

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: ETHICAL IMPACT ON NEW GENERATION
EMPLOYEES IN INDIAN IT-ENABLED SERVICES INDUSTRY

By

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this thesis to two main pillars of my life, my parents, K Mohanan Nair and P Pushkalambika who always encouraged me to pursue my academic aspirations from my beginner days. Most importantly I want to dedicate this to my dearest wife, Lekshmi Jayaprakash who ensured that I was able to spend adequate time for my academic and professional commitments by taking over most of the life responsibilities on her and to my 5-year-old sweet boy, Adhrinadh Aswin who pushed me out of the bed every day to make sure I have finished all my tasks for the day before sleeping.

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ABSTRACT

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: ETHICAL IMPACT ON NEW GENERATION EMPLOYEES IN INDIAN IT-ENABLED SERVICES INDUSTRY

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This study investigates the ethical dimensions of Distributed Leadership (DL) and its impact on organizational responsiveness and the motivation, job satisfaction, and retention of Millennial and Generation Z employees in the Indian Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) sector. While distributed leadership has been widely discussed as a structural approach to decentralizing authority, limited research has examined the role of ethics in shaping its effectiveness, particularly within emerging economies and generationally diverse workforces. This study addresses this gap by exploring how ethical principles influence the functioning and outcomes of distributed leadership systems.

A qualitative, interpretivist research design was adopted to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of employees. Primary data were collected through open-ended survey responses from 48 participants working across major ITES hubs in India, including

Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram. Thematic analysis, following a systematic coding and interpretation process, was employed to identify key patterns and themes related to ethical leadership practices, organizational adaptability, and employee engagement.

The findings reveal that the effectiveness of distributed leadership is contingent upon ethical integration rather than mere structural decentralization. Four core ethical dimensions—fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion—emerged as critical factors in establishing trust, legitimacy, and collaborative engagement within organizations. The study further finds that distributed leadership enhances organizational responsiveness and decision-making speed when supported by clear role definitions and structured accountability, while ambiguity in authority can hinder efficiency. Additionally, distributed leadership positively influences motivation, job satisfaction, and retention among younger employees by fostering empowerment, autonomy, psychological safety, and a sense of belonging.

The study concludes that distributed leadership must be understood as an ethically grounded system rather than a purely structural model. It proposes the concept of Ethically Distributed Leadership (EDL), which integrates decentralized authority with embedded ethical governance and motivational alignment. This framework provides both theoretical and practical insights for organizations seeking to enhance leadership effectiveness, employee engagement, and adaptability in dynamic, knowledge-intensive environments.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The IT-enabled services industry in India has become one of the pillars of the digital economy worldwide, making a significant contribution to economic development and employment generation. Technological innovation and globalization have diversified the sector's workforce, which consists of employees with different skill sets, academic backgrounds, and cultural perceptions. However, the rapid rate of technological change and evolving client demands required organizational agility, innovation, and ethical leadership, thereby highlighting the deficiencies of traditional hierarchical patterns of leadership. These conventional models, which tended to be rigid and centralized, hindered the flexibility and collaborative decision-making required to maintain competitiveness within the dynamic ITES industry (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Distributed leadership (DL) provided an opportune alternative wherein collective responsibility, collaborative decision-making, and empowerment were enabled across the entire organizational depth. In contrast to the traditional paradigm of concentrating power at the top, DL encouraged flexibility and inclusiveness, which were key qualities for success in high-paced, changing industries like ITES. The decentralization of power created an atmosphere of accountability and innovativeness, and therefore suited the preferences of the modern generations of workers, particularly Millennials and

Generation Z, who attached value to transparency, independence, and ethical leadership in their workplace settings (Bolden, 2011).

It was also significant that distributed leadership aligned with the values of the modern workforce, particularly Millennials and Generation Z, who comprised a significant portion of employees working in the ITES sector. These generations grew up in conditions of digital connectedness and social visibility, thus developing a vision of participatory and ethically accountable leadership. They embraced transparency and openness in decision-making and valued opportunities to be included and heard in the workplaces they chose (Bolden, 2011). Unlike previous generations, which had accepted a top-down chain of command, the current generation demanded morally upright leaders who could help employees collaborate and feel psychologically secure. This generational shift made the adoption of new leadership paradigms like distributed leadership essential, as it encouraged operational efficiency while adhering to the ethics and involvement norms valued by employees. In turn, distributed leadership offered an avenue to attract, engage, and retain values-driven and highly motivated personnel in the ITES field.

Although distributed leadership had beneficial effects, there were also several ethical issues associated with its introduction. The decentralization of authority could create unclear accountability, unreasonable divisions of decision-making areas, and power imbalances (Cai & Song, 2021). Without defined moral systems, and in the absence of centralized control, informal hierarchies or favoritism could naturally emerge, ultimately compromising trust and transparency. Ethical dilemmas could also arise when conflicts occurred between departmental interests and organizational objectives, posing threats to

fairness and objectivity (Storey & Holti, 2021). These difficulties highlighted the importance of embedding sound moral principles such as justice, transparency, and shared responsibility into the framework of distributed leadership to maintain organizational integrity and employee confidence. These ethical aspects were essential for ensuring that distributed leadership remained effective, operationally supported, and morally sustainable.

The present study explored the convergence of distributed leadership and ethics in relation to the Indian ITES industry, particularly regarding their impact on employee engagement, retention, and satisfaction. The study investigated the importance of distributed systems incorporating ethical leadership practices to improve organizational performance in terms of inclusivity, trust, and shared accountability. This study addressed a significant gap in the literature, as limited research had examined ethically driven distributed leadership or provided empirical evidence within the ITES context. The findings of this study were utilized in an action-oriented manner to guide organizations seeking to establish leadership structures conscious of ethical probity and strategic responsiveness, thereby creating value-based, high-performance environments within the Indian ITES market.

1.2 Research Problem

The Indian IT-enabled services (ITES) industry experienced spectacular growth as one of the leading drivers of the Indian digital economy. However, the rapid development of the industry, driven by globalization and technological progress, exposed shortcomings in the

traditional hierarchical leadership paradigm, which in many cases was unable to keep up with the swiftly progressing and competitive world. These highly inflexible models did not promote collaboration, inclusivity, and agility, which were required to drive innovation and sustainability in the ITES industry (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Many organizations responded to this challenge by adopting distributed leadership (DL), a model that delegated authority across all levels of the organization and facilitated participation in decision-making. ITES companies, in particular, found DL attractive, given that a multi-skilled and young labor force sought greater freedom and involvement. While the operational advantages of DL, such as flexibility and responsiveness, were well articulated, its ethical dimensions had not been fully explored, especially within the context of the ITES industry.

Research on the impact of incorporating ethical values into DL systems in this industry had been limited in empirical scope. Furthermore, the existing literature failed to adequately represent the views of Millennials and Generation Z employees, who constituted the majority of the ITES workforce and placed high value on ethical leadership. This gap in the literature presented an opportunity to explore how ethically grounded DL practices could enhance employee trust, engagement, and retention.

The present study addressed this gap by examining the ethical considerations of DL within the context of the Indian ITES sector, with a specific focus on how organizations incorporated principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability into their evolving DL practices (Fernandes & James, 2025). In doing so, the study provided insights into

how DL fostered a desirable organizational culture that promoted employee engagement, job satisfaction, and long-term retention.

1.3 Purpose of Study

This study aimed to critically evaluate the ethical concerns of distributed leadership (DL) in the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) market, particularly its impact on employees belonging to the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts. Despite the organizational flexibility and innovation observed, the ethical dimension of DL—especially the incorporation of fairness, transparency, and accountability—had not been profoundly scrutinized within the ITES framework.

Using a qualitative approach, the study filled a critical gap in the literature by analyzing how DL could be morally implemented to develop an organizational culture aligned with the values of younger employees who prioritized openness and inclusion (Ebberts & Wijnberg, 2017). The study examined the impacts of these ethical practices on outcomes such as job satisfaction, motivation, and employee retention, thereby providing practical insights for organizations seeking to adopt DL models that appeal to these generational groups.

In addition, the study provided insights into the alignment of DL with the ethical expectations of Millennials and Generation Z, both of whom increasingly dominated the ITES workforce. It also examined the potential use of digital technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), to support ethical DL practices (Koistinen & Vuori, 2024). The findings offered not only theoretical but also practical recommendations for

organizations aiming to implement ethical, innovative, and effective leadership structures.

This study therefore provided a holistic framework through which distributed leadership could be practiced in a manner that was ethically grounded, operationally efficient, and closely aligned with the values of a modern, purpose-driven workforce.

1.4 Research Objectives and Research Questions

In the present research, the necessity of carrying out a critical assessment of the ethical concerns associated with distributed leadership in the context of the Indian IT-enabled services (ITES) industry, particularly its influence on new-generation employees, was emphasized. To accomplish this purpose, the following objectives and corresponding research questions were outlined in the study:

1.4.1 Research Objectives:

This research seeks to critically assess the ethical and practical implications of Distributed Leadership (DL) in Indian ITES firms, with a focus on Millennials and Generation Z employees. The specific objectives are:

- 1.** To identify strategies that integrate the ethical implications of Distributed Leadership in Indian ITES firms, emphasizing transparency, fairness, accountability, and the prevention of power centralization.
- 2.** To evaluate the role of Distributed Leadership in enhancing organizational adaptability and workforce flexibility, particularly in decision-making speed, responsiveness, and crisis management within the ITES industry.

3. To explore the impact of Distributed Leadership on job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among Millennial and Generation Z employees in Indian ITES firms, using motivation theories as analytical frameworks.

1.4.2 Research Questions:

RQ1: What strategies can be adopted to integrate the ethical implications of Distributed Leadership into Indian ITES firms, focusing on ensuring equity and preventing power centralization?

RQ2: How does Distributed Leadership contribute to organizational adaptability and workforce flexibility in the ITES industry, particularly in decision-making speed and crisis management?

RQ3: In what ways does Distributed Leadership influence job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among Millennials and Gen Z in the Indian ITES sector?

1.5 Proposed Frameworks

1.5.1 Overview of Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical basis of this investigation was founded on the synthesis of three theoretical approaches: Distributed Leadership Theory, Ethical Leadership Theory, and Generational Cohort Theory. Together, these frameworks provided a comprehensive understanding of how ethically oriented leadership practices could address the

heterogeneous and multi-generational workforce requirements of the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) industry.

Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT): DLT posited that leadership was not merely a function of hierarchical authority but an activity shared among individuals and teams (Bolden, 2011; Leithwood & Mascall, 2020). It emphasized the collaborative and interdependent leadership practices necessary in dynamic sectors such as IT-enabled Services (ITES). The decentralization of authority and decision-making allowed organizations to become more adaptive and innovative. However, without a well-established ethical framework, such systems were prone to ambiguity and moral inconsistency—an issue this research sought to address.

Ethical Leadership Theory (ELT): ELT presented a moral dimension to distributed leadership, emphasizing integrity, justice, responsibility, and concern for stakeholder well-being (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Ethical leadership promoted consistency and accountability in decision-making across all organizational levels. Within distributed contexts, it functioned as a unifying force that ensured transparency, prevented the misuse of authority, and fostered trust among employees (Gronn, 2020).

Generational Cohort Theory (GCT): According to GCT, Millennials and Generation Z possessed distinct work values and expectations (Cai & Song, 2021; Fernandes & James, 2025). Having grown up in a rapidly digitalized environment, these generations valued inclusiveness, autonomy, transparency, and ethical leadership. By applying GCT, this study determined the impact of ethical and distributed leadership on the engagement, satisfaction, and retention of younger ITES employees. The integration of these three

theories—structural, moral, and behavioral—provided a holistic perspective on leadership effectiveness within a multi-generational workforce.

1.5.2 Key Constructs and Relationships

Based on the theoretical premises, the framework developed for this study comprised three major constructs:

Independent Variable: Distributed Leadership (DL)

Mediating Variable: Ethical Dimensions (moral principles guiding leadership behavior)

Dependent Variables: Employee Outcomes (engagement, satisfaction, and retention)

Distributed Leadership (DL): This referred to the extent of decentralization of leadership positions and decision-making powers across different levels and functions within an organization. It encompassed collaboration, collective responsibility, and shared decision-making (Storey & Holti, 2021). In the context of the ITES sector, distributed leadership represented an essential phenomenon due to the prominence of cross-functional teamwork, rapid project development, and the need for mutual knowledge exchange. The construct emphasized the relationship between structural decentralization and inclusive leadership practices, as well as how these were perceived by employees working in dynamic service environments.

Ethical Dimensions: This construct formed the moral intersection between leadership structure and employee performance. It encompassed four guiding principles—fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Lawton & Paez, 2014). These principles promoted equitable treatment and procedural justice; openness in communication and decision-making; moral responsibility and compliance with ethical

norms; and the inclusion of diverse perspectives and opinions. Collectively, these principles enhanced moral coherence within distributed systems. Employees expressed confidence in leadership decisions, demonstrated greater engagement, and aligned themselves with organizational values when they perceived their leaders to be ethical.

Employee Outcomes: This referred to the behavioral and attitudinal implications of ethical distributed leadership. The three major areas considered were engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Engagement represented the emotional energy and dedication employees invested in their work. Satisfaction emerged from the alignment between organizational and personal goals. Retention reflected employees' willingness to remain with the organization as a result of a sense of belonging and trust. When workers felt valued and respected in ethical and inclusive leadership environments, they demonstrated increased commitment and continuity in their performance. Consequently, there appeared to be a combined effect of leadership style and ethical governance on workforce stability and overall organizational achievement within the ITES sector.

1.5.3 Framework Integration and Theoretical Alignment

The theoretical frameworks upon which this study was based included two supplementary models examined in the Literature Review:

The Ethical Impact of Distributed Leadership in ITES

The Relationship between Distributed Leadership, Ethics, and Employee Outcomes

The first framework explained how Distributed Leadership (DL) diffused authority and promoted participative decision-making in the ITES sector. It underscored the need to integrate ethical aspects—fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion—to ensure

equity and foster trust in shared leadership structures. This model established the ethical guardrails necessary to sustain distributed systems and prevent power imbalances, thereby linking morality with organizational performance.

The second framework examined the relationship between DL, ethical leadership behaviors, and workforce outcomes among Millennial and Generation Z employees. It demonstrated that embedding ethical considerations within distributed systems led to higher employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Furthermore, it incorporated Generational Cohort Theory, which explained that younger employees' expectations of transparency and inclusion were reflected in their attitudes toward ethical leadership within ITES environments.

Together, these frameworks guided the methodological orientation of the study. They justified the qualitative interpretivist design adopted to capture employees' lived experiences concerning ethical distributed leadership. The frameworks informed the design of data-collection tools—such as interview guides and open-ended survey questions—by emphasizing perceptions of fairness, accountability, and inclusion. They also provided the foundation for the thematic analysis, as the emerging themes were interpreted through the dual lenses of distributed leadership structure and ethical orientation within multigenerational contexts.

1.5.4 Analytical Focus

This research analyzed how Distributed Leadership (DL), facilitated by Ethical Dimensions, affected key Employee Outcomes—namely engagement, satisfaction, and retention—within the context of the Indian ITES industry. The framework

operationalized all constructs within the qualitative interpretivist design of the study, thereby ensuring consistency between the theoretical assumptions and the methodological implementation.

1. Operationalization of Constructs

Distributed Leadership: This construct was examined using the indicators of shared decision-making, shared accountability, and empowerment across various organizational levels.

Ethical Dimensions: The ethical aspects were captured through participants' narratives reflecting fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in leadership practices.

Employee Outcomes: Evaluation was performed based on participants' narratives representing motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, and long-term retention intentions.

These constructs formed the basis for the development of interview guides and open-ended survey questions, designed to capture the lived experiences of participants.

2. Hypothetical Linkages

The study did not test formal hypotheses but instead explored how distributed leadership practices shaped ethical perceptions and employee outcomes within the Indian ITES context.

3. Data Alignment

Data collection was informed by the conceptual relationships identified in the theoretical framework, thereby complementing theoretical insights with empirical inquiry.

The semi-structured interviews elicited detailed descriptions of how employees perceived ethical leadership within distributed structures.

The interviews were supplemented by open-ended surveys, which facilitated the identification of additional patterns and supported thematic triangulation.

This multi-source design provided a richer and more credible contextual understanding of ethical distributed leadership in practice.

4. Analytical Strategy

The thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed to analyze data in six distinct phases. Systematic coding and theme generation were supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed an inductive–deductive hybrid approach, where emergent patterns both informed and were informed by the theoretical constructs of distributed leadership, ethics, and generational influence.

1.5.5 Summary Transition

In conclusion, the framework developed for this study integrated Distributed Leadership Theory, Ethical Leadership Theory, and Generational Cohort Theory to explain how shared leadership practices grounded in moral reasoning influenced employee engagement, satisfaction, and overall well-being. It identified ethical dimensions as the key mediating factor between leadership structures and behavioral outcomes. The generational element added contextual depth by recognizing the differing expectations of Millennials and Generation Z employees, who constituted the majority of the Indian ITES workforce.

This integrated framework served not only as the conceptual foundation of the study but also as the structure guiding data collection, interpretation, and analysis. It ensured that the investigation was both theoretically grounded and reflective of the realities of leadership in modern service organizations.

According to this established framework, the subsequent chapter presented the methodological plan used to examine these relationships, detailing the study design, sampling approach, data collection tools, and analytical techniques employed to refine and validate the conceptual model.

1.6 Methodology

1.6.1 Research Design

This research adopted a qualitative, interpretivist design to examine the ethical aspects of distributed leadership within the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) sector. The interpretivist paradigm focused on understanding the meaning and lived experiences of individuals rather than producing statistical generalizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was considered suitable since the study aimed to clarify how and why ethical practices—such as fairness, transparency, inclusion, and accountability—occurred within distributed leadership frameworks, and how these practices were perceived by a multigenerational workforce.

The qualitative method enabled a broader exploration of leaders' and employees' perspectives on ethical decision-making, empowerment, and teamwork. As leadership ethics are contextual and value-specific, understanding them required capturing narratives

rather than numerical data. This orientation provided a foundation for an exploratory, meaning-centered investigation of distributed leadership and its ethical implications for employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention in the fast-paced ITES environment.

1.6.2 Research Approach and Rationale

The interpretivist methodology recognized that reality is socially constructed through human interaction and the sharing of meanings (Schwandt, 2015). Within this framework, distributed leadership and ethical behavior were viewed as co-created phenomena between leaders and employees at different hierarchical levels. Through this paradigm, the researcher acted as a co-interpreter of participants' experiences, acknowledging subjectivity as integral to the meaning-making process.

The rationale for this approach rested on three key considerations. First, there was no objective way to measure leadership ethics in distributed systems; instead, these were best understood through the connections and experiences of employees.

Second, distributed leadership relied on contextual and relational dynamics that could not be effectively studied through predetermined variables but rather required open dialogue. Third, Distributed Leadership Theory, Ethical Leadership Theory, and Generational Cohort Theory were theoretically integrated and complemented by the interpretivist approach, ensuring methodological consistency between the conceptual and empirical dimensions of the study.

1.6.3 Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of Indian employees and managers working in leading ITES sub-sectors, including Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), and IT support services, located in major technology hubs such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram. These sectors were chosen for their high levels of coordination, technological adaptability, and multigenerational diversity, which made them ideal for exploring ethical distributed leadership (Cai, 2021; Fernandes, 2025).

The sample primarily included Millennial and Generation Z employees, who represented the largest and most ethically conscious segments of the Indian ITES workforce. Their expectations of inclusiveness, openness, and empowerment made them essential participants in understanding leadership ethics in practice.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select information-rich participants with firsthand experience in teamwork, decision-making, and distributed team environments (Patton, 2015). Approximately 20 to 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with both employees and mid-level managers, complemented by 50 to 60 electronically collected open-ended surveys to obtain broader perspectives. The combination of interviews and surveys facilitated data triangulation, thereby ensuring depth and diversity of opinions.

1.6.4 Data Collection Methods

Two qualitative data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey questions. These methods ensured that both narrative and contextual depth were achieved in the research.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and followed a flexible guide addressing ethical decision-making, accountability, fairness, inclusion, and perceptions of distributed leadership. The semi-structured format allowed participants to share detailed illustrations and personal reflections while enabling the researcher to probe emerging themes. Depending on feasibility, interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face and recorded with informed consent. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Open-Ended Survey Questions

An online qualitative survey was distributed to a wider group of ITES employees to broaden the study's scope. The survey included open-ended questions that invited participants to share their experiences with leadership ethics, inclusion, and collaboration within teams. This method complemented the interviews by identifying general patterns and enhancing triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The combination of these two sources produced a robust dataset that was both deep (through interviews) and broad (through surveys). It aligned with the interpretivist goal of constructing collective meaning through participants' voices and shared experiences.

1.6.5 Data Analysis Plan

Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the collected data. Thematic analysis is a flexible and rigorous technique that identifies and interprets patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted in six systematic phases:

- **Familiarization:** The researcher read and re-read transcripts and survey responses to become deeply immersed in the data.
- **Initial Coding:** Text segments that were meaningful and associated with ethical values, leadership dynamics, and generational attitudes were coded.
- **Theme Development:** The generated codes were organized into potential themes, such as fairness in decision-making, inclusiveness, shared accountability, and moral leadership.
- **Reviewing Themes:** The themes were refined to ensure coherence between coded extracts and theoretical constructs.
- **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined, and representative names were assigned.
- **Reporting:** The thematic findings were integrated with conceptual perspectives and the existing literature.

NVivo software was employed to organize, code, and visualize the data, creating an audit trail that enhanced analytical rigor. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used: the inductive analysis allowed themes to emerge from participants' narratives, while the deductive analysis connected these themes to the constructs of Distributed and Ethical Leadership.

A comparative analysis of Millennial and Generation Z participants was also conducted to explore generational nuances and to identify differences in ethical expectations, trust, and perceptions of distributed leadership.

1.6.6 Ethical Considerations

This investigation was grounded in integrity as a core ethical principle, focusing on leadership values and employees' experiences. The study adhered to the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written or electronic consent was obtained from all participants.

All data were anonymized and securely stored in password-protected files, and identifying information was removed from transcripts. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board.

The researcher practiced reflexivity by recording personal biases that could potentially influence interpretation. These measures ensured transparency, fairness, and accountability—values consistent with the ethical focus of the study.

1.6.7 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure methodological rigor, this research followed the criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

- **Credibility:** Triangulation of interview and survey data, along with member checking, was employed to ensure the accuracy of interpretations.
- **Transferability:** A detailed description of the ITES environment was provided to enhance contextual understanding and facilitate application to similar settings.

- **Dependability:** Clear documentation of coding schemes and the analytical process ensured reliability.
- **Confirmability:** The maintenance of an audit trail and reflective notes grounded the interpretations in participants' perspectives.

Through these combined strategies, the study strengthened its authenticity, reliability, and overall integrity.

1.6.8 Summary and Transition

In summary, this methodological structure provided a coherent, ethically informed, and interpretivist approach to analyzing distributed leadership practices within the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) industry. The qualitative methodology enabled a deeper understanding of how fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion were perceived and practiced across different leadership levels in complex, team-based environments.

The combination of semi-structured interviews and open-ended surveys yielded both the depth of personal experiences and the breadth of organizational perspectives, ensuring that the ethical dynamics of leadership were understood within context rather than through abstract numerical measures. Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, facilitated the systematic identification of recurring patterns and relationships. Furthermore, adherence to the trustworthiness criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) enhanced the rigor, credibility, and dependability of the findings.

Overall, this methodology established a strong continuum between theoretical perspectives and empirical investigation. It provided a systematic yet adaptable design

capable of uncovering the lived experiences and moral foundations of distributed leadership in multigenerational ITES contexts—thereby contributing meaningfully to both leadership literature and practice.

1.7 Nature of the Study

This research employed a qualitative, interpretivist design to examine how ethical aspects such as fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion became integral components of Distributed Leadership (DL) practices in the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) sector. It explored the lived experiences and perceptions of Millennial and Generation Z employees, who represented the most numerous and value-driven segment of the ITES workforce. This qualitative orientation enabled the study to achieve its purpose of understanding how ethical DL functioned within organizational settings and how it influenced employee involvement, satisfaction, and retention (Schweisfurth, 2023).

The use of a qualitative method was justified by the fact that leadership ethics and shared power were socially constructed phenomena that could not and should not be measured numerically. Through an interpretivist lens, the study sought to comprehend the meaning that respondents derived from distributed leadership, moral responsibility, and generational values within the interdependent and collaborative structures characteristic of ITES organizations.

1.7.1 Scope and Context

The study was conducted in major Indian technology hubs, including Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram, within leading ITES sub-sectors such as Business

Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), and IT support services. These regions were characterized by high levels of collaboration, digitization, and multigenerational diversity. The research examined employees' perspectives regarding ethical distributed leadership and its impact on motivation, inclusion, and participation in organizational decision-making.

1.7.2 Participants and Sampling

The sample consisted of Millennial and Generation Z employees who held various positions ranging from entry-level executives to mid-level managers. Leaders, including team leads and managers, were also interviewed to provide a balanced view of leadership practices. Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with substantial experience and firsthand involvement in distributed or collaborative decision-making processes (Shahid et al., 2023). Approximately 20–25 semi-structured interviews were conducted, complemented by about 50 open-ended qualitative surveys administered electronically. This combination provided both depth and diversity in participant perspectives.

1.7.3 Data Collection Approach

Two complementary qualitative approaches were applied:

Semi-Structured Interviews:

The interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, followed a flexible guide addressing ethical decision-making, accountability, inclusion, and transparency in leadership. The semi-structured format encouraged participants to share their

experiences, while allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes. Interviews were conducted both online and face-to-face, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

Open-Ended Survey Questions:

A web-based qualitative survey collected brief narrative feedback from a wider group of employees. The survey addressed perceptions of fairness, inclusion, and transparency in organizational practices. The results complemented interview data and enhanced triangulation, thereby increasing the breadth and validity of insights.

