

Managing Employee Discipline: An Entrepreneurial Engineer Perspective in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: In Sri Lanka's emerging economy, entrepreneurial engineers who lead their own enterprises face the dual challenge of technical innovation and workforce management. This study investigates how these entrepreneurial engineers maintain discipline within their organizations, an often-overlooked aspect of engineering entrepreneurship. Based on 22 in-depth interviews with founders and leaders of engineering-based businesses across Sri Lanka, the research employs an inductive thematic analysis to uncover key strategies, obstacles, and cultural dynamics that shape disciplinary practices in privately run firms. The five themes that emerged as self-discipline, workforce attitude challenges, ethical conduct, external institutional barriers, and practical strategies reflect a complex interplay between internal leadership behaviors and the broader socio-cultural and institutional environment in which these businesses operate. This study highlights how entrepreneurial engineers, as business owners, act as both technical leaders and organizational architects, shaping discipline not through rigid hierarchies but through adaptive, ethically anchored leadership. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of engineering entrepreneurship in the Global South and offer practical implications for those leading technical enterprises in culturally complex and resource-constrained settings.

Keywords: Employee discipline; Engineering leadership; Entrepreneurial engineer; Organizational culture

1. Introduction

In Sri Lanka's evolving engineering sector, entrepreneurial engineers who establish and manage their own engineering businesses are key drivers of innovation, employment, and industrial growth. While their technical and entrepreneurial contributions are well recognized, little attention has been paid to how they maintain discipline within their workforce, a factor essential to operational efficiency and business sustainability.

Unlike larger corporations or public institutions, many privately owned engineering firms in Sri Lanka operate with lean structures, limited formal human resource management systems, and high dependence on personal leadership styles [1]. In such settings, workforce discipline is shaped less by policies and more by ethical leadership, mentorship, and interpersonal influence. Entrepreneurial engineers must navigate challenges such as employee complacency, generational value gaps, and external pressures including political interference and unfair competition. At the same time, they are required to uphold professional standards. Despite its significance, the disciplinary role of engineer-entrepreneurs remains largely underexplored in the literature.

This study addresses that gap by examining how 22 Sri Lankan entrepreneurial engineers manage discipline within their firms. Using an inductive thematic analysis approach, the research uncovers strategies, obstacles, and cultural dimensions that inform how discipline is practiced in privately led engineering enterprises.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Workplace Discipline in Organizational Settings

Workplace discipline traditionally refers to the systems and actions organizations adopt to ensure employees adhere to expected behavioral and performance standards [2]. It includes both preventive strategies, such as setting clear expectations and fostering a strong

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organizational culture and corrective measures, such as warnings or dismissals. In formal organizations, particularly in the corporate or public sector, discipline is enforced through codified HR policies, legal frameworks, and performance monitoring systems [3].

However, in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in developing economies, disciplinary practices tend to be informal, personalized, and culturally contingent [4]. Owners often rely on interpersonal influence, leadership charisma, and trust-based relationships to maintain order. This is especially evident in industries like construction and engineering, where workforce compositions are diverse and project-based work requires high adaptability.

2.2 Engineering Leadership and Organizational Behavior

In engineering settings, leadership has often been analyzed through the lens of project delivery, technical competence, and ethical standards. Engineering leaders are expected not only to oversee complex technical tasks but also to shape professional conduct through example-setting, problem-solving, and value-driven decisions [5]. Literature suggests that engineers who transition into managerial roles often face challenges in balancing technical priorities with people management responsibilities [6].

Although some studies have addressed ethical leadership and communication in engineering organizations [7], they have mostly focused on structured institutions like multinational firms, universities, or public agencies. The entrepreneurial engineering context, where engineers run their own firms, remains an under-researched domain, especially in the Global South.

2.3 Entrepreneurship and People Management in SMEs

Entrepreneurship literature acknowledges that founders of SMEs often carry the dual burden of strategic direction and daily operations including the management of people, discipline, and culture [8], [9]. Entrepreneurial leaders tend to develop context-specific, non-bureaucratic methods for managing human capital, particularly in the absence of formal HR departments. Such methods are deeply influenced by the entrepreneur's values, leadership style, and understanding of local labor dynamics.

