

Concept, Integration Model and Research Prospect of Ethical Leadership From the Perspective of Organizational Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Ethical leadership is an important research topic in the field of organizational behavior, and it is of great significance to sort out the research results of ethical leadership to promote the development of organizations. Firstly, this paper introduces the concept, characteristics and measurement methods of ethical leadership, and analyzes them. Secondly, it analyzes the antecedent and consequence variables of ethical leadership. Then, from different theoretical perspectives and research levels, this paper discusses the intermediary mechanism and boundary conditions of ethical leadership, and constructs an integrated model of ethical leadership. Finally, on this basis, the shortcomings of the current research are analyzed and the future research is prospected.

KEYWORDS

Ethical leadership; Influence mechanism; Intermediary mechanism; Boundary conditions

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, China's science and technology and economy have developed rapidly, and people's lives have been improved by leaps and bounds. However, with the prosperity of economy and society, there have been many moral scandals in business, politics, institutions and other fields. For example, Zhao Ming, a professor at Southwest University Law School, threatened his students with a degree to avoid proper relationship; During the epidemic period, dozens of nucleic acid detection institutions were put on file for investigation, notification or punishment. It shows the universality and seriousness of moral problems in commercial society, especially the frequent exposure of unethical behaviors of employees in commercial enterprises, such as occupying the company's finances for their own selfish interests, revealing the company's commercial secrets and commercial fraud, and emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership in the organization. In recent ten years, people from all walks of life have paid more and more attention to the moral problems in business society, and researchers have carried out extensive research on ethical leadership. Therefore, this paper summarizes the concept dimension, influencing factors and influencing mechanism of ethical leadership, studies its development status and analyzes its future development trend, so that ethical leadership can be effectively applied to practice.

2. THE CONCEPT DIMENSION, INFLUENCING FACTORS AND MEASUREMENT OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

2.1. The Concept of Ethical Leadership and Its Dimensions

The concept of ethical leadership originated from the west. Enderle (1987) first thought that ethical leadership was a way of thinking, aiming at clearly describing the ethical issues in management decision-making and standardizing the ethical principles referred to in the decision-making process, and pointed out that ethical leadership should include the connotation of two leadership levels: individual level and organizational level [1]. After that, researchers began to define the concept of ethical leadership from different angles, and we will review the concept of ethical leadership from macro and micro perspectives.

From a macro point of view, ethical leadership emphasizes its universality. Trevino et al. (2000) [2] think that ethical leadership mainly works through two aspects, namely ethical individuals and ethical managers, and researchers can also define its concept from these two dimensions. Some scholars consider both dimensions when defining the concept of ethical leadership. Kanungo(2001) [3] believes that ethical leadership is a leadership style driven by ethical norms and centered on altruism; De Hoogh and Den Hartog(2008)[4] hold that ethical leaders pay extensive attention to the interests of others, groups, communities and society from the perspective of social responsibility, and utilitarianism is the deep source of many explicit qualities of ethical leaders (such as justice, fairness, collectivism orientation, etc.). Secondly, it focuses on the definition of ethical individuals. Ladkin(2008) [5] believes that the core of leadership ethics is to adhere to moral standards and safeguard the interests of employees and society to the greatest extent; Brown & Mitchell(2010)[6] believes that ethical leadership is to follow ethical norms and implement these ethical standards in the organization. Finally, from the aspect of ethical managers, they pay more attention to the process and way of management. Bass and Steidlmeier(1999) [7] believe that ethical leaders abide by moral norms, care for others, put collective interests first and implant moral values into organizational vision; Khuntia and Suar(2004) [8] believe that ethical leaders will integrate moral principles into employees' ideas, values and behaviors.

Microscopically, researchers divide leaders into two levels: middle-level leaders and high-level leaders. Trevino et al. (2003) [9] found that high-level ethical leaders should include five aspects: adhering to people-oriented, taking ethical actions, setting ethical standards, expanding ethical awareness and implementing ethical decisions; Khuntia and Suar(2004) [8] indicate that empowerment, motivation and character are two main connotation dimensions of ethical leadership at the top. High-level ethical leaders mainly emphasize the distribution of rights, moral norms and other related elements that are more closely related to the overall development of the organization[23]. Resick et al. (2006) [11] analyzed the connotation of ethical leadership in different cultures based on the GLOBE project, and found that honesty, altruism, collective motivation and motivation are the four dimensions that constitute the ethical leadership structure, and the research results passed the verification of Martin et al. (2009) [12]. From this, we can find that middle-level leaders pay more attention to factors that directly affect their subordinates, such as encouragement and guidance.

