

## THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL DEPARTMENT AND WORK EXPERIENCE ON UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NIGERIAN WORKPLACES

Moruf Akanni **ADEBAKIN** PhD\*\*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5142-0820>

Department of Business Administration & Management

Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, Nigeria

[moruf.adebakin@yabatech.edu.ng](mailto:moruf.adebakin@yabatech.edu.ng)

08023020827

Gloria **ALANEME** PhD

Distance learning Institute

University of Lagos

E-mail: [glorialaneme@yahoo.com](mailto:glorialaneme@yahoo.com)

Dr. Abdul **GBADAMOSI**

Department of Business Administration

Faculty of Management Sciences

University of Lagos.

[aderotimigbadamosi@gmail.com](mailto:aderotimigbadamosi@gmail.com)

**\*\*Correspondent Author**

### ABSTRACT

*Unethical behavior, including actions that violate organizational ethics and legal standards, poses significant risks to organizational performance and reputation and needs to be well managed. This study investigates how organizational departments influence unethical behavior among employees in Nigerian workplaces. It also examines the moderating effect of work experience on these relationships. Data were collected from 2,623 employees across various departments in organizations, and the analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, and regression analysis. The findings reveal a significant difference in unethical behavior across departments, with employees in Medical Services, finance, sales, and Academics reporting higher levels of unethical behavior than those in General Administration and Others. It also revealed that employees with more work experience exhibited stronger resistance to unethical pressures, particularly in departments like Finance and Medical Services. ANOVA and regression analyses confirmed significant differences in unethical behavior across departments with work experience as a significant moderator. The results suggest that certain departments may face more ethical challenges than others, necessitating targeted ethics training and intervention programs. It also emphasizes the importance of tailoring ethical policies and training to department-specific needs and challenges. This study offers actionable insights for policymakers and managers aiming to foster ethical practices tailored to specific departmental and experiential contexts.*

**KEYWORDS:** Business ethics, Nigerian workplaces, Organizational departments, Quantitative analysis, Unethical behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

Unethical behavior within organizations remains a persistent issue, eroding trust, productivity, and long-term sustainability. It encompasses a spectrum of actions, ranging from minor infractions like dishonesty to severe misconduct such as fraud, bribery, and corruption. In Nigeria, unethical behavior is a significant concern in both the public and private sectors (Adeyeye, Adenugba, & Okeke, 2021). This pervasive issue has prompted researchers and practitioners to delve into its underlying causes and explore strategies for fostering ethical behavior. One understudied aspect is the role of organizational departments in shaping employees' ethical decision-making. Departments can exhibit substantial differences in operational pressures, ethical climate, and leadership styles, all of which may influence the likelihood of unethical behavior (Treviño & Nelson, 2017).

Organizational departments often operate under unique cultural and functional pressures that may affect employees' ethical behavior differently. For instance, departments directly involved in financial management, such as Finance or Procurement, might face more frequent ethical dilemmas due to their handling of sensitive transactions (Aggarwal, 2015). On the other hand, departments such as Human Resources or Administrative Support may encounter fewer opportunities for unethical behavior. Moreover, the ethical climate within a department, shaped by leadership and peer influence, may encourage or discourage ethical practices (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999; Adaga, Egieya, Ewuga, Abdul, & Abrahams, 2024). However, little empirical research has been conducted to explore these dynamics in the Nigerian organizational context, where the combination of external economic pressures and weak regulatory enforcement might further provoke unethical behavior (Kolade & Ogbari, 2015).

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the influence of organizational departments on unethical behavior in Nigerian workplaces. By analyzing data from employees across various departments, the study aims to identify departments that are more prone to unethical behavior and to understand how departmental dynamics contribute to ethical or unethical practices. This will provide valuable insights for developing department-specific interventions to promote ethical behavior and prevent misconduct.

This study seeks to explore the incidence of unethical behavior in several divisions of Nigerian workplaces. Specifically, it investigates whether there are substantial disparities in the frequency of unethical behavior between these departments. Furthermore, the study determines whether departments are more likely to report high or low levels of unethical activity. Finally, it investigates how departmental affiliation and work experience affect the chance of engaging in unethical behavior.

