

**WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?  
ETHICAL LEADERSHIP ACROSS THE PUBLIC-PRIVATE CONTINUUM**

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**Summary**

Is there one best practice for ethical leadership? To date, most studies on ethical leadership have implicitly assumed that a 'one size fits all' model is adequate for organizations operating in different environments. This study analyzes the validity of that assumption by exploring the extent to which conceptions of ethical leadership in different organizational contexts fit with prevailing theoretical and empirical insights. Drawing on data from qualitative interviews with 21 managers and leadership experts operating in various public, hybrid, and private sector organizations in the Netherlands it is shown that there are indeed basic components to ethical leadership that seem to hold across contexts. However, the data also reveal differences in the concrete conceptions and manifestations of ethical leadership that appear to be associated with the publicness of the organization. These results once again underscore the importance of comparative research in general, and ethical leadership research in particular, which crosscuts the boundary between public and private sectors and between public administration and organization science. Furthermore, the results warrant the development of more context-sensitive conceptualizations and measurement instruments of ethical leadership. Propositions for further empirical testing are thus posited and a Q-set on ethical leadership is presented that can be used for more structured measurement of the commonalities and diversity in people's subjective viewpoints on ethical leadership.