



Exploring the Paths Between Ethical Leadership and Task Performance: Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence

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Abstract

Ethical leadership is known to produce multiple positive employee outcomes. Ethical leaders provide guidance to their followers on ethical standards. The ability of emotional perception enables one to perceive and understand his/her own feelings completely and correctly, and better react to situations involving emotional interactions. Emotional intelligence has also positive impacts on various employee outcomes such as task performance. Task performance is linked to main organizational activities and behaviors typically specified in job definitions. Task performance is influenced by several factors, one of which is ethical leadership. Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine how emotional intelligence is related with task performance and whether ethical leadership has a mediating role in such relationship. The study was conducted with 256 participants using a set of questionnaires. The study data was analyzed using structural equation modeling. The study results showed that emotional intelligence has a positive effect on task performance, and ethical leadership plays a fully mediating role in such relationship.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership; Task Performance; Emotional Intelligence; Leadership.

1. Introduction

Personal interactions are very important in organizations, and employees are mostly in interactions with their managers, i.e., leaders. Leadership is generally viewed as the process of affecting followers for achievement of specific goals shared by a leader and the followers (Gardner, 2007; Locke, 2003). In organizations, leaders have the position to affect followers' behaviors through a reward-punishment system toward ethical and unethical actions (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Such leadership is defined as ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005). Based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), followers working with an ethical leader learn and exhibit proper behaviors by observing the actions of such credible and ethical role models. Recently, multiple studies have explored the outcomes of ethical leadership and established several positive follower outcomes (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2012; Neubert et al., 2013).

Employee behavior is certainly one of the most critical factors with impact on performance (Kusluvan, 2003). Yet, the multidimensional structure has to be understood in order to comprehend performance, which primarily consists of two prominent aspects, task performance and contextual (Borman et al., 2001) performance that is also called prosocial behavior (Penner et al., 2005) and organizational citizenship behavior (Netemeyer et al., 1997). Task performance refers to job-related activities contributing to the technical essence of an organization (Borman & Motowildo, 1997), which is more likely to be specified in job descriptions.

Task performance is positively influenced by emotional intelligence. Emotional recognition and emotional management play an important role in determining the quality of interactions between a leader and followers. Emotional intelligence is regarded as a group of emotional and intellectual abilities to perceive and understand the feelings of one's own and other people. It is the ability to manage feelings to identify the good and use such emotional knowledge to facilitate thoughts and behaviors (Goleman, 1995). Briefly, emotional intelligence is our ability to acknowledge our own and others' feelings, which is basically used to inspire ourselves and successfully control feelings within us during our interactions

with others (Goleman, 1998). Schutte et al. (2002) indicate that emotional intelligence is categorized as competency/ability (e.g. Mayer et al., 1999) or a personality trait (e.g. Schutte & Malouff, 1999). In the present research, emotional intelligence is discussed as a competency with a potential to improve positive employee attitudes, and motivate positive behaviors and better consequences.

Based on the respective literature, the present study aims to investigate the impact of ethical leadership on task performance and the mediating effect of emotional intelligence on the ethical leadership-task performance relationship.

2. Ethical Leadership

Based on social learning, ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normative 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 et al., 2005, p. 120). Behaviors suggestive of ethical leadership of a higher degree include actions normatively proper and consistent with supported values, communication with followers on ethics and stimulation of ethical behavior among followers, situation control considering morality, clear emphasis on honest relations and punishment of unethical actions (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Kalshoven et al., 2011).

In the growing line of literature on this leadership (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown & Treviño, 2006), ethical leadership is referred to as a leadership style in which ethical leader behaviors are conveyed to follower behaviors via social learning, social exchange and social identity processes (Treviño et al., 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2011). Along with underlying processes, the essence to the ethical leadership conceptualization is moral cue communication (Brown et al., 2005).

According to Trevino & Brown (2004), perception of an ethical leader should include both a moral person and a moral manager. A moral person refers to an individual who is good in character with being honest and reliable, caring for followers' well-being and being accessible. A moral manager, in turn, refers to an individual who employs ethics in the leading process, informing followers of the expectations and holding followers responsible for their actions. Moral managers are known for their ethical principles, communicating ethical guidelines, encouraging ethical work conduct and using a reward-punishment system to favor ethical actions. Such behaviors of an ethical leader drive followers to shape their own ethical behaviors.

