Identifying the Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Work Attitude of University Teachers: The Mediating Role of Trust

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Abstract

It has been widely observed that leaders' role is paramount in developing the working environment in the organization, where ethics, working attitudes and trust are the key to running the organization efficiently. Building on this, the current research was planned to study the relationship between leaders' ethical leadership, teachers' working attitude and the mediating role of trust. Teachers were asked to report about their leaders' (chairpersons/heads) ethical leadership. A quantitative survey was conducted by adopting descriptive research approach. Four public universities were scrutinized on a convenient basis. From these universities, 332 teachers were selected through a simple random sampling technique. Existing research tools were adopted to collect data. Data analyses were done using the statistical software SPSS to reach to certain findings. Two research hypotheses were presented to analyze the results. After calculating the descriptive statistics, simple linear regression and an independent sample t-test were applied to infer findings. The findings show that ethical leadership has a significant relationship with teachers' working attitude and teachers' trust in their leaders. Our second research hypothesis was not accepted as we could not detect the difference in the opinion of male and female teachers in view of ethical leadership, teachers' work attitude and trust. We also stressed the limitations and presented directions for future research.

Keywords: *Ethical Leadership; Working Attitude; Trust; Linear Regression; Independent Sample t-test*

Introduction

Generally, leaders are considered to be change agents in their organizations as they are responsible for bringing and sustaining the change in the organization, focusing on the future to achieve organizational goals (Sanders & Wood, 2015). Whatever the actions a leader takes in his/her organization has an impact on the organizational development, including on team members (Lozano et al., 2013). The role of leader is always considered as 'heroic' and a 'great man,' who is expected to have all kinds of attributes required to run the organization successfully (Spector, 2016). Among these attributes, ethics are rated at the top because ethical understanding and application is essential for all leaders to deal with their followers (Burns, 2003). Among other significant leadership theories, ethical leadership is one of the important leadership theories which deals with ethics, morality and conduct of leaders to manage their relationship with others based on values and principles (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Through ethical behavior, such leaders create a positive and conducive working environment in their organizations to achieve organizational goals. They articulate their values and principles through actions which inspire others to follow the same and this creates a positive work environment in the organization (Zhu, 2008). A sufficient amount of literature is evident about the fact that ethical leaders influence the working attitude of their employees (Neubert et al., 2009).

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Authors, Brown et al. (2005); Chughtai, Byrne, and Flood (2015) highlighted that leaders' social influence motivates their followers to perform better. By showing respect and trust in their followers, ethical leaders win the hearts of their followers. Thus, such leaders put more efforts into getting the things done in the organization (Chiaburu & Lim, 2008). Due to the higher morality of the leaders, followers' trust, job satisfaction (Brown & Mitchell, 2010), commitment (Neubert et al., 2009), citizenship behavior is also high, which of course contributes to the organizational outcomes (Toor & Ofori, 2009; Mayer et al., 2009).

Trust is the key in any relationship and this can only be built when followers are certain about their leaders that he/she is honest, concerned about their followers and committed to the better of the organization. Thus, ethical leaders satisfy the needs of the followers and develop a trustworthy environment which ultimately adds to followers' working performance (Gu et al., 2015). Sims and Brinkmann (2002) identified that ethical leaders develop an image that they are being taken care of and a trust in the followers that they are doing well in the organization, which enhances the work performance of followers (Ciulla, 2004). Being ethical is imperative for both leaders and followers and the role of every stakeholder is important to run the organization effectively. Thus, whatever the context of the organization is, ethics and morality are important. This mainly depends on the leader how they set up the organizational culture of the organization (Lu et al., 2014).

Considering this very important issue in academia we believe that ethics are everything in the organization and it helps to work efficiently. The culture of respect and manners pave the way for conducing working space and build a trustworthy environment in the organization. This research is framed on ethical leadership, teachers' work attitude – who considered as followers – and the mediator role of trust in Pakistani higher education.

Conceptual Framework

This section presents the conceptual framework of the variables and their relationships derived from empirical research.

