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Fostering Employee Creativity In Software Houses: Exploring The Influence Of Ethical Leadership, LMX, And Employee Feedback-Seeking Behavior

Dr. Muhammad Ajmal[1] , Dr. Imran Khan[2] , Azmat Islam[3]

Abstract

Today's knowledge-based IT industry provokes volatile challenges due to fast-paced changes in a competitive global landscape. Creative performance, a radical source of attaining, promoting, and sustaining a competitive edge, contributes to the long-term sustainability of this industry. The purpose of study is to identify the antecedents of employee creative perfromace with respect to ethical leadership and LMX .Data is collected from software houses in Pakistan registered in PSEB from three hundred and twenty (320) leader-employee dyads. Current research is conducted by adopting a cross-sectional design. Information was obtained from, leaders and their relevant subordinates by distributing a questionnaire online so as to reduce common method biases and physical visit as well. Results signify that leader-member exchange, ethical leadership and employee feedback-seeking behavior perform a dynamic function in the software industry in enhancing employee creativity. To the extent of pragmatic implications, findings suggest that to provoke creative performance among employees, leaders of software houses must uphold these proposed variables by considering them as an integral part of their organizational strategy.Study is to evaluate and understand how ethical leadership generate influence creative performance, particularly the way how ethical leadership affects employee creative performance through the intermediating position of LMX and employee feedback-seeking behavior.

Keywords: *Employee Creative Performance, Ethical Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange, Employee Feedback-Seeking Behavior and software industry.*

1. Introduction

The software industry in Pakistan has experienced a remarkable transformation, positioning itself as a significant player in the global IT landscape. As this sector continues to grow and gain recognition for its capabilities, the importance o[1]f fostering innovation and creativity within Pakistani software companies becomes increasingly evident (Shafique, Ahmad & Kalyar,2020). This need is not a mere luxury but a necessity, given the complex challenges the industry faces, demanding creative solutions. In the dynamic and competitive global software industry, Pakistani software firms confront the pressing challenge of consistently nurturing employee creativity. To stay at the forefront of technological advancements and adapt to rapidly changing industry trends, these organizations must find effective strategies to inspire their workforce to think innovatively (Natalia & Ellitan, 2019). The issue at hand revolves

[1]Department of Management Sciences, University of Gujrat, Pakistan. Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5301-9761
[2]Lecturer at University of Central Punjab, Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/00009-007-8280-6858
[3]PhD scholar at the Department of Business Administration, National College of Business Administration and Economics, Lahore.Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/000-0002-6118-5032

around creating an environment where employee creativity thrives and plays a pivotal role in driving innovation and long-term success.

In a highly competitive global market, the ability to nurture employee creativity becomes a critical differentiator for software companies, allowing them to stay ahead in technological advancements, remain adaptable to rapidly changing industry trends, and establish a strong position in the software development landscape (Mutonyi et al., 2020). The challenge is not just about survival but thriving and setting the pace in an ever-evolving field. Employee creative performance involves the generation and development of entirely new and implementable ideas for businesses (Sarooghi, Libaers, & Burkemper, 2015). It is essential for an organization to maintain a leading position and make significant progress in the rapidly changing business environment (Gong, Zhao, Wang, & Yu, 2018). Employee Creative performance requires taking risks, challenging established norms, and breaking free from conventional thinking. Employees inclined towards risk-taking, independent decision-making, complexity handling, problem-solving, and open-mindedness are more likely to support creative performance(Mutonyi, Slatten, & Lien, 2020) .

Ethical leadership, characterized by its emphasis on moral values, fairness, transparency, and integrity, serves as a fundamental pillar in creating an environment where employees feel motivated and safe to express their creative ideas, particularly in the context of the Pakistani software industry, where ethical considerations and a strong sense of trust are highly valued(Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018). The challenge lies in deciphering how to effectively instill these ethical principles within leadership and organizational culture to foster creativity, as well as how to measure its impact. Ethical leaders in this industry inspire their subordinates to challenge the status quo, handle risky and uncertain situations, and encourage creative performance, establishing integrity, fairness, and morality within their organizations, leading to a sense of dedication and achievement among employees (Northouse, 2021). To improve subordinates' target performance, leaders should provide feedback for goal improvement and maintain high-quality relationships. Leaders who care about their team members' psychological development empower them to tackle new challenges, and ethical leaders motivate employees to compete effectively by offering support and constructive feedback on their performance (Borden, Levy, & Silverman, 2018; Tseng & Levy, 2019). Feedback-seeking behavior, where employees proactively seek feedback, guidance, and support from leaders, is a proactive approach that helps employees manage their creative performance and achieve valuable goals.

