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Talent Inside the Diamond: A Fluid, Trifaceted Framework for Managing Employees in Knowledge-Intensive Workplaces

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SCHOLARONE MANUSCRIPTS

Talent Inside the Diamond: A Fluid, Trifaceted Framework for Managing Employees in Knowledge-Intensive Workplaces

Purpose – To introduce the *Trifaceted Framework*, integrating ethical congruence, expertise, and motivation as an interdependent system for managing talent in knowledge-intensive organizations. The framework demonstrates that expertise and motivation alone cannot sustain performance without explicit ethical alignment.

Design/methodology/approach – Conceptual synthesis extending the ability–motivation tradition (Hammond, Madsen, & Fenton, 2004) into an expertise–motivation architecture with the addition of an ethics axis grounded in behavioral-ethics literature; maps adaptive leadership behaviors (Situational Leadership Theory) to dynamic employee profiles; and provides propositions linking ethical congruence to developmental transitions.

Findings – Ethical congruence functions as a conditioning dimension that stabilizes movement across expertise–motivation quadrants and reduces ethical drift. Leadership mechanisms—transparent accountability, developmental feedback, and psychological safety—transform a static diagnostic typology into a dynamic developmental system enabling restorative interventions.

Practical implications – Provides managers a portfolio-management style framework: diagnose employee profiles across three axes, align incentives with organizational values, use HR-analytics dashboards to flag grey-zone risk, and deploy restorative rather than punitive development pathways.

Originality/value – Repositions ethics from implicit organizational climate to an explicit conditioning variable; integrates Situational Leadership Theory, the expertise–motivation architecture, and behavioral-ethics research into an actionable talent-management system for sustainable performance and stakeholder trust in knowledge-intensive contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge-intensive firms invest heavily in expertise and motivation, yet sustained performance remains elusive. The modern workplace, especially in technology-driven and knowledge-based industries, demonstrates that expertise and motivation alone are insufficient to generate enduring results. Instead, sustained organizational learning relies on embedding these qualities within a strong ethical infrastructure. When the ethical foundations that govern behavior and decision-making are underdeveloped, even the most capable and energized teams experience volatility, erosion of trust, and reputational fragility. Decades of research in leadership and behavioral ethics converge on a common insight: productivity and innovation must occur within an ethical climate that aligns individual values with institutional purpose (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006; Mitchell, Reynolds, & Treviño, 2017; Roy, Newman, Round, & Bhattacharya, 2024).

Foundational work by Starbuck (1992) characterizes knowledge-intensive firms as organizations where knowledge constitutes the principal input, and learning is facilitated through managing turnover, training, and the creation of shared organizational routines. Blackler (1995) situates such firms within a broader typology of organizations and knowledge. The typology distinguishes *expert-dependent* and *symbolic-analyst-dependent* organizations, where embodied and embrained expertise, discretionary judgment, and problem solving under uncertainty dominate. In contrast, more *knowledge-routinized* settings rely on encoded procedures and external oversight to structure conduct. The Trifaceted Framework is developed primarily for the former.

More recently, Gutterman (2023), building on Newell et al. (2009), delineates these firms as workplaces primarily composed of knowledge workers—individuals with specialized or niche expertise who develop and apply knowledge in innovative ways. Examples range from legal and consulting practices to software and technology firms, where the ability to attract, develop, and retain key talent underpins competitive advantage. Because the workforce effectively owns the means of production—its expertise—management faces unique challenges in fostering productive environments for knowledge creation and collaboration. This paper builds upon

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these insights, proposing that ethical congruence is a conditioning factor in organizational performance, operating in tandem with motivation and expertise.

Despite extensive research on motivation–competence dynamics and leadership adaptation, prevailing models either treat ethics as background climate or subsume it under culture, leaving unclear when and how ethical alignment conditions performance. This omission obscures why otherwise capable, motivated teams cycle through burnout, drift, and reputational risk. The *Trifaceted Framework* addresses this gap by formalizing ethical congruence as a third axis that actively moderates development and outcomes, specifying leader behaviors and organizational systems that stabilize movement across profiles and sustain legitimacy in such settings.

Even high-performing organizations reveal the fragility of motivation when ethical alignment is weak or inconsistent. Technology firms renowned for innovation, such as Amazon and Microsoft, have at times confronted internal dissent and burnout when performance systems emphasized speed and output without equal attention to transparency and psychological safety (Casali & Perano, 2021; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Conversely, the Volkswagen emissions scandal illustrates how motivational intensity and technical mastery, when divorced from ethical alignment, enable systematic deception and short-term gains that erode long-term trust (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008; Valentine & Barnett, 2003). Similarly, Wells Fargo's unauthorized-accounts scandal shows how misaligned incentive systems trigger moral disengagement among skilled, motivated teams. These examples reveal a recurring organizational paradox: when expertise is decoupled from ethical coherence, motivation becomes self-defeating. The result is not sustainable excellence but cyclical performance crises, underscoring the need for frameworks that embed ethics within the architecture of motivation and expertise.

Existing perspectives explain only portions of this puzzle. Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 2018; Vroom & Jago, 2007) captures the behavioral adaptability of leaders to followers' developmental readiness, emphasizing expertise and commitment. Hammond, Madsen, and Fenton's (2004) two-dimensional matrix extends this logic to performance by mapping ability and motivation as interactive drivers of

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faculty productivity. Yet, both models treat the ethical dimension as implicit at best or peripheral—essentially a background rather than a structural determinant. Critically, this omission means that existing frameworks cannot explain why identical combinations of expertise and motivation yield vastly different performance outcomes across ethically aligned versus ethically misaligned organizations. This gap necessitates a new framework that operationalizes ethics not as a contextual moderator but as a core conditioning dimension of talent performance. The absence of explicit ethical conditioning leads organizations to oscillate between overcontrol and *laissez-faire* climates, each producing its own form of dysfunction (Hunt & Hansen, 2007). The Trifaceted Framework proposed here addresses this omission directly.

My framework integrates three constructs: motivation, expertise, and ethical congruence. SLT provides the behavioral mechanism by which leaders adapt to follower readiness; the Hammond–Madsen–Fenton grid furnishes the structural base for diagnosing ability and motivation; and the behavioral ethics tradition offers the conditioning axis that stabilizes and guides development. Within this integrated model, *ethical congruence* represents the degree to which individual moral standards align with organizational norms and institutional expectations (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012; Deeds Pamphile & Ruttan, 2023; Roy, et al., 2024). Morality operates as the individual's internal compass—the cognitive and emotional capacity for self-regulation—while ethics denotes the collective and codified standards of conduct that define the organization's moral ecosystem. The intersection of these three dimensions creates the foundation for sustainable performance, transforming the dyadic framework into a morally informed developmental system.

This integration makes three core theoretical contributions. First, it reframes ethics as a conditioning variable that directly influences the efficacy of expertise and motivation, rather than as an external constraint or *post hoc* corrective (Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Second, it extends leadership theory by showing how ethical climates moderate the relationship between leader adaptability and follower development, yielding more stable motivational outcomes over time (Ahmed Iqbal

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et al., 2020; Neves, 2025). Third, it reconceptualizes performance typologies as dynamic rather than static, allowing movement across profiles through restorative mechanisms such as reflection, feedback, and transparent accountability (Gini, 1997; Treviño & Nelson, 2021; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Together, these advances respond to calls in behavioral ethics and organizational psychology for frameworks that capture how moral context shapes performance trajectories (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012; Rai, Kim, & Singh, 2023).

From a managerial standpoint, the Trifaceted Framework offers a diagnostic and developmental tool for aligning employee motivation, expertise, and ethics. By recognizing that performance shortfalls may stem as much from ethical incongruence as from skill or motivational deficits, leaders can design interventions that rebuild trust and engagement. Mechanisms such as fairness, voice, and ethical mentoring reinforce the moral infrastructure of organizations, enabling leaders to balance productivity pressures with integrity-driven climates. This developmental approach also provides managers with levers to transform punitive responses into restorative ones, sustaining high performance while maintaining psychological safety and organizational trust (Valentine & Barnett, 2003; Casali & Perano, 2021; Dust, et al., 2018; Roy, et al., 2024).

