



Ethics & Leadership Association

CERTIFICATION BLUEPRINT

Certified Ethical Leadership Strategist (ELS™)

Exam Content Outline

Version 1.0 | September 2026

Ethical leadership in strategy and organizational practice
Planned opening Q1 2027

ETHICS • STRATEGY • GOVERNANCE • STEWARDSHIP

Purpose and credential scope

Certified Ethical Leadership Strategist (ELSTM) recognizes experienced leaders who integrate ethical judgment into strategy, governance and organizational practice. Candidates currently hold leadership responsibilities with both direct and indirect reports. Their decisions affect people beyond their immediate team and carry consequences over time.

This Exam Content Outline describes the eligibility requirements, assessment components, competency domains and maintenance requirements for ELSTM. Candidates must independently pass an Ethical Leadership Case Study, a Knowledge-Understanding Exam through Aether, and a 360 Leadership Assessment using 360 Leader. Whether they pass or fail, candidates receive their completed 360 results with a SWOT analysis and improvement plan, plus feedback on their case study. Opening is planned for Q1 2027.

Relationship to ELP and ETLP

ELP™ addresses foundational ethical judgment. ETLP™ addresses the applied leadership of people, teams and stakeholders. ELSTM addresses strategic choices, governance, leadership through others and the organizational conditions that sustain ethical conduct. A title or a senior position alone does not establish competence.

Eligibility

Candidates must have at least 60 cumulative months of leadership experience, including at least 24 months leading through other leaders with accountability for their teams or organizational units. The 24 months are included within the 60 months. Overlapping periods count once; experience need not be consecutive.

Candidates must currently have responsibility for both direct and indirect reports. A direct report reports to the candidate; an indirect report sits within the candidate's leadership responsibility through an intervening leader. ELA reviews actual responsibilities and reporting relationships, including equivalent structures across sectors.

The application must include a dated role history, a description of decision authority, an anonymized reporting structure, direct and indirect reporting responsibilities, and an example of a strategic decision for which the candidate was accountable. Candidates must be able to support a credible 360 process that protects respondent confidentiality.

Preparation and prior credentials

No mandatory training course, minimum training hours or introductory course is required for ELSTM eligibility. ELP™, ETLP™ and ELA membership are not prerequisites. There are no separate RLP and non-RLP eligibility pathways.

The Ethical Leadership Practice Guide is the primary preparation reference. Candidates may prepare independently or undertake relevant learning. Prior credentials and course participation can support preparation but do not waive the experience requirements or any ELS assessment component.

Assessment structure

After eligibility acceptance and confirmed payment, candidates receive access to all three assessments. They may book the examination, nominate their 360 respondents and work on the case study in parallel. There is no required order among the components.

Type	Assessment	Evidence and requirement
Case	Ethical Leadership Case Study	Strategic judgment, decisions and response to consequences. Must meet the case-study performance standard. Delivered through the Management Worlds simulation if ready for certification use, or through a dedicated ELA certification case.
Exam	Knowledge-Understanding Exam	Understanding and application of ELA concepts to strategic leadership situations. Delivered through Aether. Must meet the examination passing score.
360	360 Leadership Assessment	Observed leadership behavior assessed through 360 Leader. Must meet the required rating under the scoring and evidence-quality rules.

All three components must be passed independently. A confirmed result below the required standard in any one component prevents certification in the current attempt. There is no compensating weighted total or additional aggregate passing score. ELA communicates each passing standard, scoring rule and review process before payment and assessment booking.

Knowledge exam content distribution

The Knowledge-Understanding Exam comprises 40 scored open-response questions completed in 150 minutes. The distribution below maps the questions to the four ELS domains.

No.	Content domain	Weight	Questions
1	Ethical Strategy and Responsible Value Creation	30%	12
2	Governance and Accountable Decision Systems	25%	10
3	Leading Leaders and Ethical Organizational Culture	25%	10
4	Stewardship and Organizational Learning	20%	8
	Total	100%	40

These domain weights apply to the knowledge examination. They do not determine the case-study criterion weights or the 360 category weights. The case study addresses all four domains, and the 360 assesses observable behaviors associated with them.

Requirements for certification

Certification requires accepted eligibility, a passing result in each of the three components and completion of any necessary integrity or evidence-quality review. Missing or insufficient evidence is pending, not an assumed failure. A component failure does not automatically cancel access to the remaining paid assessments or remove the candidate's entitlement to feedback.

