ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Effect of Ethical Leadership on Work Engagement of Physical Education Teachers with the Mediating Role of Organizational Virtue

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A B S T R A C T

The present study aimed to examine the effect of ethical leadership on the work engagement of physical education teachers, with organizational virtue as a mediating role. Considering its purpose, the study was applied; in terms of time, it was cross-sectional and classified as quantitative research. The statistical population consisted of physical education teachers in Mashhad. To determine the sample size, G*Power software was used, and using convenience sampling, 200 participants were selected. The research instruments included three standardized questionnaires: Organizational Virtue by Cameron *et al*. (2004), Work Engagement by Schaufeli *et al*. (2006), and Ethical Leadership by Brown *et al*. (2005). The validity of the questionnaires was reviewed and confirmed by several experts, and their reliability was verified through a pilot study among physical education teachers in Mashhad, using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. To test the hypotheses, structural equation modeling was employed, and data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25 and SmartPLS version 4. The results showed that ethical leadership had a positive effect on teachers' work engagement and significantly enhanced organizational virtue, which in turn had a positive relationship with employees' work engagement. Furthermore, organizational virtue acted as a mediator between ethical leadership and work engagement. Therefore, managers should pay special attention to ethical leadership and foster a virtue-oriented environment to enhance employees' motivation and work engagement, which not only increases teachers' engagement but also improves overall organizational productivity.

Introduction

An organization is a set of interacting elements, structural levels, and decision-making units. Identifying and examining these elements has always been one of the most important questions faced by organizational researchers (Ahmadi *et al*, 2019). Successful organizations, in order to achieve their goals and attain desirable levels of employee performance, pay particular attention to work efficiency, which is considered one of the most critical components in the work process and in making strategic organizational decisions. One of the influential factors in improving work efficiency, which fosters a sense of cohesion and unity among employees, is work engagement (Karimi & Mardani, 2023).

Motivated and capable human resources are among the key drivers of change within organizations (Sanders *et al*., 2010). When individuals become absorbed in their work and perform their tasks with high levels of enthusiasm, they devote themselves

fully to their jobs, expend considerable energy to perform better, and consequently achieve success (Zahedbablian *et al*., 2016). Engaged employees perceive themselves as individuals who are capable of meeting job demands (Fisher *et al*., 2018).

The antecedents of work engagement within organizations include factors such as greater attention to employees' internal and external needs, job security, effective communication between management and employees, providing a creative organizational climate, emphasizing innovation, fostering enthusiasm and vitality, enhancing reward systems, and creating innovative environments for new ideas. These factors can reduce irresponsible workplace behaviors among employees (Akbari & Rahali-Namin, 2020).

Human capital has become a competitive advantage for organizations, and talent management grounded in ethical human resources has regained its importance within organizations. Ethical human resources and organizational excellence are closely interrelated concepts. Organizational excellence largely depends on ethical and engaged human resources (Karimi & Mardani, 2020).

Teachers are among the core elements of the education system, particularly in schools. When the importance of teachers' roles in educational transformation was recognized, many experts emphasized that without improving the quality of teachers, no meaningful change or improvement in schools would occur (Imron, 2016). Consequently, successful organizations recognized the necessity of developing and promoting ethics within organizations (Niazi & Nasrabadi, 2008).

Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, as well as the promotion of such conduct among followers through two-way communication. This leadership style provides opportunities such as participation in decision-making and job design. In general, ethical leaders' behaviors support employees' individual

rights, such as dignity, respect, and autonomy, thereby enhancing employees' sense of empowerment (Bizri, 2018).

Researchers believe that because ethical leaders consider employees' needs and treat them fairly, they enhance employees' trust (Khalkhali & Rahimi, 2015, p. 70). In contrast, unethical leaders, due to their formal power and position, can exert destructive effects, including reduced job performance and diminished motivation at both organizational and individual levels (Einarsen, 2007).

In other words, ethical leaders strengthen employees' positive attitudes and contribute to higher levels of perceived organizational justice (Kray & Lind, 2002, p. 918). Organizations increasingly face employees who seek meaningful and purposeful work and desire supportive work environments that nurture creativity and personal growth (Mohammadkhani *et al*., 2014).

Therefore, one way to address this challenge is to expand work environments that cultivate employees' creativity and personal development, enabling them to utilize their full potential (Nasrabadi & Soleimani, 2013). Accordingly, organizations have emphasized virtues in an effort to address employees' spiritual and ethical gaps (Farhangi *et al*., 2006). Due to the undeniable role of organizational virtues—particularly in enhancing performance and efficiency—this concept has attracted considerable attention from organizations (Razavian & Soltan-Alqarai, 2010).

