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# Mediating Effect of Organizational Virtuousness in Ethical Leadership and Organizational Citizenship Behavior Relationship: A Study of Higher Education Sector in Pakistan

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**Abstract:** *With increased commercial crimes, work ethic, and ethical leadership have gained popularity among management researchers, focusing on the creation of an ethical climate and transferring managers from moral persons to moral managers who have the ability to shape the pro-social behavior of followers. The current study investigated the moderating role of organizational virtuousness in ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior relationship of faculty members of universities/degree awarding institutes in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. Using a cross-sectional design, 385 randomly selected faculty members of universities completed a self-administered survey questionnaire. The findings of the study support our assumptions that ethical leadership creates a virtuous organizational culture and fosters organizational citizenship behavior. Further, the mediating role of organizational virtuousness in fostering organizational citizenship behavior due to ethical leadership was also proved in the higher education sector in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. We have also discussed the implications of the study as well as the directions for further research.*

## Introduction

The last two decades witnessed commercial crimes and the collapse of leading corporations due to unethical behaviors of the executives (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020; Rokhman, 2010; Neubert et al., 2009). Consequently, organizational development (OD) managers and practitioners started developing and incorporating ethical guides in their human resource development (HRD) programs that aimed at cultivating ethical values (Khan et al., 2013) and shaping the ethical behavior of employees in the workplace. Similarly, work ethic and ethical leadership also gained popularity among management researchers, focusing on the creation of an ethical climate and transferring managers from moral persons to moral managers who have the ability to shape the pro-social behavior of followers (Den Hartog, 2015). Results of the studies on this domain suggest that ethical leadership may establish a value system that may glue employees together (Treviño et al., 2000). It may prove instrumental in developing an organizational culture of trust (Tümkan et al., 2021), cooperation, and forgiveness (Metwally et al., 2019; Bedi et al., 2016) and integrity (Zeng & Xu, 2020) that may cultivate a higher level of citizenship behavior among employees (Nemr & liu, 2021; Walumbwa et al., 2017; Mo & Shi, 2017). This culture of cooperation, trust, knowledge sharing, trust, forgiveness, integrity, and compassion coincides with organizational virtuousness (OV), a domain of positive organizational scholarship (Abdullah et al., 2019; Arjoon et al., 2018).

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There are empirical pieces of evidence that suggest that organizational virtuousness elevates positive emotions (Naseem et al., 2020), facilitates communication and cooperation, and fosters pro-social behavior, which provides benefits to others (Cameron & Winn, 2012; Cameron, 2006). In a climate of organizational virtuousness, employees are open to communication and cooperation and exhibit extra-role behavior for the well-being of the organizations (Shin, 2012).

Irrespective of the substantial empirical pieces of evidence suggesting that ethical leadership is instrumental for positive employee outcomes in organizations (Zhao & Xia, 2018), these employees' outcomes are not directly translated by ethical leadership; instead, it requires certain mediating mechanisms (Eissa et al., 2017). Hence, employees expect organizational support in the form of a virtuous organizational culture comprising trust, forgiveness, and compassion as an exchange/transactional mechanism (Abdullah et al., 2019) that may result in positive employee outcomes such as a display of organizational citizenship behavior (Nemr & liu, 2021; Walumbwa et al., 2017; Mo & Shi, 2017). Based on the assumptions of social exchange theory, there is a need to study the role of positive organizational factors, i.e., organizational virtuousness climate as an exchange mechanism in the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' OCB (Abdullah et al., 2019). The study examined the effect of ethical leadership through organizational virtuousness on the organizational citizenship behavior of employees in the organization.

The study mainly examined the effect of ethical leadership through organizational virtuousness on the organizational citizenship behavior of employees in the organization. Based on the research problem, we investigated the answers to the following research questions:

1. Does ethical leadership affect the organizational citizenship behavior of faculty members?
2. Does ethical leadership affect organizational virtuousness climate?
3. Does Organizational virtuousness affect the organizational citizenship behavior of employees?
4. Does organizational virtuousness mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior in organizations?

## Theory and Literature Review
### Ethical Leadership and Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Employees in organizations exhibit a variety of job behaviors ranging from counterproductive behavior to employees exhibiting extra-role behavior. This or extra-role behavior has been considered an important factor in the success of modern organizations (Shahzad, 2011). Katz (1964) posits that hiring employees exhibiting extra-role behavior should be a strategic concern of an organization (Abdallah & Al-Maqableh, 2017). Organ (1997) termed extra-role behavior as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). He defined OCB as "Individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization." OCBs involve two types of behaviors: (1) positive behaviors and (2) abstinence behaviors (Organ, 1997). Positive behavior may include the positive contribution of an individual, while abstinence behavior involves refraining from behaviors harmful to the organization.