The framework also opens several pathways for future empirical exploration. Specifically, it suggests that ethical congruence may moderate the relationship between expertise and motivation in predicting individual and team performance. Leadership interventions that explicitly emphasize ethical reinforcement are likely to accelerate positive movement across developmental quadrants of motivation and expertise. Finally, the integration of behavioral and HR-analytics with indicators of ethical climate could enhance the predictive validity of the framework in assessing long-term organizational effectiveness. Collectively, this agenda places ethics not at the periphery, but at the core of talent management and leadership practice.

In the sections that follow, I elaborate the theoretical foundations of the Trifaceted Framework, beginning with the adaptive mechanisms of Situational Leadership Theory, extending through the competence–motivation architecture of the Hammond–Madsen–Fenton model, and

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culminating in the integration of the ethical–moral dimension. This scaffolding leads to a typology of employee profiles that captures the luminous and shadow forms of motivation and expertise, offering scholars and practitioners an actionable model for building ethical, motivated, and high-performing organizations.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Framework Development

Effective management of knowledge-intensive talent requires integrating three perspectives often treated in isolation—adaptive leadership behavior, the competence–motivation configuration of employees, and the ethical conditions under which work is accomplished. Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) explains how leaders vary directive and supportive behaviors to match follower readiness. The Hammond, Madsen, Fenton (HMF) lens complements SLT by positioning ability and motivation as orthogonal drivers of productivity in professionalized settings. However, neither tradition directly addresses how ethical congruence—between individual conduct and organizational standards—conditions the sustainability of performance. I synthesize these streams to develop a Trifaceted Framework in which ethics is not an add-on but an operational dimension that shapes how expertise and motivation translate into firm outcomes.

In the sections that follow, I first revisit SLT in 2.1 as the behavioral mechanism; then extend the HMF model in 2.2 to knowledge-intensive firms; and finally formalize the ethical–moral dimension in 2.3, and present related propositions. In Section 3 I present the resulting typology and its actionable managerial levers.

2.1 Situational Leadership Theory: Adaptive and Values-Driven Leadership

Situational Leadership Theory (SLT), developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969, 1972) and refined by Blanchard et al. (2018), provides the behavioral foundation for my Trifaceted Framework. SLT posits that effective leaders vary their approach according to followers' developmental readiness—defined by levels of competence and commitment. Leadership effectiveness arises from the leader's ability to adjust along two behavioral dimensions, directive and supportive, producing four styles—*directing, coaching, supporting,* and

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delegating—that together capture the adaptive continuum of leadership behavior (Wang, Fu, Qiu, Moore, & Wang, 2017)[1].

Recent empirical work demonstrates SLT's enduring relevance in dynamic and knowledge-intensive environments. Studies across healthcare, education, and technology sectors show that leaders who tailor their behavior to follower competence and motivation foster higher engagement, satisfaction, and retention (Thompson & Glasø, 2015; Wang, Liu, Peng, Li, Liang, Liao, & Liu, 2024). This adaptability links directly to the competence–motivation dyad at the core of my framework: when leaders accurately diagnose follower capability and motivational state, they can deploy targeted direction or empowerment to accelerate developmental growth.

Contemporary research extends SLT by embedding adaptive leadership within broader organizational contexts. Emerging work on AI-powered leadership emphasizes that leaders must now navigate not only situational complexity but also technological transformation, requiring adaptability grounded in ethical principles and human-centered values (Aziz et al., 2025). This integration ensures that flexibility in leadership style does not compromise integrity or organizational learning. In our current world of fast adoption of generative AI, we increasingly find algorithmically governed organizations where ethical leadership is not only challenged by technological change, it is also reshaped by the ways in which these newer algorithms mediate judgment. Sposato (2025) argues that ethical reasoning in such settings increasingly emerges through human–AI interaction, creating hybrid decision environments that influence what is noticed, prioritized, and normalized. For the present framework, this introduces an important boundary condition for ethical congruence in knowledge-intensive workplaces: alignment may partly reflect human–AI assemblages rather than individual conscience or stated organizational values alone. At the same time, this does not imply that AI possesses moral agency. Rather, algorithmic systems may exercise functional agency by

[1] The four SLT styles map directly to distinct employee profiles in my framework, operationalizing adaptive leadership as a mechanism for navigating diverse motivation–expertise–ethics configurations, as detailed in Section 3, where I present the framework.

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influencing outcomes, while moral accountability remains grounded in human design, deployment, and oversight choices. Accordingly, in my Trifaceted Framework, SLT operates as the behavioral mechanism through which competence, motivation, and ethics interact, i.e., effective leadership in modern organizations is context-responsive and values-driven.

While SLT offers a valuable foundation for understanding adaptive managerial behavior, it does not fully capture the structural relationship between employee competence and motivation or the ethical dilemmas that pervade knowledge-intensive workplaces. My framework fills this void by positioning ethical decision-making as central to effective employee management. Accordingly, my framework extends SLT by embedding ethical reflection into the leader–follower dynamic, recognizing that leaders' moral orientation shapes the organizational climate.

P1a: Leaders who calibrate their adaptive behavior to followers' ethical congruence, expertise, and motivation will achieve more stable developmental outcomes than leaders who calibrate only to expertise and motivation.

P1b: Leaders who demonstrate ethical adaptability will foster greater ethical awareness and conduct among employees, reinforcing moral congruence within the organization.

This pair of propositions rests on the argument that ethical calibration reduces misdiagnosis of follower readiness and helps limit grey-zone drift, thereby linking leader behavior to the developmental dynamics, which is formalized in Section 3. This ethical calibration ensures that leadership adaptability remains rooted in organizational integrity and cascades through employee behavior. I next turn to the Hammond–Madsen–Fenton (2004) framework, designed to enhance faculty research productivity, but with underexplored relevance for knowledge-intensive firms.

2.2 Extension of Hammond, Madsen and Fenton

The foundational work of Hammond, Madsen, and Fenton (2004) offers a systematic framework for enhancing academic productivity through a two-dimensional matrix that classifies individuals according to their **ability and motivation**. Their typology distinguishes four categories—High Motivation–High Ability, High Motivation–Low Ability, Low Motivation–High Ability, and Low Motivation–Low Ability—each requiring distinct managerial approaches to

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improve institutional performance (Hammond et al., 2004). Although the original model was developed for higher education, its core logic applies broadly to knowledge-intensive settings where productivity depends on the interplay between capability and intrinsic motivation. This analytical foundation underpins the first two dimensions of my Trifaceted Framework for managing talent in knowledge-intensive organizations.

Recent empirical research reinforces the enduring relevance of this **ability–motivation** axis and extends its explanatory power across diverse professional contexts. Stupnisky et al. (2023) show that faculty members' perceived autonomy and expertise significantly predict autonomous motivation, which in turn is a strong determinant of research productivity in STEM disciplines. Their findings are consistent with the HMF logic that outcomes emerge from the interaction of capability and internalized motivation—an insight readily transferable to knowledge workers, whose roles mirror academic autonomy and self-direction.

Complementing this, Bland et al. (2005) present a predictive model in which productivity is associated with individual characteristics, institutional characteristics, and leadership characteristics. Individual-level factors such **as** motivation, content knowledge, and research skills interact with leadership and institutional characteristics to explain both personal and departmental productivity. The evidence highlights that while individual capability and drive are critical, leadership climate, communication, and culture exert strong moderating effects. This insight justifies extending the two-dimensional HMF matrix to incorporate contextual factors—an evolution especially salient for knowledge-intensive institutions where moral lapses and cultural misalignment can rapidly erode trust and innovation capacity.

