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Ethical Leadership And Creative Behaviour

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore how ethical leaders stimulate creative behaviour among employees. By conducting a qualitative study among a sample of executive managers at a State-owned enterprise (SOE) in South Africa, it was ascertained that ethical leaders use their moral legitimacy to influence employees to explore, generate, champion and implement ideas. Furthermore, ethical leaders can directly influence employee creative behaviour using ethical guidance, integrity, support, employee orientation, power-sharing, role-modelling and fairness. However, whilst ethical leadership may be effective in influencing employee creative behaviour, rigidity, self-interest, leadership changes, idea costs, idea timeliness, and idea relevance are important factors that impact creative behaviour efforts in SOEs. It is recommended that the leadership of SOEs and similar organizations establish centres of excellence where employees are actively required to explore and generate new ideas.

Keywords: creativity; innovation, leadership, engagement

Introduction

Although different leadership theories have brought greater awareness about different aspects of leadership, such as traits of leaders and behaviours that tend to motivate followers, they have often failed to highlight the importance of the ethical dimension of leadership (Metwally et al., 2019). According to Motloba (2018), the emphasis on the ethical dimension needs to be intentional and not through happenstance. In addition, leadership is more than a set of knowledge skills and abilities; it involves deliberately making decisions based on doing the right thing (Ejimabo, 2015). The type of leadership that is typical in innovative organizations supports the development of new ideas throughout the system, diffuses power, supports personal development and decentralizes authority (Koziol-Nadolna et al., 2020).

Leaders support the development of new ideas by setting innovation goals and creating processes (Ceausu et al., 2017) and in effect, they act as facilitators of creativity and innovation (Anderson et al., 2014). Thus, the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) provides the basis for ethical leadership and creative work behaviour relationship (Wang et al., 2020). Since followers of ethical leaders perceive themselves as being in a high-quality social exchange relationship with their leader, they reciprocate by exerting more effort and getting themselves engaged in creative work behaviour (Yidong & Xinxin, 2013). Furthermore, ethical leaders by demonstrating qualities of honesty, openness, collective motivation, altruism, trustworthiness, justice and fair treatment, contribute at every stage of the creative work behaviour process (Tayyasar & Ajmal, 2017).

At the first stage of idea generation, ethical leaders by facilitating two-way communication and listening to their subordinates encourage followers to generate and express new ideas for improving work processes and procedures (Koziol-Nadolna, 2020). Moreover, since ethical leaders respect the dignity and talent of others, they provide followers with the opportunities to

acquire work-related knowledge and skills and assign them tasks that best suit their capabilities (Elqassaby, 2018). As a result, this makes them capable of introducing novel improvements. At the idea promotion stage of creative work behaviour, ethical leaders contribute by exhibiting traits of altruism and honesty, making employees feel more psychologically safe to speak up for promoting their ideas (Nazir et al., 2020). In the third stage of idea championing, ethical leaders provide followers with more autonomy, freedom, independence, active roles and control over the tasks to be performed, facilitating them to implement new ideas and work processes (Wen et al., 2021).

The above theoretical arguments show that ethical leadership can influence followers' creative work behaviour. This view is supported from several international studies in China (Ko et al., 2017), India (Dhar 2016) and Taiwan (Chen & Hou, 2016), all of which concluded that ethical leadership had a strong positive relationship with employee creativity.

Not only are creativity and innovation related and critical to organizational success, but equally important is having leaders who demonstrate principled leadership (Mainemelis et al., 2015). Creativity and innovations are also made easier when ethical leaders work to develop an organizational climate that encourages employees "to seek new opportunities, accept risk, collaborate, and commit themselves to the organization beyond self-interest" (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017, p. 24). Enron, Arthur Andersen and WorldCom are examples of companies that were headed by leaders who admired and encouraged creativity and innovation (Ceasu et al., 2017). The leadership in these organizations, however, failed ethically when ambition, greed and a win-at-all-costs mentality set in (Hughes et al., 2018). This shows that encouraging creativity and innovation, if not done ethically, can result in the failure of individual careers and entire organizations.