In engineering-based firms, these responsibilities are further complicated by the technical nature of work, reliance on specialized skills, and project-oriented operations. Yet, few studies address how engineering entrepreneurs specifically manage workforce discipline. The dominant focus has been on business development, innovation, or access to finance, overlooking the internal leadership behaviors that sustain enterprise growth over time.

2.4 Cultural and Institutional Influences in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan context adds unique complexity to workforce discipline. As a society marked by hierarchical traditions, collectivist values, and deference to authority [10], discipline in organizations often relies heavily on implicit norms rather than explicit systems. Several local studies have noted generational tension, reluctance to change, and informal work ethics as key challenges in organizational behavior [11]. Furthermore, Sri Lankan SMEs often operate in a policy environment where political patronage, institutional delays, and unregulated competition create uncertainty and undermine merit-based practices [12].

These factors present considerable difficulties for entrepreneur-led engineering firms, which must maintain internal standards while contending with an inconsistent and sometimes unethical external business environment.

2.5 Identified Research Gap

While a growing body of research addresses engineering leadership and entrepreneurship independently, there is a distinct lack of integration between the two, particularly regarding how entrepreneurial engineers manage human capital and discipline. The interplay between technical leadership, informal management, and cultural negotiation has not been systematically studied in Sri Lanka or comparable settings. Existing research tends to focus on engineers in public-sector roles or senior managers in corporate firms—leaving a significant gap in understanding the lived experiences of engineer-entrepreneurs running their own businesses.

In particular, there is little to no empirical literature addressing how these professionals establish discipline, manage behavioral expectations, and respond to cultural and generational dynamics within their privately owned firms. This gap is especially critical in Sri

Lanka, where SMEs account for over 75% of total enterprises, and engineering entrepreneurship is seen as both a pathway to innovation and national development.

2.6 Contribution of This Study

This study contributes to the emerging literature on engineering entrepreneurship by focusing specifically on how entrepreneurial engineers in Sri Lanka maintain workforce discipline. It explores the leadership philosophies, ethical frameworks, practical strategies, and cultural challenges faced by engineer-entrepreneurs in managing people without formal disciplinary infrastructure. Through qualitative thematic analysis, the study reveals how these leaders navigate the complexities of informal authority, generational expectations, and external constraints while building discipline-oriented work cultures.

The findings aim to inform not only scholars of engineering management and entrepreneurship but also practicing engineers, policy makers, and industry educators, offering grounded insights into leadership development in the entrepreneurial business sector.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, Inductive Thematic Analysis (ITA) approach to examine how entrepreneurial engineers in Sri Lanka maintain workforce discipline within their own businesses. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm [13], the research focused on understanding context-specific leadership practices through the lived experiences of participants. A purposive sample of 22 entrepreneurial engineers was selected based on their formal engineering qualifications, ownership of a registered engineering business. Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–90 minutes were conducted in English, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. The interviews used open-ended questions to examine leadership philosophies, approaches to discipline, and challenges within the workplace. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis process, with codes and themes developed inductively from the transcripts [14]. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study. Rigor was ensured through peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and maintaining an audit trail to enhance credibility and dependability [15].

Twenty-two employer engineers with chartered engineer status participated in the study as per the purposive sampling strategy. They belonged to various engineering disciplines and served as MD/CEO at the time of the interviews. Most of the employer engineers were the owners of those firms. Majority of them came from Colombo and few from other semi-urban areas of the country. They had industrial experience of over ten years and had employed several engineers in their firms. Out of the 22 firms, 77% were belong to the small & medium enterprise category whose total employee count was less than 250 and 23% belong to the large scale category with a higher than 250 staff count.

To assure confidentiality, the authors have assigned pseudonyms to each participant from the English alphabet commencing from 'A'. All the firms were established within the period from 1978 to 2019 and are still in operation.