Further refinement comes from Kern (2011), whose multifactor model identifies investigator quality, motivation, institutional support, and passion as joint predictors of research output. Kern further demonstrates that analytic accuracy is a critical but often-neglected dimension of productivity. Ability and motivation alone cannot sustain productivity when analytic rigor and ethical institutional conduct are absent. Similarly, DeConinck (2011) and Teresi et al. (2019) demonstrate that ethical climate shapes employee performance and retention. Collectively, these studies substantiate the ability × motivation core proposed by Hammond et al. (2004) while exposing the theoretical gap my model addresses—namely, the absence of an explicitly

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articulated ethical dimension that operationalizes institutional accountability, analytic integrity, and moral leadership as conditioning forces on performance sustainability.

Building on this body of work, the Trifaceted Framework extends Hammond, Madsen, and Fenton's logic to knowledge-intensive workplaces by replacing ability with expertise and incorporating ethical congruence as a third axis. This reformulation reflects the distinctive character of knowledge-intensive work, in which performance depends less on general capacity than on cumulative, context-specific mastery, discretionary judgment, and adaptive knowledge application. It also addresses a central limitation of prior models by specifying how ethical congruence shapes evaluations of employee potential and leadership effectiveness.

The substitution of expertise for ability is supported by research on expert performance. Ericsson and Lehmann (1996) argue that domain-specific expertise, developed through sustained deliberate practice and contextual experience, is qualitatively distinct from general cognitive ability, and that the association between general ability and domain-specific performance weakens as experience accumulates. This distinction is especially consequential in knowledge-intensive firms, where knowledge constitutes the principal organizational input (Starbuck, 1992). In such settings, effective performance depends less on abstract capacity than on accumulated, context-sensitive mastery. Evidence from adjacent domains points in the same direction. Iso-Ahola (2024) distinguishes among ability, effort, and skill, arguing that high performance rests on developed skill rather than raw ability alone. Brummett (2023), writing in applied ethics, similarly treats ethics expertise as situated professional judgment grounded in disciplinary standards and contextual interpretation rather than in generic capacity. Taken together, these arguments justify recasting HMF's ability dimension as expertise and align the Trifaceted Framework more closely with the organizational-learning tradition.

My framework further introduces **ethical congruence** as the axis that conditions the sustainability of performance in knowledge-intensive workplaces. Earlier HMF applications tended to emphasize static quadrant placement. Subsequent extensions of the HMF logic (Bland et al., 2005; Stupnisky et al., 2023) demonstrate that productivity stems not only from skill and drive but also from the ethical culture in which these qualities are enacted. The

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Trifaceted Framework therefore advances the HMF model by detailing a fluid, dynamic system of professional development.

*P2a: Incorporating ethical congruence into the **expertise × motivation** matrix will transform it from a static diagnostic typology into a dynamic, developmental framework that captures the evolving relationship among capability, motivation, and integrity.*

P2b: When leaders evaluate employees through this tri-dimensional lens, they can better align talent-management practices with organizational values, enabling fluid transitions across roles while sustaining ethical and motivational balance.

This triadic structure reconceptualizes employee classification from a fixed typology into a continuous developmental system, allowing for morally grounded talent management that adapts as individuals and organizational needs evolve. The next section formalizes this integration by distinguishing between moral reasoning at the individual level and ethical congruence at the organizational level, setting the stage for the employee typology developed in § 3, where these dimensions are operationalized in practice.

2.3 Integration of Ethical–Moral Dimension

While the competence–motivation matrix captures the structural drivers of performance, it remains incomplete without explicit attention to the ethical conditions under which work unfolds. Decades of behavioral-ethics research demonstrate that the context in which individuals act profoundly shapes both moral cognition and conduct (Bandura, 1986; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006; Moore et al., 2012). The Trifaceted Framework therefore advances beyond functional productivity to encompass the moral and institutional climate shaping employee behavior. At its core lies the recognition that productivity divorced from ethical integrity is neither sustainable nor strategically sound.

2.3.1 Ethical–Moral Axis: Integrating Individual and Institutional Levels

Ethics and morals are often conflated in organizational discourse, but they operate at distinct yet interdependent levels: morality as the individual's internal compass and capacity for self-regulation, and ethics as the codified standards and collective norms governing organizational

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life (Rest, 1986; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Behavioral-ethics research demonstrates that moral reasoning tends to be personal and dispositional, whereas ethical reasoning operates contextually and institutionally (Bandura, 1986; Moore et al., 2012). When personal morals diverge from prevailing ethical norms, self-regulatory processes may be deactivated through moral-disengagement mechanisms, enabling rationalized misconduct (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008). Conversely, when moral identity is central to the self-concept, individuals are more likely to notice ethical features of situations and regulate behavior in ways that remain consistent with that identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). The internalization dimension of moral identity provides an especially useful individual-level anchor for the ethical–moral axis, while moral attentiveness, both perceptual and reflective, further equips individuals to recognize ethical cues in ambiguous organizational contexts (Sturm, 2017).

Research on person–organization fit demonstrates that alignment between individual values and organizational culture significantly predicts job satisfaction and commitment (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Building on this insight, my framework positions ethical congruence as a critical dimension of such fit. When employees' personal moral standards align with organizational ethical norms, and with leadership models that reinforce shared purpose, the result is enhanced engagement and reduced ethical drift (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Conversely, misalignment often triggers the moral-disengagement mechanisms documented in behavioral-ethics research, eroding motivation, trust, and ethical culture.

Integrating these dimensions enables leaders to align personal conviction with institutional standards, ensuring that capability and motivation are exercised within a morally coherent environment. The ethical–moral axis thus operationalizes this integration by linking moral conviction at the individual level with ethical congruence at the organizational level, creating conditions in which employees' internal moral standards reinforce, rather than conflict with, the organization's ethical climate.

Within the Trifaceted Framework, this distinction manifests across analytical levels: morality operates at the micro level of individual conscience and self-regulation, whereas ethics functions at the macro level of institutional norms and collective governance (Valentine &

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Barnett, 2003). Recent research extends this logic beyond individual organizations, showing that ethical congruence and virtue propagation occur at network and alliance levels as well, reinforcing shared ethical commitments across strategic, institutional, and relational boundaries (Mion et al., 2023). The ethical–moral axis thus bridges individual conscience and institutional governance—and extends across network and alliance boundaries—by linking a leader's capacity to cultivate ethical culture with employees' internalized moral standards. This micro–macro integration provides the theoretical foundation for the later distinction, where personal morality and institutional ethics are mutually reinforcing, and where their dissociation leads to moral disengagement, ethical erosion, and ultimately organizational decay.

2.3.2 Ethical Congruence and Organizational Outcomes

Classical ethical traditions offer complementary logics for understanding conduct in organizations: consequentialist theories assess actions by collective outcomes, deontological reasoning emphasizes duty and adherence to moral principles, and virtue-based approaches stress character formation and habituated moral excellence (Aristotle, 350 BCE/2009; Kant, 1785/1993; Mill, 1861/1998; Solomon, 1992; Gini, 1997). Together, these paradigms ground integrity as both a personal virtue and a structural imperative linking individual intent to institutional purpose. By linking these philosophical traditions with behavioral-ethics research, the Trifaceted Framework positions ethical congruence as a stabilizing force for motivation and expertise. Empirical studies confirm that congruence between individual moral identity and organizational values enhances job satisfaction and commitment (Valentine & Barnett, 2003) and that ethical leadership amplifies follower empowerment and well-being (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Dust et al., 2018). In contrast, environments marked by misalignment invite moral disengagement, rationalization, and systemic misconduct (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; Detert et al., 2008).

Consequently, integrating the ethical–moral dimension transforms the motivation–expertise matrix from a descriptive typology into a prescriptive guide for leadership practice. It enables managers to view productivity not merely as a function of skill and drive but as a reflection of character and context. Ethical integrity thus becomes the connective tissue that sustains

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performance, aligns personal purpose with institutional mission, and secures the long-term legitimacy of the enterprise. While SLT and the HMF model explain how leaders adapt behavior and how employees vary in expertise and drive, the ethical–moral layer explains why these behaviors sustain or erode organizational integrity. This integration sets the stage for my expanded typology, which visualizes employees across three mutually orthogonal continua: motivation, expertise, and ethical orientation. With this positioning, I move to a dynamic schema in which moral alignment determines whether talent contributes to or corrodes collective performance.

