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# Ethical Leadership as Process: A Conceptual Proposition

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This conceptual study proposes that ethical leadership is studied through a processual lens. The study develops different models of ethical leadership as a process. Multiple constructs of ethical leadership from the literature are compared and used to develop these models, including a timeline of ethical leadership, a two-dimensional quadrant, and concentric circles of ethical leadership. The models provide a new perspective into the function and interdependency of the constituent parts to study ethical leadership as a process. The research agenda provides a roadmap for how these assumptions can be tested empirically, by looking into the external orientation of leaders—for example, through administering a broader ethical leadership measurement tool. This study calls for future research to test this assumption empirically, explore antecedent factors, and study various historically important leaders through their actions and decisions to test if they followed a leadership development path in accordance with the proposed model.

**Keywords:** concentric circles of ethical leadership, ethical leadership, ethical leadership process, ethical leadership quadrant, ethical leadership timeline

Studies focusing on ethical leadership attribute its growing importance to the immoral and unprofessional conduct of leaders that looms large nowadays, affecting both public and private sector organizations. According to one report, forced turnover in the world top 2,500 largest public companies due to ethical lapses increased from 3.9% in 2007–2011 to 5.3% in 2012–2016 (Rivera & Karlsson, 2017). However, ethical leadership crises are not new, and the literature on ethical leadership has its roots in ancient as well as recent history and despite decades of research, most papers are normative (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Shakeel, Kruyen, & Van Thiel, 2018).

Ethics scholarship in general and ethical leadership literature in particular have sought to highlight the significant role of ethics for leaders across sectors by conceptualizing ethical leadership in different ways. For instance, the most basic model includes the prime dimensions of the ethical virtues of the leaders themselves and activities that they undertake to inculcate these into followers (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Other models include

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aspects of contemporary leadership debate including, but not limited to, sustainability (Eisenbeiss, 2012; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011a; Voegtlin, 2016).

In the presence of such multiple constructs, the narrative of what constitutes ethical leadership can be found through establishing common grounds; however, a broader perspective is required to achieve it. A broader perspective on the interlinkages between constructs of ethical leadership and related leadership styles suggests the possibility of their coexistence as a process to achieve a common goal, higher ethical values in all styles of leadership. This article is intended as a conceptual study that attempts to answer the question of whether the existing literature provides sufficient evidence for ethical leadership to be studied as a process. If proven, such a processual perspective can help to explain whether ethical leadership is constant or can develop over time—and if so how—and how it relates to other leadership styles. This article is intended as purely argumentative; empirical validation is beyond the scope of this article.

This study assumes that it is important to consider ethical leadership as a process and link it to other leadership styles instead of regarding it as a leadership style of its own. Comprehension as one distinguishable leadership style greatly undermines the role that ethics play in all leadership theories and styles. Seeing ethical leadership as a process helps to connect the ethical aspects of multiple leadership theories and thus broadens our scope of the role that ethics plays within leadership at large. This article will present and illustrate a pattern for the development of distinct ethical modes of leadership, which will provide important new opportunities for research into ethical leadership.

This study develops the debate of studying ethical leadership as a process by outlining three building blocks as separate sections leading toward processual illustrative models. The first building block contrasts definitions of ethical leadership by Brown et al. (2005) and a broader classification by Van Wart (2014). This leads toward the second building block which includes a new broader definition and timeline of ethical leadership. Third, a timeline is presented in which ethical leadership develops through different steps. Lastly, this article presents its conclusion and recommendations for the future.

## THE FIRST BUILDING BLOCK: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Ethical leadership has been conceptualized in different ways, but the definition put forward by Brown et al. (2005) remains popular (see review by Shakeel et al., 2018). Brown et al. (2005, p. 120) define ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal action and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.” This definition implies two main roles of an ethical leader: the moral person and the moral manager. The role of moral person refers to the ethical values of the leader him/herself, whereas the moral manager refers to the activities that the leader undertakes to inculcate such ethical values in followers. The definition stated above mentions three such activities: communication, reinforcement, and decision making. In other studies (e.g., Heres & Lasthuizen, 2012) empowerment is also considered as an integral part of the activities of

the moral manager (Den Hartog & De Hoogh 2009; Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006).

