Ethical Leaders: Trust, Work-Life Balance, and Treating Individuals as Unique

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This study examined the ethical behaviors of leaders and managers in organizations. Specifically, we explored the frequency with which employees perceive their managers to be ethical, as well as managerial traits that influenced employees' perceptions. Respondents were asked to specify how frequently their managers exhibited ethical behaviors. We found that managers are not perceived as being routinely ethical. Interestingly, we found that trust, work-life balance, and treating individuals as unique positively influenced employee perceptions of their manager's ethical behavior. The inter-relationship between work-life balance and treating individuals as unique emerged as an unexpected finding which is new in the literature.

HUMAN SUBJECTS

All human studies have been approved by the appropriate ethics committee and have therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. Furthermore, all persons participating in the study gave their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study.

INTRODUCTION

The Ethics Resource Center reports that two major drivers of ethical culture are senior executives and supervisors (NBES, 2011). According to the Ethics Resource Center's 2011 National Business Ethics

Survey, employee perceptions of both groups has declined, with one third of employees reporting that their managers do not display ethical behavior, the highest percentage ever reported. In addition, confidence in senior leadership was at a historic low.

Schein (1985, p.2) stated that the "only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture." Prior research demonstrates that leaders influence company culture by focusing the organization's way of thinking and taking action (Gilley et al., 2008). However, when leaders and managers also employ an ethical focus, the result can improve the overall long-term performance of the company (Caldwell, et al., 2008; Longenecker, 1985).

What characteristics influence employee perceptions of ethics in their leaders and managers? Guidance concerning specific characteristics that influence employee perceptions of ethics would prove useful for both companies and their managers. However, the challenge here is that ethics is inherently personal in nature. One's ethical lens develops through family, education, relationships, and life experiences, leading to different standards and approaches to ethics (Gilley et al., 2008). Despite these differences and complexities, it is important for companies to develop programs that encourage leaders and managers to act ethically.

This study explores leadership and management practices that influence employees' perceptions that their managers are ethical. Respondents were asked to specify, in their opinion, how frequently firm managers were considered ethical. The three items that measured positive management behaviors included trust, promoting work-life balance, and treating employees as unique individuals. The three items that measured negative behaviors included creating a hostile work environment, lack of management skills, and promoting ineffective managers. Results and implications are discussed below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leaders are challenged more than ever to think and plan strategically, act decisively, enhance performance, work collaboratively, focus on customers, and develop the organization and its people (Holt, 2011). Leadership has been found to be of particular importance to organizations in crisis situations (Weick, 1995).

For decades, researchers have sought to identify the behaviors, skills, and styles demonstrated by effective leaders capable of meeting these myriad demands (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Gilley, McMillan, & Gilley, 2009; Ligon, Wallace, & Osburn, 2011). More recently, much of the research and literature have shifted from trait theory to behavioral theory, which focuses on what the leader says and does (Miner, 2003). Despite this shift, Hemsley (2001) reminds us that a leader's behavior is based on his or her skills and traits. Today, research continues to seek a better understanding of effective leader behaviors (Steers, Mowday, & Shapiro, 2004) and their predictors (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005).

Leadership has been viewed as a social phenomenon based on interactive relationships between leaders and followers (Griffin & Stacey, 2005) and as a shared influence process that flows from the interactions of diverse individuals (Van Ameijde, et al., 2009). The emphasis on interpersonal and social skills finds support in the literature on effective leaders that posits a transformational as opposed to transactional approach (Harris, et al., 2003). The four interpersonal aspects of transformational leadership are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1993). Astin and Astin (2000, p. 49) concur in their view of transformational leadership as "self-aware, authentic, and empathetic, and because it develops trust through listening, collaborating, and shaping a common purpose."

Although linkages have been found between transformational leadership and greater satisfaction with and trust in leaders (Keller, 1995), Martin (1999) found that the most important element for leadership, in general, is the ability to engender trust. Additional behaviors and skills critical for effective leadership are ethics (Neubert, et al., 2009; Walumba, et al., 2011), the ability to build relationships and enhance collaboration (Martin, 2005), and treat individuals as unique (Gilley, Heames, & Gilley, 2012), among others.

Ethical Leadership

Ethics, a subject discussed for centuries (Toor & Ofori, 2009), has been anecdotally defined as "doing the right thing when no one else is watching" (Wikiquote, 2013). In a business context, ethics generally refers to the social and moral obligations of business. Thus, leaders and managers must pay attention to the obligations and expectations society places on business.