Traditional models of organizational behavior tend to overlook the psychological and cultural processes through which this alignment is enacted and maintained. The Trifaceted Framework links the moral convictions of individuals to the ethical systems of their organizations, proposing that congruence between the two stabilizes motivation and strengthens engagement.

P3a: Ethical congruence between employees' moral values and the organization's ethical climate will increase job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and ethical conduct (Valentine & Barnett, 2003; Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005).

P3b: Misalignment between personal morality and organizational ethics will heighten moral disengagement and ethical risk, undermining both individual motivation and collective trust (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005).

When leaders nurture a culture in which personal conscience and institutional norms reinforce one another, the result is a self-regulating workforce that sustains productivity through integrity rather than surveillance. Conversely, when these dimensions diverge, the resulting dissonance erodes morale and encourages rationalizations for misconduct. The Trifaceted Framework thus positions ethical alignment as both a measurable condition and an actionable target for managerial practice.

I apply this logic to the Employee Diamond typology, showing how ethical alignment conditions movement across the axes of motivation and expertise. The following section operationalizes

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this integration through a typology of employee categories and managerial pathways of my Trifaceted Framework.

3. The Employee Diamond: A Trifaceted Typology for Knowledge-Intensive Organizations

Having established the theoretical foundations of motivation, expertise, and ethical congruence, I now operationalize these dimensions into a unified framework—the **Employee Diamond Typology**—designed to guide leadership practice in knowledge-intensive organizations. This framework visualizes employees across three mutually orthogonal continua, transforming the motivation–expertise matrix from a descriptive diagnostic into a dynamic developmental system. The typology captures both the luminous ("inside-the-diamond") and shadow ("outside-the-diamond") manifestations of employee profiles, enabling leaders to diagnose, intervene, and cultivate talent in ways that sustain both performance and principle.

Building on Situational Leadership Theory and the Hammond–Madsen–Fenton competence–motivation matrix, the Trifaceted Framework incorporates an explicit ethical dimension, transforming the typology from descriptive diagnostic to developmental tool. This enables leaders to evaluate not only what employees can do and want to do, but whether they align with organizational purpose. The framework integrates behavioral adaptability, motivational readiness, and ethical congruence into a unified schema for managing talent in complex organizational contexts.

Quadrant 1: High Motivation – High Expertise (Engaged Experts)

These employees combine intrinsic motivation with deep competence. They are self-directed, collaborative, and often serve as informal mentors. **Risks:** burnout or ethical blind spots when intense focus on results overshadows reflection. **Levers:** provide autonomy with accountability (Deci & Ryan, 2000), structured peer mentoring to diffuse knowledge, and periodic role rotation to sustain purpose alignment. Ethical leadership behaviors that emphasize transparency and fairness help maintain intrinsic motivation over time (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).

Quadrant 2: High Motivation – Low Expertise (Enthusiastic Learners)

Motivated but still developing their skills, these individuals respond best to coaching and progressive challenge. **Risks:** frustration or overreach if learning demands exceed their

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capability. **Levers:** scaffolded development pathways, regular feedback loops (London, 2014), and visible progress milestones that reinforce confidence and self-efficacy. When paired with ethical climates that reward honesty about limitations, learning accelerates without creating performance anxiety (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Quadrant 3: Low Motivation – High Expertise (Under-mobilized Experts)

Employees with substantial knowledge but low engagement often signal a misalignment between personal values and organizational incentives. **Risks:** selective participation, cynicism, or quiet resistance that undermines team cohesion. **Levers:** job crafting around meaningful projects (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), recognition linked to mentorship contributions, and transparent advancement criteria that rebuild trust. Research on value congruence indicates that restoring ethical alignment reignites professional commitment and reduces withdrawal (Edwards & Cable, 2009).

Quadrant 4: Low Motivation – Low Expertise (Re-engagement Candidates)

This group requires diagnostic attention rather than dismissal. **Risks:** withdrawal, dependency, or ethical shortcuts under pressure. **Levers:** targeted upskilling opportunities, micro-goals to create early success, and supportive supervision emphasizing inclusion and procedural fairness (Colquitt et al., 2013). Even incremental skill growth coupled with ethical reinforcement can shift these employees toward productive engagement.

The adaptive leadership behaviors articulated in Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) correspond directly to employee profiles within the motivation–expertise matrix. The *Directing* style aligns with employees low in both expertise and motivation, requiring structured guidance and clear expectations. The *Coaching* style—combining directive and supportive behaviors—is most effective for *Enthusiastic Learners* (high motivation, low expertise, Quadrant 2), who benefit from skill scaffolding and frequent feedback. The *Supporting* style, emphasizing collaboration and autonomy, suits *Under-mobilized Experts* (low motivation, high expertise, Quadrant 3), where the leader's task is to rekindle engagement and moral commitment. Finally, the *Delegating* style fits *Strategic Contributors* (high motivation, high expertise, Quadrant 1),

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allowing autonomy under shared ethical accountability. This mapping operationalizes SLT as a mechanism for navigating developmental movement within the Trifaceted Framework.

Dynamic Movement and Ethical Conditioning

Professional growth in organizations often entails movement across the axes of expertise, motivation, and ethics. The framework assumes that employees are not static; movement across quadrants is both possible and desirable. Leaders can accelerate development by recognizing that ethical congruence—shared norms of honesty, fairness, and accountability—acts as a stabilizer. Without it, transitions risk becoming opportunistic or politically driven. When ethical congruence is high, growth from Enthusiastic Learners to Engaged Experts is sustained, and corrective movement for Under-mobilized Experts becomes restorative rather than punitive. Standard typologies often cast these categories as fixed states, ignoring the ethical conditions that enable individuals to move fluidly and constructively through different developmental stages. Recent research underscores the critical role of organizational climate and ethical stability in facilitating restorative transitions rather than triggering punitive responses to performance gaps (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013).

Each quadrant in the Employee Diamond possesses both its luminous and its shadow form. In Figure 1, I provide a richer and more descriptive typology that encompasses the third orthogonal ethical–moral axis. The inner-diamond variants—those operating under high ethical congruence—represent constructive expressions of talent, while their outer-diamond counterparts illustrate how identical combinations of motivation and expertise can deteriorate under moral misalignment. This representation captures the essence of the Trifaceted Framework: performance potential is never independent of ethical context.

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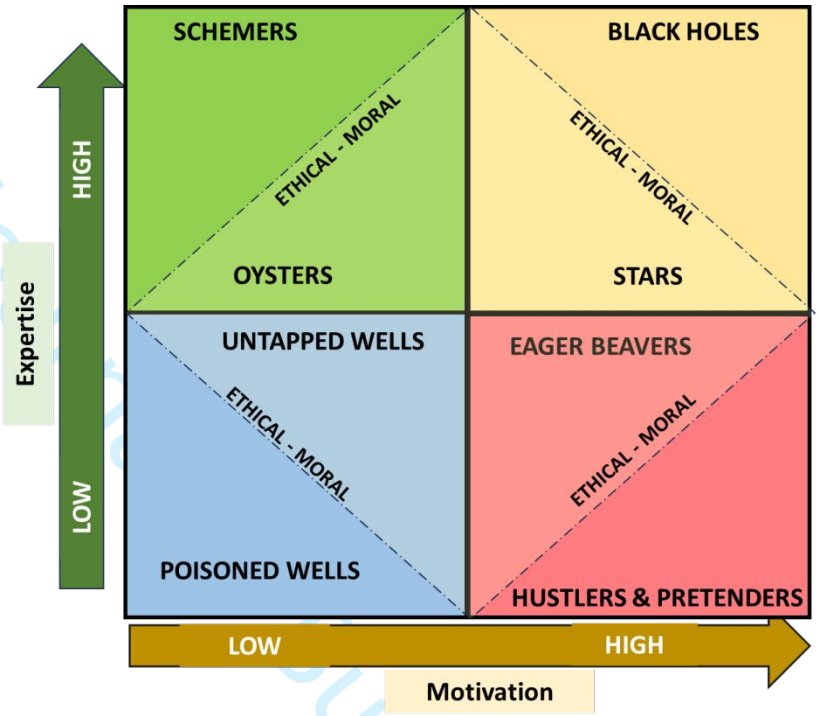
Figure 1. The Employee Diamond Typology. (Motivation × Expertise with Ethical Conditioning)



The Employee Diamond Typology (Motivation × Expertise with Ethical Conditioning). The two-dimensional matrix forms base quadrants; the ethical–moral axis introduces inner- and outer-diamond manifestations representing high and low ethical congruence (see Table 1).