Virtue-oriented organizations are those formed based on ethical virtues and competencies, in which managers and employees are virtue-driven individuals (Danaei-Fard *et al*., 2015). The concept of virtuousness in work and organizations describes employees' experiences characterized by enthusiasm and energy at work. Such employees understand the meaning and purpose of their work and believe they maintain effective relationships with their colleagues (Wong, 2005). Workplace virtuousness is associated with increased honesty, creativity, commitment, and trust, as well as enhanced feelings of personal growth and maturity (Asili, 2002).

Exposure to organizational virtuousness generates positive emotions among employees and motivates them toward mutual assistance and respect, ethical behavior, resilience in the face of adversity, improved job performance, enhanced organizational culture, and citizenship behavior (Ghobadi *et al.*, 2016). In today's challenging and rapidly changing world, organizations strive to go beyond basic job requirements in utilizing human resources to achieve their goals (Ghanbari & Abdolmaleki, 2022). Due to global competition and rapid innovation, working conditions have changed significantly, compelling employees to work more than ever before (Van Beek *et al.*, 2012).

Every organization must attend to human factors and related issues in order to achieve its objectives and fulfill its mission (Dehghani *et al.*, 2016). Organizations require energetic and engaged human resources—individuals who possess strong interest and enthusiasm for their work. Engaged employees are deeply involved in their jobs and perform their tasks effectively (Simons *et al.*, 2014).

Due to the distinctive influence leaders exert on followers' behavior, leadership has attracted substantial attention in management research (stansbury, 2009). For organizational sustainability, it is essential to employ ethical leadership to encourage the expression of employees' opinions, ideas, and viewpoints (Zarei-Matin *et al.*, 2015). Traditional organizational cultures focus only on certain dimensions of human existence; therefore, it is unrealistic to expect employees to bring only those aspects of themselves deemed necessary by the organization to the workplace while leaving the rest behind. As a result, contemporary approaches must fundamentally change to allow individuals to devote greater attention to other dimensions of their existence (Zamaheni & Shokari, 2016).

One of the transcendent aspects within organizations is virtuousness, which has gained attention due to its significant role in organizations—particularly its impact on employee performance (Rego *et al.*, 2011). In light of current changes, organizations have realized that they should not focus solely on profitability. Consequently, they have become more sensitive to employees' needs, recognizing that a healthy organization requires healthy employees. This realization has led to an increased emphasis on higher values, namely virtues (Zeinabadi *et al.*, 2018).

The education system, in order to achieve its fundamental mission of educating and developing individuals, requires dedicated, compassionate, and committed teachers. Teachers who possess a strong sense of responsibility perform their duties effectively and contribute to enhanced efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity within the educational system (Naderloo *et al.*, 2016).

Given that organizations require energetic and committed human resources to perform tasks effectively and considering that ethical leadership styles influence work engagement—while organizational virtuousness provides the foundation for such leadership—research on these topics has become a priority. Therefore, in light of the existing challenges within the education system, addressing these issues is of particular importance. Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following questions: What effect does ethical leadership have on work engagement? And how can organizational virtuousness mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement? (Figure 1)
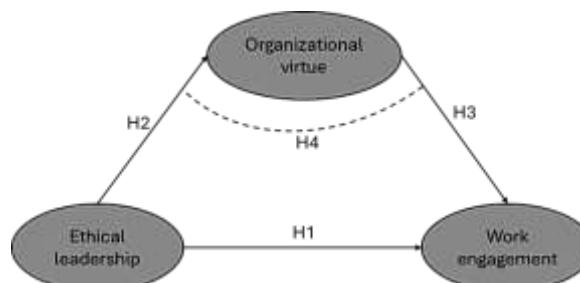
Figure 1. The relationship beetwen ethical leadership, work engagement and organizational virtue

Results

Ma and colleagues (2022) examined the effect of ethical leadership on service recovery performance, with organizational virtue serving as a mediating variable. The study population consisted of employees working in the service sector across various organizations. The results indicated that followers learn from and emulate ethical leaders, demonstrating forgiveness, compassion, integrity, empathy, and other positive characteristics through their behaviors and actions.

Islam and khatoon (2023), in a study entitled How Does Ethical Leadership Increase Employees' Work Engagement? The Roles of Trust in the Leader and Harmonious Passion for Work, investigated this relationship among employees and their direct supervisors working in different organizations in Pakistan. The findings showed that ethical leaders positively influence their subordinates to engage in their work. In addition, employees' trust in their leader was identified as a mediator of the relationship between ethical leadership and job satisfaction. Employees who possess harmonious work passion are more likely to engage in their work when they perceive their leaders' ethical style.

