

Linking Ethical Leadership to Employee Voice Behavior: The Role of Leader-Member Exchange

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Abstract

This study presents the findings of a research which examined the relationship between ethical leadership, leader-member exchange and employee voice behavior. Further, the research determined the impact of ethical leadership and leader-member exchange on employee voice behavior. Although these interrelations are very important for motivating employee voice behavior, a little empirical study investigates these relationships together. Finally, the research tested the most important factor that effects on employee voice behavior. This article investigates these relationships using SEM with data 465 employees of service companies located in Vietnam. Findings of the study revealed that ethical leadership promoted employee voice behavior mediated through leader-member exchanges. Based on the study findings, implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords

Ethical Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange, Employee Voice Behavior

I. Introduction

According to Brown, Treviño & Harrison (2005), Ethical leadership is defined as “The demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to subordinates through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making”. Ethical leadership plays an important role in motivating enhancing employee attitudes and behaviors. Recently, ethical leadership has appeared as a trend of leadership research following the recent ethical scandals in reputable corporations worldwide. Ethical leadership has been found out that it has an association on employee outcome, such as employee well-being (Chughtai, Byrne, & Flood, 2015), unethical behavior (Miao, Newman, Yu, & Xu, 2013), innovation (Tu & Lu, 2013).

Although, there are the rapid developments of research, little research has found out the impact of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior. Thus, it is important to study both theoretically and practically why and how ethical leadership behavior effect on employee voice behavior, and if so, the mechanisms through which ethical leadership relates to employee voice behavior. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to extend this early and more recent research by testing the role of leader-member exchange (LMX) as a social exchange process in the ethical leadership-employee voice behavior link.

Graen & Scandura (1987) defined leader-member exchange concept as the quality of exchange between a leader and a follower. Leader can shape high-quality social exchanges that are based on open communication, trust, information sharing. On the contrary, leader can form lower-quality social exchanges that do not extend beyond the employee contract (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Thus, we propose that the reason why ethical leadership predicts employee voice behavior is that ethical leadership behavior promotes enhancing high-quality leader-member exchange and

high-quality leader-member exchange can be improve employee voice behavior.

This study makes several important contributions to extend literature of ethical leadership. First, we indicate that ethical leadership has a positive relationship with leader-member exchange. Second, by exploring leader-member exchange as a mediating mechanism, this study not only integrates the existing knowledge on ethical leadership, leader-member exchange, and employee voice behavior, but also reveals the proactive role that ethical leaders may play in helping increase employee voice behavior. Third, on a practical level, this study indicates that leader-member exchange positively effects on employee voice behavior. We test our hypotheses using a sample of service companies in Vietnam. The findings of our study also inform service companies` managers in Vietnam about the importance of ethical leaders` behavior.

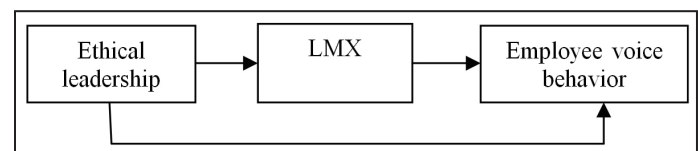


Fig. 1: Research Model

II. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

A. Ethical Leadership and Leader-member Exchange

In recently, leader-member exchange concept has been received considerable attention in research (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2012; Garg & Dhar, 2014). The foundation of leader-member exchange lies in the degree of leader and their followers mutually support and exchange valued resources (Linden et al., 1997). Therefore, Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor (2000) stated that leader-member exchange is a style of social exchange relationship that exists the relationship between an employee and his or her immediate supervisor. Employees have more frequently interact with their immediate supervisors, it is likely that their relationships with immediate supervisors will be stronger (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). So, enhancing leader-member exchange relationship is very important because of their effects on employee.

Ethical leaders can enhance quality leader-member exchange with followers in some ways. Ethical leaders are the presumed people who are honest and trustworthy; their decisions are foundation of greater good of the followers, organization and society (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Hansen, Alge, Brown, Jackson, & Dunford, 2013). When followers perceive their immediate supervisor is caring, supporting and motivating them in the best interesting, with them the immediate supervisor is committed. The result is that it will increase high-quality leader-member exchange because of high levels of loyalty, faith and sense of belonging (Erdogan, Liden, & Kraimer, 2006).