Competency domains and tasks

Domain 1 Ethical Strategy and Responsible Value Creation

Knowledge-exam weight 30%

Task	Candidate must be able to	Representative enablers and observable evidence
1.1	Frame a strategic ethical decision.	Identify purpose, decision authority, evidence gaps, dependencies and affected stakeholders. Examine who benefits, who bears risk and whose perspective is missing.
1.2	Evaluate strategic options using the Integrity Model.	Apply Ability, Legal, Ethics and Values. Compare feasibility, obligations, stakeholder impacts and values alignment. Explain uncertainty and distinguish legal permission from ethical sufficiency.
1.3	Allocate resources and accept risk responsibly.	Explain trade-offs across people, functions and time. Protect vulnerable stakeholders, set conditions for proceeding, and make accepted risks and accountable owners explicit.
1.4	Turn ethical commitments into strategic execution.	Specify priorities, decision rights, resources, safeguards and review points. Revisit the strategy when evidence changes; account for long-term value and unintended consequences.

Domain 2 Governance and Accountable Decision Systems

Knowledge-exam weight 25%

Task	Candidate must be able to	Representative enablers and observable evidence
2.1	Design clear accountability across leadership levels.	Align authority with responsibility. Define delegation, oversight and escalation. Distinguish executive decisions, governance oversight and operational implementation.
2.2	Build credible challenge and escalation mechanisms.	Ensure concerns reach people able to act. Protect speaking up, manage conflicts of interest and prevent retaliation or concealment through reporting practices.
2.3	Integrate ethics into policies and incentives.	Examine how targets, rewards, controls and resource choices shape conduct. Correct contradictions between declared values and the behaviors the system encourages.
2.4	Maintain effective oversight of technology and emerging risks.	Assess evidence quality and impact, including AI-supported decisions. Provide meaningful human authority, traceable decisions, proportionate controls and routes for correction.

Competency domains and tasks

Domain 3 Leading Leaders and Ethical Organizational Culture

Knowledge-exam weight 25%

Task	Candidate must be able to	Representative enablers and observable evidence
3.1	Lead through other leaders with accountable delegation.	Set clear expectations for managers and team leaders. Provide authority and support, address inconsistent conduct and retain accountability for the wider system.
3.2	Diagnose the gap between stated and lived culture.	Use the Cultural Configuration Model with attention to national, corporate, generational and individual influences. Examine actual behavior without stereotyping groups.
3.3	Create conditions for voice and fair treatment.	Listen across reporting levels, seek dissent, respond to concerns and protect people with less power. Test whether these expectations reach indirect reports.
3.4	Lead cultural change with congruence.	Align personal conduct, management routines and organizational systems. Support managers through difficult changes, respond to resistance and monitor impacts on people.

Domain 4 Stewardship and Organizational Learning

Knowledge-exam weight 20%

Task	Candidate must be able to	Representative enablers and observable evidence
4.1	Represent long-term and external stakeholder interests.	Consider communities, partners and future consequences. Explain how consultation changes decisions and how competing legitimate interests are handled.
4.2	Evaluate ethical performance using balanced evidence.	Combine indicators, narratives and stakeholder experience. Recognize bias, gaming, missing perspectives and the limits of quantitative measures.
4.3	Take responsibility for harm and correct systemic causes.	Acknowledge errors, protect affected people, arrange proportionate remediation and change the policies or incentives that contributed to the harm.
4.4	Use feedback to develop leadership capacity.	Interpret 360 feedback with humility and contextual judgment. Set observable development actions, develop successors and strengthen practices beyond the individual leader.

ELA's core values inform all domains: Congruence, Service Before Status, Courageous Responsibility, Transformational Humility and Shared Stewardship. The credential recognizes demonstrated capability within this assessment framework; it does not certify moral character or guarantee future conduct.

Ethical Leadership Case Study

The case study assesses how candidates apply ethical leadership to strategic choices, competing obligations and consequences over time. Candidates must meet the required case-study performance standard independently of their exam and 360 results.

Delivery routes

The case study is delivered through the new Management Worlds simulation platform if it is ready and accepted by ELA for certification use. Otherwise, candidates complete an original ELA certification case using a realistic organizational narrative, an evidence pack and staged developments.

The certification case is separate from ELA's public teaching cases and facilitator answers. It requires an individual record of the candidate's decisions and reasoning.

Both delivery routes address the ELS competencies and use the same assessment criteria. The delivery format, duration, permitted resources, submission limits and detailed instructions are communicated before assessment booking.

