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# Ethical leadership, work engagement, and voice behavior

Work engagement and voice behavior

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## Abstract

**Purpose** The purpose of this paper is to draw on ethical leadership and regulatory focus theory perspectives to examine the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between ethical leadership and voice behavior, and it addresses the moderating effect of promotion focus on the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement.

**Design/methodology/approach** The paper uses a sample of 239 supervisor subordinate dyads collected from a large economic research institution in northern Taiwan to test all hypotheses.

**Findings** The paper finds that ethical leadership facilitates subordinates to engage in their work and encourages subordinates to speak up. This study also reveals a positive relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement that is moderated by the subordinate's self regulatory focus, which is driven by a focus on promotion.

**Originality/value** The paper extends ethical leadership theory by considering that work engagement serves as a cognitive motivational underpinning in support of the link between ethical leadership and voice behavior. The results provide new and deeper insights in explaining the impact of ethical leadership on voice behavior by strengthening the mediating role of work engagement.

**Keywords** Work engagement, Ethical leadership, Promotion focus, Voice behaviour

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing theoretical pluralism in the ethical leadership literature that reflects a growing awareness of the importance of a construct known as ethical leadership behavior. Previous studies have found that ethical leadership behavior can result in many positive outcomes, such as improved employee performance, trust in leaders, organization commitment, extra effort, job satisfaction, and affective commitment (e.g. Kuo, 2013; Avey *et al.*, 2011; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2011). This stream of research has provided valuable insights and highlighted the importance of ethical leadership, which has prompted many researchers to contribute to our present understanding of the nature of ethical leadership behavior.

Ethical leadership is defined 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” (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Ethical leaders are characterized as having high levels of integrity, setting ethical standards, making ethical decisions, and being caring. Researchers have related ethical leadership to the positive attitudes of followers



at work, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work motivation (Toor and Ofori, 2009), and extra-role behaviors, such as voice behavior, organizational citizenship behavior, and relation-oriented behavior (Brown and Treviño, 2006; Mayer *et al.*, 2009; Sirca, 2013).

Recent research in ethical leadership has focussed on examining the process by which ethical leadership is linked to employees' in-role behavior, such as job performance (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2011). It is noted that only a few studies have studied how ethical leadership is connected to extra-role behavior (e.g. Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009). This line of research provides helpful insight and accounts for the process of ethical leadership in determining voice behavior; however, few studies have considered intrinsic motivation to explain the process of ethical leadership as it relates to voice behavior, specifically, the role of work engagement as the mediating process of the aforementioned relationship. Work engagement is a motivational concept (Kühnel *et al.*, 2009) that has been referred to as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008). Brown *et al.* (2005) found that ethical leadership is related to increased employee motivation and more positive work attitudes. A leader with ethical values treats employees fairly and is considerate of their needs. This treatment enhances employee satisfaction and creates trust, thus increasing employee motivation and promoting work engagement. According to the work engagement model, engaged individuals work with greater intensity and exhibit higher levels of intrinsic motivation to perform their tasks. When employees exert more vigor and work with greater dedication and energy as they perform their tasks, they also tend to engage in behaviors that are more altruistic and virtuous (Babcock-Roberson and Strickland, 2010), which may enhance and widen their perceptions and responsibilities with regards to their work roles (Teh and Hongyi, 2012). In turn, these employees are more likely to exhibit proactive employee voice behavior (Blader and Tyler, 2009). Hence, work engagement may serve as an important bridge between ethical leadership and voice behavior.

In organizations, leaders influence followers by inducing a specific socio-cognitive principle of promotion focus in the minds of employees (Higgins, 1997). Promotion focus explains employees' attitudes toward and behaviors at work as resulting from their intrinsic motivations, which are induced by emotions and experiences. Several studies have found that promotion focus acts as a critical triggering mechanism in creating an employee's attitude and behavior (De Cremer *et al.*, 2009). In promotion focus theory, employees are motivated by leadership behaviors that align with their ideal or ought selves, thereby either heightening or weakening work outcomes (De Cremer *et al.*, 2009; Kark and Van Dijk, 2008). Ethical leadership behavior emphasizes moral standards; leaders promote their followers to seek their goals and voice opinions (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009). Ethical managers perform in a fair, honest, and trustworthy manner and procedural justice is important to demonstrate one of the connotations of ethical leadership. As a result, employees under their ethical leadership will perceive the organization's procedures to be credible (Loi *et al.*, 2012). This congruence in values will increase the likelihood of behavior engagement (Dewett and Denisi, 2007) and increase the willingness to exhibit voice behavior. These arguments seem to imply that promotion focus will be evoked via supervisors' ethical leadership, thereby increasing positive work outcomes. However, in ethical leadership literature, the extent to which promotion focus interacts with ethical leadership to predict work engagement is still unclear. Thus, one purpose of this study is to test a theoretical model that highlights

the mediator mechanism of work engagement as it underlies the relationship between ethical leadership and voice behavior. An additional purpose of this study is to explore the moderating role of promotion focus between ethical leadership and work engagement.

