



Target Pressure Paradox: Balancing Humanistic Ethics for Organizational Efficiency Through Employee Well-Being

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Abstract:

Target pressure has become an increasingly important issue because excessive performance demands may reduce employee well-being despite improving organizational efficiency. This study aims to explore the paradoxical relationship between target pressure, humanistic ethics, organizational efficiency, employee well-being, and sustainable educational productivity. A qualitative case study was conducted involving 20 purposively selected informants through semi-structured interviews, observations, document analysis, and field notes, with data analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model. The findings indicate that excessive target pressure weakened employee well-being, humanistic ethics balanced organizational efficiency, and balanced leadership strengthened sustainable educational productivity. The study proposes an integrated humanistic management perspective connecting organizational performance with employee welfare. Educational leaders should adopt balanced performance management systems that simultaneously prioritize accountability, ethical leadership, and employee well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Performance targets have become one of the defining managerial mechanisms for improving organizational performance across educational institutions. Schools, universities, and educational organizations increasingly rely on measurable performance indicators to strengthen accountability, institutional competitiveness, and productivity (Mukherjee et al., 2022; Omran et al., 2021; Siliņa et al., 2023). While performance targets can stimulate efficiency, excessive emphasis on numerical achievement often creates unintended ethical and psychological consequences for employees. Humanistic management perspectives argue that organizational sustainability depends not only on productivity but also on preserving employee dignity, well-being, and professional autonomy (Chaika, 2025; Rajaram, 2023). Educational institutions are particularly vulnerable because their outcomes depend heavily on human interaction rather than purely mechanical processes.

Despite the intended benefits of performance targets, many educational organizations face growing challenges arising from excessive target-oriented

management systems. Lecturers, teachers, administrative personnel, and educational managers frequently experience increasing workloads, psychological strain, emotional exhaustion, and work-life imbalance as institutions prioritize measurable outputs such as publication numbers, accreditation scores, graduation rates, and institutional rankings (Maqbali et al., 2021; Yurina et al., 2022). These conditions often reduce intrinsic motivation and encourage compliance-oriented behavior instead of meaningful educational innovation. Furthermore, prolonged target pressure may weaken organizational commitment, increase turnover intentions, and diminish collaborative organizational culture. Consequently, educational institutions encounter a paradox in which greater organizational efficiency is pursued through stricter performance controls (Asare et al., 2021; Piao et al., 2022). At the same time, the human resources responsible for achieving those targets experience declining well-being and reduced long-term productivity.

Previous studies have extensively examined performance management, organizational efficiency, and employee well-being from different disciplinary perspectives. Shi (2023), Şahin et al. (2024), and Teng et al. (2022) emphasized that performance measurement systems improve strategic alignment and organizational effectiveness. Zada et al. (2022) and Lo et al. (2021) demonstrated that psychologically safe workplaces enhance employee learning and organizational performance. Arias et al. (2021), Sánchez et al. (2024), and Kumar et al. (2024) argued that competitive organizational performance requires effective resource management and measurable outcomes, whereas Singhal et al. (2024) and Maj (2023) highlighted the importance of organizational culture in sustaining employee engagement. Nevertheless, these studies generally examine organizational performance, ethics, psychological well-being, or management practices separately. Limited research has integrated target pressure, humanistic ethics, organizational efficiency, employee well-being, and educational productivity sustainability within a unified analytical framework, creating an important theoretical and practical research gap.

The novelty of this research lies in developing an integrated conceptual perspective that explains target pressure as a managerial paradox rather than merely a performance management instrument. Instead of viewing organizational efficiency and employee well-being as competing objectives, this study proposes that humanistic ethics functions as a mediating organizational principle that balances productivity demands with employee welfare (Manongcarang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024). This perspective extends previous discussions by positioning ethical organizational practices as strategic resources for sustaining educational productivity over the long term. Furthermore, the study specifically focuses on educational organizations, where organizational success depends significantly on knowledge creation, professional commitment, collaboration, and human-centered service (Kang et al., 2023; Kimakwa et al., 2023). Addressing this issue is essential because sustainable educational development cannot be achieved solely through quantitative performance indicators without considering employees' psychological and ethical conditions.

Based on these circumstances, several important research problems emerge regarding the relationship between managerial target pressure and sustainable organizational performance. First, it remains unclear how target pressure influences organizational efficiency while simultaneously affecting employee well-being within educational institutions. Second, there is insufficient evidence on whether humanistic ethics can reduce the negative consequences of excessive performance pressure without compromising institutional productivity. Third, previous research has not adequately explored how educational productivity sustainability can be maintained under increasingly competitive organizational environments characterized by continuous accountability demands and performance evaluations. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the interaction among target pressure, humanistic ethics, organizational efficiency, employee well-being, and sustainable educational productivity to provide a more comprehensive understanding of organizational sustainability in education.

