Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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The relationship between ethical leadership, illegitimate tasks and burnout facets of academic staff in German universities: A path analysis

Jack K. Bramlage [1], Benedict Jackenkroll[1], Christian Julmi[1], José M. Pereira[1]

[1]*FernUniversität in Hagen, Hagen, Germany*

Research Domain: Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract: Summary

Despite a growing interest in ethical leadership, research on the relationship between ethical leadership and burnout is still scarce. This study focuses on illegitimate tasks as a mediator between ethical leadership and burnout for two reasons. First, literature suggests positive relationships both between (un)ethical leadership and illegitimate tasks and between illegitimate tasks and burnout. Second, illegitimate tasks are comparatively easy to objectify and to detect in real life settings. The research model is tested using structural equation modeling and data from 1053 academic staff members. The results significantly support all hypothesized effects, showing direct correlations between (1) (un)ethical leadership and illegitimate tasks, (2) (un)ethical leadership and burnout facets and (3) illegitimate tasks and burnout facets. The relationship between (un)ethical leadership and burnout is therefore partially mediated by illegitimate tasks. The findings provide a substantial contribution to the literature. Implications for further research and leadership in universities are discussed.

Paper: Introduction

In research and practice, there is a growing interest in the relevance and consequences of ethical leadership, which can be defined as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Literature shows that ethical leadership leads to burnout, and that this connection is partially mediated by role clarity, role overload (Vullinghs, Hoogh, Den Hartog, & Boon, 2018), trust in leader

or surface acting (Mo & Shi, 2017). However, research on the relationship between ethical leadership and burnout is still scarce.

In our study, we focus on illegitimate tasks as a mediator between ethical leadership and burnout. Illegitimate tasks refer to the feeling of employees that they should not have to carry out certain tasks, either because the tasks are seen as unreasonable or as unnecessary (Semmer et al., 2015). Literature strongly suggests positive relationships both between (un)ethical leadership and illegitimate tasks and between illegitimate tasks and burnout. Considering illegitimate tasks as a mediator between ethical leadership and burnout may therefore significantly increase the explanatory power of the latter. Beyond, in comparison to other factors illegitimate tasks are easier to objectify and to detect in real life settings. The study therefore has practical relevance as well.

We decided to choose (German) universities as our research object mainly for two reasons. First, there is an increasing report on increased illegitimate tasks in German universities due to a lack of control mechanisms and sanction possibilities. Second, ethical leadership is considered especially relevant in uncertain and complex environments; both aspects are constitutive for universities.

Analytical Framework

Our theoretical model includes the constructs of ethical leadership, unnecessary tasks and unreasonable tasks as the two facets of illegitimate tasks, and the burnout facets exhaustion and distance from work. The model considers eight hypotheses. 1) Consistent with the literature, ethical leadership is expected to reduce the exhaustion of employees. Ethical leaders are seen as more consistent, effective and fair, so employees feel they are in a stable environment helping them to save their energy. 2) It is assumed that ethical leadership decreases the perceived distance from work, because employees are treated accordingly. 3) Ethical leadership should reduce the amount of unnecessary tasks as ethical leaders try to distribute the workload properly. 4) For the same reason, ethical leadership is supposed to reduce the amount of unreasonable tasks. 5) As unnecessary tasks are likely to increase the workload, they should raise the exhaustion of employees. 6) We expect that unnecessary tasks correlate positively with distance from work as employees may feel overworked and exploited. 7) Unreasonable tasks may cause stress and should therefore raise exhaustion. 8) Obviously, unreasonable tasks should be likely to cause distance from work.

Method

Data in this study were collected by means of a large-scale quantitative, internet-based and anonymous survey of academic staff in state-supported German universities during winter semester 2018/19. The questionnaire was created with Unipark software. We performed all statistical analyses using Stata, version 15.0. The proposed model is estimated using structural equation modelling.

In total, the sample comprises N = 1053 academic staff members in doctoral and postdoctoral positions. To ensure the validity of statements, controlled variables were used (e.g. sex, age, university size, faculty, length of membership to the organization, academic qualification level, percentage of working hours, limitation of work contract, funding type). An initial rough comparison of the distribution of characteristics with the population showed no serious deviations.

