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Fostering the Moral Competence of University Teachers through Ethical Leadership: Exploring the Mediating Role of Psychological Empowerment

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Abstract

Leadership as a practice involves moral and ethical elements needed to run an organization justly and effectively. Empowered teachers who possess a strong morality can change the fabric of Higher education institutions. This study was designed to examine the mediating role of psychological empowerment in the relationship between ethical leadership of department heads (as perceived by university teachers) and teachers' moral competence. It also strived to investigate gender differences in the relationship between ethical leadership of department heads and teachers' moral competence and empowerment. An adopted questionnaire was used for data collection. The sample consisted of 265 teachers from five public sector universities in Punjab, Pakistan. Gender differences were explored through *t-test*. Pearson's moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between ethical leadership of department heads and teachers' moral competence. Structure Equation Modeling (SEM) was used for mediation analysis. The results revealed that leaders' ethical behavior is positively related to teachers' psychological empowerment and moral competence. It was also found that the ethical leadership practices of male and female department heads were the same. Simultaneously, there was no gender difference was found in teachers' moral competence. SEM results indicated that all direct effects were significant, except for ethical leadership and moral competence. The indirect effect of leadership on moral competence through the mediation of psychological empowerment was found to be significant, which suggests complete mediation.

Keywords: ethical leadership, department heads, moral competence, psychological empowerment, teachers

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Introduction

Leadership is the most popular research topic (Mcshane & Glinow, 2015) and has remained imperative since the time of Greek philosophers. With the advent of the twenty-first century, each organization and institution divided its workforce into groups of individuals working under the supervision of a leader (Tsourvakas et al., 2007). Through leadership, heads specify which type of role is suitable for building an efficient and effective work environment in an organization (Banerji & Krishnan, 2000). The education system of any society is primarily responsible for transmitting values and ethics from one generation to another. Heads of the institutions may use their leadership to build an ethical work environment. An ethical leader is a straightforward and focused person with strong moral values and acts like a role model. Hence, ethical style of leadership can be helpful for leaders to run universities and educational institutions effectively.

Ethical leadership is an advanced concept that is most important for analysts nowadays. Ethical leaders establish an ethical environment in universities and show moral behavior. Higher authorities are always expected to behave morally in managerial settings in an organization. They should create a culture of complying with ethics and contribute according to the set standards. Ethical leadership is a significant aspect of running organizations, successfully (Kanungo & Mendonca, 2001). It is a vibrant behavior that affects leaders and their workers (Banerji & Krishnan, 2000). Ethical leaders are high in morality and take decisions fairly and objectively (Brown & Trevino, 2006). This is considered as a significant characteristic of the person working as a leader. Treviño et al. (2003) presented a new ethical leadership feature which they called the 'virtuous manager'. Behaviors related to virtuous leadership include doing the right things, appreciating people, respectfully treating people, and bringing ethics into their own lives (Treviño et al., 2003).

An ethical leader plays a vital role in establishing an ethics-oriented organization. Styles of leaders strongly impact the followers' behavior and group performance. Ethical leadership appeals when the work level and morale are necessary to maintain (Omolayo, 2007). Ethics can be defined as the prescribed moral requirements and activities that offer how to behave in the society, organizations, and educational institutions. Ethics provide a code of life to individuals and groups in the society. Ethical leadership is vital and vibrant in allowing institutions to achieve their desired objectives.

It is a significant aspect of reflecting organizational status inside and outside (Kanungo & Mendonca, 2001). While performing tasks, leaders mainly strive to guarantee that honest decisions are made and organizational culture is improved in favor of the employees (Lennick & Kiel, 2005).

Ethical leadership leads to the effectiveness of an organization. As a consequence of ethical leadership, employees are willing to put in extra effort and remain satisfied with their job, which leads to better performance. The trust and commitment of employees are considered as critical in improving their job performance. Ethics generate trust and commitment in all stakeholders, which warrants long-term organizational performance. When it comes to the gender of employees, it was found that female employees are more committed if their heads are more supportive, fair, and ethical (Karakuş, 2018). Karakuş explained that principals' ethical leadership behavior has a stronger impact on the organizational commitment levels of female teachers as compared to their male counterparts. Ethically strong leaders intrinsically motivate employees, leading to greater engagement and commitment (Alge et al., 2006) from both male and female employees.

