



Ethical leadership at work questionnaire (ELW): Development and validation of a multidimensional measure

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and validation of the multi-dimensional Ethical Leadership at Work (ELW) questionnaire. Based on theory, interviews and a student sample, we developed seven ethical leader behaviors (fairness, integrity, ethical guidance, people orientation, power sharing, role clarification, and concern for sustainability). We then tested the factor structure in two employee samples (first common-source, EFA; next multi-source, CFA). To establish construct validity we related ethical leader behaviors to other leadership styles and employee attitudes in Study 1. The expected pattern of relationships emerged, e.g., positive relationships with satisfaction and commitment, and negative ones with cynicism. The results suggest that the ELW scales have sound psychometric properties and good construct validity. In Study 2, using a multi-source sample, the ELW behaviors explained variance in trust, OCB, and leader and follower effectiveness beyond a uni-dimensional measure of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership was also related to OCB (supervisor-rated). Employees who rate their leader higher on power sharing and fairness show more OCB. Taken together, the results suggest that the ELW is a useful new multidimensional measurement tool that can help further our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of ethical leadership.

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Recent fraud scandals have put ethical leader behavior high on the priority list of organizations as ethical problems break down the trust and reputation of both leaders and organizations (Mendonca, 2001; Waldman, Siegel, & Javidan, 2006). Ethical leadership is expected to have positive effects on the attitudes and (ethical) conduct of employees and ultimately even on business unit or organizational performance (Aronson, 2001; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Kanungo, 2001; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003).

Research on ethical leader behavior at all levels in the organization is increasing. Ethical leadership is often seen as a multi-dimensional concept, yet with a few exceptions (e.g., De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008, 2009; Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006), previous studies have not measured multiple ethical leader behaviors. Rather, uni-dimensional measures tend to be used. For instance, Brown et al. (2005) developed the 10-item Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) that is currently often used to measure ethical leader behavior. This scale combines different leader behaviors, including acting fairly and honestly, allowing followers' voice, and rewarding ethical conduct in a single scale. Although such a short scale is useful for certain research purposes, theoretically the underlying behaviors seem rather different and they may have different antecedents and consequences. Combining such different behaviors into a single undifferentiated construct could make it harder to uncover the different mechanisms through which ethical leadership develops and may be effective.

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In a newly emerging research field, developing valid measures is of great importance. Here, we aim to contribute to the emerging field of ethical leader behavior through developing a questionnaire to measure different forms of ethical leader behavior (the Ethical Leadership at Work Questionnaire [ELW]). Drawing on a literature review, we distinguish seven ethical leader behaviors. In Study 1, we first describe the item generation and scale development process based on interviews and a pilot study. Next, we investigate the ELW factor structure and measurement properties in a single-source employee sample. To start establishing construct validity, we examine relationships of the ethical leader behaviors with transformational leadership and work-related attitudes. Specifically, we look at perceived leader effectiveness, job and leader satisfaction, trust, cynicism and commitment. In Study 2, we retest the factor structure and psychometric properties of the ELW scales and further address construct validity by examining the relationship between ethical leader behaviors and perceived leader effectiveness, trust, employee effectiveness and employee organizational citizenship behavior in a multi-source sample. In this multi-source field study, we also contribute to the literature by examining the extent to which the ethical leadership behaviors explain variance in employee behavior (Study 2).