According to Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds (2006), “because ethical leaders are caring... relationships with ethical leaders are

built upon social exchange and norms of reciprocity” (p.967). As a result, ethical leadership could be motivate strong exchange relationship with their followers that goes beyond economic exchange agreements (Kuvaas, Buch, Dysvik, & Haerem, 2012; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Thus, we have following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 Ethical leadership has a positive effect on leader-member exchange

B. Ethical Leadership and Employee Voice Behavior

Employee voice concept is defined by Dyne & LePine (1998) as “a promotive behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive challenge intended to improve rather than merely criticize” (p.109). Voice behavior plays an important key for extra-role behavior such as positive and discretionary behaviors that are not depend on the organization but that are very important to form facilitate effective organizational functioning (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Ethical leadership plays a significant predictor role in group-level helping behavior, which is a factor of extra-role behavior (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes & Salvador, 2009). Similar to helping behavior, constructive voice behavior also plays an important role by leaders because it can find out problems and solutions to problems like to other ideas which could help work unit functioning (Dyne & LePine, 1998).

Brown et al., (2005) stated that ethical leaders provide followers with voice. Ethical leaders encourage their employees to voice opinions and suggestions both ethical matters and other work-related processes and work context because ethical leaders convey high moral standards to employees. Brown et al. (2005) also presented that ethical leadership had a significant relationship with employees` willingness to report problems to management that is one aspect of voice behavior construct (Dyne & LePine, 1998). Moreover, voice behavior includes expressing dissent when employees perceive that certain actions would be inappropriate or unethical, like sharing constructive ideas for work unit improvements even when problems have not surfaced. Thus, we propose that ethical leadership promotes employee voice behavior in work unit.

Hypothesis 2 Ethical leadership has a positive effect on employee voice behavior

C. Leader-member Exchange and Employee Voice Behavior

The relationship in confines of high to low quality between differences leaders and their employees is explained in LMX theory (George B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High quality exchanges is synonym with better relationships between employees and their leaders (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Thus exchanges mean that employees tend to have better experience to social support, shape channels of communication, motivate trust and enhance performance. On the contrary, employees who have low level LMX relationship have a different experience as evidenced by voice behavior (Gerstner & Day, 1997). If follower don`t have a close relationship with their immediate leader, they will not be willing to speak up. Thus, Linden, Wayne, & Stilwell (1993); Sparrowe & Liden (1997) stated that high quality relationships between leader and employees would encourage better employee outcomes.

On the other hand, empirical researches have tested how leadership

behaviors are transmitted to employee voice behaviors (Detert & Burris, 2007; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Employee voice behavior can challenges and upset the status quo of an organization and its power holders. In addition, that behavior can be used to promote constructive change in the status quo if it is positive behavior in nature (Zhou & George, 2001).

From these evidences, we have the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 Leader-member exchange has a positive effect on employee voice behavior

III. Method

A. Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 465 employees from service companies in Vietnam. One set of questionnaire were contributed during regular work hours to 800 employees after author had list of employees` information from human resource managers of 52 service companies. The authors directly explained the objective of this study, and explained the procedures for completing the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was developed based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature. The questionnaire was translated from English to Vietnamese and then back-translate to English by two independent bilingual scholars to ensure translation quality and guarantee equivalence of meaning. The questionnaire includes three main parts: ethical leadership, leader-member exchange and employee voice behavior. After questionnaire was distributed, 483 complete questionnaires returned, yielding a response rate of 60.4%. We were able to use responses from 465 complete and valid questionnaires for analysis.

