



Complexity Leadership and the Rise of Nepotism: An Analysis of Ethical Implications

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The Rise of Nepotism

Nepotism, defined as the preferential treatment of relatives or close associates in professional settings, has long been a subject of scholarly and managerial interest. It challenges organizations to uphold meritocratic standards while navigating the complexities of personal relationships in recruitment, promotion, and decision-making (Arasli & Tumer, 2008; Bellow, 2003; Danvers, 2022). Organizations have become more interdependent over the last several decades and have faced heightened global competition, providing many benefits. However, risks have also increased, and the infiltration of nepotistic practices might pose ethical, financial, and cultural risks.

Multiple empirical studies have documented the growing (or at least persistently high) incidence of nepotism in the United States. Despite its pervasive nature, research on nepotism remains disjointed and dispersed, with many fields rarely merging or cross-referencing each other (Schilpzand et al., 2025). Opportunity Insights reports that a substantial portion of workers have been employed within their parent's company, particularly in small firms or family-dominated industries, highlighting a systemic dependence on personal connections (Staiger, 2023). Danvers (2022) notes that some perceive this small-business tendency toward nepotism as a benign form of networking and workforce management. However, critics argue that nepotism distorts labor market equity by potentially excluding talent from diverse backgrounds. Krupnick (2024) further examines the economic implications, indicating that nepotism can influence wage patterns by facilitating the hiring of younger professionals through familial connections, often resulting in accelerated promotions or higher salaries. This type of unmanaged nepotism moves past benign networking and has the potential to create perceived and actual workplace inequalities.

The primary goal of this white paper is to critically examine nepotism through the lens of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), emergent, adaptive leadership processes, and psychological safety. Through analysis of recent findings from the University of Phoenix 2025 Career Optimism Index® study, this paper aims to contextualize employee perspectives on career mobility, trust, and fairness factors that often intertwine with nepotistic dynamics. This paper also reviews nepotism in small and family-owned organizations, where the results may be more profound, both positive and negative (Chrisman et al., 2004). Understanding the complexities of nepotism is vital for any organization seeking ethical integrity, workforce stability, and sustained innovation.

Important Findings from the 2025 Career Optimism Index

The 2025 Career Optimism Index (COI) from the University of Phoenix (UOPX) Career Institute® offers critical insights into how perceptions of equity, acknowledgment, and career advancement may be influenced or skewed by nepotism. Several significant conclusions are pertinent:

1. **Employee Perceptions of being Undervalued and Replaceable**

The UOPX 2025 COI revealed a disconnect between employee development desires and employer practices. This exacerbates feelings of being undervalued and undertrained. The report highlights that workers who feel a lack of control over their careers are 56% more likely to experience burnout (University of Phoenix, 2025, p. 19), with institutional trust also noted to be at "record-low" levels, framing this environment as a workforce crisis (University of Phoenix, 2025, p. 7). In settings where personal connections overshadow professional performance, employees may see executive

accolades, promotions, and lateral transfers as influenced more by favoritism than objective standards.

2. Insufficient Clarity Regarding Internal Mobility

The 2025 COI research indicated that numerous employees lacked adequate direction on potential career trajectories inside their existing firms (University of Phoenix, 2025). Nepotism can exacerbate this challenge. When informal networks or familial connections influence promotions or leadership appointments, non-nepotistic employees may experience diminished motivation to demonstrate loyalty, ultimately increasing the likelihood of organizational turnover.

3. Desire for Skill Enhancement

The UOPX COI (2025) also found that employees highly prioritize training and development as pathways to progression. Thus, when an organization practicing nepotism dictates who has access to desirable upskilling or mentorship, it fractures the wider talent pool, ultimately suppressing creativity. This pathway to staffing development might also increase turnover as high-potential individuals leave for firms that foster a meritocratic culture (University of Phoenix, 2025).

4. Consequences for Employee Turnover and Engagement

The 2025 COI from UOPX highlights persistent issues around employee turnover intent and disengagement. Nepotism likely exacerbates these intentions by reinforcing the perception that certain nepotistic employees are expedited in their advancement while others have restricted progression opportunities (a lack of procedural justice). This employment relationship discrepancy or perception of procedural injustice can erode unity, impede collaboration, and reduce group performance over time. Adverse impacts

of nepotism can be exacerbated when employees perceive insecurity or lack of appreciation. According to the University of Phoenix 2025 COI, "...hiring and retaining workers remains a persistent challenge for Employers" (p.29). In contrast, firms that use transparent, meritocratic systems and effectively communicate with them see enhanced retention and stronger morale (University of Phoenix, 2025).

