

Promoting Employee Voice Behavior: Role Of Ethical Leadership And Mediation Of Felt Obligation

Syed Shoeb Ahmed¹, Sumair Farooq², Asif Uddin³, Ashley Adrian⁴

¹Associate Professor, Hamdard University.

²Assistant Professor, Hamdard University.

³Assistant Professor, Jinnah Sindh Medical University.

⁴PhD Scholar, Hamdard University.

Abstract

Theorizing on the social learning theory, present study established the relationship of ethical leadership and employee voice behaviour. Present study examined a mediation model which include ethical leadership as independent variable, employee voice as a dependent variable and felt obligation as a mediator. The study mentioned that how employee manage to speak up if leader exhibits ethical role both as a person and as a manager. Further, social exchange theory confirmed that employee demonstrate a positive behaviour in return if they are treated good by the organization and employers. Mediation of felt obligation proved that if employees receives ethical treatment, they reciprocate and raise a constructive voice in favour of organization. Data of 304 employees from the educational sector was collected to conduct the present study. Implication of the study was also discussed

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, felt obligation, constructive voice, social learning theory.

Introduction

Voice behavior at the work place helps the organizations to know about the malpractices, mistakes and weaknesses of the organization. Further the voicing behaviour assists to prevent from losses such as social and financial losses (Ejaz, Anjum, Rasheed, Waqas, & Hameed, 2022). Thus by attaining the voicing environment organizations gain the capability to improve the quality and innovation with regards to services and products. Voicing behaviour in organizations helps them to learn about their weaknesses, malpractices and mistakes, the behavior, further assists to prevent from social and

financial losses which in turn enables the organization to create value and innovation in the services and products of the firm. (Avey, Wernsing, & Palanski, 2012; Detert & Burris, 2007; Ejaz et al., 2022; Grant & Rothbard, 2013). Moreover, employee voicing behaviour plays a vital role to link human resource and best performance (Wood & Wall, 2007). Voice behavior is an extra role and pro social behaviour (Yousaf, Abid, Butt, Ilyas, & Ahmed, 2019). However, the behavior is voluntary and risky that may have the consequences beyond ones' expectations (Ejaz et al., 2022). In past studies researchers tried to find out the factors that are the

predictors of voice, one such factor is the ethical leadership. Researchers have previously examined a variety of variables that predict voice behaviours, while ethical leadership is the behaviour that is essential and plays a vital role (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Ejaz et al., 2022; Ng & Feldman, 2015; Zappalà & Toscano, 2020). Brown and colleagues (2005) initially introduced the idea of an ethical leader from the perspective of social learning. The promotion of normatively acceptable behaviour to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making, as well as the setting of such a behaviour as an example through one's own behaviour and interpersonal interactions, is considered as ethical leadership. The social learning theory's point of view holds that ethics as a manager and as a person are the two pillars on which ethical leadership is built. The former is related to the personal characteristics of the ethical leader such as possessing desirable personal attributes like honesty, fairness and altruism demonstrated by the ethical leaders for each employee. The ethical manager refers, how a leader with ethical values utilizes the leadership quality (Treviño, Weaver, & Brown, 2000). The social learning theory holds the intuitive and theoretical approach to understand the ethical leadership. Whereas, most of the researches uses different approaches; such as, social identification theory is used to clarify the association between ethical leadership and employee voicing behaviour. And there is scarce literature on the direct effects of ethical leadership and employee voice by using the perspective of social learning theory. In order

to bridge this gap, aim of this paper is to use social learning perspective to provide an empirical proof of the relationship of ethical leadership and voice. Being an ethical person, ethical leaders exhibit values and trait of the moral person, to inspire each employee (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Individual employee becomes aware and understands the acceptable and appropriate behaviour through observations. In this way the aspect of moral person as an ethical leader becomes a role model which in turn becomes a fundamental mechanism for social learning process.