In this three-dimensional model of the Employee Diamond, the ethical–moral axis functions as a continuum of ethical congruence, rather than a rigid binary. Individuals or behaviors that cluster close to this axis signal robust alignment between personal moral standards and organizational norms—forming the "inside-the-diamond" zone, where ethical coherence is strongest. As one moves farther outwards from the ethics axis, alignment weakens and *ethical drift* increases, marking a transition toward greater risk of corrosive or unethical conduct. Importantly, the diamond's boundary lines represent these transitional grey zones, where context, incentives, and individual decisions interact to complicate moral judgment. The behavioral-ethics literature describes one important mechanism here as *ethical fading*: the gradual loss of ethical salience as decisions come to be framed as technical, strategic, or commercial rather than moral, often reinforced by euphemistic language, incremental exceptions, and self-serving causal attributions (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004; Bazerman &

Tenbrunsel, 2011). Within the Employee Diamond, ethical fading helps explain how skilled, motivated employees can appear to remain inside the diamond while ethical cues quietly recede under performance pressure and ambiguity. Grey-zone drift, in this sense, may reflect attentional erosion rather than conscious malice, which underscores the importance of leadership interventions that restore ethical salience before deeper disengagement takes hold. Within this schema, ethical stability is not merely a passive climate but serves as an active moderator shaping employees' developmental trajectories. This operational framing transforms the ethics axis into a practical diagnostic tool, enabling leaders to identify, monitor, and restore ethical congruence as a central facet of talent management.

Table 1. Mapping of Core Quadrants and Their Ethical Manifestations

Core Quadrant: Motivation × Expertise	**High-Ethical Alignment** ***Inside the Diamond***	**Low-Ethical Alignment** ***Outside the Diamond***	**Leadership Lever**
Engaged Experts	*Stars* – Purpose-driven mentors who pair mastery with humility and integrity.	*Black Holes* – Brilliant but ethically blind performers who absorb credit and erode trust.	Maintain autonomy with transparent accountability and ethical reflection.
Enthusiastic Learners	*Eager Beavers* – Highly motivated novices eager for growth and feedback.	*Schemers* – Politically motivated strivers who game visibility for advancement.	Provide structured development and values-based coaching that rewards authenticity.
Under-mobilized Experts	*Oysters* – Deep but under-recognized experts who can resurface through renewed purpose.	*Hustlers* – Skilled cynics who deploy expertise for self-interest or manipulation.	Reignite purpose through meaningful projects, fairness, and trust restoration.
Re-engagement Candidates	*Untapped Wells* – Dormant contributors capable of renewal under ethical support.	*Poisoned Wells* – Disengaged or corrosive actors who undermine morale.	Diagnose causes of withdrawal, rebuild inclusion, or ethically exit as needed.

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Together, Figure 1 and Table 1 extend the expertise–motivation matrix into a truly trifaceted model. Each quadrant's dual ethical manifestation shows that expertise and drive yield positive performance only when aligned with moral integrity. The **distance from the ethics axis** represents the degree of ethical congruence, while the **diamond's boundary lines** symbolize the grey zones of moral ambiguity where leadership vigilance matters most to avoid drift.

By embedding ethics as a continuum rather than a static state, the Trifaceted Framework equips managers to diagnose, intervene, and develop talent in ways that sustain both performance and principle. The following propositions formalize these dynamics, specifying how ethical congruence conditions movement and leadership behavior across the Employee Diamond.

P4a: Higher ethical congruence will stabilize transitions across motivation–expertise quadrants, fostering restorative rather than punitive development pathways (Colquitt et al., 2013).

P4b: Leaders who prioritize mentorship, fairness, and transparent communication will re-engage under-mobilized experts and guide them toward sustained ethical performance (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Such ethical stability transforms talent management from reactive correction to proactive growth, ensuring that advancement and remediation are rooted in values rather than compliance. By cultivating a climate of ethical transparency and restorative development, managers can guide diverse talent through adaptive, accountable progression across the Employee Diamond.

4. Contributions, Managerial Implications, and Future Research

The preceding analysis established a robust theoretical scaffolding for the Trifaceted Framework, illustrating how motivation, expertise, and ethics intersect to shape employee performance in knowledge-intensive organizations. This section synthesizes those insights, translating them into empirically grounded implications for scholarship and practice while situating the framework within broader discourses on leadership, talent development, and ethical management.

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4.1 Theoretical Contributions

The Trifaceted Framework advances three mutually reinforcing theoretical contributions. First, it operationalizes ethics as a core conditioning dimension, moving beyond rhetorical positioning to embed ethical congruence within the competence–motivation matrix. This directly extends Hammond, Madsen, and Fenton's (2004) typology and incorporates behavioral ethics insights (Brown et al., 2005), responding to calls for frameworks that link ethical climate to organizational outcomes rather than relegating ethics as an exogenous factor. Second, the framework reconceptualizes Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Blanchard et al., 2018) as a behavioral mechanism for navigating varied employee profiles, mapping directive, supportive, and delegating leadership behaviors to specific quadrants of the motivation–expertise grid. Third, it advances a developmental perspective in which employees are viewed as dynamic actors moving across quadrants through learning, feedback, and ethical reinforcement, establishing the framework as a testable midrange theory of growth and resilience.

This approach offers a marked contrast to integrative models such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and AMO (Appelbaum et al., 2000), where ethical factors are often implicit. By formalizing ethical congruence as central, the Trifaceted Framework aligns with emerging empirical evidence underscoring the pivotal role of ethics in performance and well-being.

4.2 Managerial Implications: Building a Culture of Ethical Productivity

While Table 1 outlines quadrant-specific leadership levers, their strategic value emerges only when embedded within an organizational culture that continuously reinforces ethical congruence. The Trifaceted Framework thus moves beyond individual development plans to emphasize systemic alignment—the structures, incentives, and routines through which firms sustain motivation, expertise, and moral integrity simultaneously.

Empowerment with accountability must serve as a core design principle. When autonomy is balanced by transparent goals and feedback, employees internalize responsibility for both results and process, reducing ethical drift. Developmental feedback and psychological safety

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are critical enablers: open communication, learning-oriented performance reviews, and mentorship systems transform coaching from a corrective function into a trust-building mechanism. Travis and Anthony (2011) demonstrate the potency of rapid feedback cycles—providing mentors' evaluative input within 48 hours—which accelerated research productivity by 144% in their first year while sustaining gains across three years. Such structured, timely feedback loops operationalize psychological safety by signaling organizational commitment to growth over punishment. Finally, ethical-climate reinforcement requires leaders to model congruent behavior and embed fairness and integrity in decision systems (i.e., promotion, reward, and recognition) so that ethical conduct and expertise become mutually reinforcing signals of success.

Across all profiles, cultivating an ethical climate is foundational, not decorative. Systems that reward transparency, feedback, and accountability foster cooperative learning and moral capability. Leaders act as ethical architects, aligning expertise and motivation with moral development for sustainable performance. Collectively, these mechanisms operationalize the Trifaceted Framework at scale, translating its micro-level insights into organizational practice. By institutionalizing fairness, voice, and reflective learning, leaders create conditions under which movement within the Employee Diamond remains restorative rather than punitive, sustaining high performance with enduring trust.

