

The Effect of Ethical Leadership on Employee Engagement: The Mediating Role of Work Meaningfulness and Person-Organization Fit. Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

*Ethical Leadership,
Employee Engagement,
Work Meaningfulness
Person-Organization
Fit, Self-Efficacy,
Social Exchange
Theory.*

Ethical leadership is increasingly essential for cultivating a vibrant workplace and strengthening employee-organization relationships. Using the framework of social exchange theory, this research delves into how ethical leadership directly affects employee engagement and indirectly influences it through work meaningfulness and person-organization fit. Additionally, it examines how self-efficacy shapes the connection between employee engagement and person-organization fit. The study used a cross-sectional analysis with Structural Equation Modeling following data gathered from 279 employees across two Iranian factories. The findings highlight that employee engagement is influenced by ethical leadership, work meaningfulness, and person-organization fit. Moreover, work meaningfulness and person-organization fit mediate the positive impact of ethical leadership on employee engagement. Additionally, self-efficacy moderates the relationship between person-organization fit and employee engagement. The findings provide new perspectives for business organizations by articulating a novel mechanism in ethical leadership literature to boost employee engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In modern organizational settings, mainly during ethical and corporate misconduct crises, reputation can be destroyed and undermines employee trust and engagement. Ethical leadership is recognized as a critical managerial activity (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Onakoya et al., 2018). The era has passed by when a leader could possess unethical behavior and not be caught at all, irrespective of where it is or how large it is (Zhang et al., 2018). This study analyzes the complex interrelations between ethical leadership and employee engagement, looking at work meaningfulness and Person-organization (P-O) fit mediating this

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relationship and self-efficacy plays a critical moderating role. Still, revealing what causes high levels of employee engagement or low levels of it, especially regarding the influence of leadership styles, is an issue to be further researched. The latest evidence indicates that engagement is a common factor. They are still separate constructs with different mechanisms and outcomes when leadership practices are involved (Cai et al., 2023). Although the widespread focus has been on leadership's style direct impact, the mediating and modulating mechanisms that bind these two constructs together are less analyzed.

Work meaningfulness and P-O Fit mediate the robust correlation between ethical leadership and employee engagement (Ashfaq et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2015; Xi et al., 2022). Leaders appearing ethical would instill a culture that employees feel would match their values with organizational values, increasing perceptions of P-O Fit (Lu et al., 2019). Value alignment enhances the meaningfulness of work. More than that, self-efficacy has a moderating role in this dynamic. In particular, workers who have high Self-efficacy increases one's propensity to accept and reflect ethical standards set by the leaders; hence, their heightened engagement by feeling both empowered and motivated within a value-aligned and supportive environment is expected (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Taiyi Yan et al., 2022).

This study has the purpose of looking at how leaders and subordinates interact and how this interaction and leadership is impactful in making employees more motivated and engaged to perceive the value in the organization in which they work. It is grounded in the principles of Social Exchange Theory (SET). The Social Exchange Theory postulates that workers should be more engaged and show organizational citizenship behaviors when they feel their leaders are ethical and trustworthy (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to previous research, work design and organizational culture are just some of the elements that other factors affect employee engagement (Farzianpour et al., 2016; George et al., 2020; Rasool et al., 2021). Meaningfulness of work and person-organization fit have emerged as leading predictors of the level of engagement exhibited by individuals (Vogel et al., 2020). However, how leadership—in particular, ethical leadership—and its effects on enhancing or decreasing engagement still needs to be more thoroughly explored. Since this is a new research domain, another primary motive for our study is to investigate the fundamental mechanisms and boundary conditions related to ethical leadership, work meaningfulness, person-organization fit, and employee engagement. This study will help to advance insight into how ethical leadership relates to employee engagement—via the mediating mechanisms

of work meaningfulness and person-organization fit—and how individual confidence in one's abilities amplifies this effect.

We contribute to the literature on ethical leadership, work meaningfulness, employee engagement, and person-organization fit with three key contributions. First, based on our literature review, we are, to the best of our knowledge, studying these variables in a country that is trying to have a leadership style similar to the modern style in the Middle East; they to be the first to test the mediating mechanisms of work meaningfulness and the moderating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement. Previous research has focused on the role of ethical leadership in influencing various organizational outcomes; however, all such findings on the topics of meaningfulness of work and work engagement cannot be generalized.