Complexity Leadership and Ethical Leadership

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) is a contemporary leadership concept that conceptualizes organizations as complex adaptive systems composed of interdependent agents rather than inflexible hierarchies (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2007). Traditional leadership models emphasize command and control, whereas CLT highlights the dynamic, emergent, interdependent, and dynamic aspects of leadership in changing situations. Complexity leaders reduce uncertainty among followers to minimize unnecessary tension within the organization. Emphasizing implicit communication, these leaders enable alignment on key goals and processes, ultimately enhancing organizational cohesion and harmony (Tourish, 2019). Furthermore, these leaders cultivate a learning culture, uphold accountability, establish a clear vision, and reinforce ethical standards, creating an environment that fosters innovation and employee engagement. This approach is particularly relevant in rapidly evolving industries where adaptability, creativity, and collaboration are essential for sustained success (Baltaci & Balci, 2017; Tourish, 2019). This leadership approach reinforces ethical leadership by creating a culture of transparency, accountability, and shared organizational values. Prioritizing implicit communication, leaders ensure that ethical principles are seamlessly integrated into decision-making processes, promoting alignment with the organization's core ethical framework.

The Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) also views organizational inner workings as complex adaptive systems composed of interdependent agents to understand how leaders and followers collaborate to achieve organizational goals (Uhl-Bien, 2021; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In contrast to traditional leadership models and organizational structures emphasizing hierarchical structures, CLT focuses on continuous interaction among individuals, teams, and networks. The theory emphasizes that outcomes, such as ethical decision-making or cultural shifts, arise from dynamic processes rather than solely from the directives of a single authority figure (Hazy et al., 2013).

Complex Adaptive Systems and Ethical Behavior

At its core, Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) is rooted in Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). This perspective emphasizes that ethical behavior is not solely mandated by hierarchical authority but develops through decentralized employee interactions, where collective decision-making, shared accountability, and a culture of transparency foster ethical leadership within dynamic organizational systems (Hazy et al., 2013). However, nepotism can disrupt these decentralized interactions by prioritizing personal connections over merit, leading to organizational inefficiencies and ethical concerns. In an environment without ethical oversight, nepotism may erode employees' trust in leadership, weaken team cohesion, and compromise the organization's ethical climate, ultimately diminishing psychological safety for team members.

A fundamental principle of CLT is that leaders must cultivate an environment where employees feel empowered to surface problems, challenge assumptions, and propose solutions (Plowman & Duchon, 2008). When organizations promote distributed leadership and shared responsibility, unethical behaviors such as nepotism become more visible and addressable. Rather than relying solely on formal authority to enforce ethical behavior, employees within

complex adaptive systems develop a collective moral framework that reinforces accountability. As a result, ethical safeguards become embedded throughout multiple organizational network nodes, reducing the likelihood that a single leader or unit can discreetly engage in or enable nepotistic practices (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). When nepotistic practices are minimized, this supports a psychologically safe environment.

There are several ethical concerns when nepotism is woven into the foundation of an organization. Equitability concerns, perceived performance bias, confidentiality, and fear of retaliatory acts can influence the overall culture if all employees do not have fair oversight. CAS references the crucial aspect of transparency in leadership to ensure trust and hierarchy are authentic and just. White and Griffith (2016) discussed the role of human resources in designing policies that promote objective skillsets and advance engagement processes for service excellence without prejudice. The neutrality of Human Resources (HR) assists with professional boundaries in conflict resolution, eradicating perceptions of favoritism and mitigating risk in the disciplinary process. This unbiased entity can also build and sustain a competent workforce based on merit and competency to reduce feelings of distrust. Ethical leadership that thwarts nepotism-driven behavior and applied negativity cultivates a mission-driven environment with reduced conflict and risk (Akuffo & Kivipõld, 2019).

Organizational Well-Being and Belonging

Organizations create environments where employees feel valued, heard, and supported by creating psychological safety through ethical leadership and minimizing nepotistic practices. In the post-pandemic workplace, where psychological safety has become a central factor in employee satisfaction and retention, organizational well-being has shifted from an abstract ideal to a strategic necessity. Workplaces prioritizing employee mental and physical health and

cultivating a sense of belonging consistently demonstrate higher engagement, innovation, and overall performance (Goods et al., 2024). Specific practices of this type of organizational engagement include:

- **Wellness Initiatives:** Benefits should address mental health, work-life balance, and career development. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and health insurance benefits should not be limited to physical health and wellness.
- **Creation of Enterprise-Wide Sense of Belonging:** When employees feel genuinely connected to their organization, they are more likely to share ideas, collaborate, and contribute to long-term success.
- **Enhanced Engagement:** Empirical evidence indicates that organizations with robust well-being programs often see improved productivity and lower turnover rates (Hofhuis et al., 2015; Pradhan & Hati, 2019).

