

Bridging Ethics and Engagement: A Review of Psychological Safety in Ethical Leadership Research

Nor Ananiza Azhar, Mohd Firdaus Ruslan*, Mohd Shafiz Saharan, Roseamilda Mansor, Norhafiza Hashim

Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Kedah Branch

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This review synthesises recent empirical studies that examine the relationship between ethical leadership, psychological safety, and employee engagement across diverse organisational and cultural contexts. Guided by the PRISMA framework, a systematic search of Scopus and Web of Science databases identified seven empirical studies that met the inclusion criteria. The findings reveal that ethical, benevolent, inclusive, and authentic forms of leadership consistently enhance trust, fairness, and psychological safety, which subsequently promote engagement, creativity, and innovation. Psychological safety emerges as the primary mediating mechanism through which moral conduct translates into behavioural and emotional engagement, supported by complementary mediators such as trust, job satisfaction, and workplace friendship. Cultural factors, including power distance and collectivism, influence the strength and expression of these relationships, suggesting that ethical leadership is interpreted differently across contexts. The review integrates insights from Social Exchange Theory and Social Learning Theory, framing ethical leadership as both a relational and cognitive process that shapes the moral–psychological climate of organisations. It concludes that ethical leadership should be viewed as a strategic capability that nurtures psychological safety, engagement, and well-being, particularly within the evolving realities of hybrid and cross-cultural workplaces.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership; Psychological Safety; Employee Engagement

INTRODUCTION

In a time of rapid change, blurred organizational boundaries, and mixed work styles, leadership in organizations is more important than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes, such as a revolution in remote collaboration, changes in employee expectations, and increased public scrutiny of corporate ethics. This demands leaders in organizations who can balance ethics with efficiency. Ethical leadership, once considered a values-based style, is now seen as a way to drive long-term performance and employee health. Companies are beginning to understand that being ethical is not just about following the rules; it is also about making the workplace a place where employees feel safe to speak up, ask questions, and grow.

Recent empirical research supports this shift in perspective. Ethical leadership, characterized by the display of normatively acceptable behaviors through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, along with the promotion of those behaviors among subordinates (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), has been shown to foster trust, fairness, and psychological safety in teams. Hassan et al. (2017) found that ethical leaders can improve performance by maintaining moral standards and fostering an emotional environment that encourages engagement and learning. This is consistent with research by Liu, Zhang, and Liu (2023), which shows that ethical leadership can foster innovative work behavior through the dual mediation of psychological safety and work engagement. Ethical leaders can also generate a more open and fulfilling environment by creating a space where people can communicate and respect each other (Guo, 2022). These findings suggest that ethical leadership functions as an external regulatory mechanism and psychological driver, enhancing creativity, belonging, and commitment.

A central theme of this growing debate is psychological safety. People believe they can take social risks without being ridiculed or punished (Edmondson, 1999). This links ethical behavior at the top to dedication at the bottom. When leaders are open and honest, they make employees feel part of the organization and can trust them, which is essential for true work engagement (Niu, 2023; Qasim et al., 2022). A bibliometric synthesis by Dong, Li, and Roxas (2024) shows that the convergence of research on ethical and psychological safety reflects the growing recognition that ethical leadership is essential for employee well-being and innovation. In many ways, ethical leadership can translate abstract moral principles into concrete feelings of safety that enhance group performance.

However, the literature remains fragmented. Some research highlights trust as the primary explanatory mechanism (Eluwole et al., 2022), while others, such as Meng et al. (2022) focus on meaningful work, and Zainal (2023) posit organizational culture as a mediating pathway. Various efforts have been made to integrate these perspectives into a coherent explanatory framework. Contextual nuances introduce complexity: hierarchical distance, bureaucratic inertia, and digital communication barriers can reduce psychological indicators of ethical intent. This challenge has sparked interest in examining the conditions and mechanisms through which ethical leadership can sustain psychological safety in diverse cultural and structural contexts.

Accordingly, this review synthesises empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 to elucidate how ethical leadership enhances employee engagement through psychological safety and related psychological mechanisms. Specifically, it addresses three guiding questions:

1. What mechanisms enable ethical leadership to promote psychological safety?
2. How does psychological safety mediate or moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and engagement?
3. What contextual and cultural factors influence these dynamics?