With a complete understanding of the complex dynamics involved, organizations can develop leadership practices that not only enhance performance but also foster a workforce that is engaged, involved, and 'bounces back' from challenges (Alherimi et al., 2024; Goon et al., 2022). It is, therefore, through investigating this complex interplay between the relationships of ethical leadership, job meaningfulness, employee engagement, and person-organization fit that valuable insights can be gained for organizations working towards better employee performance and well-being.

Theory and hypotheses development

Ethical leadership and Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement can be defined as a combination of commitment, loyalty, productivity, and obligation. (Wellins & Concelman, 2005). Employee engagement encompasses employees' well-being and job performance in such actions (Kwon & Kim, 2020) leader and supervisors can enhance their possibilities of recruiting and retaining precious employees by providing a positive and friendly environment that promotes worker engagement (Motyka, 2018). Though this is rational, employee engagement is essential for organizational leaders and employees. So, it is more likely a response to the ethical values of ethical leaders who foster employee engagement as one of the outcome factors for the organization (Ashfaq et al., 2021).

We draw that the correlation between ethical leadership and employee engagement can be supported by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017). when we believe a leader can increase benefits and decrease the costs inside the organization. In addition, any ethical perception values the employee as a resource in the organization; therefore, they will reciprocate to their

organization via commitment, loyalty, and engagement to their work and their moral behavior by their leader. Employee behavior can reflect their commitment, often influenced by their Trust in their leader, which makes them confident in their job and leads them to increase engagement in the organization (Prastio et al., 2020). Employee engagement results from leadership action in the workplace and its character perceived by employees, which is a direct reaction to their leadership morals approach with integrity (Ahmad et al., 2021). Therefore, when subordinates know that their leader, even in decision-making, exhibits ethical conduct, they are more likely to participate in the organization and potentially benefit from the firm's decisions (Hoang et al., 2023). We hypothesize as follows:

H1: Ethical leadership is positively related to Employee Engagement.

Ethical leadership and work meaningfulness

The leadership approach is one of the important phenomena for subordinates to get motivated toward the organization's goal, so it is something more related to feeling that gives a meaningful environment inside the organization. In social exchange theory, when people feel and perceive someone as powerful and follow morality and ethics, the job is meaningful, so they try to make it up to their leader through performance (Ahmad et al., 2021; Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Some scholars believe people's meaningfulness in work is related to the moral responsibility made in the workplace by a leader (Shamir et al., 1993). The concept of social exchange theory, Blau (1964) clarifies the behavior of individuals within the workplace when they perceive their leader to be fair, and this makes them valuable resource in their workplace. This kind of leadership, the reverse of destructive leadership, never violates the psychological safety of staff, enabling people to express themselves and discover deeper meaning in their job (Burhan et al., 2023; Pour et al., 2024). Ethical leaders exhibit equality, honesty, and care for the well-being of employees, setting an example of responsible behavior (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown et al., 2005). Employees who witness and understand the moral behavior of their leaders are more likely to align their principles with those of the organization. This alignment increases the meaning of work for employees, as they perceive it as a component of a general ethical mission and purpose. The second hypothesis is hereby formulated as thus;

H2: There is a significant positive impact of Ethical leadership on Work Meaningfulness.

Work Meaningfulness and Employee Engagement

The meaningfulness of effort is the role in which an employee is driven to possessive emotions to achieve organizational goals and objectives (Kaur & Mittal, 2020). Organization-

based positive meaning is a successful factor in the life circle of the organization that manages their employee to reach employee engagement as a positive outcome. As jobs are very meaningful, they can be defined by any position in an organization to stay loyal and committed, so clearly can yield relationships to engagement (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). any mechanism that gives employees a better meaning of work in the workplace makes them adapt to the organization with no negative feelings, so they feel valuable at work, which makes them stay devoted to their industry (Nord et al., 1990; Steger et al., 2012). Therefore, the relationship between an employee and an organization can be strengthened by creating meaningful perceptions. So, this study can even justify the social exchange theory (SET). Workers are more committed to their occupations and exert their maximum effort when they perceive that their work is significant. The heightened investment has been seen in the increased levels of work engagement. When individuals experience substantial psychological benefits from their work, they exhibit increased engagement, demonstrating a strong commitment and enthusiasm toward their job responsibilities (Joubert, 2020; May et al., 2004). Based on the above review, the study therefore hypothesized as follows.