It has been fairly well established that managers and leaders influence ethical culture (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Ciulla, 1995; Trevino et al., 2003; Trevino et al., 2000). In terms of ethics, ethical leadership has been 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, p. 120).

Establishing a positive ethical culture can lead to improvements in the entire culture of an organization (Brown et al., 2005), such as extra effort, reporting problems, and other employee outcomes. Previous studies have linked ethical leadership to higher job satisfaction and job commitment (Neuber et al., 2009); better performance (Walumba et al., 2011); and lower levels of deviance (Mayer et al., 2009). Thus, the characteristics and behaviors of those who would have such an influence over an organization are important (Jordan et al., 2013). Jordan, et al. (2013) focused on what made followers, or employees, perceive that executives were ethical. Their findings have shown that managers who are "caring, honest, and principled individuals" are ethical, as well as those who are fair, trustworthy, reward ethical behavior, punish unethical behavior, and communicate the importance of ethics to followers (Brown et al., 2005; Trevino et al., 2003; Trevino et al., 2000; Yukl et al., 2013). Among these attributes, trust has the strongest correlation to job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). As trust seems to be an important theme in ethical leadership, we review the literature on trust below.

Trust

Trust is a vital element in all of our relationships – personal, professional, and community. While there are numerous definitions of trust in the literature, most focus on the idea of constancy (Bennis, 1989) and positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of others (Hodson, 2004; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Nooteboom, 1997; Rousseau, 1998). Trustworthiness has been defined as an attribute of exchange partners in which an exchange partner who will not exploit another's vulnerabilities is worthy of trust (Barney & Hansen, 1994). Merriam Webster Dictionary defines trust as, "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something," and includes trustworthiness in its definition as well (Trust, n.d.). In the business ethics realm, some minimal level of trust is critical for employees and managers to effectively interact with each other (Bandsuch, 2008). Unfortunately however, society generally regards business leaders as untrustworthy (Child, 2004).

Theoretical Approaches

Dirks and Ferrin (2002) reviewed the literature and found that there are two theoretical perspectives on trust. The relationship-based perspective focuses on the principles of social exchange and reciprocity between managers and employees. The character-based perspective focuses on how the perceptions of a manager's character can affect employees in a hierarchical relationship.

Relationship-Based Trust

Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) proposed a model based on a relationship-based theory of trust. Under this theory, managers and employees perceptions of each other's trustworthiness will affect their risk-taking behavior. The outcomes of risk-taking behavior will ultimately influence trust. The social exchange process has also been used as a basis for examining trust in manager-employee relationships (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994). Konovsky and Pugh (1994) wrote that employees who believe that their manager has or will act with care and consideration will spend more time on required job performance tasks.

Managers who display integrity with employees, tell employees the truth, and treat employees with dignity and respect are also more likely to be perceived as trustworthy (Sankar, 2003). Another study

identified five types of trustworthy behaviors by managers, which are consistency, integrity, sharing and delegation of control, communication, and demonstration of concern (Whitener, 1998). In their meta-analysis on trust in leadership, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) examined 106 independent samples with 27,103 individuals. The results showed that trust had a positive correlation for work behaviors and outcomes with altruism, civic virtue, conscientiousness, courtesy, and sportsmanship. In fact, trust in leadership had the strongest relationship with job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Caldwell (2008) adds to the literature by suggesting that the ethical stewardship model allows leaders to earn the trust and followership of employees. Employees are more likely to trust management if the manager's behavior conforms to prevailing norms of fairness, integrity, and respect for employees' rights and interests, such as predictability and justice (Hodson, 2004; Kickul, 2005).

Character-Based Trust

The second theoretical perspective is character based and comes from employee perceptions of a manager's character. This is crucial since from the manager's perspective, trustworthiness is a trait that is most often associated with ethical leadership (Trevino et al., 2000). To establish trust, leaders must clearly and fully communicate, institutionalize, and embody the company's values.

Employees make judgments about their manager's character, which will impact their work performance and attitudes. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) examined how integrity, capability, or benevolence affected employees' willingness to take risks in the workplace. Cunningham and MacGregor (2000) also researched supervisor characteristics, while Jones et al., (1975) researched forms of leader behavior. Both found positive correlations between leader's characteristics and levels of trust.