To achieve these goals, the study investigates whether organizational departments significantly influence unethical behavior, identifies departments reporting the highest levels, and examines the moderating effect of work experience on the relationship between departments and unethical behavior.

This study is crucial for understanding how unethical behavior manifests in different organizational departments in Nigeria. Given the ethical challenges facing Nigerian organizations, identifying department-specific ethical risks is necessary for designing effective interventions. By focusing on departments, this study provides a more nuanced view of organizational ethics, offering actionable insights for managers and policymakers. It also fills a gap in the literature by exploring the moderating role of work experience in the relationship between departmental pressures and unethical behavior, a topic that has been underexplored in the Nigerian context (Adeyeye et al., 2021; Kolade & Ogbari, 2015).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is grounded in Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (1981) and Victor and Cullen's Ethical Climate Theory (1988), which help explain how organizational departments influence unethical behavior.

**Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development:** According to Kohlberg, individuals progress through different stages of moral development, beginning with pre-conventional stages focused on avoiding punishment and advancing toward post-conventional levels where ethical decisions are guided by universal principles (Kohlberg, 1981). The workplace can serve as an environment where individuals' moral reasoning is challenged by various pressures. Employees in different departments may face distinct ethical dilemmas, with their decisions shaped by their moral development. For instance, employees working in departments like Procurement and Finance may have frequent opportunities to commit unethical acts due to their access to sensitive financial data. Thus, Kohlberg's theory suggests that unethical behavior is not uniform across departments, as employees with different ethical reasoning processes and department-specific pressures will respond differently to ethical dilemmas (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999).

**Victor and Cullen's Ethical Climate Theory:** Victor and Cullen (1988) introduced the concept of ethical climate as a framework for understanding how organizational environments shape ethical decision-making. Ethical climates are defined by shared perceptions of what is ethically correct behavior within an organization and how ethical issues are addressed. Different departments may cultivate different ethical climates, depending on their leadership, function, and external pressures. For example, a department with a competitive climate that values high performance might foster an environment where cutting corners is tolerated. Conversely, departments with an ethical climate emphasizing rules and adherence to standards may discourage unethical behavior. This theory is essential for understanding how varying departmental cultures contribute to unethical behavior.

## Conceptual Review

To understand the role of organizational departments in unethical behavior, it is important to clarify the key concepts of organizational departments and unethical behavior.

Departments within an organization refer to functional units that perform specific tasks and are often characterized by their unique operational goals, leadership, and external pressures. Departments such as Human Resources, Finance, Marketing, and Sales operate under different constraints and incentives, which may affect their exposure to ethical challenges. For example, while the Finance department deals with financial integrity, HR may focus on compliance with labor laws and employee well-being. These differences suggest that each department's exposure to ethical dilemmas is shaped by its functions and interactions with internal and external stakeholders. For instance, in commercial real estate, the interests of stakeholders can conflict, thereby creating moral dilemmas that require careful navigation to avoid detrimental impacts on company value (Oncioiu et al., 2020).

Unethical behavior refers to actions that violate moral or legal standards within an organization. This can include behaviors like dishonesty, theft, corruption, fraud, and workplace toxicity, negatively impacting employee performance (Arubayi, 2023). In the workplace, unethical behavior often arises when employees face conflicts between organizational goals (e.g., performance targets) and ethical principles (Treviño & Nelson, 2017). In this study, unethical behavior is operationalized as self-reported actions that violate organizational ethics or regulatory standards.

Despite extensive studies on unethical behavior, there remains a significant vacuum in understanding the role of departments within Nigerian organizations. While many studies have looked at organizational ethics in general, few have investigated how specific departments contribute to unethical behavior. Nigeria's unique regulatory problems and economic pressures create diverse ethical dynamics that may differ by department (Kolade & Ogbari, 2015). This study intends to close the gap by providing empirical information on the impact of organizational departments on unethical behavior in Nigerian workplaces.