Most domestic studies directly adopt foreign research conclusions, among which the definition of Brown et al. (2005) [10] is the most cited. For example, Hu Zongren (2020) [27] based on the concept of Brown, summed up the activities of ethical leaders to mobilize and lead followers to achieve organizational goals by upholding correct and reasonable moral standards and ethical norms.

2.2. Influential Factors of Ethical Leadership

So who is more likely to become an ethical leader, or under what circumstances individuals are easy to grow into ethical leaders, which is a question about the antecedent variables of ethical leaders [24].

Brown and Treviño (2006) [13] believe that the influencing factors of ethical leadership include personal factors and situational factors.

Personal factors include individual personality traits, neural mechanisms, and cognitive factors of leaders. Wang Zhen and others (2012) [28] believe that the core self-evaluation of managers will also have a positive impact on the emergence of ethical leadership. The higher the core self-evaluation, the higher the ethical leadership. In terms of neural mechanism, there is a positive correlation between the brain's default pattern network and ethical leadership (Waldman et al., 2017) [14], and the default pattern network is related to social emotional thinking, that is, ethical leadership is related to emotional thinking mode. In terms of cognitive factors of leaders, moral identity is an important factor that affects ethical leadership. Moral identity can promote leaders to have moral behaviors, including having a sense of social responsibility. De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) [4] found that leaders with high sense of social responsibility are more likely to be regarded as ethical leaders.

Situational factors include organizational and social situational factors. Leaders may be influenced by ethical role models in organizations. Brown and Treviño (2014) found that ethical role models in the career development of leaders will have a positive impact on ethical leadership, and ethical role models will promote the emergence and development of ethical leadership [15].

2.3. Measurement Scale of Ethical Leadership

Western researchers first developed the ethical leadership scale. Brown et al. (2005) designed a one-dimensional scale with 10 items based on the research of Treviño et al. (2003), starting from moral people and moral leaders. However, the scale is a unit structure and the content of ethical leadership is not comprehensive [10]. After that, researchers began to study the scale of multidimensional structure, such as Resick et al. (2006) [11], which designed and formed a 15-question multidimensional structure scale with four dimensions of integrity, altruism, collectivism and motivation, and used samples from many countries to test the cross-cultural applicability of ethical leadership for the first time, which increased the universality of ethical leadership measurement, but it was rarely used in empirical research. Yukl et al. (2013) [16] from the perspective of the dichotomy of leadership tasks and relationships, in honesty and integrity; Pass and strengthen the behavior that conforms to moral standards; Fairness in decision-making and reward distribution; A 15-question multidimensional structure scale was designed from the four dimensions of caring, kindness, sympathy and respect for subordinates, which provided a new perspective for the design of the scale in the future, but it was not fully verified and was rarely used.

Domestic scale research started late, and it was basically based on western scales. Because of the cultural differences between Chinese and western situations, Chinese researchers began to develop their own scales. Zheng et al. (2011) [17] designed a multi-dimensional scale with 14 questions from three dimensions (people's moral characteristics, ethical decision-making style and moral standard construction) according to the connotation and manifestations of ethical leadership in China. Meng Hui et al. (2014) [29] designed a multi-dimensional scale with 24 questions from three dimensions, namely, moral quality, respect and tolerance, and moral rewards and punishments. The above two scales have good psychometric properties, taking into account the situation of China to some extent, but they fail to fully reflect the connotation of ethical leadership in the situation of China, and they also have a certain western color, and the discrimination of the scales has not been fully verified [26].

3. RESEARCH ON THE INFLUENCE RESULT AND MECHANISM OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Ethical leadership in an organization can be divided into high-level ethical leadership and straight-line (grass-roots) ethical leadership. Some western scholars will define ethical leadership according to different levels when defining ethical leadership, and the role of ethical leadership varies with

different levels. At present, most scholars focus on the research of straight-line ethical leadership, but a few scholars also study the mechanism of high-level ethical leadership.

3.1. The Influence Mechanism of High-Level Ethical Leadership

The latest research paradigm of high-level ethical leadership abroad is the waterfall model. Waterfall model, also known as "drip model" and "trickle model", clearly and completely shows the effectiveness of high-level ethical leaders in the organization by analyzing the relationship between leaders at different levels. Brown and others [10] believe that subordinates will learn and imitate leaders from the perspective of social learning. Similarly, linear leaders belong to subordinates and will learn and imitate high-level ethical leaders, so the waterfall model is also applicable to explain the mechanism of high-level ethical leaders. Mawritz et al [19] examined the trickle-down effect of abusive management by leaders, and found that abusive management by top leaders was positively related to abusive management by middle managers, which in turn affected employees' abnormal interpersonal behavior.

