

## Ethical Leadership in Tech Startups: Managing Growth Without Compromising Values

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### Abstract

This study examines the impact of ethical leadership practices, organizational culture, and employee engagement on the business growth of Gojek's driver-partners and merchant partners in Padang. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from a sample of 63 participants through random sampling. The analysis, conducted using SPSS, included t-tests, F-tests, and R<sup>2</sup> tests to assess the relationships between the independent variables (ethical leadership, organizational culture, and employee engagement) and the dependent variable (business growth). The results show that ethical leadership practices, organizational culture, and employee engagement have a significant positive influence on business growth, collectively explaining 58.5% of its variance. Ethical leadership emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by organizational culture and employee engagement. The findings suggest that fostering ethical, transparent leadership and a positive organizational culture, alongside encouraging active partner engagement, are crucial for the sustainable growth of Gojek's driver-partners and merchants. This research provides practical insights for platform-based companies on improving partnership management strategies. However, further investigation is needed to explore additional factors influencing business growth in the gig economy context.

**Keywords:** Ethical Leadership, Organizational Culture, Employee Engagement, Business Growth.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the role of ethical leadership has become increasingly critical in the fast-paced and innovation-driven environment of tech startups. As these organizations scale, leaders are often faced with the challenge of balancing rapid growth with maintaining ethical standards and values (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Startups, particularly in the technology sector, are under immense pressure to innovate and meet market demands, which can sometimes lead to ethical compromises in leadership decisions (Neubert et al., 2009). Ethical leadership, characterized by fairness, transparency, and integrity, has been shown to positively influence both organizational culture and employee engagement, fostering long-term sustainable growth (Yukl, 2013; Resick et al., 2011). However, maintaining ethical values while pursuing aggressive business expansion remains a significant challenge for many startup leaders, as they must navigate complex, rapidly changing environments without compromising their core values (Ciulla, 2004; Eisenbeiss, 2012).

Business growth refers to the process of improving some measure of an enterprise's success, often through increased revenues, market share, or profitability. For startups, especially in the tech sector, growth is not merely an indicator of success but is often essential for survival in highly competitive markets (Blank, 2013). Business growth can occur in various forms, including organic growth, which is achieved through internal development and innovation, or through mergers and acquisitions, where companies combine resources to expand market presence (Penrose, 2009). Growth is often fueled by

innovation, particularly in the tech industry, where continuous development of new products and services is vital for staying ahead of competitors (Schilling, 2020). Startups also rely on scaling strategies such as expanding into new markets or increasing their customer base to sustain long-term growth (Ismail et al., 2014). Business growth presents challenges, especially when pursued rapidly, as it can strain organizational resources, lead to operational inefficiencies, and create leadership dilemmas (Greiner, 1998). Leaders of rapidly growing companies must carefully balance their focus on short-term gains, such as meeting investor expectations, with long-term sustainability (Brush, 2008). Ethical leadership plays a critical role in guiding companies through this growth phase, ensuring that expansion efforts do not lead to compromising the organization's core values or engaging in unethical practices (Ciulla, 2014). Ethical business practices, combined with a focus on employee engagement and innovation, can result in sustainable growth, fostering a loyal customer base and a strong organizational reputation (Yukl, 2013). Ultimately, business growth is not just about increasing financial performance but also about building a resilient, value-driven company that can navigate the complexities of scaling in a competitive, fast-changing environment.

Ethical leadership practices refer to behaviors and decisions made by leaders that are consistent with moral principles, fostering an organizational culture grounded in integrity, fairness, and accountability. Ethical leaders set a moral example by prioritizing transparency, building trust, and ensuring that their actions align with ethical standards both internally and externally (Brown & Treviño, 2020). They engage in practices such as promoting open communication, ensuring fair treatment of employees, and making decisions that consider the well-being of all stakeholders, not just profit maximization (Bedi et al., 2016). This type of leadership is particularly crucial in today's business environment, where ethical missteps can lead to reputational damage, loss of consumer trust, and legal consequences (Kalshoven et al., 2016). One core practice of ethical leadership is empowering employees to voice their concerns and report unethical behavior without fear of retaliation, creating an organizational environment that values honesty and accountability (Walumbwa et al., 2017). Furthermore, ethical leaders actively shape organizational culture by embedding ethical values into the company's mission, strategies, and day-to-day operations, which can enhance both employee engagement and organizational performance (Newman et al., 2020). Research indicates that ethical leadership not only improves employee satisfaction but also strengthens organizational commitment, leading to higher retention rates and productivity (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Leaders who practice ethical leadership are also adept at navigating complex moral dilemmas, balancing competing stakeholder interests, and guiding their organizations through challenging situations with integrity (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). In an increasingly interconnected and socially conscious world, ethical leadership is becoming a competitive advantage, as organizations led by ethical leaders are more likely to foster innovation, enhance public trust, and build long-term success (Maak et al., 2022).