To sum up, this paper contributes to ethical leadership theory by: first, providing a coherent review and a critical discussion of current conceptual approaches to ethical leadership in the social sciences; second, illustrating how and why ethical leaders impact employees' attitudes and behaviors; and third, examining when employee reactions to ethical leadership enhances voice behavior through work engagement.

## Theory and hypotheses

### *Ethical leadership and voice behavior*

Employee voice behavior is defined as "promotive behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive challenge intended to improve rather than merely criticize" (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). Voice behavior is an important component of extrarole behavior (Mayer *et al.*, 2009). A few studies have shown that ethical leadership is positively related to employee voice behavior. Brown *et al.* (2005) notes that when employees feel that ethical leaders provide a fair and highly moral environment, the employees learn and internalize the mode of the leader and behave concordantly with this person; thereby, they are more likely to speak up, report problems and offer suggestions to the leaders. Similarly, De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) also suggest that ethical leaders encourage employees to express their opinions and are eager to listen to their concerns, thus, facilitating employee voice behavior.

### *Ethical leadership and work engagement*

Work engagement is perceived as a unique motivation and conceptualized as the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles in terms of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy (Rich *et al.*, 2010). Zhu *et al.* (2009) find that leadership is positively associated with work engagement. Babcock-Roberson and Strickland (2010) suggest that leadership is positively related to employee work engagement. Thus, we rely on these research bases to examine and extend the motivational effect of leaders.

The leader is typically seen as playing an important role in the process of social influence in an organization (Babcock-Roberson and Strickland, 2010). The social information processing perspective, which presumes that individuals collect situational cues from their work environment that affect their motivation, explains the underlying influence through which ethical leadership would be expected to influence employee work engagement. For example, ethical leaders are likely to entrust employees with responsibility as a way to motivate them, to consider the developmental needs of their employees, and to increase employees' perception about the importance of their job. Such ethical leadership would increase the employee's sense of control, broaden an individual's responsibilities, and create a sense of psychological meaningfulness, thus inducing greater motivation and increased effort by employees (Piccolo *et al.*, 2010). Previous studies have found that employees who are more absorbed and dedicated and who devote increased amounts of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy to their work are, consequently, more engaged in their work.

Some studies have used the social learning perspective to account for how leaders affect employees work engagement. Ethical leaders provide employees with a role model and make personnel sacrifices. When ethical leaders are dedicated to their

work, based on the social learning perspective, employees learn and emulate the behaviors of attractive role models, thereby evoking work motivation and energy in their work.

*The mediating role of work engagement*

Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) state that ethical leadership behaviors convey high-moral standards to employees; an openness to input and fair treatment to followers. In doing so, employees see ethical leaders as honing them to be increasingly sharper; they trust that their leader is concerned about doing what is right, and they are thereby willing to risk reporting problems to their leaders (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Consistent with this argument, past research has demonstrated that employees who perceive supervisors as displaying ethical leadership behaviors tend to engage in more voice behavior (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008).

Studies have also suggested that work engagement is a significant predictor of employee proactive behavior such as voice behavior (Blader and Tyler, 2009). When employees have physical, emotional, and psychological resources connected to their work, they are more likely to engage in proactive voice behavior. Several empirical findings have further suggested that work engagement has positive effects on employee's proactive behavior. For instance, Salanova and Schaufeli (2008), conducted one study in Spain and another in the Netherlands, and discovered that work engagement was positively correlated with proactive employee behavior. Moreover, Sonnentag (2003) administered daily surveys over five consecutive workdays and found that day-level work engagement positively shaped day-level proactive behavior. Accordingly, we expect that ethical leadership behaviors will be positively linked to work engagement. Due to the increase in engagement and meaningfulness, the employee is more inclined to contribute proactive suggestions and opinions to the organization (Blader and Tyler, 2009). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H1. Work engagement mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior.

