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Linking Ethical Leadership with Organisational Commitment in Selected South African Public Entities: the Mediating Role of Perceived Organisational Support

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William Makumbe

Northwest University Business School, Potchefstroom, South Africa

ORCID: 0000-0002-4197-2127

Email: makumbe.william@gmail.com

Abstract

Recent corporate scandals have put the concept of ethical leadership in the limelight. As a result, there have been increasing calls from government leaders and pressure groups for the practical application and research of ethical management. However, business ethics research and application are still limited in Sub-Saharan Africa. Accordingly, this research examined the mediating role of perceived organisational support on the link between moral leadership and organisational commitment. Three hundred managers were systematically selected from the South African public sector. Data, analysed using structural equation modelling, revealed that ethical leadership and perceived organisational support significantly impacted organisational commitment. Perceived organisational support partially mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and organisational commitment. These results offer practical insights to South African public sector managers.

Keywords: *Ethical Leadership, Perceived Organisational Support, Organisational Commitment, South Africa.*

Introduction and Background

Over the years, there has been an upsurge in corporate malfeasance, hence the need for ethical leadership. Corporate leaders and business analysts have extensively commented on corporate scandals such as Enron, WorldCom, Nortel, AIG, and Lehman Brothers (Bedi et al., 2016). Hence, it is not surprising that there has been burgeoning literature on business ethics explicitly focusing on the role of institutions in business ethics (Adeleye et al., 2019), the effect of business ethics on variables such as business sustainability (Suriyankietkaew & Kantamara, 2019), intellectual capital voluntary disclosure (Rossi et al., 2021), employee performance (Al-Jabari, 2018), and brand attitude (Ferrell et al., 2018). Although most of the research on business ethics is primarily confined to the Western context, it is a rising discipline in Africa (Adeleye et al., 2019). This is partly because of the growing call from African governments and pressure groups for corporate managers to uphold ethics in daily management. Corporate leaders are now expected to maintain integrity, transparency, honesty, and professionalism in the workplace. Owing to this, the concept of ethical leadership and its impact on business management effectiveness has become a hot topic (Bartram, 2019).

Previous research has characterised ethical leaders' behaviours as honesty, trustworthiness, care for others, and fairness (Bartram, 2019). Past research also noted that ethical leadership practices could improve organisational brand image through corporate social responsibility (Suriyankietkaew & Kantamara, 2019). Ethical leadership can enhance business performance due to the power of an ethical climate (Sarwar et al., 2020). Not only that, ethical leadership influences employee attitudes such as organisational commitment (Bartram, 2019), which are critical for organisational effectiveness. Hence, a study of this nature has become paramount, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the average public sector Corruption Perception Index (CPI) is very low (33/100(Corruption Perception Index, 2024). The study is even more important in South Africa, which scored 43 points out of 100 points in the 2022 CPI (Corruption Perception Index Report, 2022). South Africa dropped to 41 points out of a possible 100 points in the 2023 CPI (Corruption Perception Index Report, 2023). Given this scenario, public practitioners must appreciate ethical leadership's importance in organisational management. Ethical leadership enhances employees' attitudes (see Asif et al., 2019; Bedi et al., 2016; Cheung, 2013; Qing et al., 2020; Toor & Ofori, 2009; Zagenczyk et al., 2021), and this is crucial

in reducing negative employee work behaviours such as corruption, thus improving the corruption perception index.

With this in mind, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

RSQ 1: How does ethical leadership impact organisational commitment in selected South African public sector organisations?

RSQ2: Does perceived Organisational support mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and Organisational commitment in selected South African public sector organisations?

This investigation offers important contributions to the field of business management. Firstly, it addresses the frequent calls for business ethics research in Africa (van Wyk & Venter, 2022a). Because of the diversity of ethical challenges confronting African organisations, this study offers important insights regarding the factors that can create a moral climate and reduce negative workplace behaviours. Secondly, this study adds to the growing literature on business ethics research. Thirdly, as little is known about the linkage between ethical leadership and perceived organisational support (Tan et al., 2019), this study attempts to close this gap by examining the relationship between the two variables.

