

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND WORK ENGAGEMENT. TESTING FOR THE MEDIATING ROLE OF TRUST IN THE LEADER

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing importance of ethical leadership, many organisations worldwide have witnessed diminishing ethical leadership and trust in management. South Africa is not an exception to unethical practices with private and public sector corruption allegations in the past decade. Unfortunately, pitiable standards of ethics and venality taint the business environment. Therefore, the conversation on business morality, particularly ethical leadership, and the development of a model of trust in organisations is highly legitimate and timely. Hence, the objective of this study was to investigate the mediating role of trust in leaders in the relationship between ethical leadership and engagement. The study utilizes a cross-sectional design and a convenient sampling frame (n = 132) recruited via social media to reach the objective from the positivistic paradigm and quantitative approach. The findings confirm the established positive relationship between ethical leadership, trust in the leader and work engagement. In addition, the findings also suggest that the mediating role of trust in the leader could not be confirmed in the relationship between ethical leadership and engagement and its components. Theoretical and managerial implications, as well as its limitations, are also provided

Keywords: Ethical leadership, trust, work engagement, mediation, and ethics

INTRODUCTION

Organisations spend annually between \$12-14 billion dollars on leadership training and development. However, the training results have failed to deliver on the expectations of long-term change in leadership skills and habits (Kivland & King, 2015; McNulty, 2017). Especially troubling is its failure to develop ethical leaders, as the impact of their poor ethical choices continues to result in alarming stories that dominate the press. These poor ethical decisions have damaged organisations' reputations and loss of profits, in some instances even affecting entire sectors. Unethical practices have the power to damage the commitment of workers and erode the future wellbeing of the business. Strengthening ethical leadership that exemplifies integrity, credibility, fairness, and transparency is imperative to good governance (Brown et al., 2015). The significant impact of ethical conduct on business has led to a body of research on ethical leadership's influence on followers and the organisation. Various literature has strongly connected ethical leadership to employee engagement (Blumenberg et al., 2019; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). The organisation's competitiveness, success, and sustainability are driven by the employee's level of engagement (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). It is therefore paramount for organisations to identifying situations that foster work engagement. A conducive environment where employees can give their best fosters greater employee engagement, thus making managers key enablers of engagement (Bhana & Suknunan, 2019).

When each man is for himself, followers lose trust and stop caring for one another; this breakdown in the relationship may negatively impact productivity. Trust lays an important foundation in determining the relationship between the organisation and the leader and significantly influences how the employee may perceive the work

environment (Engelbrecht et al., 2019:370). Engelbrecht further states that the behaviour of a leader can influence the extent to which the follower will trust the leader. A trusting and ethical leader is most likely to create an ethical and trusting environment conducive to employee work engagement and contribute positively to positive work outcomes. This study seeks to determine the relationship between ethical leadership, trust, and work engagement.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the growing importance of ethical leadership, many organisations worldwide have witnessed diminishing ethical leadership and trust in management. South Africa is not an exception to unethical practices with private and public sector corruption allegations in the past decade. Unfortunately, the business environment is tainted by pitiable standards of ethics and venality. The persistence of unethical and illegal business activities by top management in corporate South Africa is an indicator that a code of ethics, overwhelming rules and regulations are simply not enough to ensure the ethical soundness of an organisation. Strengthening ethical leadership that exemplifies integrity, credibility, fairness, and transparency are imperative to good governance and at the core of cultivating a culture of an engaged workforce and a trusting work environment. (Brown et al., 2015). Poor ethics have an impact on employees and the productivity of the organisation. Unethical behaviour of leaders leads to low morale in the organisation, which inevitably leads to poor production (Mavuso, 2019). On the contrary, when leaders behave ethically, communicate the significance of ethics and fairly treat their employees, employees are less likely to engage in counterproductive behaviours (Bedi et al., 2016).

The historical remnants of apartheid have left South Africa with unique deep social polarisation and trust deficits in the macro-environment. It is, therefore, good to know that ethical behaviour has the power to

enhance levels of trust (Brown et al., 2015; Mo & Shi, 2017) in organisations, the meso environment. Ethical leadership and trust in businesses act as a fertile ground for a flourishing and healthy work environment conducive to employee engagement (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Ethical leadership contributes towards the creation of engaged employees who are critical to a healthy bottom line. Therefore, the conversation on business morality, particularly ethical leadership, and developing a model of trust in organisations is highly legitimate and timely. For this reason, this study seeks to investigate the role of ethical leadership in work engagement and trust in the leader.