Candidate evidence

- An initial diagnosis identifying the ethical issue, evidence gaps, stakeholders and decision authority.
- A decision memorandum comparing options and explaining the chosen course through relevant ELA concepts.
- A governance and implementation plan with accountable owners, communication, safeguards and review points.
- A revised decision after a staged development such as new evidence, employee challenge, stakeholder harm or delivery pressure.
- A closing reflection on consequences, corrective action and the leadership or system changes needed.

Assessment criteria

Criterion	What the evidence must establish
Diagnosis and ethical reasoning	A defensible interpretation of the facts, uncertainty, affected interests and principles.
Strategic choice and governance	A reasoned choice with clear authority, accountability and proportionate safeguards.
Leadership and implementation	Actions that managers and teams can carry out, with credible communication and protection of voice.
Adaptation and stewardship	A response to consequences that includes learning, correction and longer-term responsibility.

Assessment considers the candidate's diagnosis, reasoning, decisions, implementation and response to consequences. Simulation success or a team result alone does not establish individual competence. Whether they pass or fail, candidates receive individual feedback on their assessed case study, including strengths, gaps against the criteria and actions to improve. Secure case answers are not disclosed.

Knowledge Understanding Exam

The Knowledge-Understanding Exam assesses understanding and application of the ELA frameworks in strategic leadership situations. A confirmed result below the required examination score prevents certification in the current attempt, regardless of the other results.

Examination approach

The examination includes 40 scored open-response questions, with 150 minutes to respond. Short contextual questions and linked situations require explanation, diagnosis or comparison. Responses are assessed against task-specific evidence criteria rather than generic writing quality.

- Explain how an ELA principle or model applies to a specific organizational situation.
- Distinguish a symptom from a governance or cultural cause and identify what evidence is needed.
- Compare plausible courses of action, including the interests and risks that each creates.
- Justify decision rights, escalation, safeguards and conditions for reviewing a decision.

ELA authority and Aether

ELA defines the competencies, content distribution, evidence criteria, scoring rubrics and decision standards. Aether, from N2X Labs, supports examination delivery and analysis within that framework. ELA retains authority over certification decisions and review.

Candidates are assessed on their own understanding and reasoning. Instructions specify the permitted resources and assistance. Answers should address the facts of the situation and explain why the selected action is appropriate.

Preparation references

Practice Guide reference	ELS preparation focus
Core Values and Chapters 2–3	Ethical leadership, principles and responsible judgment.
Chapters 4–6	Governance, leadership services, decision tools and accountability.
Chapters 7–8	Context, cultural configuration and ethical organizational change.
Chapters 9–10	Measurement, stewardship and ethical ecosystems.
Chapters 11–13	Emerging risks, AI and integration of ethical leadership practice.

Candidates should practice using concepts in their own words and connect them to responsibilities they actually hold. Public ELA cases support learning; they are not the live certification case or a source of guaranteed examination answers.

Identity checks, permitted materials and assistance, assessment-integrity rules, and the process for requesting accommodations are communicated before booking. Candidates must follow the instructions that apply to their assessment.

360 Leadership Assessment

The 360 Leader assessment gathers ratings of observed leadership behavior. Candidates must meet its required rating under the scoring and evidence-quality rules. A confirmed below-standard result prevents certification in the current attempt. Candidates and respondents are informed of this certification use before they participate.

Behavioral focus

The assessment addresses observable conduct associated with the ELS domains, including explaining difficult decisions, accepting accountability, acting consistently with stated values, responding to challenge, supporting other leaders and correcting harm. Respondents can indicate when they have insufficient opportunity to observe a behavior.

Respondent selection and sufficient evidence

Perspectives include an accountable supervisor or governance counterpart, peers, direct reports and indirect reports, alongside a self-assessment. ELA reviews the respondent mix to address selective nomination and conflicts of interest. The perspectives of people led by the candidate must be represented.

Candidates should plan for 8 to 12 completed responses from people other than themselves. The minimum is seven valid responses: at least one supervisor or governance counterpart, three peers and three people led, with both direct and indirect reports represented. Self-ratings support reflection and are excluded from the rating used for the certification decision.

Respondents should normally have observed the candidate's work for at least six months. Candidates whose circumstances require an alternative respondent arrangement must obtain ELA approval before invitations are issued. Insufficient valid responses result in a pending assessment and a request for additional evidence, not an assumed low score.

Confidentiality and reporting

An anonymous peer or people-led group is reported only when it includes at least three valid respondents and disclosure risk is acceptable. Direct and indirect reports may be combined where separate reporting would identify individuals. A lone supervisor or governance counterpart may be identifiable and is informed in advance.

