
**PERCEIVED WORK ETHIC OF GHANAIA COLLEAGUES: A
FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS ACROSS SECTORS**

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.5500>**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology to explore how Ghanaian employees perceive, describe, and evaluate the work ethic of their colleagues within their own employment settings, revealing the cultural norms, implicit standards, and underlying tensions that shape peer assessment of workplace diligence. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 40 participants drawn from public sector institutions, private Ghanaian-owned enterprises, and multinational corporations operating in Accra and Kumasi. Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended prompts designed to elicit participants' descriptions of colleagues they considered to have a strong work ethic, colleagues they considered to have a weak work ethic, the specific behaviors and character traits that distinguished these evaluations, and the tensions that arise when peer expectations conflict with organizational demands or individual preferences. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: punctuality and presence as the most visible and frequently cited marker of peer work ethic; initiative and discretionary effort as the distinguishing feature between minimally adequate and genuinely diligent colleagues; relational work values as an essential but contested component of peer evaluation; the tolerance spectrum as an implicit framework for evaluating colleagues who violate norms; envy and peer surveillance as tensions emerging from within-group work ethic comparisons; and the hypocrisy contradiction as the most frequently cited source of workplace demoralization. Participants' narratives revealed that peer evaluation of work ethic is a constant, informal, and emotionally consequential process in Ghanaian workplaces. Colleagues are continuously observed, compared, and discussed,

with evaluations based on a complex set of criteria that include punctuality, visible busyness, willingness to help, reliability, and the perceived authenticity of effort. Significant tensions emerged between the desire for collective success and resentment of colleagues who exploit group goodwill; between Ubuntu relational values that discourage confrontation and the frustration generated by persistent free-riding; and between organizational demands for individual performance and peer expectations of mutual support. The study contributes to understanding of workplace dynamics in Ghanaian organizations by illuminating the informal evaluative culture through which colleagues shape each other's work behavior, offering insights relevant to team management, performance systems, and organizational culture development.

KEYWORDS: Work ethic, peer evaluation, colleague perception, workplace norms, Ubuntu, Ghana, focus groups, social comparison, cultural tensions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In every workplace, employees watch each other. They notice who arrives first and who slips in just before closing. They observe who volunteers for extra assignments and who disappears when difficult tasks arise. They track who helps colleagues without being asked and who consistently finds reasons to avoid shared responsibility. This constant, informal peer surveillance is not merely idle curiosity or workplace gossip; it is the mechanism through which organizational norms are transmitted, maintained, and contested (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Employees learn what constitutes acceptable work ethic not primarily from employee handbooks or supervisor lectures but from watching which colleagues are respected, which are resented, and which are quietly excluded from informal collaboration (Noon & Blyton, 2007). The evaluations that colleagues make of each other's work ethic shape team dynamics, influence who is trusted with important tasks, affect informal rewards like social inclusion and cooperation, and ultimately determine whether a workplace functions as a cohesive team or a collection of individuals pursuing private advantage.

Despite the centrality of peer evaluation to workplace functioning, the specific content, structure, and consequences of how Ghanaian employees perceive their colleagues' work ethic have received limited empirical attention. Existing research has focused primarily on supervisor evaluations of subordinate performance or on formal performance management systems (Aguinis, 2013), with much less attention to the informal, peer-to-peer evaluations that constitute the daily fabric of organizational life. This gap is particularly significant in

Ghanaian organizational contexts, where Ubuntu communal values emphasize mutual obligation, collective responsibility, and relational harmony as central to work life (Gyekye, 1997). In such contexts, the evaluations that colleagues make of each other's work ethic may carry even greater weight than in individualistic workplaces because work is understood as fundamentally collective endeavour. A colleague who fails to contribute fully is not merely an inefficient individual but a violator of communal obligation, a threat to the collective's ability to achieve shared goals, and a source of resentment that undermines the relational fabric of the workplace (Metz, 2011).

The Ghanaian workplace presents particular features that shape peer evaluation of work ethic. High power distance means that subordinates may be reluctant to confront colleagues directly about work ethic deficiencies, instead relying on indirect communication, gossip, or social exclusion to express disapproval (Hofstede, 2001). Collectivism means that peer evaluation is not merely about individual productivity but about contribution to collective welfare; a colleague who works hard but refuses to help others may be evaluated more negatively than a less productive colleague who is reliably helpful (Gyekye, 1997). The informal economy's cultural influence, including the widespread practice of *susu* (rotating savings) and other cooperative labour arrangements, means that expectations of mutual support extend beyond formal job descriptions into informal norms of reciprocity that are enforced through peer evaluation rather than formal systems (Clark, 2010).

This study addresses the gap in empirical knowledge about peer evaluation of work ethic in Ghanaian organizations by conducting focus group discussions with employees across three sectors: public, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational. Focus group methodology is particularly well suited to exploring peer evaluation because the group context mirrors the social dynamics of workplace interaction: participants articulate their evaluations of colleagues, respond to others' evaluations, and collectively negotiate the norms and standards that should apply (Morgan, 1997). By asking participants to describe specific colleagues they consider to have strong or weak work ethic, and to explain the behaviors and character traits underlying these evaluations, this study aims to surface the implicit cultural grammar through which Ghanaian employees judge each other's workplace diligence.

The findings of this study have significant practical implications. Understanding how employees actually evaluate their colleagues' work ethic can help organizations design team structures, performance systems, and conflict resolution mechanisms that align with rather than contradict peer evaluative norms. Recognizing the tensions that emerge from peer evaluation including envy, surveillance, and the hypocrisy contradiction can help managers

anticipate and address sources of workplace demoralization. And illuminating the cultural specificity of Ghanaian peer evaluation including the weight given to relational helping alongside individual productivity can help multinational corporations and international development partners design culturally congruent interventions rather than imposing alien frameworks.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the ubiquity and importance of peer evaluation in shaping workplace behavior, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about how Ghanaian employees perceive, describe, and evaluate the work ethic of their colleagues. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding workplace dynamics in collectivist cultural contexts and practical consequences for team management, performance systems, and organizational culture development in Ghana.

First, the specific behavioral criteria that Ghanaian employees use to evaluate colleagues' work ethic have not been systematically identified. International research has identified dimensions such as punctuality, productivity, reliability, and helpfulness as relevant to peer evaluation (Liden, Wayne, Jaworski, & Bennett, 2004). However, the relative weight of these dimensions in the Ghanaian context, and the specific behaviors that operationalize them, remain unknown. It is possible that Ghanaian employees prioritize different dimensions for example, willingness to help colleagues may be more heavily weighted than individual productivity than employees in Western individualistic contexts. Without empirical identification of the criteria Ghanaian employees actually use, organizations cannot align formal systems with informal evaluative norms.