Moral competence can be explained as an individual's ability to adopt an appropriate method of problem-solving and decision-making, while facing an ethical problem. Moreover, it includes the ability of the association to construct, preserve, and use appropriate methods to deal with relevant ethical disputes. Moral competence is not the skill of using ethical principles but the ability to use the appropriate organizational style while facing problems. Competence consists of two levels: possession of knowledge, such as the capability to understand the situation and to find a solution according to the desired situation (Lennick & Kiel, 2005). Employees with a good match of values with their leaders are intrinsically more motivated by high moral competence and thus become good performers (Lennick & Kiel, 2005). Morally competent employees apply ethical values to objectives, goals, and actions. Moral competence is a multi-structural concept covering integrity, accountability, sympathy, and mercy (Lennick & Kiel, 2005). Integrity spreads to four interconnected ethical competencies, which include acting reliably with values and principles, telling the truth, and standing up for what is correct. Accountability involves taking responsibility for personal choices.

Morally competent leaders help people take their responsibilities seriously, while respecting their employees' involvement in their tasks. As a result, the task is more likely to achieve its purpose. Ethically competent leaders attend to their subordinates' developmental needs to increase their work competence, leading them to seek adequate development opportunities, such as specialized training or challenging task assignments. Morally competent leaders listen to their employees' opinions and are sensitive to their needs. Consequently, subordinates are provided with an ample opportunity to select their working methods and styles in order to enhance their perceived determination. Leaders who are closely associated with followers and provide guidance on financial matters, goals, and strategies must realize that their actions affect others, both externally and internally (Avolio et al., 2004).

According to Spreitzer (2007), psychological empowerment refers to intrinsic work motivation exhibited in a set of four cognitive functions reflecting a person's inclination towards their work role, which includes self-determination, meaning, impact, and competence (p. 1443). Therefore, as manifested in these dimensions, psychological empowerment focuses on the intrinsic tendency. Additionally, when employees perceive meaning in their work, their focus on tasks increases, enhancing their performance (Grant, 2008). Self-determination produces motivation and a high interest to succeed in job activities. Workers are inclined to feel revered when assigned the power to decide. Employees put more energy into their jobs when they realize that they influence others in the organization (Chandrasekar, 2011). Employees can act as moral agents when they feel empowered by their work to help others without the consequences; when their jobs are meaningful, their confidence in their work increases. Empowerment is a process of self-efficiency (Vauth et al., 2007). Empowerment includes issues such as the engagement of workers in organizational decision-making through different ways of participation and teamwork (Tuckey et al., 2012).

Meaning implies an adjustment between the demands of the role of work and an individual's behavior, standards, and views (Spreitzer, 2007). Workers complete the work well in time and in a better way when they feel that their work is important. Dickson and Lorenz (2009) stated that people in meaningful employment become more involved and engaged. Competence refers to an individual's specific job, self-efficacy, and the

passion with which they participate in the job (Robbins et al., 2002). It also refers to the knowledge and necessary skills needed to perform tasks willingly in a specific place and with a specific objective. Self-determination deals with the endeavors of groups and individuals to increase how control is related to job satisfaction and its impact on the work done. It signifies the freedom and autonomy to execute a task. Impact refers to the level to which an individual can affect operating, administrative, and strategic results at work (Spreitzer, 2007).

The relationship between employees' moral competence and ethical leadership is established through intervening processes. As able teachers and leaders are cautious for the welfare of each other, it motivates them to guide and control subordinates toward exploring their full energies (Zhu et al., 2004). Employees' moral competence and ethical leadership are mediated by psychological empowerment.

Psychologically empowered employees can positively influence their work performance, though real empowerment is yet to be achieved (Oladipo, 2009). Teachers show greater commitment to the school if their principals display ethical leadership behaviors (Karakuş, 2018). Every person works under a kind of leadership and authority, resulting in an increased capacity to work well. Ethical and visionary leadership makes it possible. A strong and visionary leadership increases the capacity of individuals by empowering them. A leader's specific leadership style may enhance teachers' abilities to achieve optimal goals. This study attempts to see the application of ethics and morality in higher education institutions (HEIs). It provides a direction for leaders to develop effective leadership in an organization, especially in the universities of Pakistan. Specifically, psychological empowerment is examined as a mediator by addressing how a leader's ethical behavior influences an employee's moral competence and how employees become motivated toward their work-related tasks when empowered. Moreover, the dimension of gender is also explored to see how women react to the ethical behaviors of their heads when feeling dis/empowered, since unsupportive and unethical behaviors of heads may affect them more.

