

# Supervisors' and Top Leaders' Ethics: Differently Related to Employee Attitudes?

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*This study examined the relationships between (1) individual employees' perceptions of top managers' and immediate supervisors' ethical tendencies, and (2) organizational climate, commitment, and citizenship behavior. Results indicated that employee perceptions of top managers' and supervisors' ethics were significantly related to climate, commitment and the OCB dimension, civic virtue.*

The corporate scandals of Enron, Tyco, Adelphia and WorldCom during the past decade have led to an outpouring of popular press articles elaborating on the lack of regulatory oversight, complex accounting schemes, and greed of these organizations' top leaders (McLean & Elkind, 2004; Toffler & Reingold, 2003). Understanding these scandals requires scrutinizing organizational leaders, their ethical sensibilities and the climates they fostered; in fact, the focus of academic literature has been on top leaders' characters, behaviors, and formative experiences (e.g., Brown & Treviño, 2006). We suggest here that for a full consideration of leader ethics, the impact of ethical behavior at lower levels of the organizational hierarchy also requires research attention. Little research has assessed the possibility of differing effects of ethical behavior displayed at top levels of an organization versus that displayed by an immediate supervisor (Davis & Rothstein, 2006), yet the ethical models at the lower ranks could be as important as that of the top leadership.

## *Ethics of Top Leaders and Supervisors*

Much has been written about ethics (Lefkowitz, 2003), about leadership (Yukl, 1998), and the intersection of the two (Bass &

Steidlmeier, 1999; Brown & Treviño, 2006). Without a doubt, top leaders are important for setting the moral tone for an organization. Not only are those at the top expected to communicate proper expectations for the organization, they are expected to model the appropriate behavior for the relevant stakeholders: Top leaders must portray themselves as ethical and then support that aura of legitimacy with ethical actions (Simons, 1999). Another issue, however, with important implications for both practice and research regards the level—top leader or immediate supervisor—of the ethical behavior relative to the individual employee. As media reports indicate, unethical top leaders can have tremendous impact on the survival of a company, but small, seemingly insignificant acts of dishonesty performed by immediate supervisors may convey an even more insidious message to the organization's employees. Supervisors who engage in dirty practices confirm local norms encouraging unethical behavior among immediate reports and most likely for other supervisors of the same rank. Interestingly, little has been written about the ethics of immediate supervisors (Davis & Rothstein, 2006).

The integrity of top leaders and of immediate supervisors can be construed as part of the fabric of an ethical organizational culture that engenders benefits for the organization and its employees. At minimum, one hopes the ethical organization is able to avoid the collapse and the accompanying media nightmares that accompanied Enron and its ilk. At best, one expects the organization will prosper because its employees and stakeholders can place trust in their leaders to “do the right thing” with the corollary that employees who trust their leaders’ probity can be expected to put forth more effort, support management’s ideas, and be good organizational citizens.

#### *Why Differentiate Top Leadership from Immediate Supervision?*

For the majority of organizational employees, their immediate supervisor is the primary representation of the organization, providing daily direction, feedback, evaluation, and information about the job, work group and organization (Greller & Herold, 1975; Therkelsen & Fiebich, 2003). Further, research indicates that differences emerge in satisfaction with, and trust in, immediate supervision and top executives (Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001). We might expect employees would differentially evaluate their top leaders’ and supervisors’ ethical tendencies. These differences may in turn be reflected in organizationally relevant individual outcomes such as organizational commitment and organizational citizenship.

#### *Purpose of this Study*

The purpose of this study was to investigate how employees’ perceptions of their top leaders and immediate supervisors’ ethical deliberations and behavior were related to employee organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee evaluations of organizational climate.