By weaving together insights from the most recent literature, this paper reframes ethical leadership not merely as a form of moral guidance but as a psychological infrastructure for engagement and innovation. It argues that ethical leaders do more than uphold principles; they shape the mental and emotional spaces in which modern organisations can endure, adapt, and excel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical Leadership and Moral Foundations

Ethical leadership is recognised as a leadership approach grounded in equity, integrity, and concern for others (Brown et al., 2005). In recent years, however, research has gradually shifted its focus from leaders simply modelling behaviour for subordinates to viewing ethical leadership as a deeper moral compass that shapes the tone and integrity of the organisational climate. Leaders who demonstrate moral courage and integrity do more than establish rules; they set moral standards that subtly influence how people behave and make decisions (Tu & Lu, 2023). From a social learning perspective, employees closely observe these leaders, internalising ethical principles through modelling, reinforcement, and the emotional impact of daily interactions.

Empirical studies conducted between 2020 and 2025 support this broader perspective. Bai et al. (2021) found that ethical leadership fosters emotional trust among employees, thereby encouraging creativity and collaborative behaviour. Similarly, Demirtas et al. (2023) show that perceived moral consistency in leaders enhances their credibility, promotes psychological comfort, and conveys fairness throughout the organisation. Collectively, these findings suggest that ethical leadership forms the moral and emotional foundation on which trust, transparency, and engagement are built. Ethical leaders not only explain what is right, but also influence how people feel about doing the right thing in group settings.

Psychological Safety as a Mediating Mechanism

Psychological safety refers to the belief that one can share thoughts and admit mistakes without fear of shame or punishment (Edmondson, 1999). It is recognised as a key psychological channel linking leadership and employee engagement. Ethical leadership models foster environments where people feel able to communicate openly and

where everyone is treated fairly (Qasim et al., 2022). In such settings, employees experience a sense of belonging and safety to express their ideas, which encourages creativity, vocal behaviour, and innovation (Aboud & Niu, 2023).

Recent empirical evidence supports this mediation process. Liu et al. (2023) demonstrated that psychological safety and work engagement sequentially mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and innovative work behaviour, highlighting the cascading effect of ethical influence. This aligns with Dong et al. (2024), who found that leadership ethics is a key antecedent in contemporary psychological research, indicating a shift from structural interpretations to psychological engagement. Their study identified psychological safety as an important mechanism through which leadership translates moral values into concrete performance outcomes. Psychological safety thus provides ethical leadership with its emotional currency by converting abstract ethical goals into everyday freedom of action.

Ethical Leadership and Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is typically defined as a state of mind that is pleasurable and enjoyable at work, marked by enthusiasm, dedication, and immersion (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Ethical leaders encourage people to engage in the workplace by building trust, fairness, and a sense of purpose (Eluwole et al., 2022). Ethical leaders use intrinsic motivation to inspire employees to align their personal values with organizational objectives, while transactional leaders rely on compliance and performance-oriented incentives.

Recent research supports this theoretical view. Meng, Tan, and Li (2022) show that meaningful work serves as a mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement, while Guo (2022) highlights the importance of transparent communication as a conduit to lasting satisfaction and engagement. These findings suggest that ethical leadership fosters engagement through a variety of psychological mechanisms, including trust, psychological safety, and perceived purpose. Engagement is not a random outcome of moral leadership; it is a planned and developed outcome of ethical settings.

Contextual and Cultural Influences

Although ethical leadership generally predicts engagement through psychological safety, this correlation is inconsistent across contexts. Research in high power distance and collectivist societies, particularly in Southeast Asia, suggests that hierarchical norms can both promote and hinder psychological safety (Zainal, 2023). For example, in Malaysia, ethical leadership often operates in bureaucratic systems where people may not be able to speak to their superiors, even when leaders mean well.

The growth of digital and hybrid work environments further complicates matters. Tan and Ong (2024) argue that in the absence of nonverbal cues and a lack of social presence, employees may not feel that things are fair, accessible, or empathetic. Therefore, ethical leadership in virtual environments requires intentional enhancement of trust and inclusiveness through transparent, consistent, and ethical communication. Contextual insights suggest that ethical leadership is dynamic; its effectiveness depends on its adaptability to cultural norms and technological realities. So, leaders need to be careful as they navigate the changing landscape if they are to maintain psychological safety and engagement in the modern workplace.

METHODOLOGY

This review uses a systematic and integrative methodology to present the latest empirical research on ethical leadership, psychological safety and employee engagement. The methodological design adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) framework guidelines, while incorporating interpretive flexibility appropriate for organizational behavior research. The primary goal was to find and critically analyze peer-reviewed empirical studies that examine the relationship between ethical leadership, psychological safety and engagement at work.

