

# One Style Fits All?

## A Study on the Content, Effects, and Origins of Follower Expectations of Ethical Leadership

*Dissertation summary*

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### **Introduction and Theoretical Background**

In response to widespread public indignation about scandals occurring in public and private organizations, leaders are increasingly recognizing the moral, democratic, and economic need to take on a proactive role in ensuring the integrity of both their employees and their institution as a whole. Indeed, research suggests that ethical leaders can have an important impact on the moral decision-making, behavior, and culture of organizations. In research and in practice, however, we often pay little attention to the fact that ethical leadership involves leaders *and* followers and that followers are likely to have an important role in the constitution and development of ethical leadership as well.

In general, ethical leadership refers to the character, decision-making, and behavior a leader exhibits to motivate followers to make decisions and behave in accordance with relevant moral values and norms. This dissertation argues that to gain a better understanding of what it truly means to be an ethical leader, how ethical leadership works, and under which conditions it is likely to be most effective, it is important to take into account what followers ideally expect of ethical leadership. As leader categorization theory suggests, followers' expectations of ethical leadership are likely to guide and bias their perception of a leader's actual characteristics and behavior, and thereby affect the leader's ability to influence follower behavior. In other words, variation in followers' expectations can have important implications for the effectiveness of ethical leadership. To the extent that followers' expectations are related to their direct work environment, such expectations can furthermore help explain why the effects of ethical leadership vary across contexts: perhaps followers who operate in different work environments have different expectations of ethical leadership and therefore differ in their responsiveness and acceptance of a

textbook approach to ethical leadership.

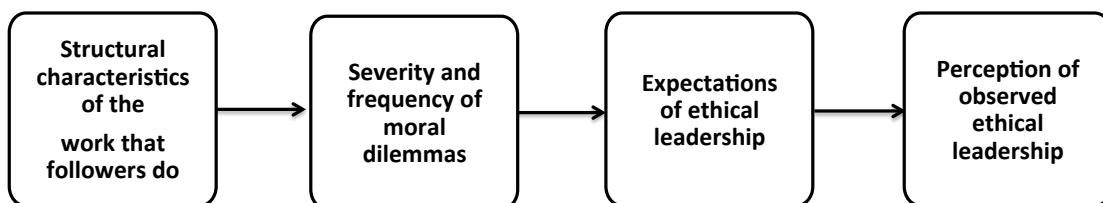
### **Main Results**

Drawing on data from a series of semi-structured interviews with managers (N = 18) and a larger quasi-qualitative Q-method study among working adults in the Netherlands (N = 59), the dissertation identified five different ideal-typical views on ethical leadership, representing the range of different assumptions, beliefs, and expectations that individuals have regarding ethical leadership. The results indicate that an individual follower's expectations of ethical leadership are typically a weighed mix of these five ideal-typical views, although in most cases one or two of the views are predominant. The qualitative studies furthermore suggest that, on a general level, follower expectations of ethical leadership are largely consistent with academic conceptualizations. For example, nearly all followers selected personal integrity, role modeling ethical behavior, reinforcement of moral standards, and some form of communication about ethics as key aspects of ethical leadership. Underneath the general agreements, however, there is notable variation in the exact characteristics and behaviors that followers expect of ethical leaders and in how important they find these various characteristics and behaviors. Rather than a simple universal construct, then, the research suggests ethical leadership is best considered a *variform* universal construct: while followers generally expect the same basic components in ethical leadership, there is subtle yet important variation in how exactly those components are understood and enacted upon in practice.

To assess the extent to which the expectations of followers play a role in managers' ability to build a reputation for ethical leadership, additional cross-sectional survey research was conducted using three different samples: working adults in the Netherlands (N = 355), members of the Netherlands Institute of Psychologists (N = 519), and employees of a large Dutch semi-public organization (N = 389). In two of the three studied samples, followers' expectations of ethical leadership indeed seemed to act as a 'lens' that shaped and biased their perceptions of the characteristics and behaviors they observed in their leader: the more a leader's style of communication about ethics or reinforcement of norms deviated from what followers expected, the less followers considered that leader to be an ethical leader. This suggests that to be perceived as ethical leaders it is important that leaders are aware of their followers' expectations and try to align expectations and practices as much as possible.