1.7.4 Data Analysis Plan

- Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and survey responses.
- Creation of preliminary codes reflecting concepts such as trust, accountability, and shared decision-making.
- Grouping of codes into broader themes connected to ethical leadership and organizational behavior.
- Refinement of themes to ensure coherence with research questions.
- Finalization and labeling of the themes.
- Development of an interpretive narrative linking findings to theoretical constructs.

The analysis adopted an inductive approach, allowing themes and meanings to emerge organically from participants' accounts. The relationship between emergent themes and theory was established by aligning them with the conceptual framework grounded in Distributed Leadership, Ethical Leadership, and Generational Cohort Theories. NVivo

software facilitated the organization and visualization of thematic relationships, ensuring qualitative integrity throughout the process.

1.7.5 Ethical Assurance and Trustworthiness

The purpose of the study was clearly communicated to all participants, who were assured of voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board prior to data collection.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study applied the trustworthiness framework of Lincoln and Guba (1985):

Credibility: Achieved through triangulation of interviews and surveys, member checking, and researcher reflexivity.

Transferability: Ensured through rich contextual descriptions of the ITES environment.

Reliability: Established through an audit trail documenting analytical decisions.

Confirmability: Maintained via reflexive journaling and peer review to minimize bias.

These measures enhanced both the moral and methodological soundness of the study, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences rather than researcher assumptions.

1.7.6 Summary and Transition

Overall, this research was qualitative and interpretivist in nature, focusing on understanding rather than quantification. It explored ethical distributed leadership and its perception among Millennial and Generation Z employees within the Indian ITES sector. Data obtained through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires were

thematically analyzed using NVivo and interpreted through the integrated perspectives of Distributed Leadership, Ethical Leadership, and Generational Cohort Theories.

This consistent methodological approach provided nuanced insights into how fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion influenced employee engagement and retention within multigenerational organizational contexts.

1.8 Assumptions

Every research study is based on certain assumptions that define its scope and guide the interpretation of results. The present study on distributed leadership (DL) in the Indian ITES sector, specifically its influence on Millennial and Generation Z employees, was grounded on the following assumptions:

Veracity and verisimilitude of respondents: Interviewees and survey participants were assumed to have provided honest and deliberate responses, ensuring that the data represented genuine perceptions and experiences of DL practices (LP Centre, 2023).

Familiarity with leadership practices: Millennials and Generation Z employees were presumed to be adequately knowledgeable about modern leadership principles, including fairness, accountability, and inclusiveness, allowing them to evaluate DL appropriately (Fernandes & James, 2025).

Eternal applicability of ethical principles: Accountability, fairness, and transparency were considered universally relevant within the ITES sector, serving as guiding principles for leadership practices across organizations of varying sizes and sub-sectors (Mishra et al., 2024).

Relevance of distributed leadership: Distributed Leadership (DL), involving decentralization of decision-making, functional sharing, and collaboration, was assumed to be appropriate for improving organizational performance and meeting younger employees' leadership expectations.

Sample representativeness: It was assumed that the selected sample accurately represented the current ITES workforce, allowing for meaningful extrapolation of the results to understand how DL influenced employee outcomes (Nikolić et al., 2024).

Generational values impact: Millennials and Generation Z were assumed to place significant emphasis on ethical leadership practices, influencing their engagement, attitudes, and responses to DL structures compared with older cohorts.

These assumptions provided the foundation for data collection and analysis, enabling the research to reflect the realities of the Indian ITES industry.

1.9 Scope and Delimitation

The study focused on the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) industry, including Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), and IT support organizations that rely heavily on technology-based services. The study examined how ethical values—transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness—were incorporated within Distributed Leadership (DL) frameworks.

The research explored the consequences of DL among Millennials and Generation Z employees, who represented the majority of the workforce in this sector. The study was organized across three key domains:

Leadership- The study compared distributed and traditional hierarchical leadership systems and examined the ethical dimensions of DL, particularly fairness and accountability (Bass et al., 2022).

Employees- It analyzed how DL influenced outcomes such as job satisfaction, motivation, retention, and professional growth. It also assessed Millennials' and Generation Z's perceptions of leadership practices and their impact on long-term organizational commitment (Shahid et al., 2023).

Organization- This domain evaluated the role of DL in enhancing organizational flexibility, collaboration, and innovation, with an emphasis on agility and responsiveness to rapid technological shifts in competitive global markets (Feng & Lyu, 2025).

The research was conducted across major Indian technology hubs, with a specific focus on the ITES sector. Although the study employed a primarily qualitative design, it complemented these insights with open-ended surveys and interviews to gain deeper understanding of issues such as role ambiguity, accountability gaps, and informal hierarchies (Leithwood & Riehl, 2020).

The focus was narrowed to Millennials and Generation Z employees in ITES organizations. While older generations such as Baby Boomers and Generation X were acknowledged, the study emphasized younger employees' perspectives on DL. The investigation concentrated on core ethical principles—justice, openness, responsibility, and inclusion—excluding broader constructs such as corporate social responsibility or AI ethics.

This focus ensured credible and context-specific findings on how ethically based distributed leadership influenced employee outcomes and organizational performance in India's ITES sector.

1.10 Limitations of the Study

While this study provided valuable insights into the ethical implications of distributed leadership (DL) for new-generation employees in the Indian ITES sector, several limitations were acknowledged:

Cross-sectional design: Data were collected at a single point in time, which limited the ability to observe changes in perceptions or ethical outcomes over time (Nikolić et al., 2024).

Self-reported information: The findings relied on participants' integrity and subjective interpretations, which could introduce social desirability bias and differences in conceptualizing leadership practices (Bass et al., 2022).

Limited generalizability: The results, specific to India's ITES sector, might not be directly transferable to other industries or cultural contexts due to differing leadership norms and organizational cultures (Storey & Holti, 2021).

Generational focus: The study primarily focused on Millennials and Generation Z, offering limited insight into older generations such as Baby Boomers and Generation X (Bass et al., 2022).

Ethical scope: The study concentrated on fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion, excluding broader ethical topics such as corporate social responsibility or AI ethics.

Organizational variation: Differences between large corporations and startups were not extensively examined, though such variations could influence how DL and ethical practices were expressed (Cai & Song, 2021).

These limitations suggested directions for future research, including longitudinal studies, broader population samples, and cross-sectoral comparisons. Despite these constraints, the study contributed meaningful insights into ethically oriented distributed leadership and its influence on employee outcomes within the Indian ITES industry (Nikolić et al., 2024).

1.11 Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance

This study contributed to leadership and organizational behavior literature by critically examining Distributed Leadership (DL) through the lens of ethical principles—fairness, accountability, transparency, and inclusion. Although these concepts had been explored extensively in Western contexts, limited empirical research addressed their ethical implementation within the Indian ITES industry (Bass et al., 2022).

Given the unique structural and cultural dynamics of India's ITES sector, this research expanded understanding of DL's relevance to job satisfaction, engagement, motivation, and retention among Millennials and Generation Z. It also added to the broader

discussion on moral leadership and its impact on employee performance and retention in underexplored contexts (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Practical Significance

Practically, the study provided actionable insights for ITES organizations seeking to implement ethical distributed leadership models. A collaborative, innovative, and flexible work culture could be achieved by embedding fairness, transparency, and accountability into leadership practices—particularly valuable in high-turnover environments dominated by younger employees (Fernandes & James, 2025).

The findings offered guidance for managers on addressing challenges such as role ambiguity, lack of accountability, and trust-building, while enhancing empowerment and long-term organizational stability (Schweisfurth, 2023). By aligning leadership approaches with the ethical expectations of Millennials and Generation Z, organizations could foster stronger employee commitment and create a more inclusive, values-driven workplace.

1.12 Chapter Summary and Transition

This chapter introduced the study by presenting its background, research problem, purpose, and objectives. It focused on Distributed Leadership (DL) within the Indian ITES industry and explored its ethical implications for Millennials and Generation Z employees, emphasizing fairness, accountability, transparency, and inclusion. The discussion also highlighted the challenges of implementing DL ethically to meet the leadership expectations of a young and diverse workforce (Feng & Lyu, 2025).

The research was limited to ITES organizations in India, with primary focus on Millennials and Generation Z employees. While older generations were acknowledged, they were not the central focus. The study employed a cross-sectional qualitative design to capture employee perceptions of DL practices and their ethical implications. The limitations—such as reliance on self-reported data and restricted ethical scope—were acknowledged (Fernandes & James, 2025).

Despite these constraints, the study provided significant theoretical and practical contributions to understanding distributed leadership and its ethical consequences. The insights gained offered organizations guidance on aligning leadership structures with the values and expectations of younger employees.

The next chapter presents a comprehensive review of theoretical and empirical literature forming the foundation of this study. It critically examines research on leadership, ethical leadership, and generational workforce dynamics, thereby establishing the basis for hypothesis development and clarifying the importance of ethical distributed leadership in enhancing employee engagement and organizational success.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

IT Enabled Services (ITES) sector organizations are increasingly facing pressure to develop agility, innovation and responsiveness to global market changes, and distributed leadership (DL) is becoming more critical. Distributed leadership contrasts explicitly with traditional models, which focus on concentrating power and authority on a minority of leaders at the top of the hierarchy. By contrast, distributed leadership is characterized by establishing multiple responsibility points for these powers and decision-making across various authoritative levels in the organization. This approach nurtures such an enabling environment for leadership as a collective practice, which implies managing leadership as a collective practice by engaging all and sundry in the organization's day-to-day operation (Leithwood & Mascall, 2020). As the ITES industry is a dynamic and fast-growing industry in which technological advancements and market alterations are routine, distributed leadership is critical in giving an organization the ability to keep itself agile and innovative by drawing from its personnel's collective knowledge and experience (Bolden, 2011).

Distributed leadership emerged as a critical driver of the Indian economy with its coming of age in India's IT industry. This model fits very well with the values of the growing workforce for higher performance. The ITES sector has grown rapidly; its workers are becoming increasingly young and diverse and being led by the works of Millennials and

Generation Z employees. They are also younger employees with new workplace expectations—particularly in their desire for ethical leadership, transparency and inclusiveness (Bakker, 2017). Unlike the previous generations, they appreciate the ethics of management practices, fairness in making decisions and opportunities for participation in organizational processes. Consequently, the distributed leadership model well suits these expectations since it represents a leadership idea that empowers, includes, collaborates, and is in line with the ethical preferences of the new generation workforce (Cai & Song, 2021). Unlike prior studies that reviewed distributed and ethical leadership separately, this review integrates both, focusing on their combined relevance to multigenerational ITES workplaces.

The research focus of this study concerns the descent, ethical concern of identifying the distributed leadership of new generations of employees in the Indian ITES sector. In particular, the study will focus on moral leadership behaviors within the distributed leadership framework, including accountability, fairness, and transparency, to determine their impact on employee satisfaction and engagement levels and the degree of their organizational commitment. These young employees demand a change in leader transparency and implementation while empowering workers and rotating the leadership power, increasing the employee's accountability and ownership (Leithwood & Mascall, 2020). In addition, when carried out in line with such ethical values, it fosters the development of a culture that encourages innovation and teamwork – one of the critical success factors that define an organization operating in the ITES industry, as most of them are underpinned by technological issues and systematic teamwork. As organizations

adopt the leadership (DL) structure, it becomes important to address moral implications to ensure fairness, transparency and accountability, especially in fast-paced industries such as ITES.

Although distributed leadership has apparent advantages, it also presents ethical issues that must be resolved before the model can be implemented. One such issue is accountability. Under a decentralized framework, where more than one person or group contributes to leadership functions, it might be challenging to determine who is accountable for the results of decisions, especially when those decisions have adverse implications (Storey & Holti, 2021). Such an absence of definite accountability may also result in ethical issues where individuals do not take full blame for bad decisions, thus leading to the erosion of trust and morality within the organization (Gronn, 2020). The fragmentation of leadership accountability can also result in disagreements between leaders with competing agendas, ultimately resulting in decisions catering to specific groups or leaders instead of the broader organization (Bolden, 2011). These unmanaged conflicts may lower employee trust in leaders and produce ethical dangers that disassemble the advantages of distributed leadership.

If organizations use a strong ethical framework, these ethical questions are less likely to arise. By explaining the roles and responsibilities clearly, everyone participating in leadership can be held accountable for what they do (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). As a result, organizations should put in place conflict management processes for their decision-makers and ensure all decisions are based on what's good for the company. Communication should be clear, as it allows every employee to see the reasons behind

important choices and trust the process. Firms are less likely to experience ethical challenges if they have accountability and clear lines of communication within their decentralized leadership. All things considered, using distributed leadership gives employees the freedom to make better choices, get involved and come up with new ideas. (Leithwood & Mascall, 2020).

Moreover, it presents major ethics questions that should be resolved to ensure its achievement. Because Millennials and Generation Z now make up most employees in the Indian ITES sector, the company uses distributed leadership to reflect their expectations for fairness and involvement in making decisions. However, companies ought to implement measures, guidelines and systems to handle conflicts, account for everyone's conduct and manage the challenges that come with distributed leadership. This study will help find out the ways to maintain distributed leadership and the right ethical guidelines needed for companies to boost employee satisfaction and improve performance.

2.2 Theory

2.2.1 Understanding Distributed Leadership and Its Ethical Implications

Distributed Leadership (DL), the company's management is shared among employees so that they all play a part in decision-making. Unlike traditional structures, Distributed Leadership does not divide or specialize duties and jobs based on an organization's hierarchy. In addition, it ensures Leadership is shared by many instead of just a few which helps everyone contribute to innovative solutions to problems (Leithwood & Mascall, 2020). Because the ITES industry experiences quick changes and requires fast

adaptation, using DL can greatly help an ITES organization achieve success (Bolden, 2011). While DL is used, organizations ought to handle problems related to transparency, fairness and accountability when making choices (Gronn, 2020).

This framework below outlines the main components of distributed leadership and its ethical intricacies. It offers strategies for creating an ethical leadership culture, the barriers to effective implementation, and how these are applied to the ITES industry. Fourth, by applying moral leadership strategies and ethical policy frameworks, an ethical and accountable leadership environment could be fostered by integrating these strategies and frameworks with the values of newer generation employees who emphasize transparency and fairness of leadership (Cai & Song, 2021).

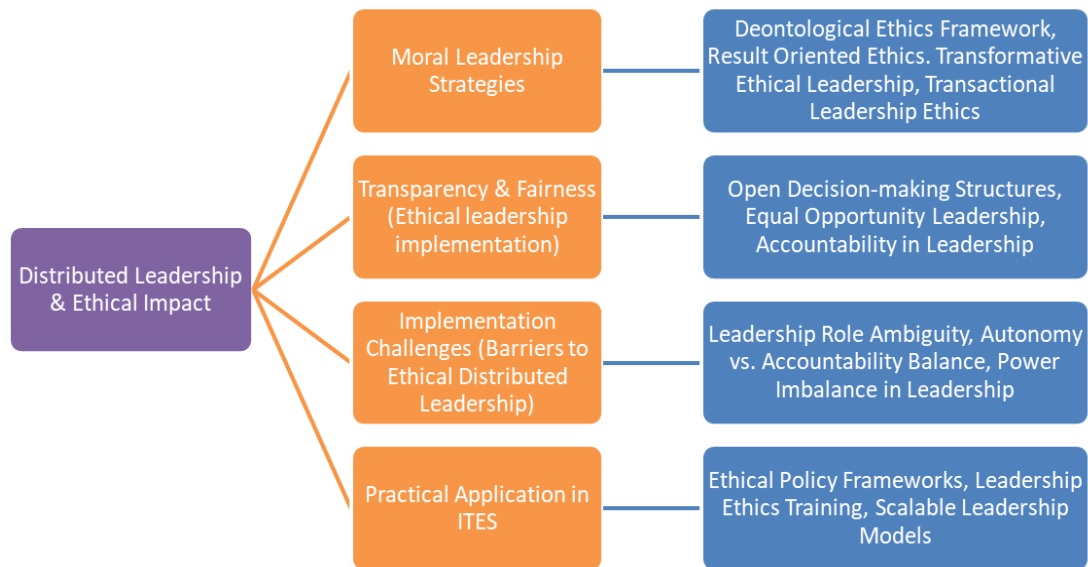


Figure: 1 Ethical Impact of Distributed Leadership on New Generation Employees in ITES Industry

Source: Author

Distributed Leadership (DL) is the contemporary organizational leadership structure that is particularly efficient in fast-moving industries like ITES. The highlights of this leadership model include that, unlike conventional hierarchical systems, power is decentralized far beyond the upper echelons, collective decisions and responsibility (Leithwood & Mascall, 2020). In a distributed leadership system, leadership roles span the organization's different levels to put staff at every level in the hierarchy to contribute to decision-making and managerial activities actively. Through this, team members can share responsibility and ownership, creating an environment that facilitates innovation, faster development and team-wide accountability (Bolden, 2011).

The evolving nature of the ITES sector, where customer demands and technology are constantly changing, makes a flexible, decentralized model like distributed leadership more necessary. With this model, organizations remain adaptable because it allows for faster decision-making and a more collaborative work culture, leading to more rapid changes when responding to a change (Gronn, 2020). ITES sector employees face challenges that require creative, direct solutions that can only be birthed by leading frameworks that push for autonomy and innovation. Distributed leadership facilitates the empowerment of employees and adds to this independence, motivating staff, elevating their satisfaction, and ensuring the organization's overall success (Bolden, 2011).

However, implementing distributed leadership raises significant ethical concerns that organizations must address carefully. One of the primary ethical challenges arises in ensuring equal distribution of leadership responsibility across teams. For decentralized

leadership to succeed, responsibilities must be clearly defined to avoid role confusion and to prevent some employees from assuming excess tasks while others remain disengaged. The rapid expansion of leadership roles within distributed leadership systems often leads to unclear decision-making authority and outcome responsibility, which can cause ethical problems around fairness, transparency, and accountability (Storey & Holti, 2021). These ambiguities can result in leader role confusion, decreasing employee morale and engagement, as individuals feel uncertain about their roles within the system (Van Der Voet, 2020). Therefore, organizations must prioritize transparency and fairness in their leadership practices to ensure that all employees clearly understand their responsibilities and contributions to the organization's goals. Although Gronn (2020) accentuates structural delegation, Bolden (2011) highlights cultural collaboration; Storey and Holti (2021) take this idea even further, using the ethical accountability prism.

Figure 1 represents a framework for understanding distributed leadership and its ethical implications. It highlights the key moral leadership strategies required for effective distributed leadership, such as deontological, result-oriented, transformative, and transactional leadership ethics. The diagram also highlights the critical role of transparency and fairness in leadership implementation and associated challenges when organizations do not effectively address ethical issues such as role ambiguity, autonomy, and power imbalances at the leadership level. The framework includes the practical application of distributed leadership for ITES, including ethical policy frameworks, leadership ethics training, and the nascent techniques for scaling leadership models up for long-term success.

For distributed leadership to be effectively implemented in organizations, leadership practices must include an infusion of ethical values of transparency, fairness, and integrity. The moral standards of leadership members are the variables that similarly influence the sustainability framework of distributed leadership frameworks. In making decisions, leaders should obey ethical principles where their actions conform to principles of morality and serve as a beacon for fairness within their sphere of influence, i.e., the organization (Sah et al., 2024). In the absence of robust ethical principles, exploitative circumstances are generated, manifesting inequality and other unethical practices that compromise the integrity of leadership systems (Lawton and Páez, 2014). Because of this, distributed leadership must be grounded in a steadfast ethical foundation to guarantee such a system's effectiveness and fairness.

Leaders facing the challenge of implementing distributed leadership can use a combination of ethical principles. In contrast, deontological ethics prioritize respect for moral principles, meaning that leadership decisions are not dictated by situational outcomes but are led by intrinsic ethical standards. On the other hand, consequentialist ethics invites leaders to consider the consequences of decisions, concentrating on the results of actions instead of the moral rules themselves. Transformative ethics of leadership ethics spurs leaders to stimulate changes for good, while transactional ethics is based on exchange and compensation for employees' performance (Sah et al., 2024). However, when these ethical views are integrated, an organizational leadership model can be created that ensures fairness, moral treatment, and accountability.

In addition, implementation barriers to the distributed leadership enterprise include role clarity and conflict barriers to decision-making. A significant issue is striking the right balance between independence and responsibility in decentralized systems. In distributed leadership organizations, power inequalities tend to arise, and staff begin to perceive themselves as being excluded and mistreated. Organizations should develop measures of balancing empowerment with adequate oversight to mitigate these disparities so employees are not undervalued (Chawla & Joshi, 2010). Even more so, the absence of clarity in the decision-making process leads to confusion and ultimately diminished organizational performance. We must implement transparent decision-making systems to aspire for ethical and fair leadership. This is why participation in managerial decision-making enhances employees' ownership and responsibility and creates a fair and ethical working environment (Chawla & Joshi, 2010).

To effectively integrate the moral implications of the leadership (DL) distributed in Indian ITES firms, organizations must adopt a comprehensive approach that emphasizes transparency, fairness and accountability at all levels of decision making. One of the primary strategies involves the establishment of formal moral training programs for leaders at all levels to ensure that moral decision making principles are clearly communicated and implemented throughout the organization. Additionally, accountability systems such as moral committees or internal audit can play an important role in removing concerns related to transparency of centralization of power and decision-making. For example, Infosys implemented an internal moral committee to evaluate the

decision -making processes, ensuring that leadership activities were in line with the basic values of the company's inclusion and equality (Verma & Mohapatra, 2017).

In summary, distributed leadership provides an excellent advantage for collaboration, innovation and employee empowerment for the ITES sector. But, for this model to be helpful at all, it must be accompanied by a strong ethical framework to redress concerns like gaps of accountability, ambiguity of roles, and imbalances of power. Organizations can promote an inclusive, transparent, ethically responsible workforce by embedding ethical principles in leadership practices and proper oversight. This will bring down employee engagement and help organizations achieve long-term success.

2.2.2. Exploring the Relationship between Distributed Leadership, Ethical Considerations, and Employee Outcomes

The growing nature of the workplace today has compelled most workplace organisations to pursue the services of both productive and ethical leaders. The concept of Distributed Leadership (DL) (or dispersed leadership) is described as the decision to distribute the decision-making power and responsibility of multiple parts of the organisation to create a flexible and inclusive structural paradigm (Leithwood & Mascall, 2020). Based on this, the Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT) gives importance to shared authority as a driver of innovation and responsiveness. It is based on this theoretical premise that Wipro adopted the distributed leadership concept, where open decision-making systems and cross-functional integration have increased employee satisfaction and minimized project delays, proving the statement by Bolden (2011) that distributed authority improves the agility of an organization. Although Brown and Treviño (2006) focus on the morality of

leaders, Lawton and Páez (2014) underline institutional systems, which suggests morals on both personal and organizational aspects.

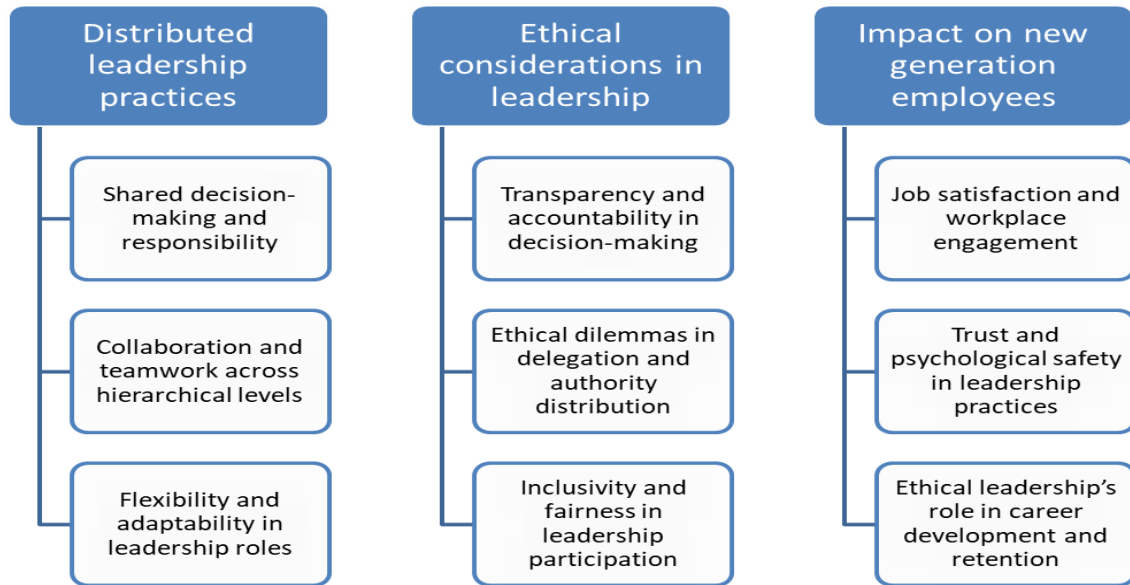


Figure 2: Impact of Distributed Leadership and Ethics on Employee Engagement and Development,

Source: Author

At the same time, the Ethical Leadership Theory (ELT) outlines the ethical protections that are necessary in decentralized systems. Unlike Brown and Treviño (2006), who give much importance to the morality of leaders, Lawton and Páez (2014) highlight the institutional ethics that strike a balance between empowerment and accountability. Such ethical alignment is also found in the leadership development programme of Infosys, where open communication has been supplemented with moral control through ethics councils that are internal to the company, and hence reflect the combination of institutional fairness and accountability brought out in ELT. The workers who are

working in such circumstances give reports that show that they experience an increased level of trust and decreased turnover, thus validating the theory in the ITES industry.

The further reason these ethically distributed approaches are practical is due to the Generational Cohort Theory (GCT). Employees of millennials and Gen Z prefer participatory decision-making and transparency, and this is what the collaborative structure of DL implies. The example of TCS and its Next Gen Leadership Circles demonstrates that the younger professionals note that they become even more engaged and innovative as they feel empowered and led by the distributed leadership systems with the help of ethical governance (TCS Annual Report, 2023).