Employee feedback and organizational turnover reports demonstrate that organizations must view well-being not as optional but as a core strategy to nurture a thriving, innovative, and sustainable workplace. Given the critical role of employee well-being in fostering a thriving and sustainable workplace, organizations must prioritize psychological safety as a foundational element of their strategy. Employee feedback and organizational turnover surveys offer insights into company culture, employee engagement, and overall job satisfaction. Patterns of unhappiness, burnout, or disengagement frequently connect with heightened turnover rates, reduced productivity, and compromised organizational effectiveness. The aforementioned indicators illustrate that employee well-being is not a peripheral concern but a strategic necessity for firms seeking to develop a resilient and inventive workforce. Well-being includes physical, mental, and emotional health and a sense of purpose and belonging within an organization. When

employees perceive themselves as respected, supported, and equipped with resources for their well-being, they exhibit heightened engagement, motivation, and commitment to their roles. Conversely, disregarding employee well-being results in workplace stress, absenteeism, elevated turnover, and reputational hazards that may affect an organization's capacity to attract and retain premier talent.

Organizational turnover studies frequently underscore the factors contributing to employee departures, including excessive workloads, insufficient career advancement prospects, inadequate leadership, or detrimental work conditions. When examined in conjunction with employee feedback, these reports uncover systemic issues for aggressive change. Organizations that prioritize well-being as a fundamental strategy execute efforts including flexible work arrangements, wellness programs, professional development opportunities, and supportive leadership practices. These initiatives foster a culture of trust, inclusivity, and psychological safety, enabling people to deliver optimal performance. Moreover, well-being is intrinsically connected to innovation. Employees experiencing elevated stress or disengagement are less inclined to take chances, collaborate efficiently, or provide innovative solutions. Conversely, firms that prioritize well-being cultivate settings that promote open communication, experimentation, and ongoing enhancement. Employees who perceive mental and emotional support exhibit more adaptability, resilience, and a propensity for fostering change.

Sustainability in the workplace transcends financial performance; it necessitates preserving a productive and healthily engaged workforce over the long term. When firms incorporate well-being into their strategic initiatives, they diminish attrition costs, improve employee happiness, and bolster their reputation as an employer of choice. In a time when

employees increasingly value work-life balance and corporate principles, organizations that neglect to invest in well-being jeopardize their competitive edge.

Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Psychologically safe work environments are essential when empowering employees to take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences and to mitigate turnover intent. In psychologically safe work settings, team members tend to perform with higher confidence levels when expressing ideas, raising concerns, and offering critical feedback without apprehension of ridicule or retaliation (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; McCausland, 2023).

Psychological safety is one primary work condition widely recognized as a fundamental element in learning organizations and is directly linked to enhanced creativity, robust problem-solving, and sustained engagement. When employee fear is minimized or mitigated with feelings of safety, employees are more apt to propose innovative solutions and challenge established norms, a necessity for effective adaptation in dynamic work environments. McDermott-Lord (2017) found that employees' perceptions of their work environment can predict behavior, with perceived injustice or unfairness associated with increased turnover intention, somatic symptoms, and workplace aggression. To improve psychological safety, leaders should implement several key strategies:

- **Transparent Communication:** Leaders must consistently model open communication and actively invite constructive feedback. According to Kotter (1996), "Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the employees are never captured" (p. 53).
- **Inclusive Practices:** Organizations should establish norms that reward curiosity, encourage learning from mistakes, and promote collective improvement. Uhl-Bien said,

"Leaders and subordinates have fundamentally different needs and views on relationships. For example, managers value clarity and accountability, while subordinates often prioritize trust and support" (Fisher Leadership Initiative, 2025, p.325).

- Regular Check-Ins: Conducting routine surveys or hosting open forums allows for systematic monitoring of employees' perceptions of safety and facilitates prompt resolution of emerging issues. Mary Uhl-Bien stated, "Even in large institutions, you can create smaller groups that foster connection and deeper learning" (Fisher Leadership Initiative, 2025, p. 325).

Integrating psychological safety into broader organizational well-being initiatives ensures employees feel supported and empowered to innovate and improve their work environment.

Balancing Competing Values and Interests

Leaders addressing nepotism must navigate competing interests, including personal loyalty to family and friends, the imperative for organizational efficiency, and the fundamental need for fairness (Arasli & Tumer, 2008). Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) offers a framework for managing these tensions by viewing organizations as complex adaptive systems where leadership is distributed rather than hierarchical.

