [63] identified person-organisation fit and affective commitment as pathways linking PSM with turnover intention, while Hassan et al. [64] connected PSM with workplace spirituality and wellbeing. Tang et al. [65] further positioned PSM as a personal resource within the job demands-resources framework. For this review, these findings are relevant because professional learning is interpreted through employees' existing motives, perceptions of meaningful contribution and fit with public-service roles.

PSM is not treated as uniformly beneficial or as a substitute for job motivation. Spiegel and Evans [66] highlighted psychological capital in reducing turnover intentions among local-government executives, while Cooke, Brant and Woods [67] linked PSM with work engagement. Potipiroon [68] identified leadership style and organisational culture as important moderators, and Chen, Hsieh and Chen [69] showed that workplace trust contributes to PSM. The broader field has been mapped by Sajida [70] and synthesised by Harari et al. [71], while Vandenabeele [72] identified job satisfaction and organisational commitment as mediating mechanisms. Dash, Gupta and Jena [73] further linked leadership styles with PSM through basic psychological needs. Conversely, Schott and Ritz [74] described a potential dark side of PSM, while Papadopoulou and Dimitriadis [75], Potipiroon and Ford [76], Kim [77] and Cowley and Smith [78] show that intrinsic motivation, ethical leadership, burnout, turnover intention and mission orientation remain important boundary conditions and related outcomes.

Self-determination theory provides the main learning-related explanation for these motivational relationships. Breugh, Ritz and Alfes [79] showed that work motivation and PSM are related but not interchangeable. Mussagulova, Chen and Ritz [80] demonstrated that autonomy and intrinsic motivation vary across institutional contexts. Deci, Olafsen and Ryan [81] identified autonomy, competence and relatedness as basic psychological needs that support high-quality motivation. Lee and Park [82] showed that discretion and communication conditions influence intrinsic motivation among street-level bureaucrats, while van der Kolk, van Veen-Dirks and ter Bogt [83] found that management control may support or crowd out motivation depending on design. Kyambade, Namatovu and Sewante [84] further linked work ethics with performance through intrinsic motivation. These studies keep the analytical emphasis on learning-related need satisfaction while retaining PSM as a separate public-sector construct.

The Malaysian and regional evidence is smaller but contextually important. Min, Ki and Yoon [85] found that employment sector moderates the relationship between PSM and job satisfaction across the Asia-Pacific region. Mahmood et al. [1] reported a significant relationship between motivational factors and job satisfaction at Royal Malaysian Navy headquarters. Ahmad, Bin Mohamed and Bin Damin [2] found that job demands outweigh transformational leadership as a predictor of work stress in the Malaysian public service. Park [86] examined organisational commitment as a mediator of public-official job satisfaction, while Aarabi, Subramaniam and Akeel [3] linked motivational factors with job performance in the Malaysian service industry. As contextual evidence, these studies support job motivation as the principal outcome while indicating that PSM and related motivational states should be operationalised separately in future empirical tests.

3.7. Institutional Context and Transfer of Workplace Learning

Institutional theory explains why similar learning and leadership interventions produce different outcomes across organisations. Hwang [87] showed how neo-institutional pressures may enable or constrain organisational change, while Aksom [88] demonstrated that organisations exposed to similar pressures still vary in practice because of differences in internal capacity. Ashworth, Boyne and Delbridge [89] showed that public-sector change remains constrained by sector-wide expectations. Applied to workplace learning, these studies indicate that the transfer of professional learning depends on organisational rules, routines and norms as well as individual competence.

Digital transformation illustrates this interaction. AlShehhi and Tipu [90] synthesised the antecedents, processes and outcomes of digital transformation in the public sector. Modell [91] showed that performance measurement systems become institutionalised practices that shape employee behaviour, while Omar and Osmani [92] used institutionalisation and structuration perspectives to explain digitally enabled service transformation. These studies are relevant to workplace learning because new systems require employees to acquire capability while organisations simultaneously adapt routines, expectations and performance structures.

Malaysian public-sector human resource evidence adds a local dimension. Woo [93] examined recruitment reform in the Malaysian public sector, while Nasir, Suradi and Ismail [94] developed a Rasch-based instrument for talent management strategy. Ananthan et al. [95] reviewed the development of talent management in the Malaysian public sector. AlQershi et al. [96] linked talent management and human capital with sustainable performance in Malaysian hospitals. Poocharoen and Lee [97] demonstrated regional differences in public-sector talent management across Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, while Lehmann [98] showed that motivation in Thai and

Malaysian service firms depends on locally appropriate reward and recognition. This body of evidence suggests that workplace learning transfer is embedded in talent systems, career structures and local employment practices. Dawi, Jopri and Kamarudin [99] provide a complementary workforce-development perspective by showing how environmental, social and governance principles move from compliance toward institutionalisation within Malaysia's manufacturing workforce. Their emphasis on sustained leadership commitment and workforce development supports the broader argument that learning becomes behaviourally consequential when it is embedded in organisational practice. Institutional context is therefore treated as a boundary condition that shapes whether professional learning, workplace learning mechanisms and leadership development are translated into sustained job motivation.