Altogether, these examples can prove that the ethical distributed leadership is not just theoretically but operationally efficient in improving satisfaction, retention, and creativity in the Indian ITES industry.

2.2.3 Distributed Leadership (DL) and Employee Engagement in ITES: Perspectives of Millennials and Generation Z

It will be based on the generational background that was explored in Chapter 1, and build upon the value orientations of Millennials and Generation Z in relation to their participation in distributed leadership (DL) practices in the Indian ITES industry. DL also fosters participatory decision-making and related accountability, which inherently fits the expectations of younger employees of empowerment and ethical transparency (Bolden, 2011; Leithwood Mascall, 2020).

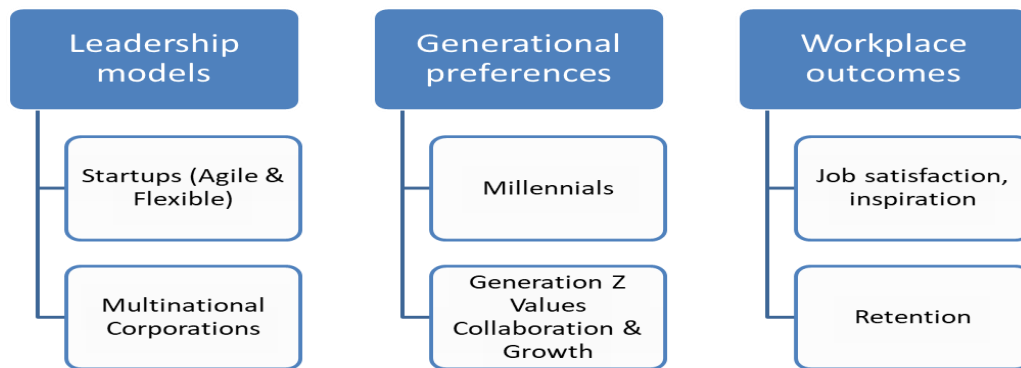


Figure 3: Relationship between leadership models, generational preferences, and workplace outcomes for ITES employees

Source: Author

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between leadership models, generational preferences, and workplace outcomes within the ITES environment. The framework shows that organizations adopting distributed leadership achieve higher job satisfaction and retention among younger cohorts due to transparent and inclusive practices.

DL helps employees to make independent decisions on issues concerning challenge and problem solving, and allows cross-functional cooperation in the context of the rapid technological change typical of an ITES organization. This distributed power leads to psychological ownership, as studies associate with increased motivation and job satisfaction (Vachhrajani, Singh, & Rai, 2020). However, as opposed to hierarchical leadership, the key to the success of DL is setting down clear ethical guardrails so that shared authority does not create an environment of indeterminism and favoritism (Storey OE & Holti, 2021).

Empirical cases point out these dynamics. An example of this is that Infosys established its own internal leadership circles that enabled the mid-level teams to take client-delivery decisions on their own; the initiative increased the scores on engagement and decreased the number of professionals who dropped off in the first years of their careers (Verma & Mohapatra, 2017). Similarly, the rotating DL model at Wipro enabled project teams to make decisions on direct client escalation, which enhanced responsiveness and innovation whenever the market became volatile (Madan, Jain, & Bolden, 2024). These examples show that in the case of equitable, accountable, and transparent communication of the underlying principles, the implementation of DL positively affects employee retention and innovative problem-solving.

The bigger ITES companies, however, face different challenges as opposed to startups. In comparison to smaller organizations with informal co-working, which fastens the pace of decision-making, the rapidly formed consensus and role ambiguity are common in established corporations (Edsel & Harjanti, 2024). Therefore, the ethicalness and consistency of the structures in terms of ethical standards make the alignment of the DL practices an essential part of preserving trust and retaining interest within multigenerational teams.

Conclusively, the consideration of a participatory value-based work environment by Millennials and Gen Z workers serves to support the applicability of ethical distributed leadership. When based on equity, inclusion and accountability, the practices of the DL anchor could enhance the level of employee satisfaction and long-term commitment, which are essential for a competitive advantage in the Indian ITES industry. Although

Cai & Song (2021) refer to Gen Z as digitally fluent, Fernandes & James (2025) observe that they prefer a purposeful ethos, which is a change in values that is relevant to ITES leadership.

2.3 Literature Review

2.3.1 Principles of Ethics in Distributed Leadership

The shift towards the framework of conventional hierarchies into the context of distributed leadership (DL) in the IT-enabled Services industry implies the importance of integrating the principles of ethics, fairness, transparency, and accountability into the process of organizational decision-making (Spillane, 2006; Bolden, 2011). This moral philosophy ensures that decentralization of power does not undermine integrity and create a power imbalance. DL allows various levels of validating teams to share responsibilities in decision-making and thus creates an inclusive and trustworthy relationship, if it is founded on the nature of moral leadership.

Knowledge- Ethical leadership is the moral compass of distributed systems. Leaders who make ethical decisions make expediency irrelevant and build cultures of trust to maintain the motivation of employees and their engagement (Sah et al., 2024; Lawton and Páez, 2014). On the other hand, a lack of strong ethical standards encourages inequality and selfishness, thus compromising the level of equality and the credibility of management. The distributed leadership should, therefore, be based on some solid ethical practice that outlines the roles clearly and maintains fairness in all levels of operation (Storey and Holti, 2021).

To apply this framework, leaders can incorporate several views of ethics. Deontological ethics promotes respect for moral obligations irrespective of the consequences, thus supporting fairness and transparency. Consequentialist ethics is an evaluation of actions based on the effects which would help to ensure that the actions of the leaders would have beneficial effects on all the stakeholders. Transformational ethics is oriented at motivating social benefit, whereas transactional ethics is aimed at the responsibility as a result of fair dealings and appreciation (Northouse, 2018; Beauchamp and Bowie, 2004). Through their synthesis, an ethical balance is created that protects distributed leadership against the abuse of authority and fosters inclusiveness and collective responsibility.

Such ethical grounding cannot help but lead leaders to balance accountability and autonomy in performance-driven ITES environments. Indicatively, Infosys has set up internal ethics committees to review leadership judgments so that the distributed authority augers with the value of inclusion and equality (Verma and Mohapatra, 2017). Similarly, TCS also introduced an organization set of ethical inspections that strengthened the integrity of project structures and outputs, leading to an increased level of staff trust and more successful innovation (Deloitte, 2022). Such examples indicate that the ethical DL promotes sustainable participation and retention through providing moral consistency in the leadership practices. This is congruent with the fairness model by Brown and Treviño (2006) but is out of proportion to the structural approach of Gronn (2020), which implies that ethical DL combines the moral purpose and the transparency of the process.

To sum up, ethical values are not peripheral but are the focus of distributed leadership. The incorporation of fairness, accountability and transparency makes DL a trust-based system of governing the organization, which reinforces organizational culture and performance. With these moral anchors, ITES organizations are able to maintain integrity in distributing leadership and promoting co-working and maintaining competitive advantage based on ethically reasonable involvement.

2.3.2 Challenges in Distributed Leadership

Though the system of distributed leadership (DL) has some benefits in the form of facilitating cooperation and collective responsibility, the distributed approach also presents some structural and ethical problems, especially in the context of the fast-growing sector of Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES). Although the concept of autonomy and empowerment is supported, DL often brings to light issues of fairness, accountability, and hidden hierarchies (Houghton et al., 2020; Bolden et al., 2020). All these issues are important to make sure that decentralization is not an unwanted recreation of the very inequality that DL is meant to address.

One of the most noticeable is the epistemic injustice, which refers to sidelining or down valuing the knowledge and the opinions of certain employees because of social or cultural prejudices (Langton, 2010). Even in the decentralized systems, participation gaps remain, as the voices of the junior employees, who are in minorities, remain hesitant to participate. These differences may be the reason to remain quiet about creative insights and make an organization unable to capitalize on DL fully in the case of ITES companies operating across various locations (Murphy et al., 2020). To deal with this, organizations

need to have diverse and inclusive processes institutionalized, e.g., bias-awareness programmes and clear feedback loops, to make knowledge sharing and decision-making activities democratic (Jang et al., 2021).

The second difficulty is based on the hidden hierarchies. Even though the dispersion of power, at least on paper, is encouraged by DL, the informal networks of power still tend to persist, which enables the senior staff or project managers to continue to be empowered. This unofficial gathering of authority is a decline in the authenticity of distributed systems and employee distrust (Spillane, 2020; Khan et al., 2021). This is as opposed to Western contexts covered in the study by Bolden (2011), where hierarchical norms also limit shared authority. Investigations of the Indian ITES are presented in a study by NASSCOM ('23). It, therefore, becomes imperative to proactively break down informal hierarchies by providing open communication and rotating the roles to ensure that authentic dispensation of leadership is maintained.

Another issue is role ambiguity and the absence of accountability. Lack of responsibilities is distributed in a broad manner with little or no separation, and, as a result, employees are prone to confusion regarding authority and ownership, which can cause redundancy in their work, delays in decision-making, and low productivity (Rowold, 2005). ITES workplaces with a high level of performance, which operate on a strict client deadline basis, require a particular accountability framework that balances agility with ethical clarity. The inability to define the leadership functions may destroy morale and go against the purpose of empowering employees by DL. The implementation

of formal escalation channels and leadership charters provides clarity since it preserves distributed involvement (Houghton et al., 2020).

Lastly, a lack of accountability poses a threat to organizational integrity. There is no definitive leader to assume overall accountability for the results of the project when more than one person is involved in leadership. In the absence of precise accountability mechanisms, DL has the potential of creating decision paralysis or reputational risks (Timperley, 2005). The ITES organizations in India, therefore, need to infuse technology, including electronic boards to monitor task completion and open peer appraisal systems to keep up the transparency and equity in the decision-making process.

2.3.3 Benefits of Distributed Leadership in ITES

In the modern era, Distributed Leadership (DL) has been a significant organizational framework in the ITES and other contemporary industries. Distributed Leadership is naturally built into the structure of ITES firms as they succeed in cooperative environments stressing innovation and rapid decision-making. Unlike popular hierarchical models, which bring together the leadership responsibility in a tiny group of individuals, Distributed Leadership decreases focusing all leadership responsibilities on a few individuals within an organization instead of distributing the leadership concern to different individuals. This strategy improves openness, transparency, and group responsibility, which is incredibly virile in fast-growing industries like ITES, where elasticity and group engagement lie in the heart (Bergman et al., 2021; Houghton et al., 2020). Distributed Leadership not only brings organizational hierarchies to a new low but

also empowers staff, leading to a more inclusive and cooperative workplace (Liu & Liu, 2021).

Moving towards distributed Leadership enhances organizational transparency in different aspects, such as communication and decision-making. There is a lack of space for employees to participate in important decisions in the mainstream conventional frameworks for Leadership, which are often inflexible and hierarchical. On the contrary, distributed Leadership encourages the free flow of ideas and allows all team members to engage in an open exchange. The communication points are transparent, which creates trust among the employees, which is essential in the ITES as it has higher turnover. To a similar effect, Liu & Liu (2021) and Spillane (2020) indicate that organizations that promote openness in their Leadership have a greater probability of developing trust and mutual respect in the work environment.

Additionally, because Millennials and Gen Z value transparency intensely, distributed Leadership may significantly enhance engagement and motivation. The younger demographics tend to expect authentic Leadership that correlates with organizations that put forth ethical practices, fairness and transparency (Treviño et al., 2003; Finkelstein & Gainer, 2020). By decentralizing Leadership, companies can foster these values better than they can if they still have centralized Leadership, and employees trust Leadership better in this case. (Houghton et al., 2020)

Distributed Leadership has one great advantage: it fosters inclusivity in an organization. Distributed Leadership provides a framework for contributions from all levels of the organization, which is helpful in the ITES sector, which is characterized by a large, often

diverse, and spread workforce. Distributed Leadership empowers the organization by allowing employees across the tiers to participate by putting people in leadership positions. Specifically, this inclusivity is relevant for Generation Z and Millennials looking for career advancement and more satisfying careers. Research on leaders in the ITES indicates that young employees are more likely to stay with companies that offer promotive and developmental avenues through sharing the Leadership (Jang et al., 2021; Northouse., 2020). Distributed Leadership takes out the stumbling blocks, usually positioned in more usual hierarchical arrangements, within an atmosphere where each worker – regardless of his rank – is welcome to play the role of the authority. It fosters a sense of responsibility and gets lost attachment, improving personal performance and giving rise to a lively and supple workplace culture. There is a higher motivation and commitment to a long-term goal when organizations trust the employees to lead the initiatives, and those employees feel closer to the organization (Northouse, 2020; Liu & Liu, 2021).

Retaining employees remains a significant issue in the ITES sector, mainly due to high turnover stemming from burnout, job dissatisfaction, and limited opportunities for advancement. One of the main ways Distributed Leadership enhances retention is by cultivating a sense of purpose and involvement among staff. Employees with increased leadership roles feel more appreciated and engaged in their tasks. Assigning leadership duties minimizes hierarchical obstacles and motivates employees to embrace roles that resonate with their strengths and professional goals. Furthermore, individuals are more inclined to remain with a company, emphasizing career development and ethical

leadership. As younger professionals increasingly seek transparency and defined career paths, Distributed Leadership can be an essential strategy for meeting these expectations (Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Gronn, 2002). (Gronn, 2002; Houghton et al., 2020) Studies indicate that organizations that embrace ethical leadership tend to be more successful in keeping employees satisfied; thus, turnover rates are usually low. It has been found that when employees in ITES companies are provided with the autonomy to decide and do so, they are more motivated and dedicated to the organization and, hence, are less likely to switch jobs.

Distributed leadership is vital in promoting ethical governance within ITES organizations. Ethical governance is a fundamental element of leadership, particularly regarding decision-making processes and information dissemination within an organization. By spreading leadership duties, decision-making becomes more open, lessening power centralization and enhancing accountability. Increased transparency in leadership leads to greater employee trust in the organization's decision-making. According to research, employees in organizations with ethical leadership practices exhibit higher trust levels in their leaders, which is crucial for maintaining a motivated and engaged workforce (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Trust forms the foundation of effective leadership, and distributed leadership nurtures this trust by making leaders more accessible and their choices more predictable. Since ITES companies must decide things quickly, including different leaders ensures that the decisions are fairer and meet the needs of their employees better (Northouse, 2020; Spillane, 2020).

Being accountable in ITES through distributed leadership is shared by all leaders. With shared leadership, those who lead are responsible for nothing because the team owns every outcome. Being responsible for the group's success helps people collaborate and work as a team. In addition, using several points of view makes decisions more reliable due to involving different opinions which keeps the team from making choices that a single point of view can't offer. This study proves that spreading leadership leads to better relationships among team members and motivates everyone to help achieve the team's objectives (Liu & Liu, 2021; Houghton et al., 2020). If teams work together closely, distributed leaders establish a thriving culture by knowing they have leaders throughout the firm who share their vision (Northouse, 2020).

In addition, having distributed leadership is crucial for ITES companies since it supports ongoing leadership development. As a result, a wide number of staff are supported in leadership roles and are well-informed about the company's culture and values. Building new leaders in the ITES industry is necessary due to the importance of innovation and adaptability. Organizations that share leadership are more able to expand their business in the long term, as it improves their ability to respond to new situations (Houghton et al., 2020; Spillane, 2020). Distributed leadership structures allow companies to respond to new market conditions, develop ideas and remain in front of the competition (Gronn, 2002; Jang et al., 2021). Whereas Spillane (2020) emphasises innovation, Liu & Liu (2021) focus on engagement—both outcomes reflected in Wipro's distributed project teams.

2.3.4 Distributed Leadership and Workforce Expectations

Millennials and Generation Z are significantly shaping the way leadership is done, mainly in areas like ITES that rely heavily on both remote work and the use of online tools. Because these groups are used to technology and require flexible workplaces, they are expressing less satisfaction with the standard authority structure. Alternatively, individuals are interested in companies that help people feel engaged, are open with information, let them have freedom and follow strong values (Avolio et al., 2009; Houghton et al., 2020). For this reason, people now consider traditional hierarchical methods of leadership to be no longer effective or suitable in most areas. Both Millennials and Generation Z value having a proper work-life balance, improving their careers, honoring ethical principles and contributing to decision-making processes (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Gronn, 2002). Because of what they expect, organizations must make significant changes in their approach to Leadership. This can be observed in ITES companies as leaders add more inclusive and participatory systems, often choosing Distributed Leadership (DL) (Berson et al., 2021; Spillane, 2020).

The way DL is organized makes it a flexible and popular system for modern workers. While traditional leadership models rely on one person making most of the decisions, Distributed Leadership involves everyone in both decision-making and guidance. Applying the concept of Distributed Leadership, organizations encourage teamwork and allow all employees to share in decision-making (Houghton et al., 2020; Spillane, 2020). ITES organizations find this important due to widespread adoption of both remote and hybrid work. Given that ITES companies have teams distributed in different locations

and countries, effective leadership methods for leading diverse teams must be created (Bergman, et al., 2021; Liu & Liu, 2021). Distributed Leadership enables the whole workforce to contribute their intelligence, so that teams in various locations can decide what works locally for them, following the overall goals of the organization. Decentralizing leadership in ITES can lead to quicker, more flexible and more effective teams when faced with the changing digital world (Avolio et al., 2009).

It is also expected that employees younger than Generation X will look for flexible leaders committed to ethics and honesty. Those who belong to these generations deal with worries related to the responsibilities of businesses (CSR), diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), as well as the actions of their employers (Treviño et al., 2003). Brown and Treviño's research (2006) suggest that employees who work under ethical leaders tend to be happier, trust their leaders more and feel more committed. In ITES companies, since teams are made up of people from all walks of life, leaders are expected to be clear and encourage a genuine focus on being fair with everyone (Bergman et al., 2021). Distributed leadership manages to meet these requirements by supporting a strong, ethical model of corporate governance, where everyone participates in making decisions and all leaders are responsible for them (Avolio et al., 2009; Liu & Liu, 2021). When everyone sees the decisions being made, it assures everyone that their perspectives are taken into consideration. Since face-to-face communication may be lower in hybrid and remote jobs, teams need to focus on good communication to keep the team engaged and trusting (Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Spillane, 2020).

Leading IT companies are modifying their Distributed Leadership systems by applying AI-assisted leadership tools. As companies look to work more efficiently and promptly, AI supports management, drives better communication and aids staff in leadership skills. With data analysis, the platform allows organizations to help managers and teams decide with the information they need (Edsel & Harjanti, 2024). Besides, HR technology can watch how team members work and send recommendations for improving employee managers. Therefore, using automation can simplify the way leaders perform their duties and confirm that it is important for leadership to include everyone. AI-based tools can be used by ITES organizations to plan and structure effective leadership methods that match the requirements of various employee groups or regions. At the same time, leaders and managers should consider the ethical effects of AI on their work. AI systems should be open, fair and without bias to ensure employees trust and have confidence in decisions made by their leaders (Berson et al., 2021; Avolio et al., 2009).

With more hybrid work, the character of the workforce has transformed, providing both advantages and disadvantages for businesses using distributed leadership in the ITES field. Thanks to hybrid work models, employees find it easier to manage their job and personal life, resulting in their greater happiness and involvement with their work (Houghton et al., 2020). Nevertheless, leading a team working from different locations in a hybrid arrangement means that managers should aim to support communication, teamwork and inclusion. In regular office settings, leaders can easily communicate with their team, respond quickly to their needs and take part in small talks aimed at boosting relationships. Because opportunities are fewer in hybrid or remote work, ITES companies

must adopt up-to-date leadership strategies (Spillane, 2020; Liu & Liu, 2021). Distributed leadership offers a strategy for addressing these issues by ensuring that leadership responsibilities are not limited to a select few but are shared throughout the team. This method fosters community and teamwork, even when team members are situated in various locations. By enabling employees to assume leadership roles, Distributed Leadership aids in closing the gap between remote workers and their in-office colleagues, resulting in a more united and connected team (Northouse, 2020).

Distributed Leadership frameworks in ITES organizations are not complete without mentorship initiatives. Given that Millennials and Generation Z will emphasize career advancement and progression, companies must find a way to offer bespoke guidance and help. Mentorship programs allow seasoned leaders to pass their knowledge and experience on to emerging leaders, helping them develop the skills needed to fill leadership positions (Spillane, 2020). Additionally, these initiatives foster knowledge transfer, providing employees the tools and resources to succeed. In the context of Distributed Leadership, mentorship can be effective in a more personalized way, and support can be provided more specifically. Unlike the traditional workforce model of a mentor managing a mentee, mentorship within a Distributed Leadership structure allows leaders to mentor members from other levels, instilling a cooperative and supportive work culture (Bergman et al., 2021). In addition, mentorship can also assist with Distributed Leadership risks, such as leadership uncertainty or decision-making conflicts. Through mentoring involving clear guidance and support, employees' roles and responsibilities can be defined well within the leadership framework, eliminating or

reducing the chances of confusion and miscommunication in operations (Liu & Liu, 2021).

Millennials and generations Z are the largest part of the workforce in the ITES sector, and their expectations from leadership are based on values such as transparency, inclusiveness and commercial development. These generations seek a work environment where they get the right to participate in decision-making processes, and where the methods of leadership reflect fairness and openness. Distributed leadership (DL) promotes a work culture in line with these expectations that encourage cooperation and autonomy (Spillane, 2020). For example, TCS has successfully integrated distributed leadership (DL) by providing opportunities to play leadership roles at all levels, which has improved job satisfaction and engagement. This approach not only inspires employees, but also reduces turnover rates, especially among young employees who give importance to the career development opportunities and decisions.

Although Distributed Leadership bears a lot of advantages, one shouldn't fail to identify the risks and challenges that a model like this one might present. A key concern is if there might be a chance for leadership ambiguity, which could leave your employees unsure of who is responsible for what decisions. Uncertainty can lead to confusion, waste, and disputes within the team. Ambiguity will grow particularly when you work in hybrid and remote settings where direct communication is limited. To solve this problem, ITES organizations must have policies and guidelines that specify leadership roles and responsibilities in a distributed environment. All these policies must ensure that decision-making and policies are open and that all team members understand their organizational

roles. Millennial autonomy and the genuineness of Gen Z fall into one another on the participatory model of DL and accentuate its cross-generational applicability.

2.3.5 Distributed Leadership in ITES: Power Dynamics and Workforce Expectations

Implementing Distributed Leadership (DL) in IT-enabled services (ITES) shows considerable differences between startups and large corporations. The differences stem from the different structures and associated ways of doing business prevalent in small and fast-responding businesses versus large, more bureaucratic organizations. Distributed leadership is thriving in startups because initiatives such as their natural agility and flat organizational structures help in more collaborative and adaptable decision-making. It is the other way around for large ITES companies: While they greatly need the adoption of worry-free Distributed Leadership, many obstacles hinder such adoption due to the necessity of structured governance and defined roles. However, both types of organizations need to change and adapt to satisfy the modifying expectations of the Supply team of Millennials and Generation Z, centered on Independence, innovation and adaptability (Houghton et al., 2020; Avolio et al., 2009). Unlike the hierarchical leadership (Leithwood and Mascall 2020), distributed leadership refrains influence redistribution; however, Indian ITES still have some aspects of partial adoption due to structural inertia.

That is why startups naturally embrace distributed leadership, which is because of the size and lack of rigidity in their structure. Fewer tiers in management mean that these organizations oftentimes follow a more decentralized approach towards decision-making.

Employees in startups are usually even asked to take up leadership roles on an ad hoc basis so that they get directly involved in initiating the initiative or making the decision. This distribution of Authority allows a culture of innovation and flexibility to grow where team members do not need to ask for their superiors' approval to make quick decisions (Spillane, 2020; Bergman et al., 2021). Millennials and Generation Z choose this style of leadership as it lets them influence and control their own actions in the workplace (Gronn, 2002; Northouse, 2020). Considering the rapid flow of details and fast pace of early decisions in their environment, young people may quickly lead and direct change in places that appreciate their views.

Being decentralized, startups can make quick decisions and this is very important in the ITES industry, where rapid innovation matters the most (Houghton et al., 2020). Better adapting to changing markets and innovations is possible when there is more than one leader at these companies. Additionally, the simple structure of many startups inspires employees to work together as a team. Because employees collaborate, they get inspired and able to take on more significant roles at a younger age. Consequently, this approach helps cultivate a competent and profoundly committed workforce to the company's long-term objectives. Therefore, distributed leadership in startups resonates well with the changing values of younger employees, who prioritize personal development, career advancement, and the chance to influence company outcomes (Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Avolio et al., 2009).

The adoption of the distributed leadership (DL) model has not only increased employee satisfaction, but also a significant improvement in organizational performance. Research

suggests that organizations that have high levels of participation achieve better results in areas such as innovation, customer satisfaction and organizational efficiency. For example, Infosys has seen a significant improvement in team cooperation and productivity by adopting decentralized decision-making models, which has directly contributed to its strong market position (Avolio et al., 2009). DL promotes the culture of shared ownership and accountability, which increases the morale of the employees and performs better in all departments. Organizations that promote such culture are in a better position for innovation and competition in the rapidly developing ITES scenario.

In contrast, large ITES companies, with their intricate organizational frameworks, encounter considerable difficulties in implementing a distributed leadership approach. These entities are marked by established roles, hierarchical decision-making systems, and organized governance, which can obstruct the agility and independence distributed leadership aims to foster (Spillane, 2020). In sizable organizations, leadership is frequently centralized at the top, and the decision-making process may be sluggish due to the necessity of consulting numerous management layers. Consequently, distributed leadership in these contexts can produce concealed hierarchies, leadership disparities, and operational inefficiencies. Such problems emerge when authority is spread out, but roles and responsibilities remain ambiguous, resulting in uncertainty regarding who is accountable for decision-making. This lack of clarity can generate power dynamics that weaken the effectiveness of the leadership framework, making it challenging for employees to feel empowered and engaged (Gronn, 2002; Liu & Liu, 2021).