Whereas traditional theories view ethical leadership as having uni-dimensions, modern theories have adopted a multi-dimension perspective of ethical leadership that leads to different consequences and antecedents (Yidong & Xinxin, 2013). Kalshoven et al. (2011b) argue that ethical leaders practise people orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, role classification, fairness and power-sharing. According to Javez et al. (2017), fairness is regarded as a crucial ethical leadership behavioural attribute. An ethical leader takes ownership and responsibility to own actions, does not practise favouritism, is honest, is trustworthy, makes fair choices, is principled, treats others fairly and acts with integrity (Chughtai, 2016).

Avarnitis and Kalliris (2019) further postulate that if an individual is of a high level of integrity, they will demonstrate individual moral behaviour consistency. This integrity trait becomes an important motivator for the leader to engage and influence followers using ethical leadership. McMahan and Ford (2013) regarded power-sharing as an important ethical leadership behaviour. Kalshoven et al. (2011a) argue that ethical leaders allow subordinates a say in decision-making and listen to their ideas and concerns, which empowers employees. Similarly, Yidong and Xinxin, (2013) suggest that ethical leaders provide followers with a voice; the sharing of power allows subordinates more control and makes them less dependent on their leaders to behaviour positively.

Empowering leaders demonstrate trust in their employees' abilities and involve them in decision-making. Such behaviour sends a clear message to employees that they are trusted, capable and competent members of the organisation (Matsuo et al., 2019). When employees incorporate such positive messages into their self-evaluation, their organisational-based self-esteem (OBSE) rises accordingly. According to Deng et al., (2020), employees with high OBSE will be more willing to take on challenges and engage in more creative behaviours, owing to their higher self-perceived competence and capabilities.

Guo et al. (2016) describe ethical leaders as being people-oriented. The people-orientation component in ethical leadership reflects genuinely caring about, respecting and supporting subordinates and where possible, ensuring their needs are met (Kalshoven, 2011b). Leadership role modelling is needed to help followers to generate new ideas (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Acting as a model for creativity was expected to increase the chance that followers would practise idea

generation themselves (Mainemelis et al., 2015).

Perceiving a leader that is supportive of creativity can play a facilitating role in helping to transfer employees' creative role identity into them performing creatively (Diedrich et al., 2015). Employees who experience leadership support for creativity are likely to position creative role identity higher up in their identity hierarchy and be more committed to such an identity (Koseoglu et al., 2017). To then satisfy this highly-ranked role identity, employees are expected to control more resources and exhibit more relevant behaviours, such as being proactive in searching for new information and trying new methods to solve a problem (Wu & Parker, 2012).

It may be summarised from the above that ethical leadership's support for creativity would enhance the effect of subordinates' creative role identity on engagement in creativity-facilitating behaviours, resulting in a stronger relationship with employee creativity.

In South Africa, leadership impoverishment is evident in well-known state-owned enterprises, such as Petro-SA, South African Road Agency Limited (SANRAL), South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), South African Post Office (SAPO), Electricity Supply Commission (ESKOM), Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA) and South African Airways (SAA) (Sithomola, 2019). Sebake and Sebola (2014) argue that poor leadership mostly results in sub-standard service delivery to a country's population. This is because compromised and dishonest leaders or individuals, occupy strategic positions and monopolise resources whilst failing to show their regard for efficient and effective service delivery, as the Republic's Constitution requires.

According to the 2020 South African Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, innovation in state enterprises is key to achieving Vision 2030 as set out in the National Development Plan (NDP) (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2020). The SA Presidency's (2020) Annual Performance Plan 2020/21 advocates for innovation and creativity within SOEs (Business Insider, 2020). A section of the NPC (2020) report highlights how low-efficiency levels in selected SOEs, namely, Transnet, Eskom and PRASA, have led to continuous poor performance and in some cases, near collapse. The current leadership at these SOEs does not seem to guide the organizations to operate effectively and efficiently. According to the position paper titled "The Contribution of SOEs to Vision 2030: Case studies of PRASA, Transnet and Eskom", released by the NPC, Eskom, South Africa's main electricity generation company, is reported for its many struggles leading to the failure in fulfilling its core business, which is to supply electricity reliably and efficiently (NPC, 2020). PRASA, an SOE within the public transport sector, was reported to be underperforming throughout its key performance indicators (KPIs) that guide its operations objectives, public interest objectives, corporate governance, operations expansion and maintenance investments, and financial stability (NPC, 2020).