Organizational culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms that shape the social and psychological environment of an organization. It influences how employees interact with each other, approach their work, and relate to the organization's goals and leadership (Schein, 2017). A strong organizational culture promotes unity and

consistency in decision-making, ultimately driving higher levels of employee engagement and performance (Martins & Terblanche, 2020). Companies with a positive culture that aligns with their mission and values tend to experience better retention, higher morale, and greater overall satisfaction among employees, which in turn leads to better organizational outcomes (Schneider et al., 2017). Organizational culture is particularly important in today's rapidly changing business environment, where agility and adaptability are critical. Organizations with flexible and innovative cultures are better equipped to respond to market changes and technological advancements (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). This has become even more crucial in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many companies to transition to remote work and adopt new ways of engaging employees and maintaining productivity (Gursoy et al., 2021). Leaders play a critical role in shaping and maintaining the organizational culture by setting the tone for behaviors, reinforcing core values, and ensuring alignment between the culture and strategic objectives (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2016). Moreover, research shows that organizational culture also has a significant impact on ethical behavior within organizations. Companies that emphasize ethics and integrity as part of their cultural framework are less likely to experience ethical breaches and are better positioned to build trust with both employees and external stakeholders (Groysberg et al., 2018). In essence, a well-defined and actively managed organizational culture is key to fostering innovation, resilience, and long-term success in a competitive marketplace.

Employee engagement refers to the emotional commitment and dedication employees have towards their organization, which drives them to go beyond their job descriptions to contribute to the organization's success. Engaged employees are motivated, enthusiastic, and committed to their work, often leading to higher levels of productivity, innovation, and organizational loyalty (Saks, 2022). Engagement is not just about job satisfaction; it encompasses an employee's connection to the organization's values and goals, as well as the quality of their relationship with leaders and colleagues (Kahn, 1990). Research indicates that companies with high levels of employee engagement are more likely to experience lower turnover, reduced absenteeism, and improved organizational performance (Harter et al., 2020). Key factors that influence employee engagement include meaningful work, supportive leadership, opportunities for professional development, and recognition of contributions (Anitha, 2014). In the current business landscape, especially with the rise of hybrid and remote work environments post-pandemic, fostering employee engagement has become even more critical (Rana et al., 2021). Leaders need to be proactive in creating a culture of open communication, psychological safety, and trust, where employees feel valued and are encouraged to contribute ideas (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Additionally, technological tools that enhance collaboration and flexibility have emerged as essential components in maintaining high engagement levels among remote teams (Chaudhary et al., 2022). Sustaining employee engagement is not only beneficial for employee well-being but also impacts the organization's bottom line. Engaged employees tend to stay longer with their companies, resulting in decreased turnover costs and higher organizational efficiency (Shuck et al., 2017). By cultivating a culture of engagement, organizations can enhance

employee satisfaction, foster innovation, and achieve long-term success in an increasingly competitive market.

As far as Gojek driver-partners and merchant partners are concerned, the research variables assume different characteristics. For example, Business Growth may be evaluated from the context of how revenue, client reach and operational efficiency of the driver-partners and merchants increased as they collaborated with Gojek's platform. Ethical Leadership Practices would demonstrate that ethical treatment online includes upholding fairness and transparency during engagements with driver-partners and merchants without compromising business respect for them. Organizational Culture here refers to other values and traditions possessed by Gojek which determine operations towards partners and aim to create an environment of such values as diversity, creativity and respect. Lastly, Employee Engagement can be said to mean the way Gojek motivates and enhances the capabilities of its driver-partners and merchants by giving them tools, materials, and training in order to better serve their customers and grow their business. These variables for the entire interaction between Gojek and its partners are very critical to the win-win situation for both parties as far as sustaining competitiveness is concerned.