Sahabuddin and colleagues (2024) examined the effect of Islamic work ethics on public employees' performance, with work engagement as a mediating variable. The statistical population consisted of Muslim public employees working in Makassar, Indonesia. The results demonstrated that Islamic work ethics positively affect both work engagement and the performance of public employees. Furthermore, work engagement has a positive effect on public employees' performance and serves as an important mediator in the relationship between Islamic work ethics and performance

Findings of the Research

To obtain a more accurate understanding of the study sample, it was necessary to describe the collected data prior to conducting inferential statistical analyses. Accordingly, the demographic characteristics of the participants, including marital status, age, gender, level of education, and work experience—are presented below.

Descriptive analysis of demographic variables

The results derived from the questionnaire data regarding the effect of ethical leadership on work engagement among physical education teachers, with the mediating role of organizational virtuousness during the study period, are summarized as follows.

Table 1. Marital status of the respondents

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	74	37%
Married	126	63%
Total	200	100%

Table 2. Age distribution of the respondents

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage
20–30	63	31.5%
31–40	74	37%
41–50	34	17%
51–65	29	14.5%
Total	200	100%

Table 3. Gender Distribution of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	106	53%
Male	94	47%
Total	200	100%

Table 4. Educational Level of the Respondents

Educational level	Frequency	Percentage
Associate degree	108	54%
Bachelor's degree	77	38.5%
Master's degree	15	7.5%
Total	200	100%

Table 5. Work Experience of Physical Education Teachers

Work experience (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
1–10	93	46.5%
11–20	58	29%
More than 20	49	24.5%
Total	200	100%

Reliability and validity assessment

Table 6 presents Cronbach's alpha coefficients, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) values. Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 indicate acceptable internal consistency. Similarly, composite reliability values exceeding 0.70 confirm adequate internal reliability of the measurement model. Convergent validity was assessed using the AVE index, for which values greater than 0.50 are considered acceptable (Ghasemi *et al*., 2020).

Table 6. Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and AVE Values

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (CR)	AVE
Work engagement	0.910	0.926	0.583
Organizational virtuousness	0.936	0.943	0.527
Optimism	0.822	0.894	0.738
Trust	0.776	0.780	0.691
Compassion	0.796	0.881	0.711
Integrity	0.809	0.887	0.724
Forgiveness	0.799	0.882	0.714
Ethical leadership	0.914	0.928	0.563
Moral person	0.867	0.901	0.602
Moral manager	0.826	0.885	0.658

Based on the results presented in Table 6, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for all constructs exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming the reliability of the measures. Furthermore, AVE values greater than 0.50 indicate satisfactory convergent validity for all research variables.

Table 7 presents the results of the Fornell–Larcker criterion for assessing discriminant validity. The diagonal elements of the matrix represent the square

root of the AVE for each construct. As shown, the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with other constructs, indicating

acceptable discriminant validity. Therefore, the measurement model demonstrates a good fit.

Table 7. The results of the Fornell–Larcker criterion for assessing discriminant validity.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient (β)	t-value
H1: Ethical Leadership → Work Engagement	0.259	2.404
H2: Ethical Leadership → Organizational Virtu	0.875	40.874
H3: Organizational Virtu → Work Engagement	0.549	5.103
H4: Ethical Leadership → Work Engagement (mediated by Organizational Virtu)	0.481	5.070

Methodology of research

The present study is classified as applied research and falls within the category of quantitative studies. Moreover, the research was conducted using a field-based approach. The statistical population consisted of physical education teachers in the city of Mashhad (N = 200). Both male and female teachers were included as the target population. The sample size was determined using G*Power software and participants were selected through convenience sampling.

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire comprising four sections: demographic information; the Work Engagement Questionnaire developed by Schaufeli *et al*. (2006), consisting of 9 items; the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire developed by Brown *et al*. (2005), which includes two dimensions—moral person and moral manager—and contains 10 items; and the Organizational Virtuousness Questionnaire developed by Cameron *et al*. (2004), consisting of five dimensions: optimism, trust, compassion, integrity, and forgiveness, with a total of 15 items. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

To establish face and content validity, the questionnaires were reviewed by a panel of experts who evaluated the wording of the items, the number of questions, the content of the questionnaires, the correspondence between items and response options, and their alignment with the research objectives. The reliability of the research variables was assessed in a

pilot study conducted with a preliminary sample of 20 participants.

Findings of the Research

Hypothesis 1
-H0: Ethical leadership has no significant effect on work engagement.
-H1: Ethical leadership has a significant effect on work engagement.

According to Table 7, the effect of ethical leadership on work engagement is 0.259. The t-statistic for this path is 2.404, which is greater than 1.96, indicating significance at the 0.05 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the research hypothesis is supported.

Hypothesis 2
-H0: Ethical leadership has no significant effect on organizational virtue.
-H1: Ethical leadership has a significant effect on organizational virtue.

