Ethical leadership, frustration, and humor: a moderated-mediation model

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of ethical leadership on surface acting, positive mood and affective commitment via the mediating effect of employee frustration. The authors also explored the moderating role of humor on the relationship between ethical leadership and frustration as well as its moderating effect on the mediational chain.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected in two separate surveys from 156 individuals working fulltime; data collections were separated by six weeks to reduce common method variance. The measurement model was confirmed before the authors tested the moderated mediation model.

Findings – Ethical leadership was negatively related to employee frustration, and frustration mediated the relationships between ethical leadership and surface acting and positive mood but not affective commitment. Humor moderated the relationship between ethical leadership and frustration such that when humor was low, the relationship was stronger.

Research limitations/implications – Interestingly, the authors failed to find a significant effect for any of the relationships between ethical leadership and affective commitment. Ethical leaders can enhance positive mood and reduce surface acting among employees by reducing frustration. Humor may be more important under conditions of unethical leadership but may be distracting under ethical leadership.

Originality/value – This study demonstrates how frustration acts as a mediator and humor serves as a moderator in the unethical behavior-outcomes relationship.

Keywords Ethical leadership, Humour, Frustration

Paper type Research paper

The story of unethical behavior in organizations is common (Treviño et al., 2014), and the experience of working under or with unethical leaders destroys reputations demoralizes employees and degrades shareholder value (Brown and Mitchell, 2010), contributing to a recent emphasis on the study of “dark side” leader behaviors (e.g. Unal et al., 2012). While much about ethical leadership has been investigated (Brown et al., 2005; Chen and Hou, 2016), perhaps it is time to direct our attention to developing mechanisms to respond to, survive and potentially thrive in the face of the inevitability of ethical lapses in organizations.

Ethical leadership has frequently been studied for its effects on employee outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, deviance (DeConinck, 2015). Hunter (2012) emphasized the complexity in the relationships between ethical leadership and outcomes and argued for the identification of mediating variables that can help identify and explain the mechanism that underlies the observed relationships. Several mediators of the ethical leadership-outcomes process have been identified. For example, Den Hartog and Belschak (2012) found that employee engagement mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and citizenship behaviors.
Hassan et al. (2013) found that LMX mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and commitment. Loi et al. (2015) found that perceived organizational support mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and commitment. In short, the investigation of mediating variables has further enhanced our understanding of the mechanisms by which ethical leadership, or the lack thereof, affects employee outcomes.

As shown in Figure 1, we explored employee frustration as a mechanism through which ethical leadership affects employee attitudes and behaviors. Relying on the job demands-resources theory (JD-R) (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2014) to explain the process by which frustration arises, we investigated the effects of ethical leadership on surface acting, positive mood and affective commitment via employee frustration. We further explored the moderating role of humor on the relationship between ethical leadership and frustration as well as its moderating effect on the mediational chain. The premise underlying this study is that individuals experience job demands due to unethical leadership that deplete their resources and abilities to cope. When the demands are too high, negative outcomes occur. Workplace humor is viewed as a coping mechanism to help reduce frustration when there is an overload of job demands due to unethical behavior. This study adds to the literature on ethical leadership by exploring how frustration serves as a mediator in the ethical leadership-outcomes relationships as well as the importance of humor on these relationships.

**Job demands-resources theory**

Job demands are the physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained cognitive and emotional effort to manage and are therefore associated with certain negative behavioral and psychological outcomes (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, 2014). Chronic job demands, like those associated with working for an unethical leader, may deplete and/or exhaust employees’ mental and physical resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). Although not all job demands are negative and lead to stress, we believe that it is the sustained cognitive and emotional effort needed to manage job demands under an unethical leader which leads to the same negative outcomes associated with other extreme job demands (Meijman and Mulder, 1998). Experienced stress (via unethical leader treatment) should act to drain resources such that employees are less able to maintain positive work attitudes (Hoobler and Brass, 2006) and engage in productive work behavior (e.g. deviance, Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007). The depletion of resources in the face of the demands of unethical behavior may explain the higher incidence of frustration.

