

Price of Doing the Right Thing: A Study of Ethical Leadership



A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

While a loud chorus advocates for the imperative of ethical behavior, skepticism persists among those who question the true capabilities of individuals following the ethical route when confronted with complex challenges. Building on existing literature that points out that ethicality and competence, though orthogonal, are perceived as conflicting, the present research uncovers the ethicality-competence bias manifesting in hiring decisions. Using implicit association tests and experiments, the research demonstrates that the impact of ethicality on leader preference depends on the type of business environment in which the organization operates, as aligned with the contingency leadership theory. The findings reveal that in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business environments (VUCA), unethical leaders are perceived to possess a superior person-job fit, while ethical leaders are perceived as more fit for leading in calm, certain, simple, and clear business environments. Consequently, in VUCA environments, the employability of ethical leaders suffers due to a heightened preference for unethical ones. The research suggests that such biases can be attenuated using explicit cues about the dynamism of ethical leaders. The present research holds significant theoretical and practical implications, provides avenues for future research directions, and acknowledges its limitations.

Keywords: ethical leadership, ethicality-competence bias, person-job fit, hiring, contingency leadership theory, business environment, VUCA, CCSC

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ABBREVIATIONS

VUCA Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous

CCSC Calm, Certain, Simple, and Clear

IAT Implicit Association Test

PPJ fit Perceived person-job fit

HI Intention to hire

C.I. Confidence Interval

BootSE Bootstrap Standard Error

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changes. To successfully navigate a VUCA world, the company requires top leaders to be adaptable and experiment to bring new solutions (Bywater & Lewis, 2019). Top leaders have more complex roles and shoulder greater responsibilities since the fate of the organization significantly depends on their strategic decisions. Acknowledging the differential roles played by leaders at these levels, it is essential to study how the results of the study vary, considering the leadership level.

Conclusion

The research questions the practical application of universally propagated ideas of ethical leadership by considering contextual situations in which hiring decisions are made. The results point to some critical insights that ethical leaders may face a unique bias in business environments characterized by constant change, turbulence, ambiguity, and complexity. Despite many virtues, ethical leaders are perceived as less fit for leadership positions than unethical leaders in such environments, facing disadvantage in hiring situations. Thus, the research directs focus to the context while considering perceptions of ethical leadership. When organizations navigate through times of VUCA, the inherent tension between ethics and effectiveness becomes more evident. The research advocates for proactive actions on the part of the organizations to mitigate the ethicality-competence hiring bias and rectify perceptions of the inverse relationship between ethics and competence so that ethical leaders do not have to pay a price for their ethical approach.

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