Literature Review

Ethical Leadership

According to Bartram (2019), ethical leadership can be defined as demonstrating normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and promoting such conduct through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. There are two pillars of ethical leadership: the moral person and the moral manager (Huma et al., 2020). As a moral person, the leader demonstrates characteristics and traits in his/her behaviour as a role model. Conversely, as a moral manager, the leader exhibits role modelling through visible action and ethical use of rewards and disciplinary practices (Bartram, 2019). Leaders are key influencers and supporters of organisational ethics because they set ethical standards (Suriyankietkaew & Kantamara, 2019). When leaders set ethical standards and abide by them, most employees will strive to emulate the leader's behaviour. This can lead to the development of an ethical organisation.

Organisational Commitment

Organisational commitment refers to assessing the congruence between an individual's values and beliefs and those of the organisation (Singh & Onahring, 2019). In agreeing with Singh and Onahring (2019), Kotzé and Nel (2020) stated that organisational commitment refers to an attitude or psychological state characterising employees' relationships with their employer and subsequently influencing their decision to stay or leave the organisation. This implies that if an individual's and organisation's values and beliefs match, an attachment to the organisation will develop. In this essence, an employee can contribute towards the organisation's productivity. In analysing the concept of organisational commitment, Meyer and Allen (1990) identified three components of organisational commitment: affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Affective commitment describes the employee's emotional attachment to the organisation (Haque et al., 2020b) through observable attributes such as loyalty, affection, warmth, belongingness, happiness, and pleasure. Continuance commitment describes employees' perceptions of the potential risks and costs associated with leaving the current organisation (Oyewobi et al., 2019). Normative commitment describes the employee's emotions and compulsion to remain with the organisation (Haque et al., 2020a). An employee chooses to remain with the organisation because of a sense of commitment and responsibility to the employing organisation (Oyewobi et al., 2019). Ethical leaders are responsible for creating an environment that stimulates employees' commitment.

Perceived Organisational Support

The concept of perceived organisational support has generated interest among practitioners of organisational studies (Tan et al., 2019). This is perceived organisational support influences various important employee attitudinal outcomes. Perceived Organisational Support (POS) is the employees' global belief about how much the organisation values their contribution and cares about their wellbeing (Giao et al., 2020). This implies that employees who feel adequate support from the organisation develop a sense of belonging to the organisation and its objectives. Employees can create a strong stimulus that protects the organisation from negative behaviours that work against the organisation and its objectives (Cheung, 2013). There are various antecedents of POS; these include justice, supervisor support, human resource practices, and transformational leadership (Tan et al., 2019). Therefore, ethical

leadership practices such as honesty, fairness, caring, rewarding, and reinforcing organisational standards create a supportive environment (Van der Wal & Demircioglu, 2020).

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

Social Learning Theory

This study is premised on the Social Learning Theory proposed by Bandura (1977). The theory postulates that people learn from each other through observation and modelling (Akpan & Kennedy, 2020). When people watch specific behaviours they enjoy, they also model them. To learn such behaviours, individuals generally pay attention to emulating credible and attractive role models (Bedi et al., 2016). This implies that ethical leaders become attractive role models who demonstrate integrity, transparency, and care and develop high standards for themselves and others. Therefore, employees can emulate and internalise the likable characteristics of their role-modelling ethical leaders. This theory is, hence, applicable to this study.

Ethical Leadership and Organisational Commitment

Ethical leadership influences employee attitudes, such as organisational commitment (Zagenczyk et al., 2021). Ethical leaders can establish a better relationship with employees as they are trustworthy and caring and make fair decisions(Cheung, 2013). All this can lead to developing a felt obligation towards the organisation and its goals. In support of this, Bedi et al. (2016) argued that ethical leaders become attractive to their followers through behavioural traits such as integrity. By exhibiting likable characteristics, ethical leaders influence followers to develop an attachment to the organisation and its goals. Once employees become attached to an organisation, they will exhibit positive work efforts. Previous studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between ethical leadership and organisational commitment (see Asif et al., 2019; Lotfi et al., 2018; Qing et al., 2020). It can, therefore, be proposed that:

H1: Ethical Leadership positively influences organisational commitment.

