



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

Effects of ethical leadership on emotional exhaustion in high moral intensity situations

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 July 2013

Received in revised form 15 January 2015

Accepted 24 January 2015

Available online 11 February 2015

Handling Editor: William Gardner

Keywords:

Ethical leadership

Cohesion

Emotional exhaustion

Conscientiousness

ABSTRACT

Emotional exhaustion is a threat to standard operations, particularly in organizations in which physical safety is at risk. High moral intensity is inherent in such organizations due to the magnitude of consequences associated with ethical/unethical conduct. The authors proposed a psychological process in which ethical leadership affects emotional exhaustion directly and indirectly through team cohesion. As military operational contexts typically are (or frequently have the potential to become) high moral intensity situations, the authors tested their model among 338 military personnel deployed in combat zones. They found that: (1) team cohesion partially mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and emotional exhaustion, and (2) this psychological process of direct and indirect effects of ethical leadership did not hold among individuals approaching the low end of conscientiousness.

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Listing Enron, Arthur Andersen, WorldCom, Tyco, Parmalat, and HealthSouth as organizations in which leaders failed ethically, Bello (2012, p. 228) argued, “Ethical leadership is a clarion call to the recent credit crisis, the worst global recession since the 1930s, and the various scandals in former leading corporate business organisations.” The Jerry Sandusky scandal at Penn State and the David Petraeus–Paula Broadwell scandal at the Central Intelligence Agency serve as reminders that failures of ethical leadership are not unique to the private sector. In light of these scandals, researchers have increasingly focused on the important role of ethical leadership in both civilian and military settings (e.g., Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Schaubroeck et al., 2012).

Jones (1991) noted that ethical decision-making is issue-contingent and thus a function of “moral intensity” (p. 371); that is, moral issues vary in saliency and strength, impacting the moral awareness and ethical reasoning involved in the situation. An important aspect of moral intensity is the magnitude of consequences (Frey, 2000; Lincoln & Holmes, 2010; McMahon & Harvey, 2006; Reynolds, 2006; Singer & Singer, 1997; Valentine & Hollingworth, 2012). Ethical leadership is important in most organizations, although the magnitude of consequences of ethical decision-making is likely to be limited to internal (e.g., personnel decisions) and external customer experiences (e.g., service delivery). However, in situations where decisions frequently affect life and death (e.g., military operations, fire-fighting, law enforcement, and health care) and/or the safety of the community or environment (e.g., handling of hazardous waste), the magnitude of consequences is high; consequently, ethical leadership is particularly salient. In line with the

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emerging literature indicating a positive relationship between ethical leadership and follower well-being (e.g., Avey, Wernsing, & Palanski, 2012; Chughtai, Byrne, & Flood, 2014; Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012), we investigated the relationship between ethical leadership and emotional exhaustion among uniformed military personnel deployed in combat zones overseas.

Following Ashforth, Gioia, Robinson, and Treviño's (2008) call for increased scholarly attention to ethics, we describe a psychological process in which ethical leadership has both indirect and direct effects on emotional exhaustion via team cohesion. Team cohesion is considered an essential determinant of military effectiveness, psychological stress, and performance by scientists and military practitioners (e.g., Mael & Alderks, 1993; Mitchell, Galloway, Millikan, & Bell, 2013; Oliver, Harman, Hoover, Hayes, & Pandhi, 1999). We argue that ethical leadership enhances cohesion, which, in turn, lessens emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, we suggest that follower conscientiousness moderates the direct and indirect effects of this psychological process. In so doing, we aim to make at least three contributions with this study. First, we add to the growing body of research on the effects of ethical leadership on follower well-being in high moral intensity situations. Second, we identify a mediating mechanism that is responsible for the effects of ethical leadership on follower well-being. Specifically, our study sheds light on how ethical leadership can influence one of the most important aspects of military team functioning, team cohesion, which in turn can serve as a resource to reduce emotional exhaustion. Third, we highlight how follower personality traits may influence the effects of ethical leadership.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Emotional exhaustion

Burnout refers to a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1982). Emotional exhaustion is characterized by fatigue and feeling worn out because of work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998) and has emerged as the central dimension of burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach, 1982; Wright & Bonett, 1997). Emotional exhaustion captures the “core meaning” of burnout given its relevance to physical and psychological depletion (Shirom, 1989). Moreover, meta-analytic findings have indicated that emotional exhaustion exhibits stronger relationships with other work outcomes than depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Emotional exhaustion affects job performance, health, voluntary turnover, and citizenship behavior (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Emotional exhaustion gives rise to safety concerns for individuals whose work may be impaired by fatigue (e.g., military personnel, miners, and police officers; Gaines & Jermier, 1983). Thus, we focused on emotional exhaustion rather than the other facets of burnout.

Antecedents of emotional exhaustion include both aspects of the situation and person (e.g., Halbesleben, 2006; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Wang, Bowling, & Eschleman, 2010). Leadership style is one such aspect of the situation (e.g., Densten, 2005). With the present study, we focused on ethical leadership. Consistent with scholars who described antecedents of burnout in terms of resources (e.g., Lee & Ashforth, 1996), we employed a resource-based rationale to link ethical leadership with emotional exhaustion.

Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership refers to “the demonstration of normative appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Behaviors that reflect high levels of ethical leadership are: (1) engaging in normative appropriate conduct, (2) acting consistent with espoused values (vs. conforming in response to political pressure), (3) talking with followers about ethics and proactively encouraging them to behave ethically, (4) managing situations with morality in mind, (5) explicitly valuing honest relationships, and (6) punishing unethical behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011).

Although ethical leadership conceptually overlaps with transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2000), efforts to assess the construct validity of ethical leadership have supported its distinctiveness from the idealized influence dimension of transformational leadership (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). The difference between ethical leadership and transformational leadership is one of breadth. Whereas both forms of leadership contain transactional and ethical components, ethical leadership focuses explicitly on the ethical aspect of transactional behavior, which involves a specific obligation to set ethical guidelines and hold employees accountable for following these standards (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005). The transactional component of ethical leadership, which is also referred to as the “moral manager” facet (Brown et al., 2005), is unique to the construct of ethical leadership. In line with Mayer et al. (2012), we argue that other aspects of ethical leadership, such as fairness, people orientation, power sharing, and role clarification (Kalshoven et al., 2011) overlap with other leadership constructs (e.g., interactional justice). With the current study, we focused on the moral manager aspect of ethical leadership.

The effects of higher levels of ethical leadership on subordinates include: (1) higher satisfaction and dedication (Brown et al., 2005; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009; Weaver, Treviño, & Agle, 2005), (2) higher task and contextual performance (Brown et al., 2005; Kalshoven & Boon, 2012; Mayer et al., 2012; Piccolo, Greenbaum, den Hartog, & Folger, 2010), (3) fewer deviant and unethical acts (Mayer et al., 2012; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Stouten et al., 2010), and (4) greater well-being (Avey et al., 2012; Chughtai et al., 2014; Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Kalshoven & Boon, 2012; Li, Xu, Tu, & Lu, 2013).

Viewing ethical leadership as a valuable resource for employees, we draw on conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) to posit that ethical leadership decreases the emotional exhaustion of followers. The perception of resources loss, threat to resources, and inability to gain new resources can result in strain (Hobfoll, 1989). “Resources are anything that people personally value; they can be categorized as objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energy” (Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009, p. 1453).

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