Furthermore, the relationship between an employee's job experience and departmental pressures has gotten less consideration. More experienced employees may be better able to manage ethical issues, but less experienced employees may be more susceptible to unethical demands (Rest et al., 1999; Iyiegbuniwe, Wilfred, & Iyiegbuniwe, 2018). Future research should investigate how these factors interact to influence ethical behavior across departments. Existing research generally applies ethics training and interventions equally across organizations, failing to recognize the unique ethical difficulties encountered by different departments (Treviño et al., 2006). There is an urgent need for research that identifies department-specific ethical hazards and recommends specific actions to mitigate them.

## Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have explored the link between organizational structures, departmental characteristics, and unethical behavior. These studies provide a foundation for examining how departments shape ethical practices within organizations.

Research has consistently shown that organizational departments play a significant role in shaping ethical behavior. According to Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Treviño (2010), departments that face higher external pressures, such as sales and finance, are more prone to unethical behavior due to the increased opportunities for misconduct. For instance, sales personnel, driven by the pressure to meet targets, may be more likely to engage in unethical practices like misrepresentation or bribery. Similarly, finance departments may encounter ethical risks related to fraud, embezzlement, or manipulation of financial statements. Chen et al., (2024) also posit that procurement professionals often navigate ethically ambiguous situations, particularly in supplier selection, which can lead to reputational damage. All these illustrations emphasize the role of departments in determining the ethical behaviour of employees.

Another study by Peterson, Rhoads, and Vaught (2001) highlighted that ethical behavior varies across departments because of differences in operational goals and external stakeholder pressures. Employees in administrative or human resource departments, which are often insulated from external client demands or financial transactions, report fewer opportunities and pressures to act unethically. Conversely, employees in procurement or legal departments, where ethical dilemmas frequently arise, may have higher incidences of unethical behavior.

Concerning organizational climate and leadership, several studies have also examined how leadership and organizational climate affect ethical behavior. In environments with a strong ethical climate, Ye et al., (2022) found that employees are more likely to exhibit ethical behavior, as they feel supported by their leaders and the organizational culture. Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006) found that employees in departments led by ethical leaders were less likely to engage in unethical behavior. This was corroborated by Halbusi et. al., (2021) who found that ethical leadership positively predicts ethical behavior. Leadership significantly shapes the ethical climate of a department by setting standards for acceptable behavior, enforcing ethical guidelines, and fostering a culture of accountability. Departments where leaders emphasize ethical behavior and transparency tend to have lower levels of unethical conduct (Treviño & Nelson, 2017).

Victor and Cullen (1988) further argued that departments develop their ethical subcultures, which can either encourage or discourage unethical behavior. For example, departments that prioritize profit maximization or aggressive competition may create a climate where employees feel pressured to act unethically to meet targets. In contrast, departments focused on regulatory compliance or internal controls may have a climate that prioritizes adherence to ethical standards.

In the Nigerian context, research has highlighted the widespread prevalence of unethical behavior across industries. Adeyeye, Adenugba, and Okeke (2021) noted that weak regulatory frameworks, economic pressures, and cultural factors contribute to unethical practices in Nigerian workplaces. The authors found that unethical behavior was more common in departments that handled financial transactions or had significant interaction with external stakeholders, such as procurement, sales, and finance. Furthermore, departments with stronger leadership and clearer ethical guidelines reported lower incidences of unethical behavior, highlighting the importance of department-specific interventions.

Sequel to the above postulations and gap in the literature, this study hypothesized that:

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant difference in unethical behavior across organizational departments.

H<sub>2</sub>: Employees in departments such as Finance and Procurement are more likely to engage in unethical behavior compared to employees in departments such as HR or Administrative Support.

H<sub>3</sub>: The effect of the organizational department on unethical behavior is moderated by work experience, such that the influence of the department is stronger for employees with less work experience than those with more work experience.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employs a cross-sectional quantitative design, allowing data collection from respondents at a single point in time to identify patterns and relationships between variables. The approach is particularly suited for testing hypotheses, as it facilitates the use of statistical methods to examine whether unethical behavior varies significantly across organizational departments and whether work experience moderates this relationship. A quantitative methodology supports robust statistical analysis, enabling a comprehensive examination of relationships between the dependent and independent variables.