Conceptualizing Ethical Leadership

The concept of ethical leadership is rooted deep in the literature (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). There are a variety of definitions available characterizing leadership attributes. The most important attribute is leaders' ethics (Sweet Jr, 2012). Ethical leadership refers to individuals in positions of power who lead by example and make decisions based on ethical principles. Ethical leaders prioritize honesty, integrity, fairness, and accountability and they strive to create a culture of respect and trust within their organizations (Erdoğan, 2002). They also make decisions that are in the best interests of their stakeholders, including employees and the broader community (Koay & Lim, 2021). Ethical leadership is important because it sets the tone for an organization and can improve its reputation, increase employee morale and retention, that ultimately lead to long-term success (Ali et al., 2018). Since ethical leadership stands on moral principles and values, it also strengthens the following characteristics in the leaders, e.g., integrity, accountability, fairness, respect, service, leading by examples and social responsibility and so on.

Following are the details of these key components:

- Integrity is the key characteristic of ethical leaders; a personal sense of integrity leads to professional integrity. Integrity constitutes honesty, fairness and being consistent in actions and reducing gap between saying and actions (Engelbrecht, Heine, & Mahembe, 2017).

- Accountability means taking responsibility of your actions; ethical leaders own their decisions and actions. They always present themselves for accountability, their openness and fairness strengthen them in their positions (Ghanem & Castelli, 2019).

- Fairness; such leaders treat all stakeholders fairly and impartially without showing bias or discrimination. Ethical leaders created an environment of respect and honesty in the organization (Lu & Guy, 2014).

- Respect; this is the prime attribute of any leader to respect his/her followers, valuing diversity and treating others with empathy, compassion, and dignity. They listen the perspective of others and foster an environment of mutual respect and trust (Hansen et al., 2013).

- Service; ethical leaders prioritize the needs of the organization and its stakeholders over their personal interests or gain. They focus on serving others and creating value for the organization and society as a whole (Lu & Guy, 2014).

- Leading by example; ethical leaders model ethical behavior and values, setting the tone for the organization. They communicate values clearly and consistently and hold themselves and others accountable for upholding ethical standards (Pircher & Peus, 2020).

- Social responsibility; ethical leaders consider the broader impact of their decisions and actions on society, including environmental sustainability and social justice. They demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility and engage in initiatives that benefit the organization (Zhu, Sun, & Leung, 2014).

Nevertheless, these components of ethical leadership are crucial for promoting trust, respect, and integrity within the organization and beyond. Ethical leaders who exemplify these values can create a positive working environment in the organization and contribute to achieving the organizational objectives.

Followers' Working Attitude

Followers' working attitude refers to the way in which employees approach their work and their attitude towards their own role in the organization (Demirtas et al., 2017). It can be shaped by a number of factors, including the culture of the organization, the leadership style of managers, and the overall work environment. Here are some common attitudes that followers may have towards their work:

- Engagement: Engaged employees who are passionate about their work and feel committed to the mission of the organization. They will be willing to go beyond to achieve their goals to contribute to the success of the organization (May et al., 2014).
- Responsibility: Responsible employees take ownership of their work and their role within the organization. They are accountable for their actions and take pride in producing quality work (Raub & Blunschi, 2013).
- Adaptability: Adaptable employees are flexible and able to adjust to changes in the organization. They are willing to learn new skills and take on new responsibilities as needed (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012).
- Teamwork: Employees who value teamwork are collaborative and supportive to their colleagues. They work well with others and are willing to help the team achieve its goals (Menon & Thompson, 2010).
- Positive attitude: Employees with a positive attitude approach work with enthusiasm and optimism. They see challenges as opportunities to learn and grow and they inspire others with their can-do attitude (May et al., 2014).

