

When Values Matter: Middle Managers' Behavior and Knowledge Hiding in Public Organizations

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Abstract: In recent years, public sector organizations have faced increasing pressure not only to ensure transparency, accountability and service to society, but also to respond effectively to rapidly changing environments. Achieving these expectations depends not solely on formal regulations and procedures, but also on how knowledge is created, shared and used within organizations. Knowledge hiding – defined as the intentional concealment of requested knowledge, poses a significant barrier to organizational learning, effective decision-making, and public trust. While prior research has examined individual and contextual antecedents of knowledge hiding, less attention has been given to the role of middle managers' value-based behaviour in shaping everyday knowledge practices in public organizations. This study examines the role of middle managers' value-based behaviour in reducing knowledge hiding in public organizations. Drawing on a case study conducted within a public-sector organization, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach. The present paper reports findings from the first, qualitative stage of the study, based on semi-structured interviews with middle managers, exploring their perceptions of how managerial behaviour relates to knowledge-hiding practices. The findings suggest that, according to the interviewed managers, employees were less inclined to engage in knowledge hiding when immediate managers were seen as acting in accordance with the organization's declared values. Managers also described trust and psychological safety as important relational conditions associated with both values-based managerial behaviour and knowledge-sharing practices. The interviews further suggest that value alignment between employees and the organization may strengthen the perceived role of values-based managerial behaviour in fostering psychological safety, although managers noted that this relationship depends on organizational context. The study contributes to knowledge management research by positioning value-based behaviour of middle managers as an important contextual factor that managers perceive as influencing knowledge-hiding practices in public organizations. The findings offer practical insights for fostering trust-based and psychologically safe environments that support more open and cooperative knowledge practices in the public sector.

Keywords: Middle managers, Values-based behaviour, Knowledge hiding, Public organizations, Psychological safety, Trust

1. Introduction

Knowledge sharing is a central condition for learning, coordination and innovation in public organizations. Public institutions increasingly depend not only on formal procedures and codified information, but also on employees' experience, judgement and willingness to share context-specific knowledge. However, knowledge does not move automatically across teams, units or hierarchical levels. Employees may consciously withhold information requested by others, a behaviour defined as knowledge hiding (Connelly et al., 2012). This creates a significant challenge for public organizations, where effective decision-making, service quality, and institutional trust depend on reliable knowledge flows.

The problem is especially relevant in the context of middle management. Middle managers occupy an intermediary position between strategic leadership and operational employees. They translate organizational priorities into everyday work practices, interpret formal values for employees and shape the immediate social climate in which employees decide whether to speak openly, ask for help, admit mistakes or withhold knowledge. In public organizations, this role is complex because managers must balance formal rules, accountability requirements, and human-centered values such as respect, openness, and cooperation.

This paper argues that values-based behaviour of middle managers may be an important but underexplored condition affecting knowledge hiding. While knowledge management research has extensively examined knowledge sharing, trust and organizational culture, less attention has been paid to how managers' enacted values influence employees' willingness to share or hide knowledge. Declared organizational values alone are insufficient. Values become meaningful only when they are visible in everyday managerial behaviour: how managers communicate, support employees, respond to mistakes, distribute responsibility and model acceptable conduct.

The aim of this paper is to explore how middle managers' values-based behaviour is understood and enacted in a public organization, and how this behaviour is perceived to relate to knowledge hiding. The study used a mixed-methods approach, the qualitative interview data from middle managers in a public-sector organization were presented at this stage. It contributes to knowledge management and public management literature by connecting three areas that are often discussed separately: universal values theory, values-based leadership and knowledge hiding.

2. Theoretical Background

Values are important because they orient behaviour. Schwartz (1992; 2012) defines values as trans-situational desirable goals that serve as guiding principles in people's lives. His theory identifies ten basic value types: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence and universalism. These values are organized in a circular motivational structure. Values located close to each other are motivationally compatible, whereas opposing values are more likely to create tension. For example, openness to change may conflict with security and conformity, while benevolence and universalism may conflict with power-oriented priorities.