All constructs referred to in the questionnaire were measured with established scales. Ethical leadership was measured with items from the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) by Brown et al. (2005).

Illegitimate tasks (unnecessary tasks/unreasonable tasks) were assessed with items from Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS) (Semmer et al., 2015). Burnout facets (exhaustion/distance from work) were modelled with items from Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003). All items have a five-point Likert type response format. Factor validity (standardized factor loadings) and reliability (Cronbachs α) of all scales were appropriate.

Results

The fit indices are within the acceptable range for the hypothesized model (χ^2/df ratio = 2.48; RMSEA = 0.04; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.03). The results explain a substantial level of variance for unnecessary tasks (R^2 = .21), unreasonable tasks (R^2 = .22), exhaustion (R^2 = .29) and distance from work (R^2 = .37). The results support all hypotheses. There are direct correlations between ethical leadership and illegitimate tasks, between ethical leadership and burnout facets as well as between illegitimate tasks and burnout facets. The findings show that the correlation between ethical leadership and burnout facets are partially mediated by the effects of illegitimate tasks.

Our results provide a substantial contribution in understanding the relationship between ethical leadership and burnout. Additionally, there are implications for further research as well as leadership in universities.

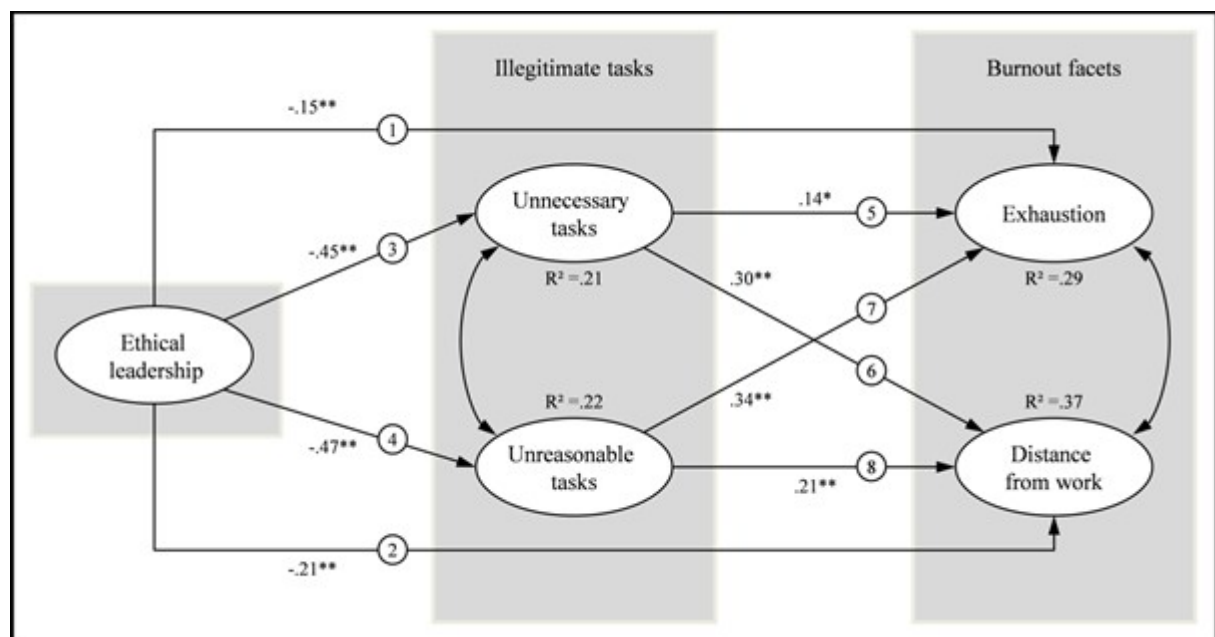Figure 1 depicts the model with standardized coefficients and values.

Figure 1: Results of the structural equation model; * p < .05; ** p < .01; N = 1053

References

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