Trust Models

Several models have been used in the literature to analyze trust in organizations. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) proposed a model of organizational trust using ability, benevolence, and integrity as factors, with the outcome being risk taking in relationships. The International Association of Business Communicators has developed an organizational trust model that identifies the following factors as significant influences upon trust: competency; openness; concern for stakeholders; shared goals; reliability; frequency of interactions; rewards; and sanctions (Bandsuch, 2008).

Hodson (2004) used organizational ethnographies to examine managerial competence and supportive employment practices as normative foundations of trust. In his model, four variables were used to measure management competence, which is a key component of trust: organization of production; leadership; communication; and level of repair. He also identified seven variables to measure supportive employment practices: internal labor markets; on-the-job training; job security; promotion of self-supervision; employee participation; absence of management abuse; and adequate pay and benefits. Hodson's findings showed that managerial competence was more significant than supportive employment practices. Specifically, it positively influenced citizenship behavior and reduced conflict between coworkers and management.

THE STUDY

Hypotheses

Prior findings that report low rates of ethical behavior (NBES, 2011) lead us to surmise that our study will also reveal low rates of perceived managerial ethics.

> *H1: Managers are perceived as consistently behaving ethically with a relatively low frequency (<50% of the time).*

Research on traits of leaders and managers who are perceived as ethical reveals that 'trust' has one of the strongest influences on employee perceptions of managers' ethics (Brown, et al., 2005; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Consequently, we predict that:

*H2: Managers who are perceived as trustworthy positively influence employees'
perceptions of their ethical behavior.*

Method

This study explores leadership practices that influence employees' perceptions that organization managers are ethical. Employees' assessments of managerial behavior provide accurate ratings of leadership performance (Hogan et al., 1994). Although this study was part of a larger, longitudinal study of managerial practices, our primary research questions focused on how frequently leaders/managers are perceived as ethical, and which of their behaviors influenced employees' perceptions of ethical behavior. The previously validated survey instrument contained 23 behavioral/content questions about leader/manager behaviors, and nine demographic questions of the respondents.

Population

The survey instrument was given to students in MBA and organizational development (OD) masters' and PhD students from five four-year, public universities in diverse locations (Mountain West, Midwest, and South) over three semesters. Master's and Ph.D. students were chosen to maximize industry and position diversity, ultimately representing all organizational levels (front-line to executive) in manufacturing, service, education, professional, and government entities. The final response rate was 92% with 313 useable responses.

Measures

The dependent variable in the study was a perceptual measure of ethics. Respondents were asked to specify, in their opinion, how frequently firm managers were considered ethical. Responses were collected using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from never (1) to always (5). The independent variables examined in this study were derived from research on leadership skills and managerial behaviors. Using the same 5-point scale, respondents were asked the frequency with which organization managers:

1. promote work-life balance
2. treat employees as unique individuals
3. are trustworthy
4. create hostile or fearful work environments

Additionally, two questions covering organizational practices were included in the survey.

1. Individuals who do not possess appropriate supervisory/management skills are promoted to or hired for management positions
2. Ineffective or poor managers are promoted

Results

Population characteristics are summarized in Table I.

TABLE 1
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Description	Percent
Respondent's gender	
Male	50.5
Female	49.5
Respondent's Age	
<25	26.2
26-35	33.9
36-45	20.8
46-55	14.4
56-65	4.7
Respondent's Years Employed at Organization (years)	
<1	21.7
1-3	43.5
4-6	22.0
7-10	7.0
11-14	4.2
<15	1.6
Industry	
Manufacturing	7.0
Service	28.4
Education	25.9
Professional	21.1
Government	12.1
Non-profit	5.5
Number of employees in organization	
<100	31.0
101-500	20.4
501-1,000	9.6
1,001-2,500	11.2
2,501-5,000	2.9
5,001-10,000	6.7
>10,000	18.2

n=313

Table 2 reports employees' perceptions that organization managers are ethical. Respondents indicated that organization managers were "never," "rarely," or only "sometimes" ethical 51.8% of the time, as compared with 48.2% for "usually" or "always" ethical. This analysis supports Hypothesis 1.

TABLE 2
ORGANIZATION MANAGERS ARE ETHICAL

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
N	6	20	136	134	17
%	1.9	6.4	43.5	42.8	5.4
Cum. %	1.9	8.3	51.8	94.6	100

Note: N=313, M=3.43, SD=.77

Table 3 reflects descriptive statistics and between-subject correlations for all seven independent variables and the control variable employee age. Strong correlations indicated by a p<.01 significance level exist between the variables, except employee's age.