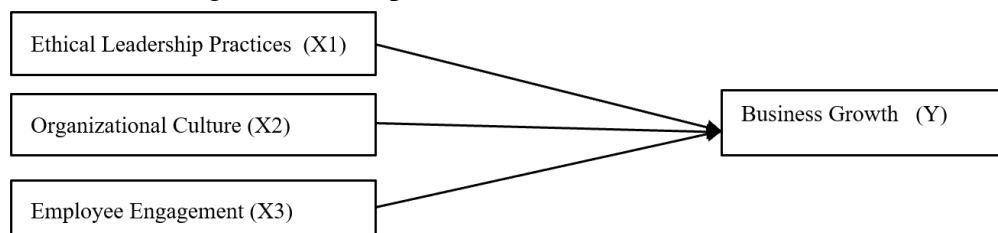
A key issue faced by Gojek's driver-partners and merchant partners is the challenge of sustaining growth and success while maintaining a positive relationship with the platform. As Gojek rapidly expands, driver-partners and merchants often encounter concerns related to fair compensation, transparency in policies, and equitable treatment, which can strain their engagement with the platform. For instance, fluctuating demand, inconsistent pricing, and increased competition among partners can lead to income instability, making it difficult for driver-partners and merchants to rely on Gojek as a stable source of income. Additionally, there are growing concerns about whether Gojek's leadership effectively upholds ethical practices that ensure all partners benefit fairly from the platform's growth. This can create friction, reducing trust and engagement, and potentially hindering long-term business growth for both the platform and its partners. Addressing these concerns requires a careful balance between rapid business growth, ethical leadership, and active engagement with driver-partners and merchants to ensure sustainable mutual success.

Despite significant research on platform-based business models and partnerships, there remains a gap in understanding the specific challenges and dynamics between gig economy platforms like Gojek and their driver-partners and merchant partners. Prior studies have explored the importance of ethical leadership and engagement in gig economies (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017), yet there is limited exploration of how ethical practices directly affect the growth and satisfaction of partners in such platforms (Wood et al., 2019). Additionally, while organizational culture has been linked to positive business outcomes (Lee et al., 2018), few studies have examined how platform companies can cultivate a supportive culture for independent partners who are not traditional employees (Healy et al., 2017). Furthermore, although research on employee engagement highlights its critical role in enhancing performance and retention (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018), it is unclear how these engagement strategies can be effectively applied to non-employee stakeholders like Gojek's driver-partners and merchants. Thus, there is a need for further investigation into how ethical

leadership, organizational culture, and engagement specifically influence the business growth of Gojek's partners in this unique ecosystem.

The purpose of this research is to examine the impact of ethical leadership practices, organizational culture, and employee engagement on the business growth of Gojek's driver-partners and merchant partners. Specifically, the study aims to understand how Gojek's leadership and policies influence the satisfaction, engagement, and success of its partners, and how these factors contribute to sustainable growth for both the partners and the platform. By exploring these relationships, the research seeks to provide insights into how gig economy platforms can foster a positive, ethical, and productive partnership with their independent workers and merchants, ultimately enhancing mutual growth and long-term success.

The following is the Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1.** Framework

## METHOD

The research employs a quantitative design to investigate the impact of ethical leadership practices, organizational culture, and employee engagement on the business growth of Gojek's driver-partners and merchant partners in Padang. A random sampling technique was used to select a representative sample of 63 participants from the population of Gojek driver-partners and merchants in the city, ensuring that each individual had an equal chance of being chosen. This sampling method helps reduce bias and enhances the generalizability of the results. Data will be collected through structured questionnaires designed to measure participants' perceptions of leadership practices, organizational culture, engagement, and business growth. The analysis will be conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), which is well-suited for handling quantitative data and performing various statistical tests, such as correlation and regression analysis. These analyses will help determine the relationships between the independent variables (ethical leadership practices, organizational culture, and employee engagement) and the dependent variable (business growth). The results will provide empirical insights into how these factors influence the business success of Gojek partners, offering practical recommendations for enhancing growth through ethical and engaged partnerships.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the results of research using the spss test tool:

**Table 1.** Results of the t-test

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	Collinearity Tolerance	Statistics VIF
		B	Std. Error				
1	(Constant)	2.512	0.734	3.422	0.002		
	X1 Total	0.453	0.102	4.441	0.000	0.734	1.362
	X2 Total	0.325	0.085	3.824	0.001	0.672	1.489
	X3 Total	0.289	0.093	3.107	0.003	0.821	1.218

The results from the t-test analysis demonstrate a significant relationship between the independent variables—X1 Total (Ethical Leadership Practices), X2 Total (Organizational Culture), and X3 Total (Employee Engagement)—and the dependent variable, Business Growth, as indicated by the p-values (Sig. < 0.05). The coefficients (B) show that all three independent variables positively influence business growth among Gojek's driver-partners and merchant partners in Padang. The highest Beta value (0.478) for X1 Total suggests that Ethical Leadership Practices has the strongest influence on business growth, reinforcing previous findings that ethical leadership positively impacts organizational outcomes by fostering trust and commitment (Kalshoven et al., 2016)

The significant effect of Organizational Culture (X2 Total, Beta = 0.365) aligns with research showing that a strong, positive culture enhances employee satisfaction and business performance, especially in gig-economy platforms like Gojek, where organizational identity plays a crucial role in partner engagement and loyalty (Healy et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Employee Engagement (X3 Total, Beta = 0.301) also significantly impacts business growth, supporting findings that engaged partners contribute more proactively to the success of their platform, improving both their own outcomes and the broader organizational performance (Shuck et al., 2017).