Unacknowledged hierarchies pose the most significant challenge in large organizations, where decentralized power without policies can default to unofficial leaders who are not formally supported or accountable to an organization. Unknown to the company, these unofficial leaders can make things worse by fostering competing power dynamics that further confuse and anger the company. In addition, when there is no clear ruling on who has control over decision-making, employees might not know where to direct their efforts, leading to ineffective organization and poor coordination (Houghton et al., 2020; Liu & Liu, 2021). In turn, this uncertainty can prevent innovation, as employees will be less inclined to step out on a limb when unsure of the bounds of their power. Power issues can emerge in this context, sapping the benefits distributed leadership intends to produce.

Large ITES companies face pushback trying to align the expectations of Millennials and Generation Z with their existing leadership frameworks. These younger individuals are accustomed to workplaces with good autonomy and the possibility to participate in actual decision-making processes. However, in large organizations where power, hierarchy and conventional leadership styles are entrenched, these expectations often clash with the rigid hierarchies and top-down management typical of such companies (Gronn, 2002; Avolio et al., 2009). Both millennials and Generation Z emphasize work-life balance while seeking an employment environment that will allow them to explore new ideas, take ownership of things and play a significant role in how the company evolves (Harrison 2019, Spillane 2008). However, as in any large firm, power structures can

impede the attainment of these goals, especially in the case of leadership that is so centralized and slow to change.

To deal with this challenge, many large ITES companies must find a way to balance the need for controlled governance with requiring innovation. Even in today's society, distributed leadership can still be very effective, providing it is carefully planned by creating good, simple rules and guidelines on roles and responsibilities while allowing for autonomy and flexibility in the decisions made. By giving middle managers and team leaders more decision-making power, large firms can adopt the responsible and adaptive distributed leadership framework (Avolio et al., 2009; Spillane, 2020). Moreover, mentorship initiatives and cross-functional teams can help spread the responsibility of leadership, as opposed to being restricted to the lead of senior executives. Thus, leadership can be spread all over the organization. This is a way to develop employees' sense of ownership and involvement, which is essential today to retain top talent (Gronn, 2002; Liu & Liu, 2021).

Other practical approaches include integrating AI-powered leadership tools within the leadership framework. These tools will aid leaders in decision-making by arming them with real-time team performance data, project progress, and other essential metrics. Besides that, AI can identify the leadership shortage and propose training and development opportunities for employees so that the spread of leadership positions aligns with the company's objectives (Berson et al., 2021). Additionally, AI can be used to monitor team dynamics and ensure leadership tasks so that power imbalance or ineffectiveness would not be possible. While this is important, it is essential to use these

tools in a transparent and equitable way because using AI too heavily could help introduce bias that can intentionally counter the effectiveness of the leadership model (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Avolio et al., 2009).

Hybrid work arrangements can align Major ITES companies' leadership framework with their employees' changing needs. Hybrid work arrangements, by allowing employees to work from the office or at home, provide more flexibility while maintaining a level of structure. Combining this approach can be a nice way to meet the needs of Millennials and Generation Z (and their desire for flexibility and balance between work and home) and ensure governance and accountability. Large organizations can expand their work atmosphere to be more inclusive and energetic and promote employees to take leadership roles to make a big difference in contributing to the organization's success if they can adopt hybrid work arrangements coupled with distributed leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Gronn, 2002).

2.3.6 Future Directions and Adaptation of Distributed Leadership Models

With the rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital transformation, leadership models are undergoing significant changes to adapt to new technological environments. This is noticeable in IT-enabled services, as technology is vital in helping remain competitive. AI tools are being used more often in leadership to improve how work is carried out, help with analysis of future trends and make decision-making swift and automated. At the same time, AI and machine learning raise challenges such as possible bias, privacy issues and depending too much on technology for making wide-ranging decisions. As organizations in India, especially within the ITES sector,

embrace these technologies, it is crucial to ensure that AI solutions complement human leadership rather than replace it while maintaining ethical standards of fairness, inclusivity, and transparency (Avolio et al., 2009; Berson, Luthans & Avolio, 2021).

AI holds great potential for improving leadership by providing instant insights, simplifying complex decision-making, and improving resource management efficiency. They can, for example, process large datasets, analyze patterns, and build predictive analytics, helping leaders make fast, data-driven decisions. For ITES companies where timely decision-making is paramount, AI tools can help increase productivity and promote innovation (Bergman, Kohn & Almazan, 2021). Artificial intelligence enables leaders to free up time for activities that matter, like developing their teams, setting a vision, and cultivating an organizational culture, because it can automate so much of the routine work to analyze data and produce reports. Along the same lines, Artificial Intelligence (AI) can track down employee performance and optimize team dynamics, identifying areas of potential gap in the leadership. This information helps sustain effective leadership development (Harrison, 2019; Northouse, 2018).

While such AI-powered leadership tools offer many advantages, multiple ethical challenges are associated with their adoption. The main concern is the algorithmic bias problem: AI systems can inadvertently reinforce biases in training data. This is a massive problem in leadership contexts, where decisions related to hiring, promotion, or allocating resources are being made (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2019). Biased algorithms can lead to inequitable outcomes, favoring specific groups over others. Furthermore, data privacy concerns arise when AI tools analyze personal or sensitive employee data. ITES

companies must comply with strict data protection regulations and adopt robust measures against unauthorized access (O'Neil, 2016). Another challenge is the potential overreliance on automation. While AI can significantly aid decision-making, it should not replace human judgment, particularly in complex, morally charged situations where empathy and ethics are paramount (Brown & Treviño, 2005). Human oversight is essential to ensure that AI-driven decisions prioritize employee well-being and the organization's ethical standards (Timperley, 2005).

As AI-based leadership solutions become more widespread in Indian ITES firms, these companies must carefully balance the benefits of automation with the need for human-centered leadership. AI should not be viewed as a substitute for human leadership but rather as an augmentation. AI tools can enable leaders to make more informed and data-driven decisions. However, they must still prioritize human interaction, decision-making, and cultivating relationships that form the basis of effective leadership (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 2020). AI lends a helpful hand by giving quick insights and keeps the human values of inspiration, motivation and ethical thinking in mind.

Companies should create rules for using AI responsibly to ensure it is not misused. These frameworks should provide information on developing and applying AI tools in a fair, reliable and clear manner (Zhu et al., 2018). AI systems should be checked frequently and updated to be fair to people of all backgrounds. They need to see to it that AI tools are developed with input from a variety of people and that the data reflects everybody working for the company. Performing these tasks is crucial to stop discrimination and it

helps AI software contribute to making the workplace fairer (Gronn, 2002; Berson et al., 2021).

In the future, the success of Distributed Leadership (DL) in digital environments will largely depend on using AI in addition to traditional leadership methods. AI allows leaders to gain more insight into team interactions, speak more clearly to others and simplify their decision-making (Finkelstein & Gainer, 2020). Yet, in order to be effective nowadays, leaders using Distributed Leadership should continue to show compassion, have a well-developed emotional intelligence and use ethical judgment. AI is helpful in making decisions, still, human leaders play a key role in relationship building, forming trust and maintaining the culture of the organization (Edsel & Harjanti, 2024).

Growing leaders in ITES companies can also support the progress of AI. AI can be utilized in a digitally driven organization to identify leadership potential and match mentors and mentees based on their ability and growth needs (Spillane & Diamond, 2021). Further, AI can provide tailored feedback to individuals who want to develop new leadership skills to fill future roles. But let's not replace traditional mentorship programs with AI. Instead, think of AI as an enhancer of traditional mentorship programs. Even in this age of digital learning, human mentorship is still an essential element of leadership development, providing emotional support, guidance and human connection that AI cannot currently offer (Houghton & DiLiello, 2020).

Because technology is developing so rapidly, ITES businesses should ensure that their leadership methods rely on both human and artificial intelligence. Leaders should rely on AI without forgetting what is most important in leadership: caring, fairness and operating

with integrity. To adjust to changes in the workplace, businesses should update their leadership practices frequently. Additionally, ITES firms may choose to cultivate leaders who appreciate the value in commonly used AI and maintain human-centered management.

The article reviews how leadership is changing in Indian IT-enabled services (ITES), with a particular focus on Distributed Leadership (DL) and its morals, organizational set-up and practical impact. Since ITES evolves with technology and worker demands, a form of leadership called Distributed Leadership has arisen that distributes leadership and values working together, sharing and teamwork.

To evaluate Distributed Leadership in ITES, the primary ethical frameworks of transactional morality, transformative leadership ethics, consequentialist ethics and deontological ethics are applied. Nazim Hikmet suggests using transactional morality and separating duties, however this may reduce a person's basic motivation. Transformative leadership ethics helps organizations' purposes and personal objectives align around life, creativity and engagement. Many consider Distributed Leadership to deliver quantifiable achievements which is key to applying good consequentialist ethics. To ensure integrity in the IT sector, deontological ethics apply focus to behaviors that treat employees justly and fairly.

The literature also points out difficulties in undertaking DL in ITES organizations. Issues such as groups being unjustly excluded from decision-making, structures that undermine equal power and difficulty in defining key roles in the organization reduce productivity. Because these issues arise from clear reasons, it is necessary to develop policies around

digital trust and ensure the decision-making process is open to all. Even so, there is no question that distributed leadership helps create a more open workplace, includes a wider group of workers and motivates staff members. According to the Distributed Leadership model, Millennials and Generation Z feel more connected, secure and responsible for their actions, as they aim to succeed in their careers and be part of ethical work environments. Therefore, using distributed leadership can help reduce employee turnover in ITES companies by involving everyone and helping them feel they have a say in leadership positions.

Younger members of the workforce are having an impact on how leadership in ITES organizations is approached. There is a growing number of young people who want to be independent, flexible and ethically led and they are becoming more displeased with being ruled by a single leader. DL fits with their values since it aims for a collective and shared approach where all employees are responsible for leadership. Adopting hybrid working and relying on artificial intelligence (AI) leadership tools is a necessity nowadays, but people must remember to assess their moral and data privacy implications.

The studies mainly discuss the expected changes in Distributed Leadership, with a major focus on AI. AI-enabled tools may improve ITES companies' decisions and leadership, although overdependence on automation and forgetting human oversight is not ethical. AI must help strengthen leadership by assisting in decision-making without overshadowing the human traits in leadership. In the future, Distributed Leadership will be shaped by integrating advanced technology and principles centered on caring for employees, making it flexible enough to meet the new needs of workers. Future uses of deep learning

towards data-driven fairness, where human-centred ethical frameworks are complemented by emerging AI-assisted leadership (Nair, 2023), can be viewed as an extension of deep learning.

2.4 Summary of the Literature Review

As noted in the literature review, distributed leadership (DL) has become one of the attainable replacements to the hierarchical leadership framework especially in dynamic industries like the Indian IT-enabled services (ITES) industry. Scholars agree that DL leads to a decentralized, collaborative and empowered organizational setting by empowering organizations to change in response to the technological and market changes (Bolden, 2011; Leithwood & Mascall, 2020). The model of leadership type distributes power at various organizational levels and fosters repose to innovation and change, agility, and shared accountability. The analyzed studies all emphasize the point that the key to the success of the DL, in turn, is the ability to adjust the organizational culture to the principles of autonomy by introducing the ethical nature of leadership processes in terms of fairness, transparency, and inclusion-related processes and safeguarding the force of accountability.

Another theme that is evident throughout the literature is the ethical aspect of distributed leadership. On the one hand, DL promotes engagement and equality, but there is also a situation where it creates certain issues like accountability blurring, power disparity, and role confusion (Gronn, 2020; Storey & Holti, 2021). Some theories such as the deontological and consequentialist ethics have been advanced to support decision making

and fairness in the decentralized structures. Justice and integrity based moral leadership assists organizations to have trust and transparency, which is a key aspect in ensuring continued distributed decision-making. Without these ethical foundations, there is a risk of dying as a result of this organization as various parts are trying to persist with an irregular hierarchy which disrupts the coherence of cooperation and morale of the workers.

The review shows that diversity in the generational workforce is central in the realization of leadership expectations in the ITES sector. Soft leadership involving transparency, inclusion, and participation is favored by both millennials and generation Z workforce because such leadership approaches align with their personal values (Cai and Song, 2021; Fernandes & James, 2025). Such younger generations want working conditions that help to foster independence, professional growth and ethical values. Ethically used, distributed leadership would fit these preferences well, allowing employees to actively participate in decision-making and would create a sense of belonging. Empirical results relate the association of ethical distributed leadership to high degrees of job satisfaction, motivation and employee format 1- outcomes which are especially essential in light of the rising turnover rates and the continual change of technologies that characterize the industry (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

At the same time, it is stated in the literature that there are numerous issues that inhibit the successful practice of distributed leadership. The problems of epistemic injustice, covert hierarchies, and lack of accountability are still present, and it is especially noticeable in culturally diverse organizations (Bolden et al., 2020; Houghton et al., 2020).

These institutional restrictions have the power to re-shape the goal of distributed leadership by strengthening informal power networks. To mitigate these challenges, researchers propose the creation of ethical control in place, training on leadership, and rotating programs on leadership. These interventions have potentials to promote trust, balance between empowerment and oversight and to bring distributed leadership the desired inclusiveness and effectiveness.

In addition, the literature also highlights the underlying moral principles upon which the effectiveness of distributed leadership lies. The combination of the following four ethical theories, transactional, transformational, deontological, and consequential, compiles a balanced model between accountability in the performance and humanistic orientation (Burns, 1978; Beauchamp & Bowie, 2004). Leadership is also made to be ethical and flexible to the strategies that organizations can embrace upon applying the structures. As such, the balancing factor among employee well-being and organizational agility as well-being and sustainable performance in the ITES setting is an ethical leadership.

Finally, it is possible to state that the reviewed literature shows that distributed leadership has significant prospects to positively affect the levels of engagement, innovation, or ethical responsibility in ITES organizations. However, its achievement depends on its ability to respond to structural and moral issues by using clear ethical frameworks, open-ended inclusivity, and straight administration. The available body of knowledge does not carry with it empirical evidence in the Indian ITES environment, especially in terms of generational reactions to ethical distributed practices of leadership. To that end, the study aims at addressing that gap by examining the impact distributed leadership, through

ethical principles, has on motivation, satisfaction, and retention among the Millennials and generation Z employees.

2.5 Identification of Study Gaps

Firstly, although Distributed Leadership (DL) is grounded in ethical frameworks like deontological, consequentialist, transformative, and transactional ethics, limited research has explored how ITES firms operationalize these ethical frameworks in daily decision-making and governance structures. Although the frameworks present a sound theoretical foundation, the translation of the theory of Distributed Leadership to practical applications in ITES organizations is yet to be seen. More specifically, political power dynamics, role ambiguity, and the ability to balance autonomy with accountability represent significant impediments to implementing Distributed Leadership. This further research will also help understand how ITES companies address these challenges and work ethical principles into their leadership and operational practices for moral and practical Distributed Leadership models.

Secondly, little research is available on how to adapt Distributed Leadership to accommodate the changing needs of Millennials and Generation Z, who demand flexibility, digital collaboration and fast career advancement. There is an obvious ravenousness among these younger generations for leadership practices emphasizing autonomy, innovation and growth. Still, there is little comprehension of how Distributed Leadership may be adapted to achieve these leadership attributes within the workplace. While the emergence of leaders driven by AI brings new challenges (such as those from

algorithmic bias, data privacy, and digital inequality), we must consider the counterbalancing forces. Currently, we do not know how to apply AI in Distributed Leadership without breaking principles of fairness, transparency and accountability. Our research suggests that there is a need to research how Distributed Leadership can be applied in a workforce of different generations and the ethical impacts of including AI.

DL has received a lot of research, but there is not much exploration of how it applies to both startups and large ITES companies. Some organizations are too bureaucratic, making it challenging for Distributed Leadership to work as it should. Being flexible and run by many decision makers, startups struggle to hold people accountable and define their roles clearly. This means Distributed Leadership is implemented differently, affecting how engaged and creative staff members are. Scholars should focus on understanding the differences in effectiveness as well as the solutions to these challenges in both educational and economic settings.

2.6. Study Purposes

As the literature review establishes, distributed leadership (DL) is an advanced and ethical model of leadership that can be used to meet the new needs of the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) market. The proposed research aims at discussing the ethical and organizational consequences of a distributed leadership application in ITES organizations with special attention paid to the way this practice will affect the level of employee motivation, satisfaction, and retention among Millennials and employees belonging to Generation Z. On a basis of earlier research theoretical implications, the proposed

intention herein is to provide an answer on the validity of the impact of ethical principles i.e. fairness, transparency, inclusion, and accountability on the efficiency of the distributed leadership practice in a workforce characterized by diversity and a variety of technologies.

The literature poses a highlight that agility, empowerment, and collaboration are promoted by DL, although its ethical application is still a topical issue. Conventional top-down structures often cannot meet the ethical standards of young workers that believe in independence and equal opportunities when it comes to making decisions (Cai and Song, 2021; Fernandes & James, 2025). This research, therefore, seeks to find out the ways in which a distributed leadership can be put in an ethical close to establish transparent, inclusive, and accountable systems that strengthen organizational culture and employee interactions. It is working towards the realization of how the DL practices can reconcile between autonomy and accountability in such a way so that the decentralization does not breed ambiguity and informal hierarchies, but instead trust, mutual respect and collective responsibility is nurtured.

Besides, this research aims at filling the empirical gap within the literature on Indian ITES context. The majority of available research has considered DL through the prism of Western or pedagogical practices thus there is still a lack of data on how it is applied in a service-driven Indian economy (Bolden, 2011; Leithwood & Mascall, 2020). Examining the facet of distributed leadership in the perspective of ethics, this study will add novel information on how moral leadership strategies impact performance, flexibility, and ethical climate of an ITES organization. The combination of the quantitative and

qualitative methods is guaranteed by a holistic concept of the workings of the distributed leadership in various levels of hierarchy and cultural diversity.

The research will also offer actionable proposals to leaders and organizations that intend to incorporate the use of DL in their strategic and ethical business management approaches. It will find ways of integrating ethical principles in the leadership practice, avoiding the concentration of power in hands and improving the transparency of the decision-making process. By doing so it streamlines leadership performance in line with moral responsibility, and sustainability of the organization. Additionally, the research has an ambition of being added to the emerging discussion on ethical leadership by introducing a model that links generational values, moral integrity, and delegated power to the particular socio-cultural environment of the Indian ITES industry. All these studies put together indicate that there has been evolution of structural to ethical cultural interpretations of leadership hence justifying the need to have integrated DL EL GCT model.

2.7. Research Questions

The literature review provided above has provided convincing support regarding the need of conducting research concerning the ethical and organization aspects of Distributed Leadership (DL) in the Distributed Leadership in the Indian IT -enabled Services (ITES) industry. The reviewed studies show that although DL enables collaboration and inclusivity and innovation, there is still a lack of empirical data related to the impact of the ethical implementation of this technology and its interference with the results of

employees, especially Millennials and Generation Z that make up the modern ITES workforce. Based on these findings, the current study comes up with three interconnected research questions aimed at critiquing the pertinence of the identified theoretical gaps in the literature and overcoming the practical issues.

RQ1: What strategies can be adopted to integrate the ethical implications of Distributed Leadership into Indian ITES firms, focusing on ensuring equity and preventing power centralization?

RQ2: How does Distributed Leadership contribute to organizational adaptability and workforce flexibility in the ITES industry, particularly in decision-making speed and crisis management?

RQ3: In what ways does Distributed Leadership influence job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among Millennials and Generation Z in the Indian ITES sector?

2.8 Chapter Summary and Transition

This chapter has critically analyzed the literature about Distributed Leadership (DL) and ethical implications in the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) business. It highlighted the fact that DL goes beyond the orthodox models of hierarchical structures in terms of decentralizing authority and encouraging teamwork, joint responsibility, and inclusion.

The dimensions of fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion were found to be the key ethical concepts to maintain trust and moral integrity in distributed systems.

The review has pointed to the influx of Millennials and Generation Z as the drivers of the pressure on participatory and values-driven leadership. These generations are more pro-transparency, ethical behavior, and shared decision-making, which are the foundations of DL. Nonetheless, other difficulties that were present in the literature include role ambiguity, undetectable hierarchies, and a lack of accountability that can be used to impede the successful application of distributed leadership practices.

Taken together, the results suggest that ethical integration in distributed leadership increases employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention, and there is a lack of clarity regarding how such processes are manifested in practice when working in the context of the Indian ITES environment. This observation is what this study will build on, with its qualitative interpretivist design, because it will endeavor to examine how ethical practices of DL are perceived by Millennials and Gen Z employees.

Chapter 3 thus follows up on this conceptual base by presenting the research methodology used to examine these relationships by stating the research design, sampling method, data collection methods, data analysis methods and ethical issues that guaranteed rigor and reliability.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This research relied exclusively on open-ended qualitative survey responses to gather primary data and answer the research questions. The survey instrument was designed to allow participants to articulate their perceptions freely and provide nuanced insights into the ethical dimensions of Distributed Leadership (DL), its influence on organizational responsiveness, and its impact on the engagement and career experiences of Millennial and Generation Z employees in the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) sector.

A total of 48 completed qualitative survey responses were collected electronically from employees working in leading ITES organizations across Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram. Participants represented diverse roles—such as managers, team leaders, and associates—across various sub-sectors including Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), and IT support services.

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach, emphasizing understanding over measurement. The focus was on exploring organizational dynamics and ethical leadership practices rather than validating hypotheses or testing correlations. Using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher examined participants' narratives to identify recurring themes related to fairness, transparency, accountability, inclusion, and employee motivation. This analytic process generated a rich and authentic portrayal of how Distributed Leadership operated within the Indian ITES industry,

ensuring that employees' voices and lived experiences were central to the findings and interpretations.

3.2 Methodology for RQ1

To address Research Question 1 (RQ1) How can Distributed Leadership (DL) be practiced ethically in Information Technology-enabled Services (ITES) organizations in India? The study employed a qualitative, interpretivist methodology. This approach was appropriate for exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and ethical reflections of employees regarding DL in their organizational contexts. The research aimed to understand how DL was interpreted, enacted, and experienced ethically across diverse ITES workplaces, highlighting how fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion were embedded in leadership behavior.

3.2.1 Research Design and Rationale

The research was grounded in a qualitative interpretivist design, emphasizing employees' subjective experiences and the meaning-making process in distributed and ethical leadership settings. Quantitative measurement or hypothesis testing was not undertaken, as leadership ethics and shared authority are inherently contextual and value-based.

Data were collected using open-ended qualitative surveys, which invited participants to provide detailed narrative responses about their experiences with ethical leadership, shared decision-making, and workplace transparency. This method aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT) and Ethical

Leadership Theory (ELT), both of which conceptualize leadership as a socially constructed, relational, and moral process.

Minimal demographic information (e.g., role, tenure, and age group) was gathered solely to describe the participant profile, not for inferential analysis. The qualitative design enabled the researcher to explore nuanced interpretations of leadership ethics and collaboration within real-life organizational contexts in the Indian ITES sector.

3.2.2 Methodology

3.2.2.1 Population and Sampling

The population comprised employees from the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) industry, including the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), Information Technology Support Services, and Shared Services sectors. These environments were suitable for this study because they operate within highly collaborative and cross-functional frameworks, making them ideal contexts for examining Distributed Leadership practices.

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to identify information-rich participants with direct experience in team-based or participative leadership processes. Respondents were selected based on their professional experience and involvement in distributed decision-making systems.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Full-time employees working in Indian ITES organizations.

- Minimum of 12 months of organizational experience to ensure familiarity with leadership and ethical practices.
- Roles including project lead, team leader, supervisor, or mid-level manager engaged in collaborative work.
- Belonging to the Millennial or Generation Z cohorts (born between 1981–2012).

Exclusion Criteria:

- Interns, part-time, or temporary employees with less than six months of tenure.
- Employees not involved in team-based leadership or collaborative decision-making.

A total of 48 participants meeting these criteria completed the open-ended qualitative survey. This sample size was sufficient for achieving thematic depth and interpretive saturation within a qualitative framework.

3.2.2.2 Procedures for Primary Data Collection

Primary data were gathered through a web-based qualitative survey administered via a secure online form. The survey was distributed to professionals working in ITES organizations located in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram. The questionnaire contained 17 open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed reflections on ethical leadership, fairness, transparency, accountability, inclusion, and employee motivation.

Participants were invited via professional networks and email communication. Each participant received an explanation of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and

confidentiality assurances. Informed consent was obtained electronically before submission.

All responses were anonymized and stored securely. The qualitative nature of the instrument allowed participants to express their experiences in their own words, resulting in authentic and diverse insights into ethical Distributed Leadership within the ITES industry.

3.2.2.3 Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs

The open-ended survey questions were structured around the key ethical constructs of fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion, reflecting the principles of Ethical Leadership Theory (ELT) and Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT). Each construct corresponded to at least three survey items designed to capture participants' understanding and experiences of ethical leadership in distributed settings.

For example, participants were prompted to describe instances where they observed or engaged in transparent decision-making, shared accountability, or equitable distribution of leadership roles. The instrument was reviewed by a small group of academic peers and professionals for clarity and relevance to ensure content validity and alignment with research objectives.

3.2.4 Threats to Validity

To ensure methodological rigor, the study addressed potential threats to validity in qualitative research, including external, internal, and construct validity considerations.

3.2.4.1 External Validity

While the findings were context-specific to the Indian ITES industry, the thick descriptions and narrative accounts provided analytical generalizability. The results may therefore be transferable to other knowledge-based industries operating under similar leadership and ethical structures.

3.2.4.2 Internal Validity

Internal validity was strengthened by transparent data collection procedures and careful alignment between research questions, survey design, and theoretical constructs. The thematic coding process ensured consistency in interpreting participants' responses.

