

## Ethical Work Climate and Teacher Workplace Engagement: Moderating Role of Leader's Trust

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**Abstract:** This quantitative descriptive study aimed to examine whether ethical work climate has a significant influence on teacher's workplace engagement with moderating role of leader's trust in the Malaysian primary school context. A total of 580 primary schools teachers from three states of Northern Peninsular Malaysia randomly selected which successfully involved in this study. Data was collected through a set of questionnaire which was adapted from previous studies [1, 2, 3]. The results of hierarchical regression analysis showed that ethical work climate and teachers' perceptions of a supportive leadership trust serve as two vital factors in encouraging the work engagement of teachers in Malaysia.

**Key words:** Ethical work climate • Workplace engagement • Leader's trust

### INTRODUCTION

Competition in the workplace is roughly which is very reasonable. Every workplace should not only be filled with the brilliant employees, but should have the advantage in inspiring them to be willing to work long hours. Employees need to feel respectable and be cheerful with responsibilities and have a high commitment [4]. Therefore, the attachment in the workplace is an important factor to ensure a person to perform the job effectively. Schaufeli and Bakker [5] have described the attachment in the workplace as successful doing something, thinking positive and that is characterized by vigor, dedication and appreciation. In addition, with the element of trust, the process of interaction between leaders and workers can run smoothly without any rejection of the assignment and willingly perform the work entrusted [6]. No feelings of suspicion and trust in the ability of the leader will be able to generate good results and benefit all members of the organization.

Malaysia is experiencing a new era of change in many areas, including education. To achieve the goals of Vision 2020, the education sector must move forward in line with the era of globalization. However, the majority of teachers considers their career as a teacher is part-time work; instead focus on other things such as teaching tuition at home to increase their income [7]. This unethical

attitude shows how low the level of work engagement among teachers. This is also explained in the study of Yener, Yaldiran and Ergun [8] where there is a significant relationship between ethical work climates with work attachment.

This study was conducted to find more accurate information about the ethical work climate, work engagement and trust as a moderator. Baron and Kenny [9] argue that the moderator is a construct that influence the direction and strength of the relationship between the dependent variable and independent variables. Thus, this study uses element of trust as a moderator to investigate whether there is a change in the relationship between ethical work climates with teachers' work engagement. Through this study, it is expected to help the school administration to understand the purpose of these three variables in the school context. This study investigated the effects of ethical work climate on the work engagement in schools and the role of trust as a moderator.

In light of this, many progressive organizations are striving to create more ethical organizational climate at workplace in order to keep employees through various leadership practices such as trust [4]. These constructs seemed to have been examined almost independently and have not been given emphasis in the Malaysian educational context. Nevertheless, the emerging construct

such as ethical work climate and work engagement at school, is all depends on how a leader's trust can have significant impact on organizational life and ultimately organizational success. The present study is an attempt to bridge this gap and is aimed to examine whether ethical work climate has a significant influence on teacher's workplace engagement with moderating role of leader's trust in the Malaysian primary school context.

### **Related Literature Review**

**Ethical Work Climate:** Starting from the 50's on, some research on ethical work climate has been carried out by researchers who have shown interest in analyzing an organization's systems. Victor and Cullen, known as "the father of ethical work climate" has introduced the construct of an ethical work climate in 1987. Before they introduce construct of the ethical work climate, many researchers previously had been generating various types of climate for conflict resolution [10]. However, in the study of Victor and Cullen [11], the key assumption is fundamentally the ethical work environment that is disjointed from the perception of the organization and individual evaluation. In other words, ethical work climate not only help members of the organization in making moral decisions to seek an answer to the question "what should I do" but it helps in the decision making process to answer the question "how do I do?" [12].