However, the absence of empowerment from this definition is not the only shortcoming of the ethical leadership conceptualization by Brown et al. (2005). Shakeel et al. (2018) identify at least eight other shortcomings including negative reinforcement; vagueness in defining stakeholders; vagueness in normative appropriateness; no attention for role clarification; no reference to environmental sustainability; capacity for self-improvement; capacity for ethical competence; and withholding necessary transformation (see also Den Hartog, 2015; Eisenbeiss, 2012; Kalshoven et al., 2011a; Voegtlin, 2016). These limitations highlight the shortcomings of ethical leadership as conceptualized by Brown et al. (2005) in definition, construct, and lack of sufficient grounds to identify it as a separate style.

An alternative conceptualization of ethical leadership, which overcomes these shortcomings, is the categorization of ethical leadership into constituent leadership styles by Van Wart (2014). Van Wart lists six leadership styles as contemporary ethical leadership theories. These styles are virtuous leadership; authentic and positive leadership; moral management; professionally grounded leadership; social responsibility leadership; and transformational leadership. These three classifications are also referred to as character; duty; and greatest good, which are termed to be important for good leadership (as a process) to be robust. In essence, this study argues that the constituent leadership styles of Van Wart can be placed on a timeline reflecting a process in which every succeeding style is dependent on the completion (“existence” in this case) of the preceding style. This is discussed in more detail in the upcoming section.

## THE SECOND BUILDING BLOCK: NEW DEFINITION AND TIMELINE

Based on the ideas of Van Wart (2014), Shakeel and colleagues presented a broader definition of ethical leadership incorporating the raised critical points:

Ethical leadership is the implicit and explicit pursuit of desired ethical behavior for self and followers through efforts governed by rules and principles that advocate learning motivation, healthy optimism and clarity of purpose to uphold the values of empowerment, service to others, concern for human rights, change for betterment and fulfilling duties towards society, future generations, environment and its sustainability. (Shakeel et al., 2018, p. 9)

This article will use this broader definition and the categorization of ethical leadership by Van Wart (2014) to create a timeline of the ethical leadership process. This timeline shows the primary difference in the scope of leadership in these related styles through varying focus on external orientation. This external orientation of the leader moves from low to high external orientation. (See Figure 1)

As explained earlier, ethical leadership styles differ from each other in the degree of external orientation of the leader, as shown in Figure 1. This points toward the possibility that leaders can move from one style to the next by taking certain steps, which will be explained in the next section. This section will first discuss the differences in external orientation between the different styles, as illustrated in Table 1.

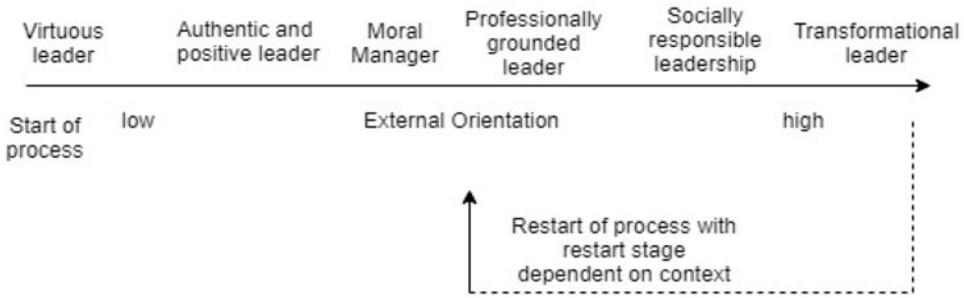


FIGURE 1 Ethical leadership timeline.

