

The Mediating Role of Ethical Leadership in the Relationship Between Perceived Governance Practices and Organizational Effectiveness in the UAE

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between perceived governance practices and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness, as well as the mediating role of ethical leadership in UAE port organizations. Although governance reforms have gained increasing attention in the UAE, limited research has explored how employees' perceptions of governance practices influence organizational effectiveness through leadership. A quantitative research design was adopted, and data were collected from operational and supervisory employees at DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports Group using a structured questionnaire. A total of 192 valid responses were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that perceived governance practices have a significant positive effect on employee-perceived organizational effectiveness and ethical

leadership. Ethical leadership also positively influences employee-perceived organizational effectiveness and partially mediates the relationship between perceived governance practices and organizational effectiveness. These findings suggest that governance practices are more effective when reinforced by ethical leadership that promotes transparency, accountability, and fairness. The study contributes to the governance and leadership literature by integrating Agency Theory and Social Learning Theory within an employee perception framework. Practically, the findings provide insights for managers and policymakers seeking to strengthen governance practices and ethical leadership to enhance organizational effectiveness and support the long-term competitiveness of UAE port organizations.

Keywords: perceived governance practices, ethical leadership, employee-perceived organizational effectiveness, UAE port organizations

1. Introduction

Organizations are increasingly recognizing that effective corporate governance extends beyond formal structures and regulatory compliance to encompass the internal governance climate experienced by employees (Anik et al., 2021). This governance climate reflects the extent to which principles of transparency, accountability, fairness, and ethical conduct are embedded in everyday organizational practices (Alderei et al., 2022). Within this context, perceived governance practices refer to employees' evaluations of how governance mechanisms are implemented and function within the organization, including the transparency of organizational processes, fairness of decision-making, accountability of management, and clarity of information flow (Khanifah et al., 2020). These perceptions are particularly important because they shape employees' trust, attitudes, and engagement with organizational systems, thereby influencing the effectiveness of governance in practice rather than merely its existence in formal policies and regulatory frameworks (Hasnan et al., 2020). As a result, understanding employees' perceptions of governance practices has become essential for explaining differences in organizational effectiveness.

Corporate governance has become a strategic priority for organizations worldwide as they operate in increasingly complex environments characterized by heightened accountability, regulatory requirements, and stakeholder expectations (Anand & Bhattacharjee, 2022). Effective governance systems promote transparency, fairness, accountability, and responsible decision-making, thereby enhancing organizational sustainability and long-term effectiveness (Al-Gamrh & Bakr, 2020). Beyond ensuring regulatory compliance, contemporary governance emphasizes the quality of internal organizational processes through which governance principles are implemented and experienced by employees (Tawfeeq et al., 2023). Consequently, employees' perceptions of governance practices have emerged as an important indicator of whether governance mechanisms function effectively in achieving organizational objectives.

Although many organizations have established formal governance frameworks, their effectiveness depends largely on how governance practices are perceived by employees. Positive perceptions of governance characterized by transparency, accountability, fairness, and ethical conduct enhance employee trust, confidence, engagement, and commitment, which subsequently improve organizational effectiveness (Abun et al., 2022; Audu & Cletus, 2026). Conversely, weak governance practices reduce employee trust and motivation, creating a disconnect between formal governance structures and their implementation in daily organizational activities (Magar et al., 2024). These findings suggest that governance should be understood not only as a regulatory mechanism but also as an organizational process shaped by employees' experiences and interactions with leadership.

This issue is particularly relevant in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where corporate governance has become a key driver of sustainable economic development, investment attraction, and organizational competitiveness (Al-Gamrh et al., 2020; Tawfeeq et al., 2023). Despite substantial governance reforms, many organizations continue to encounter implementation challenges, including limited board independence, executive duality,

inconsistent oversight mechanisms, and variations in governance practices that may reduce organizational transparency and stakeholder confidence (Farhan & Freihat, 2021; Aina, 2024). More importantly, these challenges extend beyond governance structures to the organizational environment in which governance is practiced. When leadership behaviors fail to consistently demonstrate accountability, fairness, and integrity, employees may perceive governance practices as ineffective regardless of the existence of formal governance mechanisms (Yaqoubi & Adnan, 2022).