This study argues that organizational sustainability in education requires balancing performance expectations with human-centered ethical management rather than maximizing productivity through increasingly stringent targets. The preliminary proposition suggests that target pressure contributes positively to organizational efficiency only when accompanied by strong humanistic ethical practices that protect employee well-being and encourage intrinsic motivation. Conversely, excessive target orientation without ethical consideration may produce short-term performance gains while undermining long-term organizational resilience and educational quality. The originality of this research lies in integrating organizational efficiency, employee well-being, humanistic ethics, and the sustainability of educational productivity into a single conceptual framework that contributes to organizational behavior, educational management, and sustainability literature while offering practical guidance for policymakers and educational leaders in designing balanced performance management systems.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the paradoxical relationship between target pressure, humanistic ethics, organizational efficiency, employee well-being, and the sustainability of educational productivity within the context of higher education institutions (Kohn et al., 2024). A qualitative case study was selected because the research aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of a contemporary organizational phenomenon situated in its real-life context. The design enabled comprehensive exploration of managerial practices, ethical considerations, employee experiences, and institutional responses that could not be adequately explained through quantitative approaches. Furthermore, the case study approach facilitated holistic interpretation of the interaction between organizational performance expectations and human-centered management practices within educational organizations facing increasing accountability and productivity demands.

The research was conducted at one private university in Indonesia that has implemented a performance-based management system emphasizing research productivity, teaching performance, accreditation achievement, and institutional quality assurance. The institution was purposively selected because it represented an information-rich case where organizational target pressure was consistently embedded in managerial practices. A total of 20 informants participated in this study, consisting of the rector, vice rector, quality assurance director, three faculty deans, four department heads, six lecturers, and four administrative staff members. These participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in planning, implementing, monitoring, and experiencing institutional performance targets and organizational management practices.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, document analysis, and field notes to obtain comprehensive and credible evidence (Kekeya, 2023). Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences regarding target implementation, organizational ethics, employee well-being, and productivity management. Non-participant observations focused on organizational meetings, academic activities, and workplace interactions related to performance evaluation and managerial decision-making. Documentary analysis included institutional strategic plans, accreditation reports, quality assurance manuals, employee performance evaluations, workload policies, and organizational regulations. Throughout the research process, field notes were systematically maintained to document contextual information, organizational dynamics, researcher reflections, and emerging interpretations that supported a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification (Cole, 2024). Data condensation involved organizing interview transcripts, observation records, and documentary evidence through initial coding and thematic categorization. Data reduction focused on selecting relevant information, refining categories, and identifying meaningful patterns associated with the research objectives. Subsequently, data were displayed through thematic matrices, conceptual charts, and narrative descriptions to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were continuously verified by comparing evidence across multiple data sources, refining emerging themes, and ensuring consistency between empirical findings and the overall interpretation of the organizational case.

The trustworthiness of the findings was established using the qualitative criteria proposed by Lee et al. (2024), including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation, source triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking with selected participants. Transferability was achieved by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting, organizational characteristics, participant backgrounds, and research procedures. Dependability was maintained through a comprehensive audit trail

documenting all methodological decisions, coding procedures, and analytical developments. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and systematic documentation to ensure that the findings reflected participants' perspectives and empirical evidence rather than researcher bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study demonstrate how target pressure, humanistic ethics, and balanced leadership interact in shaping organizational efficiency, employee well-being, and sustainable educational productivity. The results are presented through three interconnected themes derived from empirical evidence collected during the research. Each finding provides a comprehensive understanding of organizational dynamics and serves as the basis for interpreting their theoretical and practical implications.

Target pressure undermines employee well-being sustainably

Target pressure was operationally defined in this study as the continuous organizational expectation requiring employees to achieve predetermined institutional performance indicators within specific deadlines. In contrast, employee well-being referred to the physical, psychological, emotional, and social conditions experienced during the implementation of these performance expectations. Field evidence demonstrated that target pressure extended beyond formal performance evaluation and became embedded in daily academic responsibilities, including research publication, teaching quality, accreditation preparation, administrative reporting, and community engagement. Participants consistently described target pressure as an organizational reality that influenced motivation, emotional stability, work-life balance, interpersonal relationships, and long-term professional commitment, thereby directly affecting the sustainability of educational productivity within the institution.