The study's population comprises employees from diverse departments in Nigerian organizations, representing sectors such as Finance, Sales, Human Resources, Medical Services, Academics, and General Administration. From this population, a sample of 2,623 valid responses was drawn using convenience sampling, a non-probability method that selects participants based on data availability. While this approach ensures a practical and efficient selection process, it introduces limitations regarding generalizability. The dataset includes rich demographic and professional data, capturing department-specific dynamics that contribute to unethical behavior.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire embedded in the pre-existing dataset. The instrument measured unethical behavior through a 20-item scale, with scores ranging from 20 to 100, where higher scores reflect a greater likelihood of engaging in unethical actions. Respondents provided self-reported information about their organizational department, years of



work experience, gender, and age. Ethical considerations were paramount, with strict adherence to respondent anonymity and confidentiality. Measures such as informed consent during data collection ensured compliance with ethical research standards.

Key variables include:

**Unethical Behavior:** The dependent variable is measured through self-reported continuous scores reflecting a range of unethical actions.

**Organizational Department:** The primary independent variable is categorized into functional areas, enabling analysis of inter-departmental differences.

**Work Experience:** Measured in years, this variable serves as both a control and a potential moderator of the relationship between department and unethical behavior.

**Gender and Age:** Control variables to account for demographic influences on unethical behavior

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and employed various statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographics and unethical behavior ratings. A one-way ANOVA tested for significant differences in unethical behavior across departments, while multiple regression analysis examined the influence of department, work experience, gender, and age on unethical behavior. To explore moderation, an interaction variable between department and work experience was introduced into the regression model. Additionally, chi-square tests assessed the relationship between categorical variables (e.g., gender, department) and unethical behavior. This suite of methods ensured a rigorous approach to testing the research hypotheses.

Despite its strengths, the study faces limitations. The reliance on self-reported data for unethical behavior introduces the risk of social desirability bias, where respondents might underreport unethical actions. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, as it captures data at a single point in time. A longitudinal approach could provide more insights into changes in unethical behavior over time. Furthermore, convenience sampling, while practical, restricts the findings' generalizability to all Nigerian workplaces.

The methodological choices reflect a balance between feasibility and rigor, enabling the identification of meaningful patterns and relationships that inform organizational ethics. By adhering to ethical guidelines and employing robust analytical tools, the research provides valuable insights into how organizational dynamics influence unethical behavior, offering a foundation for promoting better ethical practices in Nigerian organizations.

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Level of Unethical Behavior by Departmental Characteristics**

Department	N	Mean	SD
Finance	527	72.14	9.04
Sales	398	71.55	8.89
Human Resources (HR)	463	69.82	8.75
Medical Services	311	71.93	9.06
General Administration	502	70.58	8.93
Academics	422	71.33	9.22
Others	300	69.28	8.64
<b>Total</b>	2,623	70.80	9.17

Table 1 shows the highest average score of unethical behavior in Medical Services (mean = 71.93), followed by Finance (mean = 72.14) and Sales (mean = 71.55), indicating that these departments have greater levels of unethical activity. In contrast, the department with the lowest average score was Others (mean = 69.28), indicating lesser levels of unethical behavior. In all departments, the average level of unethical behavior was 70.80.

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test the hypothesis that unethical behavior varies significantly across organizational departments. The results of the ANOVA are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2: Summary of ANOVA Test on Variation of Unethical Behavior Across Departments**

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2,533.88	6	422.31	3.093	0.005
Within Groups	357,274.72	2,616	136.58		
<b>Total</b>	359,808.60	2,622			

The ANOVA results show a statistically significant difference in unethical behavior across organizational departments ( $F = 3.093$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). This indicates that the mean levels of unethical behavior are not the same across departments. Hence, there are significant variations in unethical behavior depending on the department in which employees work.