TABLE 1  
External Orientation of Ethical Leadership Styles

<i>Ethical leadership Style</i>	<i>Defining characteristic</i>	<i>External stake holders</i>
Virtuous	Honesty; truthfulness; wisdom	None
Positive and authentic	Open to feedback	Internal only
Moral manager	Reliance on rules	Internal only
Grounded leader	Reliance on ethical principles	Internal only
Social responsibility leadership	Total commitment to followers and environment	Internal and external
Transformational leadership	Identification and implementation of needed change/corrective ethical measure	Internal and external

Van Wart (2014) portrays virtuous leaders as ethical leaders who focus on their own personal integrity. This conceptualization is similar to the moral person notion of Brown’s construct of ethical leadership. Brown et al. (2005) view a moral person as a leader who has ethical qualities but makes no effort to inculcate these qualities in followers (which according to their construct is the role of the moral manager) and instead focuses solely on self-ethics.

Being a virtuous leader is the baseline model for ethical leadership. All succeeding roles and styles have additional qualities. The attributes linked to the minimal virtue are honesty; fairness; wisdom; acknowledgment of mistakes by the leader; opposition of unethical practices; conscientiousness and holding followers accountable (Brown et al., 2005; MacIntyre, 1981; Shakeel et al., 2018). In view of the self-focus of the virtuous leader, this type of leadership is placed on the left side of the timeline of the ethical leadership process with low external focus.

Authentic and positive leaders succeed virtuous leaders in the timeline as they are assumed to be more externally oriented. The evidence of this external orientation lies in the virtues associated with such leadership by scholars. It is also similar to the moral person notion of Brown and colleagues’ conceptualization of ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005; Van Wart, 2014). The attributes associated with these types of leadership are self-awareness; self-improvement; open to feedback; positive influence on self and followers; and being non-defensive. The attribute of openness to feedback and an attempt to influence followers

implies engagement with other actors, probably within the organization. This shows a higher degree of external orientation than virtuous leadership.

Succeeding authentic and positive leadership in the time line of ethical leadership process is the moral manager. It entails activities undertaken by managers to achieve desired ethical outcomes. The attributes associated with moral manager are strict ethical compliance with ethical mandates or organizational rules. The emphasis here is on compliance and reliance on rules. The position of the moral manager on the time line stems from its role of guiding followers toward ethical outcomes based on rules. It is more externally focused than the positive leader who assesses himself based on an external benchmark (which implies self-correction) and who attempts to influence followers, whereas the moral manager actively guides other followers and hence interacts more with external actors in their goal toward achieving ethical outcome.

Professionally grounded leadership is similar in nature as the moral manager. However, in contrast to moral management, this leadership does not rely on rules and regulations to instill ethics in followers, but instead focuses on legal and organizational principles. It is also associated with the ability to interpret competing sources of authority and focus on aspiration rather than rules (Van Wart, 2014). To clarify the distinction between the moral manager and the professionally grounded leader, Shakeel et al. (2018) explain that if a leader makes a decision based on rules, he/she would be following the Brown et al. (2005) notion of moral management, but if he makes decisions which have no precedence or associating rule for guidance, theoretically, she will be acting as a professionally grounded leader. Since principles are prospectively broader and more generalized than rules, this article assumes professionally grounded leaders to be more externally oriented than moral managers.

The next position in the timeline of ethical leadership is that of the socially responsible leader which includes servant leadership, spiritual leadership, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Servant leadership aims to serve the actors related to the organization and has care and compassion as key attributes. Spiritual leaders see their work as a “higher calling” and display sacrificing behavior, whereas CSR focuses on the broader society and environment and values sustainability (Turker, 2009; Van Wart, 2014). Since aspects of socially responsible leaders show a greater focus (through acts like sacrifice) on follower development and aspects beyond organization including society and environment, they are considered to have more external orientation compared to the leadership styles discussed earlier. A more precise distinction between servant and spiritual leadership is beyond the scope of this study, but it emphasizes the distinction between these two and CSR, which, as indicated by the title, focuses on actors beyond the organization including the broader society and environment.