Interviews with academic staff revealed that increasing organizational targets generated persistent psychological pressure that gradually affected their professional and personal well-being. One lecturer explained, "Every semester the performance targets become higher, while the available time and institutional support remain relatively unchanged. I often continue working late into the night because I worry about failing to meet institutional expectations." Another lecturer similarly stated, "I no longer measure success by educational quality but by whether every required indicator has been completed before the evaluation deadline." These statements indicate that organizational targets gradually shifted employees' priorities from meaningful educational contributions toward fulfilling measurable institutional performance indicators, creating continuous psychological strain and reducing intrinsic professional satisfaction.

Administrative personnel and institutional leaders also acknowledged that sustained target pressure influenced emotional conditions and workplace relationships. An administrative staff member stated, "During accreditation preparation, almost everyone experiences exhaustion because every unit is expected to complete additional reports within limited timeframes." Meanwhile,

a faculty dean explained, "Performance targets are necessary for institutional competitiveness, yet I recognize that excessive pressure sometimes reduces morale and creates fatigue among lecturers and staff." These interview findings suggest that although performance targets contribute to institutional accountability, prolonged implementation without proportional organizational support may unintentionally increase emotional exhaustion, workplace stress, and declining employee well-being across multiple organizational levels.

Observational findings supported the interview results by demonstrating organizational behaviors consistent with prolonged pressure to meet targets. During quality assurance meetings and accreditation preparation activities, lecturers and administrative personnel frequently remained in their offices beyond regular working hours to complete institutional reports, research documentation, and performance evaluation requirements. Researchers also observed visible signs of fatigue, reduced informal interaction among colleagues, and increased urgency during managerial meetings approaching evaluation deadlines. These observations reinforce the interview evidence by showing that target pressure was not merely perceived psychologically but was manifested through observable workplace routines and behavioral adaptations. In other words, sustained organizational target demands reshaped employees' daily work patterns and gradually influenced their overall well-being.

Overall, the findings reveal a consistent pattern in which organizational target pressure systematically influenced employee well-being through interconnected psychological, behavioral, and organizational mechanisms. Participants experienced increased stress, emotional fatigue, and diminished work-life balance as performance expectations intensified over time. These experiences were reinforced by observable workplace practices characterized by extended working hours, heightened task urgency, and reduced opportunities for recovery. The findings further indicate that target pressure did not immediately reduce organizational performance but gradually weakened employees' psychological resilience and professional engagement. Consequently, maintaining sustainable educational productivity requires balancing institutional performance expectations with organizational practices that protect employee well-being and preserve long-term human resource capacity.

Humanistic ethics strengthens organizational efficiency balance

Humanistic ethics was operationally defined in this study as organizational practices that prioritize respect, empathy, fairness, collaboration, open communication, and employee dignity while pursuing institutional performance targets. Organizational efficiency balance refers to the institution's ability to achieve strategic objectives without sacrificing employees' psychological comfort, professional autonomy, and social relationships. Field observations demonstrated that humanistic ethics was reflected not merely in formal policies but in everyday managerial behaviors, including leadership communication, participatory decision-making, appreciation of employee contributions, conflict resolution, and mutual support among organizational

members. These observable practices illustrated how ethical organizational values were translated into routine activities that simultaneously maintained institutional effectiveness and employee well-being.

Table 1. Observation Results on Humanistic Ethics and Organizational Efficiency Balance

Observed Organizational Practice	Observed Indicator	Observed Evidence	Interpretation
Leadership briefings before weekly meetings	Leaders encouraged participation and respectful communication	Employees were invited to express opinions before decisions were finalized	Decision-making emphasized collaboration rather than authority.
Performance evaluation meetings	Constructive feedback instead of punitive criticism	Leaders discussed solutions collectively when targets were unmet	Performance management focused on improvement rather than blame.
Daily workplace interaction	Mutual assistance among lecturers and administrative staff	Employees voluntarily helped colleagues complete institutional tasks	Cooperation strengthened organizational efficiency during busy periods.
Recognition of employee achievements	Public appreciation for individual and team contributions	Certificates and verbal appreciation were provided during meetings	Recognition increased motivation and maintained a positive organizational climate.
Conflict management practices	Open dialogue and mediation	Leaders facilitated discussions before organizational conflicts escalated	Ethical leadership minimized interpersonal tension while maintaining productivity.
Academic coordination activities	Transparent communication across organizational units	Information regarding institutional targets was shared openly	Transparency reduced misunderstanding and improved work coordination.