Prior research provided evidence for the moral motivation by demonstrating moral personality traits in ethical leaders, such as a moral identity (Mayer et al., 2012) and a greater sense of social responsibility (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Additionally, four core normative reference points have been associated with ethical leaders (Eisenbeiss, 2012), which are humane orientation (dignified and respectful behaviors toward others), justice orientation (consistent and fair decision-making), responsibility and sustainability orientation (leader's consideration for social and environmental well-being) and moderation orientation (equanimity and humbleness). Such orientations collectively reflect the moral norms covered by ethical leadership, which are shared on a universal scale.

The recent focus on ethical leadership stems from its relation with many significant employee outcomes. Based on previous studies, ethical leaders are likely to enhance job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Brown et al., 2005; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009; Toor & Ofori, 2009), improved well-being (Chungtai et al., 2014) and increased performance (Piccolo et al., 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2011). Ethical leadership has also been linked to a wide spectrum of positive outcomes such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Kacmar et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2009), ethical environment of the organization (Mayer et al., 2010; Schaubroeck et al., 2012), proactive behaviors (Kalshoven et al., 2012; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), and enhanced task and contextual performance (Mayer et al., 2012; Piccolo et al., 2010).

3. Task Performance

The term performance typically characterizes the extent to which an individual uses his/her capacity or actual knowledge, ability and skills for achieving his/her expectations or goals. In other words, performance is the degree of individuals' potential to successfully carry out a work in a given time (Yıldız et al., 2008). The traditional concept of job performance was assessed considering an individual's competency to complete tasks described in the job definition. Supporting this, Borman and Motowidlo (1993) indicated that the traditional performance concept consists of implementing and accomplishing a well-defined task.

Nevertheless, the structure of job and organizations have changed, compelling scholars to revise the traditional approach to performance. In recent decades, performance has been widely recognized as consisting of multiple dimensions (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Campbell et al., 1996). In this context, Borman and Motowidlo (1993) classified job performance into two factors: task and contextual performance. These factors are concerned with behavioral differences between those with a direct connection to the job and with contribution to organizational outcomes along with no

connection to primary functions of the job. Basically, the difference of these two factors is between in-role performance (directly linked to the job) and extra-role performance (not directly linked to the job) (Shaffer & Shaffer, 2005).

Based on this two-factor job performance theory, Borman and Motowidlo (1993, 1997) proposed that most of the jobs include task and contextual performance. Task performance is a function of skills and abilities, knowledge and attributes related to a behavior specific to a role such as formal job requirements (Campbell, 1999). Task performance covers the behaviors which have a direct relation to job completion. Such behaviors may include using know-how and skills for goods/service production via the basic technical processes of the organization or completing specific tasks contributing to such basic processes. Accordingly, task performance-related behaviors generally provide support to the technical essence of an organization and contribute to main organizational activities in the nature of maintenance and transformation such as production, sales, inventory collection or service delivery (Motowidlo & Schmit, 1999). In general, the behaviors within task performance are considered formal requirements of a job. These actions are usually well-prescribed in individuals' job definitions. Contextual performance-related behaviors, in turn, support the organizational culture and environment, namely the structure where the said organizational activities are executed.

According to Borman (2004), task performance and contextual performance are two distinct aspects since people may exhibit an acceptable performance in task completion, while their contextual performance may be not satisfactory. Griffin et al. (2000) are in agreement with this distinction, suggesting that people are able to engage in and take advantage of contextual behaviors when they comprehend situations, and this enhances the efficiency of both unit and organization. Briefly, task performance is basically characterized by skills and abilities, while personality is involved in contextual performance (Arvey & Murphy, 1998). Besides, task performance differs from job to job and is required by the work role, while contextual performance is rather consistent in all jobs and not required by the work role (Aguinis, 2009).

The link from ethical leadership to task performance has been investigated in relatively few studies and therefore, the processes underlying such relation is still not known exactly. One of the contributive studies in this regard was conducted by Piccolo et al. (2010) and explored the influence of task importance, autonomy and effort in the ethical leadership-task performance link. The authors established that task importance is enhanced by ethical leadership, and this leads to greater performance.