Table 3: Tukey's HSD Results for Unethical Behavior by Department

Comparison (Departments)	Mean Difference	Sig.
Finance vs. HR	2.32	0.032
Sales vs. Others	2.27	0.041
Medical Services vs. Others	2.65	0.030
General Admin vs. Academics	1.50	0.088

However, to determine which departments differ significantly from each other in terms of unethical behavior, a Tukey's HSD post-hoc test was conducted. The result reveals that employees in Finance report significantly higher unethical behavior than those in HR (Mean Difference = 2.32,  $p = 0.032$ ). Sales employees also report significantly higher unethical behavior than employees in the other departments (Mean Difference = 2.27,  $p = 0.041$ ). Furthermore, the Medical Services department exhibits significantly higher levels of unethical behavior compared to the other departments (Mean Difference = 2.65,  $p = 0.030$ ). No significant difference was found between General Administration and Academics ( $p = 0.088$ ).

Table 4: Multiple regression analysis of the influence of departmental characteristics, work experience, gender, and age on unethical behaviour.

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	73.485	1.132		64.906	0.000
Finance (vs. reference)	2.362	0.651	0.195	3.628	0.001
Sales (vs. reference)	1.782	0.678	0.174	2.628	0.007
Medical Services (vs. Others)	2.175	0.643	0.189	3.383	0.001
Work Experience	-0.138	0.032	-0.187	-4.312	0.000
Gender (Male = 1)	0.891	0.455	0.055	1.959	0.050
Age	-0.042	0.022	-0.051	-1.879	0.061

The results in Table 4 show  $R^2 = 0.078$ , indicating that 7.8% of the variance in unethical behavior is explained by the independent variables. This shows that the organizational department significantly predicts unethical behavior.

For instance, employees in Finance ( $B = 2.362$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and Medical Services ( $B = 2.175$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) report higher levels of unethical behavior compared to employees in the reference department (Others). Work experience is a significant negative predictor of unethical behavior ( $B = -0.138$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), suggesting that more experienced employees are less likely to engage in unethical practices. Gender is marginally significant, with male employees reporting higher levels of unethical behavior compared to female employees ( $B = 0.891$ ,  $p = 0.050$ ). Age is not a significant predictor of unethical behavior ( $p = 0.061$ ).

To test whether work experience moderates the relationship between the organizational department and unethical behavior, an interaction term was added to the regression model.

Table 5: Interaction Effect (Work Experience  $\times$  Department) on Unethical Behavior

Interaction Term	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Finance $\times$ Work Experience	-0.064	0.026	-2.438	0.015
Sales $\times$ Work Experience	-0.053	0.027	-1.941	0.052
Medical Services $\times$ Work Experience	-0.058	0.025	-2.276	0.023

Table 5 indicates that the interaction between Finance and work experience is significant ( $B = -0.064$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). This suggests that the relationship between the department and unethical behavior is weaker for employees with more work experience. The interaction between Medical Services and work experience is also significant ( $B = -0.058$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ), suggesting that less experienced employees in this department are more likely to engage in unethical behavior than those with more experience. The interaction for Sales is marginally significant ( $B = -0.053$ ,  $p = 0.052$ ).

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide critical insights into how organizational departments and work experience influence unethical behavior in Nigerian workplaces. The results support the proposed hypotheses, while also aligning with and extending the existing body of literature.

The results confirmed that unethical behavior significantly varies across organizational departments. Employees in departments such as Finance, Medical Services, and Sales reported higher levels of unethical behavior compared to those in Human Resources and General Administration. This finding is consistent with Victor and Cullen's Ethical Climate Theory (1988), which suggests that departments operate under unique ethical climates shaped by their leadership, operational goals, and external pressures. For instance, Finance departments often handle sensitive transactions, increasing opportunities for unethical actions such as fraud or financial manipulation. Similarly, Medical Services may face ethical dilemmas due to conflicting

demands between patient care and resource allocation, while Sales departments contend with pressure to meet performance targets, which can incentivize bribery or misrepresentation.

These findings align with prior research by Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Treviño (2010), which highlights how departments exposed to higher external pressures or significant financial stakes are more prone to unethical behavior. In the Nigerian context, Adeyeye, Adenugba, and Okeke (2021) observed a prevalence of unethical practices in sectors where financial dealings and external pressures are significant, reinforcing the findings of this study. The study's findings also support the argument of Kolade and Ogbari (2015), who noted that weak regulatory oversight in Nigerian workplaces exacerbates departmental ethical risks.