The second pillar of an ethical leader, as a moral manager exert a profound effect on the subordinate behaviour. (Brown et al., 2005; Hirak, Peng, Carmeli, & Schaubroeck, 2012). However, there hasn't been much research done on how ethical leadership affects employee voice behaviour. As previous studies have demonstrated employee voice is an extra role behaviour with the purpose to improve organization. Poor voicing behaviour has adverse effects on organizational development. The current study argues that ethical leadership (EL) provides opportunity to raise voice for the betterment of the organization. Given that it is concluded that ethical leader and employee voice have a positive relationship (Y. Bai, L. Lin, & J. T. Liu, 2019a).

Relationship between ethical leader and how it influences felt obligation is often discussed as the norms of reciprocity (Rafique & Bukhari, 2022). Since ethical leadership and felt obligation effect on employee voice has been under-discussed, this study anticipates to examine the role of ethical leadership and felt obligation in the

proposed theoretical framework (Garba, Babalola, & Guo, 2018). Seemingly, the relationship of EL, FO and EV in the Pakistani culture has not hitherto studied until recently (Ogunfowora, Maerz, & Varty, 2021). The purpose of this study is to examine EL, FO and EV in Pakistani context. In the end, the current study suggests that EL influences EV and FO also relates to EV and mediates the relationship of ethical leadership and Ev (Rafique & Bukhari,

2022). Although some recent studies have increased rationalizing the underlying processes due to which EL has been related to employee voice behaviour (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Hence it is proposed that the relationship between EL and EV is mediated by FO.

Theoretical frame work

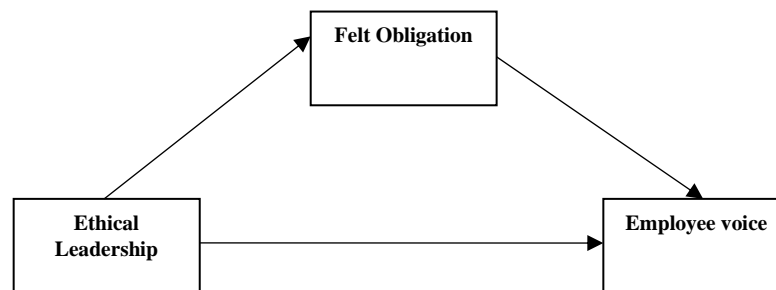


Fig 1.

Ethical leadership and employee voice

Employee voicing behaviour is a kind of optional behavior (Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003) which involves a positive, constructive and change-oriented communication with aim to get better any bad circumstances (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). In organizational activities, voice behaviour may be used as suggestions and concerns. therefore, the concept of voicing has been divided into two major categories, promotive and prohibitive voice behaviors by various theorists. (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012; Vandewalle, Van Dyne, & Kostova, 1995). The concept of promotive voice behavior is an expressing ones ideas or proposals for existing work procedures for the betterment of the work place (Van Dyne & LePine,

1998). Whereas the other dimension the prohibitive voice, refers to the expression of concerns about ongoing work procedures or events that could be harmful in the organizational settings (Liang et al., 2012). This voicing behaviour may play a vital role to manage organizational robustness by detecting and solving the problems before they appear and are helpful for leaders. Extensive review of literature on voice behaviour it has been observed that, many researchers have majorly focused on the above mentioned two dimensions of voice that is promotive and prohibitive voice behavior (Liang et al., 2012; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014). In order to obtain a holistic understanding of employee voice behaviour, it is crucial to investigate many aspects of voice simultaneously (Maynes & Podsakoff,

2014; Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2015; Ogunfowora et al., 2021). Employees willingness to actually involve in voicing activity depends upon favorability of the surrounding environment makes the employee voice behaviour more discretionary and risky in nature (Morrison, 2011). According to Bandura's social learning theory, behaviour is a collaborative function of three factors: an individual's performed behaviour, their environment, and their unique cognition (Bandura, 1977). Social learning processes gradually enables learning of voice behavior in a business environment (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). It is evident from the available literature that voice is an outcome of ethical leadership and it is positively and significantly influenced by ethical leadership (Avey et al., 2012; Bai et al., 2019a; Dua, Farooq, & Rai, 2022; Zheng, Epitropaki, Graham, & Caveney, 2022). (Chin, Hambrick, & Treviño, 2013) observed the relationship of ethical leadership and employee voice with the mediation of team harmony. In different studies social scientist studied the relationship of ethical leadership and employee voice behaviour under different theories like regulatory focus theory, (Neubert, Wu, & Roberts, 2013), cognitive evaluation theory, Yidong and Xinxin (2013), and social identification theory, (Zhu, He, Treviño, Chao, & Wang, 2015). Still, there are rare examples of empirical study with respect to social learning theory for understanding ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005). This paper is based on theory of social learning process and focuses on the relationship of employee voice and ethical leadership. Further, meta-analysis by Ng and