Organizational development managers and researchers investigated factors that may prove instrumental in shaping OCB. Studies (Abdullah et al., 2019; Walumbwa et al., 2017) suggest that ethic-driven leadership may create a culture of trust and forgiveness that may further shape OCB among employees. Consequently, employees may abstain from behaviors such as knowledge hiding that may harm the organization (Walumbwa et al., 2017). Based on these arguments, it is proposed that

**H1:** Ethical leadership positively affects the organizational citizenship behavior of employees.

### Ethical Leadership and Organizational Virtuousness

Recent commercial crimes have ignited the need and importance of workplace ethics and ethic-driven leadership to develop an organizational culture of forgiveness, trust, compassion, and integrity that may foster knowledge-sharing and pro-social work behavior (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). A number of studies have reported that moral principles are instrumental to leadership effectiveness by inspiring followers

through their ethical role (Den Hartog, 2015). Ethical leadership refers to the exhibition of normatively opposite behavior through personal actions and interpersonal interactions and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Brown et al. (2005) argue that an ethical leader is a moral manager as well as a moral person who not only manifests moral behaviors but also practices these moral values. Research revealed that there are multiple dimensions of ethical leadership that may include people orientation, fairness, power sharing, concern for sustainability, ethical guidance, role clarification, and integrity (Kalshoven et al., 2011). Studies further suggest that ethical leadership is instrumental in developing a culture of virtuousness in the organization that, in turn, may foster positive organizational behavior (Neubert et al., 2009; Nemr & liu, 2021). Literature suggests that an ethical leader creates an organizational culture of virtuousness characterized by forgiveness, trust, integrity, and compassion, which in turn may promote positive individual as well as organizational outcomes (Mayer et al., 2012; Neubert et al., 2009). Based on the above literature, it may be proposed that

**H2:** Ethical leadership positively affects the organizational climate of virtuousness.

## Organizational Virtuousness and OCB

Organizational virtuousness is the philanthropic and generous behavior expressed by the members of the organization. It is expressed in the actions of an individual as well as the collective behavior of an organization (Rego et al., 2010). A virtuous organization involves organizational conditions where "good habits," desires, and actions are undertaken, supported, cultivated, diffused, and perpetuated at individual and organizational levels (Brown & Treviño, 2006). The *five-factor model of organizational virtuousness* presented by Cameron et al. (2004) included integrity, compassion, forgiveness, trust, and optimism. Integrity refers to employees' positive beliefs towards transparency of organizational policies, compassion is empathy towards fellow employees, forgiveness is clemency for unintentional mistakes, trust refers to the credibility of an individual or group upon each other, and optimism is seeing positive aspects of affairs (Cameron, 2003). Virtuous organizations enable virtuous practices on the part of their members. Organizational virtuousness is associated with three essential attributes: moral goodness, human impact, and social betterment (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Studies suggest that organizational virtuousness may help in fostering positive employee behaviors and discouraging negative and unethical behaviors in the organization. It fosters extra-role behavior among the employees (Abdullah et al., 2019; Rego et al., 2010; Ribeiro & Rego, 2009)

Based on the assumptions of social exchange theory, it may be argued that these characteristics of OV foster positive organizational behavior, such as organizational citizenship behavior. Hence, it may be proposed that.

**H3:** Organizational virtuousness positively affects the organizational citizenship behavior of employees.

## Mediating Role of Organizational Virtuousness in Ethical Leadership and Work Outcomes Relationship

Substantial evidence suggests that ethical leadership is instrumental in producing favorable individual and organizational outcomes (Zhao & Xia, 2018). It may help in promoting pro-social behaviors such as OCB (Walumbwa et al., 2017) that may positively affect the overall well-being of the organization. However, there are still other studies that suggest that employees' outcomes are not directly translated by leadership; instead, it requires certain mediating mechanisms (Eissa et al., 2017), such as organizational support in the form of forgiveness, trust, integrity, and compassion for the employees as an exchange/transactional mechanism to exhibit OCB (Roy et al., 2023). In other words, ethical leadership and positive work outcomes such as OCB are meditated through organizational virtuousness (Pires & Nunes, 2018). Social Exchange theory suggests that social behavior is a result of the exchange process with an aim to maximize the gain and minimize the loss (Homans, 1958, 1974). This theory may be applied in the organizational context as well, where exchange mechanisms explain the relationship patterns among the members (Blau, 1964).

