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Developing a Qualitative Model of Responsibility Culture with a Blame-Free Management Approach in Iranian Governmental Organizations

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a qualitative model of responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in Iranian governmental organizations. The research method was qualitative, based on grounded theory. The statistical population included experts familiar with the subject, such as government managers, human resource specialists, academic researchers, and policymakers in the labor and civil service sectors, who were selected purposefully and through snowball sampling. Entry criteria included having executive or research experience relevant to the topic and familiarity with Iran's bureaucratic challenges. In total, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted, each averaging 60 minutes in duration, and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were recorded and documented with participants' consent. Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2020 software in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the first stage, 455 conceptual statements were extracted, which were reduced to 132 initial codes, then to 35 axial codes, and finally to 8 core categories. These categories included: culture and trust, structure and technology, leadership and management, legal and regulatory, economic and resources, assessment and evaluation, environmental and contextual, and education and capacity building. The validity of the findings was assessed through the criteria of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. The average coding reliability was 84.57%. By explaining the key dimensions of responsibility culture and identifying its barriers and facilitators within governmental structures, this research can significantly contribute to the redesign of human resource policies, enhancement of accountability, and the development of blame-free management approaches in Iran's public sector.

Keywords: Responsibility Culture, Blame-Free Management, Leadership and Management, Education and Development.

1. Introduction

Accountability in organizations refers to the commitment and acceptance of the consequences of conscious decisions and actions by the organization and its employees regarding their duties, actions, and the outcomes of decisions in their professional roles. This principle entails ownership of work and results, consideration of the ethical consequences of actions, and acceptance of the outcomes of informed decision-making (Georgaki & Anastasiou, 2019). Each employee assumes responsibility for performance, decision-making, and progress within their respective job duties and roles and must fully



strive to improve effectiveness, productivity, and the quality of services or goods at their level. In the event of errors or mistakes, employees must acknowledge and correct them (Sanati et al., 2022). All employees should be accountable for their decisions, actions, achievements, failures, and limitations and accept them with honesty and transparency. Accountability is a vital factor in accelerating personal and social development and significantly influences organizational credibility (Jamshidpour & Moghaddam, 2023).

Organizational culture represents the attitudes, beliefs, traditions, and values in an organization and reflects the main concerns of organizational sociology (Kiakojouri, 1402). Therefore, in order to make organizations more dynamic and, as a result, more innovative, the driving and reinforcing factors must be identified and improved (Firouzyar, S and Kia Kojouri, 2013). Today's organizations must attach importance to modern educational environments and be equipped to coordinate with the information age and clarify educational systems (mirtghian & Kiakojouri, 2016).

A culture of accountability in organizations refers to a set of values, beliefs, and behavioral norms that emphasize individual responsibility and transparency regarding decisions and actions (Nikitin, 2021). In organizations with a strong culture of accountability, individuals feel obligated to be answerable for their actions and internalize accountability as a core value. Strengthening this culture requires modeling from higher management and senior leaders' support for accountability across all organizational levels (Jafari et al., 2022). Among the positive outcomes of such a culture are increased employee motivation and job satisfaction, improved interpersonal relationships, enhanced organizational cooperation, strengthened trust in leadership, and increased creativity and innovation (Sharma, 2019). On the contrary, managers' failure to adhere to these principles and reverting to a blame-oriented traditional style can erode trust and employee motivation. If this culture is perceived merely as rhetoric rather than being internalized, employees' sense of responsibility and work commitment may weaken (Zarei, 2022). Thus, institutionalizing such a culture requires extensive training, patience, and persistent effort from managers to succeed.

Blame-free management is an approach that emphasizes ethical principles and respect for individuals while avoiding blame as a tool for motivation or behavioral correction. Unlike traditional management styles that may rely on pressure or threats, blame-free management focuses on promoting cooperation, trust, and intrinsic motivation. This includes practices such as fostering a culture of constructive criticism, encouraging learning from mistakes, improving interpersonal communication, and creating a safe space for expressing ideas and opinions (Lupton & Warren, 2018). This management style can be promoted through an organizational culture based on respect, trust, and collaboration (Roulet & Pichler, 2020). Creating a space where individuals can voice their ideas and learn from mistakes without fear of blame or punishment fosters greater accountability and motivation. Additionally, a culture of constructive criticism focused on solutions and learning rather than blame improves performance and drives motivation (Karimi, 2020). Overall, blame-free management fosters a culture of respect, trust, and cooperation that enhances employee accountability and motivation.