LITERATURE STUDY

Theoretical frameworks for understanding ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is a positive form of influence that motivates followers towards positive psychological states (Avolio et al., 2016) and creates an environment that is conducive to cultivating a broader set of desirable behaviours (Brown et al., 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Walumbwa et al., 2017). A leader who conducts themselves in a normatively appropriate manner that includes honesty, fair treatment, and consideration of others may successfully channel observer attraction. Followers may be more likely to respond by emulating the desired behaviour. (Bhana & Suknunan, 2019; Brown et al., 2015). The Social Learning Theory and Social Exchange Theory are practical, theoretical frameworks that propose that leaders influence the ethical conduct of followers via modelling as well as social exchange relationships.

The Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals learn the norms of appropriate conduct through their own experience and by observing others. For leaders to be seen as ethical leaders that influence ethical-related outcomes, they must be attractive, credible and legitimate, (Wood & Bandura, 2016). Effective role modelling requires attention to be focused on the model and the behaviour being modelled. Ethical leaders



need to consistently engage in behaviours that the follower is normatively appropriate, such as honesty, consideration of others, and fair treatment of employees. This consistent behaviour proliferates the model attractiveness of the ethical leader and channels observer attention to the model. Beugré and Liverpool (2016) conceptualise the workplace as a marketplace where individuals engage in transactions seeking to obtain a favourable return on investment. The Social Marketplace Model reasons that individuals judge whether they should invest their time and efforts in behaviours that will benefit the organisation. Employees that are treated ethically and somewhat are more likely to behave in a manner that is beneficial to the groups long term development and success (Walumbwa et al., 2017). Therefore, Social Learning Theory and Social Exchange Theory are suggested as a practical, theoretical frameworks that explain the dynamics involved concerning how leaders influence the trust in the leader and work engagement of followers via social exchange relationships.

Ethical leadership

Brown et al. (2005) define ethical leadership as 'the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and promoting such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making'. This definition suggests that their followers perceive those leaders who are considered to be ethical in a manner that deems them to have appropriate conduct displayed through honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, and care. Brown et al. (2005) legitimise the credibility of the leader. It is also worth noting that Brown et al. (2005) uses the word appropriate because what could be considered appropriate for a certain culture may not necessarily be appropriate for another. This resonates particularly with the diverse nature of South Africa and highlights the challenge of determining ethical principles that can adequately cater for all. When leaders demonstrate high

moral standards, followers find it easier to follow suit. Good leaders are not only competent but ethical in their conduct (Ofori, 2009:533). Ethical leadership has received much attention, which can be attributable to its impact on favourable work outcomes such as follower job satisfaction, organisational commitment, job performance, job engagement, and organisational identification (Bedi et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2005; Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Mo & Shi, 2017; Ofori, 2019). The leader's honesty, transparency and good communicating skills may foster enhanced levels of trust in the followers as well as encourage beneficial reciprocal behaviours in the form of high-quality work outcomes

Trust in the leader

The concept of trust has been studied by many scholars in different disciplines and has been defined and conceptualised in various ways (Chughtai et al., 2015). A widely accepted definition of trust by Rousseau et al. (2015:395) is "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another. Chughtai et al. (2015:655) draw attention to two prominent factors in most definitions of trust: Positive expectations and the willingness to accept vulnerability. Javed et al. (2018:391) define trust as "The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party" whereas Mo and Shi (2017:296) define trust in a leader as "a psychological state in which an individual accepts their vulnerability when they expect positive intentions of their leader". This view reflects the trustors' reliance on the goodwill of the trustee. Uncertainty forms part of any reciprocal relationship, and individuals always assess their vulnerability as well as the prospect of whether the trusted party intends to and will act accordingly (Kim, 2016:356), thus creating an opportunity for trust (Mayer et al., 2015; Rousseau et al., 2015). Trust is, therefore, not only taking the risk but the individuals' willingness to take on the risk (Mayer et al., 2015:712). For this reason, Rousseau et al. (2016) suggest

risk and interdependence as conditions essential for the conceptualisation of trust. Previous studies have demonstrated that an increase in trust results directly or indirectly in more positive workplace behaviours and attitudes like organisational commitment and employees' work engagement (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Hassan & Ahmed, 2017; Ugwu, Onyishi & Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2014).