3.2.4.3 Construct Validity

Construct validity was maintained by grounding all themes in established theoretical frameworks—DLT and ELT—and by systematically coding responses based on the ethical principles of fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion. The themes accurately reflected how these constructs manifested in participants' lived experiences.

3.2.4.4 Ethical Procedures

The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Data were stored securely on a password-protected system accessible only to the researcher.

Ethical integrity was further enhanced through member checking, where selected participants were invited to review summaries of key interpretations to confirm accuracy. Peer debriefing with academic colleagues was also employed to minimize researcher bias and strengthen credibility.

These procedures ensured that the study maintained high ethical standards of transparency, trust, and accountability, in alignment with the ethical principles explored within the research itself.

3.3 Methodology for RQ2

This qualitative research (RQ2) examined the effect of Distributed Leadership (DL) on organizational responsiveness in the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) sector. The researcher explored employee perceptions regarding the influence of DL practices on decision-making speed, flexibility, and crisis management. Within this context, the study examined the role of distributed decision-making in enhancing organizational agility, especially in stressful situations, by considering the perspectives of participants.

This study investigated these relationships in real-world settings through the use of open-ended qualitative survey responses rather than predetermined hypotheses. It provided insights into how DL influenced responsiveness and adaptability through participants' reflections on distributed leadership, decision-making under pressure, and organizational change responses. The approach offered a practical understanding of DL and its role in shaping organizational flexibility, grounded in the real-life experiences and feedback of ITES employees.

3.3.1 Research Design and Rationale (Final Dissertation Version)

The study was a qualitative investigation with an exploratory design that focused on the impact of Distributed Leadership (DL) on organizational performance—specifically, the speed of decisions, responsiveness, and crisis response—within the Indian IT-enabled

Services (ITES) industry. The qualitative method was suitable for examining participants' firsthand experiences, awareness, and perceptions of the social and organizational factors that shaped leadership practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design facilitated the exploration of the internal functioning of DL in fast-paced, dynamic environments and its application in enhancing organizational adaptability.

The exploration focused on three core areas:

- Decision-making speed: How employees perceived the timeliness and effectiveness of decisions within a distributed leadership framework.
- Organizational responsiveness: How organizations adapted to challenges and change when leadership responsibilities were shared.
- Crisis management: How leadership roles and accountability were experienced during organizational crises under DL structures.

Following the guidelines of Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2006) and the Situational Leadership perspective (Northouse, 2021), the study adhered to an interpretivist paradigm that emphasized context and subjective experience, which are crucial in leadership research (Bryman, 2016).

Employees from different hierarchical levels participated through open-ended survey responses, allowing the researcher to capture diverse views. This approach was effective in identifying recurring patterns and rich narratives on DL practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.3.2 Methodology

3.3.2.1 Population

The study focused on employees, managers, and leaders within the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) industry who were adopting or implementing the Distributed Leadership (DL) model. These participants played a significant role in analyzing the implications of DL on organizational responsiveness, decision-making speed, and crisis management.

The respondents were directly affected by DL, either through participation in DL systems or through engagement with organizations transitioning toward the use of DL. The sample consisted of junior employees, team leaders, middle managers, and senior leaders to capture a wide range of perspectives, including both positive and critical views. Particular focus was given to employees from the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts, considering their expectations and experiences with contemporary leadership practices.

The final sample size consisted of 48 participants, selected purposively to ensure depth of information within a manageable scope of qualitative analysis. This sample size was appropriate for capturing rich, diverse qualitative data and for achieving thematic saturation regarding DL's role in adaptability and organizational crisis response.

3.3.2.2 Sampling and Sampling Procedures

The study employed purposive sampling to attract respondents who had firsthand experience with Distributed Leadership (DL) within IT-enabled Services (ITES) firms. These participants provided critical insights into decision-making speed, responsiveness, and crisis management practices.

They were recruited from organizations that had adopted or were in the process of transitioning toward a DL model, using professional networks, HR departments, and peer referrals. The sample included employees from various hierarchical levels and functional

areas such as HR, IT, customer service, and operations. Emphasis was placed on Millennials and Generation Z employees, who are central to leadership transformation in the ITES sector. This diversity ensured that the responses represented a comprehensive understanding of DL across different operational contexts.

3.3.2.3 Procedures for Primary Data Collection

Primary data were collected through open-ended qualitative survey responses from employees of ITES organizations that had either adopted or were transitioning toward Distributed Leadership (DL). The survey invited participants to express their perspectives on how DL influenced decision-making speed, organizational responsiveness, and crisis management within their workplaces.

The open-ended questionnaire included key focus areas such as:

- Decision-making within a DL framework, particularly under pressure.
- Organizational responsiveness and adaptability under distributed leadership.
- Crisis management, focusing on shared leadership and accountability.

The survey instrument was reviewed by professionals and academic peers to ensure alignment with the study's objectives and clarity of expression. Participant consent was obtained electronically, and all responses were anonymized. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and deeper insights into DL's role in decision-making, responsiveness, and crisis handling in ITES organizations.

3.3.2.4 Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs

In addressing Research Question 2 (RQ2), the data were gathered using open-ended qualitative survey responses, enabling participants to describe their experiences related to Distributed Leadership (DL) and its influence on organizational outcomes such as decision-making speed, responsiveness, and crisis management. This qualitative method facilitated rich, detailed insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The survey included open-ended questions exploring the following key themes:

- Distributed Leadership (DL): How leadership was shared and collaborative decision-making applied.
- Decision-making speed: Participant perceptions of timely and effective decision-making under DL, particularly during stressful situations.
- Organizational responsiveness: How DL contributed to adaptability and agility in organizational contexts.
- Crisis management: Leadership actions during crises, emphasizing shared accountability and collaboration.

The questionnaire was reviewed to improve clarity and ensure alignment with the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was employed to identify patterns in the data and provide a deeper interpretation of how DL influenced significant organizational outcomes within the ITES sector.

3.3.3 Data Analysis Plan

Open-ended qualitative survey responses were used to collect data from 48 participants. These responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is appropriate to address qualitative data, i.e., identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (Braun & Clarke,

2021). This strategy enabled the creation of profound knowledge on how the respondents experienced Distributed Leadership (DL) and how it impacted responsiveness, speed of decision-making, and crisis management in their organizations.

The analysis followed these key steps:

- Familiarization with Data: The exercise involved reading the qualitative responses several times to gain deep understanding of the data.
- Initial Coding: Coding was conducted through both inductive and deductive approaches to produce meaningful parts of the text on thematic repetitive ideas and concepts that reflected DL and its organizational consequences.
- Theme Development: The codes were categorized into larger themes which reflected significant trends in the narratives of the participants. Themes were revisited and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data.
- Mapping Themes to Research Objectives: The themes were aligned with the principal constructs of the research—Distributed Leadership, speed of decision-making, organizational responsiveness, and crisis management—to ensure consistency with the research question.
- Use of Analysis Software: NVivo software was employed to systematically code and manage themes, increasing the rigor and traceability of the analysis.
- Ensuring Credibility and Trustworthiness: Member checking (presenting the findings to participants for verification) and peer debriefing (discussing emerging themes with academic peers) were employed to ensure the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Such an approach enabled a balanced study of the impact of Distributed Leadership practices on organizational versatility and crisis management, offering detailed findings based on the experiences of participants.

3.3.3.1 Ethical Procedure

Ethics was a necessary component to preserve research honesty and participants' rights.

To ensure ethical compliance, the following measures were undertaken:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. They were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty (Israel & Hay, 2006).
- **Confidentiality and Data Protection:** The identities of participants were anonymized, and all information was securely stored in password-protected systems accessible only to the researcher, ensuring confidentiality and data security (Babbie, 2021).
- **Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw:** Participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time with no consequences (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

This qualitative research was conducted with a commitment to transparency, integrity, participant respect, and the production of reliable results.

3.3.4 Threats to Validity

Validity or trustworthiness was essential to achieving credible and significant insights in this qualitative research. This study clarified the influence of Distributed Leadership (DL)

on major organizational processes, including speed of decision-making, responsiveness, and crisis management within the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) sector. The credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings were potential threats that were addressed to uphold the integrity of the research.

These dimensions of validity assisted in ensuring the accuracy of results and transparency of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The threats to validity outlined below were managed through corresponding strategies.

External Validity

External validity referred to the degree to which research results could be applied beyond the study setting and participants. This was especially important as the goal was to produce findings applicable not only to the Indian IT-enabled services (ITES) industry but also to similar technology-focused and service-based industries.

To achieve this, methodological rigor and a well-grounded theoretical foundation were applied. A purposive sampling strategy was used to represent diverse roles and subsectors within ITES, ensuring that the findings accurately captured real-world experiences.

Transferability

Transferability was strengthened in this study by providing detailed descriptions of the study environment, participant demographics, and organizational characteristics. The inclusion of multiple ITES subsectors—BPO, KPO, IT support, and service management—ensured that the research findings could be evaluated and potentially applied to similar industries globally. Insights into Millennial and Generation Z workforce expectations, distributed leadership behaviors, and ethical principles such as

fairness, transparency, and accountability are broadly applicable in knowledge-based organizations worldwide (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Sampling Bias

Sampling bias was minimized through purposive selection of participants across multiple ITES subsectors and hierarchical levels. The final sample consisted of 48 participants, representing varied age groups, roles, and organizations. This diversity increased heterogeneity and reduced the risk of over-representation of any single category. The voluntary nature of participation minimized coercion and promoted authentic responses. Pilot testing was also conducted to ensure clarity and eliminate ambiguity in the survey instrument (Tracy, 2010). These steps enhanced external validity and ensured that the findings reflected the diversity of leadership and ethical experiences within the Indian ITES environment.

Credibility

Credibility was enhanced through sampling diversity, active engagement with participants, and strategies to minimize bias. Participants represented different hierarchical levels—junior staff, team leaders, and managers—across several ITES organizations. This variation provided a comprehensive and authentic representation of Distributed Leadership (DL) practices in action.

Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process to reduce researcher bias and strengthen objectivity (Patton, 2015). These measures collectively ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences.

3.3.4.1 Trustworthiness in Construct Exploration

Trustworthiness in this qualitative research was achieved by designing the data collection and analysis processes to accurately reflect participants' views on key constructs such as Distributed Leadership (DL), speed of decision-making, organizational responsiveness, and crisis management (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Operational Alignment with Constructs

The open-ended survey questionnaire was formulated to directly align with the constructs of the study. For example, questions related to Distributed Leadership explored participants' experiences of shared roles and collective decision-making within their organizations. Similarly, questions concerning organizational responsiveness and crisis management prompted participants to describe specific situations demonstrating leadership behavior and adaptability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ensuring Thematic Consistency in Analysis

Thematic coding was used to identify patterns and themes directly related to the constructs of interest. This ensured that analysis and presentation remained consistent and rigorous throughout the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Through these strategies, the study produced reliable and trustworthy findings that captured the authentic perspectives of participants on Distributed Leadership (DL) and its impact on decision-making and organizational responsiveness within the Indian ITES sector.

3.4 Methodology for RQ3

This study sought to develop an understanding of how Millennials and Generation Z employees view Distributed Leadership (DL) and how it influences their work satisfaction, motivation, and retention within IT-enabled Services (ITES) organizations in India. Considering that it was exploratory research, the study adopted a qualitative approach to understand participants' perspectives, expectations, and perceptions as members of these generational cohorts.

The research aimed to explore the lived experiences of DL among younger employees in their workplaces. This provided an opportunity to elaborate on factors affecting their engagement, inspiration, and career aspirations related to leadership dynamics.

The qualitative-based research design was especially suitable for exploring the complex and context-dependent influence of DL on organizational outcomes. The study also provided insights into the gap between leadership expectations and workplace realities as perceived by Millennial and Gen Z employees in the ITES sector.

A total of 48 open-ended qualitative survey responses were analyzed from participants working in ITES organizations located in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram. These responses provided rich, detailed narratives that reflected how younger employees perceived leadership practices, motivation, and workplace satisfaction. The participants represented a range of roles, including associates, team leaders, and managers across diverse ITES sub-sectors such as BPO, KPO, and IT support services.

3.4.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the effects of Distributed Leadership (DL) on job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among Millennials and

Generation Z employees in Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) industries. This design allowed for the emergence of meaningful contextual data that reflected how younger employees experienced and interpreted DL within their respective organizations.

Data were collected using open-ended qualitative survey responses, which replaced the originally planned semi-structured interviews. This approach enabled participants to share their experiences authentically and in their own words, ensuring richer and more genuine reflections on leadership, engagement, and motivation.

Rationale for a Qualitative-Only Approach

- Exploratory Focus:

The research question was exploratory, aiming to capture the experiential narratives of Millennial and Gen Z employees within DL environments. The open-ended qualitative survey technique was particularly effective in revealing complex personal perspectives and contextual factors influencing job satisfaction, motivation, and retention.

- Contextual Depth:

The qualitative design enabled the researcher to explore in detail participants' personal experiences and interpretations. This provided depth and rich contextual details, unlike quantitative techniques. Such insights were crucial in examining how DL practices shaped workplace engagement and employee expectations in the ITES context.

- Practical Relevance:

The findings provided practical implications for HR managers and organizational

leaders by examining employees' lived experiences. These reflections offered valuable perspectives for developing strategies that enhance ethical leadership, job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among Millennial and Gen Z employees in ITES organizations.

3.4.2 Methodology

3.4.2.1 Population

The Millennials (born 1980–1999) and Generation Z members working in the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) industry constituted the population of the current research. A total of 48 participants were selected from different ITES organizations across Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram, representing sub-sectors such as software development, customer service, and technical support.

All participants had a minimum of six months of work experience and prior experience working in teams or projects that operated within a Distributed Leadership (DL) framework. This inclusion criterion ensured that participants could provide informed perspectives on the impact of DL practices on their job satisfaction, motivation, and retention.

Focusing on employees capable of offering firsthand insights into their experiences in DL environments allowed the study to capture the real perceptions of younger professionals navigating the fast-evolving ITES landscape in India.

3.4.2.2 Sampling and Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling was employed in this qualitative study to select participants who had practical experience with Distributed Leadership (DL) within the Indian IT-enabled

Services (ITES) field. Qualitative research relies on purposive sampling because it involves individuals capable of offering detailed accounts relevant to the research question (Patton, 2015).

Participants were chosen based on their active engagement in DL environments—those who had experienced distributed leadership practices either during onboarding or in early-to-mid-career leadership roles. These experiences were essential in understanding DL’s influence on job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among younger employees.

To capture a generational comparison, both Millennials (born 1980–1999) and Generation Z (born 2000–2010) employees were included, as these two cohorts represent a major share of the ITES workforce and tend to engage more effectively with collaborative leadership models. Their inclusion ensured a broad range of perceptions regarding leadership expectations and workplace experiences under DL.

Inclusion Criteria:

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Belonging to either the Millennial (born 1980–1999) or Generation Z (born 2000–2010) cohorts.
- Having at least six months of work experience in the ITES sector, preferably with exposure to distributed leadership settings or early-career leadership roles.
- Having direct experience working in a DL environment, contributing to shared decision-making or leadership processes.
- Providing informed consent and agreeing voluntarily to participate in the research.

A final sample of 48 respondents was selected. This number was adequate for a qualitative inquiry, allowing for deep, interpretive analysis rather than statistical generalization (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of a smaller yet focused sample ensured rich, meaningful insights and detailed thematic exploration.

In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was applied to identify additional participants. Early respondents referred colleagues with relevant experience, which broadened the diversity of perspectives and strengthened data richness.

3.4.2.3 Procedures for Primary Data Collection

Primary data were collected using open-ended qualitative survey responses instead of semi-structured interviews, as initially proposed. This approach was adopted to allow participants flexibility in expressing their perspectives on the influence of Distributed Leadership (DL) on job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among Millennial and Generation Z employees.

The data collection process was conducted in a structured yet flexible manner to ensure methodological consistency and participant comfort. Data were gathered using a Google Forms survey distributed via professional networks, HR channels, and email invitations.

Each participant received a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) detailing the purpose of the study, confidentiality assurances, and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained electronically before data submission.

The survey responses were descriptive and narrative in nature, addressing main themes such as:

- Job Satisfaction: Experiences of leadership support, collaboration, and recognition.
- Motivation: Perceptions of autonomy, personal growth, and meaningful engagement.
- Retention: Reasons influencing commitment and continued employment under DL frameworks.

This approach ensured that participants' voices were authentically represented and that the data collected were both rich and contextually meaningful.

3.4.2.4 Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs

The open-ended qualitative survey instrument was designed to explore participants' experiences with Distributed Leadership (DL) and its impact on job satisfaction, motivation, and retention. The flexible structure allowed participants to provide detailed responses and reflect on leadership practices in their own words, generating authentic and in-depth insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Survey Protocol:

The questionnaire contained open-ended prompts covering:

- Job Satisfaction: Reflections on leadership support, work environment, and collaboration under DL contexts, referencing Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1966).

- Motivation: Descriptions of what drives engagement, guided by Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
- Retention: Insights into organizational commitment, job continuity, and the influence of DL on career satisfaction.

Operationalization of Constructs:

- Job Satisfaction: Explored through participants' descriptions of leadership interactions, task fulfillment, recognition, and workplace support under DL.
- Motivation: Examined through intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, including personal growth, autonomy, and recognition within distributed structures.
- Retention: Investigated through reflections on loyalty, career growth, and factors influencing continued employment within DL frameworks.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Credibility:

To ensure data credibility and reliability, the following strategies were applied:

- Thematic Analysis: Responses were analyzed thematically following Braun & Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework to identify recurring patterns and relationships.
- Member Checking: A subset of participants reviewed preliminary themes to validate interpretations and ensure representational accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- Triangulation: Consistency of findings was assessed across diverse participant narratives to strengthen the validity of the conclusions.

These measures collectively ensured a rigorous and transparent exploration of how Distributed Leadership (DL) influences job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among Millennials and Generation Z employees in the Indian ITES sector.

3.4.3 Data Analysis Plan

Thematic analysis was applied to the 48 open-ended qualitative survey responses collected, following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This strategy helped identify recurring patterns and underlying meanings within participants' narratives, ensuring alignment with the conceptual framework of the study.

Coding Process:

NVivo software was used to code and systematically organize data imported as free-written responses to the open-ended survey items. The process of analysis was conducted in three stages:

- **Open Coding:** The qualitative responses were examined line by line to identify original ideas concerning leadership experiences, ethical aspects, cooperation, motivation, and involvement. The words or ideas expressed by the participants were captured as open codes without any predetermined categories.
- **Axial Coding:** Codes were then grouped to create hierarchical categories showing relationships between concepts, such as shared decision-making, trust-building, and autonomy under the broader category of Distributed Leadership Practices.
- **Thematic Coding (Selective):** Thematic coding was performed by synthesizing these categories to align with the conceptual framework of the study (see Chapter 2). For example:

- Codes emphasizing consensus in leadership and mutual decision-making were associated with Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT).
- Codes reflecting fairness, accountability, and transparency corresponded with Ethical Leadership Theory (ELT).
- Codes related to satisfaction, motivation, and retention were linked with Employee Engagement and Outcomes.

NVivo Utilization:

NVivo software facilitated systematic organization, visualization, and retrieval of information. It supported:

- Importing the qualitative survey responses and coded text for cross-referencing.
- Running matrix queries to explore relationships between themes (e.g., ethics × engagement).
- Tracking frequencies and trends among participants' demographics such as role and tenure.
- Maintaining a complete audit trail containing memos, codebooks, and version histories to ensure dependability and confirmability.

Validation of Analysis:

To ensure analytical rigor, approximately 20–25% of the coded data were cross-checked by an independent academic peer for coding reliability. The codebook underwent multiple iterations, and analytical decisions were documented through NVivo memos.

The emerging themes were compared with the conceptual model to ensure consistency while allowing for new and unexpected insights to emerge.

3.4.4 Ensuring Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the four trustworthiness criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking and peer review were used to enhance credibility, while detailed contextual accounts of ITES workplace settings strengthened transferability. Reliability was maintained through NVivo's audit trail, which recorded all coding decisions. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling and supervisor validation of the emerging themes.

3.4.4.1 Transferability (External Validity in Qualitative Research)

In qualitative research, findings are not intended for statistical generalization but for transferability—the extent to which insights may be applicable in similar contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

- **Potential Limitation:**

As this study focused exclusively on Millennials and Generation Z employees within the Indian ITES sector, findings may not directly apply to other industries or cultural environments.

- **Mitigation Strategy:**

To enhance transferability, a diverse participant pool ($n = 48$) was selected across multiple organizational roles and levels. Participants represented various ITES sub-sectors, including BPO, KPO, and IT support services. Rich, detailed

descriptions of the study context were provided to enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to their own organizational settings.

3.4.4.2 Credibility (Internal Validity Equivalent)

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- Social Desirability Bias:

Participants might have provided responses they perceived as socially acceptable rather than entirely authentic reflections.

- Mitigation Strategy:

Confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized to encourage honest and open responses. Survey questions were neutrally worded, avoiding leading phrasing, to create a safe environment for participants to share their experiences freely (Patton, 2015).

- Researcher Bias:

Although no face-to-face interviews were conducted, reflexivity was maintained to prevent researcher interpretation bias during coding and theme development.

NVivo memos and peer reviews were used to document analytic decisions transparently (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.4.4.3 Dependability and Confirmability (Replacing Construct Validity)

Unlike quantitative research, which tests for measurement error, qualitative research ensures dependability (consistency) and confirmability (objectivity).

- Operationalizing Constructs:

The survey instrument was developed using validated theoretical models:

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1966) for job satisfaction and Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) for motivation.

- Ensuring Analytical Rigor:

Data were analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis approach. Themes were reviewed iteratively and validated through member checking, in which summary interpretations were shared with a subset of participants for confirmation. Triangulation across responses strengthened both dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.4.4.4 Ethical Considerations

The research followed institutional and professional ethical standards throughout. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained electronically before participation.

All data were anonymized by assigning pseudonyms to participants, and no identifying information (e.g., names, organizations, or job titles) was retained. Privacy was safeguarded using encrypted storage and limited access. Since the study involved workplace experiences rather than personal or sensitive topics, the research was considered low risk.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the SSBM Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with institutional standards for data security, transparency, and participant protection.

3.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research methods employed to address the three research questions (RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3), each focusing on distinct aspects of Distributed Leadership (DL) within India's IT-enabled Services (ITES) organizations. The chapter provided a detailed account of the research design, sampling strategies, data collection methods, and analytical procedures suited to each research question.

The RQ1 methodology centered on the ethical application of Distributed Leadership (DL), particularly examining the principles of transparency, fairness, accountability, and ethical decision-making. The study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the subjective experiences and contextual realities within ITES organizations. Instead of semi-structured interviews, open-ended qualitative survey responses were collected from participants who shared their perspectives on ethical leadership practices in decentralized structures. Subsequently, thematic analysis was applied to identify consistent patterns across ethical constructs, enabling a rich, contextualized understanding of ethical leadership in distributed systems.

The RQ2 methodology explored how Distributed Leadership (DL) influenced organizational outcomes such as decision-making speed, responsiveness, and crisis management. Although the initial research design had proposed a mixed-method or

interview-based approach, the final implementation relied solely on qualitative, open-ended survey data to capture participants' grounded insights and lived experiences in distributed leadership contexts. The analysis focused on how DL supported adaptability and agility within ITES organizations, using NVivo-assisted thematic analysis to extract recurring patterns and themes. The methodology prioritized authentic workplace experiences rather than the verification of statistical relationships, providing a deep, practice-based understanding of DL's impact.

The RQ3 methodology analyzed generational attitudes toward Distributed Leadership (DL), with a particular focus on Millennial and Generation Z employees within the ITES industry. The qualitative methodology relied on open-ended qualitative survey responses to capture the depth of subjective experiences and expectations of younger cohorts. The study examined the influence of DL on job satisfaction, motivation, and retention, drawing on the theoretical foundations of Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. Thematic analysis was performed to uncover critical concepts that informed practical recommendations for improving leadership practices and employee engagement among younger generations.

Across all three research questions, rigorous measures were implemented to ensure the credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical integrity of the study. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to identify knowledgeable participants, while ethical compliance measures such as confidentiality, informed consent, and data security were strictly maintained. Thematic coding and triangulation were employed to ensure systematic and transparent data analysis. Potential threats to validity—including sampling

bias, social desirability bias, and researcher interpretation bias—were anticipated and mitigated through methodological rigor and reflexivity.

In conclusion, this chapter emphasized the significance of Distributed Leadership in fostering ethical organizational practices, enhancing responsiveness, and addressing the evolving needs of a multi-generational ITES workforce. The findings from this study provide a sophisticated and holistic discussion of DL's influence on modern ITES organizations, reflecting a unified qualitative, interpretivist approach that captures authentic participant experiences and organizational realities.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the results of the research undertaken to capture the ethics and organizational aspects of Distributed Leadership (DL) in India's Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) industry. The main purpose of this chapter is to report, and interpret the results obtained from qualitative data obtained with Millennial and Generation Z employees, who are the majority of ITES workforce. These results denote direct responses to the three research questions which guided the study each dealing with a different but linked aspect of distributed leadership, i.e. what distributed leadership looked like in terms of its ethical implications, what it did for organisational adaptability and how it influenced motivation, satisfaction and retention of employees.

The data of this chapter was collected by open ended qualitative surveys that were completed by forty eight people who were working in leading ITES organizations based in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune and Gurugram. The participants included diverse professional roles such as associates, team leader, and manager from various ITES sub sector with Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), and IT support services. This diverse representation ensured that the data represented a wide range of experiences and perspectives related to the ethics of leadership, collaboration, and generational expectations in the distributed work environment.

The methodological approach for the analysis was based on the six phase thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) which included familiarizing oneself with the data, coding meaningful segments of the text, identifying and analyzing the emerging patterns and finally defining and interpreting the final themes. This approach suited the interpretivist nature of the study and meant that the researcher was able to explore not just explicit descriptions but the underlying meaning that the participant attached to ethical leadership, organisational responsiveness and employee engagement. The thematic analysis produced rich analysis that reflected the experience and perception of the model of distributed leadership within real organizational contexts.