The observational data indicate that humanistic ethics functioned as an organizational mechanism for balancing institutional efficiency with employee welfare. Leadership practices consistently demonstrated participatory communication, appreciation, transparency, and collaborative problem-solving rather than excessive managerial control. Employees responded positively through active participation, cooperation, and constructive engagement during organizational activities. These observations suggest that ethical managerial behavior reduced unnecessary workplace tension while preserving organizational discipline and accountability. In summary, the implementation of humanistic ethics did not weaken organizational performance expectations; instead, it created a supportive organizational environment where efficiency was achieved through trust, collaboration, respectful interaction, and shared commitment to institutional objectives.

The observed patterns consistently demonstrate that organizational efficiency was more sustainable when managerial practices were grounded in

humanistic ethical values. Leadership behaviors emphasizing dialogue, appreciation, fairness, and transparency encouraged stronger collaboration among employees and minimized resistance toward institutional performance expectations. Rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical authority, organizational effectiveness emerged through shared responsibility, positive interpersonal relationships, and collective commitment to institutional goals. The findings further reveal that ethical organizational practices strengthened employees' willingness to contribute voluntarily while maintaining harmonious workplace interactions. Consequently, humanistic ethics served as a balancing organizational force that integrated productivity, employee dignity, and long-term institutional sustainability within everyday educational management practices.

Balanced leadership promotes sustainable educational productivity

Balanced leadership was operationally defined as a leadership approach that simultaneously emphasizes institutional performance achievement and employee well-being through participatory decision-making, equitable workload distribution, transparent communication, and continuous professional support. Sustainable educational productivity refers to the institution's ability to consistently achieve academic, managerial, and quality assurance objectives while maintaining long-term organizational effectiveness and employee commitment. Field documentation demonstrated that balanced leadership was reflected through institutional policies, strategic planning documents, quality assurance reports, academic performance records, leadership meeting minutes, and evidence of professional development activities. These documented practices illustrated that organizational productivity was pursued alongside human-centered managerial principles, creating continuity between institutional performance expectations and sustainable educational development.

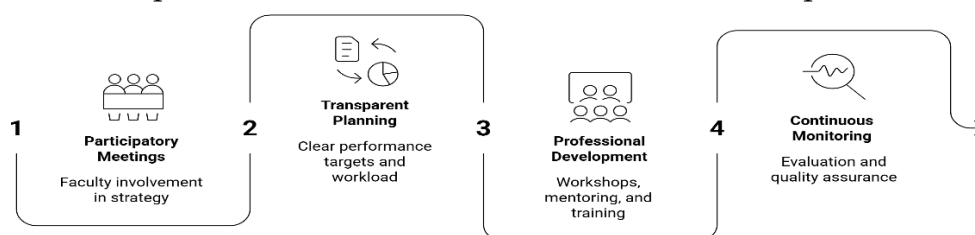


Figure 1. Achieving Sustainable Educational Productivity

Document analysis demonstrated that formal leadership policies and systematic managerial implementation consistently supported institutional productivity. Strategic planning documents outlined performance priorities while simultaneously incorporating professional development activities and collaborative evaluation mechanisms. Performance reports indicated continuous achievement of institutional targets accompanied by regular academic workshops, quality assurance monitoring, and capacity-building programs for lecturers and administrative personnel. Meeting minutes further revealed that leadership decisions frequently involved consultation across organizational units

before institutional policies were implemented. These documented organizational practices indicate that leadership effectiveness was institutionalized through transparent planning, continuous monitoring, and structured professional support, enabling productivity improvements without neglecting employee development and organizational stability.

In summary, the documented evidence demonstrates that sustainable educational productivity emerged through leadership practices that integrated organizational accountability with continuous employee empowerment. Rather than concentrating exclusively on performance outcomes, institutional leaders embedded professional development, collaborative governance, and transparent evaluation into formal organizational procedures. The documentation confirms that productivity improvements were achieved through systematic managerial planning, routine monitoring, and institutional learning processes that strengthened organizational adaptability.

Overall, the documentation reveals a consistent organizational pattern in which balanced leadership fostered sustainable educational productivity through interconnected managerial processes rather than isolated performance initiatives. Institutional planning, professional development, performance evaluation, and quality assurance were systematically integrated into routine organizational governance, creating continuity between leadership practices and institutional outcomes. The findings further demonstrate that sustainable productivity depended on transparent leadership, collaborative decision-making, continuous organizational learning, and structured employee development. This recurring pattern indicates that educational institutions were more capable of maintaining long-term organizational performance when leadership simultaneously promoted accountability, employee capacity enhancement, and ethical managerial practices within an integrated institutional management framework.