A key component of CLT is adaptive space, which allows for experimentation and innovation by relaxing rigid organizational structures. This flexibility enables leaders to respond dynamically to ethical dilemmas, such as nepotism, by fostering transparent decision-making and merit-based evaluation rather than relying solely on rigid policies.

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the necessity of adaptive leadership, as many organizations shifted organically toward more flexible problem-solving approaches to navigate uncertainty. However, the challenge moving forward is to sustain this level of adaptability in

non-crisis environments where contradictory views and ethical dilemmas such as nepotism persist. In such complex environments, open communication and collaborative dialogue are essential for resolving conflicts, managing ethical risks, and balancing competing values. Through the strategic use of CLT's emphasis on adaptability and decentralized leadership, organizations can develop ethical safeguards that prevent nepotism from undermining fairness, trust, and overall organizational effectiveness.

Jain et al. (2022) found that nepotistic hiring practices can exacerbate socio-economic disparities by limiting opportunities for marginalized groups and undermining merit-based advancement. Their research found that leaders can mitigate the adverse effects of nepotism by being transparent in promotions and hiring decisions, establishing formal checks and balances and organizational reporting chains, and encouraging respectful dialogue among organizational members. McCalla et al. (2023) found that heterogeneous groups outperform homogeneous groups, with homogeneous groups at a higher risk of employee turnover and dissatisfaction. Thus, leaders must take additional steps when using nepotistic staffing to increase transparency and procedural justice communications and actions. These risk-mitigating efforts promote fairness doctrines and ethical decision-making and build trust across the organization, ensuring that decisions are grounded in objective criteria rather than personal affiliations or relationships (Jain et al., 2022).

Organizational Culture and Morale

At an organizational level, nepotism can dilute or minimize employees' levels of trust and teamwork. Organizational leader decisions on promotions, assignments, or training opportunities, which hinge on personal relationships rather than merit, create actual or perceived ethical challenges, increasing feelings of injustice and decreasing psychological safety (Arasli & Tumer, 2008; Bellow, 2003). This sense of lacking safety and reduced fairness or procedural

justice can lower morale and spark conflict as employees question whether upward mobility depends on their skills or simply on having the "right" connections (Padgett & Morris, 2005).

Padgett and Morris (2005) found that when employees see or experience organizational practices and procedures as procedurally just, the negative impact of nepotism practices on morale and organizational justice is substantially reduced. McCalla (2017, p. 23) found that "...development and implementations of policies and procedures relating to the inclusion of employees should consider the effects of procedural justice and injustice." Ethic-centric policies and procedures can assist with mitigating the risk of any potential inequities created by nepotistic workplace relationships. Tzafrir et al. (2004) found that by increasing employees' experiences of procedural justice, organizations with employment practices such as nepotistic hiring and staff development should experience improved employee feelings of organizational fairness and leadership integrity.

Legal and Reputational Risks

Nepotistic hiring of family or friends and unfair performance evaluations can carry significant legal liabilities. Small, family-owned businesses without an objective human resources entity or third-party HR expert could be at risk for not applying fair and equitable labor practices. Maintaining Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies, wage applications and raises, and adherence to regulatory requirements could be an area of vulnerability if the person responsible for enforcement is biased based on familial relationships.

Organizations may face lawsuits and lasting reputational harm if nepotistic arrangements lead to discrimination against protected groups or wrongful termination. Even absent formal litigation, ongoing favoritism undermines leadership credibility, as employees may interpret nepotistic practices as a tacit endorsement of unethical behaviors (Danvers, 2022). Over time, the

organization risks becoming a place where cynicism replaces engagement and productivity suffers.

Nepotism in Small Organizations and Family-Owned Enterprises

Though nepotism is often perceived negatively, Danvers' (2022) research acknowledges that nepotism can deliver positive results when managed ethically in small and family-owned firms. Bellow (2003) notes that intimate familial ties can deepen trust, streamline decision-making, and reduce recruitment expenses. In these enterprises, newly hired or newly promoted family members might already understand the business's founding values, historical practices, and customer relationships (Chrisman et al., 2004).

Small-scale environments make it easier to monitor potential conflicts of interest. Family-based or friend-based hires may feel a unique sense of loyalty, often working longer hours or going the extra mile to ensure the business thrives (Basly & Saunier, 2019; Danvers, 2022). Basly and Saunier (2019) found that "... 'Identification' and 'Emotional attachment' positively influence family owners' willingness to perpetuate the firm. Furthermore, as expected, family member's commitment to the firm has a significant indirect positive influence on continuity intentions" (p. 9). However, organizations must adopt transparent performance metrics and clear promotion communication to maintain legitimacy with non-family employees (Padgett & Morris, 2005). Merit-based evaluations for all employees help to mitigate resentment and preserve organizational morale.