However, there are several studies providing evidence for the meaningful influence of ethical leadership on employee outcomes such as job performance (Brown et al., 2005; Piccolo et al., 2010; Walumbwa et al, 2012). Many studies have explored how ethical leaders lead to greater job performance of employees. For instance, Toor and Ofori (2009) established a mediating role of ethical leadership in the link from organizational culture to employee outcomes through increased efficiency of the leader, employee desire toward greater effort and increased employee satisfaction.

In light of this theoretical background and based on previous studies, the present study formulates the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a positive relationship between ethical leadership and task performance.

4. Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is an important predictor of crucial organizational outcomes, which has gained specific attention recently in the management literature. Emotions are widely recognized as an intrinsic component of the workplace; however, the field of work-related emotions still require research (Bande et al., 2015). There are certain limitations in the emotional intelligence research due to the conceptualization and measurement discussions (Davies et al., 1998). Some scholars follow a theoretical model that suggests emotional abilities as constituents of emotional intelligence (e.g., Mayer et al., 1999). Other scholars believe that emotional intelligence involves various emotional skills, but also includes personality characteristics (e.g. Goleman, 1995). Such theoretical model is known as the ability-based model, while the latter is called the mixed model (Mayer et al., 2000) or trait-based model (Petrides & Furnham, 2000).

Emotional intelligence was first introduced by Salovey and Mayer in 1990. Their conceptualization was based on the model of ability, and they described it as a kind of intelligence containing the skill to control thoughts and behaviors of an individual's own and other people. This conceptualization suggests four dimensions: personal emotional regulation, emotional assessment, others' emotional assessment and use of emotions. In 1997, Salovey and Mayer re-defined emotional intelligence as the ability to notice emotions, incorporate emotions into thoughts, understand and manage emotions for enhanced individual development. In 2000, Mayer et al. introduced a new conceptualization since they believed that all abilities related to emotional intelligence were not covered by prior definitions. This new definition referred to the ability to recognize, evaluate and express feelings correctly and adaptively; the ability to comprehend feelings and emotional information; the ability to attain and produce feelings in order to facilitate cognitive actions and adaptive behaviors, and the ability to manage feelings in one's own and other people.

Wong and Law (2002) suggest that emotional intelligence consists of multiple interrelated skills about the ability to recognize, evaluate and articulate emotions correctly; the ability to attain and/or develop emotions to simplify thoughts; the ability to comprehend emotions and emotional information and the ability to manage emotions toward an emotional and mental development. This conceptualization by Wong and Law (2002) involves four dimensions regarding emotional intelligence: *Self-emotional appraisal* refers to one's ability to apprehend his/her actual emotions and articulate such emotions easily. *Others' emotional appraisal* refers to one's ability to appreciate and perceive emotions of other people. *Regulation of emotion* refers to one's ability to manage his/her emotions, through which one can more easily cope with psychological distress. *Use of emotion* refers to one's ability to utilize his/her emotions by engaging in productive activities and individual performance.

Researchers generally believe that emotional intelligence is likely to contribute to more positive attitudes, behaviors and consequences. It is suggested that emotional intelligence significantly predicts certain outcomes at organizational level (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005; Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004), and emotional intelligence skills have the potential to improve via learning and practice (Goleman, 1998).

Emotional intelligence allows us to identify emotions and utilize information on emotions, resulting in efficient or better performance. Emotional intelligence is positively related with performance (George, 2000; Lopes et al., 2006), and success at both individual and organizational levels (e.g. Zeidner et al., 2004; Blanchard et al., 2010). Carmali (2003) suggests that emotional intelligence competency is likely to foster both individual and organizational performance. Schutte et al. (2001) reported that people who have high emotional intelligence achieve greater success at problem solving and cognitive task accomplishments compared to those with low emotional intelligence. Salovey and Mayer (1990) claimed that emotional intelligence, as a new form of intelligence, has an impact on job performance. Goleman (2001) indicated that emotional intelligence has a positive impact on individual's work success.