**Hypothesized relationships**

*Ethical leadership and frustration*

Ethical leaders are moral, honest, fair and trustworthy. They emphasize ethical values in their professional and personal lives (Trevino et al., 2003). At work, they act with integrity and
promote fair and just behaviors among employees (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership has been positively related to supervisor satisfaction, job dedication and prosocial behaviors (Mayer et al., 2009), and negatively related to employee workload, perceptions of poor working conditions and counterproductive behavior (Den Hartog and Belschak, 2012).

Frustration is an emotional state that is experienced when an individual’s desired outcomes are not realized, or they are unable to meet goals (Ambrose et al., 2002). Feelings of frustration can arise from organizational events, injustice or interpersonal conflict (Ambrose et al., 2002). Brown and Mitchell (2010) suggested that unethical treatment by leaders may be a cause of frustration for employees and make them less likely to display favorable work attitudes. Given that unethical leadership can increase job demands, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Ethical leadership will be negatively related to employee frustration.

**Frustration as a mediator**

*Surface acting.* Surface acting occurs when employees alter their outward presentation but not their inner feelings to be consistent with the expressed emotions (Grandey, 2003). The feelings that are portrayed outwardly by employees are consistent with organization display rules. Surface acting may be used by frustrated employees to mask their true emotions (Grant, 2013), such as smiling when accommodating difficult customers (Groth et al., 2009). Frustrated employees do this by either expressing alternative emotions or suppressing their feelings. This reaction is consistent with the JD-R theory as unethical leadership creates job demands that stress the personal resources of organizational members. We suspect that employees working under unethical leaders will experience frustration and hence, engage in surface acting as they may be unwilling to express their true opinions. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H2a.** Frustration mediates the negative relationship between ethical leadership and surface acting.

*Positive mood.* A positive mood is an enduring affective state characterized by generalized positive feelings, and has been linked to a wide variety of positive outcomes such as better health, well-being and, more importantly, organizational functioning (George and Jones, 1997). We believe positive moods can be enhanced when working under ethical leaders. Employees increase their personal resources when they work in an environment that has fair and equitable policies as well as social support (Wilson et al., 2004). The essence of ethical leadership is the treatment of employees with dignity and respect (Ciulla, 2004). Avey et al. (2012) argued that employees working under ethical leaders will experience higher levels of happiness and satisfaction because they perceive a higher quality relationship with an ethical leader than with an unethical leader. This is consistent with the JD-R theory and findings that individuals who perceive their leaders to be ethical display less negative and more positive moods themselves (Brown and Mitchell, 2010). Perceptions of ethical leadership will have a positive effect on employees’ moods as they will be less likely to experience frustration:

**H2b.** Frustration mediates the positive relationship between ethical leadership and positive mood.

*Affective commitment.* Affective commitment refers to employees’ emotional attachment and sense of belonging to the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Research has demonstrated positive direct and indirect relationships between ethical leadership and affective commitment (Loi et al., 2015). Reduced employee frustration due to working for leaders who are fair and impartial also may help to enhance affective commitment to the organization. The JD-R theory suggests that employees who report to an ethical leader may
respond with feelings of commitment to the organization simply because they can expect each work day to be guided by fair decision making (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

\[ H2c. \] Frustration mediates the positive relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment.

**Humor as a moderator**

The use of humor in the workplace has been widely examined in organizational research (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Morreall, 2009; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). Findings generally support humor as a way of decreasing stress and burnout and enhancing satisfaction, performance, group cohesion (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), positive communication and team performance (Lehmann-Willenbrock and Allen, 2014). Some individuals use humor to navigate difficult work situations (José et al., 2007; Rawlings and Findlay, 2016) and to lessen stressful work events (Thorson and Powell, 1993). As such, humor may help to moderate the unethical leadership-frustration relationship by reducing the frustration associated with the extreme job demands of unethical leaders.