NVivo software was employed to analyse the data conveniently. After familiarizing with the interview transcripts, initial codes for the data were generated. Then, initial codes were categorized to major themes based on their meanings and patterns. The analysis was done inductively in an open mind without incorporating the findings of previous studies into the analytical steps of generating initial codes, searching and reviewing the themes as per the ITA methodology [12].

To ensure coding reliability, the transcripts were first read multiple times to establish familiarity before initial codes were generated. To validate themes, the emergent categories were repeatedly reviewed against the raw data to ensure they were grounded in participants' accounts rather than researcher assumptions. These steps enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis.

Table 1 – Engineering Discipline of the Participants

The discipline of the employer engineer - based on the 1 st degree	Participants
Civil Engineering	A, C, D, E, K, L, N, R, S, U, V, W
Electrical Engineering	F, G, M, O, P, T
Mechanical Engineering	J, Q
Chemical Engineering	B, H

4. Results & Discussion

The five themes that emerged from the analysis as self-discipline, workforce attitude challenges, ethical conduct, external institutional barriers, and practical strategies, reflect a complex interplay between internal leadership behaviors and the broader socio-cultural and institutional environment in which these businesses operate. The following section describes each theme in detail, with the support of the narrative evidence from the interviews.

4.1 Theme 1: Self-Discipline as a Leadership Imperative

A dominant theme that emerged from the interviews was the centrality of self-discipline in the leadership philosophy of entrepreneurial engineers. Participants consistently described discipline not as something imposed on others, but as something that must first be cultivated and demonstrated by the leader. This internalized sense of responsibility formed the foundation upon which they expected their employees to build their own conduct.

"Self-discipline is the basic requirement for success. If I cannot manage myself, how can I expect others to follow?" (Participant O)

For many entrepreneurial engineers, discipline was tied to credibility. In the absence of formal authority systems found in established corporations, these business owners relied on leading by example to inspire accountability and respect among employees. The participants saw personal consistency, punctuality, ethical decisions, and persistence as essential behaviors that reinforced their leadership.

"Discipline is not about shouting or punishing. It is about being steady. When I open the office on time, stay late to finish a task, or treat clients fairly – my staff notice." (Participant R)

This view aligns with transformational leadership theory, which suggests that leaders influence others by modeling the behaviors they wish to see [16]. Specifically, the idealized influence component of the model describes how followers are inspired by the values and integrity of the leader. In the Sri Lankan entrepreneurial engineering context, where formal HR enforcement is minimal in some firms, such value-driven modeling becomes even more critical.

Moreover, the participants' emphasis on self-discipline can be interpreted through Bandura's social learning theory (1977) [17], which holds that people learn behaviors by observing and internalizing the actions of role models. Participants recognized that in small, closely-knit teams, employees are more likely to emulate observed behaviors than comply with abstract policies.

"You cannot ask your staff to be professional if you are cutting corners or coming late to meetings. They follow what you do, not what you say." (Participant D)

In contrast to traditional views of discipline as control or surveillance, the entrepreneurial engineers conceptualized it as a bottom-up influence, beginning with the leader's own work ethic. Several participants noted that before they could hold others accountable, they had to hold themselves to higher standards.

"When I was new, I didn't know everything. But I learned quickly and didn't wait for someone to tell me what to do. That mindset helped me gain the confidence of others." (Participant L)

Interestingly, many engineers linked their self-discipline to moments of isolation or lack of support—highlighting the role of resilience in the entrepreneurial journey. Without superiors or established systems to fall back on, they described developing discipline out of necessity to overcome uncertainty, build legitimacy, and drive business growth.

This reinforces findings by [8], who argued that entrepreneurs often develop non-technical leadership capabilities such as persistence, emotional regulation, and self-leadership in parallel with their business development efforts. In the Sri Lankan context, where access to institutional support and managerial training is limited, these internal qualities become even more crucial.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that for entrepreneurial engineers, self-discipline is not simply a personal virtue, it is a strategic leadership tool. It replaces formal systems, builds credibility, and shapes the behavioral norms of the workforce in a culturally resonant and practically effective manner.