Objectives

This study intends to assess the

1. Relationship among ethical leadership of heads, teachers' moral competence, and psychological empowerment.

2. Gender differences in ethical leadership of heads, psychological empowerment, and employees' moral competence.

3. Mediating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between ethical leadership of heads and teacher' moral competence.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1
Research Model
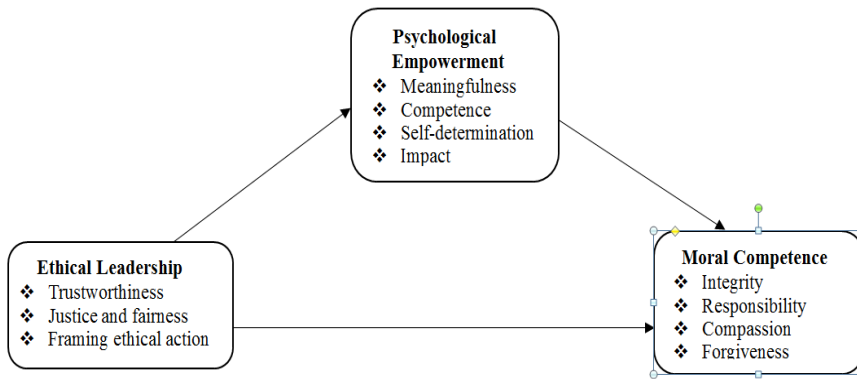
Methodology

Population and Sample

All heads of departments and teachers from the various universities of Punjab, Pakistan comprised the study population. The sample consisted of five public sector universities in Punjab, Pakistan. The sample size comprised 265 (Males 141, Females 124) faculty members/teachers. Multi-stage sampling technique was adopted to select the sample from the population defined above. In the first stage, five public sector institutions of Punjab, namely Government College University Faisalabad, University of Sargodha, University of Education (Jauharabad campus), Islamia University Bahawalpur, and the University of Gujarat were selected, conveniently. In the second stage, the faculty of social sciences and faculty of sciences of each university were selected, purposively. In the third stage,

convenient sampling technique was used for selecting the faculty members/teachers for data collection.

Instruments

For this study, three research instruments, namely the Ethical Leadership scale (Brown et al., 2005), the Moral Competence inventory (Lennick & Kiel, 2005), and the Psychological Empowerment scale established by (Spreitzer, 1995) were adopted and used.

Pilot Testing

Pilot testing of the instruments was conducted to measure their reliability using a sample of 40 employees (male and female) from the selected departments of the University of Sargodha. The instruments' validity was ensured through expert opinion regading the format and language to make them simple and understandable. Keeping in view the comments of experts, the researchers finalized the instruments. The reliability coefficient values of ethical leadership, psychological empowerment, and moral competence scale were 0.868, 0.824, and 0.839, respectively. These values demonstrated that the questionnaires were highly reliable.

Results

The analysis was performed via correlation and independent sample *t-test* using SPSS (version 22) and Structure Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS (version 21).

Table 1

Correlation of Ethical Leadership of Heads, Employees' Moral Competence, and Psychological Empowerment

Variables	Psychological Empowerment	Moral Competence
Ethical leadership	0.303**	0.113
Moral Competence	0.217**	