Ethical Leadership and Perceived Organisational Support

Ethical leaders are moral people and managers (Van der Wal & Demircioglu, 2020). Hence, their behavioural traits influence an organisation's employees' perceptions (Tan et al., 2019). This is achieved through the creation of an ethical climate. An ethical climate is associated with creating policies that support the provision of resources to employees, justice, and transparency (Tan et al., 2019). Employees who perceive an ethical climate and culture can view the organisation as supportive (Bedi et al., 2016). Positive perception of the organisation is also influenced by how much it values and cares for its employees (Giao et al., 2020). This can be achieved if organisational managers recognise employees' efforts through fair rewards and include them in decision-making. Past research confirms a positive relationship between ethical climate and perceived organisational support (Bedi et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2019). Therefore, it can be proposed that:

H2: Ethical leadership positively influences perceived organisational support.

Perceived Organisational Support and Organisational Commitment

Employees' perception of a supportive and congenial work environment can lead to developing a positive inner feeling that nurtures organisational commitment (Zagenczyk et al., 2021). Perceived organisational support implies that the organisation is caring and is also meeting the socioemotional needs of employees at the workplace (Cheung, 2013). This can lead to the development of organisational commitment (Giao et al., 2020). Employees can also exhibit discretionary behaviour that benefits the organisation and its members. Perceived organisational support also decreases adverse psychological and psychosomatic reactions from employees (Giao et al., 2020). All of this improves the employee's commitment to the organisation. Prior research has also confirmed the positive relationship between perceived organisational support and organisational commitment (see Albalawi et al., 2019; Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019). It can, therefore, be proposed that:

H3: Perceived organisational support positively influences organisational commitment.

The mediating role of perceived organisational support

Several studies have confirmed the mediation role of POS in employee attitudes studies (see Cheung, 2013; Giao et al., 2020; Jehanzeb, 2020). This body of evidence confirms the role of POS in influencing important organisational outcomes such as organisational commitment. In an organisation, employees view fair treatment from the leadership in a positive light. This implies that if employees positively evaluate the benevolent motives of organisational leaders towards them, they may develop an attachment to the organisation (Cheung, 2013). The employees can feel obligated to work towards positive outcomes in their organisation(Giao et al., 2020). This implies that work attitudes and such work engagement, organisational citizenship behaviours, and employee commitment can be nurtured. Therefore, it is proposed that:

H4: Perceived organisational support partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and organisational commitment.

Following the discussion above, this study proposes the research model below:

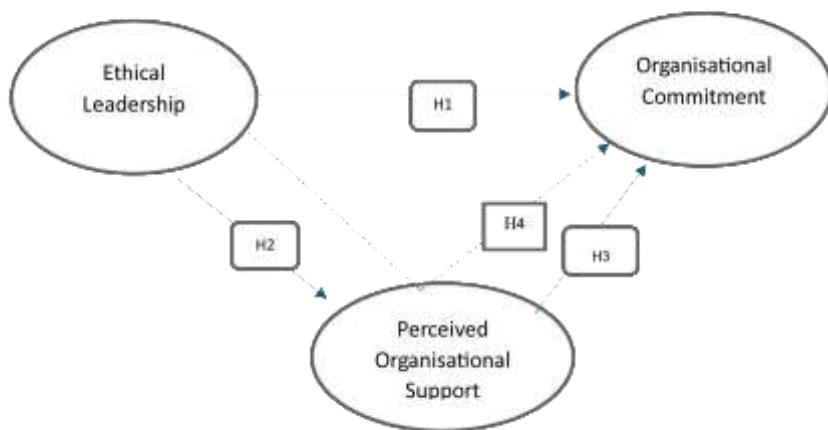


Figure 1: Research Model
Source: Authors Creation

Participants

This study systematically surveyed 300 managers from selected public sector companies in South Africa. A structured questionnaire has been uploaded onto the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire was sent to the respondents' email addresses.