H3: *There is a significant impact of Work meaningfulness on Employee Engagement.*

Work meaningfulness mediation

Several studies suggest a positive relationship between employees finding their work meaningful and higher trust in their leaders. When individuals experience notable psychological benefits from their work, they tend to exhibit increased engagement, demonstrating a strong commitment and enthusiasm towards their job obligations. This Correlates with higher levels of Trust in their leaders (Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018; Enwereuzor et al., 2020). Moreover, Work meaningfulness serves as a mediator between ethical leadership and employee engagement. Ethical leadership influences engagement through the psychological state of work meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990). When the job that follows ethical management, that makes moral conditions in the organization for employees to be committing and loyal to organizational desire, we consider one phenomenon of meaningfulness is based on Trust and atmosphere, so ethical leadership as based can mediate meaningfulness in connection to engagement (Ahmad et al., 2021; Prastio et al., 2020; Wang & Xu, 2019). In addition, we can state that when loyalty and engagement are perceived by employees in an organization, they reciprocate through their social exchange to ethical behaviors (Håvold et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2024). Based on the presented arguments and using the Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study asserts that ethical leaders can enhance

employees' engagement by fostering a sense of meaningfulness in their work. As a result, employees develop Trust in their leaders and reciprocate this Trust through increased work engagement. Thus, the current study proposes the fourth hypothesis as follows:

H4: *Work meaningfulness mediates the relationship between Ethical leadership and Employee Engagement.*

Ethical leadership and Person-Organization Fit

Ethical leadership is creating and forming ethical norms and behavior in an organization. This encourages Employees, without dictating follow behavior and culture, to fit inside the organization's environment and positively take action and operation via organization benefits and jobs (Kerse, 2021). Kristof (1996) states that "Person-Organization fit is compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when at least one entity provides what the other needs or they share similar fundamental characteristics of both". Person-organization fit is a Work principle that is a prominent part of how people evaluate. People are naturally attracted to jobs with companies that value similar to their own. In turn, companies hire people whose values align with their principles (Morley, 2007; Schneider, 2001). Under the supervision of this leadership, the employee endeavors to conform to the organization's standards. In this process, the organization and individual endeavor to address and satisfy each other's mutual requirements by reciprocating benefits between the organization and leader. In this manner, an individual develops more confidence in the organization and its leaders (Cable & Edwards, 2004).

Although rationalized, when employees are treated appropriately and accorded positive values, they are motivated to develop their personality and attitude to align with the organization's objectives. This can be viewed as a passive approach to leadership (Seong et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2022). A leader can create a culture based on ethical behavior and rules, be transparent for the employees so that they can follow what leadership does, and fit their personality impact to the organization's ethical environment and behavior of individuals so anyone tries to do their best to fit into what organization condition through organization outcomes (Al Halbasi et al., 2021; Van Wyk, 1989). We can even explain that this relationship between Ethical leader and person organization fits by the Social Exchange theory that, in this part, individuals' reciprocity to each other's behavior. That means if they see goods, try to return goods, and if they see negative treatment, they will be treated negatively. Maybe they cannot do this because of the position they have in the organization to their leader reverse of what he has ruled, but they do over any reward they received (Aselage

& Eisenberger, 2003; Wang & Noe, 2010). From the above arguments, the study hypothesizes as follows:

H5: *There is a significant positive impact of Ethical leadership on the Person-organization Fit.*

Person-Organization Fit on Employee Engagement

Person-Organization Fit is the standard term used to describe the compatibility level between persons and organizations, which is Person-Organization fit (Bryson et al., 2015). In addition, it can be stated by other scholars as the "harmony between patterns of organizational and individual values" (Chatman, 1989). Research conducted by many resource scholars consistently supports the existence of a negative correlation between person-organization fit and turnover intention. This can be defined in the case of employees with a higher congruence in the organization and individual Fit, which can impact the engagement of employees (Memon et al., 2014; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). In addition, A study conducted in the engineering sector in Malaysia revealed a robust correlation between person-organization fit and employee engagement (Hamid & Yahya, 2011).

