

Analysing the relationship between ethical leadership and the voice of Malaysian Muslim employees



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Ethical behaviour, in its simplest terms, means knowing and doing what is right. Nevertheless, the main difficulty is how to define the word 'right'. For this purpose, various individuals, cultures and religions have thus far portrayed it in different ways. The present study reflected on the Islamic society, wherein ethical leadership has been one of the most effective factors in its continuation of life and success, with a vital role in its growth, development and progress. Accordingly, the relationship between ethical leadership and the voice of Muslim employees in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2021, as the statistical population ($n = 2500$) was analysed. For this purpose, a standard questionnaire was used to collect the necessary data, whose validity was confirmed by the construct validity in the Linear Structural Relations (LISREL) software and its reliability was checked via the Cronbach's alpha in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Besides, path analysis was utilised to test the research hypothesis. Confirmatory factor analysis was correspondingly implemented to examine the data. Ultimately, the study results revealed a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership and the voice of Malaysian Muslim employees ($p = 0.80$; $t = 5.02$).

Contribution: Based on the literature review and the results of this study, ethical leadership can motivate Muslim citizens to participate in decision-making processes and even allows them to express their creative ideas in organisations and society.

Keywords: ethical leadership; Islam; Muslim; religion; voice of Muslim citizens.

Introduction

Leaders face many challenges in various areas, including ethical leadership and behaviours, services and products, society, customers, suppliers, employees and the entire ecosystem in which they are operating. As employee performance is assessed in an organisation, the employees can also evaluate that of their leaders, as an ethical criterion (Men et al. 2020). In fact, ethics are an integral part of leadership. Therefore, the moment individuals accept a leadership position, they must be prepared to be in the public view. In addition, they should have flawless attitudes and behave in a tactful manner and even show accountability toward employees and the entire society as a leader. Such people further need to know that all of their words and actions are being watched by their followers. Everything a leader says and does can thus bring a wide range of impacts, from very low to infinity. Accordingly, leadership is associated with numerous responsibilities and excessive caution (Bouckenooghe, Zafar & Raja 2015).

Moreover, there is a need to consider leaders as modern heroes who believe in ethical leadership. These individuals move patiently, carefully and consistently in the right direction, and their actions are connected with the correction or prevention of ethical errors in the workplace. They are also able to see the 'end of work' and have vision capacity and even have the power to predict the influence of each small action on that vision. In addition, such leaders guarantee that ethical behaviour is an organisational value and vision, and workplace-performance appraisal systems need to be integrated with ethics. Furthermore, these leaders dedicate extensive efforts to the gradual formation of cultures, in which people proudly adhere to values and ethics (Demirtas & Akdogan 2015).

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Ethical leadership does not involve the best outcome for shareholders; in fact, it means being capable of seeing oneself in the mirror and telling others that they have done the right thing. Besides, ethical leadership denotes being able to live with one's decisions in daily life and then rest comfortably at night. It does not entail winning a battle but doing your best shot. Respect and leadership go hand in hand. As a leader, it is of utmost importance to earn the respect of others while treating them with respect. Most people like their leaders, and being respected by one's leader creates a positive work environment (Avey, Wernsing & Palanski 2012).

Distinguishing good actions from bad ones is thus vital for self-awareness, without which ethical leadership has no meaning. Actually, ethical leadership is so important that it has been constantly mentioned in the ayats (viz. verses) of the holy Quran (e.g. Surah Al-Qalam, Ayat 4; Surah Al-Ahzab, Ayat 21; Surah As-Saff, Ayat 9; and Surah Al Imran, Ayat 159).

Today, people are going through a difficult time socially and economically. The surrounding world is also evolving rapidly, and people need leaders to guide them in the vicissitudes of changes to a better world. However, everyone likes to have an ethical leader. In this regard, the effective factors are increasing every day because of the emergence of complicated, dynamic and competitive environments. In addition, the nature of these factors is changing every day (Krettenauer & Hertz 2015), which have shortened the product and service life cycle, changed customers' expectations and drawn attention to product and service quality. In this situation, human capital can be assumed as a factor of growth and development for an organisation (Kacmar et al. 2011). The expression of ideas is thus identified as the voice of employees, and withholding ideas is called silence. Behaviourally, these two activities are opposite to one another. The difference between silence and voice is not just in making remarks, but building motivation, which is the most important factor that leads to the expression of ideas in an organisation or withholding employees' voice in another one (Mo & Shi 2017). Silence is introduced as the sociology of the workplace, not the psychology of people at work. In addition, it becomes a collective action and identified as organisational silence when the members choose to be silent about organisational issues. Therefore, silence can be an active, conscious, intentional and purposeful reaction. An example occurs when the employees of an organisation refrain from providing confidential information to others (Hung & Paterson 2017). Given the importance of this subject, the present study aimed to analyse the role of ethical leadership on the voice of Malaysian Muslim employees in 2021.