*The moderating role of promotion focus*

Promotion focus is elicited by an emphasis on growth needs, attention to gains, and the attainment of aspirations. Individuals with promotion focus tend to achieve goals and are concerned with positive outcomes. A considerable amount of research has suggested that the regulation of individuals can be elicited by the behavior of their leaders (De Cremer *et al.*, 2009). In view of our earlier discussion, ethical leaders emphasize altruistic orientation to support the personal growth and career development of their employees; thus employees perceive ethical leadership satisfies their needs and elicits promotion focus.

Accordingly, we anticipate that employees with promotion focus will be motivated by ethical leadership and be more willing to engage in their work. Furthermore, the goals of employees with high-promotion focus match the values promoted and modeled through ethical leadership behavior and such congruence contributes to increased motivation to engage in work. Thus, we predict the following hypothesis:

- H2. The positive relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement is moderated by employee promotion focus, such that the relationship is stronger for employees high in promotion focus.

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## Methods

### *Participants and procedures*

A total of 745 individuals – 670 subordinates and 75 supervisors – participated in the study. Participants were from a large economics research institution in Taiwan. At the time of the survey, this institution had 12 main research departments and five supporting departments. Each department is usually staffed by 15-100 researchers. This institution is set on becoming an international policy think-tank for Taiwan economic and industry-related research. We focussed on the “researcher-knowledge workers” as respondents because the work of researchers is primarily the result of their tacit knowledge. The related knowledge sharing requires that employees offer suggestions and speak up to supervisors to solve problems; therefore, it is considered an important asset to success in such work. The HR manager provided us with a list of potential participants. They were told about the objectives and procedures of the survey, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Supervisors were given the link to get on the web site and each received a randomly generated code. This code was used to match the responses of the supervisors with their corresponding subordinate.

All 75 supervisors and 300 of their subordinates responded after several rounds of follow-up reminders, yielding very high-response rates. In addition to the reminders, the high-response rates also occurred because the president supported the study and encouraged participation. After eliminating incomplete and invalid surveys, the final sample consisted of 239 dyads for a response rate of 79.6 percent. Of the supervisor sample, 40.5 percent were male and 70.3 percent were married. Most had a bachelors or master’s degree (94.9 percent), and 83.5 percent of the supervisors were aged 26-50 years old, while 94.8 percent had organizational tenure in excess of three years. Of the subordinate sample, 54.7 percent were male and 50.6 percent were married. Most of the sampled subordinates had a bachelors or master’s degree (87.7 percent). Furthermore, the age group 26-45 years old accounted for 75.4 percent of the sample and 60.7 percent had organizational tenure exceeding five years.

To reduce concerns regarding social desirability effects and common method bias, data were collected from multiple sources (i.e. subordinates and immediate supervisors). Immediate supervisors were given a questionnaire that assessed subordinate voice behavior, while subordinates were given a questionnaire that rated ethical leadership behaviors of supervisors, subordinate engagement, and promotion-focus orientation.

### *Measures*

All measures were originally developed in English; then, following Brislin (1980)’s approach to ensure semantic equivalency, a two-step procedure for back translation was conducted. First, measures were translated from English into Chinese, and two bilinguals were invited to assist in back translation from Chinese to English. All responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

### *Subordinate measures*

Ethical leadership was measured using a ten-item Ethical Leadership Scale ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) adapted from Brown *et al.* (2005). Sample items included: “The supervisor adequately makes fair and balanced decisions,” “The supervisor adequately sets an example by doing things the right way in terms of ethics,” and “The supervisor adequately defines success not just by results but also by the way the results are obtained.”

Promotion focus was measured using the Promotion Focus Scale, a nine-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ) developed by Lockwood *et al.* (2002). Sample items included: "I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations," "I see myself as someone who is primarily striving to reach my ideal self and to fulfill my duties, responsibilities, and obligations," "I often imagine myself experiencing good things that I hope will happen to me," and "Overall, I am more oriented toward achieving success than preventing failure."

Work engagement was measured using the Rich *et al.* (2010) Work Engagement Scale. The 18-item scale measures three dimensions of work engagement, namely, physical engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Sample items from these three dimensions, respectively, included "I work with intensity on my job," "I am proud of my job," and "At work, I focus a great deal of attention on my job." The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of physical engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement were 0.90, 0.94, and 0.95, respectively, and the integrated Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.96.