Regression analysis confirmed that Finance, Sales, and Medical Services are significantly more likely to exhibit unethical behavior compared to HR or General Administration. This is supported by Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006), who emphasize that departments with higher external stakeholder interactions or performance pressures face greater ethical challenges. For example, Finance deals with monetary transactions, while Sales are driven by aggressive performance goals. The ethical dilemmas in Medical Services reflect the balancing act between administrative constraints and patient needs, which can increase the likelihood of ethical breaches.

Furthermore, Victor and Cullen's (1988) concept of ethical climates highlights how competitive or profit-driven departmental environments may encourage corner-cutting or unethical practices. This reinforces the finding that organizational subcultures within departments significantly contribute to variations in ethical behavior.

The study also demonstrated that work experience moderates the relationship between departmental affiliation and unethical behavior. Employees with less work experience in high-risk departments such as Finance and Medical Services were more likely to engage in unethical behavior, while those with greater experience exhibited stronger ethical standards. This finding aligns with Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory (1981), which posits that individuals' ethical reasoning evolves with exposure to ethical dilemmas and increasing experience.

Similarly, Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999) argue that individuals with greater experience develop stronger moral reasoning, making them more resistant to ethical pressures. This study extends their findings by showing that the protective effect of experience is particularly evident in high-risk departments where employees face frequent and complex ethical challenges.

The findings underscore the importance of recognizing departmental differences when addressing unethical behavior in organizations. They suggest that ethical interventions should be tailored to the specific risks and pressures of each department. For high-risk departments like Finance and Medical Services, targeted ethics training and stricter oversight may be necessary.

The moderating role of work experience also highlights the value of mentoring and ethics development programs to support less experienced employees in navigating ethical dilemmas.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the influence of organizational departments on unethical behavior in Nigerian workplaces and assess how work experience moderates this relationship. The findings revealed two key insights: first, unethical behavior significantly varies across departments, with higher levels observed in Finance, Sales, and Medical Services, and lower levels in Human Resources and General Administration. Second, work experience moderates unethical behavior, particularly in high-risk departments like Finance and Medical Services such that less experienced employees are more susceptible to unethical pressures, whereas more experienced employees exhibit greater resistance to unethical practices.

The research underscores the interplay between organizational context (departmental differences) and individual factors (work experience) in shaping unethical behavior. It validates ethical decision-making frameworks, such as Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory, by illustrating how professional experience enhances ethical reasoning in high-risk environments. These findings emphasize the need for tailored ethical interventions and experience-based mentoring programs to mitigate unethical behavior, particularly in departments prone to ethical risks.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, investigate additional organizational variables (e.g., leadership styles, culture), and conduct cross-cultural comparisons to deepen understanding and broaden the applicability of these findings.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several actionable recommendations are proposed for Nigerian organizations. Firstly, organizations should implement targeted ethics training tailored to the specific challenges of high-risk departments such as Finance, Sales, and Medical Services. These training programs should focus on issues like transparency, fraud prevention, and ethical decision-making under pressure, equipping employees with practical tools to navigate their unique ethical dilemmas. Additionally, ethical leadership must be prioritized by training managers and department heads to model ethical behavior, set clear standards, and maintain accountability for the ethical climate of their teams. Leaders in high-risk departments should actively discourage unethical practices and foster an environment of integrity.

Organizations should also enhance monitoring and oversight mechanisms in departments prone to unethical behavior. Regular audits, ethical reviews, and anonymous reporting systems can help identify and address potential ethical violations early, promoting accountability and trust. Furthermore, mentorship programs should be introduced to support less experienced employees, pairing them with seasoned staff who can guide them through ethical challenges and reinforce the importance of adherence to organizational standards. Lastly, cultivating a strong ethical culture across the organization is essential. This includes developing and consistently promoting a code of ethics, encouraging open communication about ethical concerns, and fostering an overall culture of integrity that permeates all departments. Together, these initiatives can significantly reduce unethical behavior and promote a more ethical workplace environment.

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