Feldman (2015) explains that ethical leadership has a positive connection with the constructive voice behavior. Constructive voice most commonly gives recommendations for problem solving through which individual employees present their expertise and self-sufficiency (Wei, Zhang, & Chen, 2015). Ethical leaders emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication and encourage when employees speaking up at the workplace (Avey et al., 2012; Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Rafique & Bukhari, 2022). An ethical leader takes interest in listening his follower's opinion and respect their suggestions regarding organizational operations (Shin, Sung, Choi, & Kim, 2015). Brown et al. (2005) found the empirical evidence that ethical leadership is a strong predictor of employee intention to raise voice about issues in the organization. It shows that employees who perceive ethical values in leaders they are inclined to raise voice. They are more involved in constructive voice behaviour and tend to speak up for organization (Yang & Wei, 2018). An ethical leader is generally considered as a considerate person who expresses his worries about troublesome behaviours and situations and is unable to regulate constructive reactions (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011). As a matter of fact, ethical leaders have a propensity to speak out overtly against wrong actions at work and focuses on normalizing the problematic situations (Avey et al., 2012). Thus, ethical leadership and organization understand and encourage the voicing concern of the employees. (Avey et al., 2012). These dynamics can hence inspire employees to indulge in constructive voice

behaviour (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002). Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Ethical leadership is positively related to employee voice behavior

Ethical leadership and felt obligation

(Gouldner, 1960) observed that individuals follow indiscriminate moral norm of reciprocity that forces them to support and not harm those who have facilitated them. An employee receives a guideline, psychological and social support from a leader or role model and considers these a benefit that brings respect praise, trust and a sense of obligation to reciprocate by doing things that are helpful for leader. (Baranik, Roling, & Eby, 2010). Research shows that at the work place employees repeatedly exhibit such kind of obligation to the organization. In an organizational setting observes the ethical role of manager while achieving the organizational targets, in return he feels obligated to participate in organizational process and help the manager to full fill the organizational targets (Rafique & Bukhari, 2022). From this perspective individual employee sense a feeling of performing duty with full commitment and honesty (Rafique & Bukhari, 2022; Rice, Massey, Roberts, & Sterzenbach, 2021). Moreover, as a role model ethical leader activate an understanding of obligation in the supervisor and help the organization to protect the moral infra structure. Previous researchers supported this argument such as (Demirtas, Hannah, Gok, Arslan, & Capar, 2017) note that ethical leaders through their conduct promote employee duty and obligation to the organization.

Hypothesis 2. Ethical Leadership is positively related to felt obligation

Felt obligation and employee voice

A significant relationship between felt obligation and employee voice is suggested by social exchange theory (Rafique & Bukhari, 2022). Past researchers widely adopted the concept of social exchange theory as a theoretical framework. Voicing behaviour brings change in the organization, if the voice is positive and constructive in nature it pinpoints the glitches at the workplace and helps to resolve the issues. (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). The norm of reciprocity suggests that when a person makes a positive move, in return the other person reacts in the same positive way to have an improved relationship quality (Bai et al., 2019a; Cook & Emerson, 1987; Morrison, 2011); this reciprocation is quite similar to self-obligation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gouldner, 1960). According to the reciprocity norm, social interactions' quality keeps becoming better with time (Molm, Whitham, & Melamed, 2012; Shore, Coyle-Shapiro, Chen, & Tetrick, 2009). Employees who feel obligated to work in the organization's best interests on behalf of their employers are expected to do so ((Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Previous studies have shown that social exchange and a sense of obligation serve as a medium for communication between employers and their staff (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Lew, 2009). In the current study, it was found that voice behaviour in the workplace was predicted by felt obligations to the organisation. In

particular, voice behaviour and a felt obligation to cause constructive change in an organisation were found to be significantly positively correlated (Choi, 2007; Liang et al., 2012). Employees therefore interpret voice behaviour as a form of reciprocation, leading to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Felt obligation is positively related to employee voice