Finally, the dissertation examined possible explanations for the differences in follower

expectations of ethical leadership. Specifically, it considered whether followers' expectations are purely individual, idiosyncratic perspectives on what ethical leadership should entail, or instead whether the similarities and differences among followers have something to do with the context in which they operate and the type of work that they do. Consistent with the findings of the exploratory research, the quantitative analyses revealed that followers' hierarchical position, the public nature of their work (task publicness), and the impact that their work has within the organization (task significance), raise the frequency and severity of the moral dilemmas with which they are confronted. As a result, followers' expectations for ethical leadership are also raised: followers who experience more and more severe moral dilemmas expect a more proactive and explicit approach to ethical leadership than those who perceive their work to be less morally ambiguous. At the same time, followers' expectations regarding such things as safety and room to make mistakes, leader's personal accountability and strong moral character, and the use of reinforcement, seem consistent irrespective of followers' demographic and work characteristics. The results of the research are summarized in Figure I below.



**Figure I: Empirical model of the research (simplified)**

### **Implications for Research**

The findings of the dissertation have important implications for both research and practice. For scholars, the results are a reminder that ethical leadership is not a one-sided act on behalf of the leader: followers' assumptions, beliefs, and expectations indeed play a significant role too and should be taken into account more explicitly when trying to understand how ethical leadership emerges and when it is most effective. For instance, the results seem to suggest that depending on followers' expectations, the type of leadership that scholars typically denote as 'ethically neutral' or 'morally mute' may actually have an important impact on follower ethical behavior, while the effects of 'textbook' proactive and explicit ethical leadership may be limited and in some cases even be counterproductive. Indeed, one style of ethical leadership need not fit all and we must acknowledge the fact that ethical leadership can take on different meanings in practice.

Given the different meanings, interpretations, and expectations of ethical leadership, the results also warrant continued theoretical and empirical research to critically assess and further refine academic conceptualizations and measures of ethical leadership. Since follower expectations appear to bias their perceptions of ethical leadership, it is especially critical that we examine the individual and group variation in the measurement models that underlie existing scales. In addition, the study's results suggest measures of ethical leadership behaviors should be expanded to include more concrete behaviors and especially more aspects to represent safety, learning, and personal accountability.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

For practitioners, the research shows that to most followers, being an ethical leader is first and foremost about being a safe haven where they can turn to in times of need. Indeed, ethical leadership shows its true colors when the stakes are high, when dilemmas are hard, or when lines have already been crossed. While most studies typically emphasize the ethical leaders should engage in explicit and proactive communication about ethics and values, the present study thus suggests that ethical leadership is perhaps more about exhibiting personal integrity and accountability, allowing some room for mistakes to be made, dealing with transgressions in a fair and respectful way, and turning mistakes into valuable learning experiences for the group. In fact, the results seem to suggest that when followers' sense of safety is not ensured or the leader is perceived as showing insufficient personal accountability, other ethical leadership efforts such reinforcement and communication about ethics may be in vain.

This is not to say that explicit and proactive ethical leadership, and especially communication about ethics and values, is not important. Rather, the research suggests the effectiveness of such a proactive approach to ethical leadership in part depends on whether it fits with what followers ideally expect of an ethical leader. Thus, in an attempt to align follower expectations and ethical leadership practices, leaders should look critically at the dilemmas that are involved in the work that followers do and discuss with followers what they themselves expect in terms of moral guidance. As the research shows, followers in higher hierarchical positions as well as followers whose work affects either others within the organization or society and the public in general, tend to experience more moral dilemmas than others. For these groups, explicit discussions about the moral principles and values that should guide their behavior seem important aspects of ethical leadership. In contrast, for followers whose work is less likely to raise particularly severe or frequent moral dilemmas,

less explicit and somewhat less frequent communication may suffice. Of course, a leader may also conclude that the work actually does hold particularly moral dilemmas, yet followers do not perceive them as such. In such cases, leaders will need to focus on first raising followers' awareness of the direct moral implications of their work before engaging in more general discussions about the organization's values, principles, or code of conduct.