

How Ethical Leadership Prompts Employees' Voice Behavior: The Roles of Affective Commitment and Moral Disengagement

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Executive Summary

This study addresses the mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences employee voice behavior, a topic previously examined primarily through rational-cognitive lenses. The authors argue, drawing on Affective Events Theory (AET) and moral disengagement literature, that affective commitment mediates the ethical leadership–voice behavior relationship, and that moral disengagement moderates both this mediation and the underlying direct relationships. A three-wave field study (N = 232) was conducted across 15 retail companies in southeastern China, with data collected at one-month intervals to reduce common method variance. PLS-SEM analysis using SmartPLS 3.0 confirmed all six hypotheses: ethical leadership positively predicted affective commitment (H1), affective commitment positively predicted voice behavior (H2), affective commitment partially mediated the ethical leadership–voice relationship (H3), and moral disengagement negatively moderated the ethical leadership–affective commitment link (H4), the affective commitment–voice link (H5), and the overall moderated mediation (H6). The study concludes that employees with low moral disengagement are more responsive to ethical leadership cues and more likely to translate affective commitment into voice behavior, enriching understanding of both ethical leadership theory and proactive behavior research.

Key Insights

1. Affective commitment partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior, introducing an affective mechanism to a literature previously dominated by rational-cognitive explanations.
2. Moral disengagement acts as a boundary condition: employees with low moral disengagement show stronger positive responses to ethical leadership in terms of both affective commitment and subsequent voice behavior.
3. The indirect effect of ethical leadership on voice via affective commitment is itself moderated by moral disengagement, forming a moderated mediation where the pathway weakens significantly at higher levels of moral disengagement.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations operating in contexts where employee voice is strategically important may find that assessing moral disengagement tendencies during hiring processes is associated with differences in how employees respond to ethical leadership.

- The study's findings suggest that cultivating affective bonds between employees and the organization — through fair treatment, feedback responsiveness, and leader transparency — is associated with higher rates of constructive employee voice.

Frameworks Mentioned

Affective Events Theory (AET) — A theoretical framework by Weiss and Cropanzano proposing that workplace events trigger affective reactions which in turn shape employee attitudes and behaviors; used here as the primary theoretical foundation linking ethical leadership events to affective commitment and voice behavior.

Critical Analysis

Strengths include the three-wave longitudinal design that partially mitigates common method variance, the use of PLS-SEM with bootstrapping for moderated mediation testing, and the integration of AET with moral disengagement theory to address an underexplored affective pathway. The sample size ($N = 232$) meets recommended thresholds for PLS-SEM. However, several limitations reduce confidence in the findings: (1) the sample is drawn exclusively from the Chinese retail industry, constraining cross-cultural and cross-industry generalizability; (2) all measures are self-reported perceptual data from a single source, raising concerns about social desirability and percept-percept inflation despite time-separation; (3) the AVE for moral disengagement (0.408) falls below the conventional 0.50 threshold, indicating suboptimal convergent validity for this construct, which the authors acknowledge but address only through HTMT discriminant validity; (4) the use of the same control variables across all three time points is identified by the authors themselves as a limitation; and (5) the moderated mediation effect sizes are relatively modest (e.g., $\beta = -0.061$ for the full moderated mediation path). The study does not engage with alternative explanations for why moral disengagement might suppress voice, such as political behavior or impression management motives.

Organizational Practice

Three-wave data collection was conducted across 15 retail companies in southeastern China, with HR departments facilitating random sampling from different departments. Employees completed questionnaires at one-month intervals measuring ethical leadership perceptions, affective commitment, moral disengagement, and voice behavior. Anonymous and voluntary participation procedures were used to minimize social desirability bias.

Strategic Implications

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of ethical leadership as a driver of employee voice is contingent on individual-level moral characteristics, suggesting that PMS designs relying on ethical leadership alone may produce variable outcomes across employee populations. The partial mediation result implies that affective attachment to the organization operates as a distinct pathway alongside rational cost-benefit calculations, pointing toward the relevance of affective dimensions in performance and engagement system design. The moderating role of moral disengagement introduces a boundary condition that could inform how organizations structure feedback and voice channels across employee segments with differing ethical orientations.

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