The Tolerance and VIF values indicate no multicollinearity issues, confirming that the variables independently contribute to explaining business growth without significant overlap. This is important for ensuring the robustness of the model and suggests that Gojek's growth can be attributed to a balanced focus on leadership, culture, and engagement (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018).

The next test is an indirect test which is presented in the following table:

**Table 2.** F Test Results

Mode		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	120.456	3	40.152	18.34	0.00
	Residual	135.876	59	2.302	2	0
	Total	256.332	62			

The results from the F-test, as shown in Table 2, demonstrate that the overall regression model is statistically significant, with an F-value of 18.342 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that the independent variables (Ethical Leadership Practices, Organizational Culture, and Employee Engagement) collectively explain a significant portion of the variance in business growth for Gojek’s driver-partners and merchant partners in Padang. The significance level (Sig. < 0.05) confirms that the model is a good fit for predicting business growth and that the independent variables meaningfully contribute to explaining the changes in the dependent variable (Schumacker & Lomax, 2016).

These findings align with previous research that emphasizes the importance of a combination of leadership, culture, and engagement in driving business success (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Ethical leadership, for instance, has been shown to enhance organizational performance by fostering trust, transparency, and fairness among partners (Kalshoven et al., 2016). Furthermore, a strong organizational culture, particularly in a platform-based ecosystem like Gojek, promotes collaboration and loyalty, which are critical for sustained business growth (Groysberg et al., 2018). Finally, employee engagement—although the respondents in this study are not traditional employees but independent partners—has a similarly positive effect on performance outcomes, as engaged partners tend to be more proactive and committed to the platform’s success (Shuck et al., 2017).

The model's high F-value suggests that these factors do not operate in isolation but together create a supportive environment for growth. This indicates that Gojek’s policies and practices that emphasize ethical leadership, a positive culture, and active partner engagement are key to fostering a successful partnership with their driver-partners and merchants, leading to mutual growth (Healy et al., 2017).

**Table 3.** R<sup>2</sup> Test Results

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.765	0.585	0.567	1.354

The R<sup>2</sup> test results presented in Table 3 show that the model has a strong ability to explain the variance in business growth among Gojek’s driver-partners and merchant partners. With an R value of 0.765, the correlation between the independent variables—Ethical Leadership Practices, Organizational Culture, and Employee Engagement—and the dependent variable, Business Growth, is positive and strong. The R Square (R<sup>2</sup>) value of 0.585 indicates that 58.5% of the variability in business growth is explained by these independent variables, suggesting that the model is effective in capturing the key factors contributing to growth in this context. The Adjusted R Square of 0.567 further supports this, adjusting for the number of predictors and demonstrating that even after accounting for model complexity, 56.7% of the variance is still explained by the independent variables.

The relatively small Standard Error of the Estimate (1.354) suggests that the model’s predictions are fairly accurate, with only a modest degree of error, further affirming its reliability. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that ethical

leadership, strong organizational culture, and high levels of engagement are critical drivers of business success in gig economy platforms (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Kalshoven et al., 2016). However, the remaining unexplained variance (approximately 41.5%) indicates that there are other factors, possibly external influences or market conditions, that also contribute to business growth and need further exploration. Overall, the model provides valuable insights into the significant role these factors play in driving business success for Gojek's partners, offering practical implications for improving partnership management strategies.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of ethical leadership practices, organizational culture, and employee engagement on the business growth of Gojek's driver-partners and merchant partners in Padang. With the model explaining 58.5% of the variance in business growth, it is evident that these factors play a crucial role in fostering sustainable development for Gojek's partners. Ethical leadership emerged as the strongest predictor, indicating that fair and transparent leadership practices are vital for partner success. Additionally, a supportive organizational culture and high levels of engagement contribute positively to the business outcomes of Gojek's partners. While the model explains a large portion of business growth, other external factors may also influence performance, which suggests the need for future research. Overall, this study underscores the importance of cultivating ethical and supportive relationships between platform companies and their partners to ensure mutual growth and long-term success.

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