#### *Supervisor measures*

To measure subordinate's voice behavior, we adopted six indicators developed by Van Dyne and LePine (1998). The voice behavior scale was distributed to the supervisors, who were asked to evaluate to the subordinate's voice behavior. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for this scale was 0.87. Sample items included: "This particular subordinate speaks up and encourages others in this group to become involved in issues that affect the group," "This particular subordinate develops and makes recommendations concerning issues that affect this work group," and "This particular subordinate communicates his/her opinions about work issues to others in this group even if his/her opinion is different and others in the group disagree with him/her."

#### *Control variables*

To minimize the influence of confounding effects, the current study controlled variables including gender, age, education, and tenure of both supervisors and subordinates; because prior studies provide evidence to indicate that these variables are related to voice behavior. For example, males were more likely to display voice behavior than females (Johnson and Schulman, 1989). Employees with senior tenure in their job may feel more comfortable speaking up than newcomers (Stamper and Van Dyne, 2001). Education and age may also increase an individual's level of confidence that he or she possess the skills and knowledge necessary to make suggestions and speak up (Farr and Ford, 1990).

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)*

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all of the variables used in the present study are reported in Table I. An examination of this table indicates that ethical leadership is significantly positive correlated with work engagement, promotion focus, and voice behavior ( $r = 0.48, p < 0.01, r = 0.28, p < 0.01, r = 0.25, p < 0.01$ ). Work engagement was significantly positively correlated with promotion focus and voice behavior ( $r = 0.46, p < 0.01, r = 0.33, p < 0.01$ ). These findings suggest that a supervisor's ethical leadership can facilitate a subordinate's work engagement. In addition, the higher the subordinate's work engagement is, the greater the subordinate's voice behavior is.

Variables	Mean	SD	Cronbach's $\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Supervisors' gender	0.58	0.50	-											
2. Subordinates' gender	0.44	0.50	-	0.24 <sup>***</sup>										
3. Supervisors' education level	3.41	0.65	-	0.16 <sup>*</sup>	0.09									
4. Subordinates' education level	3.14	0.65	-	0.04	0.16 <sup>*</sup>	0.35 <sup>***</sup>								
5. Supervisors' tenure	151.15	116.16	-	0.08	0.17 <sup>***</sup>	-0.07	0.003							
6. Subordinates' tenure	104.60	103.49	-	0.18 <sup>**</sup>	0.12	0.06	-0.28 <sup>**</sup>	0.49 <sup>**</sup>						
7. Dyadic tenure	59.88	61.24	-	0.06	0.07	-0.18 <sup>**</sup>	-0.24 <sup>**</sup>	0.41 <sup>**</sup>	0.39 <sup>**</sup>					
8. Ethical leadership	5.34	0.97	0.93	-0.05	-0.08	0.06	-0.12	0.03	0.02	0.07	(0.75)			
9. Work engagement	5.36	0.91	0.96	0.06	-0.16 <sup>*</sup>	-0.04	-0.07	0.15 <sup>*</sup>	0.13 <sup>*</sup>	0.19 <sup>**</sup>	0.48 <sup>**</sup>	(0.84)		
10. Promotion focus	5.29	0.89	0.89	0.130	-0.04	0.018	-0.05	-0.01	-0.04	0.08	0.28 <sup>**</sup>	0.46 <sup>**</sup>	(0.60)	
11. Voice behavior	5.22	0.94	0.87	0.12	0.03	0.03	-0.06	0.11	0.19	0.15 <sup>*</sup>	0.25 <sup>**</sup>	0.33 <sup>**</sup>	0.14 <sup>*</sup>	(0.73)

**Notes:**  $n = 239$  (supervisor-subordinate dyads). The square root of average variance extracted appears in parentheses along the diagonal. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table I.**  
Means, standard deviations, correlations, the square root of average variance extracted, and reliabilities of the variables



Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted CFA on the scales used in our study to establish convergent and discriminant validities and to confirm the expected factor structure of our scales. To perform our CFAs, we used LISREL 8.80, a covariance matrix as input, and maximum likelihood estimation. As evidenced in Table II, we estimated a four-factor measurement model where one factor represented each of our scales. The results in the Table II baseline model show that indicators fit the data well ( $\chi^2 = 2487.68$ ,  $df = 854$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.91$ ,  $GFI = 0.93$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $NNFI = 0.97$ ,  $CFI = 0.98$ ), and all of the standardized loadings are highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), providing evidence for convergent validity.