The mediating role of trust

This project was also aimed at testing the mediating effects of trust in the manager in the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement. Mediating variables are prominent in psychological theory and research. Mediators refer to variables that establish how or why one variable predicts or causes an outcome variable (Frazier, Tix & Barron, 2004). In other words, a mediator is a mechanism through which a predictor influences an outcome variable (Baron and Kenny 1986), providing useful information regarding psychological intervention for practising psychologists. Therefore, a mediating variable transmits the effect of an independent variable to a dependent variable (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). One of the primary reasons for the popularity of mediating variables in psychology is the historical authority of the stimulus-organism-response model (Hebb, 1966). In this study, mediating mechanisms (trust in the leader) in the organism translate how a stimulus leads to a response. Researchers have argued that trust is the major lynchpin in a meta-analysis of ethical leadership, explaining why ethical leaders positively affect their subordinates (2015). In fact, the mediating role of trust has been confirmed in empirical studies (Chughtai, Byrne & Flood, 2015; Ilyas, Abid & Ashfaq, 2020; Zeng & Xu, 2019).

Work engagement

Schaufeli et al. (2020:74) popularly define work engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour is defined as "high

levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication is defined as "a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge". Absorption as the last dimension of engagement, is defined by Schaufeli et al. as "being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly, and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work". Research has demonstrated that high levels of employee engagement can have valuable organisational outcomes such as greater job satisfaction, improved employee wellbeing, reduced turnover rate, less absenteeism and enhanced job performance (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Chughtai et al., 2015:655). This can be attributed to the fact that individuals who have high levels of work engagement have a physical, cognitive, and emotional connection to their work roles and are thus more likely to go the extra mile in their work, other than those who are not engaged (Gawke et al., 2017:92). On the other hand, Mostafa and Abed El-Motalib (2020) attribute financial cost implications and negative service delivery to disengaged employees.

Ethical leadership trust in the leader and work engagement

Various studies have provided empirical evidence for the positive relationship between ethical leadership and trust (in the leader and organisation) (Brown et al., 2015; Dadhich & Bhal, 2018; Javed, Rawwas, Khandai, Shahid & Tayyeb, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Kalshoven et al., 2018; Van den Akker et al., 2019). Scholars have focused on the antecedents of work engagement, mainly attributed to job and personal resources. Recently studies have found leadership and trust in the leader to be related to work engagement. Various literature has strongly connected ethical leadership to employee engagement (Ahmad, & Gao, 2018; Avey et al., 2012; Blumenberg et al., 2019; Demirtas, 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Naeem, Weng,



Hameed, & Rasheed, 2020; Sarwar, Ishaq, Amin, & Ahmed, 2020). The organisation's competitiveness, success and sustainability are driven by the employee's level of engagement (Engelbrecht et al., 2017:368). It is therefore paramount for organisations to identifying contextual variables that foster work engagement. A conducive environment in which employees can give their best fosters greater employee engagement, thus making managers key enablers of engagement (Bhana & Suknunan, 2019:316). Additionally, various studies have confirmed the positive relationship between trust and work engagement (Chughtai & Buckley, 2011; Chughtai, Byrne, & Flood, 2015; Mone & London, 2010) and proposed that having a good degree of trust (in the organisation and leader) can result in increased work engagement. Based on the above-mentioned, the following research questions and objectives were formulated.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study's primary research question was the role of ethical leadership in trust in the leader and work engagement in a selection of South African organisations is. Based on the primary research question, the following secondary research questions were formulated:

- What is the relationship between ethical leadership and trust in the leader?
- What are the relationships between ethical leadership, employee engagement (and its components), and trust in the leader?
- What is the relationship between employee engagement (and its components) and trust in the leader; and
- Does trust in the leader mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement (and its components)?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the role played by ethical leadership in trust in the leader and work

engagement in a selection of South African organisations. Based on the primary research objective the following secondary objectives were formulated for the study: To determine:

- the relationship between ethical leadership and trust in the leader.
- the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement (and its components).
- the relationship between employee engagement (and its components) and trust in the leader; and
- if trust in the leader mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement (and its components).