It is against the above background that this study was undertaken to critically examine the relationship between ethical leadership role-modelling and support for employee creative behaviour in a logistics and transport SOE in South Africa.

The logistics and transport SOE, one of the largest in South Africa, is also part of the several SOEs with a poor performance record (Sithomola, 2019). Although this logistics and transport SOE recorded a profit increase of 24.7% in the 2018/19 financial year, its product and service innovation drive was reported to have underperformed as the group continues failing to harness and leverage blockchain technology for transport and logistics, virtual/augmented reality for operations and failure to deal with disruptive innovations, amongst others (Organisation A, 2019b).

Research Methodology

This research study qualitatively explored how ethical leadership impacts the creative behaviour of their followers. The case study approach was used by selecting a South African SOE that has creativity and innovation challenges, poor performance and a record of ethical leadership as demonstrated previously. The study included executive top-level managers and middle-level managers as leaders. The SOE is one the largest South African SOE involved in the transport, freight and logistics business with employees up to 55,946. The organisation has five strategic business units (SBU) with a particular commercial mandate operated for the benefit of the

government as the major shareholder. Instead of researching all five SBUs of the SOE, one rail freight division was selected which has a staff complement of 3,700 employees. The Executive Committee (EXCO) for the selected division has 24 members, of which 12 were purposively sampled for semi-structured interviews.

The 12 executive leaders were purposively sampled/selected for semi-structured interviews as per the guidelines of Yin (2014). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

A pre-designed interview guide was used to direct the interview which was conducted using the Zoom online platform which allows for recording and adherence to social distancing protocols in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interview, much focus was put on the participant's viewpoint and the capability to provide detailed and rich answers. Flexibility was permitted during the interviews using follow-up questions to allow for more detailed information to be collected. The 12 executive participants were sent formal requests for an online meeting to be scheduled at a time convenient to them. The recorded interviews were transcribed for further analysis and the transcripts were subjected to content analysis by coding, categorizing and analysing themes.

Research Findings

The demographic information of the executive leaders interviewed is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic data

Attribute	Description	Percentage (N=12)
Age	31-40 years	4%
	Above 40 years	96%
Gender	Male	65%
	Female	35%
Working Experience	5-10 years	2%
	More than 10 years	98%
Educational Level	Post-Graduate	94%
	Others	6%
Managerial Level	Senior Management	35%
	Other Executives	65%

The group of highly educated and well-experienced executive managers made up 65% of the participants. The majority had an experience of over 10 years and were males aged over 31 years. The main themes that emerged from the participant interviews are presented and discussed as guided by the research objective.

Leader's integrity and employee creative behaviour

The participants were of the view that ethical leaders operate in environments of high levels of integrity to enable open lines of communication for creativity to take place. This is because ethical leaders behave as role models by exhibiting ethical and moral practices, thereby motivating employees to display positive behaviour and attitude (Brown & Treviño, 2013), which in turn influences the discretionary behaviours that benefit both workers and organisations. Ethical leaders display specific attributes and traits such as trustworthiness, determination, selflessness, honesty and integrity, support, and sensible decision-making capacity that encourage employees to act with positivity and introduce creative ideas (Asif et al., 2020). The leaders keep promises and commitments and hence can be trusted by employees as genuine supporters of creativity. However, when leaders fail to show their integrity, followers lack the morality and motivation to exhibit a positive display of creativity.

Ethical leaders as moral managers are anticipated to impact their followers' behaviours and attitudes using their leadership behaviours, such as making reasonable and fair decisions, autonomy and work importance improvement, development support, followers' respect, and emphasis on integrity (Yidong & Xinxin, 2013). In addition, ethical leaders take responsibility for their own conduct, do not practice favouritism, are honest, and trustworthy, make fair choices, are principled, treat others fairly and act with integrity (Chughtai, 2016).