4.3 From Ethical Alignment to Organizational Legitimacy

Beyond individual and team dynamics, the framework also extends to firm-level culture and legitimacy. Ethical responsibility initiatives are often cited as sources of competitive advantage, but their true influence depends on deeply embedded ethical norms rather than surface-level policies. The absence of authentic ethical integration frequently leads to stakeholder skepticism and inconsistent outcomes (Treviño, Weaver & Reynolds, 2006; Casali & Perano, 2021). To achieve sustainable success and enduring stakeholder trust, ethics must permeate not only individual and group dynamics but also the broader institutional culture and outward-facing relationships of the firm.

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The Trifaceted Framework positions ethical grounding as integral to both internal culture formation and the organization's credibility with external stakeholders, closing the loop from leader-to-employee influence to firm-level outcomes.

P5a: Organizations that embed the Trifaceted Framework's ethical principles within their culture will experience fewer ethical breaches, higher stakeholder trust, and increased collaborative innovation (Treviño, Weaver & Reynolds, 2006; Casali & Perano, 2021).

P5b: When leaders actively align internal values and external messaging with ethical congruence, they enhance both organizational cohesion and external legitimacy, sustaining a strategic advantage in high-change, knowledge-intensive industries (Casali & Perano, 2021).

By anchoring substantive ethical practices within organizational culture, firms move beyond reputation management toward genuine systemic integrity—aligning performance imperatives with societal expectations and positioning themselves for long-term success.

4.4 Future Research Directions

Building on the Trifaceted Framework's integration of motivation, expertise, and ethical congruence, future research should advance both theoretical precision and organizational application. The next wave of inquiry must move from conceptual articulation to cumulative evidence, clarifying how ethical alignment conditions developmental progress and performance durability in knowledge-intensive contexts (Deeds Pamphile & Ruttan, 2023; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Empirical Validation. A critical step is empirically tracing longitudinal transitions of employees across the Employee Diamond, moving beyond static typologies. Field-based longitudinal data, event-history models, and latent-transition analyses can reveal how shifts in competence, motivation, and ethical congruence interact across individual, team, and organizational levels. Staggered rollouts and quasi-experiments can further clarify the causal mechanisms through which ethical climates and personal values sustain engagement and reduce volatility (Ye et al., 2021).

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Measurement and Operationalization. Methodological innovation is essential for translating the framework's three axes into actionable constructs. Future scholarship can develop composite, multi-source indices of ethical congruence—combining self-reported moral identity, unit-level climate perceptions, and behavioral HRIS data such as mentoring or code-of-conduct activity. Such integrative metrics will enable real-time mapping of alignment versus drift, supporting proactive interventions and tracking movement across Employee Diamond categories (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Contextual boundary conditions. Comparative analyses across contexts that differ in industry turbulence, team interdependence, cultural norms, and digital or remote work modalities can identify where ethical congruence exerts its strongest conditioning effects on performance and well-being (Demerouti et al., 2001). Technology-intensive and other knowledge-intensive sectors, characterized by high autonomy and task complexity, provide especially appropriate settings, particularly when outcomes link micro-level transitions in the Employee Diamond to innovation, collaboration quality, retention, and organizational legitimacy.

This emphasis on knowledge-intensive settings is deliberate. The framework applies most directly to organizations that approximate Blackler's (1995) expert-dependent and symbolic-analyst-dependent types, where embodied and embrained expertise, discretionary judgment, and continual recombination of knowledge under uncertainty shape everyday work (Newell et al., 2009). Its logic extends more partially to communication-intensive settings, where collective sensemaking creates similar interpretive latitude, although knowledge is more distributed and interactional. Under these conditions, leaders retain considerable interpretive discretion, and that same discretion makes ethical congruence more consequential because norms are enacted through interpretation, peer interaction, and informal decision routines rather than through tightly codified compliance systems. By contrast, in more knowledge-routinized environments, where knowledge is embedded in standardized procedures and conduct is shaped primarily by formal oversight, mandated rules, and external monitoring, as in compliance-heavy functions in healthcare or finance, the framework is best treated as a boundary condition and a source of testable propositions rather than as a fully specified diagnostic. The Employee Diamond is

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therefore likely to be most diagnostic in settings where autonomy and interpretive latitude are high.

AI-Mediated Moral Agency. The ethical congruence dimension in my framework assumes that moral judgment is primarily exercised by human actors aligning personal standards with organizational norms. In knowledge-intensive workplaces, however, algorithmic governance increasingly mediates consequential decisions such as screening, evaluation, and compliance monitoring, thereby complicating how ethical congruence is enacted and assessed. Sposato (2025) suggests that such environments generate hybrid forms of ethical reasoning through human–AI interaction, even though accountability remains human rather than algorithmic. Future research should therefore examine whether transparency and contestability features moderate the relationship between ethical congruence and workplace outcomes in algorithmically governed settings. More specifically, ethical congruence may become less predictive when opaque black-box systems reduce explainability and challenge, and more predictive when organizations embed transparency mechanisms such as explainability tools, periodic algorithmic audits, and bias-impact reviews.

Developmental Interventions and Analytics. Experimental and field studies should examine the impact of coaching, mentoring, role rotation, and ethically grounded leadership programs on transitions toward high-alignment quadrants. A formalized HR-analytics blueprint can integrate competence, motivation, and ethics signals through dashboards that flag “grey-zone” drift and trigger restorative—rather than punitive—interventions. This operationalization transforms a static typology into a dynamic developmental system that directly serves leaders and HR strategists (Fetters et al., 2013).

Cross-Level Integration. Modeling cross-level mechanisms can illuminate how leader behaviors—diagnosis, coaching, and transparent accountability—shape unit-level ethical climates that stabilize or catalyze individual developmental transitions. Advanced multilevel SEM and cross-lagged panels can provide sharper evidence of leader-to-culture transmission central to the framework, linking micro-processes to organizational outcomes (Ye et al., 2021; Deeds Pamphile & Ruttan, 2023).

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Pre-registered field experiments testing leader transparency, developmental feedback, and accountability protocols can isolate causal effects of ethical leadership behaviors on ethical drift and developmental movement across quadrants. Measurement should triangulate validated ethical-climate scales with real-time behavioral indicators embedded in HR-analytics dashboards for continuous monitoring.

Through these avenues, future inquiry can extend the Trifaceted Framework beyond hypothesis generation toward cumulative, actionable evidence demonstrating how ethical congruence, expertise, and motivation jointly sustain performance and trust across evolving organizational systems.

5. Conclusion

This paper has articulated a Trifaceted Framework that positions motivation, expertise, and ethical congruence at the core of sustainable organizational performance. Drawing on established theoretical traditions and contemporary empirical research, the framework bridges behavioral ethics, leadership psychology, and human-capital strategy to offer an actionable developmental model for scholars and practitioners alike (Deeds Pamphile & Ruttan, 2023; Ye et al., 2021).

In knowledge-intensive and technology-driven environments, enduring advantage arises not from technical expertise or motivational energy alone but from the ethical alignment that binds individual action to organizational purpose. By reframing ethics as a conditioning dimension—rather than an external constraint—the model recasts leadership as a developmental enterprise that shapes climates of trust, innovation, and accountability (Demerouti et al., 2001). The typology operationalizes these principles, enabling leaders to diagnose and develop talent portfolios in real time, while providing scholars a platform for empirical tests across micro–macro boundaries. Integrating Situational Leadership Theory and the Hammond–Madsen–Fenton matrix within an ethical context offers diagnostic clarity and strategic relevance: long-term legitimacy depends on maintaining congruence across all three axes of expertise, motivation, and ethics (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

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Practically, the framework encourages organizations to assess the ethical tenor of their systems and equips managers to cultivate engaged, capable, and conscientious employees. Leaders who embed integrity as a capability—rather than a compliance norm—unlock and sustain high performance even amid volatility and change (Fetters et al., 2013). Ultimately, the Trifaceted Framework advances a vision of leadership that is developmental, humanistic and strategic.