Mediating role of felt obligation

The study of interpersonal relationships is typically emphasized by theories of social exchange. According to the notion, a process in which various parties exchange valuable resources in pertinent activities is necessary for human connection and relationships. People frequently attempt to form social interactions based on constructive interpersonal communication and reciprocal norms, in accordance with the social exchange theory's positive exchange principle (Su et al., 2021). The same rule applies to organizations; when staff members obtain financial and social benefits from them, they feel obligated to pay those benefits back (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The pioneering work of Eisenberger et al. (2001) in integrating the reciprocal norm into organisational behaviour (Y. Bai, L. Lin, & J. T. J. T. I. J. o. H. R. M. Liu, 2019b). Therefore, it is advised to thoroughly examine the effect of leadership traits on employees' work output. Some researchers have also claimed in recent studies that a leader's moral integrity and principles are crucial for enhancing leadership effectiveness (Hassan, 2019; Lu & Guy, 2014). Many researchers believed that social

exchange, or ethical leadership, had a considerable impact on how well employees performed at work (Brown et al., 2005; Hassan, 2019; Su et al., 2021). In contrast, when a leader behaves unethically, the employees will respond negatively through their attitudes and behaviours, which could harm the entire team and common interests (Su et al., 2021), voice behavior (Hu et al., 2018), subjective well-being, and organizational citizenship behavior (Wang, Lee, & Wu, 2017). These results suggest that managers model excellent interpersonal relationships with staff members by modeling ethical behavior and developing normative standards that will inspire imitation among staff members and encourage positive behaviour that will benefit organisations. The discussion suggests the following hypothesis:

H4: Felt obligation mediates the relationship of ethical leadership and employee voice.

Method

Data was collected through questionnaire survey from educational institutions of Pakistan, with the aim to analyze that how ethical leadership influences voicing behaviour amongst the employees. The data also helped to examine that how felt obligation influence the connection of ethical leadership and voice behaviour of employees. There were 304 respondents and the survey was conducted personally by the researcher so that researcher can clarify any doubt in the questionnaire on the spot. After data collection, it was initially entered in SPSS, 26. Data was cleaned and irrelevant and invalid questionnaire were removed and finally 284 sample questionnaire were

retained for analysis in smart PLS 4.0 to conduct Structural Equation Modelling.

Sample

The participants of the study were mainly the teacher of the colleges and university with minimum experience of five years. Data was collected after informed consent and participant were asked that their identity will be kept confidential and they may leave at any stage if they do not want to answer the questions.

Measure

The analysis of the current study is done with the three main constructs, that is, ethical leadership, employee voice behaviour and felt obligation. Each construct has multiple items that have been tested and validated in past studies.

All items in the study were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Questionnaire was in English language which is the medium of instruction in colleges and universities in Pakistan.

Ethical Leadership

A ten-item scale was used to evaluate ethical leadership. The scale was created by Brown et al. (2005) and modified for the current study's use in measuring ethical leadership. A sample question was: 'My supervisor makes fair and balanced decisions'. The Cronbach alpha reliability for the scale was .87.

Employee Voice Behaviour

Five items to measure employee voice behaviour were adapted from the scale developed by (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014).

The main scale consists of four dimensions of voice, whereas for the current study only one dimension is adopted that is the supportive voice. A 5- point rating Likert scale is used to measure the data whereas 1= is strongly disagree and 5= is strongly agree. The alpha reliability of the subscale supportive voice was 0.89 (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014).