Van Wart (2014) considers transformational leadership the “proper ends” of ethical leadership. Other ethical leadership studies, such as that of Brown et al. (2005), characterized the overlap between the conceptualization of ethical leadership and transformational leadership partial at best. However, this article stresses the central role in ethical propagation of transformational leadership attributes, such as undertaking actual changes within organizations to adapt to growing needs of the organization as well as society—for example, the transition to environmentally friendly methods of doing business (sustainability). On this basis, it can be seen as an important outcome of the process and assume it as the highest externally oriented form of ethical leadership.

### THE THIRD BUILDING BLOCK: STEPS OF THE ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PROCESS

The process in which leaders’ external orientation increases and leaders can move from one form of ethical leadership to the next on the time line depends on their taking specific steps. This is illustrated in [Figure 2](#).

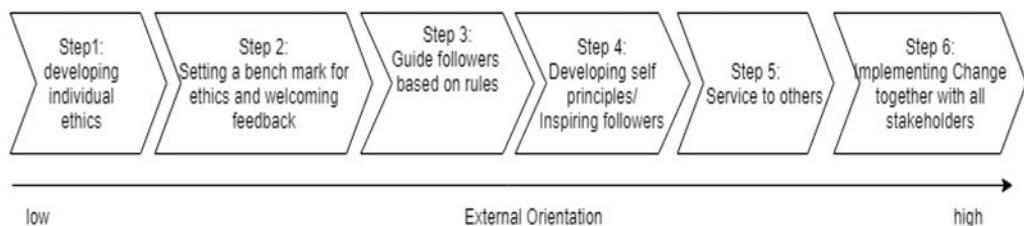
[Figure 2](#) shows a process consisting of six broad steps, which are associated with the corresponding leadership styles from [Figure 1](#). Again, the order of the steps depicts an increasing external orientation. This implies that ethical leadership development starts with self-focus, grows into utmost dedication toward followers and other external factors, and concludes into commitment to initiating change of the status quo.

The first step of the process starts with individual ethics, and the role of the leader is to focus on developing ethical skills. The source of adopting an ethical lifestyle could be external and internal drivers as evident from the social learning theory implied in ethical leadership by seminal authors (Brown et al., 2005). However, the personal wisdom associated with virtuous leadership is the primary factor of ethical behavior. At this point, the leader does not make any efforts to instill these qualities into followers, so it is assumed that, willingly, there is no point of external contact. Since there is no active role on the part of the virtuous leader in question to engage with external actors, his/her focus remains narrow.

In the second step, the general focus on ethical behavior is still limited to the leader herself. However, there is a new development in behavior setting it apart from virtuous leadership. At this stage, the leader willingly opts to have his ethical behavior analyzed by external actors for feedback (Van Wart, 2014, p. 29) thus providing a benchmark for ethical behavior. Input in the form of feedback can be seen as the first point of contact with external actors; hence, the higher external orientation.

Before the third stage, leaders make efforts to develop their own ethical behavior. In the third step, however, the leader starts to instill this learned ethical behavior in followers. This dissemination of ethical knowledge is the second point of contact with external stakeholders. It fits with the role of moral management as described by Brown et al. (2005). However, the focus of moral management is assumed to be only on employees within the organization. The source of ethical guidance to steer toward desired ethical behavior comes predominantly from the existing rules and regulations of the organization (Van Wart, 2014).

The fourth step of the process marks its existence only in terms of improved skills with no big change depicted in external orientation. Professionally grounded leaders and moral



**FIGURE 2** Steps of ethical leadership process.

managers are both assumed to govern employees toward ethical behavior through their functional roles. It is also probable that they cater to the same extent of external actors. However, in this step principles guide a leader's behavior more than rules. This competency can indicate being governed by such guidelines that include both aspirational codes and operational assistance (Meine & Dunn, 2013). In a study that attempts to distinguish between rules and principles, Braithwaite (2002) asserts that when the type of action that needs to be regulated is simple, stable, and does not involve huge economic interests, rules tend to regulate with greater certainty than principles (Braithwaite, 2002, p. 75), whereas when the type of action to be regulated is complex, changing, and involves large economic interests, principles tend to regulate with greater certainty than rules (Braithwaite, 2002, p. 75).