Despite the growing importance of corporate governance, limited empirical research has examined how employees in the UAE logistics and port sector perceive governance practices and how these perceptions influence organizational effectiveness (Al-ahdal et al., 2023). Existing studies within the UAE and the broader regional context have primarily focused on governance from structural and financial perspectives, including regulatory compliance, firm performance, investment decisions, succession planning, and corporate transparency (Al-Gamrh & Bakr, 2020; Gunawan & Widodo, 2023; Jasir et al., 2023; ElKelish et al., 2024). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to employees' perceptions of governance practices and their implications for organizational effectiveness. Furthermore, although previous studies have demonstrated that ethical leadership strengthens organizational performance and promotes ethical organizational behavior (Ahmed, 2018; Vashisth, 2024; Koeswayo et al., 2024), few studies have examined ethical leadership as a mediating mechanism linking perceived governance practices with employee-perceived organizational effectiveness within a unified conceptual framework.

This gap limits understanding of how governance mechanisms are translated into employee-level outcomes in organizational settings where leadership plays a central role in reinforcing governance principles (Alkhadra et al., 2023; Yaqoubi & Adnan, 2022; Abdi et al., 2024). Without considering ethical leadership, it remains unclear how governance practices influence employees' perceptions of organizational effectiveness. Addressing this issue is particularly important in the UAE port sector, where effective governance and ethical leadership are essential for maintaining operational excellence, stakeholder confidence, and sustainable organizational performance.

Accordingly, this study proposes and examines the mediating role of ethical leadership in the relationship between perceived governance practices and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness in UAE port organizations. By integrating governance and leadership perspectives within a single model, the study contributes to the corporate governance and organizational behavior literature while providing practical insights for strengthening governance implementation, promoting ethical leadership, and enhancing organizational effectiveness in one of the UAE's most strategically important industries.

2. Hypothesis development

2.1 The Relationship Between Perceived Governance Practices and Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness

Previous empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that effective governance practices

contribute significantly to organizational effectiveness by enhancing transparency, accountability, fairness, and decision-making processes (Al-Gamrh et al., 2020; Zahoor et al., 2022; Tawfeeq et al., 2023). Governance practices strengthen internal control systems, improve resource utilization, and promote alignment between organizational objectives and operational activities, thereby enhancing employees' perceptions of organizational effectiveness. Empirical evidence further supports this relationship. For example, Delima, (2017) found that corporate governance positively influences organizational performance in financial institutions, while Kyere (2021) reported that good corporate governance improves organizational performance through stronger oversight and accountability mechanisms. Similarly, Zahoor et al. (2022) and Tawfeeq et al. (2023) confirmed that effective governance practices positively influence organizational outcomes across different organizational settings. Based on these findings, it is expected that employees who perceive governance practices to be transparent, accountable, and fair are more likely to perceive their organizations as effective.

H1: Perceived governance practices have a positive and significant relationship with employee-perceived organizational effectiveness.

2.2 The Relationship Between Perceived Governance Practices and Ethical Leadership

Perceived governance practices provide the institutional foundation that shapes leadership behavior by promoting transparency, accountability, fairness, and ethical responsibility within organizations (Othman, 2014). Empirical evidence consistently supports this relationship. Bhana and Bayat (2020) found that effective governance structures strengthen ethical leadership by enhancing accountability and oversight mechanisms. Likewise, Suriaga (2023) reported that governance frameworks emphasizing transparency and compliance positively influence leaders' ethical behavior. More recently, Izzaz et al. (2024) and Ayugi (2024) demonstrated that effective governance practices promote leadership integrity, ethical decision-making, and responsible managerial conduct, thereby fostering an ethical organizational climate. Based on these theoretical and empirical findings, it is expected that employees who perceive governance practices to be transparent, accountable, and fair are more likely to perceive their leaders as demonstrating ethical leadership.

H2: Perceived governance practices have a positive and significant relationship with ethical leadership.