Based on Table 7, the effect of ethical leadership on organizational virtue is 0.875. The t-statistic for this path is 40.874, which exceeds 1.96, indicating significance at the 0.05 level. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the research hypothesis is confirmed.

Hypothesis 3
-H0: Organizational virtue has no significant effect on work engagement.
-H1: Organizational virtue has a significant effect on work engagement.

As shown in Table 7, the effect of organizational virtue on work engagement is 0.549. The t-statistic for this path is 5.103, which is greater than 1.96, indicating significance at the 0.05 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the research hypothesis is supported.

Hypothesis 4

-H0: Ethical leadership has no significant effect on work engagement through the mediating role of organizational virtue.

-H1: Ethical leadership has a significant effect on work engagement through the mediating role of organizational virtue.

According to Table 7, the effect of ethical leadership on work engagement through organizational virtue is 0.481. The t-statistic for this path is 5.070, indicating significance at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the research hypothesis is confirmed.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the study indicate that ethical leadership has a positive and significant effect on work engagement. This finding aligns with the results of Eslami *et al.* (2023), Mohammadzadeh *et al.* (2023), and Adel-Bablian & Foroughi-Souha (2021). The necessity of focusing on ethical leadership stems from its proven positive outcomes for organizations (Ardalan *et al.*, 2020). Education is a particularly sensitive sector, as its ultimate product is the individuals who shape the future of the country. When managers effectively strengthen ethical leadership in their interactions with employees (Salimi & Shahreki, 2021), work engagement, cohesion, and unity among organizational members emerge, resulting in desirable outcomes for both individuals and the organization (Mirheidari *et al.*, 2012). Selecting an ethical leadership style leads to employees who are not only motivated but also willingly perform both their formal and extra-role duties and feel a strong sense of belonging to the organization.

Ethical leadership has a positive and significant effect on organizational virtuousness. This finding is consistent with those of Ma *et al* (2021), Foroughi-Souha & Hosseinpour (2021), and Nikpay & Malkian-Mofrad (2016). Ethical leadership, based on fairness, justice, and communication grounded in attention, care, and respect for employees' dignity, positively influences their perceptions. Managers practicing ethical leadership foster a climate of psychological safety and well-being, thereby positively affecting employees' moral identity (Bohrani & Foroutani, 2022). Organizational virtuousness is highly valued by the organization, representing members' identity and pride (Behzadi *et al*., 2007, p. 241) and contributes to the enhancement of individual behaviors within the organization (Jamasbi, 2016, p. 94). By fostering ethically grounded environments, ethical leaders encourage employees to adhere to these values, which strengthens organizational virtuousness.

Organizational virtuousness has a positive and significant effect on work engagement. This result is consistent with the findings of Arianpour *et al* (2023), Heidari-Fard *et al* (2022), and Mosleh-Garmi *et al* (2020). Singh *et al* (2018) also found a positive relationship between organizational virtuousness and work engagement. Based on these findings, managers can enhance organizational virtuousness to increase employee engagement and foster a more committed workforce. Human Resource Development (HRD) specialists can also maximize human capital by cultivating positive psychological states such as work engagement. A set of values associated with employees' satisfaction and sense of belonging provides a suitable environment for self-actualization, thereby facilitating engagement and enhancing motivation.

Organizational virtuousness mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement. That is, part or all of the effect of ethical leadership on work engagement depends on the presence of organizational virtuousness. This finding can be

explained as follows: ethical leaders create a climate of trust, forgiveness, and integrity, which plays a crucial role in filling the ethical gaps within the organization. Such an environment fosters and strengthens organizational virtuousness, enabling employees to feel safer and more supported, which in turn increases their work engagement. Over time, these positive changes become evident not only in employee behaviors but also in overall organizational performance.

Previous studies have primarily focused on bivariate relationships, and research simultaneously examining ethical leadership, organizational virtuousness, and work engagement is scarce. However, these findings are consistent with studies by Eslami *et al*. (2023), Adnan *et al*. (2020), Heidari-Fard *et al*. (2021), and Foroutani & Bahrami (2020). Eslami *et al*. (2023) reported that ethical leaders positively influence subordinates to become more engaged in their work. Furthermore, employees' trust in their leaders mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and job satisfaction. Ultimately, employees who are passionate about their work become even more engaged when they perceive their leaders as ethical. Adnan *et al*. (2020) similarly found that ethical leadership has a positive and significant effect on employees' work engagement, with organizational virtues such as cooperation, respect, and empathy creating a supportive and motivating environment that encourages employees to perform their tasks with enthusiasm. Therefore, organizations can increase employee engagement by promoting ethical leadership and cultivating ethical virtues in the workplace. These findings underscore the importance of ethical management and attention to human values within organizations.

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