Governmental organizations must possess a dynamic and meritocratic organizational culture to effectively fulfill their critical roles in national economies. Such a culture facilitates the realization of employee potential and fosters conditions conducive to innovation and productivity. A merit-based culture that emphasizes professional competence and individual merit enables qualified personnel to ascend to managerial and leadership positions, enhancing governmental organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Consequently, senior managers must strategically plan and adopt appropriate human resource policies to cultivate such a transformative culture. Employee accountability plays a fundamental role in organizational success. Employees with a strong sense of responsibility carry out their duties with diligence, precision, and dedication. They strive to enhance organizational efficiency and productivity and prevent the occurrence of errors or mistakes (Hosseini & Sargazi, 2020). Responsible employees are also more motivated to learn from past experiences and mistakes by accepting responsibility for their actions and decisions. Therefore, enhancing employee accountability in governmental organizations is crucial to improving service quality, reducing errors and accidents, and ultimately increasing customer and stakeholder satisfaction.

Adopting a blame-free management approach in government organizations yields several advantages. By focusing on root cause analysis rather than blaming employees, this approach reduces the recurrence of similar mistakes. It enhances process efficiency and fosters a culture of trust and constructive dialogue, where employees feel safe to report errors without fear of



punishment. This facilitates faster process improvements. Furthermore, blame-free management enhances employee mental well-being, stimulates creativity and innovation, boosts job motivation, and ultimately improves organizational performance. Thus, implementing this approach is a crucial step toward achieving organizational excellence. Government organizations frequently face challenges in promoting employee accountability. Chief among these are hierarchical and bureaucratic structures that slow down processes and encourage responsibility avoidance. Additionally, rigid and excessive regulations discourage employees from accepting greater responsibilities (Ramezani et al., 2022). Moreover, weak reward and punishment systems diminish employee commitment (Siahpour & Jamehfar, 2021). Lack of job security and managerial stability are also critical challenges. Therefore, governmental managers must be aware of these obstacles and plan appropriately to institutionalize accountability within their organizations. When organizational members avoid accountability, instead of functioning as a cohesive team, individuals shift responsibility to others, undermining cooperation, increasing internal conflict, and decreasing overall organizational efficiency (Sackmann, 2022). Mutual accusations and criticism can further deteriorate work relationships and create a toxic work environment (Schloetzer et al., 2021).

Implementing effective managerial strategies to change organizational culture is essential. Leaders must take a transformative role in promoting values and principles that support accountability. Moreover, employee participation is vital; they should be recognized as key partners in the change process. Training and awareness on the importance of change and expected outcomes must also be provided (Izanloo et al., 2023; Jafari et al., 2022; Jamiri et al., 2022). Periodic performance evaluation and feedback regarding cultural change initiatives are important, as is revising and improving organizational systems and processes. Effective role modeling by leaders and system reinforcement are critical to facilitate and support cultural transformation. Ultimately, continuous support and follow-up enhance employee motivation and trust, ensuring sustained progress (Tasoulis et al., 2023).

Several management and organizational behavior theories are directly or indirectly related to the topic of “developing a responsibility culture model with a blame-free management approach in Iran’s public sector,” though none fully address the issue, indicating a theoretical gap. These include:

Total Quality Management (TQM) theory (Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988), which emphasizes collective employee participation and responsibility in continuous improvement but does not explore how to cultivate a culture of accountability in governmental organizations. The Learning Organization theory (Garvin et al., 2008; Senge, 1991) emphasizes learning from experiences and mistakes rather than blame and punishment, but its implementation in government organizations facing legal and structural constraints remains unexamined. Transformational Leadership theory (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985) highlights leaders’ roles in creating cultural change, but offers no practical strategies for public sector leaders to establish a culture of accountability and blame-free management. Strategic Human Resource Management theory (Becker et al., 2009; Lepak & Snell, 1999) stresses the alignment of HR policies with organizational strategy but requires further research on designing and implementing such policies to promote accountability in public organizations. Finally, Complex Systems theory (Holland, 1992; Mitleton-Kelly, 1997) emphasizes understanding internal complexity and interactions but needs further development to apply in transforming organizational culture and cultivating accountability in Iran’s public sector.

Institutionalizing a culture of accountability in organizations is fraught with challenges. Longstanding reliance on traditional, control-based management styles poses a major barrier to change, requiring significant time and effort. Furthermore, inflexible bureaucratic structures hinder the development of accountability culture (Mousavi & Fili, 2020). A lack of managerial competencies to promote such a culture often undermines these efforts. Mental and practical resistance from some employees toward increased responsibility also presents a major obstacle. Thus, successful cultural transformation depends on strong support from top managers and collaboration across all staff levels.