TABLE 3
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, CORRELATIONS

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Are ethical	3.43	.77							
2. Promote work-life balance	2.87	.97	.50**						
3. Treat employees as unique individuals	2.89	.93	.54**	.57**					
4. Are trustworthy	3.34	.80	.74**	.51**	.55**				
5. Creates hostile or fearful work environments	2.66	.82	.28**	.33**	.33**	.37**			
6. Do not possess appropriate supervisory/ management skills	2.97	.77	.21**	.31**	.37**	.34**	.32**		
7. Ineffective or poor managers are promoted	2.87	.75	.31**	.34**	.46**	.44**	.39**	.64**	
8. Employee age[a]	2.38	1.16	.10	-.08	.06	-.01	-.17**	-.17**	-.18**

*Notes: N=313, **p<0.01, [a]Employee age stratified into 6 levels, level 2 is 26-35, average of 2.38 indicates the average age falls within the age range 26-35.*

Data Analysis

Two statistical tools were used to analyze the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable managers' ethics. Linear regression was used to test the individual item measures and structural equation modeling was used to test the combined impact of the behaviors that could positively or negatively impact the dependent variable managers' ethics. Both methods rely upon similar assumptions about the distribution of the data. The dependent variable exhibited a reasonable normal distribution. Additionally, there was no evidence of collinearity (all VIF factors < 3.0).

Regression Analysis

To test the influence of the individual item measures on ethical behavior, a multiple regression analysis using a stepwise method of all items was performed. Stepwise regression is appropriate for determining significant influences of multiple independent variables on a single dependent variable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Vogt, 2005). The following variables emerged as significant after initial regression:

1. Managers promote work-life balance
2. Managers treat employees as unique individuals
3. Managers are trustworthy
4. Managers create hostile or fearful work environments

The stepwise criteria used on the F scores for variable inclusion were $p < .05$ for inclusion and $p > .10$ for exclusion. This resulted in four independent variables that were statistically significant at a minimum of $p < .05$ (see Table 4). The item measures "trustworthy," "work-life balance" and "treat individuals as unique" had a positive impact while "managers lack appropriate management skills" had a negative influence on the employees' perceptions that organization managers are ethical. The negative traits of hostile work environment and promotion of ineffective managers were not significant. The model explained 57.7% (R^2 adjusted = .577) of the variation of the dependent variable "My organization's managers are ethical."

TABLE 4
REGRESSION ANALYSIS

	B	SE
Constant	1.068***	.145
Are trustworthy	.596***	.045
Treat employees as unique individuals	.143***	.041
Promote work life balance	.089**	.038
Appropriate management skills	-.097**	.040

$**p < .05, **p < .001$

Structural Equation Modeling

Amos 20.0 was used to estimate the model. The two-step approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was followed. In the first step, confirmatory factor analysis was used to validate the measurement model. In the second step, structural equation modeling was used to evaluate the full model including both the measurement and structural model.

Measurement Model Assessment

The variables "promote work-life balance," "treat employees as unique individuals," and "trustworthy" were included in the positive traits construct, while "hostile work environment," "individuals lack appropriate management skills," and "ineffective managers are promoted" were included in the negative trait construct. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis, along with the composite reliability and average variance extracted, are detailed in Table 5. All items were statistically significant at $p < .05$. All but one of the individual item factor loadings exceeded the minimum threshold of .5 recommended by Hair, et al. (2006). The composite reliabilities for both constructs exceeded the minimum threshold of .7 (Hair et al., 2006) and the average variance extracted (AVE) met or exceeded the threshold of .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The fit indices for the measurement model also demonstrate a good fit with $\chi^2=20.96$, GFI=.98, AGFI=.94, NFI=.97, RFI=.94, IFI=.98, TLI=.96, CFI=.98, and RMSEA = .07. Recommended thresholds for the fit indices are .90 or better and for the RMSEA .08 or less (Hu & Bentler, 1999). These results provide evidence that the measurement model is valid.