#### *Expected Corollaries of Ethical Leadership*

*Organizational climate.* Among the most extensively studied variables, employee perceptions of work climates has been found to be related to individual level work attitudes, motivation, and performance (Parker &

Associates, 2003). Considerable journal space has been devoted to the proper definition of climate, with no one agreed upon designation or label (e.g. psychological climate, work climate, organizational climate), although there has been coalescence around the climate concept representing an individual’s subjective description of an organization’s structure, procedures, and policies taken as an aggregate impression (James, Hater, Gent, & Bruni, 1978). We propose that this aggregate description reflects an individual’s psychological appraisal of the organization as interpreted through that individual’s needs and values (cf., Schein, 1990). Among the organizational domains that are likely to be interpreted through the lens of the individual are aspects of its leadership (e.g., support, strategic direction; Jones & James, 1979). A meta-analysis (Parker et al., 2003) indicated that leader behaviors were significantly related to perceptions of organizational climate. Similarly, we would expect that employees’ perceptions of top leaders’ integrity could have a critical impact on the climate of the organization. Therefore, we anticipated a positive relationship between organizational climate and perceptions of leader ethics. Further, because climate is a variable defining the *organization*, of which top leaders may be more strongly associated, we expected the correlations between the perceived ethics of top leaders to be more highly correlated with climate than the perceived ethics of immediate supervisors.

*Organizational commitment.* Organizational commitment is related to a host of psychological work variables. Relative to non-committed employees, committed employees are more satisfied with and involved in their jobs, are more motivated, and are less likely to think of quitting or being absent from work (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). When the ethical values of top managers conflict with employees’ values, employee commitment suffers and turnover intentions increase (Schwepker, 1999; Sims & Kroeck, 1994). The presence of ethical leaders would be expected to encourage an atmosphere in which employees feel loyal to the organization. Because organizational commitment is measured as an attachment to the *organization* as a whole, we would expect top

leader ethics would have a stronger relationship to organizational commitment than the ethical values of the immediate supervisor. We hypothesized that employees who see their top leaders and immediate supervisors as ethical would be more likely to identify with and feel attached to their organizations.

Commitment can further be categorized into affective, continuance, and normative (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Affective commitment encompasses the emotional attachment and identification with the organization. Continuance commitment is based on the recognition that leaving the organization has costs. Normative continue refers to a sense of obligation or moral expectation to remain with the organization. Affective and normative commitment have similar antecedents, such as job challenge, role clarity and management receptiveness. In contrast, continuance commitment is most strongly related to organizational tenure (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Consequently, we expected affective and normative commitment would positively relate to leader ethics, but that continuance commitment would not be affected by leader ethics.

*Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB).* Organ (1988) originally defined OCB as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (p. 4). Since Organ first introduced the concept, considerable debate has ensued about the definitional nature of OCBs. In his later work, Organ redefined the construct as activities that contribute “to the maintenance and enhancement of the social and psychological context that supports task performance” (Organ, 1997, p. 91). Though the dimensionality of OCB has been debated over the past 20 years (cf., LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002), the five categories that Organ originally proposed have endured. These five types of OCB are altruism, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue. The first, altruism, represents behaviors that have the effect of helping a specific other person with an organizationally relevant task or problem. Conscientiousness involves employee behaviors that go beyond the

minimum role requirements of the organization, in the areas of attendance, obeying rules and regulations, and taking breaks. The third, sportsmanship, is the willingness of the employee to tolerate less than ideal circumstances without complaining. Courtesy includes behaviors aimed at preventing work-related disputes. Finally, civic virtue is characterized by behaviors by an individual that indicates he or she participates in, is involved in, or is concerned about the life of the company (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990).

Following on the tenets of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), followers of ethical leaders would want to support their leaders because of the expectation that they—the followers—would be supported in turn. If employees perceive top leaders, as well as immediate supervisors, as being ethical, we would expect them to be willing to “step up” to fill the “white space” of the organizational chart. Because this aspect of social exchange would be more salient at the local level (Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996), we would expect the immediate supervisors’ ethical stance to have more impact than top leaders on those behaviors. Therefore, we expected OCB and its subdimensions would be moderately (and positively) correlated with leader ethics, with the relationship stronger for immediate supervisory ethics.

## Method

### *Sample*

Participants were recruited from a variety of organizations including mortgage companies, medical services, advertising, collections, and one mid-sized research institution. Some participants were recruited through a “snowball” method that utilized students from upper division psychology classes at a regional university in southern California; students were asked to distribute one or two paper surveys to working adults they knew, who, in turn, would distribute a survey to a coworker. Two forms of the survey were administered: an online version and a paper and pencil version<sup>1</sup>.

