



Ethical leadership and group in-role performance: The mediating roles of group conscientiousness and group voice

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 October 2011

Received in revised form 6 June 2012

Accepted 8 June 2012

Available online 28 June 2012

Keywords:

Leadership

Ethical leadership

Group conscientiousness

Group voice

Group performance

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we propose that ethical leadership will lead to higher group in-role performance. Building from and integrating several different research streams, we argue that two key mechanisms for this effect are group conscientiousness (an emergent state) and group voice (a group process). We collected survey data at three points in time from 80 groups of nurses and the groups' leaders. The results provide support for all of our hypotheses. There was a positive relationship between employee ratings of ethical leadership (Time 1) and leader ratings of group in-role performance (Time 3). Group conscientiousness and group voice (Time 2) both partially mediated this relationship. These results contribute to our understanding of leadership and group effectiveness not only by showing that ethical leadership has a positive influence on group in-role performance, but also by identifying specific norms and group-level behaviors that help to account for this relationship.

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1. Introduction

Groups have become a basic means through which many different types of work are carried out in organizations, in large part because of the potential for groups to generate better quality outcomes than individuals working on their own (Devine, Clayton, Philips, Dunford, & Melner, 1999; Lawler, Mohrman, & Benson, 2001; Salas, Goodwin, & Burke, 2009). As the use of groups has increased in organizations, considerable research has focused on the role of leadership in fostering group performance (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). This research has highlighted both the instrumental value of leadership (e.g., transactional leaders who clarify tasks; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2003; Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003) and the inspirational value of leadership (e.g., transformational leaders who communicate an inspiring vision; Bass et al., 2003; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007; Walumbwa, Avolio, & Zhu, 2008). Less emphasized, however, is how the behaviors associated with ethical leadership might impact group in-role performance.

Although philosophers have long considered the ethical dimension of leadership, the organizational literature, until relatively recently, has given it scant attention. In an important contribution to that literature, Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) offered a social learning model of ethical leadership. Unlike the normative perspective offered by philosophers (which tends to emphasize how leaders “ought to” behave), this model offers a descriptive perspective, focused on describing and characterizing ethical leadership in the workplace (how ethical leaders “do” behave) and on identifying its antecedents and consequences.

Brown et al. (2005) defined 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). Building from Brown and colleagues (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005), this is the conceptualization that we adopt in this paper. Hence, when we use the term “ethical leadership” from this point

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forward, we are referring to ethical leadership as conceptualized by Brown and colleagues and in several recent papers in the organizational literature that have built upon that work (e.g., Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, & Zivnuska, 2011; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Piccolo, Greenbaum, den Hartog, & Folger, 2010; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009; Walumbwa et al., 2011).

Ethical leadership has been argued to be important for organizations because of its effects on the behavior and performance of individual employees (Brown et al., 2005; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Piccolo et al., 2010) and on organizational level outcomes such as the reduction of business costs (Thomas, Schermerhorn, & Dienhart, 2004). However, empirical examination of how ethical leadership affects the performance of work groups remains scarce. We believe that an examination of this relationship could help to expand our understanding of ethical leadership in organizational contexts. In addition to affecting individual-level behavior, we argue that ethical leadership may facilitate *collective performance* by providing a foundation for the development of productive group norms and behaviors that, over time, become self-reinforcing (Cropanzano & Walumbwa, 2010).

Our work is aimed at expanding not just the current understanding of ethical leadership, but also the current understanding of group in-role performance. Whereas the existing literature on groups provides valuable frameworks for understanding group effectiveness (e.g., Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005; Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001), researchers have not fully investigated when and how different group processes, shared cognitions, and behaviors predict performance, nor how leadership shapes those processes, cognitions, and behaviors. Indeed, Mathieu et al. (2008) urged researchers to devote more attention to the specific types of group processes that may emerge in different group contexts. They also urged researchers to work toward providing a fuller understanding of how specific group characteristics and dynamics relate to outcomes such as performance.

In light of the above, the purpose of this study is to build and test a theory that examines not just the connection between ethical leadership and group in-role performance, but also two of the key mechanisms that we believe help account for this connection. Our central argument is that ethical leaders promote norms and behaviors within workgroups that enable those groups to perform more effectively. Specifically, we argue that ethical leadership affects performance by helping to create norms and behaviors that encourage high levels of collective conscientiousness and by encouraging groups to be actively involved in the improvement of work practices through voice behavior.

In building a model linking ethical leadership and group in-role performance, we draw on the distinction made by Marks et al. (2001) between group processes and emergent states. Group processes are team behavioral activities and interactions, whereas emergent states reflect collective-level cognitions, attitudes, and motivations (Marks et al., 2001). Similar to other work that has focused on specific group processes and states in examining the effect of leadership on teams (e.g., Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006), we focus on group conscientiousness (emergent state) and group voice (group process) as key explanatory mechanisms linking ethical leadership to group in-role performance. These are not the only possible explanatory mechanisms, but they are ones that we believe play a particularly important role in explaining the relationship between ethical leadership and group in-role performance. Drawing from Hofmann and Jones (2005), we define group conscientiousness as group habits and norms supporting dependability, effort, and diligence. We define group voice as the extent to which members of a workgroup make constructive suggestions for improvement, share new ideas, and speak up about problems or potential problems (Frazier & Bowler, 2009).

In arguing that group conscientiousness and group voice are key mechanisms explaining the effect of ethical leadership on group in-role performance and by providing empirical support for these arguments, we hope to make several important theoretical and empirical contributions. First, we hope to add to the growing body of research showing that ethical leadership affects not just individual-level behavior and ethical conduct (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011; Kacmar et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2012; Piccolo et al., 2010), but also important group-level outcomes (Detert, Treviño, Burris, & Andiappan, 2007; Mayer et al., 2009, 2012; Schaubroeck et al., *in press*). Second, our study sheds light on how it is that ethical leaders help shape group in-role performance. Kozlowski and Bell (2003, p. 358) noted that “relatively neglected is what leaders should actually be doing to enhance team effectiveness.” By examining the mediating role of two potential intervening variables, we extend previous research by showing underlying mechanisms that are responsible for the effects of ethical leadership, which is important because leadership is a complex and dynamic process (Barling, Christie, & Hopton, 2010; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2002). Third, our study contributes to the literature on employee voice behavior (e.g., LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). A key assumption in the voice literature is that voice helps groups and organizations perform more effectively, yet this assumption has received little empirical attention. In addition, we contribute to recent research on group conscientiousness (e.g., Hofmann & Jones, 2005), providing additional evidence that this is a robust group-level construct with meaningful outcomes.

2. Theory and hypothesis development

According to Brown and colleagues (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005), beyond possessing personal traits such as honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness, ethical leaders are characterized by a set of behaviors. These include setting and communicating high performance expectations, role-modeling behaviors that are normatively appropriate (e.g., self-discipline, responsibility) and good for the collective (speaking up about issues of concern), using rewards to hold people responsible for appropriate conduct, and treating people fairly and with respect (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003; Weaver, Treviño, & Agle, 2005). It is through their actions that ethical leaders seek to influence the behavior of their followers. Indeed, Brown and Treviño (2006) argued that this “proactive influence on the ethical/unethical conduct of followers” (p. 597) is what distinguishes ethical leadership conceptually from other styles of leadership. Ethical leadership has also been shown to be

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