Human behavior and reactions are valuable resources that influence any positive outcome. Person-organization Fit and employee engagement These are two interdependent elements but can influence each other ultimately; each variable can impact people's behaviors and bring out the best intention in employees to remain with the organization (Aydemir & Endirlik, 2023; Kim et al., 2013; Westerman & Cyr, 2004). To motivate people to achieve their highest potential, it is important to do tasks that best fit the organization and inspire them and others to prefer the organization they are working for compared to other workplaces and do their best within the task they assign (Dhir & Dutta, 2020). Drawing from the contention above, the sixth hypothesis is hereby formulated.

H6: *There is a significant impact of Person-Organization Fit on Employee Engagement.*

Person-organization Fit as a mediator between ethical leadership and employee engagement.

Person-organization Fit entails the practical of belonging that individuals share with the organization. It involves personnel fit with the environment inside the organization's objectives, ethics, and culture supported By higher authorities (Sidal & Akbaba, 2023). Generally, leaders are considered an important source for personal organization Fit. When staff members believe they are receiving proper treatment, Moraly, with empowerment and transparent decision-making and standard norms, influences organization Fit and engagement (Kılıç, 2010; Sidal & Akbaba, 2023). Therefore, the person-organization Fit effect was

generally mediated and supported human resources behavior for employees through job satisfaction and Employee Engagement (Westerman & Cyr, 2004). Biswas and Bhatnagar (2013) investigated the influence of employee engagement on person-organization fit and Organisational performance results. The results suggested that employee engagement can contribute to establishing a person-organization fit. The study revealed that workplace conditions exhibited the Primary connection, followed by organizational leadership and POF. The relationship between organizational leadership and person-organization fit can act as a mediator in influencing employee commitment and engagement within a company. The study by Yang et al. (2020) found that personal Organization Fit mediates the relationship between EL and employee engagement. Following the above affirmations, the study formulate the seventh hypothesis as follows:

H7: *Person-Organization Fit mediates the relationship between Ethical leadership and Employee Engagement.*

Moderating role of self-efficacy

Self-efficacy as a Moderator is grounded on the individual's belief, control, and perception of their capacity to perform a task in an environment (Bandura, 1997). Moreover, it can play an essential role in the successful outcomes of the organization (Waddington, 2023). Self-efficacy can even give a brighter view regarding work the organization and the situation in which they work. Self-efficacy helps staff to have better tasks and control with better results. Also, it can create and motivate success in jobs related to firms (Zen et al., 2023). We could argue that it is a significant phenomenon in an organization's human resources (Diawati et al., 2023). Additional variables can contribute to effective leadership, employee commitment, and workplace success (Azzaakiyyah, 2023; Tunio et al., 2021). Ethical leadership is distinguished by fairness, adherence to ethical principles, and making morally correct organizational decisions, fostering a conducive environment for employees (Brown & Treviño, 2006). These ethical norms can impact employee engagement; therefore, when self-efficacy is high in relationships, employees can better engage with the organization when they can control and do their jobs. Therefore, the reverse comes true; employees with low self-efficacy may avoid assigning the same level of engagement (Waddington, 2023). Engagement occurs when employees align themselves with leadership and demonstrate the skills and abilities to meet the goals set by leadership (Zhou et al., 2022). Work meaningfulness can be defined as the employee's perception that their role serves a purpose and is aligned with their identity. Consequently, employees with a higher self-efficacy tend to find their employment more meaningful and are more engaged in the organization.

Thus, harnessing the power of a robust sense of self-efficacy at a high level, which arises from the employee's abilities, can lead to increased organizational success (Law & Guo, 2016; Spreitzer, 1995). Moreover, the converse demonstrates a low self-efficacy when individuals perceive work as meaningful but lack capability. Having this control over their ability to use their capability in the job can weaken the result of work meaningfulness and employee engagement (Martinez et al., 2021). Employees are fit for the organization if they believe in values influenced by the atmosphere (Kristof, 1996). Employees with organizational Fit are more friendly and closer to the environment and engage with leaders and organizations. As the level of self-efficacy inside an organization is high, they are more feeling to adjust to the high level of engagement in their workplace (Qu & Wang, 2022). Person-organization fit refers to the "congruence between an individual's values, beliefs, and personality and the values, norms, and culture" (Kristof, 1996). Perceiving a solid fit with their organization leads to increased employee engagement and a greater sense of alignment with the organizational objectives, making them more satisfied with their work environment (Cable & DeRue, 2002). When the employees believe in their capability to do work regarding the organization's goals, this amplifies their task and engagement, and they yield their values and beliefs via organizational commitment and engagement to achieve goals (Steiner et al., 2020). In contrast, low self-efficacy never experience the same level of engagement, even when they engage in their organization. After a while, this might harm the relationship between person-organization fit and employee engagement. In line with the above arguments, the eighth proposition is hereby formulated.