The Trifaceted Framework is fundamentally a conceptual model grounded in theoretical synthesis and literature integration. While it provides a robust diagnostic and developmental tool for management practice, its propositions require empirical validation through longitudinal and multi-level field studies. Future research should test whether ethical congruence moderates the relationship between expertise, motivation, and sustained performance across diverse industry contexts.

A pressing empirical priority is objective measurement of ethical-congruence behaviors. A recent 50-year meta-analysis of leadership evaluations found that only one primary study across thirteen behavioral dimensions — including ethical/moral leadership — used an objective rather than a subjective measure (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). Validating the Employee Diamond will therefore require pairing self- and other-reports with behavioral-trace or observational instruments.

A related boundary condition concerns the ethical standing of managers themselves. The framework's prescriptive logic assumes that leaders who diagnose employee profiles and deploy adaptive interventions are themselves operating from a position of moral integrity. In practice, competitive pressures, misaligned incentives, and organizational cultures that reward results over process can erode managerial ethical conduct (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). When managers engage in moral disengagement or self-serving rationalization, their diagnostic authority may be exercised in ways that entrench favoritism or normalize ethical shortcuts. Future research should therefore examine whether the developmental pathways proposed here hold when managerial integrity is itself compromised, and whether institutional safeguards, such as independent oversight mechanisms and

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transparent accountability structures, can partially compensate for individual managerial lapses.

By integrating moral judgment into talent architecture, it charts a pathway to workplaces where productivity and principle reinforce one another. The challenge—and opportunity—for today's organizations is to institutionalize these insights so that performance, trust, and purpose evolve in concert.

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Response to Associate Editor and Reviewers

Talent Inside the Diamond: A Fluid, Trifaceted Framework for Managing Employees in Knowledge-Intensive Workplaces

April 2026

Response to Associate Editor and Reviewers

Manuscript: *Talent Inside the Diamond: A Fluid, Trifaceted Framework for Managing Employees in Knowledge-Intensive Workplaces*

Manuscript ID: JBS-03-2024-0042.R2

I am sincerely grateful for the thoughtful and constructive guidance provided by the Associate Editor and both reviewers. Their comments helped me sharpen the manuscript's framing, clarify its contribution, and refine several targeted aspects of the argument and presentation. In this minor revision, I have addressed each point carefully and systematically, with the goal of strengthening the manuscript while preserving its core conceptual contribution. The value of the peer review process came across very clearly as I worked to get greater clarity not only in my exposition, but also in the theoretical framing. I am deeply appreciative.

Part I: Response to Associate Editor

AE Comment 1: Response document and final submission requirements

Original Comment: Please prepare a detailed response to each of the comments provided by the Associate Editor and the Reviewers; upload this response as a separate "Supplementary file for Review." Also ensure that the revised manuscript remains under 9,000 words.

Response:

Thank you for this clear guidance. This response document is prepared for upload as a separate supplementary file for review, alongside the revised manuscript itself. The revised manuscript currently stands at approximately 7,500 body words, leaving substantial headroom below the 9,000-word cap.

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AE Comment 2: Paper title

Original Comment: Please consider removing "Ethics, Expertise, and Motivation" from the paper title to make it catchier, clearer, and more concise.

Response:

Done! Thank you. In response to the Associate Editor's suggestion to tighten the title, I have revised it from "Talent Inside the Diamond — Ethics, Expertise, and Motivation: A Trifaceted Framework for Managing Employees in the Hi-tech Workplace" to "Talent Inside the Diamond: A Fluid, Trifaceted Framework for Managing Employees in Knowledge-Intensive Workplaces." The revised title removes listing the three constructs, adds *Fluid* to signal the framework's developmental movement across quadrants rather than a static typology, and broadens the setting from *hi-tech* to *knowledge-intensive* in line with the manuscript's explicit scope argument in the Introduction — where Blackler's (1995) typology positions the framework primarily for expert-dependent and symbolic-analyst-dependent organizations rather than knowledge-routinized settings — and its further elaboration as a boundary condition in §4.4.

Part II: Response to Reviewer 1

Thank you for your thoughtful and encouraging feedback. I sincerely appreciate your engagement with my work. I was especially encouraged by your assessment that the revised paper now offers a more solid and comprehensive model and that it ties its theoretical basis to the proposed framework effectively. Your remaining concern, regarding the implicit assumption of managerial moral integrity, was important and well taken.

Reviewer 1, Question 5: Managerial moral integrity as a boundary condition

Original Comment: The paper appears to assume that managers are morally and ethically honourable. In the competitive world of business, where the pressure to succeed can easily override the drive to behave ethically and morally, this may not always be the case. It would be interesting to see how this affects the proposed model. I believe this needs to be covered.

Response:

Thank you for this constructive observation. I agree that the earlier version did not sufficiently acknowledge this boundary condition. A new paragraph in the conclusion now recognizes that the framework's prescriptive logic assumes managers acting from a position of moral integrity, and then qualifies that assumption: in practice, competitive pressures, misaligned incentives, and results-driven organizational cultures can produce managerial moral disengagement (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). The revised conclusion therefore identifies managerial ethical standing as a boundary condition

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and points to institutional safeguards — accountability structures, independent oversight mechanisms, and ethical climate monitoring — as a direction for future research.

Your comment was one I had been uneasy about myself, so it was helpful to be pushed on it. The addition lets the framework acknowledge the ethical vulnerability of leadership itself, rather than treating leaders as normatively exempt from the pressures the paper otherwise analyzes.

I trust that these revisions meet your expectations and sincerely thank you for prompting improvements that have meaningfully strengthened the manuscript.

Part III: Response to Reviewer 2

Thank you for your thoughtful and encouraging feedback, and for recognizing the distance the paper has traveled since the original submission. I was especially encouraged by your positive assessment of the Employee Diamond typology and by your note that the manuscript now reads more professionally after the removal of pop-culture references. I have addressed each of your remaining comments below. The value of the peer review process came across very clearly as I worked to get greater clarity not only in my exposition, but also in the theoretical framing. I am deeply appreciative.

Reviewer 2, Principal Comment: AI-mediated moral agency and Sposato (2025)

Original Comment: The framework does not engage with the theoretical implications of AI-mediated moral agency for the ethical congruence axis. The author should engage with Sposato (2025), which addresses this directly and would strengthen both the theoretical grounding and the forward-looking research agenda.

Response:

Thank you for this essential suggestion, and for pointing me to Sposato (2025) specifically. I was not aware of this paper as it was published well after my initial submission. I was able to contact the author and get the paper (that was not yet available online) directly. I confess I had to really grapple with this one. I agree this was a real gap, particularly given that the manuscript already positions itself in knowledge-intensive and technologically mediated settings. Sposato (2025) now appears at two points in the revised manuscript. In Section 2.1, the new passage notes that in algorithmically governed environments, ethical judgment may increasingly emerge through human–AI interaction rather than solely through individual conscience or stated organizational values — while also clarifying that this does not imply AI possesses moral agency in the human sense: algorithmic systems may exercise functional agency by influencing outcomes, but ultimate moral accountability remains grounded in human design, deployment, and oversight decisions. In Section 4.4, a new “AI-Mediated Moral Agency” paragraph formalizes this as a boundary condition for the ethical congruence axis and names transparency and contestability features —

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explainability tools, periodic algorithmic audits, and bias-impact reviews — as moderators worth testing.

Sposato (2025) now operates not as a tangential citation but as an explicit contemporary boundary condition that strengthens both the theoretical grounding and the forward-looking research agenda.

Reviewer 2, Question 1: Originality and theoretical distinctiveness

Original Comment: The claim to originality needs to be defended more carefully. The paper should more explicitly articulate what the framework explains that prior models cannot, particularly why identical expertise-motivation profiles produce different outcomes across ethical contexts, and ground that explanation in a tighter theoretical mechanism.

Response:

Thank you for this valuable comment. I agree the manuscript needed to defend its originality not merely through novelty of configuration, but through explanatory distinctiveness. The revised manuscript states the central theoretical claim more directly: the framework explains why identical motivation–expertise profiles may generate different outcomes when ethical congruence differs across individuals, teams, or organizational settings. The explanatory advance lies not only in adding ethics as a third factor, but in theorizing ethical congruence as a conditioning dimension that stabilizes or destabilizes developmental movement across profiles. The tightening of Proposition P1a (see Q4 below) reinforces this mechanism directly. I believe this refinement addresses the originality concern while preserving the core argument.