Leader support, people-orientation and employee creative behaviour

The participants were of the view that support and people orientation are important in motivating employees to be creative. According to Iqal et al. (2020), an ethical leader is not only about morals but also pays salient attention to followers in the social environment whilst providing them with a voice, interpersonally or procedurally. The leaders interviewed showed genuine support, whether things were good or bad, to defend employees' creative output even when things went wrong. An environment of creative thinking is created by asking employees difficult and open-ended questions about their work and giving employees the freedom to apply their minds. An ethical leader gives an employee's role meaning by helping the individual to make their job more meaningful (Yidong & Xinxin, 2013). In this study, the leaders noted the provision of creative resources, rewards and recognition, facilitation and inspiration, training interventions, regular feedback, and employee empowerment as ways to make employees behave more creatively. The leaders act as visionaries to stimulate and inspire followers to generate useful creative ideas by demonstrating normatively suitable behaviour using interpersonal and personal relationships and actions to promote such behaviour amongst employees, using decision-making, reinforcement, and two-way communication (Metwally et al., 2019).

Ethical guidance and employee creative behaviour

The participants concurred that leaders within the organisation use ethical guidance to influence employee creative behaviour and believe that their ethical virtues lead employees into useful creative behaviour that aligns with the SOE's governance structures. This is because an ethical leader communicates the need for ethical and responsible behaviour and they set a good example for their followers (Nejati et al., 2019). Islam et al. (2019) regard ethical leadership as critical due to employees' search for ethical guidance from their leader in dealing with any arising workplace ethical dilemma. A firm that lacks ethical leadership and a positive work environment can be characterised by feelings of uneasiness, anxiety and depression that impede employees from acting creatively (Chughtai, 2016). The employees require leaders to be understanding and open to removing doubt about their capabilities by not unnecessarily changing goal posts and rejecting new ideas. Additionally, the leaders ensure employees follow creative behavioural ethics and clarify the possible consequences of possible unethical creative behaviours. These ethical leaders possess values of high moral standards which assist in building a strong community, effective communication with employees and the establishment of an environment that encourages followers to behave creatively (Zhu et al., 2016).

Power-sharing and employee creative behaviour

The leaders interviewed were of the view that employee creative behaviour within the SOE is much more important and productive when employees are given latitude and a platform to exercise their power to explore new ideas that are aligned with governance processes and regulations. This is supported by Kalshoven et al.'s (2011b) argument that 'ethical leaders practice people orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, role classification, fairness, and power-sharing.' Kalshoven et al. (2011a) also argue that ethical leaders permit followers' decision-making and communication which empowers them. Similarly, Yidong and Xinxin (2013) suggest that an ethical leader gives employees a voice and power, permitting them to have more control and be less leadership-controlled and dependent on their leader.

Leader fairness and employee creative behaviour

The participants stressed the importance of fairness in influencing employees to behave creatively by creating a safe space for employees to freely explore or generate ideas based on their strengths and without fear or worry about their weaknesses. This is done to increase employees' self-confidence to explore new ideas in their workspace. This safe place is created when a leader does not hold employees accountable for creative output, they have no control over and act fairly to permit employees to behave creatively whilst giving credit to every creative idea originator and not their own name. According to Javez et al. (2017), fairness is seen as an important characteristic of ethical leadership behaviour. Ethical leaders take responsibility for their own actions, do not practice favouritism, are honest, and trustworthy, make fair choices, and are principled with fairness (Chughtai, 2016).

When workers receive fair treatment and respect from their leaders, they have a greater chance to visualize their connection with the leader using the social exchange perspective (Engelbrecht

et al., 2013). Additionally, reciprocation by the workers occurs when extra work effort is made, as evidenced by increased job dedication and a willingness towards greater work engagement (Engelbrecht et al., 2013) The element of ethical leadership that treats people fairly, particularly improves ethical leaders' subordinates' perceptions of them as trustworthy, to trust the leaders as genuine supporters of their creative efforts.