H8. *Self-Efficacy Moderate the relationship between Person-Organization Fit and Employee Engagement.*

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design data collection and analysis methods. The study was conducted in two factories in Iran, one in Mashhad and the other in Zanjan, but one leader managed it as the owner. The target population for the study consisted of 1100 employees. However, a sample size of 285 was determined from the above population with Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Data Collection Procedure

Given the factory's operational hours, the researchers assured participants that their information would be treated with confidentiality and that their names would be maintained

anonymous. Participants were also asked to participate in the study and provide verbal consent voluntarily. The researchers administered 285 copies of the questionnaire to the participants but only 279 copies of the instrument were correctly filled leaving 6 copies invalid. This implies that 279 copies of the instruments were used for data analysis.

Measures

All English questionnaire items were translated into Persian. Following the back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980).

Ethical Leadership (IV): We employed the 10-item Scale by Brown et al. (2005) to assess Ethical Leadership. Sample items include “My supervisor/Manager listens to what employees have to say” and “My supervisor/Manager disciplines employees who violate ethical standards”. Respondents completed the measures using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=disagree, 2= strongly disagree, 1- not at all).

Employee Engagement (DV): Following our study (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003), with 9 items with the following lead-in statement: “At my work, I feel bursting with energy” and ended with the statements such as “I get carried away when I am working”. Respondents completed the measures using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=disagree, 2= strongly disagree, 1- not at all).

Self-Efficacy (MO): This was assessed using General Self-Efficacy Scale, developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) with 10 items including “I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough”. Also “If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want”. “It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals”. Respondents completed the measures using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=disagree, 2= strongly disagree, 1- not at all).

Work Meaningfulness (MD): cross-validation strategy (e.g., Mosier, 1951; Yu, 2003) with 10 items as “I have found a meaningful career." And" I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning”. Respondents completed the measures using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=disagree, 2= strongly disagree, 1- not at all).

Person-Organization Fit (MED): Based on questions used by Cable and Judge (1996) 3, items include “The values and personality of this work reflect my own values and personality" "My values match those of current in this work” “I feel my values fit this work and the current colleagues in this organization”. Respondents completed the measures using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=disagree, 2= strongly disagree, 1- not at all).

ANALYSIS

Initially, the statistics were examined through SPSS and reported in Table 1 below with Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (S.D) for EL (36.0, 6.0), WE (26.0, 6.5), SE (42.6, 6.6), WM (39.9, 5.5), and POF (6.8, 2.4) as seen in Table 1.

Table 1 : Descriptive Statistics

		Statistics				
		EL	WE	SE	WM	POF
N	Valid	279	279	279	279	279
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		36.0753	26.0143	42.6022	39.9104	6.8459
Std. Error of Mean		.36002	.38922	.39778	.33304	.14789
Median		37.0000	27.0000	43.0000	40.0000	6.0000
Mode		40.00	27.00	49.00	40.00	6.00
Std. Deviation		6.01360	6.50123	6.64431	5.56284	2.47023

The reliability tests were also performed to check the quality of measurement scales. The Cronbach's alpha scores for EL, WE, SE, WM and POF are 0.900, 0.930, 0.951, 0.888 and 0.878 respectively. According to Pallant (2011), Cronbach's alpha of a scale above .70 indicates that the scales are of high reliability with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the threshold. After confirming the quality of the measurement scale, the correlation tests were executed. The relationship between EL and WE has a value of 0.354, indicating a positive significant relationship. Similarly, the correlation between EL & WM, WM & WE, EL & POF and POF & WE are also positive and significant, with a correlation of 0.430, 0.309, 0.183 and 0.347 respectively.