This step does not imply that following principles depicts a higher moral position compared to following rules alone; instead it reflects the increased focus on external orientation. There are no studies that have empirically proven higher moral grounds for individuals possessing or following certain ethical principles. The intent to separate the two steps is focused solely on the specificity and generic nature of the two in terms of external orientation as stated in Braithwaite (2002).

As problems best solved through principles are more complex than those best solved by rules, it is safe to assume that grounded leaders are trained and developed more in terms of new skills learned to handle complex problems. For a moral manager to handle complex problems, she will need these added skills and experience. Such skills relate to ethical competence (Shakeel et al., 2018)—an aspect that can be addressed through leaders' learning.

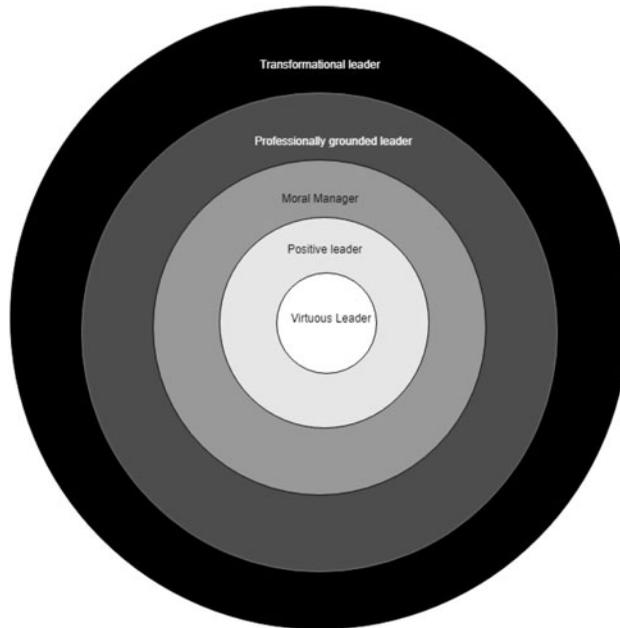
The fifth step in the ethical leadership process is related to leadership behavior that is predominantly focused on the self-actualization of followers, and how the leader can help them to achieve their goals. This implies a certain servitude or even sacrifice on the part of the leader and his utmost dedication toward his followers and the broader social environment.

Finally, the last step of the ethical leadership process is concerned with achieving change, which can be both inside and outside the organization, of the organizational culture, as well as change aimed at achieving ethical needs outside of the organization. In this step, a leader will develop and implement a plan of action to achieve changes that are considered necessary from an ethics perspective.

This sequence is an incomplete mapping of numbered leadership styles and does not represent an exhaustive list of such. Moreover, the distinctions between the styles are merely educated arguments to feed the processual discussion within this domain and remain to be proved empirically.

## CONCENTRIC CIRCLES OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Figures 1 and 2 present the idea that ethical leadership can take on different forms, and that there is a step-wise evolution in ethical leadership behavior. To be sure, this implies that a leadership style higher on the timeline and/or further in the step-wise evolution builds on elements from leadership styles lower on the timeline and step-wise development. To illustrate this, Figure 3 presents a model of concentric circles. The inner most circle represents the virtuous leadership, which depicts the ethics of the individual leader central to the process as



**FIGURE 3** Concentric circles of ethical leadership.

well as the primary role that it plays in the process. The next circle of authentic and positive leadership illustrates that this leadership, besides its own new roles, already includes the roles and attributes of virtuous leadership. This essentially can be explained such that all positive and authentic leaders are virtuous leaders but not otherwise. The grounded leadership also includes the capacity to make decisions based on principles, but has all the attributes of moral management embedded within. The outermost circle represents ethical transformational leadership, which includes the attributes of all the previous styles of ethical leadership.