Second, the tensions and contradictions inherent in peer evaluation of work ethic have not been adequately examined. Peer evaluation is not a neutral, objective process but a socially embedded practice shaped by envy, competition, in-group favouritism, and other biases (Festinger, 1954). Employees may evaluate a hardworking colleague negatively because that colleague makes them look bad by comparison. They may evaluate a colleague with strong relational skills positively even if that colleague's individual productivity is low. They may resent colleagues who work too hard (creating performance pressure) and colleagues who do not work hard enough (creating unfair burden). Understanding these tensions is essential for managing the social dynamics of workplaces, but they have not been systematically explored in the Ghanaian context.

Third, the relationship between peer evaluation and Ubuntu relational values has not been empirically examined. Ubuntu's emphasis on harmony, mutual support, and collective obligation suggests that peer evaluation may be constrained by norms against direct criticism and public confrontation (Gyekye, 1997). Employees who evaluate a colleague negatively may express that evaluation through indirect means: gossip, social exclusion, or withholding cooperation, rather than direct feedback. These indirect expressions of negative peer evaluation may be invisible to formal performance systems but highly consequential for workplace relationships and individual well-being. The specific strategies Ghanaian employees use to express negative peer evaluations, and the consequences of these strategies, require empirical investigation.

Fourth, the intersection of peer evaluation with formal performance management systems has not been examined in Ghanaian contexts. Organizations invest substantial resources in formal performance appraisal systems, yet employees' actual behavior is shaped more by the immediate, ongoing evaluations of their peers than by annual supervisor ratings (Noon & Blyton, 2007). When formal systems reward individual performance but peer norms reward relational helping, employees face conflicting demands. How Ghanaian employees navigate this tension, which set of incentives they prioritize, and how the conflict affects their work behavior and workplace relationships are unanswered empirical questions.

Fifth, the consequences of peer evaluation for workplace demoralization have not been explored. The finding in other cultural contexts that perceived inequity colleagues who receive the same rewards while contributing less effort is a powerful source of demoralization and reduced effort (Adams, 1965) may be particularly significant in Ghanaian workplaces where colleagues work in close proximity, observe each other's behavior continuously, and have long-term relationships that amplify the emotional impact of perceived free-riding. Understanding how peer evaluation produces or mitigates demoralization is essential for designing workplaces that sustain employee motivation over time.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore how Ghanaian employees perceive, describe, and evaluate the work ethic of their colleagues within their own employment settings, revealing the cultural norms, implicit standards, and underlying tensions that shape peer assessment of workplace diligence across public, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational sectors.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 4.1 To identify the specific behaviors, character traits, and work habits that Ghanaian employees use to distinguish colleagues with strong work ethic from colleagues with weak work ethic.
- 4.2 To examine the relative weight that employees assign to individual productivity versus relational helping in evaluating colleagues' work ethic.
- 4.3 To explore the tensions and contradictions that emerge from peer evaluation, including envy, peer surveillance, and resentment of free-riders.
- 4.4 To identify the strategies employees use to express negative peer evaluations without violating Ubuntu norms of harmony and direct confrontation.
- 4.5 To examine the consequences of peer evaluation for workplace relationships, team dynamics, and individual motivation.
- 4.6 To compare peer evaluation patterns across public, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational sectors to identify sector-specific dynamics and common cultural patterns.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: What specific behaviors, character traits, and work habits do Ghanaian employees use to identify colleagues with strong work ethic versus colleagues with weak work ethic?

Research Question Two: How do Ghanaian employees weigh individual productivity against relational helping (Ubuntu values) when evaluating colleagues' work ethic?

Research Question Three: What tensions and contradictions emerge from peer evaluation of work ethic, and how do employees navigate these tensions?

Research Question Four: How do employees express negative peer evaluations in cultural contexts that value harmony and discourage direct confrontation?

Research Question Five: How does peer evaluation of work ethic affect workplace relationships, team dynamics, and individual motivation in Ghanaian organizations?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy. Social Constructionism, as elaborated by Berger

and Luckmann (1966), posits that social reality, including the meaning of work ethic and the standards for evaluating colleagues, is actively constructed through shared meanings, language, and social interaction. From this perspective, what constitutes "good work ethic" is not a fixed, universal standard but a locally negotiated understanding that emerges from the specific history, relationships, and interactions of a particular workplace (Gergen, 2015). Employees do not simply apply pre-existing standards when evaluating colleagues; they co-construct standards through conversation, comparison, and collective sense-making. Focus group discussions, in which participants articulate their evaluations and respond to others' evaluations, are therefore not merely a method for accessing pre-existing beliefs but are themselves sites of social construction where work ethic standards are negotiated and contested.

Social Constructionism directs analytical attention toward the discursive strategies participants use to justify their evaluations of colleagues. It asks: What linguistic resources do employees draw upon to claim that a colleague has weak work ethic? How do they manage the social risk of criticizing a colleague who may be absent from the focus group but could be identified? How do they negotiate disagreement when group members evaluate the same colleague differently? These questions require qualitative inquiry that captures the interactive process of evaluation, not only its content (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the specific content of Ghanaian peer evaluation. The Ubuntu principle, encapsulated in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), posits that personhood and moral value are constituted through relationships and communal participation (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this philosophical orientation manifests in Akan concepts such as *suban* (character) and the expectation that a good person is someone who contributes to collective welfare (Gyekye, 1997). Ubuntu philosophy suggests that Ghanaian employees may evaluate colleagues not only on individual productivity but also on relational dimensions: Does this colleague help others without being asked? Does this colleague share credit and accept shared responsibility? Does this colleague maintain harmonious relationships even under pressure? A colleague who is highly productive but refuses to help others, who is punctual but arrogant, may be evaluated negatively because they violate Ubuntu relational expectations.

Ubuntu philosophy also illuminates the constraints on peer evaluation. The value placed on harmony and the cultural norm against public confrontation (Gyekye, 1997) suggest that Ghanaian employees may avoid expressing negative peer evaluations directly. Instead,

negative evaluations may be expressed indirectly through gossip, social exclusion, withholding cooperation, or the silent withdrawal of goodwill. Understanding these indirect expressions requires attention to the social dynamics of workplace interaction, not only to explicit evaluative statements.

6.2 Peer Evaluation in Organizational Contexts: Theoretical Foundations

Peer evaluation, also known as coworker assessment or peer rating, has been extensively studied in organizational psychology. Peer evaluations are used formally in some organizations as input to performance appraisals, promotion decisions, and team-based rewards (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). However, the vast majority of peer evaluation occurs informally, in the ongoing social interaction of workplace life. Employees constantly form and update impressions of their colleagues' work ethic, competence, reliability, and trustworthiness, and these impressions shape decisions about who to collaborate with, who to seek help from, who to avoid, and who to exclude from informal networks (Liden et al., 2004).