Table 2: Correlation

Relationship	Correlation	P Value
EL and WE	0.354	0.000
EL and WM	0.430	0.000
WM and WE	0.309	0.000
EL and POF	0.183	0.001
POF and WE	0.347	0.000

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Indirect Effects – Mediating Effect

The mediating effects are examined using PROCESS by Hayes (Model 4). Results for the mediating effect of WM between EL and WE indicate a mediation with a value of 0.089. Furthermore, with 95% confidence, the upper and lower values do not overlap with zero (0.028, 0.154) also supports the hypothesis. The second mediation of POF between EL and WE also has a significant effect value of 0.0578 with upper and lower confidence values lying between 0.020 and 0.102. Finally, the Hayes PROCESS Macro (model 1) of SPSS was used to investigate the moderating effect of SE on POF and WE, the result of interaction

between POF and WE was significant ($B[SE] = 0.049 [0.023]$, $p < 0.05$) see Table below 3 below.

Table 3: Interaction – Moderating Effect

R	R Square	MSE	F	p		p
0.3889	0.1513	36,2637	16,3381	0.000		
	Coeff	SE	T	P	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	28.286	7.057	4.008	0.000	14.393	42.179
POF	-1.202	1.010	-1.190	0.235	-3.190	0.7865
SE	0.195	0.161	-1.208	0.227	-0.513	0.1228
Int_1	0.049	0.023	2.116	0.0352	0.0034	0.0945

DISCUSSION

The current study aims to examine the intricate association between ethical leadership and employee engagement by incorporating work meaningfulness and person-organization fit as mediators, with self-efficacy as a moderator, all within a unified framework. Using a cross-sectional analysis with SEM, the study offers robust empirical evidence for all proposed hypotheses. By offering evidence-based insights, this study contributes to the broader field of organizational behavior by clarifying how ethical leadership, work meaningfulness, and person-organization fit impact deeply involved employees in their tasks. These findings provide valuable guidance for organizations seeking to foster a more motivated, committed, and productive workforce.

The study supports Hypothesis 1 positing that ethical leadership positively impacts employee engagement. This finding suggests that when leaders uphold an ethical work environment, employees are more likely to demonstrate commitment to their work. This positive association observed in this study aligns with findings from previous research (Alam et al., 2021; Ansong et al., 2024; Ashfaq et al., 2021; Bahadori et al., 2021; Bonner et al., 2016; Iddagoda et al., 2023; Mo & Shi, 2017; Sarwar et al., 2020). This consistency reinforces the idea that leaders who uphold ethical principles and demonstrate ethical behavior are more likely to serve as effective role models. Their attractiveness and credibility as leaders draw attention to their actions, thereby positively influencing their followers (Brown & Treviño, 2006). From the theoretical perspective, this relationship is reinforced by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017) which is used in workplace behavior literature to explain the leader-member exchange (Alam et al., 2021; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In this association, a mutual obligation arises from fulfilling responsibilities, which builds trust. When leaders act ethically, this trust is strengthened, leading to increased employee commitment and loyalty (Prastio et al., 2020). Overall, employee perception of ethical leadership, including perceived

integrity, fairness, and ethical decision-making are key factors driving higher levels of employee engagement.

Furthermore, this study reveals how multiple factors work together to shape employee engagement, highlighting that ethical leadership significantly influences employees' perceptions of work meaningfulness (H2) and person-organization fit (H5). This advocates that leaders who act ethically with their subordinates demonstrate significant character that supports employees' psychological well-being, gives deeper meaning to their work, and fosters a sense of belonging within the organization's purpose. These results were also obtained from previous research. For instance, align with studies highlighted ethical leaders are highly effective in enhancing followers' sense of meaning by connecting their work to broader organizational values, moral purpose, and social benefits (Demirtas et al., 2017; Mostafa & Abed El-Motalib, 2020). Furthermore, leaders who act with honesty, transparency, and trustworthiness inspire employees to develop positive values and do their best to align with organizational conditions through achieving objectives (Al Halbusi et al., 2020, 2021; Grobler & Holtzhausen, 2018; Huhtala & Feldt, 2016). Hence, ethical leadership greatly influences employees' perceptions and emotions by promoting satisfying work and organizational alignment.