Without a culture that promotes learning and accepting responsibility for mistakes, employees are less likely to develop and grow. Continuous blame fosters a toxic environment where real solutions are rarely found. This lack of accountability reduces creativity and risk-taking, ultimately halting organizational progress (Daniel & Daniel, 2020). Fostering a culture that embraces learning from failure and encourages calculated risks is crucial for an innovative, adaptive workplace.



Organizational learning is diminished when mistakes are not acknowledged, harming both productivity and performance. As motivation and commitment decline, the work environment becomes toxic and counterproductive (Kump & Scholz, 2022).

Given the challenges organizations face in cultivating a culture of accountability, developing a comprehensive, applicable model is essential. Such a model, grounded in blame-free management principles, can help organizations identify barriers and plan step-by-step implementation strategies to promote accountability. This model is necessary as it provides a cohesive framework and practical guidance for managers to design and execute initiatives effectively. Implementing the model can also mitigate potential resistance.

Fostering a culture of accountability in Iran's public sector requires attention to several core principles. First, the culture of accepting responsibility must be deeply rooted, encouraging staff to acknowledge mistakes rather than conceal them. High value should be placed on continuous learning and improvement, fostering a culture that enables process refinement through learning from errors. Additionally, the organization should encourage error reporting and assure employees that reporting contributes to organizational betterment. Positive reinforcement for those who report mistakes should be strengthened. Finally, dissemination of information and training is critical to empower employees in identifying errors. Based on these points, the core research question emerges: What is the qualitative model of responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in Iran's public sector?

2. Methods and Materials

This research is qualitative in nature and grounded in data-driven inquiry, employing a grounded theory approach. The purpose of this study is to develop a qualitative model of responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in the Iranian public sector. Therefore, it is categorized as applied research.

The statistical sample consisted of: senior and mid-level managers in governmental organizations with at least 10 years of managerial experience; human resource experts specializing in organizational culture development; academic researchers in public administration or organizational behavior with a minimum of five years of relevant research experience; and policymakers in the domains of labor law and civil service.

Inclusion criteria encompassed practical or research experience in organizational accountability, familiarity with the bureaucratic challenges of Iran's public sector, and the ability to provide in-depth perspectives on blame-free culture. Additionally, the selection of experts from various governmental entities (such as ministries, executive bodies, and regulatory agencies) and from different geographic regions of Iran was taken into account to ensure the comprehensiveness of perspectives. Individuals without direct experience in the public sector or lacking relevant expertise were excluded to ensure the validity and relevance of the collected data.

Theoretical saturation was reached with 20 interviews. Participants were selected based on their direct relevance to the subject matter. The interviews began with the core research questions and concluded with an open-ended question such as, "Do you believe there is any aspect we have not yet addressed in this domain?" Interview duration ranged from 40 to 100 minutes, with the average being 60 minutes.

It is worth noting that to ensure accurate data capture, both note-taking and a specialized voice recorder were used during interviews. Ethical considerations were observed by obtaining consent from participants before recording each session. Interviews were held in locations agreed upon by the participants.

Of the 20 interviewees, 6 were selected purposefully based on the research team's prior familiarity and review of scientific literature, while 14 were recruited using the snowball sampling method introduced by the initial group. After scheduling each interview, participants received an explanatory letter via email or social media that outlined the study's objectives and included the interview questions, allowing them to be mentally prepared for meaningful engagement. The questions were modified as necessary before or during the interview, depending on the context.

To explore deeper and more specific aspects of the model, interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format until theoretical saturation was achieved with the 20th interview. Data coding was performed using MAXQDA 2020 software, where the identified central phenomenon and extracted codes were categorized through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.



Regarding the validation of the study, four criteria were examined and confirmed: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. To enhance credibility, the interview transcripts and extracted codes were shared with select participants for feedback. For transferability, documentation was prepared for other researchers, including demographic details, sample experiences, and the research context.

To ensure dependability, inter-coder reliability was calculated using agreement percentages between two coders.

Table 1. Inter-Coder Reliability Results

Interview No.	Total Codes	Agreements	Disagreements	Reliability (%)
3	38	16	7	84.21%
6	34	14	6	82.35%
12	39	17	8	87.17%
Total	111	47	21	84.57%

3. Findings and Results

Table (2) presents the demographic information of the interview participants.