4.2 Theme 2: Workforce Attitudes and Cultural Barriers to Discipline

A recurring theme among participants was the difficulty of maintaining discipline due to entrenched employee attitudes, shaped by cultural norms, generational differences, and shifting expectations in Sri Lanka's workforce. Entrepreneurial engineers expressed frustration over what they described as a lack of intrinsic motivation, entitlement mentality, and resistance to structure or accountability among many employees, particularly younger staff.

"We see a big difference in mindset between the older generation and the new. The younger staff are less patient, they question authority, and they don't take initiative unless pushed." (Participant J)

This view reflects broader concerns in the South Asian context, where collectivist values, hierarchical workplace culture, and respect for seniority often clash with emerging generational aspirations for autonomy and informality [18]. As Sri Lanka undergoes rapid urbanization and exposure to global work cultures, entrepreneurial engineers find themselves at the crossroads of cultural transition, trying to enforce traditional discipline within a workforce that is increasingly individualistic and digitally connected.

Participants highlighted that this cultural shift complicates efforts to build consistent workplace norms:

"Changing the mindset of workers was the biggest challenge I faced. Some don't want to learn or improve—they just do the minimum and expect rewards." (Participant C)

"Some employees feel they are doing us a favor by showing up. There's no sense of pride in work or responsibility unless you guide them every step." (Participant E)

This echoes what Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory describes as high power distance and low uncertainty avoidance [10], conditions under which employees may avoid proactive behavior unless explicitly instructed. In such environments, enforcing discipline through participatory or trust-based methods becomes more complex, as subordinates may not automatically assume shared responsibility for outcomes.

Entrepreneurial engineers who run small and medium size enterprises, unlike managers in larger firms, lack formal HR departments or disciplinary hierarchies. This makes the leader-employee relationship more personal, increasing the emotional and cultural tensions involved in correcting behavior or demanding higher standards.

"It's not like in a big company where you can just issue a warning letter. In a small firm, if you confront someone directly, they might resign or hold a grudge. So you have to be tactful." (Participant F)

This excerpt illustrates the double bind faced by entrepreneurial engineers: the need to be approachable and motivational leaders while also setting clear boundaries and expectations. This aligns with findings from SME management research, which suggests that leaders in small firms often must combine coaching, mentorship, and subtle forms of authority to manage workforce discipline effectively [19].

Some participants also expressed concern that education systems have not adequately prepared engineering graduates for real-world professional expectations, contributing to poor discipline and inconsistent workplace behavior.

"There's a big gap between what is taught at university and what is needed in the field. They come in with degrees but not the right attitudes." (Participant W)

These insights reinforce previous research indicating a disconnect between formal education and industry readiness in South Asian contexts, with soft skills and work ethic often underdeveloped among new entrants [20].

In summary, this theme reveals that cultural expectations, generational value shifts, and institutional limitations significantly shape the challenge of maintaining workforce discipline for entrepreneurial engineers. Rather than facing outright insubordination, they encounter passive resistance, low accountability, and motivational gaps, requiring culturally nuanced and psychologically sensitive strategies to maintain professional standards.

4.3 Theme 3: Ethical Conduct as a Business Strategy

For the entrepreneurial engineers in this study, ethical conduct emerged not just as a personal value but as a deliberate strategy to promote discipline and organizational coherence. Many participants described how upholding integrity, fairness, and professional consistency was central to building trust, motivating employees, and setting behavioral expectations.

"I never compromised on standards, even under pressure. When staff see that I don't cut corners, they start following the same path."
(Participant D)

This account resonates strongly with theories of ethical leadership, which emphasize the leader's role in modeling appropriate conduct and establishing moral legitimacy [21]. In engineering context, where decisions often carry both technical and societal consequences, ethical consistency functions as both a guide and a governance mechanism, particularly in small firms without institutional enforcement tools. Several participants reflected that maintaining ethical behaviour, such as resisting corruption, treating all staff equally, and avoiding favoritism—helped them earn the respect necessary to lead by influence rather than control.