Promoting Adaptive Leadership to Address Nepotism

Grounded in Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), adaptive leadership derives its effectiveness from enabling emerging solutions across all levels of the organization rather than imposing directives from the top (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). This approach can reduce

nepotism's influence by encouraging employees to identify inconsistencies, procedural injustice, or abuses of power. For example, favoritism has less chance of thriving unchecked if hiring committees are diversified across departments or if peer reviews and cross-functional assessments are embedded into promotion processes.

Creating Transparent Policies

While small, family-oriented firms may rely on "known quantities" for new hires, it remains critical for every organizational context to define explicit policies around recruitment and promotion. These policies should include clear job descriptions, standardized evaluation rubrics, clear non-familial reporting structures (where possible), and thorough documentation of decisions (McCalla, 2017). Enhancing hiring practices by including employee groups in informal or formal meetings or interviews with all candidates, coupled with regular audits or "spot checks" of hiring processes, can further enhance transparency and reassure employees that favoritism is minimized.

Encouraging Reflective Dialogue

Leaders should promote an atmosphere where employees feel safe voicing ethical concerns (McCalla, 2017; Plowman & Duchon, 2008). Open forums and routine question and answer sessions with senior management can create a culture of accountability. Reflective dialogue, where participants examine the root causes and implications of specific hiring or promotion decisions, can enhance collective ethical awareness. Programs that allow anonymous reports of unethical practices with safe and prompt attention from leadership also show organizational commitment to reflective dialogue and openness to critique.

Skill Development Opportunities for All

The University of Phoenix's (2025) Career Optimism Index repeatedly highlighted employees' appetite for skill-building. By making professional development resources widely available through mentorship programs, e-learning platforms, or external workshops, leaders reinforce that career progression is attainable based on demonstrated commitment and performance, not personal relationships (University of Phoenix, 2025). This can be especially powerful in family-owned firms, where offering development to all employees helps neutralize any perception of insider advantage.

Future Research

Although studies increasingly address nepotism's organizational impact, gaps remain. Future research could investigate the following areas: Longitudinal studies might assist with extended data collection needed to understand how nepotism influences organizational culture, profitability, and employee retention over time (Krupnick, 2024; Staiger, 2023). Comparative analysis might benefit this study by examining nepotism within various cultural backgrounds, highlighting how societal norms and familial obligations may shape ethical standards. Through continued research on the impact of remote and hybrid work and how the emergence of remote work and technological advancements in the workplace, including AI-driven recruitment tools, are becoming more commonplace, researchers might explore whether automation curbs nepotism or inadvertently reinforces hidden biases. A qualitative survey to assess the actual or perceived bias within a family-owned business could provide insight into employee engagement and barriers to long-term sustainability and retention. Such a study could explore career trajectory and psychological safety for non-familial employees. In filling these gaps, scholars and

practitioners might garner actionable findings that inform ethical policies and reinforce leadership practices aligned with complexity leadership theory.

Conclusion

Nepotism presents a multifaceted challenge for organizations of all sizes, potentially undermining meritocracy, creating resentment and procedural unfairness, and triggering costly turnover. However, it is also considered a viable business continuity and economic success source. Specifically in small and family-owned businesses, nepotism is likely to continue to be a primary recruitment source. From a Complexity Leadership Theory perspective, unethical and damaging favoritism flourishes when systems lack distributed accountability and transparent decision-making. Small and family-owned businesses sometimes benefit from employing trusted insiders, demonstrating that nepotism can yield limited efficiency gains in constrained contexts if rigorous fairness standards remain in place.

The research in this article related to nepotism and the recent findings from the 2024 University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index highlight how nepotism might compound employees' feelings of replaceability, lack of career clarity, reduced psychological safety, and diminished trust in leadership. These sentiments harm long-term engagement and performance. However, when organizations adopt adaptive leadership practices emphasizing transparency, open dialogue, and equitable access to skill development, they can mitigate many of these risks. Clear, merit-based processes should be institutionalized to protect employees' professional growth and the organization's broader ethical standing.

Confronting the negatives and positives of nepotism requires more than a single edict or policy memo. It demands a holistic rethinking of how leadership unfolds in complex adaptive systems, how leadership communicates with transparency, and an eye to holistic care for

employees' well-being and feelings of belonging. Through proactive, adaptive strategies, organizations can uphold ethical norms, harness the full potential of their workforce, and sustain a culture defined by trust and innovation grounded in procedural justice and fairness rather than personal connections alone.

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