Ethical leadership

In its simplest definition, ethical behaviour means knowing and doing what is right. The real difficulty is in characterising the word 'right'. In fact, it is pictured in different ways by various people, cultures and religions. How women are treated and how slavery is viewed in diverse cultures and at different times are thus among the excellent examples of this

issue, showing how much the word 'right' can be miscellaneous (Nicholson & Kurucz 2019). While many people define ethics and morality in the same way, these two concepts must be distinguished from each other. In general, ethics is based on a set of social norms or philosophical rules that comply with logic, whereas morality is founded on a collection of often broader, religious and cultural beliefs and values, as well as other rules that might not go along with logic. However, morality can be the basis for an ethical system (Lee et al. 2017).

Ethical behaviour indicates a value system that is often rooted in a coherent view of the world, based on equity, justice, needs and rights of oneself and others, a sense of commitment to others and society, as well as legal standards in a community. This definition, however, is not complete (Ehrhart 2004). For instance, what forms the basis of the legal needs and standards of society has been constantly debated for centuries and even changed with the evolution of societies. Ethical leadership is thus a completely different kind of leadership. In fact, ethical leaders serve instead of wishing to be followed by others. In addition, ethical leaders intend to expand others' capacities rather than highlighting their own skills. Moreover, this type of leadership is not related to ranking, and anyone with any position can become an ethical leader. These individuals, however, have a deep sense of ethics, are driven by core ideals (such as justice) and are motivated to achieve higher rankings (Brown & Treviño 2006). Ethical leadership is also related to certain capacities and skills. Firstly, ethical leaders know how to manage themselves, alleviate their interests and act with decency and honesty. They are also insightful people and influence character change. Such leaders even have the knowledge of emotional intelligence and key social skills. They work to eliminate barriers by their counselling skills. Moreover, these leaders agree on diversity and unity. Ethical leaders are also the conscience (viz. ethical compass) of an organisation and its maintenance element (Kalshoven, Den Hartog & De Hoogh 2013).

Overall, ethical leadership encompasses two elements. Firstly, ethical leaders must act and make ethical decisions, like all morally inclined human beings. Secondly, ethical leaders must ethically 'lead' in the way they interact with others on a daily basis, in their attitudes, in the ways in which they encourage others and in the direction they lead their organisation, institution or headquarters (Mark 2007).

Ethical leadership is also both explicit and implicit; the former is how they cooperate with others, behave in a group and talk and operate, but the latter is related to their character, decision-making process, mental structure, values and rules and audacity to make ethical decisions in difficult situations. In fact, ethical leaders always act morally and not just when they are watched by others. They have always acted based on ethics and have repeatedly proven that ethics is an essential part of the intellectual and philosophical system they use to understand and relate to the world (Brown, Treviño & Harrison 2005).

Moreover, ethical leaders guide themselves with the values and behaviours they develop over time and based on experience. The examples of such values are honesty, respect, accountability, a sense of community, capacity, fairness and service. In addition, ethical leaders have their own emotions and cannot be threatened by others. They also realise that they are not the most important part, and leadership is not about them (Graf et al. 2012). Real leaders respect others and prioritise their interests over their own. Such individuals do not even impose their values on others but consider others' values. They interact and understand others. A combination of their own values and that of other groups also generates a vision for a better future. People also seek ethical leadership when they demand change. Leaders do not fear change and have the courage and conviction that they share a common vision to strive for positive change (Bavik et al. 2018).

It rarely occurs that everyone agrees with each other. Leaders listen to people with different perspectives and try to attract everyone. They also know not to make divisions. Ethical leaders do their best to set a goal in order to motivate as many people as possible to participate in making positive changes for the greater good (Forner et al. 2020).

Voice of employees

A comprehensive literature review revealed that the word 'voice' has been thus far defined as the oral expression of ideas, information and opinions about working with a positive motivation to collaborate passively, positively and altruistically in organisations. In today's world, it is of utmost importance to listen to the voice of employees because their views can solve many organisational issues, and their voice reflects their interests and demands from management (Hung & Paterson 2017). Researchers have always given emphasis on the importance of employees' participation in the decision-making process and expressing their opinions in various forms, thanks to the positive outcomes in this regard. They have also assessed the factors facilitating employees' ability to express their own opinions. According to Pinder and Harlos (2011), organisations with cultures of injustice foster in which employees lose hope to comment on organisational issues. Whiteside and Barclay (2016) had also declared that organisational justice could improve the belief in people that they could make significant changes in their environment.