B. Measures

1. Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership was assessed using 10 items from Brown et al., (2005). Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). A sample item is “My leader disciplines employees who violate ethical standards”. In this study, the subordinates indicated their perceptions about the behavior of ethical leadership of their leader. The authors develop a confirmatory factor analysis to validate the ethical leadership scale (Chi-square $\chi^2(35)=75.841$; Goodness of Fit Index [GFI]=.969; Comparative Fit Index [CFI]=.980; Incremental Fit Index [IFI]=.980 ; RMSEA=.050) and show that the scale is unidimensional and has high validity and reliability (Cronbach`s alpha=.901).

2. Leader-member Exchange

Leader-member exchange was measured with the seven item version developed by Dhar (2016). All items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1= “Not at all” to 5= “Very much”. A sample item is “How well does your leader recognize your potential?” The Cronbach`s alpha coefficient was .919. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of leader-member exchange scale yielded a good fit ($\chi^2(14)=22.501$, IFI=.996, GFI=.986, TLI=.994, CFI=.996, RMSEA=.036).

3. Employee Voice Behavior

Employee voice behavior was measured with six item version developed by Dyne & LePine (1998). We used a five-point scale ranging from 1, “strongly disagree”, to 5, “strongly agree”. A

sample item is “I speak up and encourage others in this group to get involved in issues that affect the group”. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .864. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of employee voice behavior scale yielded a good fit ($\chi^2(9)=17.097$, $IFI=.993$, $GFI=.988$, $TLI=.988$, $CFI=.993$, $RMSEA=.044$).

4. Control Variables

We controlled age, gender and education because previous research has showed that these variables can effect on individual and organizational variables (i.e. Foote & Tang, 2008). In this study, we also used the work tenure of employee as a control variable because of their impact on managers and employees’ work behavior.

IV. Results

A. Descriptive Statistics

The means, standard deviations and zero-order Pearson correlations of all the key variables are presented in Table 1. Fig. 1 showed the research model of gender, age, education, tenure, ethical leadership, leader-member exchange and employee voice behavior.

As shown in Table 1, gender was negative related to LMX ($r=-.138$). Age was negative related to LMX ($r=-.111$) and employee voice behavior ($r=-.115$). Tenure was positive related to ethical leadership ($r=.112$), and LMX ($r=.100$). Ethical leadership was positive related to LMX ($r=.379$) and employee voice behavior ($r=.199$). And LMX was positive related to employee voice behavior ($r=.197$).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Scale Reliabilities

Variable	Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.46	.499							
2. Age	2.25	.990	.042						
3. Education	2.48	.871	-.005	-.226**					
4. Tenure	2.23	.871	.073	-.091	.179**				
5. Ethical leadership	3.91	.568	-.059	.039	-.010	.112*	.707		
6. Leader-member exchange	3.52	.879	-.138**	-.111*	.020	.100*	.379**	.787	
7. Employee voice behavior	3.63	.688	-.021	-.115*	.061	.049	.199**	.197**	.722

Note:

- (1). Cronbach alpha reliabilities for observed variables are in parenthesis in the diagonal
- (2) * Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)
- ** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). N =465
- (3) The square root of AVE for discriminant validity are in parentheses along the diagonal

B. Convergent and Discriminant Validity

In this study, we conducted an EFA using Principal Axis Factoring with promax with Kaiser Normalization to examine the observed variables loaded together to check criteria of reliability and validity. The results showed that the KMO and Bartlett’s test of sampling adequacy was significant for each variable were sufficiently (KMO=.945). Moreover, as shown Table 2, all the factor loadings was significant at .001 levels (all above .506), the results showed a good discriminant validity. Therefore, all chosen variables were suitable for factor analysis. The Cronbach’s alpha for variables were also presented in Table 2. All alphas are reflective because all of was above .864.

On the other hand, we examined the common method bias through Harman’s single-factor test. The ten items of ethical leadership, seven items of LMX and six items of employee voice behavior was entered in a principle component factor analysis. The results presented that the first factor in the model explained 37.505% of the variance. Thus, in here, the common method bias was not issue.