"I refused to do unethical things even if others benefited from them. That made it harder sometimes, but people began to value my decisions more." (Participant F)

In the Sri Lankan context, where political patronage, informal hierarchies, and systemic inefficiencies are common challenges in the professional sphere, choosing to maintain ethical discipline becomes a countercultural act of leadership. By modeling virtue in the face of adversity, these entrepreneurial engineers positioned themselves as moral exemplars—a concept reflected in the "idealized influence" component of transformational leadership theory [16].

Moreover, ethical leadership was seen as a tool for alignment: when leaders act fairly and transparently, it reduces confusion, conflict, and disengagement within teams. Employees are more likely to self-regulate when they see that rules are applied consistently, rewards are earned, and decisions are just.

"When staff see that no one gets special treatment – not even my relatives, they start to believe in the system. That's when you get real discipline, not fear-based obedience."
(Participant K)

This aligns with research by [21], which suggests that ethical leaders shape organizational climate through both moral personhood and moral management—being trustworthy individuals and also actively managing values and accountability in their teams.

Importantly, participants noted that ethical behavior had long-term business benefits. By building reputational capital, they could attract and retain clients, partners, and staff who respected and reinforced the same values.

"Ethical behavior is not only the right thing – it's the smart thing. People trust us, come back to us, and even refer good staff. That makes discipline easier to manage." (Participant V)

"If we treat workers with fairness, they don't leave, they don't protest. They start to self-manage. That saves a lot of time and stress."
(Participant A)

These reflections affirm that ethical leadership is not merely a moral stance but a strategic asset in entrepreneurial business management, particularly in high-trust, low-structure environments like engineering firms in Sri Lanka [22].

In summary, entrepreneurial engineers in this study use ethical conduct as a pragmatic and culturally appropriate strategy to promote discipline. By consistently modeling fairness, transparency, and professional integrity, they influence behavior in ways that formal rules alone cannot—especially in contexts marked by informal norms and systemic ambiguity.

4.4 Theme 4: Political and Institutional Barriers to Discipline

Although entrepreneurial engineers exercise significant autonomy within their own businesses, many reported that their internal disciplinary efforts are frequently undermined by external institutional and political forces. These include political interference, regulatory inconsistencies, favoritism, and unregulated competition, which collectively erode merit-based systems and diminish the credibility of discipline within their firms.

"We strictly follow engineering standards. But in the market, those who use shortcuts win contracts. That affects the morale and discipline inside the company." (Participant S)

Such observation aligns with studies that highlight weak institutional governance and politicization as barriers to professionalism in South Asian work environments [12], [23]. For entrepreneurial engineers, these conditions create a moral and managerial dilemma: they must maintain internal discipline while navigating an external environment where unethical behavior often goes unpunished or is even rewarded.

Participants also noted that inconsistent enforcement of professional standards by regulatory bodies such as engineering associations, municipal authorities, and government departments creates confusion among employees about what is truly expected.

"One project inspector asked for favors to pass our work. I refused. Later, my junior staff asked why we lost the job when we did everything right." (Participant E)

"Political appointments and favoritism in public contracts make it hard for us to reward merit internally. Our employees see the outside world and think rules don't matter." (Participant S)

This highlights a key tension between internal values and external signals. According to institutional theory, organizational practices are influenced not only by internal choices but also by the expectations and norms of the wider environment [24]. In Sri Lanka's hybrid institutional context, where formal regulations coexist with informal networks and political patronage, maintaining internal discipline requires active resistance to external dysfunction.

Some entrepreneurial engineers described experiencing direct interference from political actors or government officials. They were often pressured to make unethical decisions or ignore employee misconduct in order to secure contracts or maintain political favor.

"I had to fight with corrupt management and political actors many times. I even lost contracts because I refused to bend the rules." (Participant T)

This account suggests that entrepreneurial engineers often act as frontline defenders of professional ethics in environments where institutional integrity is weak or inconsistent. However, the cost of maintaining discipline in such settings is high. It involves economic risk, political confrontation, and potential isolation.

