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Ethical Leadership: What Does It Look Like?

Laura Schulte, Ph.D.

This article focuses on the development and validation of the Ethical Leadership Index (ELI). The development and validation processes included: adopting a framework; developing items; providing evidence of content validity; conducting a pilot study; and analyzing data to provide evidence of construct validity and reliability estimates. Five ethical principles that are mentioned in leadership models, theories, and approaches served as the framework for the ELI. They include respect for autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, and fidelity. The results of the study indicate that the ELI is a psychometrically sound instrument, which warrants its use in leadership programs and organizations.

“If you have integrity, nothing else matters. If you don’t have integrity, nothing else matters” (Simpson, n.d.).

Recently, we have witnessed countless examples of unethical leadership from top executives in the business world which has led to the global economic crisis. There is a great need to promote and value ethical leadership in our society. What does ethical leadership look like? Leadership models, theories, and approaches touch upon the characteristics of ethical leadership. For example, the Contingency Model addresses the need for leader-member relationships that center on trust (Fiedler, 1995; Northouse, 2004), while Leader-Member Exchange Theory conceptualizes quality leader-member exchanges as a mature partnership with a “high degree of mutual trust, respect, and obligation toward each other” (Northouse, 2004, p. 152). The trait approach to leadership emphasizes the importance of a leader’s honesty and integrity (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Kouzes & Posner, 2002), while the skills approach recognizes the importance of a leader’s ability to create a work environment where employees feel secure (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000; Northouse, 2004). The style approach takes into account a leader’s concern for people (Blake & Mouton, 1985), while the transformational approach focuses on a leader’s ability to motivate others to contribute to the greater good by fostering honesty, loyalty, fairness, justice, equality, and human rights (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

A review of the literature on leadership failed to identify a perceptual instrument that measures the characteristics of ethical leadership. In re-

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sponse to this need, an instrument that assesses the characteristics of ethical leadership was developed and validated as part of a course project in scale development in an applied advanced statistics course the author teaches. This article discusses the processes involved in the development and validation of the Ethical Leadership Index (ELI): adopting a framework; developing items; providing evidence of content validity; conducting a pilot study; and analyzing data to provide evidence of construct validity and reliability estimates (DeVellis, 2003).

Adopting a Framework—Ethical Principles

In this project the ELI was developed by operationally defining the characteristics of ethical leadership, using, as a framework, five ethical principles that are mentioned in leadership models, theories, and approaches. The five ethical principles include respect for autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, and fidelity (Kitchener, 1984, 1985, 2000). Respect for autonomy refers to the freedom to act independently in thought, choice, and/or action (Beauchamp & Childress, 1979; Kitchener, 1984, 1985, 2000). A person's right to autonomy is limited by respect for others' decisions and values (Northouse, 2004). Beneficence requires one to benefit others, contributing to another person's welfare (Beauchamp & Childress, 1979; Kitchener, 1984, 1985, 2000; Noddings, 1984). Nonmaleficence refers to doing no harm to others, physical and/or psychological, intentional or not (Beauchamp & Childress, 1979; Kitchener, 1984, 1985, 2000). Justice refers to treating others fairly and involves impartiality, equality, and moral reciprocity (Benn, 1967; Kitchener, 1985, 2000). Fidelity refers to being faithful, trustworthy, and loyal (Kitchener, 1984, 1985, 2000; Ramsey, 1970). At the core of these five ethical principles lies integrity and respect for persons.

Developing Items

The ELI item development panel included 24 educators who were enrolled in an applied advanced statistics course. Twenty-three of the educators were pursuing doctoral degrees in educational administration while serving as administrators and teachers in the area school districts. One member of the item development panel was a university professor who taught courses in community counseling. The item development panel members had from 7 to 38 years of experience in the field of education ($M = 14.79$, $SD = 7.01$). Their roles as educational leaders in the community provided

them with the experiences and expertise needed to serve as members of the item development panel. The instructor of the statistics course provided the students with a definition of and example items for each of the five ethical principles. Then, the students broke into groups of 4 or 5 to brainstorm items for each principle with each group focusing on one ethical principle. As a result of the item development process, 61 items were generated. The number of items developed for each ethical principle was as follows: respect for autonomy (10), beneficence (14), nonmaleficence (13), justice (11), and fidelity (13).

Providing Evidence of Content Validity

To provide evidence of content validity 21 community leaders were recruited to serve as members of the content validity panel. They included 8 educational leaders from the surrounding P–12 school districts, 6 educational leaders from the area universities, and 7 community leaders involved in business or law. Their years of experience in their current leadership positions ranged from 1 to 24 years ($M = 8.17$, $SD = 5.83$). They rated each item's appropriateness in operationally defining the corresponding ethical principle on a 3-point scale ("1"—not appropriate, "2"—marginally appropriate, and "3"—very appropriate). For items they rated 1 or 2, they were asked to provide ways to improve the items.

The item development panel reviewed all the information from the content validity panel and made changes to the items based on the item ratings and other written input. From this process, 23 items were deleted, and 9 items were reworded. This resulted in a 38-item ELI with the following number of items for each ethical principle: respect for autonomy (7), beneficence (9), nonmaleficence (8), justice (6), and fidelity (8).