Table 2: Item Loading of the Latent Constructs

Item	Ethical leadership	Leader – member exchange	Employee voice behavior	Cronbach’s Alpha
EL1	.738			.901
EL2	.695			
EL3	.705			
EL4	.781			
EL5	.729			
EL6	.639			
EL7	.622			
EL8	.506			
EL9	.707			
EL10	.736			

LMX1		.773		.919
LMX2		.790		
LMX3		.870		
LMX4		.737		
LMX5		.709		
LMX6		.835		
LMX7		.770		
EVB1			.675	.864
EVB2			.869	
EVB3			.868	
EVB4			.593	
EVB5			.683	
EVB6			.542	
Note: (1) Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. (2) Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.				

The third, discriminant validity relates to the degree to which items differentiate between constructs, and presents by the square root of average variance extracted. In Table 1, the authors presented the square root of the average variance extracted of each latent constructs. All of them was greater than that construct's correlation with other constructs.

Table 3: Regressions

Independent variables \ Dependent variables	Leader-member exchange		Employee voice behavior	
	Coefficients (t statistic)	TOL (VIF)	Coefficients (t statistic)	TOL (VIF)
Constant	1.234*** (4.7)		2.549*** (11.528)	
Ethical leadership	.568*** (8.812)	1.000 (1.000)	.176** (2.981)	.856 (1.168)
LMX			.111** (2.904)	.856 (1.168)
R ²	.144		.057	
Adjusted R ²	.142		.053	
F	77.660		13.944	
Standard Error	.814		.670	
Note: * p <.05; **p<.01; *** p<.001 (two-tailed), TOL = Tolerance; VIF = variance inflation Factor				

On the other hand, there are significant and positive correlations that exist among ethical leadership, LMX, and employee voice behavior. Moreover, we used a series of regression to test the direct effects that were analyzed in this study. Addition, a series of test (i.e. tolerance, variance inflation factor) was used to examine the non-presence of multi-collinearity (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009).

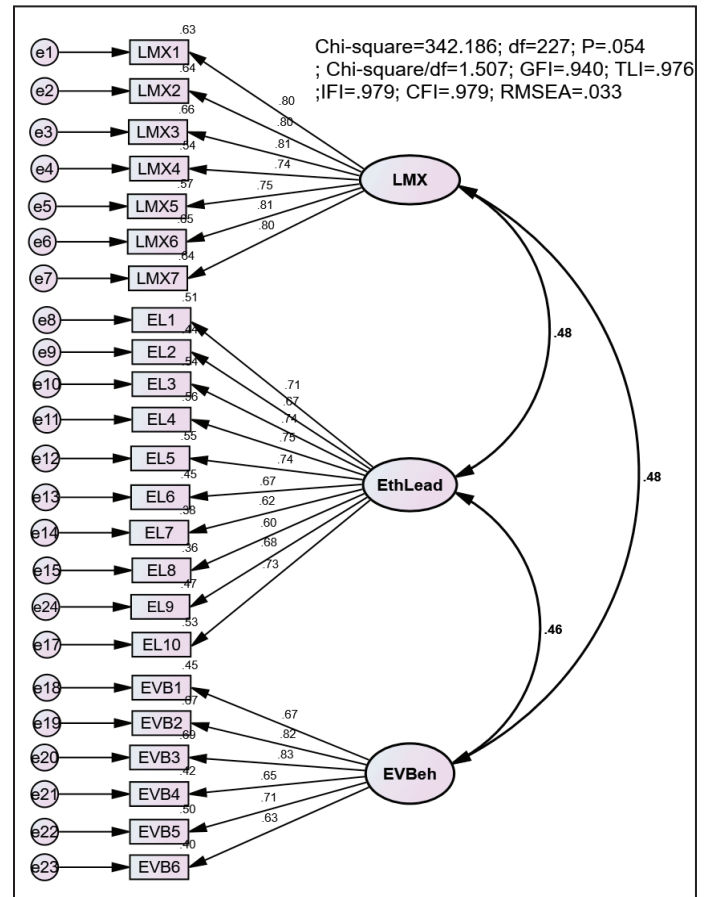


Fig. 2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The authors used CFA before testing the hypothesis to examine the fit of the three-factor model. The three-factor model included ethical leadership, LMX and employee voice behavior. The CFA for measurement model presented the following indices: $\chi^2(227) = 342.186$, $p = .054$, IFI=.979, GFI=.940, TLI=.976, CFI=.979, RMSEA = .033 (see Fig. 2). The results showed a good fit between the measurement and the data collected.