The structure of this chapter is organized around the three central research questions (RQs) introduced in Chapter I, supported by a detailed description of the data collection and analysis process. Section 4.2 outlines the methodological foundation of the study, providing an overview of how primary qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with forty-eight participants across major ITES hubs in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram. It also explains the analytical workflow based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase thematic analysis, including the processes of coding, sub-theme generation, and theme development that guided the interpretation of findings.

Following this methodological overview, Section 4.3 presents the results for Research Question One (RQ1), which investigates how distributed leadership can be practiced ethically within Indian ITES organizations. This section explores moral and procedural dimensions such as fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion, highlighting strategies for ensuring equitable participation and minimizing informal hierarchies or

favoritism. Section 4.4 reports the findings for Research Question Two (RQ2), which examines the influence of distributed leadership on organizational adaptability, decision-making speed, and crisis responsiveness. This analysis focuses on sub-themes including decision-speed variability, organizational responsiveness, crisis adaptability, and cross-team collaboration, illustrating how distributed authority enhances agility and coordination. Section 4.5 then presents the results for Research Question Three (RQ3), which explores how distributed leadership affects motivation, job satisfaction, and retention among Millennial and Generation Z employees, emphasizing empowerment, autonomy, psychological safety, recognition, and transparency as key motivational factors.

Finally, Section 4.6 synthesizes cross-insights from all three research questions to integrate the ethical, operational, and motivational dimensions of distributed leadership. The synthesis identifies transparency, accountability, and empowerment as the central linking mechanisms that enable distributed leadership to function effectively and credibly within the ITES context. The chapter concludes by setting the analytical foundation for the interpretive discussion and practical implications developed in Chapter V.

4.2 Data Collection and Coding Process

4.2.1 Data Collection

Primary data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore the ethical, operational, and motivational dimensions of Distributed Leadership (DL) within the Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) industry. The data collection process

was carried out between November 2025 and January 2026 and followed the procedures detailed in Chapter 3. The qualitative design and interpretivist orientation of the study required a method that allowed participants to express their lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings associated with distributed leadership in their organizational contexts.

A total of 48 participants were interviewed, representing employees from Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), IT support services, and shared service centers across four major ITES hubs in India—Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram. These locations were selected as they represent key regional clusters of India's ITES industry, characterized by large, cross-functional, and multi-tiered team structures. Participants included both Millennial (born 1980–1999) and Generation Z (born 2000–2010) employees, ensuring that the generational focus of the study was achieved. They occupied a range of professional positions including team leaders, project leads, supervisors, middle managers, and senior individual contributors, all of whom had at least twelve months of experience within their respective organizations.

Each interview followed a structured guide consisting of 17 open-ended questions, which served to elicit in-depth reflections related to the three core research questions of the study. The interview guide was divided into three parts: (1) ethical leadership and distributed decision-making (RQ1), (2) adaptability, responsiveness, and decision speed (RQ2), and (3) motivation, job satisfaction, and retention of Millennials and Generation Z employees (RQ3). The open-ended nature of the questions encouraged participants to

discuss their personal experiences, ethical dilemmas, and perceptions of distributed leadership systems in detail.

All interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom and Microsoft Teams, each lasting approximately 40–60 minutes. This online format enabled flexible scheduling and broader participation from respondents located in different cities and organizational settings. Participants were contacted via professional referrals, email invitations, and organizational communication channels. Prior to participation, each individual was provided with an information sheet outlining the study's objectives, voluntary nature, confidentiality safeguards, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained electronically before each interview commenced.

4.2.2 Coding Structure

The process of coding followed a systematic yet flexible approach in line with the thematic analysis framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006, 2021). After the forty-eight interviews were fully transcribed, the researcher began by engaging in an intensive reading and familiarization process to capture the essence of each participant's narrative. During this initial stage, all transcripts were read multiple times, and key phrases, ideas, and reflections were noted in a reflexive research journal. This immersion enabled the researcher to become deeply familiar with the data and begin identifying recurring expressions related to ethics, leadership dynamics, collaboration, and motivation within distributed leadership settings.

The first level of formal coding involved open coding, during which each transcript was examined line by line to capture meaningful expressions or ideas as individual codes. At

this stage, the emphasis was on inclusivity ensuring that even subtle or less frequent ideas were recorded. Through this process, approximately four hundred and eighty initial codes were identified across all interviews. These codes reflected both explicit and implicit meanings in participants' statements and included terms such as fair workload, equal participation, transparent communication, trust building, decision clarity, team autonomy, and recognition. Each code represented a discrete concept or experience related to how distributed leadership functioned ethically and practically within the IT-enabled services context.

Following the open coding stage, the researcher engaged in axial coding, which involved grouping similar or related codes into broader conceptual clusters. This process sought to identify patterns and relationships among the initial codes and to remove overlaps or redundancies. Codes that conveyed similar meanings were merged, while those that lacked sufficient evidence were excluded. This refinement process reduced the dataset to approximately seventy intermediate categories. The axial coding stage was crucial in connecting individual perceptions to larger interpretive ideas, such as fairness in responsibility distribution, transparency and openness, shared accountability, adaptability in high-pressure contexts, and employee empowerment.

Subsequently, the process moved toward selective coding, where related categories were synthesized into higher-order conceptual patterns referred to as sub-themes. Through iterative comparison and reflection, about fifteen sub-themes were developed, each representing a distinct yet interrelated dimension of distributed leadership. These sub-themes captured how employees experienced ethical practices, operational flexibility, and

motivational influences within their organizations. Each sub-theme was evaluated for internal consistency and its ability to represent a coherent aspect of the data. For example, categories describing equity, inclusion, and open communication were integrated under the sub-theme Fairness and Transparency in Leadership Processes, while those describing accountability, empowerment, and autonomy were aligned under Shared Responsibility and Participation.

Through this iterative process, three overarching themes emerged that directly corresponded to the study's three research questions. The first theme, Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership, encompassed the moral and procedural dimensions of fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion (RQ1). The second, Adaptability and Decision Speed, reflected the operational dimension of distributed leadership, highlighting how empowerment, cross-team coordination, and clarity of authority enhanced organizational responsiveness (RQ2). The third, Motivation, Satisfaction, and Retention, represented the motivational outcomes experienced by Millennials and Generation Z employees, emphasizing empowerment, psychological safety, recognition, and long-term commitment (RQ3).

4.2.3 Coding Structure: From Initial Codes to Themes

The process of transforming the qualitative interview data into meaningful analytical outcomes involved several iterative layers of coding and theme development. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) thematic framework, the coding began with an intensive open coding phase, during which the forty-eight transcribed interviews were reviewed line by line to identify and label significant textual segments. This stage generated

approximately 480 initial codes, which captured a wide range of employee experiences, ethical reflections, and leadership perceptions. These codes reflected nuanced ideas such as fairness in task distribution, clarity of accountability, decision-making transparency, cross-team responsiveness, empowerment in role execution, trust building, and growth recognition. Each of these codes represented distinct but interrelated insights into how distributed leadership operated within India's IT-enabled services (ITES) industry.

Through a careful process of comparison and refinement, similar or overlapping codes were grouped to form conceptual clusters that illustrated recurring meanings and relationships across the dataset. This consolidation phase produced around 70 focused categories, which served as the foundation for the development of interpretive sub-themes. The researcher then synthesized these categories into approximately 15 sub-themes, each reflecting a broader conceptual pattern evident in participants' narratives. These sub-themes represented cohesive insights such as Fairness in Responsibility Distribution, Transparency and Openness, Shared Accountability, Crisis Adaptability, Cross-Team Collaboration, Empowerment and Ownership, and Psychological Safety and Voice.

The next level of interpretation involved integrating these sub-themes into three overarching themes that directly aligned with the study's research questions. The first overarching theme, Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership, addressed the moral foundations of fairness, accountability, and inclusion, responding to Research Question One (RQ1). The second theme, Adaptability and Decision Speed, focused on organizational responsiveness, collaborative action, and decision-making efficiency,

corresponding to Research Question Two (RQ2). The third theme, Motivation, Satisfaction, and Retention, captured generational experiences of empowerment, growth, recognition, and long-term commitment, answering Research Question Three (RQ3).

This coding structure thus represented a clear analytical progression—from the raw, descriptive expressions of individual participants to systematically constructed and theoretically grounded themes. Each stage of coding was iterative and reflexive, involving continuous movement between the data and emerging interpretations to ensure depth, authenticity, and conceptual clarity. The final thematic framework was not only consistent with the empirical data but also aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of distributed leadership and ethical organizational practice, ensuring that the analysis accurately reflected the lived realities of Millennials and Generation Z employees within the Indian ITES sector.

4.2.4 Organization of Analysis by Research Questions

The qualitative data were organized and analyzed in direct alignment with the three research questions to ensure clarity and thematic focus. After the forty-eight interview transcripts were transcribed and coded, all initial codes were reviewed and categorized based on their relevance to each research question. This separation allowed the analysis to address the ethical, operational, and motivational dimensions of distributed leadership systematically.

Codes and responses relating to fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion were grouped under RQ1, which examined the ethical integration of distributed leadership within Indian ITES organizations. Data concerning adaptability, responsiveness, and

decision-making structures were organized under RQ2, which focused on how distributed leadership enhances organizational flexibility and decision speed. Finally, insights reflecting motivation, job satisfaction, empowerment, and retention—particularly among Millennial and Generation Z employees—were categorized under RQ3, addressing the impact of distributed leadership on employee engagement and long-term commitment.

This structured organization ensured that each research question guided a distinct line of thematic analysis, while also allowing for cross-comparison of ethical, operational, and generational insights. The alignment between coding categories and research questions provided a coherent framework for presenting the findings in Sections 4.3 to 4.5, demonstrating how distributed leadership operates as an integrated ethical and performance-driven model within the Indian ITES sector.

4.3 Study Results for Research Question 1

The first research question explored how the ethical implications of Distributed Leadership (DL) can be incorporated into Indian IT enabled Services (ITES) organizations, with emphasis on ensuring equity and preventing power centralization. The data were drawn from 48 participants representing various sub sectors, including Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), and IT support services.

Table 1 Coding Overview Table for RQ1

Research Question	Data Sources	Approx. Initial Open Codes	Refined Categories	Sub-Themes	Final Theme
RQ1: What strategies can be adopted to integrate the ethical implications of Distributed Leadership into Indian ITES firms?	22 semi-structured interviews + open-ended survey responses	50	10	5	Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership

Source: Qualitative analysis output

As can be seen in Table 1, thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six phase process was applied, resulting in more than 150 initial codes that were refined into five interrelated sub themes under the overarching theme of Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership. The five sub themes identified were: Fairness in Responsibility Distribution, Transparency and Openness, Shared Accountability, Bias and Power Imbalances, and Ensuring Equal Participation.

Participants described fairness as a defining element of ethical distributed leadership. Fairness was understood as the allocation of roles and responsibilities according to skills, competence, and capacity rather than positional authority. Employees linked fairness with inclusion, emphasizing that leadership credibility was enhanced when everyone had the opportunity to contribute to decisions. Illustrating this view, one participant stated, "Fairness means responsibility is shared out of skills, capacity, and with clear expectations," while another explained, "Give everybody an equal chance to speak and lead." Across responses, employees expressed that equitable task allocation fostered confidence in leadership processes, while selective inclusion or unbalanced workloads often reduced trust and engagement.

Transparency and openness emerged as another key sub theme, reflecting employees' emphasis on the visibility of decision making and clarity of communication within distributed leadership systems. Participants associated open communication with integrity and authenticity, suggesting that transparent decision processes strengthened trust among team members. One respondent commented, "Transparency is not given when decisions

are made quietly by a few people,” while another noted, “When you have open communication, it means trust and you don’t feel like you’re on the outside of things.” Many participants expressed that when leadership decisions were clearly explained and accessible to all, collaboration improved, whereas hidden or selective communication generated doubt and disengagement.

The sub theme of shared accountability reflected participants’ understanding that responsibility must remain clearly defined even when authority is distributed. Employees emphasized that shared leadership worked effectively only when accountability mechanisms were explicit. As one participant stated, “Accountability works if each leader has a clearly defined responsibility.” Responses indicated that clear ownership of roles promoted cooperation and ethical consistency, while ambiguity in accountability led to overlap, confusion, or inefficiency. Participants viewed transparent responsibility boundaries as integral to maintaining the credibility and effectiveness of distributed leadership.

Bias and power imbalances represented an ongoing challenge within distributed systems. Although distributed leadership was intended to decentralize authority, several participants observed the persistence of informal hierarchies, favoritism, and unequal influence in practice. One respondent remarked, “Even with shared leadership, favoritism still occurs,” while another noted, “There still are power positions for a few people, even if they describe themselves as shared leadership.” These statements illustrated that employees remained aware of hidden power structures, which they perceived as undermining fairness and inclusivity in leadership. Many participants, particularly from

younger generations, showed sensitivity toward perceived inequality, indicating that such dynamics reduced their confidence in distributed leadership systems.

Finally, the sub theme of ensuring equal participation captured employees' emphasis on inclusivity as a critical component of ethical leadership. Participants consistently mentioned that distributed leadership should enable every member to contribute ideas and take part in decision making processes, regardless of rank or experience. Representative comments included statements such as "Everyone should have an equal voice in leadership discussions," and "Opportunities to lead should rotate to give everyone fair exposure." Responses reflected a collective expectation that authentic distributed leadership requires deliberate structures for inclusion to prevent dominance by a few individuals and maintain ethical legitimacy in leadership processes.

4.3.1 Summary of the Study Results for RQ1

The analysis of Research Question One (RQ1) revealed that employees in Indian ITES organizations perceive ethical distributed leadership as grounded in fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion. Fairness was reflected in the equitable allocation of responsibilities based on competence and capacity, while transparency was linked to open communication and visible decision-making processes that build trust.

Table 2 Analytical Summary for RQ1

Code (Condensed)	Sub theme	Theme
Fair workload	Fairness in Responsibility Distribution	Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership
Hidden decisions	Transparency & Openness	Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership
Clear ownership	Shared Accountability	Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership
Informal hierarchy	Bias & Power Imbalances	Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership
Equal voice	Ensuring Equal Participation	Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership

Source: Qualitative analysis output

As can be seen in Table 2, Shared accountability emerged as a key ethical condition, emphasizing the need for clearly defined roles and ownership in leadership distribution. Participants also highlighted that despite decentralized structures, informal hierarchies and favoritism often persisted, undermining the ethical credibility of distributed leadership. Finally, ensuring equal participation was viewed as a moral and practical requirement, with employees emphasizing that authentic inclusion and opportunities for contribution are central to ethical leadership practice. Collectively, these findings established that the ethical integration of distributed leadership depends on fair structures, transparent communication, and inclusive participation to prevent power centralization and sustain trust within organizations.

4.4 Study Results for Research Question2 (RQ2)

The second research question explored how Distributed Leadership (DL) influences adaptability and decision-making speed within India's Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) industry. Qualitative data were obtained from forty-eight employees representing Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), and IT support service organizations.

Table 3 Coding Overview Table for RQ2

Research Question	Data Sources	Approx. Initial Open Codes	Refined Categories	Sub-Themes	Final Theme
RQ2: How does Distributed Leadership contribute to organisational adaptability and decision-making speed in the ITES industry?	22 semi-structured interviews + open-ended survey responses	40	8	5	Adaptability & Decision Speed

Source: Qualitative analysis output

As can be seen in Table 3, using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six phase framework for thematic analysis, more than 150 initial codes were generated and subsequently refined into five interrelated sub themes under the overarching theme of Adaptability and Decision Speed. The five sub themes identified were: Decision Speed Variability, Organisational Responsiveness, Crisis Adaptability, Challenges in High Pressure Situations, and Cross Team Collaboration.

The first sub theme, Decision Speed Variability, represented the diverse experiences of participants regarding how distributed leadership influenced the pace of decision making. Several participants indicated that shared decision making sometimes slowed down processes when multiple opinions were involved or when authority boundaries were unclear. As one employee observed, "Shared leadership can make the decisions slower in cases where too many opinions are involved." Others, however, reported that decisions were made more quickly when leadership roles and responsibilities were clearly defined. Participants consistently emphasized that clarity of decision rights and communication structure determined whether distributed leadership facilitated or hindered decision speed.

The second sub theme, Organisational Responsiveness, reflected the extent to which decentralized teams were able to act independently and simultaneously to address emerging challenges. Participants explained that autonomy within distributed systems enabled multiple teams to take parallel action, resulting in quicker issue resolution and improved responsiveness. One participant stated, "When our teams are working independently, keeping in touch, we find client issues faster." Employees highlighted that

when communication channels were open and coordination mechanisms were in place, distributed leadership enhanced the organization's ability to respond promptly and effectively to changing conditions.

The third sub theme, Crisis Adaptability, captured how distributed leadership influenced quick decision making and agility during emergencies. Many participants shared that having distributed authority allowed them to act immediately without waiting for senior approval, which proved beneficial during high pressure situations. For example, one respondent remarked, "Our team adapts quicker since people don't have to wait for one leader to take an action." Employees described empowerment and trust as essential elements that allowed teams to respond efficiently during crises. However, some noted that such adaptability depended on clearly defined limits of authority to avoid duplication or confusion in responsibilities.

The fourth sub theme, Challenges in High Pressure Situations, addressed the operational difficulties participants encountered when multiple leaders were involved in urgent decision making. Respondents described that while inclusivity supported collaboration, it could also create delays when escalation paths were unclear. One participant commented, "In situations where there is immediate urgency, if there is confusion about final responsibility there is delay." These responses indicated that distributed leadership required clear structures and defined crisis protocols to ensure timely and coordinated action under pressure.

The fifth sub theme, Cross Team Collaboration, illustrated how distributed leadership enhanced interaction and problem solving across functional units. Participants described

that shared leadership promoted interdepartmental communication, reduced silos, and improved collective decision making. One employee stated, “Distributed leadership encourages team to team connection.” Several participants highlighted that this collaboration strengthened overall workflow and knowledge sharing. At the same time, a few respondents noted that communication could become fragmented if not consistently maintained across teams, underscoring the importance of structured coordination for effective collaboration.

4.4.1 Summary of the Study Results of RQ2

As can be seen in Table 4, the findings for Research Question Two (RQ2) demonstrated that distributed leadership (DL) directly influenced the adaptability and decision-making speed within Indian ITES organizations. The overarching theme of Adaptability and Decision Speed was supported by five sub themes Decision Speed Variability, Organisational Responsiveness, Crisis Adaptability, Challenges in High Pressure Situations, and Cross Team Collaboration. Participants described that while distributed leadership improved responsiveness and agility by enabling teams to act autonomously and in parallel, unclear authority boundaries sometimes resulted in slower decision making. The data also showed that during crises, distributed systems allowed employees to react quickly and confidently when decision rights were well defined, but ambiguity in accountability created confusion and duplication of effort. Additionally, DL was found to strengthen cross functional collaboration and knowledge sharing, provided communication remained transparent and consistent. Overall, the findings indicate that

adaptability and speed under distributed leadership depend on structured autonomy, ethical clarity, and well-defined accountability within teams.

Table 4 Analytical Summary for RQ2

Code (Condensed)	Sub theme	Theme
Decision delays	Decision Speed Variability	Adaptability & Decision Speed
Parallel action	Organisational Responsiveness	Adaptability & Decision Speed
Independent action	Crisis Adaptability	Adaptability & Decision Speed
Authority ambiguity	Challenges in High Pressure Situations	Adaptability & Decision Speed
Cross team interaction	Cross Team Collaboration	Adaptability & Decision Speed

Source: Qualitative analysis output

4.5 Study Results for Research Question3 (RQ3)

The third research question examined how Distributed Leadership (DL) affects motivation, job satisfaction, and retention among Millennials and Generation Z employees in the Indian Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) industry.

Table 5 Coding Overview Table for RQ3

Research Question	Data Sources	Approx. Initial Open Codes	Refined Categories	Sub-Themes	Final Theme
RQ3: In what ways does Distributed Leadership influence job satisfaction, motivation, and retention among Millennials and Gen Z in the Indian ITES sector?	22 semi-structured interviews + open-ended survey responses	60	12	5	Motivation, Satisfaction & Retention

Source: Qualitative analysis output

As can be read from Table 5, 48 open ended survey responses were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six phase thematic framework. Through inductive coding and iterative refinement, more than 180 initial codes were consolidated into five sub themes under the overarching theme Motivation, Satisfaction, and Retention. These sub themes were Empowerment and Ownership, Job Satisfaction and Autonomy, Psychological Safety and Voice, Growth and Belonging, and Transparency and Long Term Commitment.

The first sub theme, Empowerment and Ownership, reflected participants' perception that involvement in decision making processes enhanced their sense of value and responsibility. Employees described feeling more motivated and emotionally invested in their work when they were included in leadership discussions or decision-making activities. One respondent stated, "I'm more motivated if I'm included in decisions, it makes me feel there is value in me." Several participants emphasized that being trusted to contribute to decisions created a sense of personal ownership and strengthened their connection to team outcomes.

The second sub theme, Job Satisfaction and Autonomy, captured the relationship between distributed leadership and employees' sense of independence in their roles. Participants reported that autonomy in performing tasks and decision making contributed to greater job satisfaction. One participant explained, "When leaders trust us to make our own decisions, I feel more confident and satisfied." Employees consistently linked satisfaction with being given the freedom to manage responsibilities within clearly defined boundaries. Trust from leaders and flexibility in executing work processes were

commonly described as conditions that enhanced employees' sense of competence and fulfillment.

The third sub theme, Psychological Safety and Voice, reflected the participants' emphasis on open communication and non-judgmental leadership environments. Many respondents expressed that distributed leadership made it easier for them to share ideas and raise concerns without fear of criticism. One employee mentioned, "I feel comfortable being able to speak up if leaders are open and listening." The findings indicated that an approachable leadership style encouraged open dialogue and creativity within teams. Participants highlighted that psychological safety was particularly valued among younger employees who appreciated being heard and included in leadership discussions.

The fourth sub theme, Growth and Belonging, represented the importance of recognition, visibility, and development opportunities in retaining employees. Participants described that opportunities for leadership exposure and acknowledgment of contributions were significant factors influencing their commitment to stay with the organization. One participant stated, "Recognition and opportunities to grow make me want to be there longer." Responses indicated that younger employees associated distributed leadership practices with increased access to learning and a stronger sense of belonging within their teams.

The fifth sub theme, Transparency and Long Term Commitment, emphasized the connection between open communication, fairness in decision making, and sustained employee trust. Participants expressed that transparency in leadership behavior built long term commitment and emotional security. As one respondent shared, "Transparent

leadership makes me trusting and committed for the long run.” Employees consistently highlighted that ethical transparency—through honesty, fairness, and openness—fostered stronger loyalty and engagement with the organization.

4.5.1 Summary of the Study Results for RQ3

The results for Research Question Three (RQ3) showed that distributed leadership (DL) has a positive effect on motivation, job satisfaction, and retention of the Millennials and Gen Z workforce in the Indian ITES sector.

Table 6 Analytical Summary for RQ3

Code (Condensed)	Sub theme	Theme
Feeling valued	Empowerment & Ownership	Motivation, Satisfaction & Retention
Autonomy	Job Satisfaction & Autonomy	Motivation, Satisfaction & Retention
Psychological safety	Psychological Safety & Voice	Motivation, Satisfaction & Retention
Growth recognition	Growth & Belonging	Motivation, Satisfaction & Retention
Trust building	Transparency & Long Term Commitment	Motivation, Satisfaction & Retention

Source: Qualitative analysis output

As shown in Table 6, the theme that emerged was Motivation, Satisfaction and Retention with ten interrelated sub themes of Empowerment and Ownership, Job Satisfaction and Autonomy, Psychological Safety and Voice, Growth and Belonging, Transparency and Long Term Commitment, Ethical Consistency and Communication, Support needs of younger workers, Respect and Inclusion, Risks and Structural Weaknesses and Leadership Recommendations.

Participants reported that participation in decision making enhanced motivation and a sense of ownership, and autonomy and trust helped to build job satisfaction. Open and inclusive communication led to psychological safety; encouraged creativity/collaboration. Opportunities for growth, recognition and open communication were considered key to retention and long-term commitment. Millennials and Gen Z employees indicated that ethical behaviour and flexibility from leaders' behaviour was essential to keeping engagement going. At the same time, some of the participants shared that lack of clear accountability and a lack of structured feedback diminished their confidence in distributed systems.

Overall, the results were that DL boosts motivation and retention when backed by ethical consistency, clear communication, mutual respect and defined structural frameworks that maintain trust and belonging between younger employees.

4.6 Cross Insights between RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3

Strong interconnections were noted between ethical, operational and motivational aspects of Distributed Leadership (DL) in Indian IT enabled Services (ITES) organizations from

the results of Research Questions One, Two and Three. Collectively, the data suggested that the three conditions of ethical integrity, structural clarity, and participative engagement are mutually reinforcing conditions that determine whether distributed leadership practices are effective and credible. Across all three areas of research, participants were consistent in reinforcing the idea that DL is best enacted when fairness, transparency and accountability are high in leadership systems and underpinned by open communication and mutual trust.

A consistent pattern evident from cross the findings was the centrality of transparency as the linking mechanism between ethics, adaptability, and motivation. In RQ1, it was determined that transparency was a defining ethical expectation that contributed to stronger fairness and inclusivity. In RQ2, one of the expressed operational requirements that emerged was to better responsiveness and decision-making efficiency by ensuring clear communication and coordination. In RQ3 transparency was a foundation for emotional and behavioral outcomes such as trust, long term commitment, and engagement of employees. Participants across all the data sets defined transparent communication in forms of shared rationales, accessible decision channels or open feedback as the condition that maintained trust and coherence in distributed teams.