A comprehensive search of the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases was conducted. Both are well-known for having many reputable journals in management, psychology and organizational studies. Table 1 shows how the search strategy was carefully designed using Boolean operators and key terms to ensure that it covered a wide range of topics while remaining relevant.

Table 1

Database	Search String
Scopus and Web of Science (WoS)	(“ethical leadership” OR “moral leadership”) AND (“psychological safety” OR “trust climate” OR “psychological climate”) AND (“employee engagement” OR “work engagement” OR “organisational commitment”).

The initial search yielded 14 documents in the Web of Science database and 5 documents in Scopus. Subsequently, all retrieved articles were screened based on the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only empirical, peer-reviewed journal articles written in English were retained. To ensure consistent methods and relevant results, we did not include concept papers, book chapters, editorials, or conference proceedings.

After eliminating duplicates and ineligible studies, seven articles met the inclusion criteria and were selected for a comprehensive analysis. Each study was reviewed for its theoretical framework, sample characteristics, analytical methodology, and key findings. Figure 1 shows how the review process worked, with the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of the PRISMA model. This methodical yet interpretive approach facilitates both rigor and contextual sensitivity, ensuring that the synthesis encompasses not only empirical trends but also the theoretical and cultural subtleties that characterize ethical leadership in modern organizational development.

DISCUSSION

The six empirical studies analyzed in this review span a variety of industries and cultural contexts across Asia, yielding convergent evidence that ethical and related leadership styles, such as benevolent, inclusive, and authentic leadership, promote employee outcomes that promote research through psychological mechanisms. The majority of studies use quantitative methodologies, using cross-sectional data surveys analyzed through techniques such as structural equation modeling (SEM), AMOS, or partial least squares (PLS). A study conducted by Ochiai and Otsuka (2022) advances the methodology of progress by validating psychological safety measures. Collectively, these studies illustrate that ethical leadership increases employee engagement, innovation, and prosocial behavior by fostering psychological safety, trust, and a sense of purpose in the workplace.

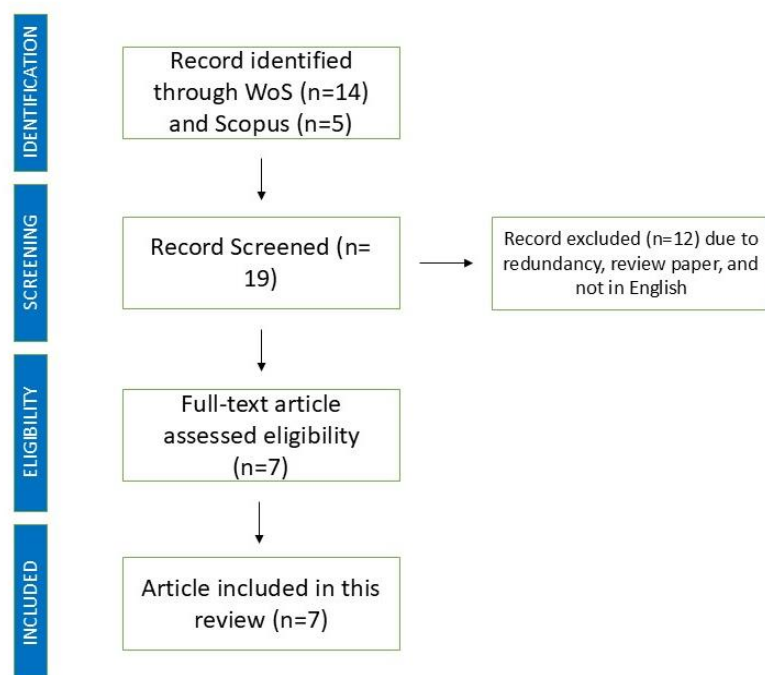


Figure 1: Flow of Review Process

The main theoretical frameworks of this study are Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Social Learning Theory (SLT), which explain the relational and observational mechanisms that link moral leadership to follower behavior. Psychological safety is the most stable mediating construct, followed by trust, satisfaction, and meaningfulness, which explain how moral climate transforms ethical intentions into action.

Ethical Leadership as the Foundation of Psychological Climate

Ethical leadership is the moral and emotional foundation of the workplace. Liu et al. (2023) found that leaders who demonstrate fairness, integrity, and genuine concern for the well-being of employees significantly increase psychological safety and job engagement, thereby fostering innovative behavior. Khairy et al. (2023) reached similar conclusions, showing that benevolent leadership, an ethics-driven approach founded on compassion, fosters a climate of caring and reciprocal trust that encourages engagement. Junaidi (2024) also noted that ethical leadership increases trust and job satisfaction, both of which serve as mediators between leadership and engagement. These findings suggest that moral consistency fosters emotional safety and loyalty among employees.