Cullen, Parboteeah and Victor [13] found three basic ethical standards combined with an ethical work climate in line with the level of cognitive and moral development of self-interest, generosity and principles. Meanwhile, work climate seen in two types, namely egoistic climate and welfare climate of workers. Egoistic climate refers to employees who decided to ignore the interests of other employees and they are not concerned about their needs. While welfare climate (caring) refers to a climate that encourages employees to focus on the excitement of other workers inside and outside the organization. In the climate-based principles, ethical decisions are made based on the interpretation of the rules, laws and standards in accordance with the expected norms of an organization or social unit [11].

There are some researchers that provide definitions of the ethical work climate. According to Cohen [14], ethical work climate is under the value system of the organization. Schneider [15] describe aspects of the ethical work climate is like the existence of a normative system that received by workers that allows them to respond to the issues of ethical or moral issues that occur in the workplace. In this case, the ethical work climate can be developed when the workers believe that there are

some forms of unethical behavior that goes on in the organizations. Payne [16] describes the ethical work climate as a social system planned by individuals who share formal or informal structure. Accordingly, Schminke, Arnaud and Kuenzi [17] corroborate Payne [16], saying such a climate of ethical norms, attitudes, feelings and behavior of workers who form the social organization. Verbos, Gerard, Forshey, Harding and Miller [18] suggest in any organization should have ethical work climate that is positive and every employee must hold the principle of "things to do is the only thing that needs to be done first."

**Workplace Engagement:** Engagement in work is defined as a positive state of mind characterized by morale, dedication and appreciation [5]. The definition of the work attachment operates in three distinct sub-scales [19]. Morale is high energy levels and mental resilience while working. This includes the willingness to make every effort and show perseverance in the face of adversity. Dedication is also someone's feelings about the importance of passion, inspiration, pride and challenge [19]. While appreciating refers to a state of high focus and feel happy by giving full attention to the work done. Individuals will feel time passes quickly and is very difficult to separate yourself from tasks performed [19].

Engagement in work has been widely discussed in the academic literature. Previous research suggested the level of engagement in the work generally affected by personal characteristics and work [20] and occupational characteristics including job demands and job status [21]. Engagement in the work of the teachers may be affected by their personal characteristics such as self-esteem and identity. Therefore, teachers with a clear identity and high self-esteem tend to be more attached to their work.

**Leader's Trust:** Trust in leadership as a sign of unity between leaders and followers, as well as a sign of acceptance of followers to their leaders of the organization [3]. In addition, according to Tschannen-Moran [3] also, trust means the followers have a high level of trust in the ability of a leader to lead them effectively. Theoretically, the main factors affecting the level of trust of teachers in schools is the ability to lead that would contribute in enhancing the level of teacher commitment.

According to Tschannen-Moran [3], a leader who has the openness in sharing ideas and information with subordinates will be able to improve the dedication and commitment of the employees towards their job. The findings of the quantitative study by Tschannen-Moran

[3] showed that 45 schools involved have proved a connection between; collaborative culture with the headmaster, teachers' beliefs towards leaders in school, trust each other and a collaborative culture among the teachers. Collaborative culture among members would be shaped if there is trust in an organization. This is because of trust that was formed able to establish cooperation, increase performance and improve the quality of education.

### **Ethical Work Climate, Work Engagement and Leader**

**Trust:** Wimbush, Shepard and Markham [22] conducted research on the relationship between ethical work climate with four unethical actions and results of their study showed a significant correlation between these variables. Accordingly, Peterson [23] found a simple correlation between ethical climate and unethical behavior on the job attachment. Reviews of Harter, Schmidt and Hayes [24] also describes the attachment in working as independent variables correlated with customer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability, productivity and security. Based on studies of attachment by Demerouti and Cropanzano [6] can be formulated engagement in work related to the positive attitude of work, behavior proactive and increased performance by the employee and the organization. The study of Laschinger and Finegan [25] also found that the practice of respect, fairness and trust organizations are able to influence the organization's commitment to the organization and their job satisfaction.