In other words, employees will be encouraged to express their views and ideas for more improvement to the benefit of the organisation when they feel that the interests and resources of an organisation are fairly allocated, the procedures for allocating these resources are nondiscriminatory and supervisors are unbiased in their dealings with subordinates. Employees can thus do well to their organisation with their feedback when they believe that their ideas can make important changes in the environment (Liang, Farh & Farh 2012). Organisations can greatly benefit from such a workforce. In fact, having sensitive human resources in organisations who attempt to be useful by providing novel ideas is favourable.

However, organisational voice is a broad concept, whose different aspects and types have been thus far assessed. This concept does not necessarily mean the expression of positive opinions by employees, but it can involve some destructive behaviours (Treviño, Chao & Wang 2015). The Holy Quran has also mentioned the autonomy of people in expressing their opinions directly and indirectly. In this regard, the Prophet (Surah Al Imran, Ayat 159), believers (Surah Ash-Shura, Ayat 38), family members (Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayat 233) and righteous servants (Surah Az-Zumar, Ayat 18) form the themes of these ayats (viz. verses) in terms of expressing opinions. In western literature, Van Dyne, Ang and Botero (2003) had also developed a model to describe employees' motivation in the workplace, regarding expressing their voice. In this respect, they had introduced three types of voice: (1) *obedient voice*, motivated by neutrality, wherein employees, believing that they cannot change the status quo, will only express ideas and opinions in confirmation of the current situation. Based on motivations, an obedient voice is the expression of ideas, information and opinions depending on the feeling of surrender. This type of voice is a non-participatory behaviour founded on the feeling that the person is not able to change the situation. Therefore, this type of voice leads to the expression of statements of agreement and support for the status quo, based on the mentioned motivation (Chen & Hou 2016), (2) *defensive voice*: in this type of voice, the person expresses their opinions about a subject, fearing that expressing their ideas and opinions or providing specific information on a subject can have some consequences for them, such as punishment and insult. This type of voice is motivated by self-protection. In fact, a defensive voice is based on self-protection. Such a behaviour occurs with less personal responsibility and risk-free decision-making. Therefore, people will generally show defensive behaviour to protect themselves if they fear the consequences of punishment for discussing the problems of the organisation. These behaviours include shifting attention, blaming others, as well as apologising, justifying and denying as the self-protection strategies, in which voice occurs as a reaction to the feeling of fear and threat. Based on these features, a defensive voice is identified as an expression of opinions, information or ideas about work because of fear or self-protection (Walumbwa, Morrison & Christensen, 2012) and (3) *altruistic voice*: this type of voice is motivated by altruism and goodwill, which are opposed to personal self-interest. In this type of behaviour, individuals comment on the assumption that expressing their ideas and opinions can benefit the organisation or their colleagues. Similar to altruistic silence, altruistic voice requires awareness and insight and might not be demanded by the organisation ever. In fact, speaking explicitly and making suggestions for change may be one of the types of organisational citizen behaviours as this type of behaviour requires personal risk, because many employees in an organisation (especially those with a powerful position) feel satisfied with the path they are on and prefer to maintain the status quo. Therefore, an altruistic voice is not always considered a positive phenomenon by its recipients (Liang et al. 2012).

In fact, there is a three-element framework for the voice presented by these researchers, including altruistic voices based on the motivation of otherness, defensive voices founded with the motivation of self-support and obedient voices characterised by submission and consent to existing conditions. With reference to the related literature, it seems that leadership styles can be effective factors in employees' voice. Therefore, the following hypothesis was raised among Muslims in Malaysia:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between ethical leadership and the voice of Malaysian Muslims.

Methodology

The statistical population of this study included 2500 Muslims in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, selected randomly from 60 service organisations in the areas of tourism, education, finance and accounting and art. In total, 2387 questionnaires were returned. Notably, the Ethical Leadership at Work (ELW) questionnaire, developed by Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh (2011), was applied to collect the data in this regard. This 23-item instrument could evaluate the four components of integrity, power sharing, fairness and ethical guidelines. On the other hand, the Organizational Voice Questionnaire (OVQ; Zehir & Erdogan 2011) was applied to assess the voice of Muslim employees in Malaysia. This 15-item tool could evaluate the three components of obedient, defensive and altruistic voice. In terms of gender, 69% of the participants were male and the rest (31%) were female. Regarding marital status, 73% of the participants were married and 27% of them were single. Moreover, 31% of the individuals recruited in this study were aged below 20 years, whereas 58% and 22% of the participants were aged 30–40 and above 40 years, respectively. In this study, the reliability of the ELW and the OVQ was also confirmed with the Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 and 0.79, respectively. In addition, their validity was approved based on the fit indexes of the structural model. In this respect, chi-square (X^2)/degree of freedom (df) < 3, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < 0.1 and p -value < 0.05 signified the appropriate validity of the tools.