Table 2. Demographic Information of Research Participants

ID	Occupation	Education	Age	Gender	Field & Specialization	Executive	Academic
M1	University Professor	PhD	45	Male	Public Administration		*
M2	Senior Government Manager	PhD	52	Male	Human Resource Management	*	
M3	HR Specialist	Master’s	40	Female	Organizational Behavior	*	
M4	Academic Researcher	PhD	47	Female	Organizational Culture		*
M5	Mid-Level Government Manager	Master’s	40	Male	General Management	*	
M6	Policy-Maker	PhD	50	Male	Labor Law and Civil Service Affairs	*	
M7	University Professor	PhD	42	Female	Strategic Management		*
M8	Senior Ministry Executive	PhD	55	Male	Executive Management	*	
M9	Organizational Behavior Researcher	PhD	39	Female	Organizational Accountability		*
M10	Senior Government Expert	Master’s	40	Male	Organizational Development	*	
M11	University Professor	PhD	48	Male	Public Administration & Bureaucracy		*
M12	Supervisory Organization Manager	PhD	53	Female	Monitoring & Performance Evaluation	*	
M13	Academic Researcher	PhD	41	Female	Professional Ethics		*
M14	Mid-Level Executive Manager	Master’s	44	Male	Change Management	*	
M15	HR Policy-Maker	PhD	49	Male	Human Resources Policy-Making	*	
M16	University Professor	PhD	46	Female	Knowledge Management		*
M17	Senior Executive Manager	PhD	51	Male	General Management	*	
M18	Academic Researcher	PhD	40	Female	Organizational Behavior		*
M19	Labor Law Specialist	Master’s	39	Male	Civil Service Law	*	
M20	Mid-Level Ministry Manager	PhD	50	Female	Human Resource Management	*	

To develop the qualitative model of responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in the Iranian public sector, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts. Through content analysis of these interviews, 455 meaningful expressions were extracted. During the open coding phase, these expressions were categorized into 132 initial codes. With further in-depth analysis, the codes were refined and consolidated into 35 axial codes. Ultimately, these 35 axial codes were grouped into 8 selective codes.

The findings derived from the interviews are presented below in the form of open and axial codes:

Table 3. Open Codes and Axial Coding

Interview Code(s)	Open Code	Axial Code
M7, M12, M3	Error acceptance for improvement	Belief in learning from mistakes
M15, M8, M4, M19	Motivation through learning from errors	
M2, M11, M6	Sharing mistakes for innovation	Psychological safety for expressing errors
M14, M9, M17, M5	Trust from open expression	
M13, M1, M16	Participation from psychological safety	
M10, M18, M20	Transparency from psychological safety	
M7, M3	Stress reduction from safety	Ethical values
M12, M8	Trust from professional ethics	
M9, M4, M19	Responsibility from ethical behavior	



M2, M11, M6, M17	Collaboration from ethical values	
M5, M14, M1	Positive culture from ethics	
M13, M16, M10, M18	Accountability from ethics	
M20, M7, M3, M15	Trust through apology	Promotion of a formal apology culture
M8, M12, M9	Open dialogue through apology	
M4, M19, M2	Respect through apology	
M11, M6, M17	Transparency through formal mechanisms	Formal error-reporting mechanisms
M5, M14, M1	Quick identification through mechanisms	
M13, M16, M10, M18	Collaboration through formal reporting	
M20, M7, M3	Follow-up through formal mechanisms	
M15, M8, M12	Trust through anonymous reporting	Digital platforms for anonymous reporting
M9, M4, M19, M3	Secure recording through technology	
M2, M11, M6	Error analysis through technology	
M17, M5, M14	Participation via digital access	
M1, M13, M16	Confidentiality through technology	
M10, M18, M20	Documentation through knowledge management	Organizational knowledge management systems
M7, M3, M15	Experience sharing from knowledge	
M8, M12, M9	Access to solutions from knowledge	
M4, M19, M2	Accuracy from data mining	Data mining and AI tools for error analysis
M11, M6, M17	Risk prediction via AI	
M5, M14, M1	Root cause analysis via data mining	
M13, M16, M10	Decision-making through AI	
M18, M20, M7	Cost reduction from integration	Integration with existing organizational systems
M3, M15, M8	Efficiency from system integration	
M12, M9, M4	Easy access from integration	
M19, M2, M11	Trust through participatory leadership	Participatory and supportive leadership style
M6, M17, M5	Innovation through managerial support	
M14, M1, M13	Collaboration from participatory leadership	
M16, M10, M18	Stress reduction through support	
M20, M7, M3	Responsibility through empowerment	Employee empowerment for decision-making
M15, M8, M12	Rapid accountability from empowerment	
M9, M4, M19	Creativity through empowerment	
M2, M11, M6	Reporting culture through training	Training managers to avoid blame
M17, M5, M14	Safety through managerial training	
M1, M13, M16	Trust via anti-blame training	
M10, M18, M20	Collaboration from managerial training	
M7, M3, M15	Judgment reduction from training	
M8, M12, M9	Acceptance via resistance management	Change resistance management
M4, M19, M2	Resistance reduction through transparency	
M11, M6, M17	Trust through change support	
M5, M14, M1	Trust from legal protection	Legal frameworks supporting whistleblowers
M13, M16, M10	Participation through legal protection	
M18, M20, M7	Fear reduction via legal protection	
M3, M15, M8	Transparency through legal frameworks	
M12, M9, M4	Honesty via bylaws	Supportive bylaws for whistleblowers
M19, M2, M11	Follow-up through bylaws	
M6, M17, M5	Safety via supportive policies	
M14, M1, M13	Trust from legal coordination	Coordination with labor and civil service laws
M16, M10, M18	Justice via legal alignment	
M20, M7, M3	Support through legal coordination	
M15, M8, M12	Transparency via legal coordination	
M9, M4, M19	Accountability through coordination	
M2, M11, M6	Transparency from legal limitations	Defining responsibility boundaries in exceptions
M17, M5, M14	Fear reduction through legal limitations	
M1, M13, M16	Justice through legal limitations	
M10, M18, M20	Decision-making from legal limitations	
M7, M3, M15	Coordination through conflict management	Inter-organizational legal conflict management
M8, M12, M9	Trust through conflict resolution	
M4, M19, M2	Integrity from conflict management	
M11, M6, M17	Culture via training budget	Allocation of budget for training and development
M5, M14, M1	Skills from training budget	