Research on peer evaluation has identified several consistent findings. Peer evaluations are generally reliable and valid predictors of job performance, often correlating as strongly with objective performance measures as supervisor ratings (Conway, Lombardo, & Sanders, 2001). However, peer evaluations are also subject to biases: friendship effects (rating friends more positively), competition effects (rating rivals more negatively), and ingroup favouritism (rating members of one's own subgroup more positively) (Kane & Lawler, 1978). In collectivist cultural contexts, these biases may be amplified because relationships are more enduring and group boundaries more salient than in individualistic contexts (Hofstede, 2001). The specific criteria that employees use to evaluate peers vary across contexts. Research in Western individualistic contexts has identified task performance (quantity and quality of output), citizenship behavior (helping colleagues, volunteering for extra work), and counterproductive behavior (absenteeism, lateness, social loafing) as the primary dimensions (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). However, research in collectivist contexts has found that relational harmony and face-saving behavior may be additional dimensions (Kim & Nam, 1998). The present study extends this line of inquiry by examining peer evaluation criteria in Ghana's Ubuntu-influenced organizational culture.

6.3 Social Comparison, Envy, and Workplace Tensions

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that individuals evaluate their own abilities and opinions by comparing themselves to others. In workplace contexts, employees continuously compare their own effort, performance, and rewards to those of their colleagues.

These comparisons have significant emotional and behavioral consequences. Upward comparisons (comparing oneself to a more diligent or productive colleague) may produce inspiration, motivation to improve, or envy and demoralization, depending on whether the comparison target is perceived as attainable. Downward comparisons (comparing oneself to a less diligent colleague) may produce satisfaction, relief, or contempt, depending on the context.

Envy the painful emotion experienced when another person possesses something one desires is a common consequence of social comparison in workplaces (Smith & Kim, 2007). Envy of a colleague's work ethic or performance can motivate constructive self-improvement or destructive behaviors such as social undermining, gossip, and active obstruction. In collectivist cultural contexts where open competition is discouraged, envy may be suppressed or expressed indirectly, but it does not disappear (Kim & Nam, 1998). The present study examines how envy shapes peer evaluation of work ethic in Ghanaian workplaces.

Social loafing the tendency for individuals to exert less effort when working collectively than when working individually is a related tension in peer evaluation (Karau & Williams, 1993). Employees who perceive that colleagues are free-riding, contributing less than their fair share to collective tasks, experience resentment, reduce their own effort to restore equity, and may withdraw from cooperative relationships. The perception of free-riding is a powerful source of workplace demoralization (Adams, 1965). In Ghanaian workplaces, where collectivism and Ubuntu emphasize collective responsibility, the violation of fair contribution norms may be particularly consequential, as free-riders are seen not merely as inefficient but as morally deficient.

6.4 Cultural Context: Ubuntu, Harmony, and Indirect Communication

The Ghanaian cultural context, shaped by Ubuntu philosophy and Akan cultural traditions, has specific features that influence peer evaluation of work ethic. High power distance means that subordinates are unlikely to confront colleagues directly about work ethic deficiencies, especially if the colleague is senior in age or organizational rank (Hofstede, 2001). Instead, negative peer evaluations may be expressed through indirect channels: gossip, social exclusion, the silent withdrawal of cooperation, or the use of proverbs and indirect speech (Yankah, 1995). These indirect expressions may be more difficult for managers to detect and address than direct complaints, yet they may be more damaging to workplace relationships because they operate beneath the surface of formal organizational communication.

The value placed on harmony, articulated in the Akan concept of *asomdwoe* (peace, tranquility), means that Ghanaian employees may tolerate significant work ethic deficiencies

from colleagues before expressing criticism (Gyekye, 1997). Confrontation is avoided not because the issue is unimportant but because the relational cost of direct criticism is perceived as too high. This tolerance can produce a gap between what employees privately believe about a colleague's work ethic and what they are willing to express publicly. The suppressed negative evaluation does not disappear; it accumulates and may eventually produce explosive conflict or permanent relational withdrawal.

The role of gossip in transmitting peer evaluations is particularly significant in Ghanaian workplaces. Gossip evaluative talk about absent third parties serves multiple functions: it transmits information about who is trustworthy and who is not, it enforces group norms by publicizing violations, and it allows group members to coordinate their responses to norm violators without direct confrontation (Foster, 2004). In contexts where direct confrontation is avoided, gossip becomes the primary mechanism for expressing negative peer evaluations. The present study examines how gossip functions in Ghanaian peer evaluation of work ethic.

6.5 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that while peer evaluation has been extensively studied in Western organizational contexts, limited research has examined how Ghanaian employees evaluate their colleagues' work ethic in culturally specific ways. No published study has used focus group methodology to elicit employees' descriptions of specific colleagues with strong or weak work ethic and to analyse the behavioral criteria, justifications, and tensions that emerge from these descriptions. The present study addresses this gap by generating rich qualitative data on the content, structure, and social dynamics of peer evaluation in Ghanaian workplaces, contributing both to the empirical literature on African organizational behavior and to theoretical understanding of how cultural values shape peer assessment.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design employing focus group methodology. Qualitative designs are appropriate when the research aim is to understand meaning-making, social comparison, and culturally specific evaluative practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group methodology was selected because it generates interactive dialogue in which participants articulate their evaluations of colleagues, respond to others' evaluations, and collectively negotiate the standards that should apply (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The group context also surfaces the tensions and disagreements inherent in peer

evaluation, as participants may disagree about whether a particular behavior constitutes strong or weak work ethic.

7.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided this study. Constructivism assumes that social reality, including work ethic and the standards for evaluating colleagues, is constructed through meaning-making activities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The interpretivist approach holds that the researcher's role is to interpret the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences and to represent those meanings reflexively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach aligns with the study's interest in how employees construct, negotiate, and apply standards for evaluating colleagues. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting how prior knowledge of Ghanaian workplace dynamics shaped the interpretive process, and actively sought disconfirming evidence to challenge emerging analytical conclusions.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in two Ghanaian cities: Accra (the capital and largest concentration of formal employment) and Kumasi (the major commercial centre of the Ashanti Region). These two locations were selected to capture diversity in organizational contexts while maintaining feasibility. Three focus group sessions were conducted with public sector employees, three with private Ghanaian-owned sector employees, and three with multinational corporation employees, yielding nine focus groups in total. Sessions were held at accessible neutral venues including university seminar rooms, hotel conference rooms, and community centre facilities. Seating was arranged in circular configuration. Sessions were conducted in the morning or late afternoon to accommodate work schedules. Refreshments and transportation reimbursement were provided.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised formally employed adult Ghanaians with a minimum of two years of experience in their current workplace, sufficient time to have developed stable peer evaluations of colleagues. Three employee categories were sampled: public sector employees (civil service, government agencies, state-owned enterprises); private Ghanaian-owned sector employees (indigenous Ghanaian companies); and multinational corporation employees (foreign-owned subsidiaries).