Next, we estimated two alternative nested models to compare to our measurement model based on the highest correlations in Table I. Model 1 combined promotion focus and work engagement scales into one factor to create a three-factor model, and model 2 merged the ethical leadership, promotion focus and work engagement scales into one factor. As shown in Table II, the fit indices and the  $\chi^2$  difference tests indicate that the baseline model yields a better fit than the other models. To further explore the discriminant validity of these scales, we followed the procedure outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981) by calculating the square root of the average variance explained (AVE) for each of the scales in our study. We present these values on the diagonal in Table I. Both the baseline model and the AVE results provide evidence for discriminant validity.

Collecting data about dependent and independent mediating variables from different sources is important to reduce common method biases (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). To reduce concerns regarding social desirability effects and common method bias, data were collected from multiple sources. Because data about ethical leadership, work engagement, and promotion focus come from the same source, this study compares two models for examining the extent to which the results are due to common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The first model (Baseline model) includes four factors. The second model (model 2) combines ethical leadership, work engagement, and promotion focus. The models differ significantly ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 877.88$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and the fit indices of the Baseline model are better than those of model 2 (e.g.  $GFI: 0.93 \rightarrow 0.78$ ;  $NNFI: 0.97 \rightarrow 0.86$ ;  $CFI: 0.98 \rightarrow 0.89$ ;  $RMSEA: 0.06 \rightarrow 0.24$ ). These findings suggest that common source bias was not a major problem for the data (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

#### *Hypotheses testing*

To test the mediating effect of work engagement, we used a four-step procedure (Baron and Kenny, 1986). After controlling demographical variables, as a first step, ethical leadership must be significantly related to voice behavior. Step 2 required that ethical leadership be significantly related to work engagement. In the third step, work engagement must be related to voice behavior. In step 4, when both ethical leadership

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	RMSEA	NNFI	CFI
Baseline model (four factor)	2,487.68	854		2.91	0.93	0.06	0.97	0.98
Model 1 (three factor)	2,523.01	857	35.33**	2.94	0.92	0.11	0.91	0.92
Model 2 (two factor)	3,365.56	859	877.88**	3.92	0.78	0.24	0.86	0.89

**Table II.**  
Results of confirmatory factor analyses: comparison of measurement models

**Notes:** The values of  $\Delta\chi^2$  and  $\Delta df$  were differences between the baseline model (four factor) and other models. Model 1: ethical leadership, voice behavior and the promotion focus and work engagement scales combined in one factor; model 2: voice behavior and combination of all the scales for ethical leadership, promotion focus, and work engagement scales in one factor. \*\* $p < 0.01$

and work engagement are simultaneously included in a regression model, the significant relationship between ethical leadership and voice behavior in step 1 must be reduced in magnitude or eliminated. Model 4 in Table III reveals that there was not a significant relationship between voice behavior and ethical leadership ( $\beta = 0.13$ , ns), but there was a significant relationship between voice behavior and work engagement ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results suggest that work engagement mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and voice behavior. A Sobel test was conducted as a means of further examining evidence for mediation and the results confirm that the indirect effect was significant ( $Z = 4.936$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, *H1* is supported.

To test *H2*, that is, whether ethical leadership and work engagement are moderated by employee promotion focus such that the relationship is stronger for employees high in promotion focus, we followed the Muller *et al.* (2005) approach to examine the proposed moderating effect. As shown in Table IV, in step 1, the effects of the control variables predict work engagement. After regressing work engagement on the main effects of control variables and ethical leadership, we entered employee promotion focus in step 3. In step 4, the interaction term between ethical leadership and employee promotion focus was entered. Consistent with findings by Aiken and West (1991), as predicted, after controlling the main effects of ethical leadership and promotion focus, the results of model 4 in Table IV indicate that the interaction between ethical leadership and promotion focus significantly predict work engagement ( $\beta = 1.44$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). To confirm that the form of this interaction aligns with our prediction, the graphical depictions of the moderated effects are shown in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, the positive relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement is moderated by employee promotion focus, such that the relationship is stronger for employees high in promotion focus. Thus, *H2* is supported.