There is relatively little research on the influence mechanism of high-level ethical leadership in China, and most of them cite the research of foreign scholars. He Jing and others [35] found that the waterfall model of ethical leadership influencing employees' counter-productive behavior is still valid in China, and the orientation of employee power distance has different regulatory effects on the relationship between ethical leadership and counter-productive behavior at different levels. Jin Yanghua and others [37] based on the "waterfall model", summed up three basic paths for top ethical leaders to shape organizational ethics, and studied the mechanism of top ethical leaders.

3.2. The Influence Mechanism of Linear Ethical Leadership

The most research on the mechanism of ethical leadership is the influence of linear ethical leadership. Linear ethical leaders have direct contact with employees, which can timely perceive employees' behaviors, and employees also have more opportunities to observe leadership behaviors. Therefore, linear ethical leadership has a greater influence on employees and a greater decisive role in organizational achievements, prompting many scholars to conduct in-depth research on it [35] [36]. At present, the research on linear ethical leadership includes the influence result and its mechanism.

3.2.1. Influence the results

The influence of linear ethical leadership can be divided into two parts according to its level: external and internal. At present, most scholars focus on the internal influence of the organization. The research content of the existing literature can be divided into two aspects, namely, the influence at the organizational level and the influence at the individual level.

On the organizational level, Wang Duanxu et al. (2018) [38] found that ethical leadership has a positive impact on team performance, and this impact can improve team performance through the intermediary role of employees' trust in leaders, and is moderated by team moral identity. Ma Ling et al. (2018) [39] found that ethical leadership has a significant direct impact on both organizational performance and corporate social responsibility, and this impact plays a role through certain corporate dynamic capabilities.

On the individual level, Sun Ling et al. (2023) [42] studied the inspiring effect of ethical leadership and its calling to employees, and put forward that ethical leadership can guide employees' behavior and consciousness through example and purification of organizational atmosphere, so as to help employees form correct and comprehensive values and maintain higher enthusiasm and organizational commitment in their work. Zhang Yinan et al. (2023) and Xie Jihan et al. (2022) [41] [43] based on the perspective of ethical behavior, studied ethical leadership to improve the quality of external service of organization members through employees' service motivation, organizational self-esteem, organizational identity and trust in leaders.

3.2.2. Intermediary mechanism of ethical leadership

In order to study the intermediary mechanism of ethical leadership, scholars have studied it from different theoretical bases, among which the most basic theories are social learning theory, social exchange theory and social identity theory.

Social learning theory holds that the power and status of role models will improve the possibility of individual imitation learning (Bandura, 1977) [21]. Ethical leadership in the organization's manager role, superior position and successful decision-making make it easy for employees to observe and emulate. Its leadership behavior adheres to high moral standards, strives to enhance self-credibility and charm, and becomes an example for employees to learn [30]. Yang Xia introduced ethical atmosphere as an intermediary variable from the perspective of social learning, and thought that ethical leaders could promote employees' knowledge sharing behavior by shaping ethical atmosphere. Zhang Guangxi et al. (2021) [31] Based on the social learning theory, moral identity is introduced as an intermediary variable. If the tutor has good moral behavior, students will follow the tutor as an example to reduce the occurrence of academic misconduct.

According to the theory of social exchange, social interaction between people can be regarded as a kind of social exchange relationship. Individuals will give back resources such as trust, respect and support in the process of interpersonal interaction based on the principle of reciprocity, while the influence of ethical leadership on subordinates is a reciprocal process, and its positive behavior can stimulate followers to produce corresponding positive behavior [32]. For example, Yang Xia [30] and others take organizational trust as an intermediary from the perspective of social exchange, and believe that ethical leaders increase employees' knowledge sharing behavior by establishing trust relationship with employees; Zhang Yali et al. (2022) [33] take the leader-member exchange as an intermediary, and find that ethical leadership can positively affect the leader-member exchange, and then store employees' cooperation satisfaction and knowledge sharing behavior, and increase organizational performance.

Meal et al. (1992) [18] think that social identity theory means that individuals always belong to various social groups (categories, categories), from which they get corresponding group identification and their own meanings, and gradually develop a sense of identity with their groups. When employees have a sense of identity with the organization, they will do more behaviors that are beneficial to the organization, including suggestions, innovations and knowledge sharing. For example, Zhang Yongjun and others (2017) [34] believe that the moral quality and interpersonal care behavior of ethical leaders promote subordinates to have a strong sense of leadership identity, induce subordinates to practice ethical leadership's words and deeds, and reduce employees' counter-productive behavior; Yang Xia et al. (2017) [30] believe that ethical leadership can help employees build a sense of identity with the organization, make employees pay more attention to the interests of the organization, and encourage employees to have more knowledge sharing behaviors.