This framework is useful for analysing managerial behaviour because managers often face competing value demands. In public organizations, middle managers must reconcile procedural stability, accountability, and compliance with openness, support, development, and responsiveness. Their decisions are therefore not only technical or administrative, but also value-laden. The way managers interpret and prioritize values can influence how they respond to employee mistakes, uncertainty, conflict and requests for support.

Schwartz (2012) also explains how values shape action. Values are connected to emotions, express desired goals, transcend specific situations, function as evaluative criteria, are hierarchically ordered and influence behaviour through trade-offs between competing priorities. Bardi and Schwartz (2003) further show that values are associated with recurring behavioural tendencies, although this relationship depends on situational conditions.

A process perspective helps explain why declared values do not always become enacted values. Sagiv and Roccas (2021) argue that values influence behaviour through three mechanisms: accessibility, interpretation and control. First, values affect behaviour when they are cognitively accessible. Second, individuals must interpret a situation as relevant to a particular value. Third, internal self-regulation and external organizational conditions must allow the value to be expressed. This means that an organization may formally promote openness, teamwork or professionalism, but these values will not necessarily guide behaviour if routines, incentives or informal norms support silence, blame or status protection.

In this paper, values-based behaviour is understood as the practical expression of values in managerial action. It refers to how middle managers communicate, provide support, handle mistakes, encourage cooperation, distribute responsibility and demonstrate consistency between declared principles and actual conduct. This understanding is aligned with research on values-based leadership, which emphasizes that leadership becomes credible when espoused values are visible in daily behaviour (Chang, Budhwar and Crawshaw, 2021; Lemoine, Hartnell and Leroy, 2019).

The public sector provides a distinctive context for values-based behaviour. Public organizations are governed by formal rules and institutional expectations, but they are also shaped by public values such as legality, accountability, transparency, fairness and responsiveness (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007). These values provide normative direction for managerial action. However, they must be interpreted and applied in specific everyday situations.

Middle managers are especially important in this process because they operate at the interface between strategic decisions and operational practice. They translate abstract organizational principles into concrete actions and interactions. Currie (2000) emphasized the strategic role of middle managers in public-sector change, showing that they are not merely implementers of top-level decisions. Rather, they shape how employees understand and enact organizational priorities.

In this sense, middle managers act as value translators. Their behaviour signals what the organization's values actually mean in practice. If a manager responds to mistakes with blame, employees may learn that openness is unsafe, even if openness is formally declared as an organizational value. Conversely, if a manager responds with support and problem-solving, employees may experience openness and learning as real organizational norms. Thus, values-based behaviour is not only an individual leadership style, but also a social mechanism through which organizational values become visible and credible.

This is particularly relevant for knowledge management. Knowledge sharing depends on interpersonal relationships, trust, and perceived safety. When managers demonstrate respect, help, professionalism, teamwork, and openness to development, they may create conditions in which employees are more willing to ask questions, admit uncertainty, and share knowledge. When managers behave inconsistently or fail to embody declared values, employees may become defensive and more likely to withhold information.

Knowledge management literature distinguishes between explicit and tacit knowledge. Because tacit knowledge is difficult to codify, it depends strongly on social interaction. The SECI model developed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) explains organizational knowledge creation as a dynamic process involving four modes: socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization. These processes require interaction, dialogue, reflection, and shared practice. In public administration, knowledge formation can therefore be understood not simply as the transmission of information, but as a social process in which meaning is created through interaction, interpretation, and dialogue (Laihonen, Kork and Sinervo, 2024).

Knowledge hiding disrupts this process. Connelly et al. (2012) define knowledge hiding as an intentional attempt to withhold or conceal knowledge requested by another person. They identify three main forms: evasive hiding, rationalized hiding, and playing dumb. Evasive hiding occurs when a person provides incomplete or misleading information. Rationalized hiding occurs when a person justifies withholding knowledge by referring to reasons such as confidentiality or authority. Playing dumb occurs when a person pretends not to possess the requested knowledge.

Later research expanded this understanding by identifying delay as an additional form of knowledge hiding (Jin, Jin and Qian, 2023). Delay is not merely slow communication; it may serve as a deliberate strategy to withhold knowledge until it becomes irrelevant or useless. This broader understanding is important because knowledge hiding can be subtle and difficult to detect. It may appear as silence, postponement, selective communication, or excessive procedural justification.