**Discussion**

This study endeavors to propose a theoretical model by empirically exploring whether a supervisor’s ethical leadership influences a subordinate’s voice behavior through

Variables	Voice behavior model 1		Work engagement model 2		Voice behavior model 3		Voice behavior model 4	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<i>Control variables</i>								
Supervisors’ gender	0.10	1.55	0.11	1.88	0.06	0.96	0.07	1.14
Subordinates’ gender	0.00	0.043	0.19	3.21**	0.06	0.86	0.05	0.77
Supervisors’ education	0.01	0.07	0.08	1.31	0.04	0.53	0.02	0.23
Subordinates’ education	0.03	0.41	0.09	1.38	0.02	0.20	0.01	0.11
Supervisors’ tenure	0.01	0.17	0.07	0.98	0.03	0.36	0.03	0.39
Subordinates’ tenure	0.155	1.92	0.076	1.07	0.12	1.55	0.14	1.72
Dyadic tenure	0.08	1.11	0.12	1.79	0.05	0.70	0.05	0.72
$\Delta R^2$	0.05		0.09		0.03		0.05	
<i>Independent variable</i>								
Ethical leadership	0.25	3.96***	0.47	8.44***			0.13	1.85
Work engagement					0.32	5.00***	0.25	3.50***
$\Delta R^2$	0.06		0.22		0.12		0.11	
Total $R^2$	0.11		0.30		0.15		0.16	
Adjust $\Delta R^2$	0.08		0.28		0.12		0.13	
<i>F</i> value	3.70***		12.50***		4.93***		4.81***	

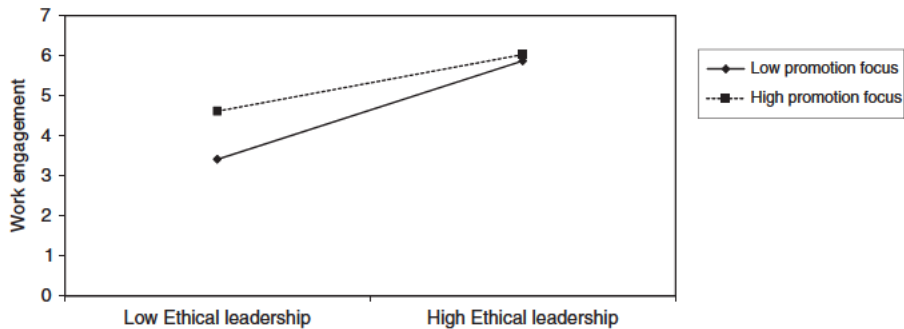
**Notes:** *n* = 239 (supervisor subordinate dyads). \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table III.**  
The results of mediating  
effects of work  
engagement between  
ethical leadership and  
voice behavior

Variables	Work engagement							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<i>Control variables</i>								
Supervisors' gender	0.09	1.33	0.11	1.88	0.05	0.95	0.05	0.95
Subordinates' gender	0.22	3.23**	0.19	3.21**	0.17	3.18**	0.15	2.83**
Supervisors' education	0.01	0.14	0.08	1.31	0.09	1.49	0.08	1.34
Subordinates' education	0.01	0.17	0.09	1.38	0.10	1.66	0.11	1.85
Supervisors' tenure	0.10	1.29	0.07	0.98	0.07	1.12	0.05	0.75
Subordinates' tenure	0.04	0.45	0.08	1.07	0.11	1.73	0.13	2.06*
Dyadic tenure	0.15	2.00*	0.12	1.79	0.08	1.39	0.09	1.51
<i>Independent variable</i>								
Ethical leadership			0.47	8.44**	0.38	7.02**	1.32	5.04**
<i>Moderating variables</i>								
Promotion focus					0.34	6.32**	1.20	5.00**
<i>Interactive effects</i>								
Ethical leadership × promotion focus							1.44	3.66**
$\Delta R^2$	0.06**		0.28***		0.38***		0.42***	

Notes: *n* = 239 (supervisor subordinate dyads). \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table IV.**  
The results of interactive effects of ethical leadership and promotion focus on work engagement



**Figure 1.**  
Moderating effect of promotion focus on the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement

the mediating role of the subordinate's work engagement and by examining the moderating effect of promotion focus on the relationship between a supervisor's ethical leadership and a subordinate's work engagement. As hypothesized, the subordinate's work engagement mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and voice behavior. It appears that our finding supports the notion of social information processing and social learning perspective, thus suggesting that the behaviors of an ethical leader motivate a subordinate's engagement, and the motivation from engagement inspires a subordinate's willingness to speak up. In addition, consistent with our suppositions, this study also finds that ethical leadership is positively associated with work engagement when the subordinate's self-regulatory focus is driven by promotion focus. Thus, our results extend the ethical leadership literature by demonstrating the importance of the subordinate's self-regulatory focus in ethical leadership behavior to the subordinate's work engagement level.