This reality reflects findings in development literature that highlight the burden placed on ethical leaders in low-governance environments, where rule-following behavior is not institutionally reinforced [25]. In such cases, even strong internal leadership may not fully compensate for systemic dysfunction.

Despite these barriers, many participants remained committed to upholding discipline, often framing it as a long-term investment in company reputation and sustainability.

"We may lose out in the short term, but in the long run, clients trust us more, and employees understand we stand for something." (Participant M)

In summary, this theme underscores how external institutional and political dynamics shape the internal disciplinary climate of engineering firms. Entrepreneurial engineers must contend not only with managing employee behavior but also with navigating a broader environment that frequently undermines accountability, rewards shortcuts, and challenges principled leadership. Their ability to maintain discipline depends not only on personal integrity, but also on their capacity to shield internal values from external dysfunction.

4.5 Theme 5: Practical and Adaptive Strategies for Instilling Discipline

Despite facing systemic, cultural, and attitudinal challenges, entrepreneurial engineers in Sri Lanka do not rely on rigid or punitive methods to enforce discipline. Instead, they adopt practical, adaptive, and relationship-oriented strategies tailored to the realities of small-firm leadership. These include hands-on mentorship, structured communication, incentivized accountability, and capacity-building efforts aimed at creating a workplace culture grounded in responsibility and trust.

"We work mostly with newcomers. So we have to train them from scratch, not just technically but also in professional behavior. It's time-consuming but essential." (Participant C)

This finding aligns with SME management literature, which emphasizes the importance of informal control mechanisms, such as role modeling, team-based accountability, and personalized supervision in environments where bureaucratic systems are impractical or absent [19], [26]. In small engineering firms, where leaders often work alongside staff, visibility and proximity become natural tools for reinforcing discipline.

Many participants described their preference for mentoring and soft guidance over direct confrontation. This leadership style is reflective of servant leadership theory, where the leader prioritizes the growth, well-being, and development of their team, fostering intrinsic motivation and accountability [27].

"You can't expect employees to follow standards if you don't teach them first. I spend time with them one-on-one, and slowly they start internalizing the right ways of working." (Participant L)

Participants also emphasized communicating clear expectations and structured feedback, particularly for younger or less experienced employees. This aligns with behavioral management research, which suggests that setting specific performance goals and providing ongoing feedback significantly enhances employee focus and discipline [28].

"We clearly outline job roles, timelines, and checklists. That way, there's no confusion. When expectations are clear, discipline follows naturally." (Participant A)

In many cases, simple operational adjustments such as creating standard toolkits, organizing daily debriefs, or assigning peer accountability roles were cited as effective mechanisms for cultivating responsible behavior. These practical, low-cost solutions reflect what [29] describe as "mindful organizing," where organizations in high-reliability environments create routines that promote alertness, adaptability, and collective discipline.

"Earlier, workers wasted time every morning lining up for tools. We created basic toolkits for each technician. That small change improved punctuality and work discipline." (Participant T)

Another notable strategy was the use of intrinsic motivators such as recognition, autonomy, and role advancement.

Participants found that offering employees visible growth pathways, however small, encouraged them to act with greater responsibility.

"We give them ownership of small tasks, then appreciate their performance publicly. That creates a culture where they want to improve – not because they're afraid, but because they feel respected." (Participant C)

This strategy reflects the principles of self-determination theory, which asserts that people are more likely to exhibit disciplined behavior when they feel competent, autonomous, and connected to their work environment [30].

Furthermore, participants often contrasted their methods with what they perceived as outdated or authoritarian disciplinary practices in larger or public-sector organizations. Their adaptive approach, based on communication, trust, and behavioral shaping, was viewed as more sustainable and culturally sensitive.

"Top-down control works only in books or in big companies. In our environment, discipline must come through relationships and fairness." (Participant M)

These approaches also reflect findings from leadership research in emerging economies, which argue that context-sensitive, participatory leadership models are more effective than Western-style command-and-control frameworks, particularly in collectivist cultures [31].