In addition, this study posits that the linkage of ethical leadership to employee engagement is not only straightforward but in some what complex and intermediated. Therefore, this study deeper the analysis and reveals that the impact of ethical leadership on employee engagement is significantly and positively mediated by both person-organization fit (H7) and work meaningfulness (H4). These findings align with previous research highlighting the critical role of mediation in the relationship between leadership styles and work engagement. Consistent with the literature, both person-group fit and person-job fit positively mediate the link between effective leadership and work engagement (Cai et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020). Moreover, previous research findings reveal that person-organization fit is a critical mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and positive work expectations, reflected as psychological capital in the workplace (Grobler & Joubert, 2020). Person-organization fit also mediates the link between ethical leadership and work engagement, leading to heightened job commitment and reduced turnover intentions (Huhtala & Feldt, 2016). This intricate relationship underscores that the ethical qualities of leadership, such as morality, fairness, and integrity, are potent predictors of various work-related outcomes. These include fostering employee ethical behavior (Al Halbusi et al., 2021), reducing turnover intentions,

boosting commitment levels (Mitonga-Monga, 2018), increasing productivity (Grobler & Grobler, 2021), and strengthening interpersonal relationships with supervisors (Grobler & Holtzhausen, 2018). To sum it up, when leaders are fair and honest, it makes people around them feel more connected to their work. This helps them stay devoted and less likely to quit. Therefore, aligning employees' interests and values with the organization, along with fostering a positive workplace atmosphere are key drivers of influenceable ethical leadership and organizational success.

Above and beyond, the research model was made more complex by examining how self-efficacy affects the relationship between work meaningfulness and employee engagement. Unambiguously, the findings showed that self-efficacy moderates how strongly work meaningfulness impacts employee engagement (H8). This climaxes that the confident employees who feel about their abilities can change how much they find their work meaningful. This, in turn, affects how engaged they are with their work (Kim, 2023). In organizational behavior literature, self-efficacy is recognized as a powerful substance for exceptional performance (Schmidt & DeShon, 2010). However, to fully harness its potential, it must be paired with an effective leadership style to boost employee engagement and performance (Mulyanti et al., 2023; Riggs et al., 1994). Accordingly, our findings build on previous research. For instance, Yu et al. (2020) discovered that self-efficacy not only mediates the link between job satisfaction and work engagement but also bridges job satisfaction and job performance (Yu et al., 2020). Moreover, self-efficacy moderates the linkage between psychological empowerment (i.e., employees' belief in their ability to affect their work environment) and work engagement, as well as between affective commitment (i.e., emotional attachment to the organization from positive work experiences) and work engagement (Al Halbusi et al., 2023). Recently, a study found that self-efficacy moderates the impact of perceived distributive justice and respect from managers on employees' work meaningfulness and effort, affecting how these factors influence their job performance (Peng et al., 2024). As conclusion, the interaction terms of self-efficacy between work meaningfulness and employee engagement indicate that the relationship is stronger when self-efficacy is high rather than low.

Conclusion

This study uncovers the intricate mechanisms through which ethical leadership enhances work engagement via a series of mediating factors. Drawing on social exchange theory, the study found that employees are more likely to enjoy their work and be committed to them

when their leaders are fair and respectful, their work feels meaningful, they fit in with the organization, and they believe in their own abilities. Therefore, the study validates all hypotheses and underscores those factors such as ethical leadership, work meaningfulness, person-organization fit, and self-efficacy work together to create a positive and fulfilling work environment. Our study offers fresh theoretical and empirical insights into how ethical leadership influences work engagement, enriching contemporary organizational behavior literature.

Theoretical implications

The contributions of this research are emphasized in the three following points. First, our research model expands prior models that only highlight the direct link between ethical leadership and work engagement (Bahadori et al., 2021; Bonner et al., 2016; Fuller, 2021) by incorporating additional variables (i.e., work meaningfulness and person-organization fit) to explore how these factors jointly strengthen this association. Second, several studies underscore the importance of person-organization fit (i.e., congruence value, person-group fit) as a mediator between ethical leadership and employee outcomes (Grobler & Holtzhausen, 2018; Grobler & Joubert, 2020; Grobler & Grobler, 2021). However, this study extends these models by integrating work meaningfulness as a call of previous research by (Demirtas et al., 2017) For example, the study underscores that value congruence is crucial for fostering trust, communication, and employee satisfaction, while ethical leaders simultaneously shape an ethical climate, promoting person-organization fit and thereby enhancing career satisfaction (Xi et al., 2022). Third, by employing the social exchange theory ET, this study offers a novel contribution to the literature. While previous studies have primarily relied on social learning theory, which focuses on how employees model their behavior based on the ethical standards set by their leaders (Junaidi, 2024), social exchange theory offers a different lens (Blau, 2017). This theory emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between leaders and employees, where ethical leadership fosters a sense of obligation and trust, encouraging employees to engage more deeply in their work (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Social exchange theory can better account for the complexity of relationships in the workplace (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Ethical leadership might not only influence work engagement directly but also indirectly through the work meaningfulness and person-organization fit, all of which are key elements in social exchange theory. This provides fresh insights for comprehensive understanding of how ethical leadership influences employee behavior

