



Ethical leadership and follower organizational deviance: The moderating role of follower moral attentiveness

Suzanne van Gils^{a,*}, Niels Van Quaquebeke^b, Daan van Knippenberg^c,
Marius van Dijke^c, David De Cremer^d

^a Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands

^b Kühne Logistics University, Hamburg, Germany

^c Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, The Netherlands

^d Judge Business School, Cambridge University, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 April 2013

Received in revised form 2 July 2014

Accepted 29 August 2014

Available online 16 September 2014

Handling Editor: Kevin Lowe

Keywords:

Ethical leadership

Moral attentiveness

Organizational deviance

ABSTRACT

The literature on ethical leadership has focused primarily on the way ethical leaders influence follower moral judgment and behavior. It has overlooked that follower responses to ethical leaders may differ depending on the attention they pay to the moral aspects of leadership. In the present research, we introduce moral attentiveness as an important moderator for the relationship between ethical leadership and unethical employee behavior. In a multisource field study ($N = 90$), we confirm our hypothesis that morally attentive followers respond with more deviance to unethical leaders. An experimental study ($N = 96$) replicates the finding. Our paper extends the current leader-focused literature by examining how follower moral attentiveness determines the response of followers to ethical or unethical leadership.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Organizational deviance at work is a source of massive damage for businesses (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Brown & Treviño, 2006b). Follower organizational deviance is defined as “voluntary behavior that violates organizational norms and thereby threatens the well-being of the organization, its members, or both” (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556). It includes behaviors such as dragging out work to receive payment for overtime, or taking property of the organization without permission. Leadership has been found to be a driving or inhibiting force in this behavior. In particular, a lack of ethical leadership has been identified as one of the main antecedents of follower organizational deviance (Tepper et al., 2009; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009). The rationale suggested is that leaders influence their followers through social learning and exchange and hence the ethicality of the leader “trickles down” to followers at the lower hierarchical levels (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2012). Thus, behavior of leaders has been suggested to impact follower’s behavior across different levels of the organization.

Research about ethical leadership has mostly taken a leader-focused approach, and thus does not specify how follower characteristics form boundary conditions for ethical leadership. Yet, some followers may pay more attention to moral content than others (Reynolds, 2008). As a result, some followers may react more strongly to ethical leaders and therefore the effects of ethical leadership may depend as much on the followers as on the leader. The current paper sets out to show that the effects of ethical leadership on

* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, Maastricht University, Universiteitssingel 40 r. 4.743, PO Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands.

E-mail address: suzanne.vangils@maastrichtuniversity.nl (S. van Gils).

follower organizational deviance result from the interaction between the leader and the followers rather than being a function of the leader's behavior alone.

The growing research on ethical leadership (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown & Treviño, 2006a) describes ethical leadership as a general leadership process that transfers ethical leader behavior into follower behavior through the general mechanisms of social learning, exchange, and identity (Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2011). All of these mechanisms, however, could also apply to other leadership styles. Besides the underlying mechanisms, communication of moral cues is the central aspect of the definition of ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). However, the initial operationalization of the concept and conceptualization of its underlying processes did not do justice to the unique moral character of ethical leadership. In response, recent research started to provide support for the specific moral foundation of ethical leadership by discussing, on the one hand, how moral personality traits motivate ethical leadership (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012) and specifying, on the other hand, universal normative reference points for ethical leadership (Eisenbeiss, 2012). We seek to extend that literature by arguing that, because of its moral element, ethical leadership is most effective for followers who are sensitive to moral cues.

Recent research exploring cognitive processing of moral cues suggests that employees differ in the extent to which they pay attention to moral issues (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2009). These differences are captured by moral attentiveness, that is, the extent to which a person chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences (Reynolds, 2008). As a consequence of moral attentiveness, follower sensitivity to moral cues, also in the leader's behavior, increases. Since the core aspect of ethical leadership is the communication of moral cues, it is reasonable to propose that the effects of ethical leadership are contingent on follower moral attentiveness.

The present study investigates how ethical leadership and follower moral attentiveness interact to predict follower organizational deviance. Specifically, we focus on organizational deviance as the consequence of being confronted with low ethical leadership (cf. Robinson & Bennett, 1995), as earlier research shows that followers react to low ethical behavior by their leader with counterproductive work behavior (Folger, Sheppard, & Buttram, 1995; Tepper, 2000). Because followers confronted with low ethical behavior often cannot retaliate toward their leader directly due to the power difference, they tend to retaliate toward the organization instead (Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008).

We expect that followers who are highly attentive to moral cues are more likely to detect low ethical leadership and will therefore react to it more strongly in terms of deviance than followers low in moral attentiveness. By investigating the moral process through a moderator (Jacoby & Sassenberg, 2011), the present paper contributes to theorizing on ethical leadership primarily from a moral point of view rather than considering it as another general leadership style. We investigate our model for both dispositional moral attentiveness (Study 1) and situational-induced moral attentiveness (i.e., an experimental manipulation; Study 2).

Ethical leadership

Most research in the domain of ethical leadership builds on Brown et al.'s (2005) definition of 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 thus inform and shape the ethical behavior of their followers. Ethical leadership has been associated with a number of positive outcomes, including followers' organizational citizenship behavior (Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, & Zivnuska, 2011; Mayer et al., 2009; Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonko, 2009), proactive behavior such as helping or voice behavior (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2012; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), the organization's ethical climate (Mayer, Kuenzi, & Greenbaum, 2010; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Schminke, Ambrose, & Neubaum, 2005), and follower performance (Piccolo, Greenbaum, Den Hartog, & Folger, 2010).

The definition of ethical leadership as “normatively appropriate conduct” raises the question of what standards the normative appropriateness of the leader is measured against. Recent research has addressed this question by suggesting that the assessment of ethical leadership may lie in the eye of the beholder (Giessner & Van Quaquebeke, 2010; Meindl, 1995), which means that leadership is perceived as ethical when it aligns with the follower's perception of ethical leadership. The standards to assess leadership against may thus depend on the type of work relationship between leaders and followers, and followers' expectations of their leaders based on this relationship (Engle & Lord, 1997; Giessner & Van Quaquebeke, 2010; Rai & Fiske, 2012). In addition, there are different cultural perspectives on ethics (Eisenbeiss, 2012). Thus, to some extent, the assessment of ethical leadership is influenced by the standards to which followers compare their leader's behavior.

Ethical leadership can be distinguished from other follower-focused leadership styles that consist of both moral and amoral aspects, such as transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978; but see Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) or servant leadership (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). The central aspect for this distinction is that ethical leadership is driven by moral motives that are independent of the mental frame of the perceiver. The idea that ethical leadership is based on the leader's moral motivation is supported by research showing that ethical leaders possess moral personality traits such as a moral identity (Mayer et al., 2012) and a high social responsibility (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Moreover, ethical leadership has been linked to four essential normative reference points (Eisenbeiss, 2012): 1) humane orientation, referring to treating others with dignity and respect; 2) justice orientation, making fair and consistent decisions; 3) responsibility and sustainability orientation, covering leaders' concern for the welfare of society and the environment in their long-term views; and 4) moderation orientation, referring to temperance and humility. Together, these orientations represent universally shared moral norms underlying ethical leadership. In the current paper, we take a deontological approach to ethical leadership by presenting it as a leadership style with a moral foundation based on personality-based moral motivation and supported by the four orientations.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/887745>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/887745>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)