RESEARCH METHODS

Research paradigm, method, design

Following a positivistic paradigm, this research study employed a quantitative method using a cross-sectional survey design to analyse the relationship between ethical leadership, work engagement and trust. Bryman and Bell (2017:31) describe quantitative research as a distinct research approach that entails the numerical data entails a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research and adopts an objectivist conception of social reality. According to Bryman (2012:66), a cross-sectional research design entails collecting data on more than one case and at a single point in time to collect a body of quantitative in connection with two or more variables, which are then examined to detect patterns of association.

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained formal approval from the applicable university scientific committee and the Economics and Management Sciences Ethics Committees, enabling the researcher to carry out the study, and ethical clearance was granted (NWU-00775-20-A4). Only after approval was granted from both committees were the individuals contacted. The questionnaires were

formulated online through survey monkey, a cloud device that allows participants to gather information through personalised surveys. The data collected is automatically linked to a spreadsheet that is populated with the questions and the participant's responses. The participants received an email with a link to the survey containing the informed consent form. The email invitation outlined the cause and context of the study, the questionnaire's length, and the expected time it might take to complete the questionnaire. The researcher emphasised that the information obtained would be kept confidential. The participants were made aware that they could stop at any stage of the completion of the questionnaire process if they wished to or felt uncomfortable about anything regarding the process. Individuals who finished the questionnaires received an email confirming their completion of the survey, and the researcher received

an email notification for each response submitted. The data were analysed with IBM SPSS computer software (IBM, 2021) version 27.0

Sample and sample characteristics

For this study, a combined convenience sampling strategy was used. The researcher specifically focused on participants who were easy or convenient to approach. Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) state that convenience sampling is inexpensive, easy, and willingly available participants. Additional features of the sample are presented in Table 1 below.

Most of the sample were between the age of 21 to 25 (58%), female (62.3%), six to ten years of experience and holds a B degree (57.2%).

TABLE 1: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Demographics	Sub-groups	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Age	18 – 20	8	5.8	5.8	5.8
	21 – 25	80	58.0	58.0	63.8
	26–30	40	29.0	29.0	92.8
	31 – 35	7	5.1	5.1	97.8
	36 – 40	2	1.4	1.4	99.3
	41 – 50	1	.7	.7	100.0
Gender	Male	52	37.7	37.7	37.7
	Female -	86	62.3	62.3	100.0
Years of experience	1–5	43	31.2	31.2	31.2
	6–10	49	35.5	35.5	66.7
	11–15	20	14.5	14.5	81.2
	16–20	14	10.1	10.1	91.3
	21–25	4	2.9	2.9	94.2
	26–30	6	4.3	4.3	98.6
	31–35	1	.7	.7	99.3
	36–40	1	.7	.7	100.0
Qualifications	Below Matric	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
	Matric	10	7.2	7.2	8.7
	Diploma	11	8.0	8.0	16.7
	B Degree	79	57.2	57.2	73.9
	Hons	35	25.4	25.4	99.3
	Master's	1	.7	.7	100.0



Measuring instruments

Data was collected using electronic web-based questionnaires comprising of three scales, namely the Leadership of Ethics Scale (LES) (Brown et al., 2005), the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli et al., 2006), Leader Trust Scale (LTS) (Engelbrecht et al., 2017) and a demographic section. The measuring instruments in this study included:

- Ethical leadership

Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) developed by Brown et al. (2005) is a questionnaire measuring perceived ethical leadership behaviour. Participants were asked to rate their top management executive. The Ethical leadership Scale combines different leader behaviours such as acting fairly, rewarding ethical conduct, ethical visioning, and ethical practices of ethical leaders. The fifteen-item questionnaire was measured on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Sample items include My manager: "Shows a strong concern ethical and moral values." and "Communicates clear ethical standards for members" and "Is honest and can be trusted to tell the truth." An acceptable Cronbach alpha ($\alpha = .91$) was obtained using the scale in previous studies (Brown et al., 2005).