Chaudhary and Panda (2018) also argue that leadership based on moral values makes people feel more psychologically connected and engaged. Employees perceive ethical behavior from leaders as an affirmation of their professional purpose and identity. In general, this study is based on one main idea: ethical leadership is not a way to get people to follow rules, but rather a way to build trust and purpose, which are what keep people engaged over time.

Psychological Safety as the Mediating Core

In every model examined, psychological safety consistently emerged as a significant link between ethical leadership and employee outcomes. Liu et al. (2023) described a sequential mediational pathway in which ethical leadership influences psychological safety, which in turn increases work engagement and innovation. Khattak et al. (2022) also found that inclusive leadership promotes prosocial rule-breaking and vocal behavior specifically by increasing psychological safety and leader identification.

These results suggest that psychological safety translates moral intentions into behavioral energy. Employees who feel safe are less afraid of being embarrassed or punished, which makes them more creative, willing to try new things, and emotionally committed to their jobs. Chaudhary and Panda (2018) assert that psychological meaning, a construct closely related to safety, also mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and creativity. Collectively, these insights suggest that psychological safety serves as an important component of a comprehensive empowerment system that fosters an ethical climate. Thus, ethical leadership not only changes what employees think is right, but also what they feel safe to do. This transforms ethical behavior into everyday courage.

Complementary Mediators: Trust, Satisfaction, and Friendship

Psychological safety is the strongest mediator, but there are other mechanisms that help explain how ethical leadership leads to greater engagement. Junaidi (2024) identified trust and knowledge sharing as sequential mediators, confirming that fairness and transparency in leadership foster open communication networks that increase engagement. Khairy et al. (2023) presented workplace friendships as an alternative interpersonal pathway, observing that leaders who demonstrate empathy and concern foster stronger social connections among employees, thereby increasing engagement.

These results suggest that ethical climates are always group-based. Safety and trust extend beyond the relationship between leaders and followers. They also create a larger team environment in which people respect and cooperate. This type of environment promotes both emotional bonding (through friendship and happiness) and cognitive safety (through trust and fairness). Liu et al. (2023) also found that personal traits, specifically openness to experience, compound this effect, suggesting that personality factors can enhance the benefits of a psychologically safe and ethical environment.

Cultural and Contextual Influences

C Contextual variation significantly moderates the effects of ethical leadership on engagement. The studies examined span diverse cultural contexts, including China, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Japan, each characterized by unique social values related to authority, harmony, and collectivism.

In collectivist contexts such as China and Indonesia, ethical leadership has significant influence because moral behavior is consistent with cultural norms regarding welfare and relational responsibility. Liu et al. (2023) found that workers in the Chinese service industry favor leaders who are morally consistent and care about their colleagues, which makes the group stronger. Similarly, Junaidi (2024) found that Indonesian workers value fairness and honesty as important moral traits that build trust and a sense of shared identity.

Khattak et al. (2022) observed that in the high-power distance culture of Pakistan, inclusive leadership reduces hierarchical barriers by fostering respect and voice, thereby helping to restore psychological safety. In Japan, Ochiai and Otsuka (2022) confirmed that psychological safety is closely related to leader fairness and support, thus confirming the diversity of constructs while highlighting the importance of norms of harmony. These findings emphasize that while psychological safety is a basic human need, its manifestation is culturally dependent. Leaders must define safety in their specific context, using open dialogue, respectful interaction, or emotional congruence, and tailor their ethical communication accordingly.

Integrative Synthesis

This synthesis yields three key insights.

1. Ethical leadership strengthens the moral and psychological framework of engagement. Ethical and benevolent leadership styles consistently increase trust, fairness, and warmth in relationships across industries and cultures, thereby fostering environments that encourage collaboration and innovation.
2. Psychological safety serves as a means of connecting the center. It transforms moral behavior into motivation and creativity by encouraging employees to speak up, take responsibility, and participate fully.
3. Contextual and individual factors influence the process. Cultural dimensions such as power distance and collectivism, along with personal characteristics such as openness and relationship dynamics such as trust and friendship, influence the magnitude of this effect.

In theory, these results support Social Learning Theory, which states that employees imitate the moral behavior of their leaders, and Social Exchange Theory, which states that fairness and trust lead to cooperative efforts. So, ethical leadership does not work like a straight line; it works like an interactive system that depends on how well people get along and how sensitive they are to other cultures.