Table 1 shows a significant correlation between ethical leadership of heads and psychological empowerment ($r = 0.303$), ethical leadership and employees' moral competence ($r = 0.113$), and psychological empowerment and employees' moral competence ($r = 0.217$).
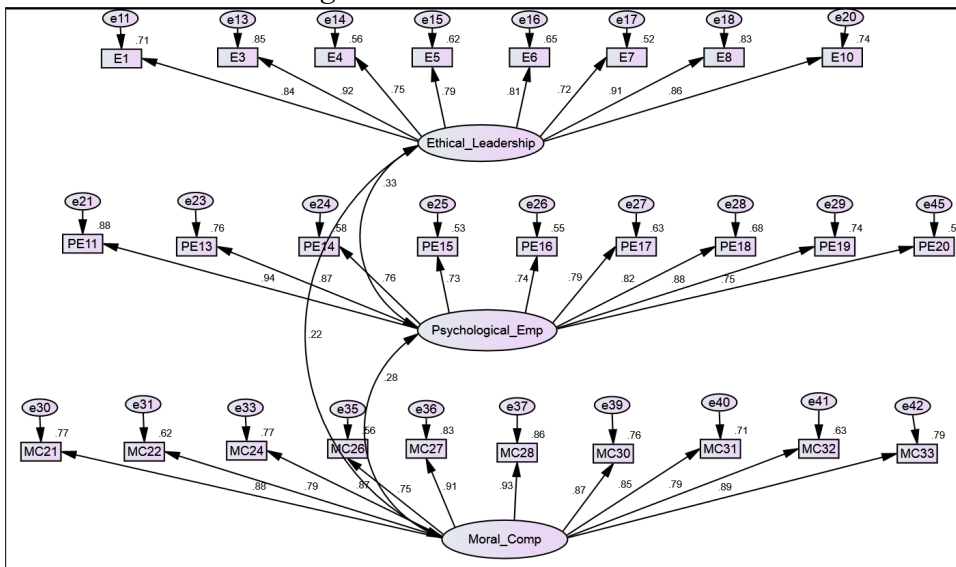
Table 2

Gender Difference in Ethical Leadership of Heads, Moral Competence, and Psychological Empowerment

Variables	Gender	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Ethical leadership	Male	141	32.98	6.58	263	-.270	.787
	Female	124	33.21	7.33			
Moral Competence	Male	141	37.63	6.61	263	1.454	.147
	Female	124	36.41	7.02			
Psychological Empowerment	Male	141	59.65	7.06	263	.172	.864
	Female	124	59.50	8.05			

Table 2 indicates no significant gender difference ($t(263) = -.270$, $p = 0.787$) between the ethical leadership of male heads ($M = 32.98$, $SD = 6.58$) and female heads ($M = 33.21$, $SD = 7.33$) in universities. Moreover, no significant difference was found ($t(263) = 1.454$, $p = 0.147$) in employees' moral competence with respect to their gender ($M = 37.63$, $SD = 6.61$) and ($M = 36.41$, $SD = 7.02$). There was also found no significant difference ($t(263) = 0.172$, $p = 0.864$) in the psychological empowerment of male ($M = 59.65$, $SD = 7.06$) and female employees ($M = 59.50$, $SD = 8.05$) in universities.

Figure 2

Measurement Model Diagram

Table 3

Fit Indices for Measurement Models and Reliability of Constructs

Construct	No of Items		Uni-dimensionality					Convergent Validity			Reliability	
	Total	Retain	$\chi2/df$	CFI	GFI	RMR	NFI	SFL	t-value	AVE	CR	α
Criteria			<5	>0.95	>0.95	<0.05	>0.95	>0.5	>1.95	>0.5	>0.6	>0.7
Ethical Leadership	10	8	4.11	0.96	0.90	0.035	0.93	0.72-0.92	7.6-11.4	0.77	0.92	0.75
Psychological Empowerment	10	9	4.96	0.97	0.93	0.018	0.95	0.73-0.94	4.6-9.4	0.79	0.96	0.81
Moral Competence	15	10	3.98	0.98	0.95	0.011	0.96	0.75-0.91	13.8-15.6	0.72	0.90	0.72

Measurement Models

All measurement models were separately analyzed using CFA. Because of fewer extracted variances, two items from ethical leadership, one from psychological empowerment, and five from moral competence scales were removed. Reliability, discriminant validity, unidimensionality, and convergent validity of all constructs with remaining items were checked. Almost all components of unidimensionality are given with cut-off values in Table 3. Although, the GFI for ethical leadership and psychological behavior is slightly lower than the threshold value, all other indicators present a good model fit.

All reliability coefficients measured in the model were higher than the threshold value of 0.6. The Cronbach alpha value for all the variables was also greater than the minimum acceptable level, that is, 0.7. Table 3 displays good results for all components of convergent validity. This table also presents the Average Variance Extraction (AVE) of the remaining items as equal to 0.5 or higher.

Structure Equation Modeling

Structure Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS (version 21) was performed to study the mediating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between ethical leadership of heads and teachers' moral competence. CFA analysis was run to check the factor structure of the instrument.