- Work engagement

Employee engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) questionnaire (Schaufeli et al., 2006). The questionnaire consists of a seventeen item self-report scale grouped into three subscales engagement, namely vigour (six items), dedication (five items), and absorption (six items) were scored on a seven-point frequency rating scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always). Cronbach alpha values for this survey exceeded the required .70 cut-off value in a recent South African study (Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

- Trust in the leader

Trust in management was measured using

the Leader Trust Scale (LTS) (Engelbrecht et al., (2017). The LTS scale contains five categories: behavioural consistency, acting with integrity, sharing and delegation of control, the openness of communication, and demonstration of concern. These categories have been summarised to form a final scale of fifteen items, three items for each category which were scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Disagree strongly) to a 5 (Agree strongly). Sample items included the following: "My superior always tells the truth", "My superior's behaviour is coherent with his/her values" and "My superior is concerned about others." An acceptable Cronbach alpha ($\alpha = .88$) was obtained with the use of the scale in previous studies (Cardona & Eloia, 2013); and

- A demographic section was also included (age, gender, educational attainment, years of experience) to profile the sample.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Data was captured and cleaned by an expert's statistical consultant provided by the institution's statistical consultation service. The data were analysed with SPSS computer software (2021) version 27.0. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was computed to confirm if items load on the intended scales in the present study. Reliability was determined through computed Cronbach alpha's and mean inter-item correlations. Descriptive statistics included means and standard deviations to determine central leadership, trust, and work engagement observations. The extent and direction of relationships between observed ethical leadership, trust in the leader and work engagement will be determined with Pearson's product correlations. The purpose of correlation analysis was not to determine causality but rather to confirm whether noticeable relationships between the proposed variables was present or not. Effect sizes were considered with a confidence level set at 95% with ($p < 0.05$) to be viewed as

significant. Effect sizes were classified with 0.1 denoting a small effect, 0.3 a medium effect and 0.5 equalled a large effect (Steyn, 2015). Simple mediation modelling was computed with the PROCESS macros (version 3) (Hayes, 2017) which was installed in SPSS. Mediation modelling also included standardised regression coefficients in determining predictor characteristics of the investigated variables. Mediation was recognised with the indirect effect verified using a percentile bootstrap estimation approach with 10 000 samples (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The percentile bootstrap estimation is incorporated into the PROCESS macros version 3 (Hayes, 2017). An indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis was considered significant if the lower-level confidence interval (LLCI) and upper-level confidence interval (ULCI) excluded zero (0) (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010).

RESULTS

The results section presents the findings of this study by focussing on the EFA and the descriptive statistics and the correlation analysis, and lastly, the mediation analysis is presented.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

EFA were conducted using a simple principal component analysis on the items of the of the individual scales [the Leadership of Ethics Scale (LES); (eigen value = 11.16; variance explained = 74.39%); KMO = .96] and the Leader Trust Scale (LTS); (eigen value = 6.37 ; variance explained = 63.65%; KMO = .92)] and sub-scales [the Utrecht

Work Engagement Scale (UWES); (Vigour = [(eigen value = 3.02 ; variance explained = 50.33%; KMO = .83)]; Dedication = [(eigen value = 3.58 ; variance explained = 71.57%; KMO = .85)]; and Absorption = [(eigen value = 3.82 ; variance explained = 63.60%; KMO = .86)] used in this study. The results (eigen values and scree plots) suggested that LES, LTS and the sub-scales of the UWES used were unidimensional. The analysis also considered and confirmed the UWES [(eigen value = 9.67; variance explained = 56.89%; KMO = .95)] as a unidimensional construct.

Descriptive statistics and correlational analysis

The first objective of this study was to determine the relationship between ethical leadership, trust, and employee engagement. The descriptive statistics and results of the correlational analysis are presented in Table 2 below.