2.3 The Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness

Ethical leadership is widely recognized as a key driver of organizational effectiveness because it promotes integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability in organizational decision-making (Guo, 2022). Ethical leaders serve as role models by demonstrating principled behavior, fostering employee trust, encouraging responsible conduct, and creating a positive work environment. These leadership behaviors strengthen employees' commitment, motivation, and confidence in organizational processes, thereby enhancing their perceptions of organizational effectiveness. Empirical evidence consistently supports the positive influence of ethical leadership on organizational outcomes. Kim and Thapa, (2018) found that ethical

leadership significantly improves organizational performance by promoting ethical behavior and effective management practices. Similarly, Dwi et al. (2020) reported that ethical leadership positively contributes to organizational performance through improved employee behavior and decision-making. Khan and Ullah (2021) further demonstrated that ethical leadership enhances organizational performance by fostering intellectual capital and innovation. More recently, Vashisth (2024) confirmed that ethical leadership strengthens organizational effectiveness by promoting trust, accountability, and ethical organizational practices. Based on these theoretical arguments and empirical findings, employees who perceive their leaders as ethical are expected to report higher levels of organizational effectiveness.

H3: Ethical leadership has a positive and significant relationship with employee-perceived organizational effectiveness.

2.4 The Mediating Role of Ethical Leadership in the Relationship Between Perceived Governance Practices and Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness

Ethical leadership provides an important mechanism through which perceived governance practices are translated into positive organizational outcomes (Abdullah et al., 2018). While governance practices establish formal principles of transparency, accountability, and fairness, their effectiveness depends on leaders' ability to implement and reinforce these principles in daily organizational activities (Alkhadra et al., 2023). Ethical leaders promote integrity, fairness, and responsible decision-making, creating an organizational environment that strengthens employee trust, commitment, and confidence in governance processes. Consequently, employees who perceive governance practices positively are more likely to perceive their leaders as ethical, which in turn enhances their perceptions of organizational effectiveness (Ayugi, 2024).

Empirical evidence supports the mediating role of ethical leadership in explaining how organizational factors influence employees and organizational outcomes. Wadei et al., (2020) found that ethical leadership mediates the relationship between psychological safety and creative performance, while Ghorbani et al. (2023) demonstrated its mediating role between moral sensitivity and professional commitment. Within the governance context, Gunawan and Widodo (2023) reported that governance practices positively influence ethical leadership and organizational effectiveness, suggesting that ethical leadership serves as an important pathway through which governance practices contribute to organizational outcomes. Therefore, these findings indicate that ethical leadership translates governance principles into ethical managerial behaviors that enhance employees' perceptions of organizational effectiveness. Although previous studies have demonstrated the mediating role of ethical leadership across various organizational settings, limited research has examined its mediating effect in the relationship between perceived governance practices and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness. Addressing this gap will advance understanding of how governance practices influence employee perceptions of organizational effectiveness through ethical leadership in a strategically important organizational context.

H4: Ethical leadership positively mediates the relationship between perceived governance

practices and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness.

3. Research Framework

This study proposes a conceptual framework that examines the relationships between perceived governance practices, ethical leadership, and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness. Perceived governance practices are conceptualized as the independent variable, employee-perceived organizational effectiveness as the dependent variable, and ethical leadership as the mediating variable. The framework is underpinned by Agency Theory and Social Learning Theory (Bijandi, 2011; Otman, 2014). Agency Theory suggests that governance mechanisms promote accountability, transparency, and effective oversight, thereby aligning managerial actions with stakeholder interests and enhancing organizational effectiveness (Panda & Leepsa, 2017; Kozcu, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms also depends on how employees perceive and experience governance practices within the organization (Nidumolu & Deshpande, 2018). Social Learning Theory complements this perspective by explaining that ethical leaders act as role models whose integrity, fairness, and ethical conduct reinforce governance principles and shape employees' attitudes and behaviors (Yılmaz, 2018; Nawaiseh et al., 2021; Junaidi, 2024). Accordingly, the framework proposes that perceived governance practices influence employee-perceived organizational effectiveness both directly and indirectly through ethical leadership.