Research Instrument Measures

The research constructs were measured using validated items. Perceived Organisational Support and Organisational Commitment were measured using items adapted from the work of Eisenberger *et al.* (2001). The ethical leadership scale used in this study was adapted from the work of Zappalà and Toscano (2020).

Reliability and Validity

The assessment of validity and reliability was based on the following indicators:

Indicator reliability: According to Hulland (1999) an acceptable reflective indicator loading should be greater than 0.5. As depicted in Table 1, all indicator loadings were greater than 0.5.

Internal consistency reliability: This indicator was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha. According to Gefen, Straub, and Boudreau (2000), a CR value of at least 0.7 is indicative of adequate internal consistency reliability. On the other hand, Hair *et al.* (2017) state that a Cronbach alpha (α) value greater than 0.60 is acceptable. As shown in Table 1, internal consistency reliability was satisfied.

Convergent reliability: This is assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). This indicator should be greater than 0.5. Table 1 below confirms that AVE values are acceptable.

Table 1: Factor Scores, Means, Standard Deviation, AVE & CR.

	Variable	Factor Score	Mean	Standard Deviation	Alpha	AVE	CR
	Ethical Leadership				0.84	0.53	0.87
EL1	My leader listens to what employees have to say	0.64	3.77	1.287			
EL2	My leader disciplines employees who violate ethical standards	0.71	4.14	1.175			
EL3	My leader conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner	0.66	3.10	1.382			
EL4	My leader has the best interests of employees in mind	0.73	3.86	1.132			
EL5	My leader makes fair and balanced decisions	0.79	3.70	1.188			
EL6	My leader discusses business ethics or values with employees	0.64	4.06	1.085			
	Perceived Organisational Support				0.87	0.56	0.86
PO1	This organisation takes pride in my accomplishments	0.83	3.92	1.055			
PO2	This organisation cares about my wellbeing	0.88	3.93	1.032			
PO3	This organisation values my contributions to its wellbeing	0.80	4.05	1.099			
PO4	This organisation shows concern for me	0.89	3.97	1.109			
PO5	This organisation strongly considers my goals and values	0.73	3.64	1.205			
PO6	This organisation is willing to help me if I need a favour	0.71	2.95	1.374			
	Organisational Commitment				0.86	0.65	0.91
OC 1	Working in this organisation has a great deal of personal meaning to me.	0.63	4.06	1.103			
OC 2	I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organisation	0.77	3.83	1.217			
OC 3	I am proud to tell others that I work at this organisation	0.86	4.06	1.043			
OC 4	I feel emotionally attached to this organisation	0.77	3.85	1.234			
OC 5	I would be happy to work at this organisation until I retire.	0.72	3.97	1.123			

Source: Authors Creation

Discriminant Validity

The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to assess discriminant validity. According to Hair (2017), to achieve discriminant validity, the AVE of each construct must be greater than the correlation with any other construct, as in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

	Ethical Leadership	Perceived Organisational Support	Organisational Commitment
Ethical Leadership	0.72		
Perceived Organisational Support	0.55	0.74	
Organisational Commitment	0.65	0.70	0.80

(Discriminant validity values are shown diagonally in bold)

Source: Authors Creation

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were used to assess the data suitability for factor analysis. The KMO value was 0.81 and Bartlett's Sphericity was significant at $p = .000$. This implied that the sample data was adequate for factor analysis.

The CFA model was assessed using CMIN (2.52), IFI (0.90), CFI (0.91), and the RMSEA (0.058). The model indices were within acceptable limits (see Hair et al., 2017)

Structural Equation Modelling

SEM analysis was conducted using Amos version 28 to test this study's hypotheses. As shown in Table 3, all model fit values were within the acceptable range.

