

# HOW ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IMPACTS EMPLOYEES' PERFORMANCE AT THE WORKPLACE: A PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract** *In the current competitive business scenario, success lies in high-quality organizational performance. Keeping and sustaining superior performances is dependent on the right leadership approach. It is a leader who develops the vision and leads the people in the right direction to achieve their personal and professional objectives. Developing mutual trust and employees' commitment is an important step in achieving organizational goals, which is possible only when organizations start practicing ethical leadership behavior in their day-to-day activities. Researchers believe that practicing ethical leadership is one of the ideal ways to manage and develop the employees' trust, mutual understanding, cooperation, higher job commitment, and job satisfaction, which eventually results in superior performance. This review paper includes different psychological beliefs about ethical leadership, personality characteristics, and behavior of ethical leaders, and their role in managing employees' performance at the workplace.*

**Keywords** *Ethical Leadership, Personality, Leadership Styles, Employee Performance*

## INTRODUCTION

In this growing competitive world, there are many organization scandals which have taken place because of irresponsible and unethical behaviors of their leaders. Corporate frauds including Enron and Satyam are a few examples which gained popularity around the world and raised a big question on the leader's behavior and role in the organizational settings (Brown & Treviño, 2006). It is believed that a leader plays a significant role in strategy development, policy making, guiding followers, and execution and control of organizational activities (Bello, 2012). Available leadership literature discusses about a leader's behavioral norms and actions in managing group activities and achieving goals. But still, questions about the concept and application of ethical leadership in organizations remain unanswered, leaving scholars and behavioral practitioners to make constructive efforts to find out the answer to a few basic questions, such as "what is ethical leadership and how it plays an important role in managing people performance in an organization?" (Chen & Hou, 2016; Brown et al., 2005; and Treviño et al., 2003). This research article is an effort to answer these basic questions.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Ethics is something which guides the conducts and actions of a person in various social settings. Ethics is defined as "a

set of moral principles that distinguish what is right from what is wrong" (Azmi, 2010). In organizations, ethics helps in developing a sense of honesty, authenticity, fairness, transparency, and a truthful relationship of leaders with their followers. Researchers in business ethics mentioned that without establishing an ethical system, an organization cannot imagine of its existence and future survival (Kaptein, et al., 2005; Sharma, Khandelwal & Agrawal, 2018).

On the other hand, leaders act as role models to their followers and show them the right path to achieve predetermined goals (Northouse, 2007). Leaders provide the right leadership by proposing the performance excellence skeleton within their own functional area. They are obliged to take an active role in strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation and control of various functions within the organization. Organizational leaders motivate employees by leading through examples; they describe organizational values and norms, and encourage their employees to perform the best of their abilities (Bello, 2012).

According to Yukl (2006), "leadership is a process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objective".

Integration of the ethical principles and guidelines with the leadership process helps to outline the concept of ethical leadership, whereby the leader's behavior, actions, and decisions in different contexts are judged on the parameters of honesty, integrity, transparency, equality, and truthfulness, by the followers.

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“Ethical leadership is defined as an expression of normatively suitable conduct through personal actions and Interpersonal relationships, and the encouragement of such conduct to followers through the means of two-way communication, reinforcement, and a sound decision-making (Brown et al., 2005)”.

Ethical leadership is explained as a practice where leaders believe in practicing honesty, sincerity, care, truthfulness, and transparency in behavior and decisions while leading others. Brown, Treviño and Harrison (2005) stated that “ethical leadership includes normatively accepted behaviors of a leader which is likely to be similar and reliable among subordinates”.

Ethical leadership believes in leading followers in a way that compliments the privileges and dignity of others. Ethical leaders hold the social power and ethical leadership develops the way leaders apply this social power in the decision making process, initiating actions, and in influencing others (Treviño, Brown & Hartman, 2003). Leaders who are really principled exhibit a high level of truthfulness, which is essential for inspiring a sense of leader reliability and significant for followers to understand and admit the vision of their leader (Treviño et al., 2003).

In its earlier literature, the concept of ethical leadership was directly connected to transformational leadership behavior. Burns (1978) believed that transformational leaders encourage followers by making constructive alignment of their own values with their followers' value systems and practicing essential ethical principles.

## UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF THE ETHICAL LEADER'S PERSONALITY

According to Cumbo (2009), “A leader is considered ethical when inner virtues direct the leader's decision-making process and style and followers simply are beneficiaries of a leader breathing an honorable life.” The author believes that virtues are augmented when the leader demonstrates “imagination, consideration, empathy, sensitivity and discernment”.