In the local context, researchers found a significant positive correlation between recognition and appreciation with employee engagement. Tan [26] found that there is a close link between affective factors and make a decision to trust someone. Accordingly, the nature of a person can facilitate the formation of the trust, perseverance, piety, sincerity and austerity, sharing efforts, respect for authority and harmonious relationships at work, generous and not overbearing [26].

Ethical work climate in schools has to do directly with the positive behavior of teachers as well as negative behaviors such as absenteeism and delays to work [23]. Teachers need to have the work ethic to create an ethical climate in the workplace. In this case, ethical principles for a teacher is to deliver the promised knowledge, guiding students towards good, disciplined and courteous and formed his students are useful. Arnaud, Ambrose and Schminke [1] have introduced a new theory about the ethical work climate which is believed to give an explanation of ethical behavior among members of the organization. Employees with high work attachment in themselves is more excited and involved in their work and

be able to give full commitment to their work, especially in solution of problems faced by [4]. It is believed by Bakker and Leither [4] that those are bound to the organization will perform well and work hard to achieve challenging goals [4]. According to Bakker [2], the survey results have shown that teachers involved with their work, will indirectly improve the academic performance of students.

### **Research Methodology**

**Participants:** The data for this study was collected from 580 trained teachers in 67 primary school across the states of Northern Peninsular Malaysia, namely Penang, Kedah and Perlis using a convenient sampling. The pre-requisite for teacher participation as respondents in this study was that the teachers must have worked for at least a year under the mandatory principals. The sample consists of 78 percent female respondents, 22 percent male respondents, while an overall of 86 percent respondents with working experience of more than five years.

**Instruments:** A set of questionnaires were employed in this study, combining five Likert scales measuring ethical work culture (EWC), workplace engagement (WE) and leader's trust (LT). The questionnaires were distributed to selected schools. Ethical work culture was measured using a 34-items developed by Arnaud *et al.* [1] and workplace engagement also measured using 34 items developed by Bakker [2] on five-point Likert-points scale. The leader's trust questionnaire was measured using 11 items which was developed by Tschannen-Moran [3]. The findings of a pilot study on all four constructs have obtained the high reliability Cronbach Alpha exceeds .89.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**Descriptive Findings:** Preliminary analyses of correlations between research variables are presented in Table 1 below. The Pearson correlation matrix revealed that all three research variables were significantly and positively correlated with ranging from .58 to .69).

Table 2 shows the results of hierarchical regression analysis performed. As shown, the findings show that ethical work culture ( $\hat{\alpha}=.33, p<.01$ ) has a significant relationship with work place engagement. Second, there indicates teachers' perceptions of a leader trust ( $\hat{\alpha}=.45, p<.01$ ) has a significant association with work place engagement. Third, the interaction of with ethical work culture and leader trust ( $\hat{\alpha}=.13, p<.01$ ) has a significant relationship to work place engagement. Thus, all the three conditions suggested by Baron and Kenny [4] were satisfied.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	S.D.
Age	-							1.85	.95
Gender	.80**	-						1.39	.48
Education	-.63**	.54**	-					1.31	.46
Experience	.83**	.64**	.32**	-				2.09	.82
Ethical Work Culture	.01	.01	.10	.01	-			3.99	.65
Work Engagement	.05	.02	.07	.06	.58**	-		4.37	.49
Leader Trust	.07	.05	.07	.02	.67**	.69**	-	3.67	.71

Note: \*\* Significantly correlated at  $p < .01$

Hypotheses Testing

Table 2: Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable	Work Engagement		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Control variables			
Age	.21	.15	.01
Gender	-.13	-.07	-.25
Education	.17	.13	.12
Experience	.14	.15	.04
Independent variable			
Ethical Work Culture	.33**	.36**	.68**
Moderator			
Leader Trust	-	.45**	.52**
Interaction			
Ethical Work Culture x Leader Trust	-	-	.13**
R	.65	.74	.79
R <sup>2</sup>	.42	.55	.63
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.41	.53	.61
Change of R <sup>2</sup>	.42	.13	.08
Change of F	29.45*	38.86*	29.78*