Table 4: Validity, Reliability and Internal Consistency.

Construct	No. of items	Variable	Standardized regression weights	C.R.	R2	AVE	Composite reliability
Ethical leadership	10	EL1	.713	f.p.	.509	.500	.909
		EL2	.666	13.648	.444		
		EL3	.737	15.079	.543		
		EL4	.749	15.325	.562		
		EL5	.739	15.114	.546		
		EL6	.672	13.760	.451		
		EL7	.618	12.674	.383		
		EL8	.744	12.349	.363		
		EL9	.684	14.000	.467		
		EL10	.734	14.962	.535		
LMX	7	LMX1	.796	f.p.	.634	.620	.919
		LMX2	.802	19.156	.644		
		LMX3	.813	19.505	.662		
		LMX4	.736	17.152	.542		
		LMX5	.753	17.640	.567		
		LMX6	.807	19.311	.652		
		LMX7	.802	19.136	.643		

Employee voice behavior	6	EVB1	.671	f.p.	.450	.522	.866
		EVB2	.819	15.097	.671		
		EVB3	.829	15.226	.687		
		EVB4	.650	12.443	.423		
		EVB5	.708	13.401	.501		
		EVB6	.632	12.138	.400		

Table 4 presented the Composite Reliabilities (CR) and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The authors used these factors to examine the quality of measurement model for the sample. The scales showed satisfactory levels of reliability with CR range from .866 to .909 and AVE from .500 to .620.

C. Hypothesis Testing

The authors used SEM (structural equations modeling) to test direct and indirect effects using AMOS software (version 22). Figure 3 indicated the standardized structural coefficients. The all scales fit measures, multiple squared correlation coefficients of the variables, and significance levels of the path coefficients showed that the model fits the data well $\chi^2(227)=342.186, p=.054, IFI=.979, GFI=.940, TLI=.976, CFI=.979, RMSEA=.033$.

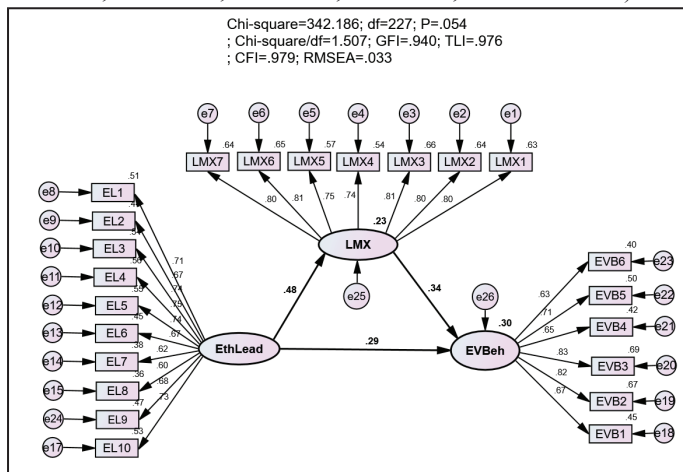


Fig. 3: Results of Structural Equation Model

Table 5 indicated the results for the structural model in fig. 3. Structural equation modeling was performed the direct and indirect effects of the independent variables of ethical leadership, LMX, and employee voice behavior.

Table 5: Structural Model Result (Direct, Indirect and Total Effects).

Effect from	To	Direct effects ^a	Indirect effects ^a	Total effects ^a
Ethical leadership	LMX	.478 ***		.478 ***
Ethical leadership	Employee voice behavior	.293 ***	.165 ***	.458 ***
LMX	Employee voice behavior	.345 ***		.345 ***
Goodness of fit statistics	Chi-square = 342.186; chi-square/df = 1.507; df = 227; P=0.054; IFI=.979; GFI=.940; TLI=.976; CFI=.979; RMSEA=.033			
Note: a Standardized Structural Coefficients: *** p<.001.				