Past research demonstrates positive relationships between emotional intelligence and task performance. For instance, Hui-Hua and Schutte (2014) reported that task performance is facilitated by emotional intelligence. The study by Van Rooy and Viswesvaran (2004) established that emotional intelligence has the power to predict performance outcomes with different degrees based on situation. The study by Kappagola (2012) found emotional intelligence significantly positively related with task and contextual performance. Similarly, Côté and Miners (2006) also reported a positive association between emotional intelligence and task performance.

Based on this theoretical background, the present study formulated the following hypotheses:

H2: There is a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and task performance.

H3: Emotional intelligence has a mediating effect on the relationship between ethical leadership and task performance.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Goal

This study aims to determine the impact of ethical leadership on task performance and the mediating effect of emotional intelligence. According to the model developed for this purpose, it is assumed that ethical leadership positively affects task performance, and this effect is reduced partially or fully by emotional intelligence.

5.2. Measures

Ethical leadership was measured using the Ethical Leadership Scale developed by Brown et al. (2005). The scale consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Example items include "Defines success not just by results but also the way that they are obtained" and "Discusses business ethics or values with employees". The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.92.

Task performance was measured using 4 items from the 7-item Task Performance Scale by Williams and Anderson (1991). Example items include "I am very competent" and "I get my work done effectively". The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.91.

Emotional intelligence was measured using the 16- item Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS, Wong and Law, 2002). This scale involves four subdimensions, emotional appraisal of the self (e.g. "I really understand what I feel"), emotion appraisal of others (e.g. "I have good understanding of the emotions of people around me"), regulation of emotions (e.g. "I have good control of my own emotions"), and use of emotion (e.g. "I am a self-motivated person"). Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was between 0.84 and 0.93.

5.3. Research Model

Based on the research model created according to the research hypotheses, ethical leadership has a direct effect on task performance, whereas it has an indirect effect through emotional intelligence (Figure 1).

6. Results

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for the observed variables used in the present study are shown in Table 1. Taking the two-step approach as a base, the analyses are reported in two sections: tests of the measurement and structural models.

Variable	M	SD	EI_OEA	EI_OUE	EI_SEA	EL_P1	EL_P2	TP_P1	TP_P2
EI_OEA	6.93	1.08	-						
EI_OUE	6.66	1.32	.59**	-					
EI_SEA	6.97	1.33	.44**	.55*	-				
EL_P1	7.39	.95	.17**	.24**	.14*	-			
EL_P2	6.64	1.38	.17**	.22**	.10	.90**	-		
TP_P1	6.81	1.36	.39**	.58**	.33**	.17**	.19**	-	
TP_P2	4.12	.83	.44**	.52**	.29**	.31**	.27**	.74**	-

Notes: N = 285; EI_OEA = Others emotion appraisal, EI_OUE = Use of emotion, EI_SEA = Self emotion appraisal; EL_P1-P2 = Two parcels for ethical leadership; TP_P1-P2 = Two parcels for task performance.
*p<.05, ** p<.01