M13, M16, M10	Participation via development funding	
M18, M20, M7	Sustainability from training budget	
M3, M15, M8	Participation from financial incentives	Financial incentive systems for honest reporting
M12, M9, M4	Honesty from incentives	
M19, M2, M11	Motivation from monetary rewards	
M6, M17, M5	Justification via cost analysis	Cost-benefit analysis of the blame-free approach
M14, M1, M13	Cost reduction via blame-free approach	
M16, M10, M18	Resource allocation from analysis	
M20, M7, M3	Productivity via blame-free approach	
M15, M8, M12	Support from economic analysis	
M9, M4, M19	Facilitation via external resources	Attraction of external resources
M2, M11, M6	Technology through external resources	
M17, M5, M14	Sustainability via external resources	
M1, M13, M16	Accurate assessment from indicators	Qualitative and quantitative performance metrics
M10, M18, M20	Transparency via quantitative indicators	
M7, M3, M15	Satisfaction from qualitative indicators	
M8, M12, M9	Continuous improvement through indicators	
M4, M19, M2	Productivity from evaluation	Methods for evaluating organizational performance
M11, M6, M17	Weakness identification from evaluation	
M5, M14, M1	Support from impact evaluation	
M13, M16, M10	Standard enhancement via benchmarking	Benchmarking against international best practices
M18, M20, M7	Modeling through benchmarking	
M3, M15, M8	Innovation via benchmarking	
M12, M9, M4	Trust from benchmarking	
M19, M2, M11	Coordination from benchmarking	
M6, M17, M5	Quality through continuous monitoring	Quality control and monitoring
M14, M1, M13	Deviation identification through control	
M16, M10, M18	Sustainability from monitoring	
M20, M7, M3	Acceptance through satisfaction assessment	Employee satisfaction assessment of blame-free culture
M15, M8, M12	Strength identification from satisfaction	
M9, M4, M19	Trust through satisfaction measurement	
M2, M11, M6	Motivation from satisfaction evaluation	
M17, M5, M14	Acceptance through cultural adaptation	Adaptation to Iranian administrative culture
M1, M13, M16	Collaboration from Iranian culture	
M10, M18, M20	Reporting method from Iranian culture	
M7, M3, M15	Trust from cultural adaptation	
M8, M12, M9	Facilitation via bureaucratic alignment	Alignment with governmental bureaucracy
M4, M19, M2	Transparency from bureaucracy	
M11, M6, M17	Sustainability from bureaucratic alignment	
M5, M14, M1	Flexibility through environmental factors	Consideration of external environmental factors
M13, M16, M10	Acceptance from external factors	
M18, M20, M7	Coordination from external factors	
M3, M15, M8	Transparency from environmental factors	
M12, M9, M4	Innovation from external factors	
M19, M2, M11	Facilitation from political management	Managing political influences
M6, M17, M5	Trust from political management	
M14, M1, M13	Coordination from political management	
M16, M10, M18	Institutionalization from training	Continuous training programs
M20, M7, M3	Skills from continuous training	
M15, M8, M12	Participation from continuous training	
M9, M4, M19	Trust from continuous training	
M2, M11, M6	Acceptance via practical workshops	Practical workshops to promote blame-free culture
M17, M5, M14	Skills through practical workshops	
M1, M13, M16	Collaboration from practical workshops	
M10, M18, M20	Root cause analysis from systems thinking	Developing systems thinking skills
M7, M3, M15	Decision-making from systems thinking	
M8, M12, M9	Collaboration from systems thinking	
M4, M19, M2	Innovation from systems thinking	
M11, M6, M17	Sustainability from systems thinking	
M5, M14, M1	Coordination from inter-organizational training	Inter-organizational training for national alignment
M13, M16, M10	Standards from national training	