Based on the assumptions of social exchange theory, we argue that if employees may hesitate to hide knowledge due to strict ethical norms, organizational exchange mechanisms such as organizational virtuousness may work as transactional mechanisms and may mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and knowledge hiding as well organizational citizenship behavior in organizations. It is thus argued that ethical leadership promotes a climate of organizational virtuousness, which in turn reduces knowledge hiding and increases organizational citizenship behavior.

**H4:** Organizational virtuousness mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior in organizations.

### Figure 1
*Research model*
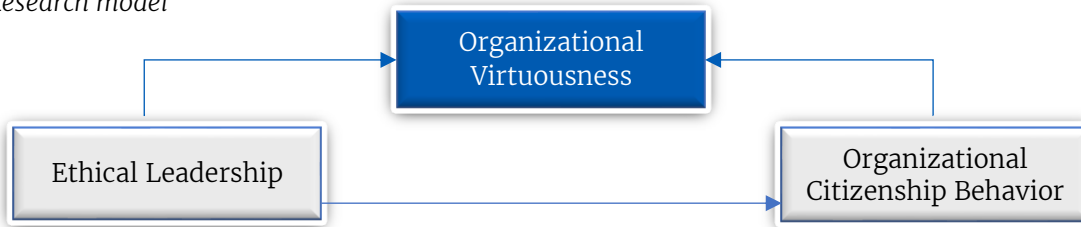


## Methods
### Respondents

Respondents of the study included 345 faculty members working at universities and Degree Awarding Institutes (DAIs) established before or in 2015 in the province of Punjab. The reason for delimiting the study to this specific time frame is that they may have an established organizational culture. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select the representative sample from the population.

## Instrument
### Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership was measured using an items scale developed by Brown et al. (2005). The reliability of the scale was 0.96. Sample items include (i) Holding me accountable for problems over which I have no control, (ii) Allowing subordinates to influence critical decisions, and (iii) Ensuring that employees follow codes of integrity.

### Organizational Virtuousness

A 14-item scale developed by Cameron et al. (2004) was used to measure five sub-dimensions of Organizational Virtuousness. The reliability of the scale was 0.99. Sample items include (i) This organization demonstrates the highest levels of integrity and (ii) Honesty and trustworthiness are hallmarks of this organization.

### Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Sixteen items developed by Podsakoff et al. (2000) were used to Organizational Citizenship Behavior will be measured using. The reliability of the scale was found to be 0.99. Sample items include (i) I take steps to try to prevent problems with others and/or other personnel in the company, and (ii) I attend and actively participate in company meetings. The reliability of the scales is presented in Table 1 below.

### Table 1
*Reliability analysis*

| Variable | No. of Items | Cronbach's Alpha | CR | AVE |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ethical Leadership | 10 | 0.96 | 0.96 | 0.70 |
| Organizational Virtuousness | 14 | 0.99 | 0.98 | 0.78 |
| Innovative Work Behavior | 16 | 0.99 | 0.98 | 0.72 |

## Data Analysis and Results

### Demographics Characteristics of Respondents

Table 2 shows that 345 faculty members participated in the study, out of which 183 respondents were male and 162 were female. The sample was true representative of all the age groups ranging from 20 years to 62 years. The sample comprised 163 lecturers (47%), 85 assistant professors (20%), 69 associate professors (20%), and 28 professors (8%). Similarly, the experience of respondents ranged from 0–5 years (43%) to more than ten years (19%).

### Table 2

*Demographics of respondents*

| Description | | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sex | Male | 183 | 53 |
| | Female | 162 | 47 |
| | Total | 345 | 100 |
| Age | 20–30 | 90 | 26 |
| | 31–40 | 91 | 27 |
| | 41–50 | 79 | 23 |
| | Above 50 | 85 | 24 |
| | Total | 345 | 100 |
| Designation | Lecturer | 163 | 47 |
| | Assistant Professor | 85 | 25 |
| | Associate Professor | 69 | 20 |
| | Professor | 28 | 8 |
| | Total | 345 | 100 |
| Experience | 0–5 Years | 147 | 43 |
| | 6–10 Years | 132 | 38 |
| | More than 10 Years | 66 | 19 |
| | Total | 345 | 100 |

### Correlation Analysis

Table shows that ethical leadership has a significant positive relationship with organizational virtuousness (r=0.308**, P<0.0%) and organizational citizenship behavior (r=0.202**). The table further shows that organizational virtuousness has a significant positive relationship with organizational citizenship behavior (r=0.569**).