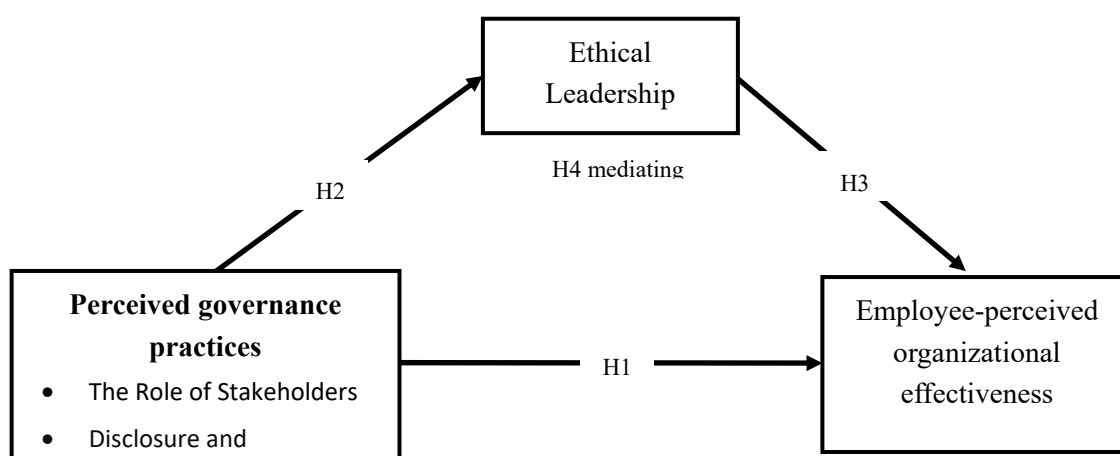


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual framework and the hypothesized relationships among the study variables. Specifically, the framework proposes that perceived governance practices positively influence employee-perceived organizational effectiveness (H1) and ethical leadership (H2), ethical leadership positively influences employee-perceived organizational effectiveness (H3), and ethical leadership mediates the relationship between perceived governance practices and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness (H4).

4. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using a perception-based approach (Creswell, 2013), to examine the relationships between perceived governance practices, ethical leadership, and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to employees of Abu Dhabi Ports Group and DP World Group in the United Arab Emirates. The unit of analysis was the individual employee, as the study focuses on employees' perceptions of governance practices, ethical leadership, and organizational effectiveness. The target population comprised employees of Abu Dhabi Ports Group and DP World Group in the United Arab Emirates. Based on the sample size determination guidelines proposed by Glenn (2012) a minimum sample of 200 respondents was considered adequate for this study. Moreover, to ensure proportional representation of both organizations, stratified random sampling was employed following the recommendations of Taherdoost (2017). Accordingly, the sample was proportionally allocated to 113 respondents from Abu Dhabi Ports Group and 87 respondents from DP World Group.

The measurement instruments used in this study were adopted from validated scales reported in the literature. Perceived governance practices were operationalized using two dimensions which are the role of stakeholders and disclosure and transparency. These dimensions are derived from the corporate governance principles of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and have been widely adopted in previous studies (Otman, 2021). In the present study, however, they were measured from an employee perception perspective rather than as formal governance structures. A total of 10 items were adapted from Otman (2021); Mwachikoka (2023); Jin Zhu and Fang (2025) comprising five items for the role of stakeholders and five items for disclosure and transparency.

Moreover, ethical leadership was measured using 10 items adapted from the validated scales developed by Yaqoubi and Adnan (2022) and Zhu et al. (2025). The items were slightly modified to reflect employees' perceptions of the ethical behaviors of their immediate supervisors and organizational leaders within the UAE port sector. Employee-perceived organizational effectiveness was measured using 10 items adapted from Siyad and Sasaka (2018) and Jin et al. (2025). The instrument assesses employees' evaluations of their organization's communication, operational efficiency, innovation, and goal achievement. All measurement items were adapted to suit the context of UAE port organizations while preserving the original meaning of the constructs.

The proposed research model and hypotheses analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is appropriate for this study because it accommodates complex research models, supports mediation analysis, and provides robust parameter estimates for relatively small to medium sample sizes (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021). The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the measurement model evaluated by assessing indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity using factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. Second, the

structural model assessed by path coefficients, coefficients of determination (R^2), and the significance of the hypothesized relationships using the bootstrapping procedure (Hair et al., 2022).