In practice, evidence suggests that fostering ethical leadership should be considered a psychological-climate intervention. Organizations should create leadership programs that prioritize empathy, equity, and open communication. In hierarchical or collectivist settings, human resource systems should reward people who are honest and consistent. Ultimately, leaders who combine moral integrity with relational sensitivity create a workplace where people can feel safe and engaged, which is good for both people and the organization.

CONCLUSION

Recent empirical studies collectively confirm that ethical leadership functions as a psychological catalyst that converts moral behavior into engagement, innovation, and well-being. Across a variety of organizational and cultural contexts, such as China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, India, and Japan, ethical, kind, inclusive, and authentic leadership consistently correlates with high levels of trust, psychological safety, and work engagement. Common to these findings is the understanding that ethical leadership is more than just following the rules or talking about morality. It creates mental states such as trust, fairness, and openness that enable employees to make meaningful contributions, speak honestly, and generate new ideas without fear.

A consistent empirical theme in research, including Liu et al. (2023), Khattak et al. (2022), and Chaudhary and Panda (2018), is the mediating role of psychological safety. When leaders are honest, open, and supportive,

employees feel safe taking risks with each other. This makes them more engaged and creative. Psychological safety acts as an important psychological conduit linking ethics to performance. This mechanism is further strengthened by complementary mediators, such as trust, job satisfaction, and work camaraderie (Junaidi, 2024; Khairy et al., 2023), which enhance affective relationships and team bonding. This pathway argues that the effectiveness of ethical leadership lies not in authority or dominance, but in its ability to foster relational trust and emotional safety. This is a hidden structure that makes the workplace enjoyable, adaptable, and creative.

The function of this mechanism is also influenced by culture. In societies with high power distance or collectivism, ethical leadership is often seen as benevolent and protective rather than egalitarian. Studies conducted in China, Indonesia, and Pakistan show that leaders who demonstrate moral consistency and interpersonal concern are highly effective at fostering commitment and assertive behavior. Japanese research by Ochiai and Otsuka (2022) shows that psychological safety is influenced by cultural norms of harmony and fairness, suggesting that safety is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by values and expectations. This variation emphasizes that ethical leadership has no universal definition; it requires interpretation through local cultural lenses and must be formulated taking into account hierarchy, harmony, and emotional norms.

This research conceptually synthesizes Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Social Learning Theory (SLT). As SET suggests, employees are more engaged when they are treated fairly. As SLT suggests, they also follow the moral behavior of their leaders. This dual perspective explains why ethical leaders consistently achieve high levels of engagement and creativity among their employees: they inspire through role modeling and foster reciprocity through fairness. To fully understand the psychological dimensions of this process, further research could enrich the theory by incorporating frameworks such as Conservation of Resources (COR) or Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This perspective would allow researchers to consider psychological safety as a protective element against stress and a stimulus for intrinsic motivation.

Despite the increasing evidence, there are still some gaps in the research. Most current studies have used cross-sectional designs, thus limiting causal inference. Future research should use longitudinal or experimental methodologies to examine the gradual influence of ethical leadership on psychological safety and engagement over time, particularly in the context of organizational change or crisis. There is also a clear need to adjust measurement tools to fit different cultures. Research from Japan and other Asian settings suggests that Western-developed instruments may not reflect the collectivist dimensions of psychological safety or the moral underpinnings of ethical leadership relationships. As a result, future research must emphasize the creation of context-sensitive scales that capture cultural scripts and implicit norms.

There is a need for more research on individual-level differences. Personality traits such as openness to experience or moral identity can influence leadership ethics, thereby increasing or decreasing the impact of engagement, as shown by Liu et al. (2023). In addition, structural and technological aspects of the contemporary workplace require further investigation. Hybrid and virtual workplaces are changing.

In conclusion, the evidence from 2018 to 2024 suggests that ethical leadership is more than just a moral ideal; it is also a strategic psychological skill. When leaders demonstrate fairness and kindness, they create an environment of trust that encourages people to be themselves, to be curious, and to generate new ideas. In this sense, psychological safety serves as a bridge between ethics and performance that is always present. Future research should advance this understanding by investigating the dynamic, multilevel, and cross-cultural mechanisms through which ethical leadership fosters safe and engaged work environments. The task ahead is not to demonstrate the importance of ethics—that has already been acknowledged—but to understand how ethical leadership can be systematically integrated into organizations, ensuring that morality, safety, and engagement serve as interrelated foundations for sustainable human performance.

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