Positive working attitudes can contribute to a healthy and productive workplace, and they may be fostered through effective leadership, a supportive work environment and a commitment to the organization's mission and values. All these attributes are linked to leaders' ethical leadership. Though ethical leaders are positive and respectful to their colleagues, at the same time they should encourage their followers to perform well in their tasks and responsibilities (Brown et al., 2005). Mayer et al. (2009) argued that in large-sized organizations, employees generally cannot interact with top management. Thus, there is a less probability that they perceive the ethical values and morality of their leaders. Valentine et al. (2006) stated that in top-down organizations, leaders must ensure that their followers are perceiving the same image as they have been showing and behaving. Such ethical leaders should tell their followers that they are there to support them. This will enable the followers to have a valuable and productive working environment and will enhance their satisfaction with work and organization (Tsai & Huang, 2008).

Role of Trust

Trust is the key to developing working relationships between a leader and followers. This develops a communicative environment, openness which ensures transparency and cooperation between leaders and followers and among followers (Lapidot, Kark, & Shamir, 2007). Hosmer (1995) presented a unique definition which is not widely accepted but it helped to explore a link with ethical leadership. Trust is actually expectations from a person or a group of ethically justifiable behavior in the organization (p. 399). Leaders' fairness, transparency, and trustworthiness directly contribute to enhancing the level of trust in followers (Bhatti et al., 2021). Ethical leaders have clear communication patterns with their employees, they also facilitate their followers in getting required resources, streamlining the processes of the organization, which psychologically encourages them to perform better in their workplace.

Leaders' exemplifying values and working standards develop a trustworthy relationship between followers and leaders (Banks et al., 2021).

The role of trust in this research is as mediator mapping the relationship between ethical leadership and followers' work attitude. Thus, we follow the model of McAllister's (1995) of trust. This model is mainly based on two dimensions of trust which perfectly suit our research. Moreover, this model has been widely validated in a variety of contexts (Wang et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2009). Trust is reciprocal and interpersonal. It means it is from both leaders' and followers' sides. The first dimension of this model is 'trust from the leader' (Chua et al., 2008), which is rooted in leaders' ethical attributes, values, integrity and based on cognitive aspects of trust (Yang et al., 2009). This develops a sharing and cooperative working environment in the organization. The other dimension of this model is 'trust from the followers' side', which is affective trust (Chua et al., 2008) and has more relational orientation. Considering the level of trust from followers, followers exchange their emotions and concerns which helps both leaders and followers to develop a mutual understanding of various problems in the organization and explore ways to achieve organizational objectives (Colquitt et al., 2012).

Problem Statement

The existing pool of research is evident of the fact that leaders' moral values and ethics play an important role in the organization. However, in the present time, the changing demands and policies of higher education put pressure on academic leaders to meet the needs of time. The funding policies and an over number of higher education institutes create tension in academia about maintaining enrollment, faculty development, quality and equity in the organization. The race among higher education organizations is creating frustration which is lowering the quality of education and administration in Pakistani universities. Thus, due to this tense and tough situation, academic leaders are under pressure and their ethical values and integrity are at stake. Literature also proves that if leaders' integrity and values contribute to the organizational environment, ethical leaders have a positive impact on teachers' work attitude and job satisfaction. Similarly, these attributes of leaders contribute to developing trust in the organization, which enhances the working environment of the organization. The existing landscape of higher education demands for more ethical leaders showing high moral values, integrity and respect to their teachers to better achieve the organizational goals. The current research was intended to identify the relationship between ethical leadership, teachers' work attitude and the mediating role of trust in Pakistani higher universities.

Research hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were designed to achieve the study objectives:

H1 Teachers' trust in their heads mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and teachers' work attitude in universities;

Moreover, expecting the potential difference between the opinion of male and female teachers in higher education about their leaders' ethical leadership and teachers' work attitude and trust, we put forward another hypothesis:

H2 There is a significant difference of opinion between male and female teachers in view of assuming leaders' ethical leadership, teachers' work attitude and trust in higher education.