Discussion

The first finding demonstrates that sustained target pressure gradually undermines employee well-being by increasing psychological strain, emotional fatigue, and work-life imbalance. This finding is consistent with World Health Organization studies emphasizing that prolonged workplace stress negatively affects psychological health and organizational performance (Jolly et al., 2021; Shipman et al., 2023). It also aligns with Amy Edmondson, who argued that excessive performance pressure reduces psychological safety and employee engagement. However, the present study extends previous perspectives by demonstrating that target pressure in educational institutions affects not only individual well-being but also the long-term sustainability of educational productivity. Theoretically, the finding expands discussions concerning organizational paradoxes by integrating performance management with employee welfare (Dowling et al., 2023; Fan et al., 2022). Specifically, educational leaders should balance institutional targets with supportive managerial policies that prevent burnout and maintain sustainable professional commitment.

The second finding indicates that humanistic ethics strengthens organizational efficiency by encouraging participatory communication, fairness, transparency, and collaborative problem-solving. This observation corresponds with Hubbart (2023), who emphasized that organizational culture significantly shapes employee behavior and institutional effectiveness. Likewise, Mazloum et al. (2024) suggested that collaborative organizational environments promote continuous learning and improved performance. Nevertheless, this research demonstrates that ethical leadership functions not merely as an organizational value but as a practical managerial mechanism balancing efficiency and employee well-being simultaneously. Theoretically, the findings reinforce humanistic management perspectives by positioning ethics as a strategic organizational capability (Adarkwah, 2024; Qadhi et al., 2024; Shneiderman, 2020).

The third finding reveals that balanced leadership promotes sustainable educational productivity through integrated strategic planning, professional development, transparent evaluation, and continuous quality improvement. This result supports the strategic management perspective proposed by Kaplan and Fisher et al. (2023), who argued that organizational performance depends upon coherent alignment between strategy and implementation. Similarly, transformational leadership perspectives advanced by Berger et al. (2024) emphasize that supportive leadership enhances organizational commitment and productivity. However, the present study contributes by demonstrating that leadership sustainability emerges through simultaneous attention to institutional accountability and employee development. Finally, this broadens educational leadership literature by integrating sustainability with human-centered governance.

The present study offers significant theoretical and practical contributions by integrating target pressure, humanistic ethics, balanced leadership, employee well-being, organizational efficiency, and sustainable educational productivity into a unified qualitative framework. Unlike previous studies that predominantly examined these constructs independently, this research explains their dynamic interaction as an organizational paradox requiring simultaneous managerial and ethical responses. Theoretically, the findings enrich educational management and humanistic management literature by demonstrating that organizational sustainability emerges from balancing institutional accountability with employee welfare rather than prioritizing performance indicators alone. Practically, the proposed framework provides educational leaders and policymakers with evidence-based guidance for designing balanced performance management systems that strengthen organizational effectiveness while preserving employee well-being, ethical governance, and long-term institutional sustainability.

Collectively, the three findings illustrate that sustainable educational productivity cannot be achieved solely through increasing organizational targets or strengthening administrative control. Instead, organizational sustainability emerges from balancing performance expectations, ethical managerial practices, employee well-being, and strategic leadership within an integrated

organizational system. This integrated perspective differs from previous studies that generally examined these variables separately, offering a more comprehensive explanation of organizational effectiveness in educational settings. Theoretically, the study contributes an integrated understanding of the target pressure paradox through a humanistic management perspective. Practically, the findings guide policymakers and educational leaders to design balanced performance management systems that maintain accountability, organizational efficiency, employee welfare, and long-term institutional sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that sustainable educational productivity is achieved not through increasingly stringent performance targets but through balancing organizational efficiency with humanistic ethics and employee well-being. The most significant finding demonstrates that excessive target pressure gradually weakens employees' psychological well-being. In contrast, ethical organizational practices and balanced leadership create supportive environments that maintain both institutional performance and long-term productivity. The study contributes theoretically by integrating target pressure, humanistic ethics, organizational efficiency, employee well-being, and educational sustainability into a comprehensive qualitative framework for educational management. Nevertheless, the research is limited to a single institutional context and qualitative evidence. Future studies should involve multiple educational institutions, cross-cultural comparisons, and mixed-method approaches to strengthen theoretical generalization and empirical validation.

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