3.4. Boundary Conditions of Ethical Leadership

There are many studies on the boundary conditions of ethical leadership. This paper is divided into organizational level and individual level to summarize the boundary conditions within the organization.

3.4.1. Research on boundary conditions at the organizational level

The effectiveness of ethical leadership is influenced by various factors at the organizational level. Organizational climate, as an important situational factor in an organization, can have an important impact on the attitudes and behaviors of members of the organization. Zhang Yinan and others [41] regard organizational ethical climate as a moderating variable and think that organizational ethical climate can positively regulate the relationship between ethical leaders and their public service motives. Wei Feng et al. (2019) [44] introduced a caring ethical atmosphere. The higher the caring

ethical atmosphere, the smaller the role of high-level ethical leaders. Yu Xiaoyu et al. (2018) [40] introduced environmental uncertainty, and found that ethical leaders tend to adopt Zhou Min's information processing mode in a highly uncertain environment, thus improving the performance of new product development. Wang Yongyue (2015) [45] introduced the relationship between superiors and subordinates as a moderating variable, and thought that the interaction between superiors and subordinates and ethical leaders strengthened employees' psychological security.

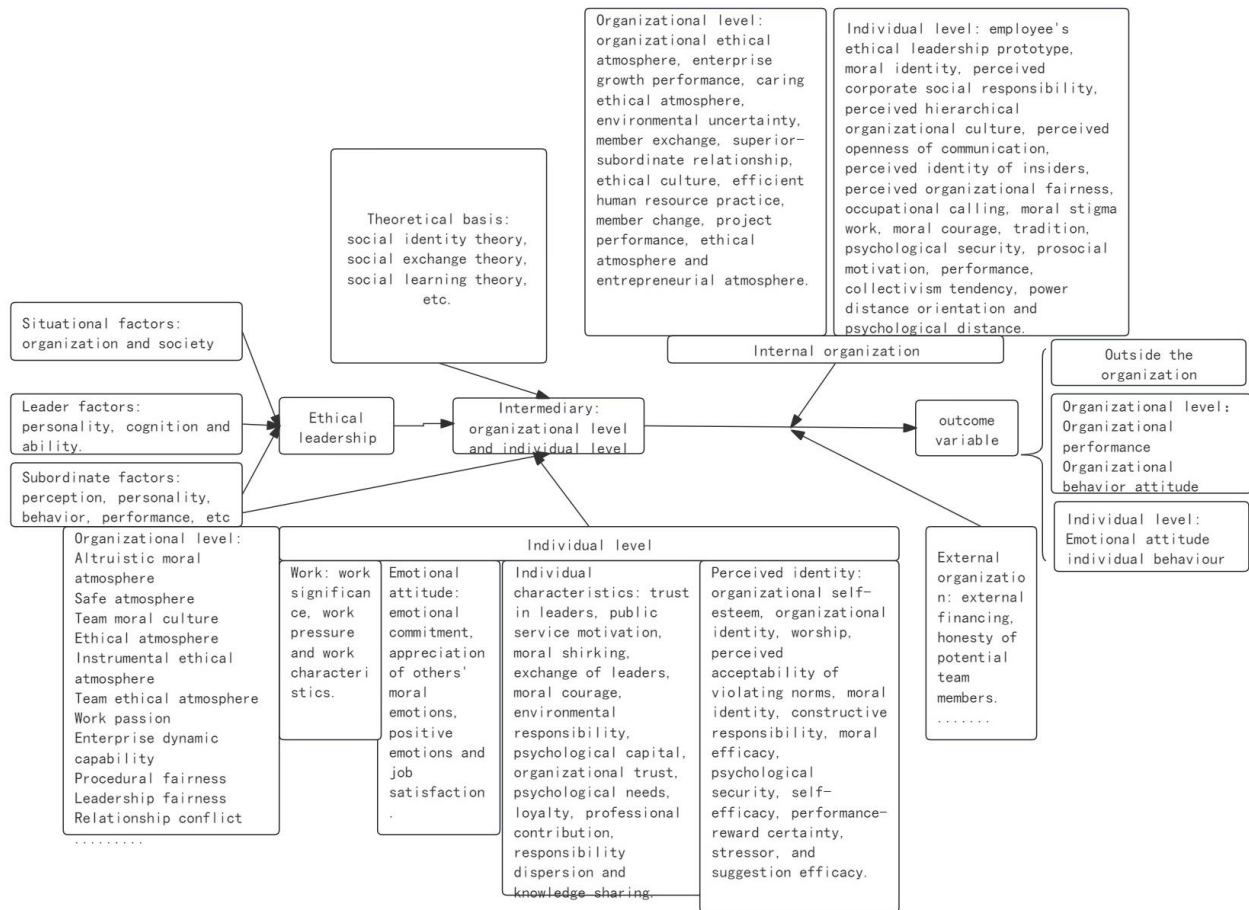


Figure 1. Framework diagram of integrated model

3.4.2. Research on boundary conditions at individual level

The effect of ethical leadership also depends on factors such as personality traits and psychological perception at the individual level. Byun et al. (2018) [20], Li Jinsong (2013) [46], Wang Duanxu et al. (2015) [47] studied the influence of ethical leadership on employee performance and employee unethical behavior, and found that it has a negative regulatory effect. Cheng Jin et al. (2021) [48], Jia Jianfeng et al. (2020) [24], Wang Yongyue et al. (2014) [25] respectively introduced corporate social responsibility, perceived hierarchical organizational culture and communication openness, and insider identity perception, and studied the moderating effect of ethical leadership on internal disclosure, employee's active behavior and employee's immoral behavior.

4. RESEARCH DEFICIENCY AND PROSPECT

Literature review shows that many scholars have carried out related research from the concept, measurement, antecedents, results and mechanism of ethical leadership, but this field needs to be further enriched and improved.

4.1. Improve the Concept of Ethical Leadership

At present, there are many definitions of ethical leadership, and there are still two prominent problems: inconsistency and fuzziness. According to the research of Sun Jianmin et al. (2017) [22], the concept of ethical leadership under scientific orientation is vague. The most cited concept of ethical leadership by Brown et al. not only gives "ethical contingency", but also leads to the ambiguity of ethical connotation, which is not conducive to setting ethical reference in measurement. On the contrary, the definition of ethical leadership is relatively clear under the normative or philosophical orientation, so the concept of ethical leadership can be further deepened