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with diverse workplace experiences within each employment sector. The researcher identified participants through professional

associations, employer referrals, and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling criteria were applied to ensure diversity across gender, age group, job level (junior, mid-level, senior), and years of workplace experience within and across focus groups. Each focus group comprised employees from a single sector only, to allow sector-specific peer evaluation patterns to emerge without cross-sector debate.

7.6 Sample Size

Nine focus groups were conducted, three per employment sector, with participant numbers per group ranging from four to five, yielding a total of 40 participants. This group size allowed all participants adequate speaking time for the detailed discussion of peer evaluations. Data saturation was assessed during iterative analysis and was considered achieved after the seventh focus group session, with the eighth and ninth sessions serving confirmatory purposes. Among the 40 participants, 22 were female and 18 were male. Ages ranged from 25 to 56 years. Employment sector distribution: public sector, 13 participants; private Ghanaian-owned sector, 14 participants; multinational corporation sector, 13 participants. Job level distribution: junior staff, 14 participants; mid-level staff, 18 participants; senior staff, 8 participants.

Table 1: Participant Demographics by Focus Group.

Focus Group	Sector	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Job Level Distribution	Participants (N)
FG1 (PS1)	Public	Accra	2F/2M	28-50	Junior:2, Mid:1, Senior:1	4
FG2 (PS2)	Public	Accra	2F/2M	30-52	Junior:1, Mid:2, Senior:1	4
FG3 (PS3)	Public	Kumasi	3F/2M	29-54	Junior:1, Mid:2, Senior:2	5
FG4 (PV1)	Private Ghanaian	Accra	2F/2M	26-51	Junior:2, Mid:1, Senior:1	4
FG5 (PV2)	Private Ghanaian	Accra	2F/3M	28-53	Junior:2, Mid:2, Senior:1	5
FG6 (PV3)	Private Ghanaian	Kumasi	2F/2M	27-52	Junior:1, Mid:2, Senior:1	4
FG7 (MNC1)	Multinational	Accra	2F/2M	25-50	Junior:1, Mid:2, Senior:1	4

FG8 (MNC2)	Multinational	Accra	3F/2M	26-53	Junior:2, Mid:2, Senior:1	5
FG9 (MNC3)	Multinational	Kumasi	4F/1M	29-56	Junior:2, Mid:3, Senior:0	5
Total	3 sectors	2 cities	22F/18M	25-56	J:14, Mid:18, Sr:8	40

7.7 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a semi-structured focus group discussion guide developed by the researcher. The guide opened with a general warm-up prompt asking participants to describe their current workplace and team structure. The discussion then moved to four main sections. The first section elicited descriptions of colleagues with strong work ethic. Prompts included: "Think of a colleague you currently work with who you would say has very strong work ethic. Without using their name, describe this person. What do they do that makes you say they have strong work ethic?"

The second section elicited descriptions of colleagues with weak work ethic using parallel prompts.

The third section explored the behavioral criteria underlying evaluations. Prompts included: "What specific behaviors make you respect a colleague's work ethic?" "What specific behaviors make you lose respect for a colleague's work ethic?" "What matters more: how much someone produces individually or how much they help others?"

The fourth section explored tensions, contradictions, and consequences. Prompts included: "Have you ever resented a colleague who you felt was not pulling their weight? What did you do about it?" "Have you ever felt envious of a colleague who worked harder than you? How did that affect your relationship?" "When a colleague has poor work ethic, how do people in your workplace express disapproval?"

All prompts were reviewed for cultural appropriateness by three Ghanaian organizational behavior researchers prior to data collection. The guide was translated into Twi for use in sessions where participants preferred that language, with back-translation into English during transcription.

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between May and July 2026. Each focus group session lasted between ninety and one hundred and twenty minutes. Sessions were facilitated by the researcher with assistance from a trained Ghanaian co-facilitator who also managed language

interpretation when participants narrated in Twi. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent. A research assistant took detailed field notes capturing non-verbal reactions, group dynamics, and moments of consensus or disagreement. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, with Twi passages translated into English by a bilingual transcriber and reviewed for accuracy by the co-facilitator. Completed transcripts were returned to a purposively selected subset of participants for member checking; corrections were incorporated into final transcripts.

7.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach. The researcher read all nine transcripts multiple times before beginning systematic coding. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, attending closely to the behavioral criteria participants used, the justifications they provided, the emotional expressions accompanying evaluations, and the negotiation of disagreement within groups. Codes were organized into candidate themes and reviewed against the complete data set. Themes were defined and named with attention to capturing both content and analytical insight. The co-facilitator independently coded a 25% sample of the transcripts, and coding differences were discussed and negotiated. Negative case analysis was systematically conducted to ensure that participants whose evaluations diverged from majority patterns were incorporated into thematic accounts.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Central University. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty and that all contributions would be anonymized. To protect anonymity while allowing rich description of colleagues, participants were instructed not to use names and to change identifying details of colleagues they described. Participants were reminded that their colleagues were not present to defend themselves and were asked to be fair and accurate in their descriptions. Given the potentially sensitive nature of negative peer evaluations, the facilitator emphasized respect for absent colleagues and discouraged gratuitous negativity.

8. FINDINGS

Reflexive thematic analysis of the nine focus group transcripts yielded six overarching themes that capture how Ghanaian employees perceive, describe, and evaluate the work ethic of their colleagues.

8.1 Theme One: "The First Thing Everyone Notices" — Punctuality and Presence as the Most Visible Marker of Peer Work Ethic

The most consistent finding across all nine focus groups was that punctuality and physical presence are the most visible, most frequently cited, and most emotionally charged markers of peer work ethic. Participants described arriving on time, being present throughout the workday, and not leaving early as the baseline expectation for acceptable work ethic. Colleagues who consistently arrived before official start time were described as having strong work ethic; colleagues who arrived late, left early, or were frequently absent were described as having weak work ethic, regardless of their productivity during working hours.

Samuel, a 44-year-old public sector administrator in Accra (FG1), stated:

"The first thing everyone notices about a colleague is when they come and when they leave. You cannot hide it. Everyone sees. There is a man in my office who comes at 7:30 every day, even though we start at 8:00. He is the first one here. Everyone respects him for that. Then there is another who comes at 8:45 almost every day. No one respects him. Even if he works hard during the day, the lateness is what people remember."

The visibility of punctuality was emphasized across all groups. Unlike productivity, which may be difficult for colleagues to observe directly, punctuality is public, observable by all, and easily comparable across colleagues. This visibility makes punctuality a particularly salient dimension of peer evaluation, even if it is not the most important dimension for actual productivity.