### Table 3

*Correlation analysis*

| | EL | OV | OCB |
|---|---|---|---|
| EL | 1 | | |
| OV | .308** | 1 | |
| OCB | .202** | .569** | 1 |

### Linear Regression Analysis

Results in Table 4 show that ethical leadership predicts a 4.1% change in the OCB of faculty members. Results further suggest that one unit of ethical leadership brings 0.202** unit change in the OCB of employees (P=0.0000), i.e., ethical leadership positively affects the OCB of employees, confirming the 1st hypothesis (H1) of the study. Similarly, a 9.5% change in organizational virtuousness is accounted for due to ethical leadership. It further suggests that one unit of ethical leadership brings 0.308** unit change in organizational virtuousness (P=0.0000), confirming the 2nd hypothesis (H2) of the study. The table also shows that a 32.4% change is predicted in the OCB of employees due to organizational virtuousness. It further depicts that one unit of ethical leadership brings .569** unit change in OCB (P=0.0000), supporting the 3rd hypothesis (H3) of the study.

**Table 4**
*Linear regression analysis*

| Predictor | Organizational Citizenship Behavior | | | Organizational Virtuousness | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | R² | Δ R² | β | R² | Δ R² |
| Ethical Leadership | .202** | .041 | .038 | .308** | .095 | .092 |
| Organizational Virtuousness | .569** | .324 | .322 | | | |

## Mediating Analysis

The mediating effect of organizational virtuousness was assessed in the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior. It is evident in Table 5 that ethical leadership has a significant on the organizational citizenship behavior of employees (B=0.1000, t=9.114). However, the direct effect of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behavior in the presence of organizational virtuousness was insignificant (B=0.0174, P>0.0001). Hence, organizational virtuousness fully mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior of employees, supporting the 4th hypothesis of the study. Table 5 below presents the summary of the mediation analysis.

**Table 5**
*Mediation analysis summary*

| Relationship | Total Effect | Direct Effect | Indirect Effect | Confidence Interval | | t-statistics | Conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound | | |
| EL-->OV-->OCB | 0.1174 (0.0002) | 0.0174 (0.5213) | 0.1000 | 0.0567 | 0.1511 | 4.132 | Full Mediation |

## Discussion

Our study provides valuable insights into the interplay between ethical leadership, organizational virtuousness, and organizational citizenship behavior in the context of Punjab universities. The results demonstrate that ethical leadership contributes to the development of a virtuous climate within these organizations, which, in turn, influences faculty members to engage in citizenship behaviors.

Our study demonstrates that ethical leadership positively influences the OCB of faculty members (B=0.202**, P<0.05), confirming the 1st hypothesis. These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the impact of ethical leadership on the OCB of employees (Huang et al., 2021; Mostafa, 2018; Mo & Shi, 2017; Shin, 2012). These studies reported that leaders exhibiting normatively appropriate behavior serve as role models, set a standard for ethical conduct within the organization, and encourage employees to follow it (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Consequently, the employees perceive ethical leaders as trustworthy and are more willing to engage in discretionary behaviors, i.e., OCB, that benefit the organization and their colleagues (Huang et al., 2021).

Results of our study revealed that ethical leadership positively affects organizational virtuousness (B=0.308, P<0.05), confirming the 2nd hypothesis. These findings are aligned with the findings of prior research on ethical leadership and organizational virtuousness. The studies of (Arshad et al., 2023 Bright et al., 2014 Asad et al., 2017; Sun & Yoon, 2022) ethical leadership contributes to the development of a virtuous organizational culture characterized by values such as integrity, compassion, and altruism. These studies further reported that ethical leaders typically set a moral tone for the organization and inspire employees to engage in virtuous behaviors.

