

Can ethical leadership enhance employees' work engagement?

Aamir Ali Chughtai

Forman Christian College, Lahore, Pakistan

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Extended abstract

The research on work engagement has witnessed a dramatic increase in the last decade or so. Two factors have contributed to this sudden wave of interest in the concept of work engagement. First, the recent trend towards positive psychology with its thrust on human strengths, well being and optimal functioning, has evoked a general interest in positive states and as a result has catapulted the construct of work engagement into prominence (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Second, the importance of work engagement has been enhanced because past research has provided compelling evidence, which suggests that high levels of work engagement can make a significant contribution to the firm's bottom line (Gruman and Saks, 2011). Work engagement refers to a "positive, fulfilling work related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). Vigour refers to the exhibition of high levels of energy and mental resilience while working. Dedication reflects a strong work involvement and encompasses feelings of enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, significance, and challenge. The final dimension of engagement is absorption. This component refers to being fully immersed in one's work in a way that time appears to fly by and one finds it excessively difficult to disengage oneself from work.

Previous research has revealed that job resources (e.g. supervisory coaching, performance feedback, job control and social support) and personal resources (e.g. self- efficacy and optimism), due to their motivational potential are the key drivers of work engagement (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, Taris, 2008; Halbesleben, 2010). However, quite surprisingly, the role of the leader in fostering work engagement has received relatively limited research attention. To fill this void, the present study sought to examine the impact of ethical leadership on work engagement. This research adopts the notion of ethical leadership as developed by Brown and colleagues (2005). Brown et al. (2005) define ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision making" (p. 120).

Furthermore, this study also endeavoured to uncover the underlying processes through which ethical leadership behaviours can influence work engagement. Specifically, it is proposed that leader-member exchange (LMX) and organizational identification will be the intervening variables that link ethical leadership to work engagement.

Data for this cross-sectional survey study were collected from 139 doctors drawn from a large government hospital operating in Pakistan. Structural equation modelling was used to test the direct and mediating effects.

Results showed that LMX and organizational identification partially mediated the effects of ethical leadership on work engagement. These results implied that ethical leadership can affect work

engagement directly as well as indirectly through the mediating mechanism of LMX and organizational identification.

The cross sectional design of this study does not permit causal inferences. Additionally, all data were self-reported and therefore, common method variance may be a problem. Despite these limitations, results suggest that ethical leadership is likely to play a key role in creating an engaged workforce. Thus, by using appropriate interventions, organizations should encourage managers and supervisors to exhibit ethical leadership behaviours. Previous studies have mainly focused on the role of job resources and personal resources in enhancing work engagement. The present study however, demonstrates that promoting ethical leadership behaviours in the workplace can also prove to be an effective strategy for augmenting employee engagement. Additionally, this research highlights two distinct mechanisms in the form of LMX and organizational identification through which ethical leadership can affect work engagement.