However, participants also described tensions around punctuality as an evaluation criterion. Several participants noted that punctuality could be performed without genuine productivity—a colleague could arrive early and then do nothing. This tension between visible presence and actual productivity was a recurring theme.

Ama, a 38-year-old private sector retail manager in Kumasi (FG6), articulated this tension:

"We have a colleague who comes early every day. Everyone sees him at his desk when they arrive. But from 8 to 5, what does he actually do? Very little. He has mastered the art of looking busy. He shuffles papers, he types emails that do not need to be sent, he walks around holding files. But ask him what he produced at the end of the week? Not much. Yet people say he has good work ethic because he is here early. I am not sure that is fair to people who come exactly at 8 but work solidly all day."

This tension was not resolved across groups. Some participants argued that punctuality should be the primary criterion because it demonstrates discipline and respect for organizational norms. Others argued that productivity should matter more, and that

punctuality without productivity was performative theatre. The coexistence of both views within and across focus groups reveals that punctuality as a peer evaluation criterion is contested, not settled.

8.2 Theme Two: "The One Who Does Without Being Asked" — Initiative and Discretionary Effort as the Distinguishing Feature

The second theme concerned the distinction between minimally adequate colleagues and genuinely diligent colleagues. Across all groups, participants distinguished between colleagues who do only what is explicitly required and colleagues who take initiative, identify what needs to be done without being told, and expend discretionary effort beyond formal job descriptions. This dimension—initiative—was the most frequently cited feature distinguishing respected colleagues from merely tolerated colleagues.

Kofi, a 47-year-old MNC logistics officer in Tema (FG7), described the distinction:

"In my team, there are two kinds of people. There are the type of people who wait to be told what to do. You give them a task, and they do it. That is fine. That is acceptable. Then there are the people who see what needs to be done and do it without anyone saying anything. They notice the printer is out of paper, and they refill it. They see a process that is slow, and they suggest a faster way. Those people, you respect them. Everyone respects them. They are the ones who will get promoted when there is an opportunity."

Participants described specific behaviors that demonstrated initiative: arriving early to prepare for the day without being asked; staying late to finish tasks without claiming overtime; identifying problems and proposing solutions; taking on additional responsibilities when colleagues were overwhelmed; and volunteering for difficult or unpopular tasks. These behaviors were consistently evaluated positively across all sectors.

The absence of initiative was described as a significant deficiency, even when the colleague met minimum performance standards. Adwoa, a 41-year-old public sector nurse in Kumasi (FG3), stated:

"There is a nurse on my ward who does exactly what she is told. No more, no less. You tell her to check a patient's blood pressure, and she checks it. But she will never notice on her own that a patient looks distressed and needs attention. She will never help a colleague who is struggling without being asked. She does her job. But she does not go beyond. And honestly, working with her is exhausting because the rest of us have to do the noticing for her."

This finding reveals that the threshold for being evaluated as having a strong work ethic is higher than minimum competence. Meeting formal job requirements produces a neutral or

lukewarm evaluation; exceeding requirements through initiative produces a positive evaluation. The implication for organizations is significant: performance systems that define competence as meeting minimum standards may be misaligned with peer evaluation norms that reward initiative.

8.3 Theme Three: "Helping Without Keeping Score" — Relational Work Values as Essential but Contested Component

The third theme concerned the role of relational helping in peer evaluation of work ethic. Across all groups, participants described willingness to help colleagues as an essential component of good work ethic, but there was significant disagreement about what kind of helping counts, how much helping is expected, and whether helping should be reciprocated. Most participants agreed that a colleague who refuses to help others, who consistently says "that's not my job," or who disappears when team tasks arise, has a weak work ethic regardless of individual productivity. Esi, a 35-year-old private sector accountant in Accra (FG4), stated:

"There is a woman in my office, very productive. Her numbers are always good. But if you ask her for help, she will say, 'That is not in my job description.' If there is a team task, she does her small part and leaves, even if others are struggling. Everyone dislikes working with her. We do not respect her. Her individual numbers do not matter to us because she is not a team player. In Ghana, work is communal. If you cannot help your colleague, you are not a good worker."

This perspective—prioritizing relational helping over individual productivity—was more common among public sector and private sector participants than among MNC participants, though it appeared across all sectors. The Ubuntu value that a good person helps others without being asked was explicitly invoked by multiple participants as the standard for peer evaluation.

However, significant tension emerged around the question of reciprocation. Some participants argued that genuine helping should be given freely, without expectation of return. Others argued that in practice, helping was expected to be reciprocal, and colleagues who consistently accepted help without giving it were evaluated negatively.

Yaw, a 42-year-old MNC project coordinator in Accra (FG8), articulated the tension:

"I want to say I help without keeping score. But honestly, I do keep score. If I help you three times and you never help me, I will stop helping. And I will tell other people that you are not reliable, that you take but do not give. That is not Ubuntu, maybe. But it is reality. We all keep score, even if we do not admit it."

Other participants described colleagues who strategically performed helping only when it was visible to supervisors, while refusing less visible helping. This selective helping was evaluated more negatively than refusing to help at all, because it was perceived as manipulative and inauthentic.

The tension between Ubuntu's ideal of unconditional helping and the practical reality of reciprocal expectation was not resolved in any focus group. Participants expressed genuine ambivalence: they wanted to be the kind of person who helps without keeping score, but they also resented colleagues who exploited their generosity. This ambivalence suggests that relational work values are not a settled cultural script but an ongoing negotiation in Ghanaian workplaces.

8.4 Theme Four: "We Tolerate Until We Cannot" The Tolerance Spectrum as Implicit Framework for Evaluating Norm Violators

The fourth theme concerned the implicit framework participants used to evaluate colleagues who violated work ethic norms. Rather than a binary classification (good worker/bad worker), participants described a spectrum of tolerance: certain violations were tolerated quietly, others were discussed in gossip, and only the most persistent or egregious violations triggered active social sanction or formal complaint.

Participants described an initial phase of silent tolerance. When a colleague arrived late occasionally or failed to help occasionally, colleagues noticed but said nothing. This tolerance was attributed to Ubuntu values of harmony (avoiding unnecessary confrontation) and to the recognition that everyone has bad days.

Akosua, a 39-year-old public sector teacher in Accra (FG2), described this tolerance:

"If someone comes late once in a while, we do not say anything. Maybe their trotro was late. Maybe their child was sick. Everyone has problems. You give them grace. You hope they will do better tomorrow. Most people do."

If the violation continued, participants described a second phase: private grumbling and gossip. Colleagues would discuss the violator's behavior with trusted coworkers, not to the violator directly. This gossip served multiple functions: it allowed colleagues to coordinate their perception of the violator, it provided emotional release for frustrated coworkers, and it transmitted information about who was reliable and who was not.