Our study demonstrated that organizational virtuousness promotes organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) among faculty members of universities (B=0.569, P<0.05), confirming the 3rd hypothesis. These results are similar to the results of studies (Kooshki & Zeinabadi, 2016; Malik & Naeem, 2016; Nikandrou & Tsachouridi, 2015). These studies suggest that organizational virtuousness is characterized by virtues such as compassion, empathy, and altruism that are closely related to the behaviors associated with OCB, which include helping colleagues, volunteering for additional tasks, and going beyond the call

of duty (Ma et al., 2022). These studies further demonstrate that employees' perceptions of the organization as virtuous and compassionate help them gauge OCB (Magnier-Watanabe et al., 2017). Such behaviors are seen as a way to reciprocate the positive atmosphere created by the organization, leading to increased levels of cooperation and support among employees (Pires & Nunes, 2018).

Our study demonstrated that organizational virtue fully mediates the association between ethical leadership and OCB among faculty members of universities/DAIs (B=0.1000, t=9.114). These results highlight the importance of organizational virtue as a mediating element in the connection between ethical leadership and OCB. Our results are consistent with those of earlier studies (Zeng & Xu, 2020; Malik & Naeem, 2016) that looked at how corporate culture and environment mediated certain types of interactions. Through their behavior and deeds, ethical leaders foster a positive corporate culture that, in turn, motivates faculty members to participate in OCB. This moral environment encourages a sense of obligation, collective commitment, and reciprocity that motivates workers to go above and beyond the scope of their formal job responsibilities to benefit the company.

## Implications
### Theoretical Implications

This study adds empirical support to the social exchange theory within the context of higher education. It emphasizes the notion that ethical leadership can be viewed as a type of social exchange in which faculty members reciprocate with OCB when they perceive justice and ethical behavior from their supervisors.

The confirmation that the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB is fully mediated by organizational virtuousness offers a significant theoretical contribution. It demonstrates that the influence of ethical leadership on OCB is not just a direct effect but is routed through the creation of a virtuous culture in the organizations. This deepens our understanding of mediating mechanisms within leadership studies.

The focus of our study is the higher education sector in Punjab, which provides a specific context for understanding ethical leadership. This contextualization is very significant as ethical leadership can take many forms depending on the institutional and cultural context. Our findings can be used by researchers to investigate how ethical leadership functions in various local or sector-specific contexts.

## Practical Implications

Higher education institutions ought to allocate resources to leadership development initiatives that prioritize the cultivation of ethical leadership attributes. These initiatives can be realized through training, mentorship, and the advancement of individuals in leadership roles who demonstrate ethical conduct.

From a practical standpoint, it is advisable for organizations to concentrate on nurturing a virtuous organizational culture. This encompasses the promotion of values such as forgiveness, compassion, empathy, and integrity, all of which constitute integral elements of virtuousness. Leaders should set the precedent by demonstrating these values in their own behavior.

Understanding how organizational virtuousness contributes to fostering OCB can provide valuable insights for shaping human resource and management strategies. Encouraging OCB through acknowledgment, incentives, and the establishment of an inclusive and morally sound workplace can prove to be highly effective.

Insights from our study may help organizations develop tools and metrics for the measurement of ethical leadership, organizational virtuousness, and OCB within their specific contexts. A formative assessment mechanism may help in identifying areas of improvement.

Our study also offers insights for leaders in higher educational institutions making appointment or promotion decisions. Ethical values and leadership styles of candidates may be given due consideration. Organizations can actively seek leaders who exhibit ethical leadership qualities to create a positive work environment.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Like any research, our study has certain limitations and opens avenues for further investigation. These may include;

This study employed a cross-sectional design by capturing data at a single point in time. It may limit the ability to explore how these relationships evolve over time. To address this limitation, future researchers may benefit from longitudinal or experimental designs.

Similarly, we used survey questionnaires for data collection that is subject to self-report bias. Respondents might have provided socially desirable responses or might not have accurately represented their actual behaviors. This limitation may be mitigated by combining self-report measures with objective measures or observational data.

Since the study sample comprised faculty members from universities/DAIs in the province of Punjab, it may limit the generalizability of the findings of this study to other geographic regions or educational settings. Researchers may consider more diverse and representative samples.

Comparing the higher education sector in Punjab with other regions or types of educational institutions can reveal whether the observed relationships are context-specific or more universally applicable. Further, researchers may investigate the external validity of our findings by examining their applicability in other sectors, industries, or geographical contexts. This can broaden the practical implications of our research.

While our study demonstrates full mediation of organizational virtuousness in the relationship of ethical leadership and OCB, there may be room to explore potential moderation effects. Researchers may explore in more detail the mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences organizational virtuousness. In an instance, does it affect organizational norms, policies, or interpersonal relationships?

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