and improved by combining the scientific orientation with the normative orientation in the future. Secondly, at present, the concept of ethical leadership mostly adopts the theory of foreign researchers, and the concept of localization in China is relatively rare. The definition of ethical leadership is quite different in different cultures and societies. China has obvious hierarchical characteristics, emphasizing ethics in line with social order and interpersonal norms, and paying more attention to the "virtue" of leaders and themselves. Therefore, the concept of "ethical leadership" should be explored more in the future.

4.2. Improve the Measurement Tools, Data And Methods of Ethical Leadership

The empirical study of ethical leadership needs certain measurement tools and data as support, and there are still some problems at present. First of all, a variety of measurement tools have been developed in the ethical leadership of measurement, which provides researchers with diverse choices, but also brings difficulties in choosing, and the content composition of the scale is also controversial. At present, the single-dimensional scale developed by Brown et al. is the most widely used scale, but its content is relatively simple, and the exploration of multi-dimensional scale should be further improved in the future. Secondly, foreign scales are mostly used in China. In the future, China needs to study scales with its own cultural characteristics and logical paradigm to promote the development of ethical leadership research in China. Finally, the quality of the obtained data is relatively low. Most researchers are only limited to the data of a certain region, industry and time when obtaining data, and the samples have certain defects in scope, representativeness, continuity and common method deviation. Therefore, in the future, we can collect data in the form of expanding the scope of samples, multi-time, combining self-evaluation with other evaluation, and matching leaders and employees, so as to improve the accuracy of data and reduce the deviation of common methods. At the same time, in terms of research methods, in addition to questionnaires, interviews, experiments and diaries can also be used to further enhance the universality and objectivity of experimental results.

4.3. Expand the Research Content of Ethical Leadership

First of all, few scholars have studied the influence of the external environment of the organization on ethical leaders. With the development of the times, the relationship between the external environment and the internal organization becomes closer and closer, and the leadership style of leaders will be impacted by the external environment to some extent, so the research on external environmental factors should be improved in the future. Secondly, at present, the research on the mechanism of ethical leadership is mainly based on linear ethical leadership within the organization, while the cross-level research and the influence on the outside world are rare. Future research can be more cross-layer research. Finally, the current research field of ethical leadership mainly focuses on the internal influence of general enterprises, and the future research direction can be more detailed, such as expanding to the service industry, administrative institutions and so on.

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