Knowledge hiding is often associated with distrust, strained relationships, and negative organizational consequences (Serenko and Bontis, 2016). It may emerge not only from malicious intent, but also from insecurity, fear, competition, poor relationships or unclear responsibilities. This is important for public organizations, where formal hierarchy and fragmented structures may create situations in which knowledge becomes a source of control or protection.

The theoretical argument of this paper is that middle managers' values-based behaviour shapes the immediate social context in which employees decide whether to share or hide knowledge. Respectful and supportive managerial behaviour can strengthen trust and psychological safety. Professional and consistent behaviour can reduce uncertainty about what is expected. Team-oriented behaviour can reinforce shared responsibility. Openness to development can normalize learning, questioning, and admitting mistakes.

According to theoretical insights, values-based managerial behaviour is expected to reduce knowledge hiding indirectly through trust and psychological safety, while contextual conditions shape the strength of these relationships (Figure 1).

Values-based behaviour of middle managers may reduce knowledge hiding by supporting trust, psychological safety and open communication, while organizational culture, value alignment and cross-unit communication shape the strength of this relationship. This framework guides the empirical analysis of how middle managers understand values, how they enact them in practice and how they perceive their connection to knowledge hiding in a public organization.

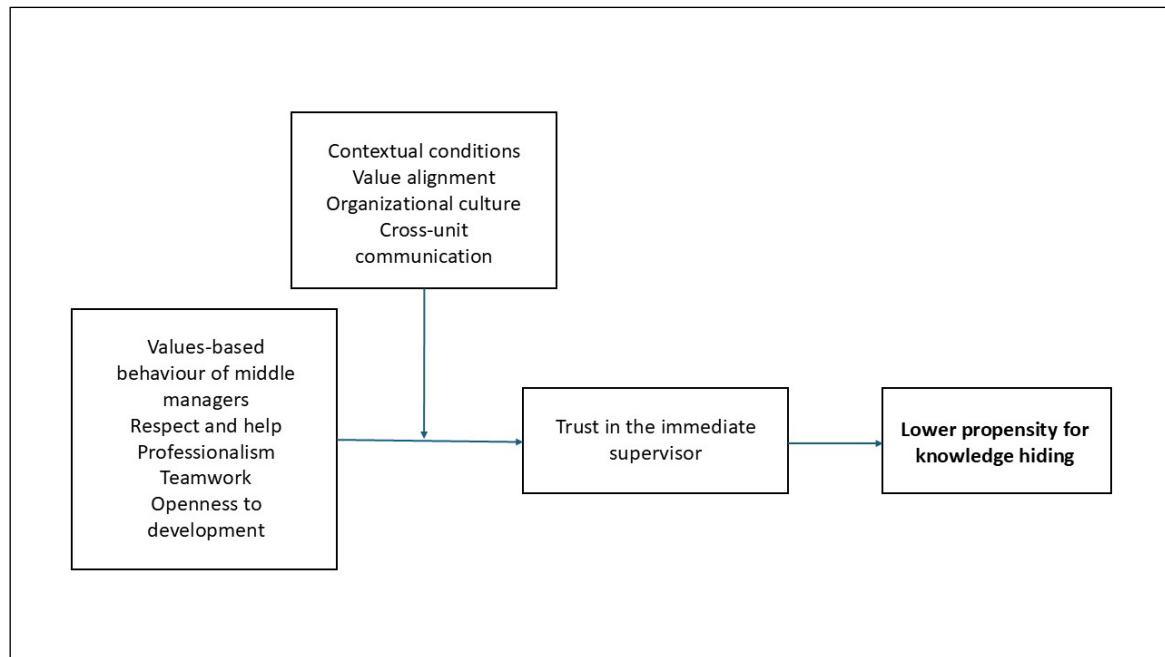


Figure 1: Conceptual model linking values-based behaviour and knowledge hiding

3. Methodology

To gain deeper insights into middle managers' values-based behaviour and its relationship with knowledge hiding, a case study strategy was chosen. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore how employees' perceptions of managerial behaviour relate to knowledge-hiding practices. At the first stage a qualitative study was conducted in the Lithuanian public sector. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten middle managers. This method allowed managers to reflect on their experiences and perceptions regarding values-based behaviour, trust, psychological safety, and knowledge hiding. The insights obtained are used to make the design of a subsequent quantitative survey, thereby ensuring conceptual clarity and empirical relevance. Such an approach enables methodological triangulation, enhances the robustness of findings, and strengthens the study's explanatory power. The qualitative phase informs the design logic and measurement structure of the quantitative phase (Table 1).