TABLE 5
CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS WITH COMPOSITE RELIABILITY AND AVE

Items	Item reliabilities	AVE
Positive Behaviors	**.77**	.63
Managers promote work-life balance	.64	
Managers treat employees as unique individuals	.70	
Managers are trustworthy	.84	
Negative Behaviors	**.74**	.50
Managers create hostile or fearful work environments.	.48	
Individuals who do not possess appropriate supervisory/management skills are promoted to or hired for management positions.	.73	
Ineffective or poor managers are promoted.	.85	

Note: Composite reliabilities in bold.

Structural Equation Modeling Assessment

The fit indices for the structural model demonstrate a reasonably good fit with χ^2=69.75, GFI=.95, AGFI=.89, NFI=.92, RFI=.88, IFI=.94, TLI=.91, CFI=.94, and RMSEA = .096. The model and results are reported in Figure 1. The positive trait construct had a positive influence (p<.01) on employees' perceptions that firm managers are ethical. In contrast, the negative trait construct had a negative influence (p<.01) on employees' perceptions that firm managers are ethical. Additionally, employees' age has a positive impact, which indicates that as employees mature their perceptions that firm managers are ethical increases.

FIGURE 1
STRUCTURAL MODEL
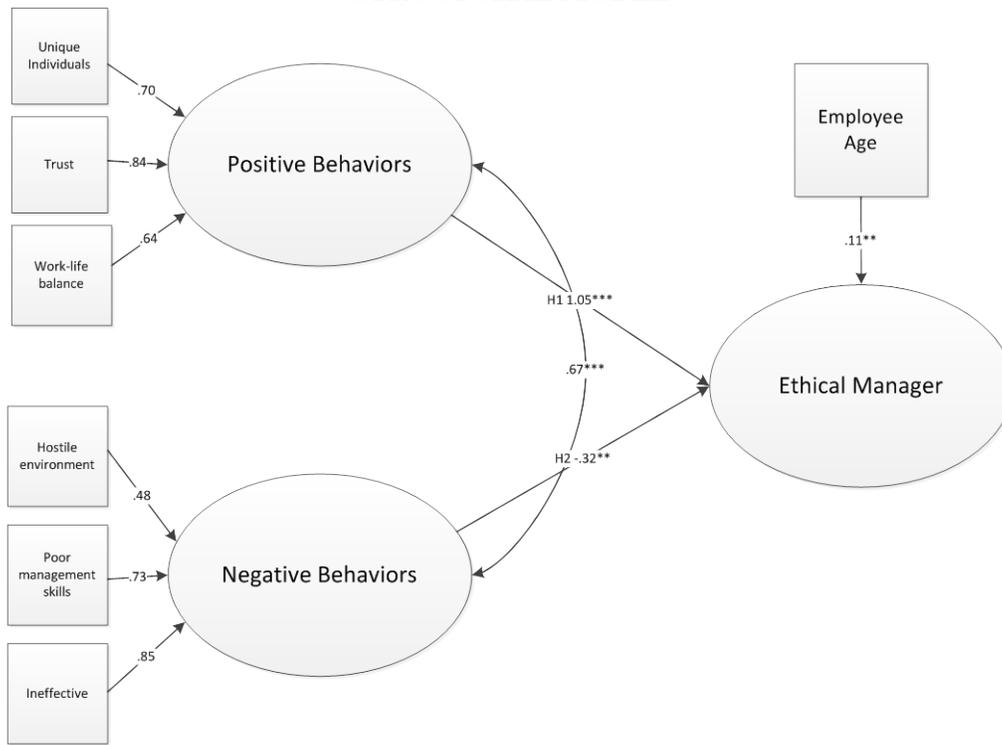
**p<.05, ***p<.001
Note: Standardized regression weights are reported.

DISCUSSION

Our study concurs with others that highlighted the frequency of ethics in the workplace and the impact of trust on employee perceptions of leader behaviors. We add to the research and literature base via our findings on the importance of work-life balance and treating employees as unique individuals as instrumental to perceptions of ethical behavior.

Implications for Trust in the Workplace

Research indicates that managers must be intentional in their efforts to establish trust in an organization, ensuring that their actions are constant, focused, and transparent (Bandsuch, 2008). Employees who perceive a manager to be trustworthy will likely increase their personal commitment to follow him or her (Caldwell, 2008). The worthwhile positive results of managers' efforts to establish trust are employee loyalty, job satisfaction, and the perception of leader effectiveness (Bandsuch, 2008; Brown, et. al., 2005; Gillis, 2003).