Table 5 presented that ethical leadership is closely related to and effects LMX ($\gamma=.478, p<.001$) and employee voice behavior ($\gamma=.293, p<.001$), as predicted in hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively. Addition, the results showed an indirect effect of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior (.165, $p<.001$) by LMX (.478x.345).

The influence of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior is thus .458 ($p<.001$). Comparing the magnitudes of these effects indicated that the effect of ethical leadership on employee voice behavior is larger than the total effects of LMX on employee voice behavior. Therefore, the model explains employee voice behavior well. Finally, Table 5 also presented a direct effect ($\gamma=.345, p<.001$) LMX on employee voice behavior, supporting hypotheses 3.

V. Discussion

This study examined the role of ethical leadership in influencing voice behavior of employees associated with service companies in Vietnam. The results highlighted the existence of a positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior service company staff. These findings are consistent with the findings of Chin (2013); Lee, Choi, Youn, & Chun (2017); Wang, Gan, Wu, & Wang (2015) who argued that ethical leadership plays a very important role in influencing the behavior of the employees` attitude in a positive way in the work place (Hansen et al., 2013; Lu & Guy, 2014). The presented findings on the positive relationship between ethical leadership and employee voice behavior have led to several suggestions. For example, when ethical leaders emphasize the job outcome of organization, promote open communication, enhance employee creative, the followers reciprocate by voice behavior.

The presented findings also revealed that the exchange shared by leaders with their employees play a mediating role in influencing employee voice behavior. The social learning theory and the social exchange theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) are two main theories proposed by many researchers (Brown et al., 2005) that explained the mechanism by which ethical leaders effect their employees. This study found LMX act as very important intervening variable in the ethical leadership-employee voice behavior link. This study adds to the literature of ethical leadership by testing the psychological and social aspects that explain the ethical leadership-employee voice behavior link. The findings, which indicate that LMX acts as a partial mediator, leads to the important contribution of this study. Therefore, this research could be regarded as one of the first studies that integrate the social learning theory and the social exchange theory in explaining the relationship between LMX and employee voice behavior.

Third, data for the research sample was collected from 52 service companies in Vietnam in order to avoid self-selection bias. Finally, virtually no studies to the author`s knowledge have been conducted on ethical leadership and its relationship with employee voice behavior in Vietnam where various aspects such as ethics, exchange relations, voice behavior are highlighted. Thus, this research tried to add to the literature generalizing and externally validating ethical leadership and employee voice behavior, both of which have been originally developed and primarily studied in Western countries.

The study findings lead to the suggestion that service companies need to understand the advantages of enhancing ethical practices and ethical leadership to achieve employee voice behavior. Service organizations are advised to conduct training programs that teach employees at all levels to maintain ethical behavior in all spheres of their work life.

Managers are advised to enhance a healthy relationship between themselves and their followers so that there can be open and free communication on a frequent basic. This might lead to motivate employee voice behavior. Hence, managers can attempt to create an environment that promotes voice behavior of employees.

VI. Study limitations and Future Research

The present study has some limitations. First, because employees provided ratings of ethical leadership, LMX, employee voice behavior, the hypothesized relationships between ethical leadership and the mediating variables must be interpreted with caution due to same-source concerns. For example, it is possible that employees' evaluations of ethical leadership bias their rating of perceptions of LMX. To address this potential limitation, we obtained employee voice behavior from direct reports' supervisors. Thus, future study should strive to measure all predictors and voice behavior ideally from different sources.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of this study implies that causes may be subject to alternative interpretations. In a longitudinal study, the measurement of cause variables and effect variables at different intervals would enhance the validity of the result.

The data were collected in service companies in Vietnam. Hence, the presented findings may not be generalized to other organizational context. Therefore, future researches should consider collecting the data from different industries to generalize the findings of this study. On the other hand, the presented study used survey based to analyze. Future researches could use qualitative methods to get a better in-depth understanding of the complexities involved in promoting employee voice behavior using ethical leadership style in service companies in Vietnam.

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