A total of 371 surveys were returned to the researchers or submitted online (online  $n = 170$ ;

paper  $n = 201$ ). The majority of participants were women (69%). There was considerable variation regarding participants' tenure, department and company size, and type of industry. The modal values for length of employment were 1 to 3 years with the organization (35%), working for a company smaller than 100 employees (22%) and in a department of 10 to 24 employees (37%). The distribution of participants' tenure, department and company size, and type of industry are shown in Table 1.

Because organizational climate was a key variable, and we believed employees require a history with a given organization to become fully cognizant of that climate, only data from those who had been working in their organizations for one year or more were used in the final analyses. The sample contained 301 participants after this criterion was applied.

### Measures

*Leader ethics.* The Perceptions of Ethical Leadership Scale (PELS, Pelletier & Bligh, 2006) is a 10-item scale that solicits responses pertaining to ethical practices of top leaders as well as immediate supervisors. Examples of questions on the scale are "My immediate supervisor sets a good example of ethical behavior" and "Moral concerns are given top priority by the organization's top leaders." In the current study, alpha was .92. The PELS includes a blend of items, some addressing top leadership, others the immediate supervisor. Following Davis and Rothstein's (2006) proposition that ethical behavior at both the top and more immediate level has an impact, we calculated subscale scores<sup>2</sup>. The top management subscale consisted of six items and yielded an alpha of .91; the other four items compose the immediate supervisor ethics subscale with an alpha of .81.

*Organizational climate.* The Organizational Climate Scale (Lawler, Hall, & Oldham, 1974) is a 15-item measure designed to capture organizational climate as perceived by those who work within the organization. Respondents were instructed to use their organization (i.e., not work group or department) as the frame of reference. Each item consists of two bipolar adjectives anchoring a seven-point Likert scale. Alpha was .80 for this study. We selected this measure as its

format (modified semantic differential) was expected to elicit a potent representation of the participant's affectation toward his or her organization's overall climate.

*Organizational commitment.* The Organization Commitment Scale (Meyer & Allen, 1997) is a widely used scale consisting of 24 items with three subscales measuring affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment. Alphas for this study were .84 for affective, .79 for continuance, and .84 for normative.

*Organizational Citizenship Behavior scale.* The Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman and Fetter (1990) Organizational Citizenship Behavior scale is composed of 19 items<sup>3</sup>. The scale measures the degree to which employees perform behaviors that contribute to the welfare of the organization, but are not included in the duties and responsibilities of their position. The five types of OCBs articulated by Organ (1988) are measured. Alphas for this study: altruism, .79, conscientiousness, .43, sportsmanship, .60, courtesy, .72, and civic virtue, .74.

## Results

Table 2 contains means, standard deviations, alphas, and correlations of the hypothesized correlates of leader ethics. As predicted, organizational climate was highly correlated with top leader ethics, .63, and immediate supervisor ethics, .54, with the relationship greater for the top leader ethics (difference in  $r$ s:  $z=1.81$ ,  $p=.035$ ). Correlations of affective, continuance, and normative organizational commitment with top leader ethics were .57 ( $p<.001$ ), .00 (ns), and .54 ( $p<.001$ ), respectively. For immediate supervisor ethics, the correlations were .54 ( $p<.001$ ) with affective, .02 (ns) with continuance, and .41 ( $p<.001$ ) with normative commitment. The direction of both sets of correlations was supportive of our hypothesis that ethical leadership would be related to organizational commitment. In contrast, results did not support our belief that organizational commitment would be more related to top leader ethics; top leader-immediate supervisor correlation pairs were not significantly different. Subdimensions of organizational citizenship

behavior, altruism, courtesy, sportsmanship, civic virtue, and conscientiousness, correlated with top leader ethics, .12 ( $p < .05$ ), .12 ( $p < .05$ ), -.11 (ns), .27 ( $p < .001$ ), and .07 (ns), respectively; with immediate supervisory ethics, the correlations were .14 ( $p < .05$ ), .10 (ns), -.18 ( $p < .05$ ), .31 ( $p < .001$ ), and .12 ( $p < .05$ ). With the exception of civic virtue, the OCB results were not supportive of the hypothesis that OCB would be moderately related to leader ethics, nor were there differences in the correlations by ethics level<sup>4</sup>.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the relationship of several individual attitudes and behaviors that could be expected to emanate from ethical leaders, both distal and immediate. We also wished to assess the relationship of organizational climate to top leader and immediate supervisor ethics. Finally, we hoped to evaluate the differential importance of top and immediate leader ethics.