Reviewer 2, Question 2: Literature gaps

Original Comment: There are notable gaps in the literature coverage. The ethical fading literature, particularly Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) and Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011), is entirely absent despite being directly relevant to the grey zone concept. The moral identity literature, especially Aquino and Reed (2002), is also missing and would strengthen the individual-level axis. More importantly, recent work on algorithmic governance and AI-mediated leadership, particularly Sposato (2025), should be cited in Section 2.1 and Section 4.4.

Response:

Done, for all three streams. Your diagnosis of the missing literatures was exactly right, and I have integrated each in the places you identified.

Aquino and Reed (2002) now grounds the individual-level axis in Section 2.3.1. The revised passage frames moral identity as an internalized self-schema that shapes how employees interpret and enact ethical norms, which tightens the individual-level side of the ethical–moral axis.

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Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) and Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) are now woven into the Section 3 discussion of the diamond's grey zones. Their concept of ethical fading — the attentional erosion through which the ethical dimensions of a decision quietly disappear from view — now provides the theoretical mechanism for the transitional grey-zone regions in Figure 1. This directly addresses your concern that the grey zone concept, while visually effective, needed stronger analytical underpinning.

Sposato (2025) is now integrated into Section 2.1 and into a new "AI-Mediated Moral Agency" paragraph in Section 4.4, as detailed in my response to your principal comment above.

Together, these three additions strengthen the behavioural-ethics foundation of the framework, tighten the analytical logic of the grey zones, and extend the research agenda into algorithmically governed work settings.

Reviewer 2, Question 3: Methodological logic and expertise-for-ability grounding

Original Comment: The paper would benefit from a brief discussion of its conceptual development strategy. The substitution of expertise for ability in the HMF model is presented as straightforward, but the citations originally used, Iso-Ahola (2024) and Brummett (2023), are not drawn from organizational behavior or knowledge-work research and do not convincingly support the definitional move being made. Stronger grounding in the organizational expertise literature is needed here.

Response:

Done. Thank you for this precise observation. I agree the expertise-for-ability substitution required stronger grounding in expert-performance and knowledge-work scholarship. The Section 2.2 paragraph is now anchored in Ericsson and Lehmann (1996) and Starbuck (1992). Ericsson and Lehmann's canonical work establishes that domain-specific expertise, built through sustained deliberate practice and contextual experience, is qualitatively distinct from general cognitive ability. Starbuck's foundational treatment of knowledge-intensive firms grounds the substitution in the organizational setting where knowledge itself constitutes the principal input. Iso-Ahola (2024) and Brummett (2023) are retained in the revised paragraph but are now repositioned explicitly as convergent evidence from adjacent domains rather than as primary support for the definitional move. The organizational-behaviour sources now lead and carry the argument; the cross-domain citations corroborate it.

Reviewer 2, Question 4: Results, spatial logic, and P1a specificity

Original Comment: The dual inner-outer diamond logic is visually effective but not always analytically tight. The paper asserts that distance from the ethical axis represents degree of congruence, but this spatial metaphor is not formally defined. P1a also remains too broad and should be tightened.

Response:

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Thank you for this observation — both points were well taken.

On the spatial logic: the Section 3 discussion of Figure 1 now explicitly defines the ethical–moral axis as a continuum of ethical congruence, not a rigid binary. Individuals or behaviours that cluster close to the axis signal robust alignment between personal moral standards and organizational norms — the "inside-the-diamond" zone. Movement outward from the axis represents weakening alignment and increasing *ethical drift*. The diamond's boundary lines are now described explicitly as transitional grey zones where context, incentives, and individual decisions interact to complicate moral judgement. This gives readers a shared interpretation of the spatial metaphor and ties it directly to the ethical-fading mechanism introduced for your Question 2 comment.

On Proposition P1a: I tightened the causal logic into a comparative, falsifiable form. The revised P1a now states that *leaders who calibrate their adaptive behavior to followers' ethical congruence, expertise, and motivation will achieve more stable developmental outcomes than leaders who calibrate only to expertise and motivation*. This contrastive phrasing specifies both the condition (three-axis versus two-axis calibration) and the expected outcome (greater developmental stability), making the proposition directly testable. A brief explanatory sentence after P1b clarifies the mechanism linking ethical calibration, reduced misdiagnosis of follower readiness, and grey-zone containment. I remain open to any additional wordsmithing for P1a.

Reviewer 2, Question 5: Contextual applicability and AI-governance boundary condition

Original Comment: The paper's applicability to hi-tech and knowledge-intensive settings is asserted rather than argued. The future research section would benefit from acknowledging how AI-driven governance structures challenge the human-centered ethical agency assumptions embedded in the framework.

Response:

Thank you for this important observation. I read it as having two prongs — contextual distinctiveness and the AI-governance boundary condition — and have treated them as complementary refinements.

On contextual distinctiveness: I now anchor the scope claim explicitly in Blackler's (1995) typology of organizations and knowledge. The revised Section 4.4 positions the framework primarily for contexts that approximate expert-dependent and symbolic-analyst-dependent organizations, where embodied and embrained expertise, discretionary judgment, and the continual recombination of knowledge under uncertainty dominate everyday work (Newell et al., 2009). The logic extends more partially to communication-intensive settings, where collective sense-making shares some of the same interpretive latitude. By contrast, in more knowledge-routinized environments (such as compliance-heavy functions within healthcare or finance, where conduct is shaped more directly by formal oversight, mandated rules, and external monitoring), the framework is best treated as a boundary condition and a source of testable propositions rather than a fully specified diagnostic. The Employee Diamond is therefore expected to be especially diagnostic where

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autonomy and interpretive latitude are high. In the Introduction, I have also added a brief passage after the discussion of Starbuck (1992) that draws explicitly on Blackler's (1995) typology, clarifying that the framework is developed primarily for expert-dependent and symbolic-analyst-dependent organizations rather than for more knowledge-routinized settings structured by encoded procedures and external oversight.

On the AI-governance boundary condition: the new "AI-Mediated Moral Agency" paragraph in Section 4.4 now makes explicit how emerging algorithmic governance structures challenge the framework's more human-centered assumptions about ethical congruence, and sets out a testable agenda built around transparency, auditability, and contestability mechanisms. Together, the two refinements move the applicability argument from assertion to argument and give the future research agenda sharper conceptual boundaries.

Reviewer 2, Question 6: Communication and submission housekeeping

Original Comment: The transition from Section 2.3.2 into Section 3 feels abrupt; some passages would benefit from selective simplification; there is a minor typographical error in the abstract where HR analytics appears as a single unspaced word; and the response-to-reviewers document is still attached to the submission file and must be removed before final publication.

Response:

Done, on each item. The Section 2.3.2 to Section 3 bridging material is present and functioning, with an explicit "having established…" opener in Section 3 that signals the shift from theoretical development to typology construction.

Done. The HR-analytics spacing issue in the abstract has been corrected, and the term now appears consistently in its hyphenated form. This response document will be uploaded separately as a Supplementary File for Review, and no prior response file will remain attached to the submission. Though I am not familiar with how the journal packages the paper for the review process.

Thank you for the precision and care of these comments. They helped sharpen the framework not only in conceptual terms, but also in its relevance to digitally mediated organizational settings.

I am grateful for your thoughtful and valuable recommendations, which have greatly improved the clarity, coherence, and overall quality of the manuscript. I trust that these revisions meet your expectations and sincerely thank you for prompting improvements that have meaningfully strengthened the manuscript.

I am grateful for the careful reading and valuable guidance provided by the Associate Editor and reviewers. Their feedback has meaningfully improved the clarity, coherence, and overall contribution of the manuscript. I trust that the revised manuscript and this response meet with your approbation, and I remain open to any further refinements that may be suggested.

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