6.1. Test of the Measurement Model

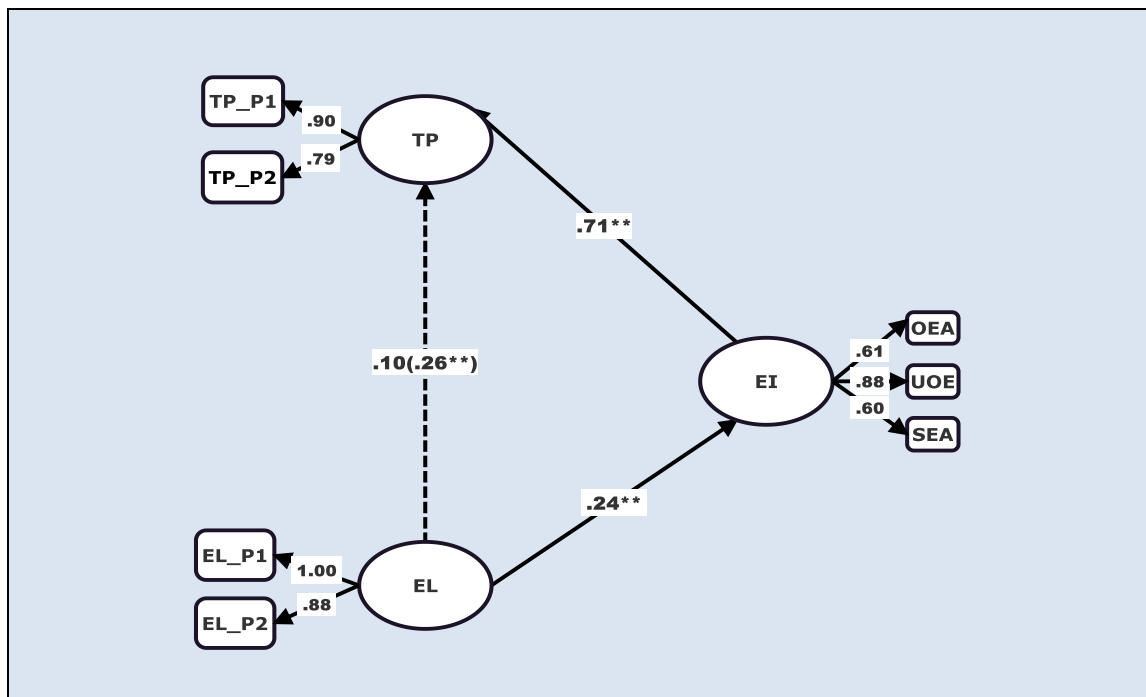
The measurement model defines the posited relations of observed variables with their underlying constructs, namely latent variables. Three latent variables were used in the present structural model test: Emotional intelligence, ethical leadership and task performance. An initial test of the measurement model resulted in a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(12, N = 285) = 32.50, p < .05$; GFI = 0.97; CFI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.039; RMSEA = 0.078 (90 % confidence interval for RMSEA = 0.046-0.11). Factor loadings of the measured variables on the latent variables are shown in Table 2. All factor loadings were found to be higher than .60, showing that these observed variables are reliable indicators of the latent variables. The results showed that these three latent variables were positively intercorrelated. Specifically, emotional intelligence was correlated positively with both ethical leadership ($r = .23$) and task performance ($r = .71$). Ethical leadership and task performance was also positively correlated ($r = .26$).

6.2. Test of the Structural Model

The proposed model, assuming indirect paths from ethical leadership to task performance through emotional intelligence, was tested using the Maximum Likelihood estimation method. The results indicated that this model fitted to the covariance matrix, demonstrated by the following goodness of fit statistics: $\chi^2(13, N = 285) = 35.75, p < .05$; GFI = 0.97; CFI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.052; RMSEA = 0.079 (90 % confidence interval for RMSEA = 0.030-0.16).

Testing the mediating effect of emotional intelligence, a path from ethical leadership to task performance was added to the model. Such a model trimming resulted in an increase in chi-square value that is shown to be statistically insignificant (3.25, 1; $p > .05$). This result showed that the effect of ethical leadership on task performance was fully mediated by emotional intelligence (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Standardized Parameter Estimates for the Proposed Model.



Notes: $N = 285$; EI = Emotional intelligence, EL = Ethical leadership, TP = Task performance; EI_OEA = Others' emotion appraisal, EI_UOE = Use of emotion, EI_SEA = Self emotion appraisal; EL_P1-P2 = Two parcels for ethical leadership; TP_P1-P2 = Two parcels for task performance; All factor loadings are significant at $p=.01$.

** $p<.01$

Although the proposed model resulted in a good fit to the data, an alternative model was tested against the possibility of a fit because of a statistical coincidence. The alternative model assuming that ethical leadership mediated the relationship between emotional leadership and task performance resulted in the following goodness of fit statistics: $\chi^2(13, N = 285) = 111.12, p<.05$; GFI = 0.90; CFI = 0.88; SRMR = 0.18; RMSEA = 0.16 (90 % confidence interval for RMSEA = 0.14-0.19).

It is clear that the proposed model had a better fit to the data as indicated by the significant decrease in the chi-square value obtained in the second model. Moreover, AIC and ECVI values for the proposed model (65.75 and .20, respectively) were smaller than those of the alternative model (141.12 and .50, respectively). Overall, the results showed that the conceptual model fits the data better than the alternative model.