Climate is a shared perception of the nature of the organization, its policies, procedures and its “way of doing things” (Vardi, 2001, p. 327). Organizational climate and ethics of leaders, at both levels, was clearly linked, providing the strongest correlations of the study. How employees perceived their general organizational climate had considerable overlap with their assessment of the ethical perspectives of their top leaders and supervisors. Our expectation that top leader ethics would be more highly correlated with climate was confirmed, supporting that top leader ethics are an important part of the overall organizational fabric. The strength of the link between supervisor ethics and climate was somewhat surprising as climate is predominantly an organizational focus, which logically would be more associated with leaders at the top than an immediate supervisor (and was within this study). Perhaps the strength of the correlation demonstrates the potency or saliency of ethical issues regardless of level of leader being evaluated for ethical behavior.

As expected, affective and normative commitment were strongly related to perceptions of ethics for both top leaders and immediate

supervision. Continuous commitment, faithful to its construct meaning, was not related to perceptions of ethical leadership at either level. Employees who evaluate their commitment in terms of the behavior necessary to remain employed are not likely to see the ethical attributes of either their top leaders or immediate supervisor as necessarily relevant. In contrast, the moderate to strong correlations of affective and normative commitment with both subscales of leader ethics indicate that the tone sounded by top management and, to a lesser degree, that of the immediate supervisor is relevant for employees’ sense of attachment and obligation to their organization. Though their meta-analysis did not address ethical leader behaviors, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) found that leader behavior was a moderate predictor of organizational commitment. Our results are also consistent with previous research in which ethical leadership led to desirable individual employee outcomes, especially affective attitudes (Koh & Boo, 2001; Vitell & Davis, 1990).

The relationship of OCBs to leader ethics was small with the exception of civic virtue, which correlated .27 and .31 respectively with top leader and immediate supervisor ethics. Employees who perceive their top leaders and their immediate supervisors to be ethical were also the ones most willing to support the organization beyond their formal job requirements. Recent research by Vey and Campbell (2004) indicated that most attitudinal items tapping OCBs are considered by independent observers to represent in-role, as opposed to extra role, behavior. Vey and Campbell found, however, that altruism and civic virtue were seen as reliably extra-role, with the results for civic virtue strongly suggesting it to be the most “contextual” of the OCBs that have been intensively studied. Its relationship here with ethics perceptions lends credence to this notion.

Finally, apart from the differences found in the relationships with organizational climate, no differences emerged in the correlates of top leader ethics and immediate supervisor ethics. The similarities of the correlations across commitment and citizenship behaviors suggest that ethical behavior at both levels is an

important antecedent for individual outcomes. Though no mean difference was hypothesized, means for the two leader ethics subscales were compared and found to be significantly different (top leader ethics subscale  $M=4.52$ , immediate supervisor ethics subscale  $M=5.09$ ). Employees rated their immediate supervisors as more ethical than their top leaders. These results support Brown and Treviño's (2006) assertion that ethical behavior does not cascade from viewing a distant model but develops from close working relationships. The implication of this mean difference taken together with Brown and Treviño's review is that impression management on the part of top leaders is necessary but not sufficient to convince organizational members that they are ethical. Working with an immediate supervisor gives a more definitive assessment of his or her ethical behavior.

#### *Limitations*

The data collected for this study cannot imply causation. All data were collected at one time and were analyzed using correlational statistics. Hence, any interpretations must be salted with caution. Further, other variables need to be assessed to verify the meaning of these correlational results. Other variables for future study include stage of development of the firm, the tenure of the top management team, the CEO in particular, the historical turnover of leaders and the centralization of power within the top management team. These variables cannot be assessed with a survey, but require different methods.

Because all data were collected via survey, common method variance could have inflated the correlations (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The pattern of results, however, is unlikely to be solely the result of method bias. Spector (1987, 2006) has also strongly argued that common, systematic method variance is not as problematic as originally imagined in work attitude research.