Employees working under an unethical leader may use humor as a way of restoring energy and the personal resources needed to cope with the stress of unethical behavior. This coping strategy may enable these employees to experience reduced frustration. Indeed, finding humor in a situation has been identified as a commonly used emotion regulation strategy by employees to reduce feelings of frustration (Diefendorff et al., 2008). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

\[ H3. \] Humor moderates the negative relationship between ethical leadership and frustration such that when humor is high, the relationship is weaker.

**Moderated mediation**

The moderating effect is expected to hold through the mediating variable of frustration. Moderated mediation happens if the mediating process (frustration) that is responsible for producing the effect of the treatment on the outcome variable depends on the value of a moderator variable (humor) (Muller et al., 2005). In our case, the moderator (humor) is a contextual variable, so we posit that when a high level of humor is present in the situation, the mediated relationships between ethical leadership and the outcomes are weaker. Thus, we predict the following hypotheses:

\[ H4a. \] The negative mediated relationship between ethical leadership and surface acting through frustration is weaker when humor is high.

\[ H4b. \] The positive mediated relationship between ethical leadership and positive mood is weaker when humor is high.

\[ H4c. \] The positive mediated relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment through frustration is weaker when humor is high.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Respondents were recruited by undergraduate students attending a private university in the Southeast region of the USA to participate in a two-wave survey study. A total of 34 students were asked to provide names and e-mail addresses of no more than 10 family and friends who were at least 21 years of age and who worked 35 hours or more per week.
In exchange for their help recruiting subjects, students received a nominal amount (< 2 percent) of course credit. This method of data collection (e.g. referral sampling) has been successfully utilized in a number of studies (Liu et al., 2004; Treadway et al., 2005). Each potential participant (n = 340) was sent an e-mail invitation from the research team with a link to the first survey. Six weeks after the initial survey were sent, we e-mailed a link to the second survey to the respondents who had successfully completed the first survey. We used a six-week lag as this timeline is sufficient to temporally separate the independent and dependent variables, but short enough to limit subject mortality.

Of the 340 participants who were recruited, 292 returned time 1 surveys (86 percent response rate). To ensure the integrity of the data, we found and excluded erroneous cases. Respondents who self-reported their age below 21, who provided the same response (“flat lining”) across 65 percent or more of the survey, and who took less than 6 minutes to complete the time 1 survey were eliminated. We included several questions (e.g. “The answer to this question is 2”) as quality control checks to confirm that the participants were actually reading the questions. We removed all cases in which the participants did not respond correctly to these questions. After removing the cases that failed the checks described above, 237 time 1 cases remained (82 percent yield rate). We sent the time 2 survey to the 237 participants who successfully completed the time 1 survey; 174 of those individuals returned a completed time 2 survey (73 percent response rate). Out of those 174 surveys, 156 passed our quality control checks (above) and compose the final sample (46 percent overall yield rate).

The sample was 42 percent male and 58 percent female. The average age was 42.39, and most of the respondents were Caucasian (93 percent). On average, they had been working for their organization for 10.47 years, in their current job for 8.85 years and for their current boss for 7.44 years.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all measures described below had response scales ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). All items were coded so that higher scores reflected more agreement with the items.

Measures collected at time 1

**Ethical leadership.** We measured ethical leadership with the ten-item scale ($\alpha = 0.92$) developed by Brown et al. (2005). A sample item is “Sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics.”

**Frustration.** We measured frustration with the three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.82$) developed by Peters et al. (1984). A sample item is “Trying to get this job done is a very frustrating experience.”

**Humor.** We measured humor with the four-item scale ($\alpha = 0.87$) developed by José et al. (2007). A sample item is “Use of humor helps to put me at ease.”

Measures collected at time 2

**Surface acting.** We measured surface acting with the three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.78$) developed by Brotheridge and Lee (2003). A sample item is “On an average day at work, how frequently do you pretend to have emotions that you don’t really have.” These items were responded to on a scale from (1) never to (5) always.

**Positive mood.** We measured positive mood with the seven-item scale ($\alpha = 0.92$) developed by Watson et al. (1988) and used by Hudders and Pandelaere (2012). Respondents were asked “How often have you felt each of these emotions during the past month? (1) not at all to (5) frequently.” Sample items are “interested,” “enthusiastic” and “attentive.”
Affective commitment. We measured affective commitment with the six-item scale (α = 0.87) developed by Meyer et al. (1993). A sample item is “I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own.”