Table 1: Sequential mixed-methods research design

Stage 1 Qualitative study	Key insights	Design Bridge Instrument development	Stage 2 Quantitative study
Semi-structured interviews Purposive sampling Thematic analysis MAXQDA	Enacted values in practice Trust and psychological safety Knowledge-hiding patterns Cross-unit communication issues	Qualitative findings refine constructs Survey blocks aligned with themes Improved conceptual clarity Operationalization of key variables	Survey-based testing Broader respondent pool Relationship testing Validation of qualitative insights

The flexible interview format enabled the researcher to probe emerging themes while ensuring comparability across responses. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in managerial experience, functional responsibilities, and organizational units. The managers represented different departments and hierarchical structures, including administrative and operational functions. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which occurred after the tenth interview.

The interview guide was structured around five thematic areas aligned with the quantitative phase of the study: (1) understanding of organizational values, (2) values-based behaviour in managerial practice, (3) knowledge

sharing and knowledge hiding, (4) trust and psychological safety, and (5) leadership reflection and future perspectives.

All interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and interpretation. To ensure systematic data management and analytical rigour, the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was employed.

The credibility of the qualitative research was strengthened through data saturation and systematic thematic analysis (Table 3).

Table 3: Alignment between qualitative themes and quantitative survey blocks

Qualitative theme	Analytical focus	Linked survey block	Role in mixed-methods design
Understanding of organizational values	How managers define and interpret enacted values	Perceived alignment with organizational values	Clarifies the substantive meaning of value-related items
Values-based behaviour in managerial practice	How values become visible in day-to-day leadership	Values-based behaviour of middle managers	Supports operationalization of observable managerial conduct
Knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding	Situations, motives, and consequences of withholding knowledge	Knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding behaviours	Links interview evidence to survey measures of knowledge exchange
Trust and psychological safety	Conditions for speaking up, asking for help, and admitting mistakes	Trust in immediate supervisor; psychological safety	Captures the relational mechanisms highlighted in interviews
Leadership reflection and future perspectives	Perceived improvements and enabling conditions	Contextual and demographic variables	Provides interpretive background for variation across respondents

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the research objectives, data usage, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and all managers provided informed consent. The findings are presented in an aggregated form to protect participants' identities.

4. Research Results

4.1 Values as Practical Rather Than Symbolic Orientations

The interviews show that middle managers do not understand organizational values as abstract slogans. They describe values as a practical basis for managerial work, team relations, and organizational direction. Values are seen as part of "who we are" rather than merely what is formally written down. Managers associated values with authenticity, responsibility, acceptable conduct, and the quality of relationships with employees. In their accounts, values are meaningful when they are lived, not simply declared.

Four values stood out repeatedly: respect and help, professionalism, teamwork, and openness with development. Respect and help were described as daily availability, attentive listening, and concrete support for employees in difficult situations. Professionalism meant more than technical competence; it also implied responsibility, fairness, and commitment to meaningful outcomes. Teamwork was treated as the most foundational value because no manager, however competent, can perform alone. Openness and development were linked to learning, asking questions, acknowledging uncertainty, and improving collectively.

These accounts indicate that managers interpret values behaviourally. Values become visible through the way managers speak, respond, prioritize, and support others. This supports Sagiv and Roccas's (2021) argument that values need interpretive clarity and situational accessibility in order to guide behaviour. Values seem most

effective when managers can show employees what respect, teamwork, or openness actually look like in ordinary work.

4.2 Values-Based Behaviour in managerial practice

Managers described values-based behaviour as a consistent and relational style of leading. Respect and help were enacted through listening before judging, asking how to help, and standing by employees when pressure came from elsewhere in the hierarchy. Professionalism appeared as a mature stance: taking responsibility, not shifting blame downward, reflecting on one's own actions, and defending decisions when necessary. Teamwork was enacted through shared problem solving, consultation, and inclusion of different competences in decisions. Openness and development were expressed by normalizing questions, allowing mistakes, and encouraging learning rather than silent compliance.