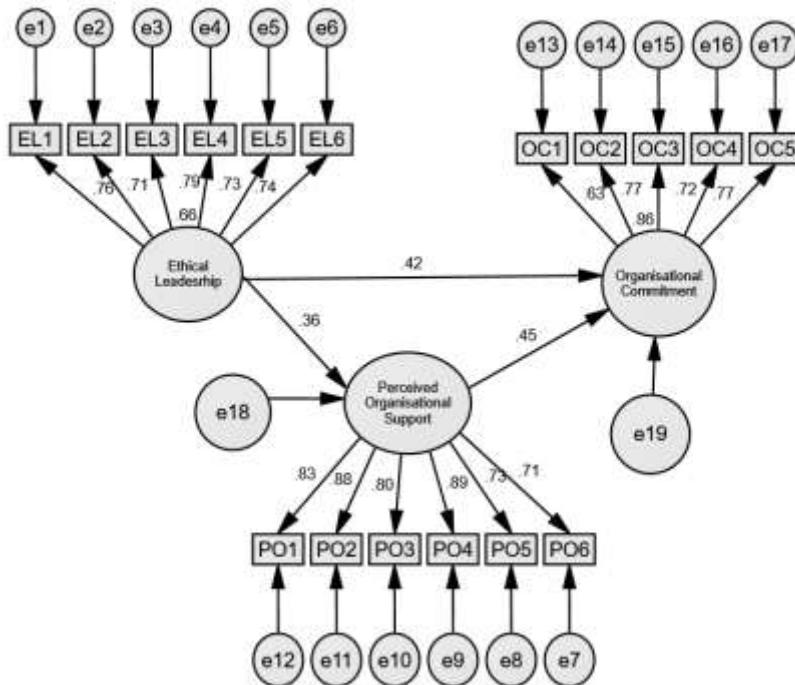


Figure 2: Structural Equation Modelling
Source: Authors Creation using SPSS Version 29

Table 3: Model Fit Indices

Model Fit Index	Scores	Acceptable Threshold
CMIN/Df	2.52	$1 < \text{CMIN/Df} < 5$
RMSEA	0.058	< 0.08
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	0.90	< 1
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.92	> 0.9

Source: Authors Creation

Direct Effects

Table 4 below shows that ethical leadership and perceived organizational support significantly impacted organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.42$, *probability value* = 0.00; $\beta = 0.45$, *probability value* = 0.00). Hence, *H1* and *H3* were accepted. Furthermore, ethical leadership had a significant impact on perceived organizational support ($\beta = 0.36$, *probability value* = 0.00; *Beta* = 0.19). Hence, *H2* was accepted.

Table 4: Path Coefficients and Probability Values

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	P-value	Decision
H1	Ethical leadership>>>Organisational Commitment	0.42	0.00	Accepted
H2	Ethical Leadership>>> Perceived Organisational Support	0.36	0.00	Accepted
H3	Perceived Organisational Support >>> Organisation Commitment	0.45	0.00	Accepted

Mediation Effects of Organisational Commitment

The mediation analysis showed that there was a partial mediation effect between ethical leadership and organisational commitment through perceived organisational support ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = 0.00$); hence, *H4* was accepted.

Table 5: Mediation Results

Regression Path		Indirect Effect	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	P. Value	Decision
Ethical leadership >>>> Perceived Organisational support>>>>Organisational Commitment	H4	0.16	0.09	0.12	0.00	Partial mediation

Source: Authors Creation

Discussion

Ethical leadership and its impact on organisational effectiveness have emerged as important issues to managers. Consequently, the concept of ethical leadership has been extensively investigated in literature (see Asif et al., 2019; Jehanzeb, 2020; Qing et al., 2020; Zagenczyk et al., 2021; Zappalà & Toscano, 2020; Kia et al., 2019). Despite this growing body of evidence, more studies are required to establish its impact on organisational outcomes. Accordingly, this research sought to investigate the theoretical and empirical relationships between ethical leadership and organisation commitment with perceived organisational support as a mediating variable. For this reason, this study examined the impact of ethical leadership on organisational commitment.