Research Methodology

Research Procedure

The central objective of this research was to identify the relationship between ethical leadership and teachers' work attitude and the mediating role of trust in higher education. The term 'followers' is this research considered for 'university teachers.' A descriptive research design was adopted to conduct this research. Existing valid research tools were adopted to collect data from university teachers who were considered as followers in this research. These teachers were asked to report about their leaders' ethical leadership. Researchers collected data by visiting the participants in their offices after making an appointment with them. The average age of the respondents was between 25-60 and their level of qualification ranged between M. Phil to Post Doctorate. SPSS was used to enter and analyze the collected data. The confidentiality and anonymity of research was ensured.

Population and Sample

There are 79 in Punjab province (Punjabhec.gov.pk, 2022). Out of these public sector universities, the following four public sector universities were selected on a convenient basis from Mulan district. It is also pertinent to mention; this research was conducted during Covid-19 thus all available teachers were invited to participate in this research. From these selected universities, N=332 (Male=189; Female=143) teachers were selected through simple random sampling technique. The sample was restricted to these universities due to the available sources, e.g., time, finance and workforce.

Research Instruments

As mentioned elsewhere in this document, we consider the existing research instruments which seem useful in a Pakistani context as these have been widely used in various contexts. As to measuring Ethical Leadership, the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire was adopted developed by Yukl (2013). This scale comprised on 15 statements on a 6-point Likert type scale. The score ranged between 1-6. Teachers were asked to report about their leaders' (heads/chairpersons') ethical leadership. The calculated reliability of this scale is .97.

As to measuring work attitude of teachers Work Attitude Questionnaire was adopted developed by Shuck, Adelson, and Reio Jr. (2017) on the five point Likert type scale. The score ranged between 1-5. This scale is also based on 15 items. The calculated reliability was .95.

As to measuring trust, six items based on Loyalty to the Leaders Questionnaire (TLQ) developed by McAllister (1995) was adopted to collect data from teachers to report about their leaders. A Likert scale consisting of five-points was utilized to collect data, score ranged between 1-5. The calculated reliability of this scale was .91.

Data Collection

All the sampled universities were contacted to seek their consent to participate in this research. After taking formal permission, we contacted each individual participant to set up a meeting with them for data collection. At the time of meeting, research objectives were shared with the research respondents. They were also assured about research ethics, including confidentiality and anonymity. Respondents were requested to give their fair response. The average age of respondents was ranging between 25-65 and their level of qualification ranged between M. Phil to Post Doctorate.

Data analysis

All the questionnaires were assigned numbers to identify any error or missing values while entering data into SPSS. A data sheet was created by using SPSS to enter data. Reliability of the research instruments was also calculated. After preparing the sheet for analysis, descriptive statistics, linear regression and an independent sample t-test were performed. The following section will present the results of this research.

Results and Discussion

The main objective of this research was to identify the relationship between ethical leadership and followers' work attitudes and to study the mediating role of trust. First, we calculate the descriptive statistics of all the research variables. Table 1 is presenting the results of descriptive analysis:

Table 1, Descriptive statistics of the variables

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ethical Leadership	8.57	1.44
Teachers' Work Attitude	8.66	1.12
Teachers Trust in Leaders	8.48	1.40

N= 332

Table 1, presenting the descriptive statistics of all the research variables. The mean score shows, on average the respondent rate their leaders' ethical leadership M=8.57, ($SD = 1.44$; N=332). Similarly, on average teachers rate their level of trust in leaders M=8.48 ($SD = 1.40$; N=332). As to teachers' work attitude on average M=8.66 ($SD = 1.12$; N=332) teachers shows positive work attitude in their universities.

Simple Linear Regression

To measure the relationship between variables and to see the role of mediator variable, simple linear regression was applied. Table 2, presents the results of linear regression.