5. Result

5.1 Measurement Model Assessment

Convergent validity and internal consistency reliability were assessed using indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019). Convergent validity is established when indicator loadings are acceptable, CR exceeds 0.70, and AVE is greater than 0.50, indicating that the indicators adequately represent their respective constructs (Rold et al., 2024). Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and CR, with values above 0.70 considered satisfactory. The results of the reliability and convergent validity assessment are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Constructs reliability and validity assessment

Indicator	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Disclosure and transparency	0.914	0.937	0.750
Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness	0.935	0.947	0.690
Ethical Leadership	0.895	0.914	0.521
Perceived Governance Practices	0.937	0.948	0.669
The role of stakeholders	0.850	0.900	0.694

As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrate satisfactory reliability and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.850 to 0.937, while Composite Reliability values range from 0.900 to 0.948, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and indicating strong internal consistency. Likewise, the AVE values range from 0.521 to 0.750, all above the recommended minimum of 0.50, confirming that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators. Although Ethical Leadership records the lowest AVE (0.521), the value remains within the acceptable range. Thus, these findings confirm that the measurement model satisfies the recommended criteria for reliability and convergent validity, providing a sound basis for subsequent assessment of discriminant validity and structural model evaluation (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

5.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT), which is widely recommended as a robust criterion for evaluating construct distinctiveness in PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2019). HTMT values below 0.90 indicate adequate discriminant

validity.

Table 2. Discriminant validity based on the HTMT ratio

Indicator	Disclosure and transparency	Employee-Perceived Effectiveness	Ethical Leadership	The role of stakeholders
Disclosure and transparency				
Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness	0.836			
Ethical Leadership	0.688	0.885		
Perceived Governance Practices	0.448	0.864	0.717	
The role of stakeholders	0.559	0.878	0.737	

As shown in Table 2, the HTMT values range from 0.448 to 0.885, all of which are below the recommended threshold of 0.90. These results confirm that the constructs are empirically distinct and that discriminant validity has been satisfactorily established, supporting the adequacy of the measurement model for subsequent structural model analysis (Hair et al., 2022).

Prior to evaluating the structural model, the measurement model was assessed to ensure that all constructs satisfied the recommended reliability and validity criteria. During this process, indicators with factor loadings below the recommended threshold were removed to improve the psychometric properties of the model. Specifically, RS3 (Role of Stakeholders) and EPOE9 (Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness) were excluded from further analysis. The refined measurement model is presented in Figure 2.