Furthermore, some studies have shown that trust in leadership is positively correlated to organizational performance, improving problem solving, communication, negotiation, performance, organizational commitment and employee turnover (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Gillespie & Mann, 2004; Williams, 2005). Conversely, a lack of trust within an organization can erode a shared sense of value and purpose between employees and managers and increase conflict in the workplace (Hodson, 2004). Employees will be less likely to make a sacrificial choice to honor trust if there is no consensus in the organization that honoring trust is the right thing to do (Dobson, 1990). Ultimately, a manager's interactions with employees are critical to establishing and maintaining trust within an organization (Bandsuch, 2008).

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is an increasingly studied topic, particularly in light of generational differences (Chao, 2005; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Wong, et al., 2008). Twenge (2010), for example, found that GenY/GenMe employees gravitate to companies that focus on work-life balance issues. This is salient to our study as well, as a significant percentage of the respondents in our study were under the age of thirty-five.

Findings of our study suggest that the manager is a key factor in establishing work-life balance. Scholars have noted that managerial support, communication, and understanding are critical to employees' achievement of work/family balance (Anderson, et al., 2002; Batt & Valcour, 2003; Clark, 2002; Eversole, et al., 2012). Eversole, et al. (2012) claim "an insensitive and inflexible manager increases tension, decreases productivity, has the single most negative influence on work-life, and makes the whole company look insensitive" (p. 615).

Watkins (1995) stated that the supervisor-subordinate relationship is one of the most powerful predictors of work/family problems, while Collins, Hair, and Rocco (2009) further claim that the relationship can be enhanced with knowledge of generational differences and the contrasting work values of each generation (Eversole, et al., 2012). Thompson et al. (1999) found three factors associated with what they termed as work–family culture and the first factor was described as the managerial support factor, defined as "the extent to which managers were supportive and sensitive to employees' family responsibilities" (p. 401). "While researchers have posited that 'contextual factors' such as work-life policies and managerial support are important, there is not substantial empirical research that examines employees' perceptions regarding the extent to which a context is supportive of work-life issues and the implications this has for work-life policy utilization (Allen, 2001)" (Greenberg & Landry, 2011, p. 1164).

Treating People as Unique Individuals

Recent research on individual differences lends support to our findings on the importance of treating employees as unique. Research by Wong, et al. (2008) emphasized "the importance of focusing on individual differences" (p. 878). This theme was supported by participants in a study by Gilley et al.,

(2012), who indicated that unique treatment of the individual "was a critical ingredient and primary remedy to managerial ineffectiveness…" (p. 74). The rise of influence in the workplace of generations X, Y, GenMe, and Millennials lends further support to the need for emphasis on individualism and recognition of employee uniqueness (Twenge, 2010). Moreover, leaders are perceived as ethical when they consider the individual needs of employees (Zhu, et al., 2004). Organizations who seek to hire or retain these talented employees will need to attend to policies and practices that support the evolving needs of new generations of workers.

Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations inherent in all empirical studies. In our study, we assessed manager ethics only from the perception of the employee. It would be interesting to explore and contract employee perceptions with the perceptions of the managers and their managers. This could provide additional information about the ethics of the organization. Although our population included people from multiple sectors across various parts of the country, they were all students, which may have some effect on the responses we received. Additionally, our study focused on the main effects of work-life balance, unique individuals, and trust on ethics. Future research could examine the interactions of these variables on work-life balance. One possible approach could be to include ethical dilemmas to prevent oversimplification of ethical leadership.

CONCLUSION

Our study implies that leaders and managers who create trust-based relationships, respect work-life balance, and treat their employees as unique individuals are perceived as more ethical than those who do not. Additionally, when individuals who do not possess appropriate management skills are placed in leadership/managerial positions, they are perceived as unethical. Our results point to positive constructs managers can use to enhance their ethical behavior.

Employees from generations X, Y, GenMe, and Millennials are more interested in issues such as work-life balance and being treated uniquely. Creating programs that support work-life balance will validate the unique individual needs of employees. These efforts promote an environment of trust between manager and employee, laying the foundation for an ethical culture. Conversely, our results point to negative behaviors that erode perceptions of ethics. Leaders and managers who lack appropriate management skills or are ineffective may unwittingly create a hostile work environment, which negatively affects perceptions of ethics. Intentional efforts to emphasize these simple but critical positive elements may help create a work environment in which ethical behavior is the norm.

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