Control variables. We controlled for age, gender and job tenure as previous research has found that these variables are significantly related to our dependent variables (Dahling and Perez, 2010; George and Zhou, 2007; Meyer et al., 2002). Age and job tenure were reported in years, and gender was coded 1 for male and 2 for female.

Analyses. We began by estimating a six-factor measurement model to ensure that our scales were independent and worked as we expected. Once the measurement model was confirmed, we averaged the items to create scales which we used to estimate the moderated mediation model shown in Figure 1. We mean centered the variables used in the interaction analyses (Cohen et al., 2003). Following the recommendations of Mooney and Duval (1993) and Shrout and Bolger (2002), we evaluated all effects by constructing bias-corrected confidence intervals using the bootstrapped estimates from 10,000 samples.

Results
The descriptive statistics and the correlations among our variables appear in Table I. As predicted, ethical leadership was negatively related to frustration and surface acting and positively related to positive mood and affective commitment. Frustration was positively related to surface acting and negatively related to positive mood and affective commitment. In addition, two of our control variables, age and job tenure, were significantly related to our dependent variables, offering some empirical support for their inclusion.

Although the correlations among our substantive variables were only moderate, we elected to explore the discriminant validity of our scales by following a procedure outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981). They suggested that the square root of the average variance explained (AVE) for each scale represents the variance accounted for by the items that compose it. We placed these values on the diagonals in Table I. If the square root of the AVE exceeds the correlations in the same row and column in which it resides, discriminant validity is demonstrated as the variance shared between any two constructs (i.e. the correlation) is less than the AVE by the items that compose the scale (i.e. square root of the AVE). As shown in Table I, this condition is met for all of our scales.

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm the expected factor structure of our scales. To conduct our CFA, we used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical leadership 4.05</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Frustration       2.80</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>-0.33***</td>
<td>0.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humor             4.06</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Surface acting    2.63</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.35***</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive mood     4.13</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>-0.38***</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.42***</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective         3.40</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.34***</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.44***</td>
<td>0.52***</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>commitment        42.39</td>
<td>14.97</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age               1.60</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.34***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Job tenure        8.85</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.61***</td>
<td>-0.29**</td>
<td></td>
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Table I. Correlations, means and standard deviations

Notes: n = 156. Values on the diagonal are the square root of the average variance explained which must be larger than all zero-order correlations in the row and column in which they appear to demonstrate discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Gender was coded 1 = male and 2 = female. Age and job tenure are coded in years. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001
LISREL 8.80, a covariance matrix as input and a maximum-likelihood estimation. We estimated a six-factor measurement model, with one factor representing each of our scales. Fit indices showed that the model fit the data ($\chi^2(480) = 806, p < 0.01, CFI = 0.95, NNFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.065$) and all of the standardized loadings were significant ($p < 0.01$). Next, we estimated an alternative nested model to compare to our measurement model based on the highest correlation in Table I. The alternative model combined the positive mood and affective commitment into one factor creating a five-factor model. The fit for this model ($\chi^2(485) = 1,327, p < 0.01, CFI = 0.91, NNFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.11$) was not as strong as the measurement model and the $\chi^2$-difference test was significant ($\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(5) = 521, p < 0.01$) demonstrating discriminant validity for our scales.

As some of the relationships we tested used variables whose data were collected at the same time, there is the potential for common method variance (CMV). Thus, we extended our measurement model to empirically test for this possibility. We implemented a CMV test outlined by Williams et al. (1989) and recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003).

The CMV model fit the data ($\chi^2(447) = 659, p < 0.01, CFI = 0.96, NNFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.057$) better than the hypothesized model, and the $\chi^2$-difference test between these models was significant ($\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(33) = 147, p < 0.01$). While the method factor slightly improved model fit, it accounted for much less variance (15 percent) than the 25 percent observed by Williams et al. (1989). The results of these analyses suggested that while the measurement model adequately fit the data, it benefited from the addition of a method factor. However, the gain in fit was small and more importantly, the method factor accounted for little variation in the data. Therefore, the results suggest that the steps we took to combat CMV were effective.