Table 2: Factor Loadings, Standard Errors, and t-values for the Measurement Model			
Measure and Variable	SE	t	Standardized Factor Loading
Emotional Intelligence			
EL_OEA	.16	10.44	.62**
EL_OUE	.13	15.71	.88**
EL_SEA	.18	10.09	.60**
Ethical Leadership			
U1	.18	23.83	1.00**
U2	.20	19.00	.88**

Task Performance			
TP_P1	.06	16.05	.88**
TP_P2	.06	14.65	.81**
<i>Notes:</i> N = 285; EI_OEA = Others emotion appraisal, EI_UOE = Use of emotion, EI_SEA = Self emotion appraisal; EL_P1-P2 = Two parcels for ethical leadership; TP_P1-P2 = Two parcels for task performance. *p<.05, ** p<.01			

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated whether ethical leadership was related with task performance and emotional intelligence had a mediating effect on such relationship. The results demonstrated that ethical leadership was significantly and positively related with task performance, and emotional intelligence had a fully mediating effect on the emotional intelligence-task performance relationship. We believe that the present study contributes much to the available literature by showing the links among ethical leadership, employee emotional intelligence and employee task performance since there is almost no study in this regard.

The first finding of the present study established that task performance was positively influenced by ethical leadership as assumed in Hypothesis 1. According to this finding, employees working with an ethical leader would exhibit better performance on tasks. This is in agreement with the study by Piccolo et al. (2010) which reported that ethical leaders positively influence employees' task performance. Such positive effect is believed to result from a social exchange relationship since employees working with an ethical leader receive ethical treatment and they trust that their leader care for their best interests, leading to enhanced performance on tasks in response to such perception (Brown et al., 2005). Thus, this finding further contributes to the literature on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee task performance, which is relatively limited. Future studies may investigate other individual or organizational variables affected by this leadership style such as contextual performance or organizational identification. Future studies may also examine the processes underlying ethical leadership, which result in such improved work outcomes.

The second finding of the present study established a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and task performance as assumed in Hypothesis 2. This finding suggests that employees with high emotional intelligence would perform better on tasks. This is consistent with the previous studies by Schutte et al. (2001) and Kappagola (2012), which reported positive associations between emotional intelligence and task performance. It is likely to indicate that an individual's success at work is a function of emotional intelligence. Integration of emotions and thoughts is likely to affect performance on various tasks (Gray, 2004). Employees with high emotional intelligence are able to perceive and understand their colleagues' and their own emotions, and use such emotional knowledge to facilitate their performance on tasks. Consistent with the study by Ahangar (2012), such employees seem to be highly aware of how they feel and how such feelings affect their actions and outcomes at work within an organization and capable of emotional management in line with the task requirements. Accordingly, this finding contributes to the available knowledge on ability-based employee behavior and work outcomes. Since emotional intelligence is believed to improve with learning and practice (Goleman, 1998), future studies may explore the means of such learning and practice in order to achieve the best performance of employees.

The third hypothesis of the present study assumed that emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and task performance and the study results demonstrated a fully mediating effect. This finding suggests that employees working with an ethical leader are more able to recognize their emotions and such emotional recognition improves their task performance. Emotional intelligence is the ability to select the accurate emotion against a particular situation and the ability to express such emotion accurately. Employees who are high on emotional intelligence are likely to perceive the ethical emotions and actions of their leader and exhibit behaviors accordingly. This finding may extend the available literature on employee attitudes and leadership since emotional intelligence has been studied mostly from the leadership perspective. The present study demonstrated that employees' emotional intelligence is also an important factor for ethical leaders and can determine the interaction between followers and the leader. Future studies are advised to investigate the link between morality and ethical decision-making in the context of cognitive abilities in order to obtain more information in this regard.

Based on the results of the present study, we recommend organizations to develop new organizational strategies to improve emotional intelligence of their employees. Organizations may provide their employees with opportunities of personal growth so that they can be aware of and manage their emotions in order to achieve better performance. Since employees with high emotional intelligence would exhibit better task performance, human resources management may

use or adapt emotional intelligence scales to establish the emotional state of prospective employees at the recruitment stage. This would help organizations to ensure a proper employee selection based on job requirements and duties.

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