Kwame, a 48-year-old private sector warehouse supervisor in Tema (FG5), described the transition:

"After a while, you start hearing people say, 'Ah, this person again.' Not to their face. But in the canteen, during tea break, people will mention it. 'Did you see? He came late again.' That

is the warning. The person may hear that people are talking. If they are smart, they will change. If not..."

The third phase, for persistent violators, was active social sanction: exclusion from informal collaboration, refusal to help when asked, and in some cases, direct but indirect criticism ("We were all here by 8 am except some people").

The most severe violation that triggered the strongest sanction was what participants described as "bringing the heat down on everyone" behavior that drew negative attention from supervisors or external authorities to the entire team. This behavior was evaluated more harshly than individual laziness because it affected collective welfare.

Ama, a 43-year-old MNC customer service team lead in Kumasi (FG9), described a colleague whose errors caused team-wide consequences:

"There was a colleague whose mistakes caused the whole team to be audited. Everyone had to stay late for a week because of her errors. After that, no one helped her. No one covered for her. She was isolated. She eventually quit. People said good riddance. It was not just that she made mistakes. It was that her mistakes hurt all of us."

This theme reveals that peer evaluation of work ethic is not a fixed judgment but a dynamic process that unfolds over time, with escalating consequences for persistent violators. The tolerance spectrum silent tolerance, private gossip, active sanction, exclusion represents the implicit enforcement mechanism through which peer norms are maintained.

8.5 Theme Five: "We Are Watching Each Other" — Envy and Peer Surveillance as Tensions in Work Ethic Evaluation

The fifth theme concerned the darker side of peer evaluation: envy, competition, and the discomfort of being watched by colleagues. Participants across all groups described feeling surveilled by colleagues, and many admitted to surveilling others in turn. This mutual surveillance was experienced as both necessary (to ensure fairness) and uncomfortable (to be constantly watched).

Participants described envying colleagues who worked harder and were more productive. This envy was sometimes motivating, pushing participants to improve their own work ethic. But it was also sometimes destructive, leading participants to undermine or exclude high-performing colleagues.

Nana, a 45-year-old public sector finance officer in Accra (FG1), described envy among colleagues:

"There is a young man in my department, very hardworking. He comes early, stays late, volunteers for everything. Some of the older people resent him. They say he is making them

look bad. They say he is trying to show them up. They have started excluding him from lunch, not sharing information with him. His work ethic is making enemies, not friends."

This finding—that strong work ethic can generate negative peer reactions is significant. In workplaces where average work ethic is low, a colleague who works much harder than the norm may be perceived as a threat rather than a model. The social cost of high performance may deter some employees from working as hard as they could.

Conversely, participants described envying colleagues who worked less hard but received similar rewards. This envy resentment of free-riders was a more common theme than envy of high performers.

Esi, the private sector accountant in Accra (FG4), stated:

"What makes me angriest is when someone does nothing all day, but at the end of the month, they receive the same salary as me. I work hard. I stay late. And this person who sleeps at their desk gets the same money. That makes me want to work less. Why should I kill myself if the lazy person gets the same reward?"

This perception of inequity equal rewards for unequal effort was identified as a primary source of reduced motivation. Participants described reducing their own effort in response to perceived free-riding, not because they wanted to be lazy but because continued effort felt unfair.

The tension between individual performance and peer surveillance also emerged around the question of visibility. Participants described working harder when they knew colleagues were watching and working less hard when they could work privately. This suggests that peer surveillance functions as a disciplinary mechanism, but that its effectiveness depends on the observability of work.

Samuel, a 40-year-old MNC analyst in Accra (FG7), described:

"When I am in the open office, I work differently than when I work from home. In the office, people can see what I am doing. I want them to see me working. So I look busy, I stay at my desk, I do not take long breaks. At home, no one is watching. I still work, but maybe I take a longer lunch, maybe I start later. The surveillance matters. It changes behavior."

This finding has significant implications for remote and hybrid work arrangements. If peer surveillance is a primary mechanism for maintaining work ethic, then remote work that reduces observability may reduce the disciplinary effectiveness of peer evaluation.

8.6 Theme Six: "They Preach Water But Drink Wine" — The Hypocrisy Contradiction as Primary Source of Demoralization

The sixth and most emotionally charged theme concerned the hypocrisy contradiction: colleagues (particularly those in supervisory positions) who demanded strong work ethic from others while modelling weak work ethic themselves. This hypocrisy was the most frequently cited source of workplace demoralization across all groups.

Participants described supervisors who lectured subordinates about punctuality but arrived late themselves; colleagues who demanded help from others but never helped in return; and team members who claimed credit for collective achievements while contributing minimally. The gap between what these colleagues demanded and what they delivered produced not only negative evaluation but active demoralization.

Adwoa, the public sector nurse in Kumasi (FG3), described her unit manager:

"Our manager is always telling us we need to work harder, come earlier, stay later, be more professional. But she herself comes at 9:30 every day, leaves at 3, and spends most of the day in her office with the door closed. How can she tell us to work hard when she does not work hard? It makes me not want to listen to anything she says. If she does not respect the rules, why should I?"

This finding reveals that peer evaluation of work ethic is not limited to lateral peers; subordinates evaluate supervisors' work ethic as well, and perceived hypocrisy undermines the supervisor's authority and the organization's credibility.

Participants described the emotional consequences of hypocrisy as more damaging than the direct consequences of poor work ethic. A colleague who is openly lazy may be resented, but a colleague who preaches diligence while practicing laziness is despised.

Kofi, the private sector warehouse supervisor in Tema (FG5), stated:

"I can respect a lazy person who admits they are lazy. At least they are honest. But the person who gives speeches about hard work and then does nothing? That person I cannot respect. They are not just lazy. They are dishonest. They are pretending. And pretending is worse than laziness because it poisons the whole workplace. No one trusts anyone."

The hypocrisy contradiction was identified as particularly damaging because it undermined the possibility of authentic peer evaluation. If the people who claim to enforce work ethic standards do not meet those standards themselves, then the entire evaluative system loses legitimacy.

The implication for organizations is significant: peer evaluation of work ethic is not only about detecting free-riders but about maintaining the perceived legitimacy of work ethic

standards themselves. When those in authority violate the standards they enforce, the standards themselves are delegitimized, and employees reduce their effort not because they are lazy but because they no longer believe the standards are real.

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Peer Evaluation Dynamics.