Table 2. Theoretical mechanisms linking professional and workplace learning to job motivation outcomes

The synthesis brings the evidence into a learning-centred sequence. Professional learning and leadership development provide structured developmental inputs. Mentoring and coaching provide workplace learning processes, while psychological safety provides an enabling interpersonal condition through which employees interpret, practise and transfer new capability. Ethical leadership behaviour contributes to the ethical climate in which employees assess trust, fairness and the legitimacy of developmental opportunities. Gwamanda and Mahembe [100] showed that ethical leadership and ethical climate jointly influence work engagement, Santiago-Torner [101] identified ethical climate as a mediating mechanism in leadership effects and Villajos, Soriano and Tordera [102] linked human resource practices with perceived ethical leadership climate and employee wellbeing. This evidence supports treating ethical leadership behaviour as an antecedent that helps shape ethical climate rather than treating the two constructs as interchangeable.

Construct	Primary theoretical mechanism	Representative sources
Professional learning & CPD	Social cognitive theory; adult learning theory (self-efficacy, skill acquisition)	[4], [5], [16], [17], [18]
Workplace learning mechanisms	Job demands-resources model; psychological safety; knowledge-sharing mechanisms	[19], [21], [23], [25], [26]
Leadership development & succession planning	Social exchange theory; leadership pipeline theory	[7], [28], [32], [36], [39]
Ethical leadership climate	Social learning theory; organisational justice theory	[10], [41], [48], [55], [61]
Job motivation & public service motivation	Self-determination theory; public service motivation theory	[1], [66], [73], [80], [86]
Institutional context & learning transfer	Institutional theory (neo-institutionalism, isomorphism)	[87], [90], [93], [96], [99]

When the seven thematic strands are read together, three points recur. Competence alone is insufficient without opportunities for learning transfer, developmental support is more effective when employees experience trust and psychological safety, and motivational effects vary with organisational context [17], [19], [25], [45]. The evidence is less consistent on the precise causal ordering of leadership development, ethical climate and motivation because many studies test only part of the proposed pathway. Malaysian evidence is strongest for ethics, integrity, talent systems and public-sector motivation, but thinner for longitudinal tests of workplace learning transfer [61], [87], [94], [100]. These gaps justify an integrative framework while requiring caution against treating the complete sequence as empirically established.

3.8. Integrated Professional and Workplace Learning Framework

Figure 2 depicts the resulting framework. Professional learning and leadership development are shown as developmental inputs feeding workplace learning processes represented by mentoring, coaching and psychological safety. In the accompanying interpretation, mentoring and coaching are treated as learning processes, while psychological safety is treated as an enabling condition for those processes. These elements connect to job motivation and public service motivation as distinct motivational outcomes. The figure retains the compact label 'ethical leadership climate'; throughout the text, this label refers to an ethical climate fostered through ethical leadership behaviour and does not imply that ethical leadership and ethical climate are the same construct. Institutional context provides broader boundary conditions related to governance, culture, organisational routines and reform priorities. The framework therefore emphasises learning transfer and developmental experience rather than assuming uniform direct effects from training or leadership interventions.

Several studies help specify how this climate connects learning with motivation. Demirtas and Akdogan [103] showed that ethical leadership shapes ethical climate, turnover intention and affective commitment. Qin et al. [104] demonstrated that ethical leadership effects differ across individual and group levels. Mostafa and Abed El-Motalib [105] linked ethical leadership with work meaningfulness and engagement in the public sector. Farinha et al. [106] connected leadership with employee motivation through training and development strategies, while Ajadi et al. [107] showed that ethical work climate also extends into employee mental health. The combined evidence supports an integrated model in which learning transfer, leadership behaviour and motivational outcomes are conditioned by the work environment.

The framework generates four propositions for future empirical testing. First, professional learning is positively associated with job motivation when employees are able to transfer new competence into meaningful work [4], [17], [18]. Second, mentoring and coaching strengthen the translation of professional learning into motivational outcomes, while psychological safety enables this process by supporting knowledge exchange, confidence and developmental participation [19], [21], [23], [25]. Third, leadership development contributes to job motivation when learning is connected to visible progression opportunities and credible leader behaviour [7], [9], [28], [39]. Fourth, ethical climate fostered through ethical leadership and institutional context are distinct enabling conditions that operate at different levels. Ethical climate shapes proximal perceptions of fairness, trust and responsible discretion, whereas institutional context shapes broader organisational constraints and opportunities for learning transfer [11], [12], [45], [87], [88], [100]. Future empirical tests should therefore model job motivation and public service motivation as separate constructs with distinct measures rather than combine them into a single motivational outcome.