### THE ETHICAL LEADERSHIP QUADRANT

So far, ethical leadership has been discussed as a positive concept, and worthwhile to achieve or developed through, for example, following the steps in [Figure 2](#). However, recently, some new research has been published (Miao, Newman, Yu, & Xu, 2013; Mo & Shi, 2017; Zheng et al., 2015), showing that ethical leadership can also have negative effects, and that not all leaders are ethical leaders. For instance, leaders, at any point in their development, can use their situation, power, and context to their advantage to pursue selfish needs and goals (Barling, Christie, & Turner, 2008).

It is assumed that each leadership style has such a darker version—for example, pseudo-transformational leadership involves undergoing and/or implementing a change that serves the leader rather than followers or society (Barling et al., 2008, p. 859). For example, when

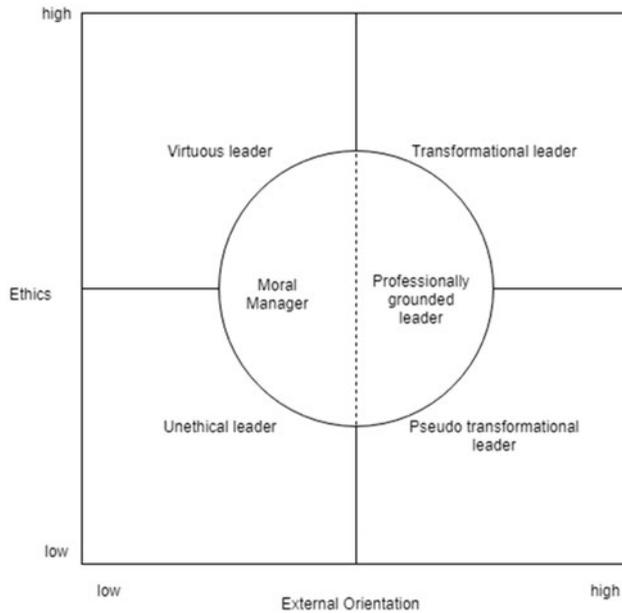


FIGURE 4 Ethical leadership quadrants.

international businesses use raw materials or import finished goods from developing countries, and the production of those materials or goods involves child labor, the leader can decide to ignore this. He would then be following the laws of his own organization—and thus be an ethical leader—but at the same time, his behavior could also be considered to be not very ethical from a wider perspective.

Studies into ethical leadership are now exploring the dark sides of ethical leadership. In their review, Shakeel, Kruyen and Van Thiel (2016) discuss studies that attribute the negative effects of ethical leadership to an overemphasis on ethics. This can lead to, for example, moral over-exhaustion (Zheng et al., 2015) or unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) (Miao et al., 2013; Mo & Shi, 2017).

The existence of this dark side raises questions regarding the process of ethical leadership presented so far. To discuss this, a two-dimensional quadrant (Figure 4) is presented here. The x-axis of this illustration comes from the timeline of ethical leadership, and indicates the level of external orientation from low to high. The y-axis indicates the level of ethics portrayed through the leader behavior, also ranging from low (negative) to high (positive). Together, this leads to four quadrants, each of which is supposed to represent a different leadership role.

The low-left hand quadrant depicts a narcissistic unethical leader, who has low values on ethics and serves only his self-interest. The high-left hand quadrant points to a virtuous leader, who follows ethical discourse herself, but is not concerned with the external environment or her followers. The high-right hand quadrant depicts an ethical transformational leader, who not only limits herself to follower guidance, but also undertakes implementation

of a wider discourse for ethical causes. The low-right hand quadrant points to an unethical pseudotransformation leader, who uses external and internal actors within the organization, and/or implements a wider agenda to fulfill selfish schemes. Pseudotransformational leaders are described as those who “advance their own self-interested agendas by dominating and controlling their followers. In focusing on self-interest, pseudo-transformational leaders are more interested in becoming personal idols than in the collective ideals that might benefit their followers” (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, cited in Barling et al., 2008, p. 852).