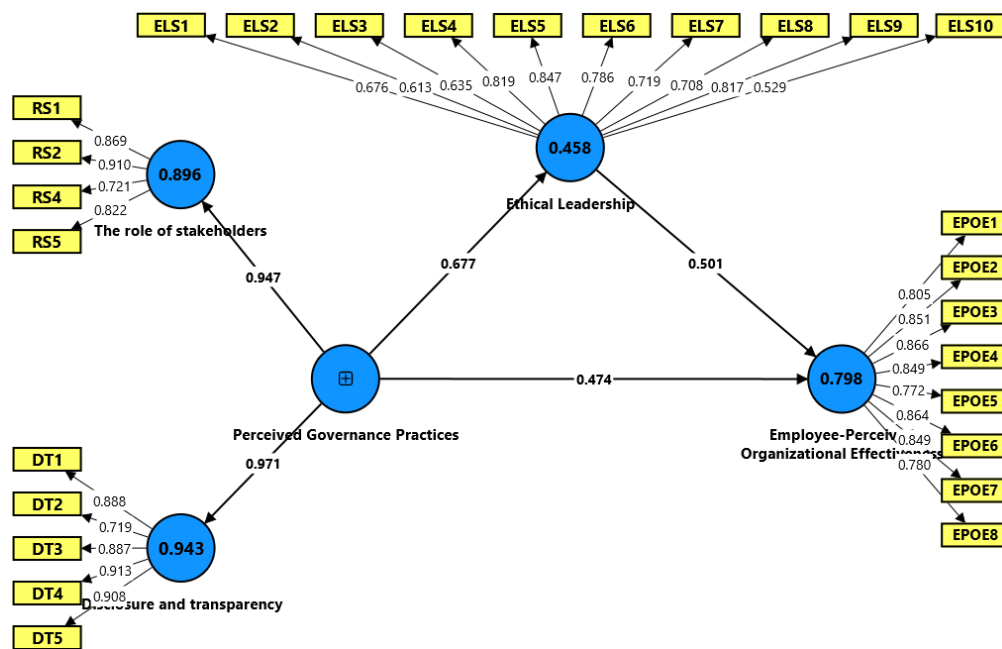


Figure 2. Final measurement model of the study

Figure 2 illustrates the final measurement model after the removal of the low-loading indicators. The remaining items demonstrated satisfactory factor loadings and met the recommended criteria for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). Accordingly, the measurement model was considered adequate, providing a sound basis for evaluating the structural model and testing the proposed hypotheses.

5.3 Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was assessed using PLS-SEM following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019). The significance of the hypothesized relationships was evaluated based on the standardized path coefficients (β), t -statistics, and p -values. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Significance test for the structural model path coefficient, t -statistics and p -values

Path	Hypothesis	Std β	Std Error	t -statistic	p -value	Results
Perceived Governance Practices → Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness	H1	0.474	0.044	10.851	0.000	Positive
Perceived Governance Practices → Ethical Leadership	H2	0.677	0.025	26.718	0.000	Positive
Ethical Leadership → Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness	H3	0.501	0.045	11.222	0.000	Positive

As shown in Table 4, the indirect effect of perceived governance practices on employee-perceived organizational effectiveness through ethical leadership is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.339$, $t = 11.794$, $p < 0.001$), providing support for H4. This finding indicates that ethical leadership serves as a significant mediating mechanism through which perceived governance practices enhance employee-perceived organizational effectiveness. In other words, positive employee perceptions of governance practices foster ethical leadership, which in turn strengthens employees' perceptions of organizational effectiveness.

Table 4. Mediation analysis results

Path	Hypothesis	Std β	Std Error	t -statistic	p -value	Results
Perceived Governance Practices → Ethical Leadership → Employee-Perceived Organizational Effectiveness	H4	0.339	0.029	11.794	0.000	Mediated

Figure 3 presents the final structural model, including the standardized path coefficients and the coefficients of determination (R^2). The mediating effect of ethical leadership was examined using the bootstrapping procedure in PLS-SEM. The results of the mediation analysis are presented in Table 4.