The present study contributes to our understanding of ethical leadership in several ways. Previous research focussed mainly on examining the antecedents and

consequences (Brown and Treviño, 2006). However, we knew very little about how and why ethical leaders impact employees' attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, the underlying mechanism that links ethical leadership to various outcomes had also received insufficient attention (Avey *et al.*, 2011; Piccolo *et al.*, 2010). Brown and Treviño (2006) suggest future work on the consequences of ethical leadership should clarify the mediating process. Taking their suggestion, we further extended ethical leadership theory by considering how work engagement serves as the cognitive motivation underpinning the link between ethical leadership and voice behavior. The results provide new and deeper insights into the impact of ethical leadership on voice behavior by strengthening the mediating role of work engagement.

Second, a majority of ethical leadership literature examines the main effect (Brown and Treviño, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2005; Toor and Ofori, 2009). Mayer *et al.* (2009), while less attention has been given to identifying the conditions under which ethical leadership behavior fosters employee outcomes. It was not previously possible to fully determine whether the boundary condition of employee reactions to ethical leadership enhances voice behavior through work engagement. Correspondingly, this study advances our understanding by examining promotion focus in the moderating role to explain the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement. It is important to determine whether promotion focus enhances or mitigates the influence of ethical leader behavior on work attitude.

#### *Managerial implications*

Our research demonstrates that ethical leadership has a significant influence on the work engagement and the regulatory mindsets of employees and the behaviors they experience in the work context. This contribution to understanding the influence of ethical leaders extends theory on ethical leadership, promotion focus, and employee voice behavior; moreover, it affirms the wisdom of those organizations that seek out, promote, and develop ethical leaders. There are two important managerial implications from this study. First, our results highlight the important role of work engagement when considering the relationship between ethical leadership and voice behavior. This finding is important as it can help employers and managers identify ways to induce and enhance employee work engagement. Additionally, ethical leaders may motivate followers' promotion focus by highlighting the impact of work motivation on work engagement and voice behavior. In this way, ethical leadership plays an important role in the occurrence of both work engagement and voice behavior (Detert and Burris, 2007), and it motivates followers' promotion focus. We suggest that organizations provide and design training programs to cultivate ethical leadership behaviors. Additionally, organizations should hire more ethical leaders by assessing applicants' level of integrity, their moral standards and their consideration for others (Mayer *et al.*, 2009).

#### *Limitations and future research*

These results must be considered in light of several study limitations. First, a limitation of this study was the use of a cross-sectional design, which precludes inference. Future studies should consider longitudinal or experimental designs using different time periods to collect data, thus providing firm evidence of causation. Second, although we collected data from multiple sources, the data were collected at the same time and with common scale formats, thus producing a potential for CMV. As CMV may inflate the true relationships among the study variables, we employed CFA to check the severity of

potential problems (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The CFA results suggest that CMV does not appear to play an important role in shaping our findings. A third potential limitation was related to external validity. The study sample was limited to a single organization in a single culture, had a relatively homogenous sample could be considered a weakness about the generalizability of our findings. We encourage researchers to conduct similar studies with more diverse samples to examine the generalizability of the results from other industries and cultures.

Finally, we suggest two possible research directions for future study. Organizations may give employees an opportunity to speak up, but employees may not say what they really think. De Vries *et al.* (2012) argued that negative effects were likely to occur when a manager was perceived as trying to deceive employees by pretending to be interested in their opinions and perspectives about work-related issues with no real intention of actually considering their perspectives and referred to the combination of voice opportunity and managerial disregard as pseudo voice. We assume that engaged people exhibit strong intentions to be passionate advocates for their workplace (Bennet and Bell, 2004). Therefore, we assumed that people voiced their true thoughts. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the possibility of pseudo voice. This idea could be included in future studies on the topic.

The present study focussed on determining the individual's chronic regulatory focus, which is formed during the subject's socialization processes and interpersonal relations since infancy. Future research could consider the situational influence of context regulatory focus theory, which could then activate a specific orientation, thus making this orientation temporarily more accessible (Higgins, 1997).

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### Further reading

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