The empirical findings of this study confirmed all the hypotheses. First, ethical leadership was found to have a positive relationship with organisation commitment ($\beta = 0.42, p=0.00$). This resonates with earlier findings(see Lotfi et al., 2018; Asif et al., 2019; Qing et al., 2020a, 2020b). The actions of ethical leaders can influence employee attitudes, such as organisational commitment. Through role modelling actions such as enforcing ethical conduct, two-way communication, and using reward systems (Kia et al., 2019), organisational leaders can influence employees' commitment to the organisation.

Ethical leadership profoundly impacted perceived organisational support ($\beta = 0.36, p=0.00$). These findings corroborate the work of Bedi et al. (2016). Ethical leaders can create an atmosphere that stimulates positive feelings from employees. This can be done through the creation of a supportive atmosphere. A supportive atmosphere is characterised by the adequacy of work resources, motivating reward mechanisms, and the provision of information critical to objective attainment. Such an environment can enhance the perceived organisational support. Perceived Organisational Support positively correlated with organisational commitment ($\beta= 0.45, p=0.00$). This finding is consistent with Albalawi et al.'s (2019) and Arasanmi & Krishna (2019b, 2019a) work. Employees who perceive that their leaders provide a supportive environment will likely develop positive employee attitudes toward the organisation. This is because employees interpret the leaders' behaviours as representative of organisational actions (Giao et al., 2020). Last, consistent with earlier findings by Cheung (2013), perceived organisational support partially mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and organisational commitment ($\beta=0.16, p=0.00$). This implies that perceived organisational support supports the ethical leadership–organisational commitment relationship. Ethical leaders must create a supportive ethical climate that influences organisational commitment.

Theoretical Implications

This study is theoretically significant in several ways. Previous research stresses the need to investigate African business ethics(van Wyk & Venter, 2022b). This study responds to this call by exploring the relationship between ethical leadership and organisational commitment. Although many authors have investigated ethical leadership (Asif et al., 2019; Bedi et al., 2016; Kia et al., 2019; Qing et al., 2020a; Toor & Ofori, 2009; Zagenczyk et al., 2021), these studies primarily relate to other

countries. Ethical leadership studies are required across cultures (Toor & Ofori, 2009). This study was done in the Sub-Saharan context, where national cultures largely reflect collectivism and high power distance (Hofstede, 2006). Therefore, this study's results contribute to the large evidence of ethical leadership.

Practical Significance

Study findings imply that public sector managers should pay attention to the antecedents of organisational commitment, which were validated in this research. Ethical leadership and perceived organisational support were positively associated with organisational commitment. This implies that South African public sector managers must cultivate ethical leadership. What does this mean? South African Public sector leaders must be moral persons and moral managers. As moral persons, they must be respectable and courageous in their line of work. As moral managers, they must promote ethical decision-making(Kia et al., 2019). This might include developing anti-corruption policies and implementing them at every level. When public sector employees observe their leaders' good behaviours, they will likely imitate them.

Furthermore, South African public leaders must create a supportive ethical climate and culture. This is critical in shaping the perceptions of the employees. A climate in which rewards are distributed fairly and resources are divided equally among competing goals is critical in shaping the employees' perceptions. This can enhance the attitude of the employees in the public sector and reduce negative behaviours such as corruption.

Conclusion

Although the concept of ethical leadership is receiving attention from scholars and practitioners, it needs to be sufficiently examined in the global south, especially in African countries where corporate scandals remain challenging. This research suggests that ethical leadership and perceived organisational support are significant predictors of organisational commitment. The development of organisational commitment can facilitate the minimisation of corporate vices such as corruption, which remain a huge challenge in the African business and public sector. The development of ethical leaders through ethics training programs and policies must be high on the agenda of organisational executives.

Limitations

The study was done in the South African setting, which may affect the findings' generalisability. Furthermore, research data was obtained at a particular point in time; it may be desirable to undertake longitudinal studies to evaluate the occurrence over a period. Lastly, 300 managers might represent a small fraction of the study sample size. However, scholars must test our conceptual model in a large quantitative study to assess its validity. Although the study has some limitations, the study findings are valid.

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