Table 2, Results of linear regression

Predictors	DV's		*B*	*SE*	*β*	*t*	*p*	*R*	*ΔR²*
Ethical Leadership	Teachers'	Working Attitude	.54	.031	.70	17.45	.000	.70	.480
Ethical Leadership	Trust		.73	.035	.75	20.76	.000	.75	.567
Teachers' working attitude	Trust		.120	.006	.724	19.07	.000	.72	.524

N=332; p=0.05

A simple linear regression was calculated by entering ethical leadership and work attitude of teachers and the following regression equation was identified F (304.574); aR^2 =.48, p = .00. The regression equation of leaders' ethical leadership and teachers' work attitude presents a significant amount of variance 48%, which means if leaders show ethical behavior in their organizations that counts for teachers' behavior towards work. This means a unit increase in mean value of leaders' ethical behavior .54 will count in teachers' work attitude. Our study results are in line with the available research conducted in various contexts Bhana and Bayat (2020); Dinc (2018); Ruiz, Ruiz, and Martínez (2011) conducted their research in difference domain including higher education and they found the same results that leaders' ethical values, morality and integrity enhance teachers' working attitude in their universities.

To map the relationship between leaders' ethical leadership and teachers trust in leaders. We again found a significant regression equation F (431.304); aR^2 =.57, p = .00. This equation also presents a significant amount of variance 57% which shows if leaders are ethical their teachers trust in leaders. The regression equation also shows significant results means increase a unit in ethical leadership .73 will add a definite increase in teachers' trust. The existing research confirmed that leaders' ethical leadership enhances the level of trust in teachers (Akker et al., 2009). This is further confirmed through the study results of Demirtas et al. (2017); Newman, Kiazad, Miao, and Cooper (2014).

Next, we apply the linear regression by entering teachers' work attitude and teachers' trust in leaders. The following regression equation emerged F (363.880); aR^2 =.52, p = .00. This means the work attitude of teachers depends on trust in leaders. If teachers work positively in the organization, it will create a working environment which enhances trust. The regression coefficient also shows that a unit increase in the mean value of work attitude .120 will enhance the teachers' trust in leaders. Our first research hypothesis got accepted after analyzing these significant results which means there is a clear relationship between leaders' ethical leadership

and teachers' work attitude and the mediating role of trust. Our study results are in line with the study findings of Cogliser et al. (2009); Demirtas et al. (2017).

Sobel Test to map the Effect of Mediating Variable

After applying regression analysis to see the relationship between ethical leadership and the mediator variable trust. We applied Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) to see the significance of indirect effect of ethical leadership on the teachers' work attitude through trust in a single study. An online Sobel test calculator was used to conduct this test. The *p=0.05 value of this test was found significant which means the mediator variable trust has a significant indirect effect on ethical leadership and teachers' work attitude.* To present these linear relationships graphically, we created scatter plots for better representation of results:

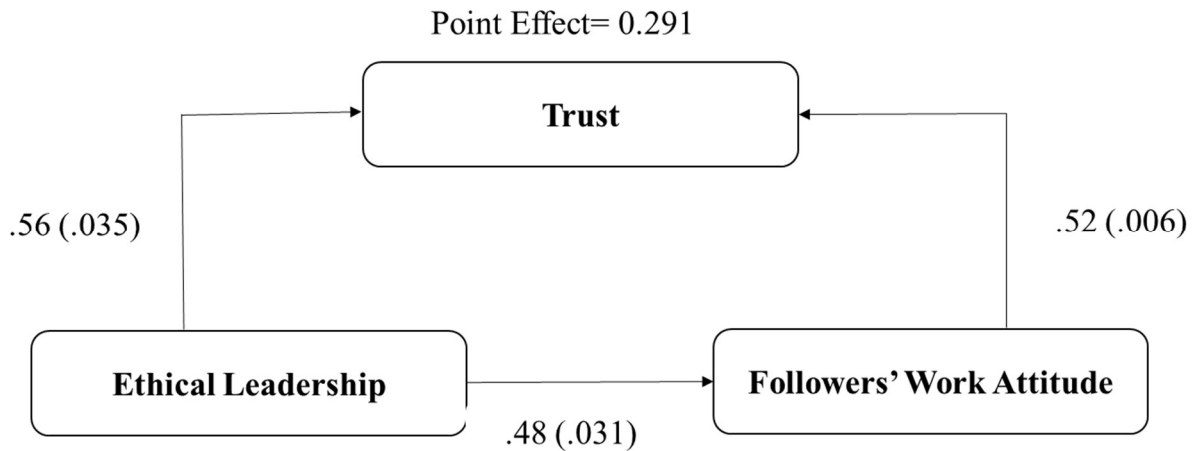*Summary of regression coefficients for mediation analysis and point effect*