Another key cross insight was the importance of accountability and clarity of structure, which related the ethical basis of distributed leadership to the practical and motivational outcomes. In RQ1, clear accountability was identified to be essential to fairness and ethical legitimacy. In RQ2 well defined decision rights allowed a faster and better coordinated response, particularly in high pressure situations. In RQ3, accountability and

defined autonomy supported the sense of trust and psychological safety of the employees. Across the different contexts, participants agreed that when there were also no clearly defined boundaries for responsibility in the case of distributed systems, that could lead to confusion, inefficiency, and disengagement; while structured accountability could create both ethical coherence as well as operational agility.

Empowerment and inclusion were also identified as two unifying enablers across the three research questions. In RQ1 inclusion was viewed as an ethical obligation to avoid unequal participation and concentration of power. In RQ2, empowerment of teams made higher fit and responsiveness under distributed authority. In RQ3, empowerment manifested itself in improved motivation and ownership of the installation, and job satisfaction in younger employees. Participants consistently described how having a voice in decision making and being free to do as one wished within defined limits created psychological involvement and organizational effectiveness, suggesting that empowerment was working as a moral as well as functional driving force for distributed leadership.

A further cross theme relating to the inter dependency of ethical consistency and organisational adaptability. Data from RQ1 and RQ2 showed that the ethical integrity through fairness, openness and accountability was not simply something that needed to be considered but rather part of operational necessity. Teams operated with increased cooperation, decision making agility, and confidence when assisting values of ethics were clearly exhibited. Similarly, in RQ3, emotional engagement and retention in Millennials and Gen Z employees had a relationship with perceptions of ethical authenticity in

leadership. This pattern indicated that adaptability and motivation both use ethical consistency as the basis for formulating it, thus accentuating the concept that ethical practice directly influences performance outcomes in the presence of DL.

4.7 Chapter Summary and Transition

This chapter presented the empirical results obtained as a result of the qualitative analysis of the data obtained from 48 number of participants who work in various sub sectors of the Indian information technology enabled services (ITES) industry. Using Braun and Clarke's six phase thematic framework, the analysis went through a systematic process of familiarization, coding, theme development and refinement to identify the patterns across the participants' experiences and perspectives of distributed leadership (DL). The findings were organized around three research questions which investigated three dimensions of equity (ethical, operational, and motivational) of DL within the context of ITES.

Findings from Research Question One (RQ1) have shown that the integration of ethics is the lower layer of distributed leadership in ITES organizations. Participants stressed fairness, transparency, accountability and inclusion as key components for ethical leadership activities. Fairness in role allocation, open communication and accountability shared was seen as important to maintain ethical legitimacy and prevent the centralization of power, while hidden hierarchies while favouritism still challenged a true level of equality of leadership distribution. These insights created the foundation for assessing those glimpses of insight as setting precedents for effective distributed leadership in that

ethical clarity and procedural openness are preconditions for effective distributed leadership.

The findings for Research Question Two (RQ2) showed that the distributed leadership has both positive and conditional effects for the organizational adaptability and decision making speed. Participants agreed decentralized authority and open communication increased responsiveness and collaboration between teams, especially in times of crisis or high pressure. However, the adaptation ability and speed were found to rely on the level of clarity of structures, the definition of decision limits, and mutual trust. When ambiguity regarding accountability was present the distributed model was less efficient, prompting the consideration that the structure of ethics and procedures directly affect the operational agility of distributed system.

For Research Question Three (RQ3), the results showed that distributed leadership is significant with regards to the motivation, job satisfaction, and retention of Millennials and Generation Z employees. Empowerment, autonomy, psychological safety, recognition and transparency were cited as key drivers of engagement and commitment. Participants described being trusted to make decisions, being recognized for their contributions, and being included in transparent communication to build the bonds of emotional attachment and long-term organizational loyalty. The results showed that distributed leadership is best effective when there is a balance between empowerment and ethical consistency and structured communication.

Finally, the cross-insight analysis synthesised the findings of all three research questions and indicated the interdependence and mutualism of the ethical, operational and

motivational dimensions of distributed leadership. Transparency, accountability, and empowerment emerged as the major connecting elements, which linked ethical integrity and adaptability to engagement of the employees. Across data, people shared that distributed leadership is successful only when fairness, structural clarity and authenticity are simultaneously present, and this ensures both ethical legitimacy and long term employee motivation.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

This section is an interpretation of the important results of the study based on the theoretical frameworks and research objectives set in the previous part. Instead of regurgitating the results, it is oriented to explain in a deeper meaning and significance highlighting the context of the Indian IT enabled Services (ITES) industry. The interpretation will use lived experiences of the individuals to connect and link their experiences with the guiding theories of Distributed Leadership, Ethical Leadership, and Generational Cohort Theory to show how distributed leadership (DL) is a structural and ethical phenomenon. Each of these subsections addresses a single research question and makes connections with both empirical patterns and conceptual understandings to identify interrelationships between ethical leadership practices, organizational responsiveness, and generational values within distributed leadership systems. In the process, this chapter goes beyond description towards an interpretive understanding of how the findings contribute to theory, practice and understanding on the subject of leadership ethics in the contemporary ITES organizations.

5.1.1 Research Question 1 Interpretation

The interpretation of findings for the RQ1 is showing that ethics is not another dimension of DL as much as the underpinning mechanisms of legitimacy and effectiveness of DL. The responses given by the participants suggest that distributed leadership within Indian

IT enabled Services (ITES) industry is not only evaluated based on distribution of authority in a structural manner, but also on moral quality of decision making process, allocation of responsibility & accountability systems. This finding gives further support to the argument that distributed leadership is not a mere structural arrangement but a social process that is prevalent, as well as being embedded ethically, as stressed by Spillane (2006). However, the current study goes beyond this view to show that the principles of ethics as opposed to the principles of fairness, transparency and inclusion are not implicit consequences of distribution, but necessary for its success.

In this sense, distributed leadership does not refer so much to the decentralization of authority, but rather to the redistribution of moral responsibility at multiple levels of the organization. This interpretation goes further than the work of Bolden (2011) who emphasizes the role of collaboration and shared practice through the addition that this collaboration must be ethically grounded in order to be perceived as legitimate. Without ethical integration, distributed leadership can easily be seen as fragmented authority, not shared leadership, thus taking away trust and engagement.

The importance placed on fairness is based on the preference for systems of leadership run by groups of employees who favor merit over hierarchy. Participants perceptions indicate that the distribution of tasks fairly and involvement provide ethical protection for fear of favoritism and implicit hierarchies. This is consistent with the tenets of the Ethical Leadership Theory (Brown & Treviño, 2006) in which fairness plays a central role in creating leader credibility and trust. However, this work goes beyond this theory to place fairness within a distributed context in which fairness is not just performed by individual

leaders but there is embedded fairness across organizational systems of the allocation of roles and participation.

In the Indian ITES context, where hierarchical traditions which have affected organizational structures in the past, this finding represents a major cultural shift towards merit based and participatory leadership. This underpins the differences between structural delegation and relational leadership practices presented by Gronn (2020), but presents a further argument that fairness can be seen to act as a bridging mechanism of the two dimensions. Therefore, fairness in distributed systems is not a matter of ethics or a dream: It's a matter of strategy to maintain collaboration, especially in extremely inter dependant and knowledge intensive environments.

Transparency came out as the ethical glue to hold distributed teams together. At a deeper interpretivist level, transparency works as the mechanism by which distributed authority is transformed into mutual trust. When decision making processes are visible, communication is open and rationales are shared, employees see leadership systems as legitimate and moral. This finding is aligned with the idea of Distributed Leadership Theory that conceptualizes leadership as a relational and interactional process (Spillane, 2006), but extends this understanding by selecting transparency as the critical condition that allows for relational coordination to take place.

Additionally, this result is echoed by Lawton and Páez (2014), who stress the importance of institutional ethics in addition to forward fairness in the organizational systems. However, the current study goes further to show that transparency is not only an ethical practice, but it is also an operational requirement in distributed environments. In a

practical sense that means that in order to maintain both trust and efficiency, the ITES organizations would need to institutionalize open communication channels, common decision-making platforms, and symmetry of information. Transparency then is not simply communicative it makes up the moral architecture of the trust, coordination and accountability that enable distributed leadership systems.

The meaning of shared accountability strengthens further the case that decentralization without ethical structuring confuses instead of empowering. The insistence of participants on defined roles suggests that there is a need to clearly specify the distribution of ownership and responsibility within the context of ethical distributed leadership. This finding adds to the argument of Storey and Holti (2021), who identify accountability as a key challenge in distributed systems, but goes further and describes accountability as a collective moral commitment, not an individual obligation.

In this context, distributed leadership does not abolish accountability, but rather it redistributes it in a collective but ordered system. This is consistent with Gronn's (2002) view that leadership is diffused between interactions, but adds that this diffusion must be grounded in ethical clarity so as to avoid the problems of role ambiguity and inefficiency. Therefore, in the context of the ITES sector, what ethical distributed leadership is about is not eliminating hierarchy, but converting the accountability of hierarchy into transparent and interrelated networks of responsibility that are sustaining operational effectiveness as well as moral integrity.

An important interpretive insight in this is revealed by the fact of continuing bias and informal hierarchies in distributed systems. Despite the goal of decentralization,

participants indicated that they still experienced the persistence of favouritism and unequal influence and showed the presence of an ethical paradox in distributed leadership. This discovery shows the difference between structural decentralization and ethical decentralization. While organizations may redistribute the authority formally, underlying power dynamics may not be altered except by being formally addressed.

This observation is in support of the arguments made by Houghton et al. (2020) and Bolden et al (2020) who provide caution for the real possibilities of distributed leadership to reproduce inequalities if not carefully managed. However, this study expands upon the literature by claiming that ethical vigilance is a necessary condition to the prevention of these kinds of outcomes. In practical terms, this means that organizations need to have mechanisms for constant ethical monitoring, feedback, and bias awareness in place so that will ensure distributed leadership doesn't trigger hidden hierarchies. Ethical leadership, therefore, serves as a system of rules protecting the integrity of distributed systems.

The idea of the inclusion of equal participation has important generational and cultural implications. Millennials and Generation Z employees, who make up most of the ITES workforce, do not find participation as a procedural part of their jobs but as a mark of respect, participation, and authenticity of leadership. This finding is consistent with Generational Cohort Theory (Cai & Song, 2021), which indicates that younger employees place a high value on transparency, fairness, and participation in decision making processes.

However, this study helps build upon the theory, showing that participation in distributed leadership systems has a direct effect on the perception of ethical legitimacy in employees. Unlike traditional hierarchical models, focused on compliance, what is meant by distributed leadership in this context is interpreted as a system of cooperative moral engagement. Consequently, the lack of genuine inclusion can contribute to disengagement, lower trust and increased turnover from their younger employees. This emphasizes on the centrality of generational expectations in contemporary organizational context, rather than peripheral.

These findings suggest that the transformation from structural model of distributed leadership to system moral governance through ethical integration is. Fairness, transparency, accountability and inclusion are not stand-alone dimensions but are together interdependent ethical conditions that collectively determine the sustainability of distributed leadership practices. This interpretation contributes to current literature by suggesting that ethical principles are not supplementary to the work of distributed leadership and the contribution of principles to the effectiveness of distributed leadership. Within this framework, fairness provides equitable participation, transparency provides relation trust, accountability provides the moral clarity and inclusion provides the legitimacy through the representation. The lack of one or more of these elements can lead to reduced leadership being reduced to a symbolic effort rather than a truly empowering system. Therefore, ethical integration as a concept should not be considered part of distributed leadership, but rather the defining principle of distributed leadership.

From a practical point of view these interpretations imply that Indian ITES organizations need to institutionalize the principle of ethics in the design of distributed leadership systems. This involves applying merit based use of tasks, transparent decision making procedures, clearly defined accountability mechanisms, and methods of inclusion. In addition, organizations should have systems of ethical review and feedback loops in place to help identify and correct informal power systems before they are ingrained in organizational culture.

5.1.2 Research Question 2 Interpretation

The results presented for Research Question 2 is that Distributed Leadership (DL) is a double-edged mechanism – one with the potential to enhance the levels of adaptation and decision-making speed by a substantial margin – within the Indian IT enabled Services (ITES) industry – and expose structural vulnerabilities when ethical and procedural boundaries are not clearly defined. This finding is suggestive of the idea that it is not decentralization per se that renders DL effective or ineffective, but actually how decentralization is structured, communicated, and ethically governed. In this sense, adaptability under DL is therefore not automatic, but contingent on the specificity of clarities in roles, the ethical alignment of participants, and the set of coordinate mechanisms in play which combine autonomy and collective responsibility.

From a theoretical perspective, this interpretation strengthens the underlying assumptions of the Distributed Leadership Theory that sees leadership as an emergent characteristic of the interactions and not as authority in the position (Spillane, 2006). Within ITES organizations, which are characterized by cross functional teams, operations that are

geographically dispersed throughout the organization, and a time sensitive delivery of services, DL turns leadership into a networked process. This networked structure facilitates parallel problem solving, distributed decision making, and shared responsibility for the organization and thus improves responsiveness. This is in line with Boltens (2011) emphasis on collaboration as one of the drivers of organizational agility. However, the current results expand this point of view by showing how such responsiveness is conditional upon an ethical clarity and structural coordination.

A fundamental understanding that is emerging from the data is the paradox of distributed authority: This assumption is open and inclusive in order to ensure more adaptive and faster decision making yet can also result in slower processes where authority boundaries are not clear. Participants reported inconsistencies found in having too much consultation, role ambiguity, and the failure of decision making on what level of decision rights such a team would have that can cause delays, especially under a situation showing high pressure. This finding provides support for the issues of accountability diffusion in decentralized systems as identified by Storey and Holti (2021). However, this study moves on to add to the literature by not focusing the research only on a structural issue but in an ethical and procedural issue. When there is not ethical clarity, distributed leadership may lead to indecision and inefficiency instead of a sense of agility.

This interpretation also rings true with the tenets of Situational Leadership Theory (Northouse, 2021), which stresses on the idea that being a good leader is more about context of readiness in which the leader can lead effectively, and the matching of leadership style to situational need. The findings suggest that the distribution of

leadership needs to be contextually calibrated dependent on the maturity, complexity of work and clarity of communication of the team. Therefore, DL should not be interpreted as a rigid structure but as a flexible system that responds to the needs of a situation. This is an important theoretical extension, which suggests that effectiveness of distributed leadership is dependent on both ethical grounding and contextual alignment.

The results also indicate a fundamental redefining of crisis management within ITES organizations brought about by DL. Traditionally, crisis response in Indian ITES companies has followed a hierarchical model of escalation which tends to be time consuming in terms of decision making process due to being centralized. However, under distributed leadership, the, employees who are empowered within clearly defined ethical and procedural boundaries, are able to act more quickly and effective. Participants provided examples of where the distribution of authority made it possible to respond immediately without waiting for senior approval, and therefore increased crisis adaptability.

This finding is consistent with Gronn's (2002) view that leadership is shared among interactions, however, this study goes further by noting the role of the trust and ethical responsibility in facilitating effective action under uncertainty. In this context, the leadership of distributed leadership doesn't change the system of crisis management from control based to trust based. Authority becomes situational sharing where accountability stands ethically anchored. This implies that ethical principles are acting as "regulatory mechanisms" that help speed up decision making processes and that prompt responses are taken: this is to ensure that fast responses do not affect the accountability or the integrity

of the organization. Thus, DL brings a model of crisis leadership whereby speed is controlled by ethical clarity rather than hierarchy control.

The meaning of cross team collaboration is further than traditional notions of teamwork and coordination. The results show that DL creates collective intelligence in complex service ecosystems. When teams are working in transparent communication systems and openly sharing information, organizational adaptability is systemic data, not episodic. This observation is in line with the idea of organizational learning, in which knowledge is continually created, shared, and improved through interactions and reflections.

This perspective provides consistency with Spillanes (2006) view of leadership as in distributed practice embedded in interactions; however, the current study reveals an additional dimension stating that the foundation of effective knowledge sharing is ethical norms such as fairness, transparency, and inclusion. In this sense, distributed leadership is not an exercise of redistributing authority; instead, distributed leadership is a way of transforming organizations into adaptive learning systems. This transformation in DL from a reactive responder to a proactive learner is a tremendous contribution in and of itself to the field and seems to indicate that DL will improve not only performance but also long term organizational stability.

Culturally, the findings suggest an overall cultural shift in Indian ITEs organizations. The success of DL in promoting adaptability is closely correlated with the level of willingness of organizations to depart from the norms of traditional hierarchical structures and adopt a leadership culture based on trust. Participants experiences show that whatever structural decentralization is undertaken there are often deeply entrenched hierarchical mindsets

and informal potential power structures in decision making processes. This observation is consistent with the work of Bolden et al. (2020) which state that distributed leadership can be limited due to the existing organizational culture.

However, the current research attempts to take the conversation further and focus on the role of integration from an ethical perspective in bringing about cultural change. As the findings show, structural decentralization is not sufficient but has to come along with ethical training, possibilities and practices like transparency, and systemic redesign of communication processes. Without these elements, distributed leadership is no more than a procedural change, rather than a cultural one. Therefore, the adaptability in the ITES organizations in India will continue to be conditional till the concept of distributed leadership is internalized as an ethical guiding norm rather than being experimented with as a management approach.

Taken collectively, these interpretations imply that distributed leadership only adds value in terms of improving organizational adaptability and decision making speed when supported by other practices such as ethical clarity, structural coordination and cultural alignment. Autonomy alone causes confusion and structure alone creates mistrust. In light of this, the effectiveness of DL therefore depends in harnessing these dimensions as to create a system where decentralised authority can be exercised within clearly defined ethical and procedural boundaries.

5.1.3 Research Question 3 Interpretation

The results of Research Question Three show that the Distributed Leadership (DL) is an emotionally intelligent and ethical form of leadership that closely correlates with the

motivational structures and psychologically expected of employees in the Millennial and Generation Z age groups in the Indian IT enabled Services (ITES) industry. Interpreted in terms of current motivational theories, these conclusions imply that DL is successful in satisfying the three basic, psychological needs proposed in the Self Determination Theory Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In so doing, DL goes beyond a model of structural leadership and functions as a form of psychological contract between organisations and employees, based on trust, mutual responsibility and ethical reciprocity.

At a deeper level of interpretation, the findings suggest that DL boosts motivation and retention due, first of all, to the redistribution of power in the form of empowerment rather than control. By Millennials and Gen Z employees, participation in decision making processes is seen as an indication of personal value and professional trust. This meaning making process is highly consistent with Herzberg's Two Factor Theory of the workplace developed by Herzberg in 1966 in which there is an emphatic role that intrinsic motivators play in job satisfaction, namely: recognition, responsibility, possibilities for growth etc. which is more important than extrinsic rewards. By moving away from the hierarchical command structure to a participative collaboration, DL redefines the traditional structure of supervision to a partnership model of shared competence and purpose. This shift is part of a larger shift in the nature of work in which younger employees are seeking more than just a transactional basis for their work they're seeking meaning, autonomy, and identity in their professional lives.

Furthermore, the results indicate that psychological safety serves as a basic mechanism through which distributed leadership is translated into intrinsic motivation. Participants always described being in environments where open communication, non judgmental leadership and inclusivity helped them express ideas freely and engage more deeply in their work. This observation is consistent with the concept of psychological safety outlined by Edmondson (1999) in which trust and openness are important for promoting learning and innovation. However, the present study incorporates this idea further by placing psychological safety in the context of ethical leadership. It shows us that fairness, transparency and accountability are not only ethical principles, but they are also enabling conditions for getting emotionally involved. In this sense, DL can be understood as a "moral architecture" that promotes psychologically secure working environments and thus generates sustainable motivation, creativity and collaboration in knowledge intensive industries such as ITES.

The focus on growth and belonging further shows the reference to the impact that DL has on not only immediate job satisfaction but also long term career identity formation among younger employees. Millennials and Generation Z participants viewed leadership not as a hierarchical power but as a collective journey on the road of development. This interpretation relates to Kahn's (1990) theory of employee engagement, in which meaningfulness, safety and availability account for the extent to which individuals invest themselves in their roles. Within the Indian ITES context in which high employee mobility and transactional employment relationships are prevalent, DL seems to promote a move towards affective commitment. Recognition, visibility and opportunities for

leadership participation develop a sense of belonging and thus contribute to a higher emotional attachment to the organisation.

This is a drastic change from the traditional models of retention built on tenure or financial incentives. Instead, DL helps people engage in value-based commitment, where employees stay with companies because of their alignment to company leadership values, ethical consistency and opportunities for growth. This finding advances the literature by noting that distributed leadership can serve as a retention strategy in industries with high turnover rates, as long as distributed leadership is implemented with ethical integrity and structural clarity.

Transparency became a bridge, at the same time a symbolic bridge as well as a functional one, between ethical leadership and motivational psychology. From an interpretive point of view, transparency bridges the gap between ethical credibility and emotional trust. For Millennials and Gen Z employees, transparency signals fairness, inclusivity, and authenticity qualities that are at the core of their concept of leadership legitimacy. This is in line with the Ethical Leadership Theory (Brown & Treviño, 2006) which focuses the role of fairness, integrity, and open communication in establishing trust. However, the present study is a step forward which shows that transparency is not only an ethical expectation but also a motivational impetus. In environments characterised by short term stability and demanding performance, e.g. ITES, employees depend on transparent communication in order to construe organizational decisions and to assess their own contribution.

Thus, transparency becomes the "ethical language" which gives distributed leadership legitimacy among younger employees. It ensures that the actions of leadership are obvious, understandable and congruent with expressed values, thus reinforcing trust as well as engagement. This finding highlights an important theoretical implication, which is that ethical leadership practices are no longer dissociated from motivational strategies, but constitute part of them, especially in knowledge-based industries where engagement rests on the perception of fairness and authenticity.

At the same time, the findings also highlight significant limitations and tensions in distributed leadership systems. While empowerment and autonomy increase motivation, participants mentioned that the lack of clear accountability structures and feedback mechanisms can lead to a lack of confidence in DL. This represents a major boundary condition and if too much empowerment is allowed with no structures, it may lead to ambiguity, inconsistency and disengagement. This observation adds to the literature in that there must be a balance between autonomy and accountability in distributed leadership in order to retain the benefits of motivation that it can provide. It questions overly idealistic visions of DL by showing that it is reliant on well-defined frameworks that are used to guide participation and decision making.

Theoretically, these findings provide support and elaboration of the integration of the Distributed Leadership Theory and Ethical Leadership Theory. Both frameworks stress on relational leadership, shared responsibility, and trust based interactions (Spillane, 2006; Brown & Treviño, 2006). However, this research contributes to the existing literature by introducing the concept of ethically grounded distributed leadership as the

mechanism that simultaneously drives motivation, engagement and retention. It shows that ethical principles, like fairness, transparency, and accountability, are not just the normative ideals of companies but are working principles that shape the experience of employees and corporate results.

From a practical standpoint, the findings imply that ITES organizations must create distributed leadership systems that put ethics into life. This involves combining structured autonomy, transparent communication channels, consistent feedback mechanisms, and recognition systems that support employee contributions. Organizations also need to invest in leadership development programs that focus on ethical awareness, emotional intelligence, and inclusive decision-making practices. In this way they can ensure that distributed leadership is not only leading to enhanced operational performance but also assists in the psychological and motivational needs of a multi-generational workforce.

5.1.4 Interpretation Related to Theoretical Framework

The interpretation of findings across all three research questions provides strong empirical support for, and extension of, the theoretical foundations outlined in Chapter 2. Collectively, the results demonstrate that Distributed Leadership (DL) within the Indian IT enabled Services (ITES) context is most effective when it operates on a robust ethical foundation and is aligned with the motivational and generational expectations of the contemporary workforce. The integration of Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT), Ethical Leadership Theory (ELT), and motivational frameworks such as Self Determination Theory and Two Factor Theory offers a comprehensive lens through

which leadership can be understood as simultaneously operationally agile, ethically grounded, and psychologically meaningful.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings strongly support the core premise of Distributed Leadership Theory that leadership is a socially constructed and shared process rather than a function of positional authority (Leithwood & Mascall, 2020; Bolden, 2011). Participants' experiences of shared accountability, collaborative decision making, and participative communication illustrate how leadership in ITES organizations is distributed across multiple actors and embedded within everyday interactions. This reinforces the idea that leadership emerges through practice rather than hierarchy, particularly in complex, knowledge intensive environments such as ITES.

However, the present study makes a critical theoretical contribution by demonstrating that ethical integrity is not merely complementary to distributed leadership but constitutive of its effectiveness. While existing DLT literature emphasizes structural distribution, the findings reveal that without fairness, transparency, and accountability, distributed authority can lead to confusion, mistrust, and disengagement. In this sense, ethical transparency functions as a stabilizing mechanism that transforms distributed leadership from potential decentralization chaos into credible and sustainable leadership practice. This extends DLT by introducing an ethical dimension as a necessary condition rather than an optional enhancement.

This interdependence between structure and ethics advances discussions initiated by scholars such as Gronn (2020) and Storey and Holti (2021), who identified role ambiguity and accountability gaps as inherent challenges within distributed leadership

systems. The findings of this study suggest that these limitations can be mitigated when principles of Ethical Leadership Theory are embedded directly into distributed leadership frameworks. Ethical Leadership Theory posits that leaders influence trust, engagement, and organizational behavior through moral conduct and transparent decision making (Brown & Treviño, 2006). The current findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that ethical principles operate not only at the individual leader level but also at the systemic level—embedded within processes, communication structures, and team dynamics.

This reconceptualization shifts ELT from a leader centric model to a systemic architecture of ethics, where fairness, transparency, and accountability are institutionalized within leadership practices. Such a perspective is particularly relevant in the Indian ITES context, where collectivist cultural tendencies coexist with high performance demands. It suggests that ethical leadership must be operationalized through systems and structures rather than relying solely on individual leader behavior.