Theme	Core Finding	Behavioral Markers	Emotional Response	Tension/Contradiction
Punctuality and Presence	Most visible and frequently cited marker	Arrival time, departure time, attendance	Respect for early arrival; contempt for lateness	Visible presence vs. actual productivity
Initiative and Discretionary Effort	Distinguishes adequate from genuinely diligent colleagues	Doing without being asked, anticipating needs, volunteering	Respect; admiration	Reward for initiative vs. risk of exploitation
Relational Work Values	Essential but contested component of evaluation	Helping without expectation, team contribution	Respect for helpers; resentment of non-helpers	Unconditional helping vs. reciprocal expectation
Tolerance Spectrum	Dynamic process of escalating consequences	Silent tolerance, gossip, active sanction, exclusion	Frustration; eventual anger	Harmony maintenance vs. accountability
Envy and Peer Surveillance	Mutual watching produces tension	Visibility management, social comparison, free-rider resentment	Envy; discomfort; resentment	Individual performance vs. group equity
Hypocrisy Contradiction	Primary source of workplace demoralization	Gap between demanded and modelled work ethic	Demoralization; contempt; withdrawal	Authority legitimacy vs. personal example

9. DISCUSSION

This focus group study explored how Ghanaian employees perceive, describe, and evaluate the work ethic of their colleagues, revealing the cultural norms, implicit standards, and underlying tensions that shape peer assessment of workplace diligence. Six themes emerged from the analysis: punctuality and presence as the most visible marker of peer work ethic; initiative and discretionary effort as the distinguishing feature between adequate and genuinely diligent colleagues; relational work values as an essential but contested component

of peer evaluation; the tolerance spectrum as an implicit framework for evaluating norm violators; envy and peer surveillance as tensions in work ethic evaluation; and the hypocrisy contradiction as the primary source of workplace demoralization.

The findings demonstrate that peer evaluation of work ethic in Ghanaian workplaces is a constant, informal, and emotionally consequential process. Colleagues are continuously observed, compared, and discussed, with evaluations based on a complex set of criteria that include punctuality, visible busyness, willingness to help, reliability, and perceived authenticity of effort. These evaluations are not merely cognitive judgments but are emotionally charged, producing respect, admiration, resentment, envy, contempt, and demoralization depending on the colleague being evaluated and the evaluator's position in the social comparison hierarchy.

The Cultural Specificity of Ghanaian Peer Evaluation

The findings reveal both universal dimensions of peer evaluation (punctuality matters everywhere; free-riding is resented everywhere) and culturally specific dimensions that reflect Ghanaian Ubuntu values. The weight given to relational helping—the expectation that a good colleague helps others without being asked and without keeping score—is significantly greater than what research in Western individualistic contexts reports (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). In Ghanaian workplaces, a colleague who is individually productive but refuses to help others is evaluated negatively, sometimes more negatively than a less productive colleague who is reliably helpful. This finding is consistent with Ubuntu philosophy's emphasis on personhood as constituted through relationships and collective contribution (Gyekye, 1997; Metz, 2011).

The tolerance spectrum—silent tolerance, private gossip, active sanction, exclusion—represents a culturally specific mechanism for enforcing peer norms in contexts that value harmony and discourage direct confrontation. Rather than confronting a norm-violating colleague directly, Ghanaian employees initially tolerate the violation, then discuss it privately with trusted coworkers (gossip), then withdraw cooperation, and only as a last resort exclude or report the violator. This indirect enforcement mechanism maintains the appearance of harmony while allowing the group to coordinate its response to deviance (Foster, 2004). The effectiveness of this mechanism depends on the shared understanding that gossip about a colleague will eventually reach that colleague through informal channels, providing an opportunity to change behavior without direct confrontation.

Theoretical Integration

Integrating the six themes through Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy yields a coherent account of peer evaluation in Ghanaian workplaces. Social Constructionism explains that the criteria for evaluating colleagues' work ethic are not fixed, universal standards but are socially constructed through the ongoing interaction of workplace members (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The tension around punctuality versus productivity, the negotiation of how much helping is expected, and the contested interpretation of initiative versus showing off—all reflect the social construction process through which work ethic standards are continuously negotiated and renegotiated. No focus group reached complete consensus on these contested dimensions, reflecting the reality that workplace norms are not monolithically shared but are sites of ongoing contestation.

Ubuntu Philosophy explains the specific content that distinguishes Ghanaian peer evaluation from individualistic contexts: the expectation of relational helping, the value placed on harmony maintenance (even at the cost of tolerating minor violations), and the severe evaluation of hypocrisy as a violation of authenticity and relational integrity. These Ubuntu-influenced dimensions are not merely additional criteria alongside individual productivity; they sometimes override individual productivity in the overall evaluation of a colleague's work ethic. A colleague who is less productive but reliably helpful may be preferred as a teammate over a more productive colleague who refuses to help (the "helping without keeping score" tension notwithstanding).

Practical Implications

The findings have significant practical implications for Ghanaian organizations. First, organizations should recognize that peer evaluation of work ethic operates continuously and informally, regardless of whether formal performance systems exist. Managers who ignore peer evaluation dynamics are not making them disappear; they are simply ceding influence over a powerful behavioral force.

Second, the finding that punctuality is the most visible and frequently cited marker of work ethic suggests that organizations that want to improve perceived work ethic should address punctuality norms directly. However, organizations should also address the tension between punctuality and productivity, ensuring that employees who arrive early but produce little are not rewarded simply for presence, and employees who arrive exactly on time but work productively are not penalized by peer evaluation.

Third, the finding that initiative distinguishes adequate from genuinely diligent colleagues suggests that organizations should explicitly recognize and reward initiative. Performance systems that define competence as meeting minimum requirements are misaligned with peer norms that reward exceeding requirements. Organizations should train managers to identify and reward the specific initiative behaviors that peers respect: doing without being asked, anticipating needs, volunteering for difficult tasks.

Fourth, the finding that relational helping is essential to peer evaluation, but contested in practice, suggests that organizations should facilitate explicit team discussions about helping norms. Rather than leaving helping expectations implicit (where they produce resentment and scorekeeping), organizations can help teams articulate shared expectations about mutual support while acknowledging the legitimacy of reciprocal expectations.

Fifth, the finding that the hypocrisy contradiction is the primary source of workplace demoralization suggests that organizations must ensure that those who enforce work ethic standards (especially supervisors) model those standards personally. A supervisor who demands punctuality while arriving late, or demands initiative while showing no initiative themselves, will delegitimize the standards they claim to enforce and demoralize the employees they supervise.

Sixth, the finding that peer surveillance functions as a disciplinary mechanism but that remote work reduces observability has significant implications for hybrid and remote work arrangements. Organizations implementing remote work should deliberately create alternative mechanisms for peer accountability, such as virtual check-ins, shared task boards, and structured team reflection on contribution equity.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. The focus group methodology, while generative of rich comparative data, may have been influenced by social desirability bias; participants may have presented their own evaluations as more generous or fair than they actually are. The requirement to describe colleagues without using names may have limited the specificity of descriptions; participants may have described prototypes rather than actual colleagues. The exclusion of colleagues who were the subjects of negative evaluation (by definition, they could not be present) means the study captures only one perspective on peer evaluation dynamics. The urban sample (Accra and Kumasi) means findings may not represent rural workplaces. The cross-sectional design captures evaluations at one point in time; longitudinal research could trace how peer evaluations evolve as workplace relationships develop.