Narrative feedback is reviewed for identifying details; absolute anonymity of comments cannot be guaranteed. Before data is collected, candidate and respondent notices explain access to responses and reports, retention, certification use and confidentiality limits. Reports are not automatically shared with the candidate's employer or nominators.

Scoring and candidate feedback

ELA confirms evidence sufficiency and applies the assessment's scoring rules before recording a pass or fail. A single respondent rating, an unvalidated raw average or a self-to-other gap is not treated as the final 360 result. Material concerns receive contextual human review.

Whether the candidate passes or fails certification, ELA provides the completed 360 results, a SWOT analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and a tailored improvement plan. The plan identifies priority behaviors, practical actions, support needs, progress measures and review points. A structured debrief supports interpretation.

Feedback is based on valid evidence and protects respondent confidentiality. Where evidence is insufficient, the 360 remains pending until a defensible report can be produced; results are not invented. Candidates may request review of factual or procedural errors without receiving protected respondent identities. Development work does not replace a passing assessment result.

Certification and candidate information

Certification decisions

ELA awards certification only when the case study, examination and 360 assessment each have a confirmed passing result and all eligibility and review requirements are met. One confirmed failure means the candidate has not met the certification standard for that attempt. With no failure but an outstanding result or review, the decision remains pending.

Passing and failing candidates receive their completed 360 results with a SWOT analysis and improvement plan, and feedback on their assessed case study. These deliverables are separate from the certification decision. A failure does not automatically terminate the remaining paid assessments. Available review or reassessment routes are explained in the outcome notice.

A material integrity concern or a corroborated pattern of harmful leadership behavior requires review by an authorized ELA decision-maker. The review considers evidence quality, context and the candidate's response. An allegation or an unfavorable anonymous comment alone is not an established finding.

Application and fees

Opening is planned for Q1 2027. Applications remain closed until ELA announces their opening. Candidates apply through a website profile; paid membership is not required and eligibility review is free. ELA reviews each application and may request clarification before accepting or declining it.

Accepted candidates receive the fee and candidate terms. After confirmed payment, they receive examination booking instructions for Aether, an account access link for 360 Leader where they nominate respondents, and access to the certification case study. The three assessment activities can then proceed in parallel. Acceptance and payment do not award the credential.

The certification fee is US\$1,000 at the standard rate or US\$800 for ELA members, a 20% member discount. It covers all three assessments, administration, completed 360 results with a SWOT analysis and improvement plan, and individual case-study feedback, whether the candidate passes or fails. Membership dues are separate. Payment is requested only after eligibility acceptance. Any reassessment charges are communicated separately before booking.

Fair participation and review

Candidates may request assessment accommodations through ELA's confidential support process. Requests are considered in relation to the assessment requirements and comparable demonstration of competence. Sensitive medical or employment records should not be entered in a general application field.

The ELA website and candidate instructions provide the applicable terms, privacy information, integrity rules, reassessment conditions, and review or appeal procedure before assessment booking. Outcome notices include the route for requesting a review. Candidate review rights do not include disclosure of confidential respondent identities or secure assessment content.

Maintaining the certification

The ELSTM credential is valid for three years. To renew, complete 24 hours of professional development during the three-year cycle, including at least 12 hours in ethics or ethical leadership, and submit one short reflective case study demonstrating continued application. No new examination or repeat 360 assessment is required under the current renewal policy.

Professional development and the reflective case should demonstrate continued application of ethical leadership in the candidate's practice. Renewal evidence is submitted through the process communicated by ELA.

Document control and references

Field	Record
Owner	Ethics & Leadership Association
Document	ELS™ Exam Content Outline
Credential	Certified Ethical Leadership Strategist (ELS™)
Version	1.0
Edition	Public edition
Date and language	September 2026. English.
Planned opening	Q1 2027

Version history

Version and date	Description
1.0 September 2026	First public edition of the ELS™ Exam Content Outline.

Primary preparation reference

Ethics & Leadership Association. The Ethical Leadership Practice Guide. First Edition, 2026. The preparation references in the Knowledge-Understanding Exam section identify the relevant topics and chapters.

ELA's public learning cases provide opportunities to practice analysis and reflection. They are distinct from the certification case and do not provide the answers to live assessments.

Candidate information

Consult the ELA website for opening announcements, fees, application instructions and the current candidate policies. Assessment instructions identify the requirements that apply to the candidate's booking. The official credential name is Certified Ethical Leadership Strategist (ELS™).

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