Table 3: Core values identified in the qualitative study and their behavioural expression

Core value	Behavioural expression in managerial practice	Expected implication for the knowledge-sharing climate
Respect and help	Listening, availability, and constructive support in difficult situations	Encourages openness and lowers defensive withholding
Professionalism	Responsibility, fairness, consistency, and reasoned decision-making	Strengthens credibility and confidence in supervisory conduct
Teamwork	Shared problem-solving, consultation, and collaborative responsibility	Reinforces the norm that knowledge is a collective resource
Openness to development	Admitting uncertainty, asking questions, and learning from mistakes	Supports psychological safety and speaking up

A strong theme across the interviews was that managers saw themselves as role models. Values were believed to spread less through formal communication than through observed conduct. When a manager behaves consistently and visibly according to declared values, employees are more likely to treat those values as credible. When there is a gap between words and actions, values lose force. This was especially visible in discussions of trust: managers repeatedly argued that employees believe in values only when managers enact them under pressure, not when circumstances are easy.

Managers also described a characteristic response when organizational values were not followed. Rather than reacting immediately through blame or punishment, they first tried to understand the situation. This usually involved identifying obstacles, holding one-to-one conversations, clarifying expectations, and setting behavioural boundaries. The emphasis on diagnosis before sanction suggests that, in this case, values-based management is not primarily moralizing; it is relational and corrective. At the same time, they acknowledged limits to managerial influence. Some believed that values can be cultivated but not fully imposed, especially if an employee fundamentally rejects them.

4.3 Trust and Psychological Safety as Relational Outcomes

Managers generally assessed trust within their own teams as moderate to high, though never complete or fixed. Trust was described as something built gradually through everyday reliability. Confidentiality, keeping promises, consistency between words and deeds, and being present in difficult moments were all mentioned as key mechanisms. Employees trusted managers when they believed sensitive conversations would remain protected and that managers would not abandon them when problems escalated.

Psychological safety was described in a similarly relational way. Employees were considered psychologically safer when they could admit mistakes, ask "naive" questions, and seek help without fear of punishment or humiliation. Several managers stressed the importance of creating a non-punitive climate in which errors trigger discussion and learning rather than blame. Yet managers also noted that safety is uneven. It tends to weaken around highly sensitive issues, personal vulnerabilities, or previous negative experiences that employees bring from elsewhere.

These findings suggest that trust and psychological safety are not abstract team attributes but ongoing achievements of managerial conduct. They are sustained through the small but repeated practices of accessibility, calm reaction, confidentiality, and supportive dialogue. In this sense, values-based behaviour appears to work indirectly by creating a safer relational climate for speaking up and sharing what one knows.

4.4 Knowledge Hiding Inside Teams and Across the Organization

Most managers reported that knowledge hiding within their own teams was limited and typically episodic rather than systemic. When it did occur, they associated it with weak interpersonal relationships, dissatisfaction with the manager, insecurity, selective information control, or attempts to preserve status. Some managers described employees who kept information to themselves in order to remain indispensable or to maintain a sense of monopoly over a process. Others pointed to routine, habit, or the desire to “do everything oneself” as less hostile but still harmful drivers of concealment.

Importantly, managers did not portray knowledge hiding mainly as deliberate sabotage. In their experience, it often grew from insecurity, poor communication, or defensive self-protection. One particularly strong interpretation described withholding needed knowledge as a subtle form of pressure that can weaken another person’s confidence and dignity. This indicates that knowledge hiding may be experienced not only as an information problem but also as a relational and moral one.

A crucial result is that managers more often identify serious knowledge-hiding risks beyond the immediate team level. They observed more fragmented communication, selective information flow, and competitive behaviour between departments and across hierarchical layers than inside their own units. Information was sometimes described as concentrated in certain units, released without explanatory context, or controlled in ways that reinforced power asymmetries. In these accounts, the problem was not simply individual unwillingness to share, but organizational fragmentation: decisions communicated as directives, unclear ownership of information, lack of cross-unit dialogue, and weak shared understanding of organizational purpose.