**Hypothesis tests**

Using Mplus 7.4, we ran the fully mediated model shown in Figure 1 requesting bias-corrected confidence intervals using the bootstrapped estimates from 10,000 samples after adding paths between our control variables and our dependent variables. For comparison purposes, we also ran a partially mediated model in which ethical leadership directly predicted the three dependent variables. Since none of the direct paths between ethical leadership and the outcome variables were significant (surface acting $-0.16$, positive mood $0.14$, affective commitment $0.24$ all $p > 0.05$), we accepted the hypothesized model and used it to test our hypotheses. Standardized results for the hypothesized model are shown in Figure 2. We did not include the control variables in Figure 2 as none of the paths were significant. As can be seen there, $H1$, that ethical leadership will be negatively related to employee frustration, was supported.

![Figure 2. Standardized path loadings](image-url)
H2a predicted that frustration would mediate the negative relationship between ethical leadership and surface acting; H2b predicted the positive relationships between ethical leadership and positive mood; and H2c predicted the positive relationships between ethical leadership and affective commitment. The indirect effect for ethical leadership to surface acting via frustration was $-0.10 \ (p < 0.05)$, suggesting that working for an ethical leader decreases one’s need to surface act by lowering the level of frustration experienced. Further, the 95% confidence interval ($-0.19, -0.02$) did not contain zero. These results provide support for H2a. The indirect effect for ethical leadership to positive mood via frustration was 0.14 ($p < 0.01$). Once again, the 95% confidence intervals for this effect did not contain zero (0.03, 0.24). These results suggest that working for an ethical leader increases one’s positive mood by lowering the level of frustration experienced. Thus, H2b was supported. The indirect effect for ethical leadership to affective commitment via frustration was 0.07, but it was not significant ($p > 0.05$). Further, the 95% confidence intervals for this effect contained zero ($-0.02, 0.15$). Therefore, H2c was not supported.

H3 predicted that humor would moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and frustration such that when humor is high, the relationship is weaker. As shown in Figure 2, the interaction is significant. However, to confirm that the form of the relationship matched our prediction, we graphed the relationship between ethical leadership and frustration at high and low levels of humor, our moderator. The graph can be seen in Figure 3. Simple slope analyses demonstrated that while both lines are significantly different from zero, as predicted, the high humor line ($t = -2.59, p < 0.01$) is weaker than the low humor line ($t = -4.96, p < 0.000$) providing support for H3.

![Figure 3](image-url)
predicted that humor would moderate the mediated relationships between ethical leadership and surface acting, positive mood (H4b) and affective commitment through frustration (H4c) such that when humor is high the relationships are weaker. Results for these hypotheses are presented in Table II. The moderated effects of the mediated relationships were significant when humor was low for surface acting and positive mood, but not when humor was high. Neither effect was significant for affective commitment. As with the simple mediation results, the moderated indirect effect for surface acting was negative suggesting that working for an ethical leader decreases one’s need to surface act by lowering the level of frustration experienced, but only when the use of humor was low. In addition, we found that working for an ethical leader increases one’s positive mood by lowering the level of frustration experienced, but only when the use of humor was low. These results offer support for H4a and H4b but not H4c.

Discussion

Relying on a JD-R theory, we explored mediating influences in the relationships between ethical leadership and outcomes. We found that ethical leadership was negatively related to employee frustration, and that frustration mediated the relationships between ethical leadership and surface acting and positive mood but not affective commitment. Results also demonstrated that humor moderated the relationship between ethical leadership and frustration such that when humor was low, the relationship was stronger. We found that the moderated effects of the mediated relationships were significant when humor was low for surface acting and positive mood, but not when humor was high. Neither effect was significant for affective commitment. The integration of frustration as a mediator (Brown and Mitchell, 2010), and the use of humor as a moderator (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012) extends theory and research in the ethical leadership literature by introducing new factors affecting ethical leadership-outcome relationships.