Data analysis

The research hypothesis was tested using the linear structural relations (LISREL) software and structural equation modeling (SEM). Figure 1 depicts the structural model developed in the present study, wherein ethical leadership was considered as an independent variable and then assessed along with the four components of integrity, power sharing, fairness and ethical guidelines. In contrast, the voice of Malaysian Muslims was regarded as the dependent variable, evaluated using the three components of obedient, defensive and altruistic voices.

According to Table 1, the rejection or acceptance of the research hypothesis was carried out based on p -value and

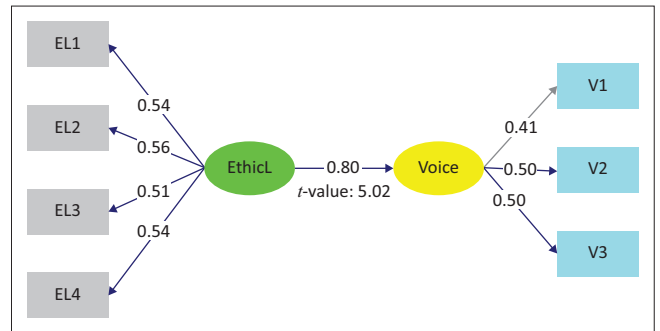


FIGURE 1: Structural model.

TABLE 1: The results of research hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	p	t	Results
Ethical Leadership → Voice of Muslims	0.80	5.02	Confirmed

TABLE 2: The fit indexes of the model.

Acceptable range	Values	Fit indexes
< 3	2.5421	X^2 /degree of freedom
< 0.05	0.0003	Significance
< 0.10	0.081	Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)
> 0.90	0.99	Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)
> 0.90	0.97	Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)
> 0.90	0.99	Comparative Fit Index (CFI)
> 0.90	0.99	Incremental Fit Index (IFI)

t -value. As observed, p -value = 0.80 showed a positive relationship between the research variables. In addition, t -value = 5.02 approved a significant relationship in this respect. Moreover, the fit indexes of the model are presented in Table 2, which were in the acceptable range and approved the reliability and generalisability of the results.

Discussion

People often refrain from telling the truth because of the fear of retaliation, especially when an authoritarian approach is used by the management system. Anyone who conveys bad news to such a leadership will be symbolically punished. In this situation, people do not speak out against the group's policies for the fear of being considered rude. They further dismiss negative facts in order to look optimistic. This tendency is likely to spread throughout organisations at all levels of management. The natural consequence is to keep management satisfied, which creates a widespread desire to give positive feedback and hide negative issues and even prevents the transfer of information to the higher levels of organisations. In other words, leadership style has a significant impact on the silence of employees. In general, individuals tend to give positive feedback to managers and avoid negative ones. That is, people try to keep management satisfied and sometimes lie flatteringly, which is explicitly forbidden in the Holy Quran (Surah Al-Mujadila, Ayat 8). The voice of employees is also related to the leadership structure. In this sense, some leaders are committed to collective goals and encourage employees to solve problems innovatively, which have been

attributed to mental security. A positive relationship between leadership and members in organisations also lays the foundation for expressing different opinions. In contrast, the amount of speaking decreases when employees realise that they are working for managers who seem to be abusing.

Conclusion

According to the results of the present study, ethical leadership improved the voice of Muslim employees working in Malaysian organisations (p -value = 0.80, t -value = 5.02). Leaders can thus create a safe environment for these individuals to express constructive feedback by adhering to high ethical standards.

Despite the increasing trend in research on the role of leadership behaviour, there is still no accurate method that make employees feel autonomous. Some behaviours that strengthen autonomy include engaging employees in discussions and decisions, asking for more information and feedback, not responding hostilely and taking action on issues that have all been stated. Notably, all these items have been underlined by Islam. However, there is no valid theory about different types of such behaviours and not much research has been thus far done on that of the leaders. It is thus recommended to conduct further studies to evaluate the behaviours of leaders who do stifle the voice of employees unintentionally and correct their behaviours. Because of their limited time and attention, managers might inadvertently behave in a way that comes across as negligence, such as lack of active listening and responding with anger. At the same time, power can cause leaders to engage in hostile or authoritarian behaviour that silences subordinates. The study findings accordingly demonstrated that adherence to Islamic teachings could lead to an appropriate behavioural model that results in valuable outcomes for the Islamic community.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

The authors contributed equally to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

Data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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