Inspection of Table 2 suggested that all scales were reliable and internal consistent because the yielded Cronbach alpha (α) values for the scales used in the study exceeded the required .70 cut-off value. All the measuring instruments used were scored above the mid-point of the scale, suggesting agreement met the experiences of ethical leadership, trust in the leader and engagement (vigour, dedication, and absorption). Table 2 also indicated that ethical leadership were statistically significant positive related to trust in the leader (large effect) and engagement (vigour, dedication, and absorption) (medium effect). Trust in

TABLE 2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS

Variables	α	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ethical Leadership	.96	4.29	1.47	-				
2. Trust in the leader	.86	3.47	0.92	.69	-			
3. Vigour	.83	5.11	1.33	.43	.40**	-		
4. Dedication	.85	5.51	1.50	.31	.35**	.87**	-	
5. Absorption	.86	5.47	1.42	.40	.35**	.88**	.89**	-
6. Engagement	.92	5.34	1.40	.40	.36**	.96**	.95**	.96**



the leader were also statistically significant positive related to engagement (vigour, dedication, and absorption) (medium effect), and the dimensions of engagement were also statistically significant positive related to one another (vigour, dedication, and absorption) (large effect).

Mediation analysis

The last objective of this study was to determine the mediating role of trust in the leader in the relationship between ethical leadership and engagement (and its dimensions). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3 below.

Inspection of Table 3 that according to the results for the standardised regression coefficients, the first regression (a) where leadership was considered as the independent variable and the proposed mediator, trust, as the dependent variable yielded a significant result ($b = 0.47$, $t(116)$

$= -10.63$, $p < 0.01$). The second regression (b) where the proposed mediator, trust, was considered as the independent variable and engagement as the dependent variable did not yield a significant result ($b = 0.21$; $t(115) = 1.24$; $p < 0.21$). The final regression (c) whereby leadership was considered as the independent variable and engagement as the dependent variable was significant ($b = 0.38$; $t(115) = 4.86$, $p = 0.00$). The indirect effect of trust on the relationship between leadership and engagement did not yield a significant result ($b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.08$, $LLCI = -0.08$ and $ULCI = 0.25$).

Inspection of Table 3 also suggest that according to the results for the standardised regression coefficients, the first regression (a) where leadership was considered as the independent variable and the proposed mediator, trust, as the dependent variable yielded a significant result ($b = 0.45$; $t(120)$

TABLE 3: TESTING FOR MEDIATION EFFECTS

Variable	Estimate	SE	p-value	Bootstrapping BC 95% CI	
Leadership → Engagement via Trust					
				Lower	Upper
Leadership → Trust (a)	0.47*	0.04	$p < 0.01$	0.38	0.55
Trust → Engagement (b)	0.21	0.20	$p = 0.22$	-0.12	0.53
Leadership → Engagement (c) ($t = 4.86$)	0.38*	0.09	$p < .00$	0.23	0.54
Leadership → Vigour via Trust					
				Lower	Upper
Leadership → Trust (a)	0.45*	0.04	$p < 0.01$	0.36	0.54
Trust → Vigour (b)	0.20	0.11	$p = 0.08$	-0.02	0.43
Leadership → Vigour (c)	0.29*	0.06	$P = 0.00$	0.18	0.39
Leadership → Dedication via Trust					
				Lower	Upper
Leadership → Trust (a)	0.46*	0.04	$p < 0.01$	0.38	0.55
Trust → Dedication (b)	0.25*	0.12	$p = 0.03$	0.02	0.48
Leadership → Dedication (c)	0.21*	0.06	$P = 0.00$	-0.10	0.32
Leadership → Absorption via Trust					
				Lower	Upper
Leadership → Trust (a)	0.47*	0.04	$p < 0.01$	0.38	0.55
Trust → Absorption (b)	0.13	0.12	$p = 0.29$	-0.11	0.37
Leadership → Absorption (c)	0.28*	0.06	$p < 0.01$	-0.16	0.39

Variable	Estimate	SE	Bootstrapping BC 95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
Leadership → Engagement via Trust	0.10	0.08	-0.08	0.25
Leadership → Vigour via Trust	0.09	0.06	-0.02	0.20
Leadership → Dedication via Trust	0.12	0.06	0.00	0.32
Leadership → Absorption via Trust	0.06	0.09	-0.06	0.18

= 10.19; $p < 0.01$). The second regression (b) where the proposed mediator, trust, was considered as the independent variable and vigour as the dependent variable did not yield a significant result ($b = 0.20$; $t(119) = 1.8$; $p < 0.08$). The final regression (c) whereby leadership was considered as the independent variable and vigour as the dependent variable was significant ($b = 0.29$; $t(119) = 5.29$; $p = 0.00$). The indirect effect of trust on the relationship between leadership and vigour did not yield a significant result ($b = 0.09$; $SE = 0.06$; $LLCI = -0.02$ and $ULCI = 0.20$).