Martinez-Saenz (2009) recognizes five patterns of ethical leadership - unselfish, egoistic, independent, legalist, and communitarian. All these were favored equally by the author, who identified various related instances and environment for each.

“Unselfish motivation defines ethical leadership as the quality of leader acting out of unselfish motives. Egoistic happens when the right thing is believed by leaders because

of a self-centered motive. Independent believes is allowing the followers in determining their own way of practicing ethics. The authors describe legalist ethics as an art of leaders to follow a set of agreed rules or regulations and communitarian emphasize on making the better society or community in which the organization exists.”

The term ‘ethical leader’ is perceived differently by different experts. Human resource and organizational behavior experts defined an ethical leader as one who knows the core values and has the guts to line them in all fractions of life. They are impartial, do not take advantage of people's ignorance/incapability of followers, are responsible, have no selfish concern, lead others while keeping ethics in mind and action, can clearly distinguish between right and wrong, treat in-groups and out-groups equally without any biases, accomplish their vision without ignoring one's moral principles and values, give right directions to the group members, do not exploit others, are emotionally intelligent, impartial, respect the right and dignity of others, inculcate values and sense of good quality work in all the subordinates, lead on the grounds of ethics, principles, and values instilled in life, believe in the common good of people, and are morally right toward all the individuals in a group (Sharma, Agrawal & Khandelwal, 2019).

The essential traits of ethical leaders as per leadership researchers may include being trustworthy, just and honest, having integrity, good relationship orientation, being confident, loyal, transparent, impartial (never keeping individual differences in the heart), having the habit of sharing credit, not exploiting team members, working for social motives, being committed toward values, both personal and that of the organization, being emotionally intelligent, sincere, bringing coordination and harmony among team members, keeping cool and calm in adverse situations, capable of rational thinking rather than getting emotional, being highly influential, believing in community building, being courageous, taking responsibility for their actions, being dignified and respectful, matured, having a strong will power, and being compassionate (Sharma, Khandelwal & Agrawal, 2018).

Researchers also defined the ethical leader as one who has brilliant qualities as a good decision maker, such as being organized in coming up with solutions to problems, not benefiting from political and religious issues, understanding and carrying out assigned duties with seriousness, handling the common decisions proficiently, and one who does not possess a distrustful behavior. Ethical leaders are also defined as those who behave ethically, and lead and manage the staff suitably. As per the authors' views, ethical behavior is not essentially known to a person but must be learned through experience and training. In the same way, if a leader learns

the worth of ethics only through his head and not with his heart, he will be considered a man without a chest (Sharma, Agrawal & Khandelwal, 2019).

King (2008) did a survey of managers across different industries and identified eight general ethical values of leaders. King believes that ethical development of leadership depends on eight major qualities, including “integrity, reliability, commitment to purpose, kindness, social justice, strong character, humbleness, and endurance” (King, 2008). All these personal characteristics and values may be learned but actually originate from one’s religious faith and believes. Through the research findings, it was noted that a leader who incorporates faith into the workplace becomes an ethical leader.

For listing the characteristics of ethical leaders, Treviño et al. (2000, 2003) conducted an investigative research to understand ethical leadership. Researchers conducted structured interviews with 20 high profile executives and 20 ethics/compliance officials in different industries, and requested them to quote the example of ethical leaders they came across in real life, respond to the broad series of questions related to personality, behavior pattern, and motives of that leader. The results of the interview conducted showed a number of personal characteristics which are essential for being an ethical leader. These characteristics include truthfulness, reliability, and true decision-makers who care for people and their society, and also believe in acting and behaving adequately in their personal and professional life (Sharma, Agrawal & Khandelwal, 2019).

## RELATING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP WITH OTHER LEADERSHIP STYLES

Around the world, researchers believe that the notion of ethical leadership overlaps with diverse leadership styles, including transformational, spiritual, and authentic styles. It is observed that whether transformational, spiritual, or authentic, the styles speak to the ethical aspect of leadership in some manner (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Sharma, Agrawal & Khandelwal, 2019).

Bass and Avolio (1993) illustrated four dimensions of transformational leadership including inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Among these, the idealized influence dimension has been portrayed as having an ethical component. The concept of idealized influence entail that transformational leaders become “role models for followers to imitate”.