Figure 1, Presents regression coefficients results and point effect

Independent Sample t-test

Table 3, Presents the results of independent sample t-test

Variables	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	t	Sig
Ethical Leadership	Male	8.50	1.44	.050	-1.10	.823
	Female	8.68	1.44			
Followers' Work Attitudes	Male	8.66	1.02	1.84	.061	.176
	Female	8.65	1.25			
Followers' Trust in Leaders	Male	8.48	1.36	1.38	-.085	.239
	Female	8.49	1.45			

N= 332; p=0.05;

To measure the second research hypothesis, we apply one-sample t-test with one tailed. The following equation of results emerged after analysis, Table 3, presents the results of independent sample t-test. The mean score of male and female students against ethical leadership was (Male = 8.50; SD = 1.44 and Female= 8.68; SD= 1.44) where, t (330) = -1.10, p = .823. Although, the mean scores are slightly difference but statistically it was not significant. This means there is no difference in the opinion of male and female respondents to rate the ethical leadership of their leaders. As to see the difference in view of teachers' work attitude, the means score (Male = 8.66; SD = 1.02; Female= 8.65; SD=1.25) where, t (330) = .060, p = .176. Again there is no difference in relation to work attitudes of male and female teachers as to ethical leadership of their leaders. As to see the difference in view of teachers' trust in leaders the following equation was found (Male = 8.48; SD = 1.36; Female= 8.49; SD=1.45) where, t (330) = -.085, p = .239, which shows the level of trust of male and female teachers towards their leaders was the same in all the selected universities. These results proved that our second research hypothesis got rejected since there was no difference in the opinion of male and female teachers.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The current research studied the hypothetical relationships between the variables. We tried maximum to enhance the scope of the research in view of all the elements of research however the generalizability of the results might be limited to the local – specified context. In this research we involved four public sector universities and within these universities we involved only teachers from certain faculties and departments. Thus, these universities and participants do not represent the whole university and their practices. Moreover, we mainly rely on the responses of teachers to rate their opinion about their leaders, but we have not invited leaders to participate in this research. In future, research may consider more participants by inviting more universities from the region and also consider the voices of leaders about their teachers and the working environment of the organization. Secondly, we grasp a significant amount of variance while mapping the relationship between variables. We concluded after the analysis that there may be other factors which are contributing to the ethical leadership of leaders and teachers' working attitude and trust. We thought that it might be due to the research instruments which were mainly being applied in the business/corporate sector. Thus, we recommend future research to consider developing local instruments to better reflect the contextual needs of the institutions and participants. And this will also enhance the research findings. Moreover, this research was quantitative in nature, which usually restricted the participants to sharing their in-depth opinion. Thus, we recommend future research to consider adding a qualitative part to their research to get an overview of the real phenomenon.

Conclusion

This research was mainly built on two research objectives, identifying the relationship between leaders' ethical leadership and teachers' work attitude and the role of trust as mediator variable. Significant results were identified. This means there is a relationship between leaders' ethical

leadership and teachers' work attitude and follower trust towards their leaders in universities account for a significant amount of variance at both sides: ethical leadership and teachers' work attitude. Thus, our research hypothesis was accepted. As to the other research objectives to find out the difference between male and female teachers in view of their leaders' ethical leadership, teachers' work attitude and the role of trust as mediator variable. Our findings show that both male and female teachers rate their leaders' ethical leadership, their own work attitude and their trust towards their leaders in the same manner, so these findings rejected our second hypothesis.

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