Table 4

Chi-square for Measurements Models and Square Root of AVE

Measurements Models	Chi-square	df	CFI	RMR	RMSEA
Independent and Dependent Model	295.185	88	0.906	0.908	0.094
Independent, Dependent and Mediation Model	290.26	87	0.908	0.066	0.094
Full Mediation Model	292.019	88	0.908	0.071	0.094
Square root of AVE	EthLead	PsyEmp	MorComp		
Ethical Leadership	0.77	0.33	0.22		
Psychological Empowerment	0.33	0.79	0.28		
Moral Competence	0.22	0.28	0.72		

Table 4 presents the square root of AVE in highlighted figures. The measurement models provide an acceptable and good fit to the data.

Table 5

*Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of All Variables of the Study*

Paths	B	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Direct Paths					
Ethical Leadership ⟶ Psychological Empowerment	.25	.05	.000	.154	.343
Psychological Empowerment ⟶ Moral Competence	.08	3.18	.007	.092	.393
Ethical Leadership ⟶ Moral Competence	.05	.83	.407	-071	.175
Indirect Path					
Ethical Leadership ⟶ PsyEmp ⟶ Moral Competence	.06			.021	.105
Total Effect					
EthLead ⟶ Psy Emp+ EthLead ⟶ Psy Emp ⟶ Moral Competence	0.11	1.85	.065	-.007	.231
Chi square /df = 4.97 CFI = 0.951		NFI = 0.925		RMSEA 0.044	

As shown in the above table, the direct effect of ethical leadership on psychological empowerment is significant (*B*= .248, *t* =.048, *p* =.000). Furthermore, the direct effect of psychological empowerment on moral competence is also significant (*B*= .076, *t* =3.18, *p*= .007). On the contrary, the direct effect of ethical leadership on moral competence is non-significant (*B*= .052, *t* =.830, *p*=.407). Moreover, all standardized direct effects are highly significant at a 5% significance level.

The indirect effect of ethical leadership on moral competence through the mediation of psychological empowerment is 0.061 (LLCI=0.021, ULCI=0.105); while 5000 bootstrap samples were selected to test the mediation. This indirect effect is significant as the confidence interval's lower and upper bounds differ from zero. The direct effect of ethical leadership and moral competence is not significant, whereas the indirect effect of ethical leadership on moral competence through psychological empowerment is significant. Therefore, the mediation type suggested by the model is complete mediation. The standardized total effect of ethical leadership on moral competence is *B* = .112. All values show a good model

fit, as in Table 6. After analyzing the statistical results of the structural model, it can be concluded that psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between both the variables.

Figure 3

Structured Model Diagram
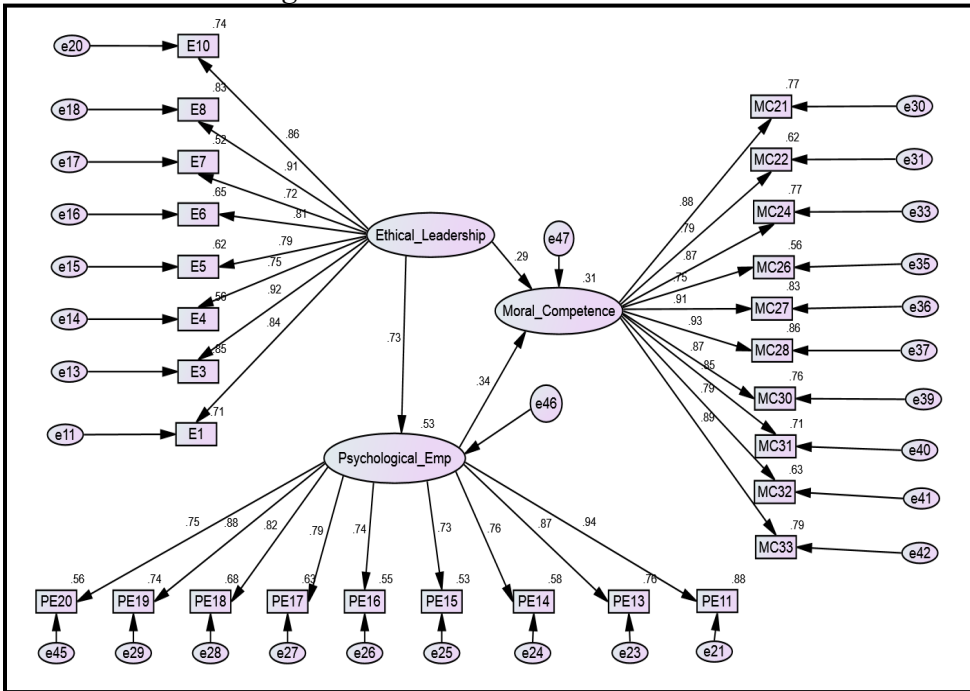
In the above model, a direct path from ethical leadership of heads towards teachers' moral competence was added, showing both the mediation model's direct and indirect effect. This model also fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 290.26$; *df*= 88; CFI =0.908, RMR=0.071, and RMSEA=0.094). Additionally, ethical leadership significantly affects psychological empowerment, while psychological empowerment significantly affects teachers' moral competence.