Furthermore, the findings provide important theoretical integration with motivational theories, particularly Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Herzberg's Two Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1966). Participants consistently associated distributed leadership with increased motivation, satisfaction, and retention due to enhanced autonomy, recognition, and purpose. These elements correspond directly to intrinsic motivators identified in both theories. Distributed leadership, by enabling participative decision making and role ownership, satisfies employees' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

At the same time, the findings confirm Herzberg's proposition that job satisfaction is driven by intrinsic factors such as responsibility, growth, and recognition. DL creates an environment where these motivators are naturally embedded within work processes, rather than being externally imposed. This positions distributed leadership not only as an organizational design model but also as a mechanism of psychological empowerment that translates abstract motivational theories into lived employee experiences.

Importantly, this study extends motivational theory by demonstrating that ethical conditions such as fairness and transparency act as enablers of intrinsic motivation. Without ethical consistency, the motivational benefits of autonomy and empowerment are diminished. This suggests that motivation in distributed systems is not purely psychological but also ethical in nature, thereby linking motivational theory with leadership ethics in a novel way.

The generational dimension of the theoretical framework is also both validated and extended. Millennials and Generation Z employees demonstrated a strong preference for fairness, authenticity, inclusion, and participative leadership values that align closely with both DLT and ELT. However, the findings go further by showing that these generations interpret leadership legitimacy through an ethical lens. Engagement is not driven solely by opportunity or reward but by perceived moral alignment between leadership practices and personal values. This supports Generational Cohort Theory while adding depth by highlighting the ethical expectations of younger employees in emerging economies.

In the Indian ITES context, where workforce diversity and rapid technological change are prominent, this generational shift places additional pressure on organizations to adopt

leadership models that are not only efficient but also ethically credible. Distributed leadership, when implemented with ethical consistency, aligns with these expectations and enhances both engagement and retention.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer several important practical implications for leaders, managers, and policymakers within the Indian ITES sector. Distributed Leadership (DL), when anchored in ethical principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability, can become a powerful framework for enhancing organizational responsiveness and workforce motivation. The following four implications outline how these insights can be effectively translated into practice.

1. Embedding Ethics into Distributed Leadership Systems

The first implication is the necessity to institutionalize ethical governance within distributed leadership structures. The research revealed that fairness, accountability, and transparency are foundational to employees' trust and engagement. Organizations should therefore implement ethical mechanisms such as leadership ethics committees, clear accountability policies, and ethical decision-making training across all levels. This ensures that distributed authority operates within moral boundaries, preventing power imbalances or favoritism. Embedding ethics in everyday leadership practice also strengthens organizational legitimacy and enhances employees' perception of fairness an essential condition for engagement and long-term retention.

2. Strengthening Transparency and Communication

Transparency emerged as the unifying link between ethical leadership, adaptability, and motivation. Practically, ITES organizations must design open communication systems that make decision making processes visible and accessible. Regular team briefings, shared decision logs, and open feedback forums can demystify leadership processes and minimize informal hierarchies. For younger employees, transparency signals authenticity and integrity; thus, organizations that communicate openly foster stronger psychological safety, encourage creative participation, and reduce generational distrust in leadership systems.

3. Enhancing Role Clarity and Shared Accountability

A key operational takeaway from the findings is that distributed leadership thrives only when roles and accountability are clearly defined. Ambiguity in distributed systems can cause delays, confusion, and ethical tension. To address this, managers should develop role charters and shared accountability matrices that outline specific decision domains for teams and individuals. This structure allows flexibility without sacrificing clarity, ensuring that empowerment is exercised responsibly. Defined accountability also promotes collaboration during crises, where quick yet coordinated decisions are essential for organizational adaptability.

4. Empowering and Retaining the New Generation Workforce

Finally, the study highlights the importance of aligning leadership practices with the motivational values of Millennials and Generation Z, who form the core of the ITES workforce. These employees value autonomy, inclusion, and personal growth over traditional incentives. Organizations should provide opportunities for shared decision

making, rotational leadership roles, and peer led projects that enhance ownership and purpose. Recognition systems should celebrate collaborative achievements rather than individual hierarchies. By integrating ethical empowerment and career development within DL frameworks, firms can significantly improve job satisfaction, commitment, and retention among younger professionals.

5.3 Chapter Summary and Transition

This chapter has interpreted the study findings within the purview of study theoretical framework, goals of research and contextual realities of Indian ITES industry. Moving beyond description, it has offered a critical framework of interpretation and understanding of how Distributed Leadership (DL) is the structural and ethical paradigm that governs adaptability, motivation, and retention principles in modern day service organizations. Drawing on empirical and the framework of Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT), Ethical Leadership Theory (ELT) and motivational perspectives (Self Determination Theory, Herzberg's Two Factor Model, etc.) the paper illustrated that the effectiveness of DL is contingent on the groundwork of ethics and psychological perspectives on which they are based.

The interpretation of Research Question 1 had adjudged that ethics is the moral infrastructure of DL, and not an ancillary feature. Fairness, transparency, accountability and inclusion appeared to be the defining conditions in which distributed authority can be transformed into legitimate and trusted leadership. Research Question 2 developed this insight further by showing that organizational adaptability and the speed with which

decisions in ITES organizations are dependent upon the ethical governance of distributed authority. Where a good clarity of structure and moral discipline co-exist, DL adds to the responsiveness and co-operation; where neither exists disorientating contradiction of expectations, NGOs, and inefficiency can be the consequence. Research Question 3 showed that DL resonates significantly with Millennials and Generation Z employees as it meets intrinsic motivational needs for autonomy, competence and belongingness. Through participative decision making and open communication, DL operates as an emotionally intelligent leadership system in a context where the generative demand for authenticity and the ethical consistency among other generations is ever more relevant.

The synthesis of these interpretations supported the intuitive theoretical proposition that ethics, structure, and motivation are interrelated dimensions of effective leadership which are mutually reinforcing. The combination of DLT and ELT as per Indian ITES context implies that distributed leadership itself develops as Ethically Distributed Leadership (EDL), a hybrid form of shared authority which is justified through moral accountability and also kept alive through psychological empowerment. This view is part of advanced leadership studies as it sees ethics not in terms of compliance but as a structural promoter or provoker of adaptability and involvement.

The practical implications drawn from these insights highlight how the future of leadership in the ITES sector is to be based on organization's capacity to: institutionalize ethical governance, design transparent communication systems, clarify shared accountability and empower younger employees through participative and developmental structures. Together, these measures are part of a practical path to creating adaptive,

trustworthy and value driven organisations that can thrive in dynamic digital environments.

CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive synthesis of the study on Distributed Leadership (DL) and its ethical implications in the Indian Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) sector, with particular emphasis on organizational adaptability and the motivation, job satisfaction, and retention of Millennials and Generation Z employees. This chapter summarizes the main points of the work and concentrates on the value of the research as it is based on the theoretical background and findings of the studies conducted in the previous chapters and emphasizes the value of the research to both theory and practice.

The research was driven by the fact that the modern-day organizational space has grown very intricate and the conventional hierarchical leadership models can no longer be applied to meet the needs presented by the fast-changing world in terms of technology, global competition, and workforce demands. In this regard, there has been the development of distributed leadership that focuses on shared responsibility, collaboration and decentralized decision making. Nevertheless, the success of this kind of leadership model is highly reliant on the ethical nature of the governing body of a business, especially in any knowledge-based industry including ITES where trust, openness and responsibility are essential factors.

The purpose of the research was to investigate the ways that distributed leadership can be ethically applied in the ITES organizations, the effect on organizational responsiveness

and decision making, as well as the way it impact the experiences and expectations of young workers. The study employed a qualitative, interpretivist design, and examined the perceptions of employees working in leading ITES hubs in India, to formulate a more in-depth insight regarding the interaction among leadership structures, ethical practices and performance of the employees.

The chapter is designed in such a way that it offers an integrated conclusion to the study. It starts by providing a synthesis about the main findings of the three research questions, and goes on to discuss the theoretical and practical contributions of the study. The chapter also presents the study limitations and suggests the future research directions. Lastly, it wraps by cogitating on the wider messages of the study in the context of the modern-day organizational leadership.

6.2 Summary of key findings

This paper has explored the importance of Distributed Leadership (DL) and its ethical implication within the Indian Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) industry as well as the impact of Distributed Leadership on organizational responsiveness and motivation, job satisfaction, and retention of Millennial and Generation Z workers. Such a study was prompted by the growing imperative to support the leadership models that are not merely structural adjustments, but ethically based on the fast-changing knowledge-based organizational contexts. Although previous research conducted has investigated distributed leadership and ethical leadership separately, there has been little

research done to study their combined effects in the Indian ITES environment, particularly with regard to the generational workforce expectations.

To fill this knowledge gap, the research took a qualitative, interpretivist, research design aimed at learning about the lived experiences of the employees and their perception of the leadership practices. Open-ended survey qualitative data were used as primary data, where 48 persons (who had worked on major ITES hubs in India, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram) were interviewed to provide their data. The participants were of various roles and levels of the organization and offered the complete view on distributed leadership practices. The thematic analysis was applied to the data with references to the six-phase framework that was suggested by Braun and Clarke and that allowed identifying the patterns, sub-themes, and overarching themes that conform to the three research questions.

The results showed that the effectiveness and legitimacy of distributed leadership is premised on ethical integration and not a secondary and complementary dimension. Concerning Research Question One (RQ1), the research results in the identification of ethical distributed leadership as being based on fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion as key concepts that guarantee equitable participation, avoid informal hierarchies in line, and enhance trust among teams. This evidence shows that the absence of ethical structures in order to support distributed leadership may make it fragmented and ineffective and this jeopardizes the collaborative nature of this leadership style.

In the case of Research Question Two (RQ2), the outcomes pointed out that there is a conditional influence of distributed leadership on organizational adaptability and speed of

decision-making. With the help of defined roles, formality of accountability, and transparency, distributed leadership increases responsiveness, allows parallel decision-making, and increases crisis responsiveness. Nonetheless, with lack of well-specified boundaries of authority and coordination, distributed systems can cause delays, ambiguity, and inefficiencies. This implies that the performance of distributed leadership is based on the need to strike a balance between autonomy and structural clarity.

In Research Question Three (RQ3), the results indicated that distributed leadership has a positive effect in motivating Millennials and Generation Z employees, job satisfaction, and retention rates. The identified key drivers are empowerment, autonomy, psychological safety, recognition and transparency. The research can conclude that participation in decision-making processes means a lot of trust and value and ethical authenticity to the younger employees. As a result, thereof, distributed leadership when applied ethically, operates as a means of psychological empowerment, increases the engagement of the employees and creates a long-term dedication to the organization.

One of the integrative lessons that come out of the paper is that transparency, accountability and empowerment are some of the major linking elements that bridge the ethical, operational, and motivational aspects of distributed leadership. All these factors define how well distributed leadership can be a credible, effective and sustainable form of leadership in ITES organizations.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

There are several important contributions that the given study adds to the existing body of knowledge in the field of leadership and organizational studies as it contributes to the understanding of Distributed Leadership (DL) in the context of ethical and generational factors. Although previous studies have mostly investigated the nature of distributed leadership as either a structural or relational phenomenon, this work contributes to the conceptual discussion, showing that ethical norms are not auxiliary, but central to the success of distributed leadership systems.

First, the study adds to Distributed Leadership Theory (DLT) the element of ethics as a fundamental aspect of distributed leadership performance. In the literature, the decentralization of authority and shared decision-making are regarded as the most important aspects of distributed leadership. Nonetheless, the conclusions of this study are that distributed leadership can cause role ambiguity, power imbalances, and a lack of trust in an organization unless ethical principles are integrated, including fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion. This work thus redefines distributed leadership as a structural set up but a morally enshrined system of collective responsibility in which ethical governance is crucial to ensuring coherence and legitimacy.

Second, the work contributes to the development of Ethical Leadership Theory (ELT) by making the shift of the theoretical approach to the aspect of a systemic approach to ethical governance. Although most of the research accomplished in the past on ethical leadership has dealt with the ethical conduct of individual leaders, this research study shows that in distributed settings, the ethical norms should be put into institutionalization

as an element of the organizational processes, communication system, and decision structures. This move towards individual ethical moral to systemic moral architecture is a significant theoretical step forward, especially in organizations of decentralized complexity, like the ITES sector.

Third, the research paper relates to the synthesis between leadership theory and the motivation theory, especially Self-Determination Theory and the Two-Factor Theory developed by Herzberg, as it shows that ethical conditions are facilitators of intrinsic motivation. Results indicate that autonomy, recognition and participation will increase motivation; however, the support of these factors requires ethical consistency and transparency. This indicates that motivation in the distributed leadership systems is not only psychological but also ethically mediated, thus filling an essential gap in literature that exists between leadership ethics and motivation of employees.

Fourth, the research builds on the Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) by including empirical data to the formulation of the theory that workers of the Millennial and Generation Z generations view leadership validity through an ethical perspective. Although the existing literature recognizes them as individuals that value participation and transparency, this study indicates that their participation and retention highly depend on the perceived geographical authenticity of the leadership practices. This observation enhances the explanation of the expectations between generations in modern workplaces especially in emerging markets.

6.4 Practical Contributions

Besides its theatrical innovations, the study presents some valuable practical implications to organizations, leaders and policymakers in the Indian ITES industry and other knowledge-based industries.

To begin with the research indicates the importance of institutionalization of ethical governance in distributed leadership frameworks by organizations. Organizations are advised to integrate the ethical principles into the formal systems including decision-making procedures, accountability systems and leadership training instead of just depending on the personal behaviour of leaders. Ethical standards, internal audit systems and training in leadership ethics can be introduced in order to make sure that the distributed authority does not exceed the moral framework but serves to prevent favouritism, power relationship, and role confusion.

Second, the results highlight the importance of transparency and open communication systems to maintain effective distributed leadership. In a bid to increase trust and coordination among teams, organizations ought to embrace practices of having shared decision-making platforms, open feedbacks and clearly defined communication protocols. Transparency will not only enhance ethical credibility but also organizational responsiveness and cooperation, especially in geographically separated and cross-functional ITES settings.

Third, a role clarity and structured accountability becomes essential in decentralized systems as made evident in the study. Although distributed leadership facilitates autonomy and empowerment, lack of clearly stated roles may create confusion and inefficiencies. Companies must hence come up with clear role definitions, bounds of

decision as well as accountability matrices that will allow employees to be able to exercise autonomy within a framework of roles. This flexibility and control are key to attaining the moral stability and efficiency in working.

Fourth, the research equips us with useful information in regard to the management and retention of a multi-generational workforce, especially the Millennials and the Generation Z workers. The results demonstrate that in comparison to the traditional hierarchical incentives, younger employees value autonomy, inclusion, recognition, and ethical authenticity at a higher extent. Companies may improve engagement and retention on the basis of participative leadership style and providing chances to make shared decisions and acknowledge the collaborative work. The models of leadership that would correspond to these values could help to improve a sense of belonging, motivation, and commitment in the long run.

6.5 Limitations & Recommendation for Future Research

6.5.1 Limitation of Study

As much as this study yielded some important results on the ethical aspects of Distributed Leadership (DL) in the Indian ITES industry, it should be noted that there were some limitations regarding the scope of the research, its methodology and its context. Acknowledging these shortcomings enables a more reasonable interpretation of the results and it gives guidance to a future study.

To begin with, the industry where the study is conducted, Indian ITES sector is contextually limited, which has a set of characteristics, including a very dynamic working

environment, global integration of its services, and a youthful workforce, among others. Even though this setting is very useful in the analysis of distributed leadership practices, the results might not be directly applicable to other fields or geographical locations where the structure, cultural beliefs, and leadership behaviours of organisations are not the same. Thus, the generalizability of the findings must be taken into consideration in the context of similar knowledge-intensive and service-oriented settings.

Second, the research used a qualitative, interpretivist research design, where depth of understanding is important in contrast to statistical generalization. Although this method allowed investigating the life experience and the perceptions of ethical leadership practices among employees, it restricts the possibility to apply the results to a broader population. The lack of quantitative validation also leads to limiting the ability to determine causal relationships between distributed leadership and employee or organizational outcome.

Third, there was the utilisation of a sample of 48 respondents, which was selected and based on ITES hubs, such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurugram. Despite the fact that the sample comprised of players with different positions and varying levels of organization, it might not adequately reflect the larger heterogeneity of the ITES workforce. The variables of organizational size, leadership practices and regional practices could also affect the adoption and experience of distributed leadership in a manner that is not covered completely in this study.

Fourth, as the main source of data collection, the research was based on the open-ended answers of the survey. Although this approach provided greater involvement and

adaptability in including specific views, it might not be as rigorous or detailed as the approach of an in-depth interview or a longitudinal qualitative approach usually would be. The lack of real-time interaction restricted the possibility to delve deeper into the responses given by the participants which could limit the depth of the data.

Fifth, the research targeted exclusively the Millennial and Generation Z professionals, since they constitute the majority of the ITES workforce. Although this perspective presents valuable knowledge of the new workforce expectations, it constrains the perception of how other generations, like the generation X, perceive distributed leadership and ethical practices and their experiences can be different.

Last, the research design was a cross-sectional design, which involved the perceptions and experiences at one instance in time. Since leadership practices, organizational dynamics, and employee expectations are constantly changing, the results might not be the full representation of changes, which will emerge with time. The longitudinal methods might be used to understand the development and impact of distributed leadership and its ethical aspects in the long-run, in more detail.

6.5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Resting on the results and constraints of the current experiment, some future research directions are offered to improve the existing knowledge of Distributed Leadership (DL) and its ethical concerns in the context of the modern organization. The following recommendations are expected to enhance the theoretical and practical underpinning of research in this field through promoting the applications of a variety of methodological approaches, more general contextual application, and longitudinal perspectives.

To begin with, future studies might broaden the form of analysis to other knowledge high and service-based industries like education, medical services, financial services, and consulting in addition to Indian ITES industry. Cross-sectoral research would assist in finding out whether the links suggested among distributed leadership, ethics activities, and worker results are generalized over organizations or affected by industry peculiarities, including organizational structure, technological level, and ethos. This research would aid in coming up with a more general and flexible model of ethically based distributed leadership.

Second, quantitative and mixed-method design research is also highly capable of enhancing the qualitative knowledge approach found in this research. The relationships among distributed leadership, ethical dimensions, and organizational outcomes could be tested using statistical methods like a structural equation modeling or regression analysis in future researches. This would be more suitable through the combination of quantitative validation and qualitative knowledge, which would make the results more empirically sound and give more evidence to be viewed as generalized.

Third, longitudinal research designs can be used in future studies to analyse the dynamics of distributed leadership practices and ethical concerns over time. Since the leadership practices, organizational designs, and expectations of employees are ever-evolving, longitudinal designs would enable scholars to germinate the long-term effectiveness of ethically instilled distributed leadership to organizational performance, flexibility, as well as employee involvement.

Fourth, the study should focus on additional research to examine how technology and digital transformation impact the distributed leadership practices. Since organizations continue to work digitally, remotely, and in hybrid formats, future research might examine the impacts that digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and virtual collaboration tools could have on ethical decision-making and transparency as well as the distribution of leadership. This would be very helpful in uncovering the dynamic nature of leadership within digitally mediated organizations.

Fifth, a further study might also broaden the area of analysis by involving a variety of generation cohorts (Generation X, senior workers) to come up with a more holistic picture of how various age cohorts perceive and react to distributed leadership and ethical methods. Comparative generational research would assist in determining the variation in expectations of leadership and inform the construction of more accommodating and adaptable models of leadership.

Sixth, additional studies of how organizational culture, leadership development and human resource practices can enable successful adoption of distributed leadership is possible. Future studies may look into the impact of leadership training programs, system of ethical governance, and systems of organizational support on the effectiveness of distributed leadership programs. Multi-organizational and case study methodologies might offer more insight into the best practices and implementation strategies.

Lastly, future research might involve examining the limitation of distributed leadership and its boundary condition particularly where there is a possibility that through decentralization issues may arise in form of ambiguity, conflict, or diminished efficiency.

A closer look at these issues would lead to more balanced and complex interpretation of distributed leadership and assist in refining its implementation in a complex organizational setting.

6.6 Conclusion

This paper was aimed at analysing the tenets and implications of Distributed Leadership (DL) and its impact on ethics within the Indian Industry of Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) with a special emphasis on how it affects the organizational flexibility and motivation, job satisfaction and retention of Millennial and Generation Z workers. By so doing, it has filled an important research gap in the literature by addressing structural, ethical and generational perspectives into a single framework of understanding current leadership practices.

The results obtained in this study indicate that as distributed leadership is applied in the absence of ethics, the whole process will be broken and ineffective. But it can be turned into a consistent and viable leadership framework that can improve the output of an organization and the involvement of employees when reenforced by the fundamental principles of ethics like fairness, transparency, accountability, and inclusion. The research emphasizes that ethical integration is neither an incidental nor a peripheral circumstance but a prerequisite of the success of distributed leadership especially in complex and knowledge based settings like in the ITES sector.

The main finding of this study is the theoretical development of Ethically Distributed Leadership (EDL) as a holistic leadership framework that unites decentralized power

with ingrained ethical regulation. The model offers a more comprehensive comprehension of leadership by offering a balanced view on structural flexibility and moral responsibility, hence a framework that is both operationally and ethically plausible. In this regard, the aspect of leadership in modern organizations no longer rests on the aspect of authority or hierarchy but on the ability to strike a balance between autonomy and accountability or power and ethical restraint.

The paper also highlights the increased role of keeping the leadership practices in line with the demands of multi-generational workforce. The Millennials and the generation Z workers are not merely in search of involvement and independence but ethical genuineness and openness in leadership as well. When ethically based, distributed leadership can meet these expectations and help achieve a higher degree of motivation, engagement, and retention by creating the sense of belonging, trust, and psychological safety.

Organizationally, the results indicate that the way forward in leadership in the ITES sector is shifting towards non-hierarchical and participative, transparent and ethics-driven by leadership systems. The institutions that can effectively implement ethical standards in a distributed leadership framework have a greater chance to react to evolving market dynamics, strong incentive to innovate, and enduring competitive edge.

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APPENDIX A:

QUESTIONNAIRE

Instruction

Please answer the questions based on your personal experiences and observations.

There are no right or wrong answers — feel free to express your thoughts openly.

Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous.

You may write as much detail as you wish for each question.

Thank you for sharing your insights!

Section A: Demographic Details

1. Age Group:

- ☐ 18–24 (Gen Z)
- ☐ 25–34 (Millennial)
- ☐ 35–44
- ☐ 45+

2. Gender:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer not to say

3. ITES Sub-sector:

- ☐ BPO
- ☐ KPO
- ☐ IT Support / Service Desk
- ☐ Other (please specify)

4. Current Role/Designation:

- ☐ Entry-level associate
- ☐ Senior associate
- ☐ Team lead
- ☐ Supervisor
- ☐ Manager
- ☐ Other

5. Work Experience:

- ☐ Less than 1 year
- ☐ 1–3 years
- ☐ 3–5 years
- ☐ 5–10 years
- ☐ More than 10 years

6. Work Mode:

- ☐ Work from office
- ☐ Hybrid
- ☐ Fully remote

7. Experience with Distributed Leadership:

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

Section B: Qualitative Questions

Ethical Integration of Distributed Leadership

1. How do you perceive fairness when leadership roles and responsibilities are shared within your team?

2. In what ways is transparency maintained or lacking when decisions are made in a distributed leadership environment?
3. How does accountability work when multiple leaders share decision-making responsibilities?
4. Have you observed any favoritism or informal hierarchies even with claims of distributed leadership?
5. What steps can be taken to ensure equal participation and prevent power imbalances in a distributed leadership structure?

Adaptability & Decision Speed

6. How does shared leadership affect the speed at which decisions are made in your team?
7. Can you describe a situation where distributed leadership improved or hindered organizational responsiveness?
8. How does distributed leadership impact your team's ability to adapt to unexpected changes or crises?
9. What challenges do you face when multiple people are involved in decision-making during urgent or high-pressure situations?
10. How does distributed leadership affect collaboration across different teams or functions?

Motivation, Satisfaction & Retention

11. How does being involved in decision-making affect your motivation to work?
12. How does distributed leadership influence your job satisfaction?
13. How comfortable do you feel sharing ideas or concerns under the current leadership style?
14. What aspects of distributed leadership encourage you to stay longer in the organization?
15. How does the transparency of leadership impact your trust and long-term commitment to your organization?

Section C: Closing Questions

16. Is there anything you would like to add about distributed or ethical leadership in your organization?

What final suggestions do you have to improve leadership practices for Millennials & Gen Z employees?

APPENDIX B:
INFORMED CONSENT

Research Title:

Distributed leadership: Ethical impact on new generation employees in Indian IT-enabled services Industry

Principal Investigator:

My name is Aswin Mohan, I am a Bachelor of engineering with Second Class Honours (Second Division) having followed an approved programme in Electrical and Electronic Engineering

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores how Distributed Leadership (DL) is practiced within Indian IT-enabled Services (ITES) organizations and how it influences ethical practices, organizational responsiveness, and the motivation, job satisfaction, and retention of Millennial and Generation Z employees.

The purpose of this study is to understand employees' experiences and perceptions of leadership practices in order to contribute to academic knowledge and provide practical insights for organizations.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a structured survey. The survey will include questions about your experiences, preferences, and perceptions regarding health insurance marketing strategies. It will take approximately 15–20 minutes to complete.

Confidentiality:

All information you provide will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes. Your responses will be anonymized to ensure that no personally identifiable information is included in the study's results. The data will be securely stored and accessed only by the researcher and authorized personnel.

Potential Risks and Benefits:

There are no significant risks associated with participating in this study. Your participation will contribute to valuable insights into improving health insurance marketing strategies, which may ultimately benefit consumers and the industry.

Consent Statement:

By signing below, you confirm that you have read and understood the information provided above. You consent to participate in this study and allow the researcher to use your responses for academic purposes.

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____