beyond mere responsibility, potentially leading to richer theoretical contributions and more actionable insights for organizations (Hsieh et al., 2023).

Practical implications

The present study offers several implications for upper-level managers and organizations to sustain quality and quality of work in the light of our model. First, the study found that leaders with ethical behavior are key drivers for organizational success. Particularly, organizations should hire ethically sound leaders and train them to uphold ethical standards, as unethical behavior can harm reputation, reduce employee retention, and hinder gaining employee acceptance. Second, the findings highlight the need for organizations to stress on ethical leadership in leader development and human resource practices, as it is key to fostering work meaningfulness. Emphasizing ethical behavior among upper managers is essential for generating a meaningful workplace, potentially lead to several second outcomes such as work engagement and productivity. Third, given the critical role of person-organization fit as a mediator between ethical leadership and work engagement, it is essential to prioritize person-organization fit. Managers should consistently evaluate and refine management practices to ensure alignment between individual and organizational goals. This includes selecting candidates whose values resonate with the organization's culture, fostering a cohesive workforce, and offering flexible work arrangements. By emphasizing ethical leadership, organizations can more effectively strengthen person-organization fit, leading to higher levels of work engagement. Lastly, to enhance self-efficacy, which positively moderates the relationship between work meaningfulness and work engagement, managers should adopt several approaches. For example, offering constructive feedback, as it helps employees identify their strengths and boosts their confidence in their abilities. In addition, managers should also set clear, achievable goals that align with employees' roles to provide direction and a sense of purpose. Moreover, ethical leaders can model resilience and a positive attitude, which can inspire similar behaviors in employees. By implementing these strategies, managers not only strengthen self-efficacy but also enhance work meaningfulness, thereby improving overall work engagement.

Limitations and further research prospects

This study is not without shortcomings. Addressing the deficiencies below will enhance our understanding regarding the incremental role of determinants of work engagement. First, our data were collected from two factories in Iran at a single point in time. Given the diverse social and cultural landscapes and evolving management practices across countries, this study

may not account for cultural factors that could influence leadership and employee behaviors in other contexts (Romani et al., 2018). Therefore, future research should expand the sample and data collection period to include a range of cultural contexts and dynamics. This approach would enable a more comprehensive test of the hypotheses. Second, the study examined the impact of positive ethical leadership on outcomes, contrasting it with negative leadership styles such as authoritarianism and unethical behavior, which typically lead to adverse employee behaviors. Given the significant differences in formation, characteristics, and effects between these leadership approaches, addressing the negative aspects of leadership offers a more thorough understanding of organizational behavioral phenomena (Hassan et al., 2023). Third, the study utilized single dimensions to measure model's constructs, yet most organizational behavior constructs are multidimensional and complex. For instance, there is no consensus on the definition or measurement of meaningful work, indicating a need for further conceptual and empirical research (Demirtas et al., 2017). Fourth, a limitation of this study is its reliance on a single theory (i.e., Social Exchange Theory) to explain the research model, despite the existence of multiple, interrelated leadership theories (Anderson & Sun, 2017). Incorporating a couple relevant theories could enhance theoretical validity and address potential ambiguities related to theoretical overlap. Fifth, the study examines the direct and indirect influential aspect ethical leadership as a behavior without considering individual differences. To gain a deeper understanding, it would be beneficial to analyze how individual differences in ethic terms, such as moral attentiveness and ethical voice, impact the effects of ethical leadership on work-related outcomes (Treviño et al., 2024). In other words, how do these individual ethical traits influence the effectiveness of ethical leadership?

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