Research shows that both authentic and ethical leaders have clearly defined social motivation and have a humanity-based leadership style (Brown & Treviño, 2006). They

both act as principled leaders who always give a thought to the consequences of their decisions. Self-awareness, candidness, clearness, uniformity, and values and concern for others are major behavioral characteristics of authentic leaders (Michael & Treviño, 2006).

Spiritual leadership is also depicted as “occurring when a person in a leadership position represents spiritual values such as integrity, honesty, and humbleness, creating the self as an example of one who can be trusted, relied upon, and admired. It emphasizes on integrity, humanity, and a consideration leadership style which is consistent with prior conceptualizations of the ethical leadership, as well as also being steady with transformational and authentic leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006)”.

## ROLE OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN MANAGING EMPLOYEES’ PERFORMANCE AT THE WORKPLACE

Different leadership theories and researches explain that a leader should understand and influence ethics at the workplace. The literature available in the field of normative business ethics (Donaldson & Gini, 1996) talks about the role of leaders in developing ethical leadership practices in organizations (Ciulla, 1998; Freeman, Gilbert & Hartman, 1988; and Rost, 1995). Descriptive business ethics literature emphasized the role of executive leaders in setting ethical priorities at the higher level of management in an organization (Murphy & Enderle, 1995) and in determining the informal and formal parts of ethical culture (Treviño, 1990; Treviño & Nelson, 2004).

The research studies highlighted the fact that executive leaders have a vital responsibility in communicating moral standards to employees and using their rewards and punishments strategy to strengthen normatively suitable conduct (Treviño, Hartman & Brown, 2000). Additionally, the upper management also has influence in developing the organization’s values and in integrating ethics into day-to-day activities like in making performance assessments and other related HR and administrative decisions (Weaver, Treviño & Cochran, 1999a, 1999b). Leaders have their important role in persuading employees to conduct themselves in a moral and ethical manner. Employees’ information and opinion about the executives’ and supervisors’ concern and care about ethics has an association with the type of conduct, both ethical and unethical, at the workplace (Treviño, Weaver, Gibson & Toffler, 1999). Leaders were found to be the most significant character in influencing organizational ethics and they take part in controlling ethical or unethical behavior at the workplace.

Hansen (2011) explored the concept of social exchange relationships between ethical leaders at supervisory and organizational levels and subordinates, and highlighted the role of these relationships in influencing the subordinate behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, many of which are not related to ethics, but extremely valuable to the organizations.

In various management researches, there is a close examination of the role of a leader in influencing subordinates' behavior for achieving organizational objectives (House & Javidan, 2004; Yukl, 2006). Ethical leaders are superior role-models, where they behave as honest and moral leaders who love to do the correct things and lead their personal life in an ideal manner. These ethical leaders always tend to make reasonable and impartial decisions and move toward working from a 'means' perspective, and not just an 'ends' perspective (Brown & Treviño, 2006). These ethical leaders lie down, communicate, and insist on clearly defined ethical standards among the followers, and are very supportive and gentle; they are trusted by their subordinates. Ethical leaders act as high-quality role models who inspire subordinates to pursue their case (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Dadhich and Bhal (2008) studied the concept of ethical leadership behavior and role of leader-member exchange in predicting subordinate behaviors. This study explores the relative impact of ethical leadership behavior and leader member exchange on subordinate outcomes. The impact is classified as ethics-related outcomes in the form of the leader's honesty, subordinate's willingness to inform about problems, level of affective and cognitive trust; work-related outcomes, which includes the leader's efficiency, gratification with the leader; and extra-effort outcomes. This study provides several contributions to the existing leadership literature and shows the relative impact of one-to-one relationship with the leader (LMX) and ethical leaders' behavior on subordinate outcomes.

This research classifies subordinate outcomes into two categories — “pragmatic/generic job related outcomes, e.g., extra effort of the subordinate, effectiveness of the subordinate, and satisfaction with the leader; and idealistic ethics-related outcomes like the leader's honesty, their willingness to report problems, emotional trust, idealized behavior, and idealized attributes. In their research, authors argue that LMX is a strong determinant of pragmatic job-related behavior/outcomes and ethical leadership is more likely to generate idealistic ethical outcomes.”

Nekoranec (2009) stated the role of a leader in influencing follower's behavior and outcomes. The major responsibility of a leader is to promote values, develop harmonious relationships, and make an effort for equally favorable solutions to problems. The researcher also states the significance of building win-win conditions, especially

when it comes to ethics and managing finances. Leaders who are ethical and maintain profits through moral ways gain maximum respect from subordinates.