Based on the results of axial coding and the common concepts among the identified categories (Table 3), eight categories were extracted for developing the qualitative model of responsibility culture with a blame-free management approach in Iranian governmental organizations. These are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Axial and Selective Coding

Selective Code	Axial Code
Culture and Trust	Belief in learning from mistakes Psychological safety for expressing errors Ethical values
Structure and Technology	Promotion of a formal apology culture Formal mechanisms for error reporting Digital platforms for anonymous error reporting Organizational knowledge management systems Data mining and artificial intelligence tools for error analysis Integration with existing organizational systems
Leadership and Management	Participatory and supportive leadership style Employee empowerment for decision-making Managerial training to avoid blame Resistance management in change processes
Legal and Regulatory	Legal framework to protect whistleblowers Supportive bylaws for error reporters Alignment with labor and civil service laws Defining boundaries of accountability in exceptional circumstances
Economic and Resource-Based	Legal conflict management across organizations Budget allocation for training and development Financial incentive systems for honest reporting Cost-benefit analysis of the blame-free approach Attraction of external resources
Assessment and Evaluation	Qualitative and quantitative performance indicators Methods for evaluating impact on organizational performance Benchmarking with international experiences Quality monitoring and control Employee satisfaction assessment regarding blame-free culture
Environmental and Contextual	Adaptation to Iranian administrative culture Alignment with characteristics of public sector bureaucracy Consideration of external environmental factors Management of political influences
Education and Capacity Building	Continuous training programs Practical workshops to promote a blame-free culture Development of systems thinking skills Inter-organizational training for national coordination