Felt Obligation

The scale to measure Felt Obligation was initially designed and tested by (Eisenberger et al., 2001). The measure comprises of 6 items to analyze the construct in the study. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1= Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The coefficient alphas of these items were .81.

Data analysis and results

Measurement model

In Structural equation modeling the measurement model explains the relationship of observed and latent variables. To be more precise it gives the relationship of each indicator with the latent construct. For the current study measurement model was evaluated through factor loadings, composite reliability and discriminant validity. Factor loadings $<.06$) were removed due to low loadings and low Average variance extracted (AVE). Three items (EL3, EL4, EL5) were from the analysis because of low factor loadings (Gefen & Straub, 2005). In measurement model reliability analysis is the first component, it is measured through composite reliability. Acceptable threshold value to measure the composite reliability is 0.70 (Becker, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2018). Accordingly, table 1 shows, in the current

analysis the composite reliability of all unobserved constructs of the model possess composite reliability.

Table 1: Factor loadings, reliability and validity

Item	Loadings	Alpha	CR	AVE
Ethical Leadership		0.856	0.901	0.576
EL1	0.711			
EL2	0.826			
EL6	0.789			
EL7	0.764			
EL8	0.765			
EL9	0.701			
EL10	0.823			
Employee Voice		0.887	0.912	0.615
EV1	0.731			
EV2	0.877			
EV3	0.702			
EV4	0.778			
EV5	0.705			
EV6	0.740			
EV7	0.834			
EV8	0.798			
EV9	0.710			
EV10	0.767			
Felt Obligation		0.898	0.931	0.622
FO1	0.803			
FO2	0.771			
FO3	0.812			
FO4	0.777			
FO5	0.798			
FO6	0.889			

In measurement mode second component is the convergent validity. Convergent validity determines that how much variance is captured a construct through the observed variables. Convergent validity is measured through AVE, cut off value for AVE is 0.50 (Becker et al., 2018). For the current analysis

all the constructs have desirable value it shows that constructs retain convergent validity (Table 1). How latent constructs are different from each other is determined through discriminant validity. It is measured through Heterotrait Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio. As highlighted by Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt

(2015), to analyze discriminant validity, discriminant validity is established when HTMT ratio is less than or equal to 0.90 which is the most conservative threshold

value to measure the validity. In the current study, all the values of HTMT are as per the requirement. Hence, table 2 shows discriminant validity is established.

Table 2: HTMT Ratio showing Discriminant validity

	EL	EV	FO
EL			
EV	0.826		
FO	0.898	0.884	

Structural Model

Path analysis of the constructs is done in the structural model. It exhibits paths between the constructs on the suggested study model. H1 states that EL has a positive and significant relationship with EV. The analysis of the model estimates that EL has statistically substantial effect (total effect) on EV ($\beta = 0.726$, $t = 8.862$, $p < 0.000$). Therefore, H1 was true. H2 estimates the relationship of

EL on FO. It is clear from the analysis that ethical leadership has a statistically significant effect on FO ($\beta = 0.816$, $t = 26.364$, $p < 0.000$). Hence, H2 was also sustained. H3 states that if FO is positively related to EV. The statistical tests discovered that FO has a statistically significant influence on EV ($\beta = 0.795$, $t = 2.567$, $p < 0.010$). Accordingly, H3 is supported (Table 3).

Table 3: Path Analysis

	Path Coefficient	Standard Deviation	T-Statistics	p-value
H1: EL>EV	0.726	0.082	8.862	0.000
H2: EL>FO	0.816	0.031	26.364	0.000
H1: FO>EV	0.795	0.310	2.567	0.010

Mediation Analysis

Finally, H4 assesses, if FO has a mediating effect between the relationship of ethical leadership and employee voice. The analysis of results demonstrates that the total effect was statistically significant and positive ($\beta = 0.726$, $t = 8.862$, $p < 0.001$). When mediator FO was included in the model it lessens the

total effect and the direct relationship of EL and EV was observed as insignificant ($\beta = 0.078$, $t = 0.235$, $p > 0.05$). However, when mediator was introduced in the model the analysis revealed the significant impacts. ($\beta = 0.649$, $t = 2.421$, $p < 0.001$). Confidence interval of bias corrected upper and lower limits have no zero in between. Hence,

according to results a complete mediation is observed in the proposed model. It illustrates that the effect of EL on EV passes fully

through FO. Subsequently, H4 is also supported (Table 4).