Inspection of Table 3 also suggest that according to the results for the standardised regression coefficients, the first regression (a) where leadership was considered as the independent variable and the proposed mediator, trust, as the dependent variable yielded a significant result ($b = 0.46$; $t(125) = 10.64$; $p < 0.01$). The second regression (b) where the proposed mediator, trust, was considered as the independent variable and dedication as the dependent variable did not yield a significant result ($b = 0.25$; $t(124) = 2.16$; $p = 0.03$). The final regression (c) whereby leadership was considered as the independent variable and dedication as the dependent variable was significant ($b = 0.21$; $t(124) = 3.69$; $p = 0.00$). The indirect effect of trust on the relationship between leadership and dedication did not yield a significant result ($b = 0.12$; $SE = 0.06$, $LLCI = 0.00$ and $ULCI = 0.32$).

Inspection of Table 3 also suggest that according to the results for the standardised regression coefficients, the first regression (a) where leadership was considered as the independent variable and the proposed

mediator, trust, as the dependent variable yielded a significant result ($b = 0.47$; $t(117) = 10.67$; $p < 0.01$). The second regression (b) where the proposed mediator, trust, was considered as the independent variable and absorption as the dependent variable did not yield a significant result ($b = 0.13$; $t(116) = 1.07$; $p = 0.29$). The final regression (c) whereby leadership was considered as the independent variable and absorption as the dependent variable was significant ($b = 0.28$; $t(116) = 4.81$; $p < 0.01$). The indirect effect of trust on the relationship between leadership and absorption did not yield a significant result ($b = 0.06$; $SE = 0.09$, $LLCI = -0.06$ and $ULCI = 0.18$).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine the relationship between ethical leadership, trust, and employee engagement and establish if trust mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement. Results of the correlational analysis suggested that ethical leadership were positively related to trust in the leader and engagement (vigour, dedication, and absorption). The findings are in line with previous empirical results. Research provides evidence that validates that ethical leadership are related to trust in the leader (Brown et al., 2015; Dadhich & Bhal, 2018; Javed, Rawwas, Khandai, Shahid, & Tayyeb, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020; Kalshoven et al., 2018; Van den Akker et al., 2019). Results also suggest that three dimensions are highly related. This is in line with previous findings that also suggest that correlations between the three scales usually exceed .65 (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2001; Salanova et al., 2000; Schaufeli et



al.; 2002a, 2002b).

In addition, various literature has strongly connected ethical leadership to employee engagement (Ahmad, & Gao, 2018; Avey et al., 2012; Blumenberg et al., 2019; Demirtas, 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Naeem, Weng, Hameed, & Rasheed, 2020; Sarwar, Ishaq, Amin, & Ahmed, 2020; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). The employee's level of engagement drives the organisation's competitiveness, success, and sustainability (Engelbrecht et al., 2017:368). It is therefore paramount for organisations to identifying situations that foster work engagement. A conducive environment where employees can give their best fosters greater employee engagement, thus making managers key enablers of engagement (Bhana & Suknunan, 2019:316). Results also suggest that trust in the leader were also positively related to engagement (vigour, dedication, and absorption).

Various literature has strongly connected ethical leadership to employee engagement (Blumenberg et al., 2019; Chughtai & Buckley, 2011; Chughtai, Byrne, & Flood, 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). The organisation's competitiveness, success and sustainability are driven by the employee's level of engagement (Engelbrecht et al., 2017:368). A conducive environment where employees can give their best fosters greater employee engagement, thus making managers key enablers of engagement (Bhana & Suknunan, 2019:316). Additionally, Chughtai and Buckley (2008) and Mone and London (2010) proposed that having a good degree of workplace trust can result in increased work engagement. The fundamentals of the social exchange theory and social marketplace model seem important in understanding ethical leadership and follower work outcomes, as these theoretical frameworks are based on social exchange, trust, and reciprocity. Thus, the quality of social exchange between the different parties impacts the level of trust. As a result, motivating individuals towards beneficial or counterproductive behaviour.