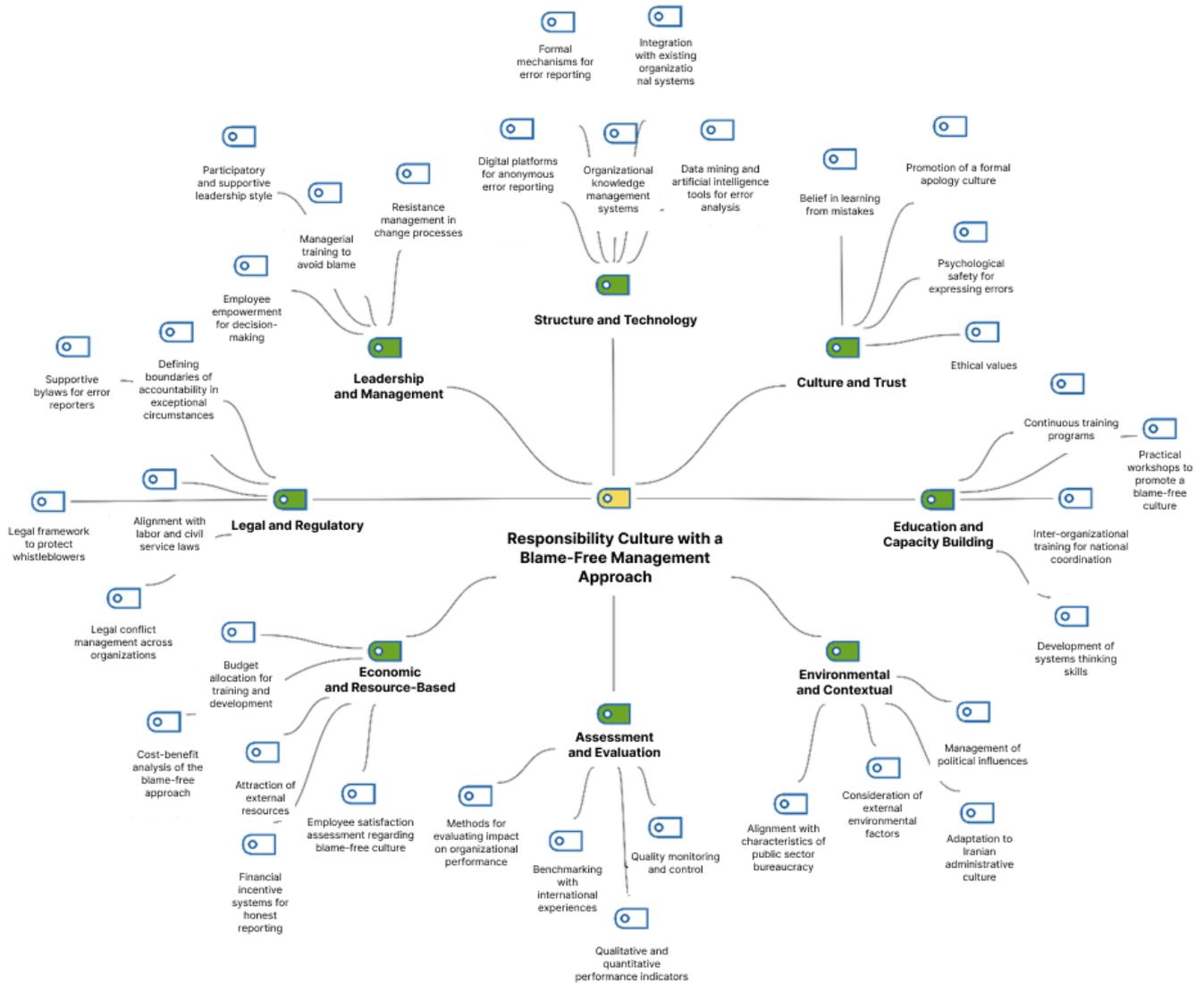


Figure 1. Paradigm Model of Responsibility Culture with a Blame-Free Management Approach in Iranian Governmental Organizations

Based on the findings from the selective and axial codes (Table 4), along with the attached visual displaying the hierarchical structure of the codes, a theory is proposed: The Networked Theory of Blame-Free Responsibility Culture.

This theory posits that a responsibility culture in Iranian governmental organizations is formed through a dynamic, multilayered network of interrelated components, including: culture and trust, structure and technology, leadership and management, legal and regulatory frameworks, economic and resource dimensions, assessment and evaluation, environmental and contextual factors, and education and capacity development.

The attached figure illustrates this network, showing central nodes (axial codes) and their connections to selective codes. In this network, each node functions both as an independent and dependent variable, and through mutual interactions, contributes to the reinforcement of a blame-free culture. For example, belief in learning from mistakes (under culture and trust) is linked to formal mechanisms for error reporting (structure and technology) and managerial training to avoid blame (leadership and management), ultimately enhancing psychological safety and employee participation.

Rooted in the qualitative analysis of 20 interviews and 455 meaning units, this theory provides a framework that not only aligns with Iran's cultural context but also offers scalability to other governmental organizations by incorporating technological tools and legal structures.



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study, which propose a model of responsibility culture based on a blame-free management approach in Iran's public sector, identified key components across eight core dimensions: culture and trust, structure and technology, leadership and management, legal and regulatory frameworks, economic and resource-based aspects, assessment and evaluation, environmental and contextual factors, and education and capacity building. These findings not only enhance the understanding of responsibility culture in Iranian government organizations but also provide a comprehensive framework for implementing a blame-free management approach. In the following sections, each dimension is analyzed and compared with previous studies to clarify its significance and originality.

The study revealed that belief in learning from mistakes, psychological safety in expressing errors, ethical values, and promoting a formal apology culture are key elements of a responsibility culture. These findings align with Izanlou et al. (2023), who demonstrated that accountability and perceived insensitivity scales in Iranian society possess strong psychometric properties and are culturally consistent. Their scale emphasized psychological safety and learning from errors, which corresponds with the core concept of blame-free management (Izanloo et al., 2023). Similarly, Lupton and Warren (2018) highlighted that a blame-free culture enhances organizational learning, which supports this study's emphasis on formal apologies and psychological safety (Lupton & Warren, 2018). However, this study places greater emphasis on ethical values and formal apologies due to the cultural context of Iran's public sector, suggesting a context-specific adaptation.

The study also identified formal error-reporting mechanisms, digital platforms for anonymous reporting, organizational knowledge management systems, data mining and artificial intelligence tools, and integration with existing organizational systems as crucial to fostering responsibility culture. These results are consistent with international studies, such as Lupton and Warren (2018), who underscored the importance of structured systems for organizational learning (Lupton & Warren, 2018). However, by incorporating data mining and AI tools for error analysis, this study extends previous research and introduces innovative applications of modern technologies within Iran's bureaucratic public sector, where system integration is often a significant challenge.