Table 4: Mediation Analysis.

	Total Effect		Direct Effect			Hypothesis	Indirect Effects			C I	
	β	t-value	β	t	p		β	t	p	LL	UL
EL>E	0.72	8.86	0.07	0.23	0.81	H4:EL>FO>	0.64	2.42	0.01	0.11	1.22
V	6	2	8	5	5	EV	9	1	6	2	8

Discussion

Ethical role modelling is the central idea in the literature of ethical leadership. That is the appropriate conduct of the moral manager. This conduct created an insight in the employees to act prosocially by raising voice regarding organizational concerns. The current study studied the method by which ethical leadership might predict voice behaviour by ethical role modelling, extending the theory of social learning from an individual to a multi-level setting.

Present study is conducted to analyze the connection of EL, FO, and EV. The establishment of the anticipated relationships endorses the norms of reciprocation in light of social exchange phenomenon. The proposed study demonstrated a statistically significant impact of ethical leadership on employee voice. The data supports these findings and are consistent with those of other studies that have shown positive relationship between EL and EV. (Bai et al., 2019a; Brown et al., 2005; Zheng et al., 2022). This illustrates ethical leadership inculcates a sense of felt obligation and employee in returns raise positive voice and

feels obligated to demonstrate positive attitude and behaviour towards the organization and this in turn will enhance his work output. This further supports the statement that leaders with their role modelling can benefit the organizations and human resources. The study established significant impact of EL on FO (Rafique & Bukhari, 2022; Su et al., 2021).

The study's findings showed that ethical leadership and voice behaviour were positively correlated (H1). The findings also showed that perceived obligation is significantly impacted by ethical leadership (H2). The relationship between felt responsibility and employee voice is also quite beneficial (H3). The results showed that felt obligation played a partial mediating role in the link between ethical leadership and employee voice with regard to the mediating role.

The results validated the hypotheses. Su et al. (2021) suggested that successful social exchange process can inject felt obligation in the employees and the ethical leaders can enhance the feeling of reciprocation and good quality relationships

can be established between employees and employer (Rafique & Bukhari, 2022; Su et al., 2021). This indicates that ethical leadership can perform as a vibrant ability with a focus on employees voicing behaviour for the betterment of the organization.

Implications

Theoretically the current model and findings have some important contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, the model contributes to ethic based leadership theories it shows that ethical leadership can create a favorable environment that motivates the employees to voice suggestions for the organization. As indicated in the literature that leaders who act ethically can change employee's attitude and behaviour through their conduct (Bai et al., 2019b). Present research introduces a construct, felt obligation as an intervening construct, to elucidate the association of ethical leadership and voice behavior. This is a dispositional characteristic variable associated with voice behavior. Also, the current research focuses on only one outcome of ethical leadership, the voice behavior in the presence of mediator. This includes voice to the categories of outcomes related to ethic based leadership theories. This may inspire more research based on of ethic based leadership.

Practically, voice is an important resource of helping an organization's continuous development. Findings of the current study offer some suggestions that how organizations can effectively encourage the practice of voicing concerns. First, the study shows the significant statistical relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice. Using this phenomenon

organization can pay special attention while hiring and promoting the managers. Organizations should set high ethical standards, to create positive environment. Organization should arrange some training to develop ethical leadership characteristics and felt obligation in the employees.

Research limitations and future research directions

It is crucial to recognize that the current study has several limitations. First of all, since the data was obtained from employees in Pakistan's education sector, the approach needs to be adopted by other industries in Pakistan. Second, future research should be undertaken using other forms of leadership and voice behaviour as just one leadership style and one type of voice behaviour were investigated in the current study. Finally, more dispositional elements and individual traits have to be investigated as mediators in future research.

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