Kaptein et al. (2005) noted that ethical leaders should influence subordinates after assessing the consequences of their actions. Researchers suggested the need for regular surveys of the employees to get an insight into the ethical activities of the organization. These surveys can expose probable outcomes of unethical behavior in working organizations and elucidate the personality traits of ethical leaders. Ethical leaders act as a role model, so that the staff act, behave, and react in an ethical way. They issue the guidelines and norms for ethical decision-making and help followers in performing their jobs sincerely and genuinely (Michael & Treviño, 2006). Ethical leadership behavior also influences the employees' organizational citizenship behavior by encouraging the practice of social learning (Bandura, 1986) and social exchange processes (Michael & Treviño, 2006).

Group-oriented leaders always try to bring out the best in their people. They believe in developing a climate that allows followers to grow and contribute to the best of their skills, capabilities, and existing potential (Ahuja, 1997). The author stated that leaders who misuse their power, and believe in using an authoritarian style, can discourage their team members, which may lead to the collapse of the team. However, leaders with the lenient use of power and high achievement values can help in the balanced development and growth of the team members (Ahuja, 1997).

According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), “the key job of a leader is to develop a vision for the organization, communicate this vision to the followers, and develop a sound strategy for achieving the vision through the procurement of quality people, effective training, sound motivation approach, information management, team building, and by encouraging change management and innovative practices in organizational context”.

Pfeffer (1994) believes that effective people management includes the development and empowerment of people, sharing information, forming self-managed teams, and offering timely learning opportunities to the people. These altogether are fundamental determinants of organizational development. Ethical leaders play an important role in achieving organizational developmental goal and building a positive image of the organization in the eyes of its stakeholders. Fig. 1 denotes different traits of ethical leaders, ethical leadership practices, and implications of ethical leadership behavior in managing employees' performance. This conceptual model is a summarized presentation of different opinions and views toward ethical leadership and its role in the workplace.

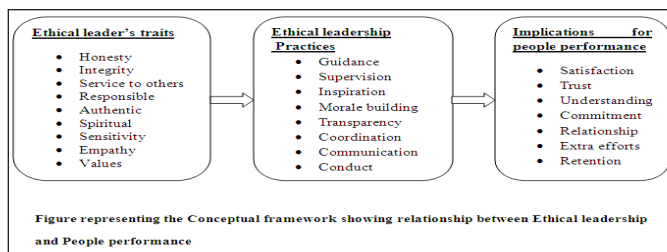


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

## DISCUSSION AND SCOPE OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Managing people's performance and producing excellent results always require an organization's pledge to develop the right leadership approach. In reality, a good leader is one who develops and practices ethics in his behavior and decisions, and motivates employees into putting in their best efforts. For sustaining people's performance, the leadership process is as important as the organization's results (Marcy, Gentry & McKinnon, 2008). Allowing and learning from errors is a primary characteristic of ethical leaders. They creatively adapt and innovate various strategies to benefit the people and organization.

For development and execution of sound HR practices like selection, training, motivation, appraisal, and career up-gradation of people, practicing ethical leadership is extremely essential in today's competitive environment. Ethical leaders effectively manage various activities, behavior and decisions based on ethical guidelines and principles as mentioned earlier. In this way they lead people and their efforts benefit the organizations. This study offers an opportunity for future research scholars to develop practical insights in the field of ethical leadership and to conduct in-depth research for exploring the job of ethical leadership in managing and developing better people performance at the workplace. This also gives an opportunity to test the proposed conceptual model empirically. Ethics and ethical behavior are very important for healthy development and promotion of all types of organizations. Hence, this study provides an opportunity to future researchers to explore the role of ethical leadership in managing employees' behavior and performance, and for handling human resource practices at the workplace. One should remember and apply a few basic principles like respecting people's autonomy, being just and fair, being true, contributing toward the general well-being of others, and so on, to develop an ethical component of behavior and to deal with personal and professional life situations in an improved way. Organizations should devote their valuable resources

to develop ethical leadership practices at the workplace (Monahan, 2012).

“Corporate executives and business owners need to realize that there can be no compromise when it comes to ethics, and there are no easy shortcuts to success. Ethics need to be carefully sown into the fabric of their companies.” — Vivek Wadhwa

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