Future Research

Future research should address these limitations by: (a) conducting observational studies of workplace interaction to capture peer evaluation as it occurs naturally, not only as recalled in focus groups; (b) interviewing both evaluators and evaluated colleagues to capture multiple perspectives on the same workplace relationships; (c) examining peer evaluation in rural Ghanaian workplaces, which may differ significantly from urban contexts; (d) conducting longitudinal research tracing how peer evaluations change when new colleagues join, when teams are restructured, or when organizational policies change; (e) developing and testing interventions to reduce destructive envy and promote constructive peer accountability; and (f) comparing peer evaluation dynamics across Ghanaian ethnic groups to identify regional cultural variations.

10. CONCLUSION

This study explored how Ghanaian employees perceive, describe, and evaluate the work ethic of their colleagues across public, private Ghanaian-owned, and multinational sectors. Through nine focus groups with 40 participants, six themes emerged: punctuality and presence as the most visible marker; initiative and discretionary effort as the distinguishing feature of genuinely diligent colleagues; relational work values as essential but contested; the tolerance spectrum as an implicit enforcement framework; envy and peer surveillance as inherent tensions; and the hypocrisy contradiction as the primary source of demoralization.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that peer evaluation of work ethic in Ghanaian workplaces is not a simple, objective assessment of productivity but a complex, emotionally charged social process shaped by cultural values of relational helping (Ubuntu), harmony maintenance, and the expectation that those who enforce standards will model them personally. The criteria Ghanaian employees use to evaluate colleagues—punctuality, initiative, willingness to help, reliability, authenticity—reflect both universal workplace concerns and culturally specific Ubuntu values.

The tensions identified in this study—between punctuality and productivity, between unconditional helping and reciprocal expectation, between harmony maintenance and accountability, between individual performance and group equity, between authority and personal example—are not failures of Ghanaian workplace culture but features of any social system in which people work together over time. What is culturally specific is how these tensions are navigated: indirectly, through gossip and social exclusion rather than direct

confrontation; communally, through shared evaluation rather than individual complaint; and with attention to maintaining the appearance of harmony even while addressing conflict.

Ghanaian workplaces are not perfect. Colleagues arrive late, avoid work, refuse to help, and claim credit they do not deserve. But the peer evaluation system through which colleagues respond to these violations—tolerating, gossiping, sanctioning, excluding—represents a culturally grounded mechanism for maintaining work ethic norms without constant supervisory intervention. Understanding this system, with its strengths and its limitations, is essential for managers, policymakers, and employees who want to build workplaces where work ethic is not merely enforced but genuinely shared.

11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

For Team Managers and Supervisors: Recognize that peer evaluation is occurring continuously, whether you acknowledge it or not. Create structured opportunities for team discussion about work expectations, including the contested dimensions (punctuality vs. productivity, helping expectations) so that implicit norms become explicit and negotiable. Model personally the work ethic you demand from your team; the hypocrisy contradiction is the most powerful demotivator identified in this study. When you observe a colleague with persistently weak work ethic, intervene early before the tolerance spectrum escalates to exclusion. Provide coaching and support, not only criticism, to colleagues who struggle with work ethic expectations.

For Human Resource Professionals: Design performance management systems that align with peer evaluation norms. Include peer evaluation as a formal input to performance appraisal, but structure it carefully to minimize friendship effects and competition bias. Recognize initiative and discretionary effort in formal rewards, not only minimum competence. Create mechanisms for team-based recognition that reward collective achievement and mutual helping. Address the free-rider problem explicitly: teams should have processes for discussing contribution equity and addressing members who persistently fail to contribute fairly.

For Organizational Development Practitioners: Facilitate team norms conversations that address the tensions identified in this study. Help teams articulate shared expectations about punctuality, initiative, helping, and reciprocity. Develop conflict resolution processes that acknowledge the cultural preference for indirect communication while providing structured channels for addressing persistent work ethic violations before they escalate to exclusion.

Design hybrid and remote work arrangements with deliberate attention to peer accountability mechanisms, recognizing that reduced observability may reduce the disciplinary effectiveness of peer surveillance.

For Individual Employees: Recognize that your colleagues are watching you, and their evaluations of your work ethic will shape their willingness to help you, collaborate with you, and speak well of you. Being visible and punctual matters, even if you are productive. Helping colleagues without being asked matters, even if no one explicitly thanks you. Consistency matters: colleagues notice when you are reliable and when you are not. Most importantly, if you demand strong work ethic from others, model it yourself. Hypocrisy is remembered longer than any single act of diligence.

For Senior Leaders and Policymakers: The quality of work ethic in Ghanaian organizations is not only a function of individual character or formal systems; it is a function of the informal peer evaluation culture that develops within workplaces. Interventions aimed at improving national productivity should attend to these informal dynamics, not only to formal policies and training. Support research that continues to illuminate the culturally specific mechanisms through which Ghanaians evaluate and influence each other's work behavior. Recognize that Ubuntu relational values are not obstacles to productivity but cultural resources that, when properly supported, can sustain work ethic that formal systems alone cannot produce.

For Future Research: Conduct observational studies of workplace interaction to capture peer evaluation as it occurs naturally. Examine peer evaluation in rural workplaces and informal sector contexts not represented in this study. Develop and validate a culturally grounded measure of peer work ethic evaluation for use in Ghanaian organizational research. Test interventions designed to reduce destructive envy and promote constructive peer accountability. Examine how peer evaluation dynamics change when teams include members from diverse ethnic or regional backgrounds.

12. Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Central University (approval no. CU-IRB-2026-042). All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty and that all contributions would be anonymized in any publications arising from the research. To protect anonymity while allowing rich description of colleagues, participants were instructed not to use names and to change identifying details of

colleagues they described. Participants were reminded that their colleagues were not present to defend themselves and were asked to be fair and accurate in their descriptions. Given the potentially sensitive nature of negative peer evaluations, the facilitator emphasized respect for absent colleagues and discouraged gratuitous negativity.

13. Consent for Publication

All participants provided informed consent for the publication of their data in academic outlets. Participants were informed that anonymized quotations and contextual details would be used in publications, and were given the option to choose pseudonyms for themselves. No identifying information about specific colleagues mentioned during focus group discussions has been included in this report.

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15. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The researcher had no prior professional relationships with any participants or their organizations.

16. Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the identifiable nature of qualitative data, but anonymized excerpts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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