Figure 4 also shows the moral manager and professional grounded leadership in the middle. This is because: (a) there are no studies that explore the dark side for these styles (for either of them), and (b) ethical leadership conceptualization (with a focus on moral management) is also predicted to use multiple styles based on their role and the nature of the organization that they serve (Heres & Lasthuizen, 2012). Earlier, a difference was discussed between moral managers and grounded leaders (following Van Wart, 2014), which showed that moral managers focus more on rules and grounded leaders more on principles. It could be argued that in the initial stages of follower guidance, leaders make more use of ethical rules, and hence, the role of moral management is more dominant in the start of the process. This is shown by placing the moral management toward the left side in the figure. Toward the end of the process, when leaders are required to solve ethical dilemmas and implement an ethical discourse, professionally grounded leadership is assumed to play a more active role. This is shown by placing grounded leadership toward the right side of the figure.

The quadrant does not include all ethical leadership styles. More elaboration is necessary but beyond the scope of this contribution. More recommendations for future research are offered in the final section of this article.

## DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH AGENDA

Ethical leadership was seen as a distinct style by scholars like Brown et al. (2005), but the categorization of ethical leadership into constituent styles by Van Wart (2014) has paved the way for ethical leadership to be studied as a process with different steps of development. Such a processual approach can also be helpful in explaining the relationship between the different styles of ethical leadership. The interdependence of these constituent styles on each other for their smooth functioning is also testimonial to the processual approach. Just as the moral management cannot completely function to its desired capacity if the moral person (similar to virtuous leadership) is not present (Brown et al., 2005); in a similar way, transformational leadership cannot achieve its desired outcome unless virtuous leadership qualities are also present. This study asserts that the presence of pseudotransformational leaders also adds evidence to this assumption.

Moreover, the linkage of leadership theory to learning (Brown & Posner, 2001) further validates that leadership can be a similar process of continued learning and adapting to the new challenges. The quadrant and the concentric circles of ethical leadership shown in this study help understand the process and indicate that ethical leadership can be seen as a process instead of a distinct style of its own, but additional empirical studies are needed to

validate this conclusion. This study is not without its limitations. The timeline of ethical leadership lists only a few related ethical leadership styles and is not an exhaustive list. Furthermore, it is certainly not asserted that transformational leadership is the end of this process. As leadership is associated with learning (Brown & Posner, 2001), which is an ongoing and continuous process, the implementation of required ethical transformational changes lead to the resumption of the process from one of the stages again. This model fails to indicate when the process restarts; more research is needed to verify this proposition.

In a similar pattern, the quadrants show only numbered styles, and offer a limited account of corresponding negative attitudes. The corresponding negative side to grounded leadership or moral management is not part of the model, due to lack of credible research evidence. These aspects warrant further research to develop this model.

Future research can focus on various aspects of the process. The process of ethical leadership with the proposed model can be empirically proven by validating the broader ethical leadership scale developed by Shakeel et al. (2018). This can help verify the processual nature of ethical leadership and will help establish the validity of ethical leadership as a process. For the empirical results to prove the process true, individuals' external orientation scores should depict a pattern similar to that of the sequence on the timeline. Future studies could also explore whether rules indeed fit best for lower management levels and principles for higher management levels because of more complexity of decisions at the top. Alternatively, it could be studied whether the effect and use of ethical rules and principles are different for different sectors (e.g., public versus private sector).

Another line of inquiry could be related to antecedent factors of ethical leadership. Although previous research into ethical leadership has established linkages to personality traits (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011b; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009; Xu, Yu, & Shi, 2011); in terms of our model, interesting avenues include discovering which personality traits are related, or necessary, to various steps along the timeline of ethical leadership. This could also help in tailored leader-development training programs for leaders along these steps. Studies can also explore where historically important political and apolitical personalities stood in their development stage as leaders by studying their decisions and impact on followers. For example, it would be interesting to know if Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was ethically transformational; Mahatma Gandhi a servant; and Mother Teresa a spiritual leader, and if they followed a leader development path visible through their actions and decisions in accordance with the model proposed through this paper.

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