1. Ethical leader behavior

In the last few years, ethics and integrity have received a growing amount of attention in the leadership field. Both transformational and authentic leadership have been described as containing an ethical component. Related to this, [Craig and Custafson \(1998\)](#) developed a leader integrity measure that focused more on the negative rather than the positive side of integrity. Integrity shows some conceptual overlap with ethical leadership, yet is only one element of ethical behavior (e.g., [Palanski & Yammarino, 2007](#)). [Bass \(1985\)](#) argued that transformational leaders could behave either ethically or unethically and distinguish between authentic (i.e., ethical) transformational and pseudo (i.e., unethical) transformational leadership ([Barling, Christie, & Turner, 2008](#); [Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999](#)). Pseudo-transformational leaders have motives or intentions that are not legitimate and aim for undesirable goals. Authenticity, on the other hand, functions as a moral compass emphasizes serving the organization ([Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999](#)). Distinguishing between authentic and pseudo transformational leadership is complicated for followers according to [Dasborough and Ashkanasy \(2002\)](#) as the behaviors shown by these two types of transformational leaders are the same, only their intentions vary. A similar distinction is made between socialized and personalized charismatic leadership based on whether leaders act on socialized or personalized power motives ([Howell & Avolio, 1992](#)). [Price \(2003\)](#) points out that egoism or personalized motives may not form the only reason why leaders behave unethically. Leaders may, for instance, also behave unethically because (altruistic) values or actions based on (altruistic) values can be inconsistent. To sum up, transformational leadership can be unethical if the motivation is selfish ([Bass, 1985](#)), power is misused ([McClelland, 1975](#)) or if values do not guide behaviors sufficiently ([Price, 2003](#)).

Recently, authentic leadership is another form of leadership, which some argue has an ethical element (e.g., [Avolio & Gardner, 2005](#); [May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003](#)). However, others do not see morality as a necessary component of authentic leadership (e.g., [Shamir & Eilam, 2005](#); [Sparrowe, 2005](#)). Authentic leadership is described as behaving in line with the true self and to know oneself (e.g., [Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005](#); [May et al., 2003](#); [Sparrowe, 2005](#)). [Walumbwa et al. \(2008\)](#) empirically showed that [Brown et al.'s](#) measure of ethical leadership is related, but well distinguishable from authentic leadership. One distinction is that ethical leaders also use transactional forms of leadership and authentic leaders don't. In other words, ethical leaders discipline and reward (un)ethical behaviors, which is less in line with authentic leadership ([Brown et al., 2005](#); [Walumbwa et al., 2008](#)).

Researchers have also started to consider ethical leadership as a set of behaviors or a separate leadership style in itself rather than focusing only on the ethical components of other leadership styles ([Brown et al., 2005](#); [De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008, 2009](#); [Kanungo, 2001](#)). The fundamentals of ethics according to the Webster dictionary are dealing with what is good and bad, moral duty and moral obligation. This relates closely to how [Kanungo \(2001\)](#) conceptualizes ethical leadership. He takes an altruism approach and addresses ethical leadership as a tension between altruistic and egoistic motives (e.g., [Kanungo, 2001](#); [Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milder, 2002](#)). This approach suggests that an ethical leader is driven by a system of accepted beliefs and appropriate judgments rather than self-interest, which is beneficial for followers, organizations and society. This way, [Kanungo \(2001\)](#) and [Aronson \(2001\)](#) emphasize the effect of leader's actions on others as a major concern in ethical leadership.

[Brown et al. \(2005\)](#) take ethical leadership as a separate style a step further and define ethical leadership as: "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making" (p. 120). Ethical leaders act as role models of appropriate behavior and use reward and punishment to stimulate ethical conduct ([Brown et al., 2005](#); [Treviño et al., 2003](#)). [Brown et al. \(2005\)](#) address ethical leadership from a social learning perspective and suggest that followers will come to behave similar to their leader through imitation and observational learning (cf., [Bandura, 1986](#)).

In addition to this social learning approach, others view ethical leadership from a social exchange approach (e.g., [Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009](#); [Turner et al., 2002](#)). Researchers using a social exchange approach focus more on the norm for reciprocity ([Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005](#)) and hold that followers are willing to reciprocate when treated fairly and with concern by their leaders (e.g., [Mayer et al., 2009](#)). Both views help understand individuals' reactions to ethical leader behavior. Other perspectives on ethical leadership are also found. For example, [Dickson, Smith, Grojean, and Ehrhart \(2001\)](#) focus on the role leaders have in creating an ethical climate and [Resick et al. \(2006\)](#) focus on how leaders use their power in decisions and actions. Similarly, [De Hoogh and Den Hartog \(2009\)](#) emphasize ethical leaders' socially responsible use of power and see ethical leadership as the process of influencing in a social responsible way others' activities toward goal achievement.

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