In summary, this theme reveals that entrepreneurial engineers maintain discipline not through rigid authority but through human-centered, adaptive leadership. By mentoring their staff, setting clear expectations, and creating a culture of mutual respect, they embed discipline as a shared organizational value rather than an externally imposed requirement. These practices, grounded in pragmatism, empathy, and cultural awareness, serve as a blueprint for leadership in resource-constrained engineering enterprises. While all themes involve elements of how entrepreneurial engineers approach workforce discipline, Theme 5: Practical and Adaptive Strategies is distinct in that it specifically captures the tangible, day-to-day practices and interventions employed within firms to directly manage employee behavior. In contrast, the other themes highlight underlying orientations

or contextual influences that shape these practices.

4.6 Practical and Policy Implications

This study offers significant implications for both engineering practice and policymaking in Sri Lanka and comparable developing economies. Practically, it emphasizes that entrepreneurial engineers can maintain workforce discipline more effectively by modeling self-discipline, ethical conduct, and hands-on leadership, particularly in settings without formal HR systems. Strategies such as mentorship, clear task delegation, feedback mechanisms, and culturally sensitive communication are crucial for sustaining discipline in lean, high-trust environments. These findings are especially relevant for small and medium-sized engineering enterprises where personalized leadership shapes organizational culture. From a policy perspective, the study reveals the need for systemic support that promotes ethical business environments and reduces political interference in professional and technical sectors. Regulatory bodies and engineering institutions should reinforce merit-based practices and provide leadership development programs that prepare engineers to manage people, not just projects. Additionally, national policies could incentivize SME-level professional training initiatives, support non-formal mentoring structures, and ensure that public procurement and licensing frameworks discourage unethical shortcuts—thereby aligning external incentives with the internal values these entrepreneurs strive to uphold.

4.7 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides in-depth insights into how Sri Lankan entrepreneurial engineers maintain workforce discipline, several limitations should be noted. First, the study is based on a qualitative design with a purposive sample of 22 participants, which, while rich in contextual detail, limits generalizability across broader populations or industries. Second, data were collected through self-reported interviews, which may be subject to personal bias, selective recall, or social desirability effects. Third, the study focused exclusively on entrepreneurial engineers operating their own businesses, excluding perspectives from employees or stakeholders who could offer alternative viewpoints on disciplinary dynamics. For future research, comparative studies could explore how discipline is maintained across different sectors (e.g., public vs. private) or

types of engineering enterprises (e.g., start-ups vs. mature firms). Quantitative or mixed-methods approaches may also be employed to test the prevalence or effectiveness of specific disciplinary strategies identified here. Furthermore, cross-cultural research within South Asia or the Global South could deepen understanding of how cultural and institutional factors shape disciplinary practices in engineering-led enterprises. Longitudinal studies might also examine how these strategies evolve as businesses grow or encounter new organizational challenges.

5. Conclusions

This study explored how Sri Lankan entrepreneurial engineers maintain workforce discipline within their privately owned engineering enterprises. Through in-depth thematic analysis of interviews with 22 engineer-entrepreneurs, the research revealed that discipline is not imposed through rigid rules or hierarchical authority, but rather cultivated through ethical leadership, personal conduct, adaptive strategies, and context-aware management practices. The five themes that emerged—self-discipline, workforce attitude challenges, ethical conduct, external institutional barriers, and practical strategies—reflect a complex interplay between internal leadership behaviors and the broader socio-cultural and institutional environment in which these businesses operate.

The findings highlight the pivotal role of entrepreneurial engineers as both technical experts and organizational leaders, whose influence extends beyond project execution to shaping workplace culture. Moreover, the study underscores the need for supportive policy environments and targeted leadership development for engineer-entrepreneurs, particularly in emerging economies like Sri Lanka.

By centering the lived experiences of engineering business owners, this research contributes new knowledge to the fields of engineering management, entrepreneurial leadership, and organizational behavior in the Global South. It offers a grounded, culturally relevant framework for understanding how discipline can be effectively maintained in resource-constrained, high-trust environments through ethical, adaptive, and human-centered leadership.

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