Discussion

This research intended to determine the mediating role of psychological empowerment in the relationship between ethical leadership of department heads and university teachers' moral competence. It is evident from the findings that when leaders behave ethically with their employees, their moral competence increases. It was also found that psychologically

empowered employees possess increased moral competence. This finding is similar to the previous research of Aryee et al. (2012). They revealed that employees' moral competence increases and they perform well when they are psychologically empowered.

The findings of the current study show a significantly positive correlation between the ethical leadership of heads and psychological empowerment of teachers and between ethical leadership and employees' moral competence. These results coincide with the study of Kim and Kim (2013) which discovered that heads' moral competence is related to employees' psychological empowerment and task performance. Stander and Rothmann (2008) revealed that ethical leadership positively relates to employees' psychological empowerment and moral competence. Stander and Rothmann (2008) also discovered that the three dimensions of psychological empowerment, namely competence, meaning, and impact are significantly related to employee engagement, while self-determination is also related to employee engagement. These results are in line with the results of this study. However, the effect of psychological empowerment on employee engagement is stronger when effective job insecurity is low. A similar study was conducted by Lambert (2000) which found that the moral competence of heads is correlated with employees' psychological empowerment, performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors. Another study was conducted at the University of Amsterdam (Kalshoven et al., 2011). The results showed conscientiousness as the most significant and positively related variable to ethical leadership behavior.

The current findings indicate no significant gender difference in the relationship among ethical leadership of heads, psychological empowerment, and moral competence of university teachers. A similar study was conducted by Kacmar et al. (2011). The authors concluded that both genders are likely to respond to ethical leadership differently. These results are contrary to the results of this study. The current study concludes that there are major gender differences regarding empowerment. Wankel et al. (2011) conducted a comparative study on students from the United States of America, Poland, and Indonesia and found that the level of moral competence of female students was higher than the level of moral competence of male university students. They further explained that it may be due to the nature of socialization, since the society places more restrictions on women than men.

The structural model of this study revealed that psychological empowerment partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' moral competence. The structural model of Stander and Rothmann (2008) revealed the same and confirmed that psychological empowerment predicts employee engagement. The study concluded that affective job insecurity moderates the effect of psychological empowerment on employee engagement. Furthermore, employees' psychological empowerment partially mediates the effect of moral competence on their behavior. Kim and Kim (2013) found that employees' psychological empowerment partially mediates the relationship between the leader's behavior and employees' moral competence. Employees display better task performance comparatively and remain involved in more flexible behaviors when leaders show a respectful and caring behavior towards them. The results of Tuuli (2009) demonstrated that psychological empowerment has direct and indirect effects, partially mediated by intrinsic motivation and the ability to perform. Qing et al. (2020) revealed that psychological empowerment fully mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment, while it partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and job satisfaction.

Conclusion

A leader's specific leadership style affects teachers' abilities to achieve their goals in an optimal way. Hence, the existing study was planned to find out the mediating role of psychological empowerment in the relationship between ethical leadership of department heads and teachers' moral competence in the selected universities of Punjab, Pakistan. The results revealed that leaders' ethical behavior is positively related to employees' moral competence and psychological empowerment. Psychologically empowered employees are morally competent and perform well. No gender difference was found in all three variables, which indicated that ethical leadership practices of male and female heads of departments were the same. At the same time, there was no difference found between male and female employees in their psychological empowerment and moral competence. Ethical leadership of heads was found to be significantly associated with employees' moral competence, as mediated by their psychological empowerment.

Recommendations

It is recommended that leaders should always behave ethically with their employees. It would increase employees' moral competence and consequently, a more ethical work environment may prevail in the institution. Ethical leaders should articulate a clear vision by following ethical values and norms to achieve the objectives honestly and confidently. Empowered employees should accomplish objectives and should deeply engage themselves in their teaching and research tasks.

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