Conducting a Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted by distributing the 38-item ELI to 112 graduate students who were employed in full-time positions. The participants were recruited by asking professors to distribute the ELI to graduate students in their classes. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous. The participants were asked to respond to the ELI items by considering how true each statement was in their interactions with their supervisor on a scale from 1 to 5, where "1" indicated rarely or never true, "2" indicated seldom true, "3" indicated sometimes true, "4" indicated often true, and "5" indicated usually or always true.

All of the respondents were educators with the majority being classroom teachers (78%). The respondents ranged in age from 22 to 58 years ($M = 34.72$, $SD = 9.05$). Their mean years of experience was 6.64 ($SD = 5.94$), ranging from 1 to 32 years. The respondents' gender breakdown was 63% female and 37% male while their supervisors' gender breakdown was 54% female and 46% male.

Analyzing Data

The students in the statistics class analyzed the data from the pilot study as part of their final examination in the course. They completed factor and reliability analyses to provide evidence of construct validity and reliability estimates (Kachigan, 1991). Using a principal axis factoring method followed by a varimax rotation of the number of factors extracted, the factor analysis and corresponding screen plot indicated that a two-factor solution best fit the data, accounting for 63% of the total variance in the ELI items. A factor loading cutoff value of .50 was used to determine which ELI items loaded on each factor (see Table 1). Items were retained that loaded on one and only one factor so that relatively independent composite scores could be created in future use of the ELI. The dominant first factor had an eigenvalue of 22.212, accounting for 58.45% of the total variance in the items. It included items about a supervisor's personal integrity (*Integrity*). The second factor had an eigenvalue of 1.653, accounting for 4.35% of the total variance in the items. It included items about a supervisor's respect for employees (*Respect*). Based on the factor analysis, 13 items were removed from the ELI, resulting in a 25-item ELI with all five ethical principles represented (see Table 1).

Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability estimates for the 11-item *Integrity* factor and the 14-item *Respect* factor were both 0.95, which indicated that respondents were consistent in their ratings of supervisors across items

TABLE 1
Ethical Leadership Index Items by Factor with Factor Loadings.

Factor 1 Items—Supervisor Integrity	Factor 1 Loading	Factor 2 Loading
1. My supervisor has high moral standards. (F)	0.786	0.379
2. My supervisor is a person of integrity. (F)	0.782	0.453
3. My supervisor's behavior is consistent and respectful. (N)	0.782	0.363
4. My supervisor is true to his/her word. (F)	0.777	0.370
5. My supervisor does not engage in gossip. (F)	0.705	0.191
6. My supervisor's communication is honest. (F)	0.684	0.457
7. My supervisor allocates time/resources equitably. (J)	0.666	0.401
8. My supervisor evaluates me fairly. (J)	0.642	0.399
9. I can trust my supervisor with confidential information. (F)	0.572	0.487
10. My supervisor holds all employees accountable for their behavior. (J)	0.572	0.277
11. My supervisor encourages personal/professional balance. (B)	0.559	0.493

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)
Ethical Leadership Index Items by Factor with Factor Loadings.

Factor 2 Items—Supervisor Respect for Employees	Factor 1 Loading	Factor 2 Loading
1. My supervisor values my opinions and ideas. (RA)	0.417	0.740
2. My supervisor supports my professional development. (B)	0.415	0.716
3. My supervisor encourages independent thinking. (RA)	0.288	0.707
4. My supervisor motivates me to excel. (B)	0.394	0.698
5. My supervisor provides me with appropriate recognition. (B)	0.357	0.692
6. My supervisor maximizes my professional strengths and skills. (B)	0.412	0.690
7. My supervisor has an open door policy. (B)	0.259	0.690
8. My supervisor trusts me to make sound decisions. (RA)	0.306	0.665
9. My supervisor trusts me to complete my work in a timely manner. (RA)	0.381	0.652
10. My supervisor's feedback is constructive. (N)	0.442	0.630
11. My supervisor acknowledges outstanding work. (B)	0.276	0.614
12. My supervisor values initiative. (RA)	0.458	0.606
13. My supervisor gives me flexibility in completing work. (RA)	0.474	0.522
14. My supervisor accepts responsibility for disappointing results. (N)	0.499	0.520

Note. Ethical principles are listed in parentheses after the items: (RA) indicates respect for autonomy; (B) indicates beneficence; (N) indicates nonmaleficence; (J) indicates justice; and (F) indicates fidelity.

that measured the same construct. In addition, two-way analyses of variance indicated that the ELI mean supervisor *Integrity* and *Respect* ratings were not dependent on the respondent's gender or the supervisor's gender.

Discussion

The results indicate that the ELI is a psychometrically sound instrument, which warrants its use in leadership programs and organizations. The ELI could be used in leadership programs to help candidates become aware of the characteristics needed to be an ethical leader/supervisor. Faculty members could align activities, assignments, and assessments with the leadership characteristics represented in the ELI items. Organizations could use the ELI as a means to evaluate the ethical leadership characteristics of their supervisors and, based on the results, develop programs to enhance those characteristics. Because the world needs leaders who exhibit the ethical leadership characteristics that are operationally defined in the ELI, future research should be conducted to validate the ELI with respondents from other fields, such as business and law.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to the world's greatest boss, John T. Langan.

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