Role-modelling and employee creative behaviour

The leaders interviewed noted acting as role models and influencers to unlock the employees' potential to be creative. The leaders interviewed confirmed acting as enablers of employee creative thinking and behaviour by intellectually challenging them to think beyond workplace problems. In this way, employees are positively engaged as the leader is close by, giving constant feedback and guidance. An ethical leader serving as a role model of ethical behaviour attempts to inculcate such behaviour in their subordinates using reinforcement and communication systems to make known unethical and ethical standards (Metwally et al., 2019). Thus, Gaechter and Renner (2018) refer to role modelling as essential leader behaviour. The leaders in this study as role models, act as influencers making sure they are approachable and consulting employees whilst listening to the ideas being suggested. The leaders also ensure that followers behave and perform in line with what they see in their leader. This view aligns with the social learning theory's role identity and self-concept development. According to Loeb (2016), high-quality interactions with leaders serve to increase employees' self-efficacy through social (vicarious) learning and social persuasion. That is why ethical leadership is about a leader being a role model to lead employees in following ethical standards (Chen & Hou, 2016). Ethical leaders build their credibility using legitimacy, which is often admired by followers (Bedi et al., 2015).

The tolerance of risk, protection from distractions and provision of adequate time and resources enacted by a supportive organizational context should reduce the perceived riskiness of trying to be creative, and potentially be beneficial for the realization of creative goals (Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Therefore, as a motivational force, creative role identity drives individuals to perform creatively because they would like to see themselves, and want to be seen by others, as creative performers. The followers' confidence is ultimately boosted by the leader's own creative role identity that influences others.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that the executive leaders in this study opined that employee creative behaviour is productive when the ideas filtering from the employees yield a better or more cost-effective way of doing business to achieve process improvements, better performance, and a competitive edge. The creative ideas must be sustainable, leading to improvements in quality and output, and eliminating waste. In this way, creativity and innovation are made simpler when an ethical leader works towards the development of a climate that motivates followers to collaborate, accept risk, seek new opportunities, and ultimately commit beyond self-interest. However, such creative thinking must align with the organisation's goals to be productive and ethical. Most SOEs operate as guided by government regulations and this ensures all creative efforts are within policy and guidance. Counterproductivity arises when an idea does not impact the entire SOE system. When an employee is exploring and generating ideas that are contrary to organisational policy, such ideas can never be considered. Therefore, when ideas come up there is a need for a balance between creativity, productivity, and effectiveness. Time and effort cannot be spent on unproductive ideas.

As such, new ideas require scrutiny or peer review before adoption. To ensure productive and good outcomes, an idea explored, generated, and championed goes through a rigorous test. However, careful consideration of ideas is needed to avoid idea generation analysis paralysis whereby ideas are shot down because of the over-analysis funnel approach without putting them to a test. These ideas may prove useful at a later stage and may be recalled from the organisation's archives. Ideas generated must be free from employee self-interest and presented timeously in line with organisational policy.

This study revealed that ethical leaders regard employee creative behaviour as critical to the performance of the SOE. However, although creativity is at the heart of today's business, most ethical leaders do not position innovation and creativity at the top of their agendas, believing that creativity has less immediate payoff than execution improvement.

Previous research has examined the role of leadership and organizational climate in determining employee innovative work behaviour and found that a supportive and empowering work environment and leadership behaviours encourage innovation on the part of employees. Therefore, ethical leaders refrain from behaviours that are harmful to others and act in ways that encourage beneficial behaviour in others.

The theoretical perspective is that creativity is not innovation until the ideas generated are implemented; rather, it is the first step to innovation. While employees may generate ideas, not all ideas generated are translated into innovations that are implemented. The followers' idea generation in the focal organisation is not a prerequisite for innovation; the new practices and ideas can also be formulated by workers who may not be part of the organization. Some ideas brought to the fore by employees may not be original, but they still require adequate feasibility testing before implementation.

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