Findings related to participatory and supportive leadership styles, employee empowerment, training managers to avoid blame, and managing resistance to change are also notable. These align with Zamaniyan et al. (2022), who found that servant leadership positively affects accountability and self-efficacy (Zamaniyan et al., 2023). Similarly, Madhoshi and Norouzi (2015) emphasized the role of ethical leadership and a supportive organizational climate in enhancing responsibility (Madhoshi & Norouzi, 2015). This study provides a practical framework for blame-free leadership in hierarchical Iranian government institutions, making a meaningful contribution by focusing on manager training and resistance management.

Legal and regulatory aspects—such as frameworks for whistleblower protection, supportive bylaws, alignment with labor laws, and inter-organizational conflict management—emerged as critical. These findings align with Madhoshi and Norouzi (2015), who emphasized the importance of ethical codes and senior management support (Madhoshi & Norouzi, 2015). On an international level, Roulet and Pichler (2020) stressed the need for discursive frameworks to manage misconduct accusations and reduce blame (Roulet & Pichler, 2020). Given the bureaucratic and legal complexities of Iran's public sector, this study's focus on labor law alignment and conflict resolution offers a localized solution to overcome legal barriers in implementing a blame-free culture.

Other findings include budget allocation for training, financial incentive systems, cost-benefit analyses, and the attraction of external resources. This study adds to the literature by offering a practical and economic justification for implementing a blame-free culture in budget-constrained public institutions, marking a noteworthy innovation.

Performance indicators—both qualitative and quantitative—impact evaluation methods, benchmarking with international practices, and employee satisfaction assessments are among the study's additional findings. These results correspond with the work of Yeganeh Mazhar and Ebrahimpour (2021), who demonstrated that organizational culture explains up to 88% of accountability variations (Yeganeh Mazhar & Ebrahimpour, 2022). Lupton and Warren (2018) also emphasized the importance of continuous assessments to ensure the effectiveness of a blame-free culture (Lupton & Warren, 2018). By



introducing benchmarking and satisfaction evaluation tools, this study offers a comprehensive measurement framework, underutilized in Iran's public sector.

Adaptation to Iran's administrative culture, alignment with public sector bureaucracy, and political influence management are additional components supported by Jafari et al. (2022), who emphasized developing an organizational culture aligned with local characteristics (Jafari et al., 2022). Given the political and bureaucratic complexities of Iran's public sector, this study's attention to political influence and cultural alignment provides a context-specific and executable strategy.

Continuous training programs, practical workshops, development of systems thinking, and inter-organizational training were also identified. These findings support Jamiri et al. (2022), who stressed the importance of lifelong learning and self-awareness for enhancing responsibility (Jamiri et al., 2022). Lupton and Warren (2018) also highlighted the role of workshops in promoting blame-free culture (Lupton & Warren, 2018). By introducing inter-organizational training for national alignment, this study takes an innovative step toward integrating training efforts at the national level.

Overall, this study proposes a comprehensive and multidimensional model for developing responsibility culture using a blame-free management approach in Iran's public sector. Compared to previous studies, it goes beyond by emphasizing cultural alignment, technological innovation, and legal and economic frameworks. The model offers practical guidance for public sector managers to reduce blame, enhance organizational learning, and improve performance. However, challenges such as organizational resistance and resource limitations may hinder implementation, which warrants future investigation.

These findings have implications for a wide range of stakeholders. Government managers can implement participatory leadership, train for blame-free practices, and build a culture of trust. Public sector employees can benefit from increased motivation and psychological safety for error reporting, particularly through incentive systems. Policymakers and legislators can use the proposed legal frameworks to support whistleblowers and develop bylaws aligned with labor laws. IT developers can utilize findings related to digital platforms and AI-based error analysis tools. Researchers and academics may apply this model in comparative and localization-focused studies. Educational institutions can use it to design continuous training and blame-free culture workshops. The general public benefits from improved government service quality and transparency, while international organizations and management consultants can benchmark the model for advisory purposes. By offering a comprehensive framework, this study contributes to performance improvement and cultural adaptation in Iranian public organizations.

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed to improve organizational performance. Government institutions should design continuous training programs for managers focused on participatory leadership, avoiding blame, and managing resistance to change. Through practical workshops, they can promote a culture of formal apology and psychological safety. Secure digital platforms for anonymous error reporting, integrated with data mining and AI tools, should be implemented to facilitate error analysis and organizational learning. Policymakers should draft supportive bylaws for whistleblowers aligned with labor and civil service laws to reduce inter-organizational conflicts. Additionally, financial incentive systems should be established to encourage honest error reporting, thereby reinforcing responsibility culture. Finally, organizations should benchmark international experiences and develop qualitative and quantitative performance indicators to assess and enhance the effectiveness of blame-free culture. These recommendations, grounded in the study's findings, contribute to aligning with Iran's cultural context and improving public sector organizational performance.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.



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