These results enhance prior work in ethical leadership insofar as they suggest that unethical behaviors may cause frustration because subordinates perceive that unethical behavior increases job demands, and that increased surface acting and lower positive mood may result. It is interesting to note that humor moderated the ethical behavior-frustration relationship, such that high humor weakens this relationship. This suggests that workplace humor may serve as a distraction from the positive effects of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership led to a stronger reduction in employee frustration when humor was low. Humor also moderated the mediated relationships between ethical leadership and surface acting and positive mood through frustration such that humor is not necessary under ethical leadership. This finding confirms previous research suggesting that ethical leadership is a useful way of decreasing workplace stress and enhancing satisfaction and performance (Bedi et al., 2016).

There are strengths of this research that bear mentioning. First, this research advances theory by integrating a new mediator and moderator into the ethical leadership-outcome relationship. By confirming full mediation of ethical behavior on surface acting and positive mood.
mood through the influence of frustration, we offer support for frustration as a useful explanatory variable and call for more ethical leadership research that includes this construct. This finding may indicate that individuals cognitively evaluate the level of ethicality in supervisory behaviors and develop a schema and behavioral scripts concerning future attitudes and behaviors as a result. Such perspectives may include an implicit determination that they must act more deliberately (surface act) when faced with a perceived break in the social contract. These results encourage research into factors which may exacerbate or moderate the effects of unethical leadership on outcomes. More theoretically grounded empirical work to develop useful mediators and moderators in this area is warranted.

We also believe that the data analytic approaches undertaken by this research provided some confidence in our results and conclusions. We took steps to control for CMV with our data collection approach and to explore its presence through post hoc analyses (Conway and Lance, 2010). We investigated the validity of our measurement instruments, analyzed the relational structure of our model and the factor structure of our measurement scales. We believe that the data collection approach is a significant strength of this research, and believe that our data are robust and our findings reproducible and practically useful.

As with all research, there are limitations that should be mentioned. First, while the snowball data collection method used here has been frequently used by other researchers, it did prevent examination within and across industries. Replication of these results using other populations will strengthen the findings presented here. Second, although our research included a variety of attitudes as outcomes, it did not include objectives measures of performance. Thus, we still do not know how ethical leadership, humor and frustration may interact to affect performance. Finally, while our research was focused on the adaptive use of humor as a moderator of the ethical leadership-frustration relationship, a more comprehensive investigation would have analyzed the negative use of humor, as well. An unexpected outcome was that we failed to find a significant effect for any of the relationships between ethical leadership and affective commitment. Perhaps the idiosyncratic nature of the dyadic superior-subordinate relationship did not sufficiently affect the individual’s commitment and attachment to the. Future research efforts using different samples will be able to determine if our explanation for the lack of findings holds.

The implications for future research are many. While one naturally thinks of minor theoretical extensions to include different moderators in the ethical behavior-outcomes relationship, additional work developing linking mechanisms between ethical behavior and outcomes would seem to be more fruitful. We have always questioned the nature of the processes involved in moving from ethical behavior to outcomes; what do individuals think about as they experience ethical/unethical behavior, and how do they process this information to incorporate it into strategies for future action? How do individual outcomes develop over time as a result of information processing? Are individual attitudes and behaviors purely individually developed strategies, or do individuals share their attitudes and behaviors about supervisor ethical behavior with others?

There are also implications for managerial practice which flow from this research. This research confirms the negative relationship between unethical leadership and outcomes, as mediated by frustration. Unethical behaviors by the leader generate downstream reactions from subordinates, though the outcomes studied here are relatively benign (surface acting, mood, affective commitment). The concern is that there are outcomes not measured here, that are more serious and consequential for subordinates. In short, chronic frustration may lead to outcomes that are more damaging to the individual and the organization than surface acting or negative moods. Our fear is that organizational policies that implicitly and unwittingly support unethical leader behaviors will increase the incidence of negative subordinate outcomes. It is a vicious, downward spiral. The indications of such a spiral may initially be modest, but the consequences for individuals and organizations are severe.


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