Viewed as a whole, the strongest pattern is that professional learning contributes to competence, while workplace learning processes influence whether that competence is used, shared and developed further. Leadership development gives learning a progression pathway. Ethical leadership behaviour helps shape the climate in which employees assess fairness, trust and responsible discretion. Job motivation and public service motivation remain related but distinct outcomes. Institutional context establishes the organisational boundary conditions within which these relationships operate. This synthesis repositions the review from a general public-management perspective toward professional and workplace learning while retaining the public sector as the substantive context.

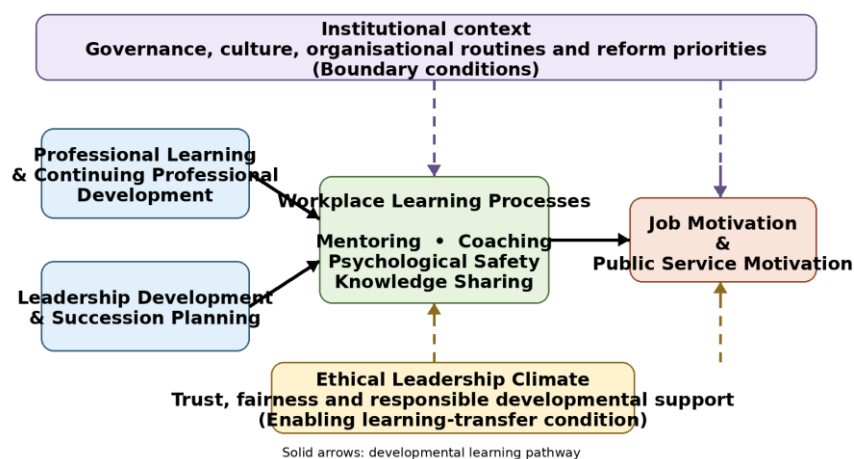


Figure 2. Learning-centred framework linking professional learning and leadership development to job motivation through workplace learning processes, ethical leadership climate and institutional context.

4.CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review integrates evidence on professional learning, workplace learning, leadership development and ethical leadership in relation to job motivation and public service motivation. Across 110 DOI-verified publications, professional learning is consistently associated with competence development, while workplace learning mechanisms influence whether that competence is applied and shared. Leadership development connects learning with progression pathways. Ethical leadership behaviour helps shape the climate in which developmental opportunities are interpreted. Job motivation and public service motivation remain analytically distinct because they capture different aspects of employee motivation in public organisations.

The learning-centred framework shifts attention from isolated human resource interventions toward the conditions that support learning transfer. In Malaysian public-sector organisations, formal learning investment is more likely to support motivation when employees receive mentoring and coaching, experience psychological safety, see

credible development pathways and work within an ethical climate reinforced by ethical leadership behaviour. Governance arrangements, organisational routines, workload pressures and reform priorities also influence how learning is applied in practice. The theoretical contribution lies in separating ethical leadership behaviour from ethical climate: leader behaviour helps shape a proximal ethical climate that supports learning transfer, while institutional context operates as a broader boundary condition rather than as a parallel human resource intervention.

The review has limitations. The search relied on Scopus AI-assisted discovery and a defined Scopus-derived, DOI-verified corpus, so the findings should not be interpreted as an exhaustive multi-database review. Relevant non-Scopus literature and grey literature were outside the retained corpus. The DOI eligibility rule also may have excluded relevant scholarly work that lacked a registered DOI, even though DOI status was used only for bibliographic verification and auditability. Because the evidence base combines empirical studies, reviews, book chapters and conference proceedings, the review used cross-cutting evidential appraisal based on directness, evidential role and convergence rather than a single design-specific risk-of-bias instrument. This approach improves comparability across heterogeneous sources but does not replace formal design-specific quality appraisal. The review also integrates studies from varied national and organisational contexts, while the proposed framework has not been tested as a complete model within a single Malaysian public-sector sample. Future research should test the framework across multiple public agencies, operationalise job motivation and public service motivation separately and examine ethical leadership behaviour and ethical climate as distinct but related constructs. Longitudinal designs would be especially useful for assessing how professional learning is transferred over time and whether ethical climate or institutional conditions strengthen or weaken this relationship.

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During preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Scopus AI to support literature discovery and a generative AI tool to improve language readability. The authors reviewed the search outputs, verified the retained references and edited the manuscript content.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent is not applicable to this study, as it involves no human participants.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval is not applicable to this study, as it involves no research on human or animal subjects.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The review did not generate primary participant data. The evidence corpus consists of the 110 publications listed in the references. The search outputs, screening record and DOI verification information should accompany the submission as a supplementary review dataset where permitted by the journal.

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