This finding extends the analysis of knowledge hiding from dyadic interaction to the broader organizational context. Even where team-level climates are comparatively healthy, higher-level structural and cultural conditions may still obstruct knowledge flow. The risk is therefore not confined to whether employees hide knowledge from one another in direct exchanges. It also lies in whether the organization creates silos, selective visibility, and asymmetrical access to meaning.

4.5 Practices That Support Knowledge Sharing

Managers identified several practices that reduce knowledge hiding and encourage sharing:

- they emphasized regular dialogue: team meetings, one-to-one conversations, and opportunities to raise problems early. Such spaces prevent issues from becoming “frozen” at the middle-management level and help avoid resentment.
- managers stressed the importance of repeatedly connecting work to a common mission. When employees understand that results are collective, there is less justification for hoarding knowledge as personal property.
- the manager’s own openness was considered decisive. Employees were more willing to disclose what they knew when managers themselves shared information, explained decisions, and showed vulnerability where appropriate.
- managers highlighted recognition and appreciation. Thanking employees for concrete contributions reinforced the idea that sharing knowledge is valued.
- some managers explicitly linked knowledge sharing to modern management principles in the public sector: less hierarchy, more dialogue, more trust in expertise, and more room for collaborative problem solving.

These practices show that knowledge sharing is maintained not only by formal systems, but by a moral and relational order, in which employees feel respected, useful, and safe. Middle managers play a central role in sustaining that order.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to examine how middle managers’ values-based behaviour is related to knowledge hiding. The findings suggest that values matter not because they exist as declarative statements, but because managers enact them in visible and repeatable ways. Respect and help, professionalism, teamwork, and openness to

development were not treated by managers as aspirational labels; they were described as concrete behavioural expectations that shape how managers respond to problems, mistakes, and employee needs.

The first-stage research results show that middle managers work as practical translators of organizational values. This supports work on values-based leadership and public management by demonstrating that middle managers occupy a critical position between organizational rhetoric and lived organizational reality. In public organizations, where formal structures are strong and value conflicts are frequent, this translational role is especially important.

This study links values-based behaviour to the social conditions of knowledge exchange. Trust and psychological safety emerged as important relational outcomes of managers' daily conduct. Although this qualitative design does not test mediation statistically, it strongly suggests that values-based behaviour reduces knowledge-hiding risk by making it safer for employees to speak up, ask for help, and admit not knowing. The implication for knowledge management is that sharing climates are not produced by systems alone; they are co-produced by the moral texture of supervision.

The research shows that knowledge hiding in public organizations should be analysed holistically. In this case, managers described relatively limited hiding within their own teams but more serious barriers across departments and hierarchical levels. This means that values-based team leadership is not sufficient on its own. Organizational-level communication patterns, leadership continuity, and cross-unit collaboration structures also shape the ability to share knowledge.

For practice, the findings suggest that values need to be discussed in relation to concrete managerial situations: mistakes, workload, cross-unit coordination, confidentiality, and decision explanation. Middle managers should be supported not only through technical training, but also through reflective development focused on dialogue, consistency, and non-punitive problem-solving. If the goal is to reduce knowledge hiding, organizations should also review whether information ownership, cross-unit interfaces, and senior-level communication inadvertently reward selective disclosure.

Future research could use comparative designs across public organizations, include employees' perspectives, or combine qualitative evidence with survey-based testing of trust, psychological safety, values alignment, and knowledge hiding.

In conclusion, the case indicates that middle managers' values-based behaviour matters for knowledge management because it shapes the relational climate in which knowledge is either shared or hidden. When managers consistently enact respect, help, professionalism, teamwork, and openness, employees are more likely to feel safe and included and less likely to conceal what they know. When values are fragmented, inconsistently enacted, or undermined by wider organizational structures, knowledge hiding becomes more likely. For public organizations seeking both integrity and learning capacity, values-based middle management is therefore not peripheral; it is foundational.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the research objectives, data usage, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and all managers provided informed consent. The findings are presented in an aggregated form to protect participants' identities.

AI Declaration: AI tools were used for translation support and language editing during the preparation of the paper.

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