When employees feel supported, trusted and incentivised with benefits from their employer, they are more likely to reciprocate with behaviour that is beneficial to the organisation (Bedi et al., 2016:519)

The last objective of this study was to determine the mediating role of trust in the leader in the relationship between ethical leadership and engagement (and its dimensions). The analysis results suggest that indirect effects were observed for various regressions using PROCESS. However, the findings of the analysis could not confirm the mediating status of trust. Empirical results emphasise the need for a dynamic view of the relationship between work engagement and personal and job-related variables. The one-directional viewpoint that emphasised work engagement as a predictor of personal and job-related variables in many previous studies, may not be able to fully capture the processes underlying mechanism for employees' thriving at work (Bakhshi & Gupta, 2016).

Theoretical and managerial implications

The results of this study extend the research on ethical leadership and make several contributions to the literature. Previous research has linked ethical leadership to several positive outcomes (e.g., Brown et al. 2005). This is one of a very few (e.g., Engelbrecht et al., 2017) to be conducted in South African, in the growing number that has explored the effects of ethical leadership on employee wellbeing by focusing on its impact on work engagement through an anticipated path mediated by trust in the leader. In addition, the significant association between ethical leadership and indicators of employee attitudes and wellbeing lends further support to the notion that leadership and the way employees are managed, are key determinants of employees' wellbeing (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2013). By empirically establishing a link between ethical leadership trust in the leader and work engagement, this study suggests that promoting ethical leadership behaviours in the workplace may be another

useful strategy for stimulating trust in the leader and work engagement. Therefore, the present study extends the existing network of ethical leadership and provides fresh insights into this emerging concept. The mediating effects of trust in the leader in the relationship between ethical leadership and engagement (and its components) could not be confirmed in this sample. This means that the path from ethical leadership to engagement through trust in the leaders could not be established in this sample.

The current study also has considerable implications for managers, human resource development practitioners and policymakers in several ways. Firstly, the positive correlations obtained in our study suggest that an ethical leadership style could contribute to increased trust of followers in their leaders, which, in turn, could assist leaders to make their employees more engaged. Thus by hiring ethical leaders and training current leaders on the characteristics of an ethical leader, organisations will have more engaged employees hence achieving social sustainability (Ilyas, Abid & Ashfaq, 2020). Written tests, psychometric assessments, graphology, structured interviews (both situational and behavioural) to identify ethical traits in potential candidates with focus on integrity or honesty should be conducted beyond merely relying on basic background checks (Brody, 2010). Secondly, ethics training programs can be provided to inspire existing managers to provide ethical role models to their subordinates (Mayer et al., 2009; Mayer et al., 2012). In addition, organisations could activate moral identity in leaders and their subordinates through the use of cues in the social environment, such as posters, slogans, or material symbols that make moral constructs, such as ethical leadership, and concerns salient (Aquino et al., 2009; Aquino & Freeman, 2009). It seems likely that being moral is central to many people's self-definition (Aquino & Reed, 2002), because most people want to view themselves as generally good (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Therefore, people should

be motivated to uphold their moral identities to avoid feeling inauthentic (Skitka, 2002).

Limitations

Although our study provides substantial insights into the dynamics involved in the relationship between ethical leadership, trust in the leader and employee engagement, it is not free from limitations. Firstly, the data was collected from a single source i.e., from employees. Future studies might consider multilevel team data i.e., from supervisors and the employees working under them aggregated as a team. In addition, this study is based on convenient sampling due to COVID 19 regulations and restrictions. To address this limitation, future studies could target a more generalised population of employees by employing a stratified sampling in a specific context to get a clearer picture of study variables across various management levels. Future studies could also be directed to further explore the moderating effect of trust in the leader in the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement. Lastly, future studies could utilise a longitudinal design to provide a better understanding of the causal inferences. The cross-sectional design used in this study also comes with the limitation of method bias.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine the role of ethical leadership in trust in the leader and work engagement of employees. The findings suggest that the three constructs are closely related (statistical and practical). Unfortunately, the mediating role of trust in the leader in the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' work engagement (vigour, dedication and absorption) could not be confirmed. But it should be noted that this study offers evidence that ethical leadership can play an essential role in encouraging employees' health and wellbeing. Our results also suggest that ethical leaders can enhance subordinates' work engagement by building trust-based relationships with their subordinates.



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