Note: \*\* $p$  value  $< .01$

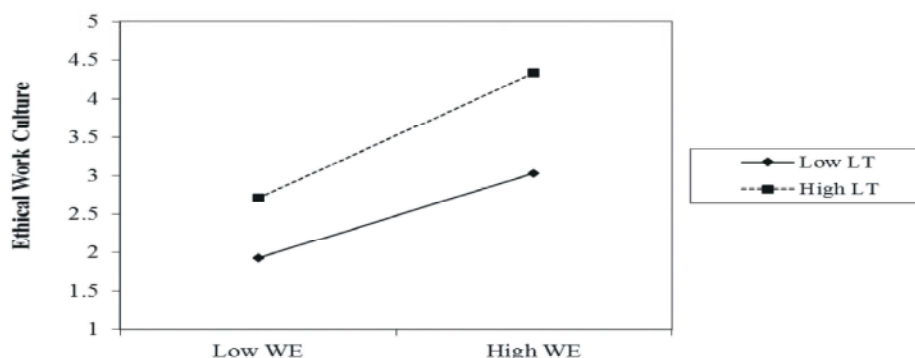


Fig. 1: The Plot of Interaction between Work Engagement and Leader's Trust

Note: WE – Work Engagement; LT – Leader's Trust

The findings proved that ethical work culture as perceived by teachers positively and significantly influence teachers' work engagement and leaders trust in school organizations in Malaysia. Furthermore, it was found teachers' perceptions on a supportive leader trust moderates the associations between ethical work culture and teachers' work engagement in Malaysian primary schools. Therefore, the outcomes specified that ethical work culture and teachers' perceptions of a

supportive leadership trust serves as two vital factors in encouraging the work engagement of teachers in Malaysia.

Figure 1 depicts the plot of the significant interaction term. As shown, the association between ethical work culture and work engagement is stronger when employees have high rather than low perceptions of a supportive leader trust.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings show there is a moderator effect on the trust towards ethical work climate and work engagement. There is a dramatic influence on the teacher's morale when teachers had a great atmosphere and good relationships with co-workers so that they would contribute greater commitment to their work [5]. Based on the results gotten, moderating variables, namely confidence in the principal strengthen the relationship between moral sensitivity, moral judgment with passion and dedication that act as independent variables. Furthermore, the results of regression analysis showed the trust acted as moderator of the working attachment.

This study has reinforcing the studies of Wimbush, Shepard and Markham [22], Peterson [23], Harter *et al.*, [24], Laschinger and Finegan [25], Demerouti and Cropanzano [6]. Thus, it can be concluded that the attachment of the work is related to positive work attitudes, behaviors proactively and increased performance by the employee and the organization (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008) and to begin the circumstances climate ethical working positively in the school should be established. According to Arnaud *et al.* [1], climate work ethics among members of the organization are solely between factors that increase the attachment of high employment among members of the organization and be able to give full commitment to their work, especially in solving the problems faced and indirectly improve the academic performance of students in support of the leader when trust [4].

This study has implications for research literature gap on ethical work climate, attachment and trust in the work of school leaders in Malaysia have yet to be explored fully. This field of study has significant theoretical and empirical limitations. The findings show that the level of ethical in work climate, employee engagement and trust in the headmaster. In fact, the findings also prove that the administration in most primary schools in Malaysia need to be concerned about the importance of ethical work climate and confidence in the headmaster to boost high work engagement among teachers in primary schools. Therefore, further studies should be more use of appropriate theories mainly related to the context of education and teachers should be trained and given courses and briefings to enhance attachment of teachers.

Practically, the results demanded that principal as an administrator at the school must ensure ethical problems do not occur among teachers. Indirectly, this can prevent the problem in the level of engagement in teachers' work

in schools. In addition, school leaders should strive to gain the teachers' trust in his leadership so that harmony situation can be established. In addition, the close relationship with the teachers should be shaped in order to help the performance growth of pupils in schools.

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