We used an affective, evaluative measure of organization climate, which permitted us to assess general organizational climate. We acknowledge that several researchers (cf., Patterson, et al., 2005) have suggested multiple climates operate simultaneously within an

organization, a possibility we could not detect with our measure. Because our intent was to examine immediate supervisor ethics and top leader ethics, the existence of multiple climates, especially ethical climates (Victor & Cullen, 1988) is particularly relevant and should be examined in future research.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

Comparing employee perceptions of top leader ethics across organizations, which have had differing histories of ethical lapses, would help to clarify the role of top leader with immediate supervisor ethics. Longitudinal studies of multiple organizations would be very desirable to gauge recovery from scandal or retrospectively, antecedents of ethical slips to determine if first line supervisors are the first line of defense against ethical breaches. Though their sample of supervisors was small (1.6% of the total sample) and authoritative statistical analyses could not be conducted, Velthouse and Kandogan (2007) found that first line supervisors accorded ethical issues less importance than did middle managers and executives. Their results, taken together with ours suggesting that employees rate their immediate supervisors as more ethical, suggest a potentially troubling disconnect in the ethical links within organizations.

Other scales and constructs need to be included in future research to investigate the nature of proximal and distal leader ethics. The distinction between immediate and top management needs to be more precisely separated to assess for the differences hypothesized. Meta-analytic moderator analysis to extract the effect of immediate supervisory ethics would be valuable, once sufficient data are available to make such comparisons.

#### **Conclusion**

We examined and found meaningful relationships between employee perceptions of the ethics of top leaders and their immediate supervisors, with important individual outcomes-perceptions of climate, organizational commitment, and the OCB of civic virtue. Although we found few differential effects of

leader level, the impact of overall leader ethics on employees is compelling. The serious and public collapses revealed in the cases of Enron, Adelphia, and Tyco may represent the final consequence of leader ethics that had in fact been eroding employee perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors for some time. Our research suggests that long before such large-scale organizational consequences, leader ethics at both top and immediate supervisor levels have an important impact on employees.

### Author Notes

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>No mean differences were found by survey administration; data were collapsed into a single sample. Further, because of the means of recruitment, response rate was not possible to calculate.

<sup>2</sup>Permission was granted by the author of the original scale to partition it into two subscales.

<sup>3</sup>This scale was originally used by peers to rate others. We revised the scale for use as a self-report.

<sup>4</sup>At the suggestion of a reviewer, we examined the possibility of a moderating effect of firm size on leader ethics. First we correlated the size of firm with the two leader ethics variables. Neither was significant (Top managerial ethics with firm size,  $r = -.069$ ; Supervisor ethics with firm size,  $r = -.021$ ). To explore the possibility that there might be differences by firm size, we also conducted a one-way ANOVA using firm size, which was grouped according to the categories represented in Table 1. ANOVAs were not significant for perceptions of ethics of either top leaders or immediate supervisor ( $F$  for top mgmt 1.565,  $p = .146$ ;  $F$  for immediate supervisor ethics = .329,  $p = .940$ ).

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Table 2

*Scale Item Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas and Correlations*

Variable	Mn	SD	Alpha	Top Leader	Immed. Super.
Organizational Climate <sup>a</sup>	4.34	.85	.80	.63****	.52****
Organizational Citizenship Behavior <sup>a</sup>					
Altruism	5.86	.80	.79	.12*	.15*
Courtesy	5.47	.81	.72	.12*	.10
Sportsmanship <sup>b</sup>	2.77	1.01	.60	-.11	-.18*
Civic virtue	5.01	1.15	.74	.27****	.31****
Conscientiousness	5.76	.91	.43	.07	.12*
Organizational Commitment <sup>a</sup>	3.98	.98	.85	.46****	.40****
Affective	4.32	1.39	.84	.57****	.54****
Continuance	3.94	1.27	.79	-.00	-.02
Normative	3.67	1.37	.84	.49****	.41****
Leadership Ethics <sup>a</sup>	4.77	1.33	.92		
Top leader	4.52 <sup>d</sup>	1.49	.91		.68****
Immediate supervisor	5.09 <sup>d</sup>	1.38	.81		

Notes. <sup>a</sup> Measure uses seven point scale. <sup>b</sup> This subscale is reverse scored; a low score indicates greater sportsmanship. <sup>c</sup> Measure uses five point scale. <sup>d</sup> Difference in item means is statistically different ( $t_{285} = 8.654$ ,  $p < .001$ ). N for correlations ranges from 280 to 293.

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*\*  $p < .001$