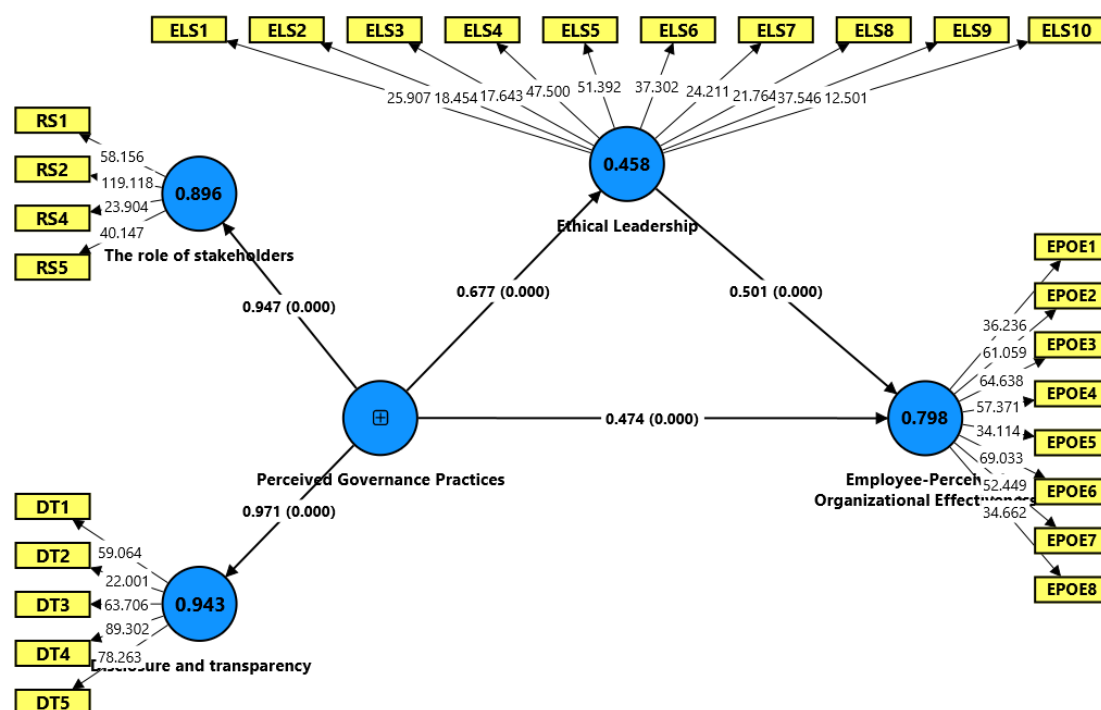


Figure 3. Structural model with t-statistics

6. Discussion

This study examined the relationships between perceived governance practices, ethical leadership, and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness in UAE port organizations. The findings support all four hypotheses, indicating that perceived governance practices positively influence employee-perceived organizational effectiveness both directly and indirectly through ethical leadership. The positive relationship between perceived governance practices and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness suggests that employees who perceive governance practices as transparent, accountable, and stakeholder-oriented are more likely to view their organizations as effective. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Delima, 2017; Kyere, 2021; Zahoor et al., 2022; Tawfeeq et al., 2023) and extends the literature by demonstrating the importance of governance from an employee perception perspective rather than relying solely on formal governance indicators.

The results further show that perceived governance practices positively influence ethical leadership, supporting the argument that effective governance creates an organizational environment that promotes integrity, fairness, and ethical decision-making. This finding is consistent with Bhana and Bayat (2020), Suriaga (2023), and Ayugi (2024). In turn, ethical leadership significantly enhances employee-perceived organizational effectiveness, corroborating previous findings that ethical leaders foster trust, accountability, and positive employee attitudes, leading to improved organizational outcomes (Kim & Thapa, 2018; Ullah et al., 2021; Vashisth, 2024). Finally, ethical leadership was found to partially mediate the relationship between perceived governance practices and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness. This finding indicates that governance practices are more effective when reinforced through ethical leadership, which translates governance principles into employees' day-to-day experiences. The result is consistent with Wadei et al. (2020), Ghorbani et al. (2023), and Gunawan and Widodo (2023), highlighting ethical leadership as an important mechanism linking governance practices to employee-level organizational outcomes.

7. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the corporate governance and leadership literature. First, it extends prior research by examining governance practices from an employee perception perspective rather than relying solely on board-level or financial governance indicators. Second, the study integrates Agency Theory and Social Learning Theory to explain how governance practices influence organizational effectiveness through ethical leadership. Third, it identifies ethical leadership as a significant mediating mechanism, providing empirical evidence that governance practices are translated into positive employee-level outcomes through leaders' ethical behaviours. Finally, the study contributes evidence from the UAE port sector, an underexplored context in governance and leadership research.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that managers should strengthen governance practices by promoting transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement throughout the organization. At the same time, organizations should invest in leadership development programmes that emphasize integrity, fairness, and ethical decision-making. Aligning governance mechanisms with ethical leadership behaviours can enhance employee trust,

improve perceptions of organizational effectiveness, and support the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of UAE port organizations.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the relationships between perceived governance practices, ethical leadership, and employee-perceived organizational effectiveness in UAE port organizations. The findings confirm that perceived governance practices positively influence employee-perceived organizational effectiveness both directly and indirectly through ethical leadership. Ethical leadership also emerged as a significant partial mediator, demonstrating its important role in translating governance principles into positive employee perceptions and organizational outcomes. Thus, the study highlights that effective governance extends beyond formal structures and regulatory compliance. Organizations are more likely to achieve higher levels of organizational effectiveness when governance practices are supported by ethical leadership that reinforces transparency, accountability, and fairness in daily operations. These findings provide valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners seeking to strengthen governance and leadership practices within the UAE port sector.

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