Leader-Member Exchange, or LMX, is another concept of significant relevance within the Pakistani software industry. LMX pertains to the quality of relationships between leaders and their subordinates, and this holds particular importance in a region where interpersonal dynamics greatly impact professional interactions(Cropanzano, Dasborough, & Weiss, 2017). The challenge here is to establish LMX relationships that not only promote employee engagement but also act as catalysts for fostering innovative thinking and creativity (Ross, Valenzuela, Intindola, & Flinchbaugh, 2017). Positive LMX relationships, characterized by mutual respect, trust, and open communication, can lead to heightened employee engagement and empowerment (Anand, Hu, Vidyarthi, & Liden, 2018). However, the complexity lies in comprehending the mechanisms through which LMX relationships contribute to creative problem-solving and the generation of novel ideas, as well as in cultivating and sustaining these relationships within the intricate context of software development. These high-quality Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) relationships, marked by trust and mutual respect between leaders and followers, have a positive impact on various employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and performance. In such relationships, employees tend to

seek feedback, which reduces uncertainty and ambiguity in creative performance (Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016). Additionally, ethical leadership, emphasizing moral and principled behaviors, has gained attention as a potential influencer of employee attitudes and behaviors(Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007). Ethical leaders uphold fairness, integrity, and transparency, setting an example for their subordinates and promoting a positive ethical climate within the organization(Sijbom et al., 2018).

Furthermore, employee feedback-seeking behavior is a pivotal aspect of fostering creativity within software companies. A culture that encourages employees to actively seek feedback, both from their peers and their superiors, and empowers them to express their opinions without fear of reprisal can be instrumental in driving innovation (Burris & Sohn, 2021). The challenge is to establish and nurture a feedback-seeking culture that is not only accepted but actively embraced throughout the organization. The willingness of employees to solicit feedback and act on it not only contributes to individual performance improvement but also augments the collective ability of the organization to adapt and innovate in response to industry challenges and opportunities (Chaubey, Sahoo & Das,2022). The challenge lies in understanding how to create an environment where feedback is not merely a formality but an integral part of the creative process, and how to ensure that feedback is consistently valued and acted upon.

In this context, our article aims to explore the intricate interplay of these factors within the unique landscape of the Pakistani software industry. By shedding light on how LMX and employee feedback-seeking behavior as mediating variables, this research aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences employee creative performance. We propose that ethical leadership positively influences LMX, fostering a high-quality exchange between leaders and employees. This positive LMX, in turn, is expected to promote employee feedback-seeking behavior, which involves seeking feedback and guidance to improve creative performance. Furthermore, we hypothesize that employee feedback-seeking behavior mediates the relationship between LMX and employee creative performance. Our research contributes to the understanding of how software companies in Pakistan can take proactive steps to nurture a culture of innovation. Through this exploration, we hope to provide valuable insights that will enable software companies in Pakistan to overcome these challenges and create environments that promote creativity and innovation, ensuring their continued success and relevance in the ever-evolving global software market.

Understanding the intricate relationships between ethical leadership, LMX, employee feedback-seeking behavior, and employee creative performance holds significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study contributes to the expanding body of literature on ethical leadership by exploring its impact on employee creativity. Additionally, by investigating the mediating roles of LMX and employee feedback-seeking behavior, it provides insights into the underlying processes and mechanisms involved in translating ethical leadership into enhanced creative performance. Practically, the findings of this study offer valuable guidance to organizational leaders and managers in nurturing a culture of creativity within their teams. Recognizing the pivotal role of ethical leadership, organizations can focus on developing and promoting ethical leaders who can inspire and engage employees to unleash their creative potential. Moreover, understanding the mediating role of LMX and employee feedback-seeking behavior provides actionable insights for organizations to foster supportive leader-subordinate relationships and encourage employees to actively seek feedback and support.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Ethical leadership and Employee Creative Performance

Leaders, whether operating at an individual or collective level, wield a considerable degree of influence over the actions and behaviors of their subordinates within the intricate context of an organization (Duan, Liu, & Che, 2018). This influence can manifest in both direct and indirect forms, affecting various facets of an organization's functioning. Within this complex organizational milieu, creativity emerges as a non-conventional yet pivotal driver of innovation, prompting leaders to place a heightened emphasis on its cultivation and sustenance (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Creativity, with its transformative potential, is a wellspring from which innovation flows, and therefore, leaders must be attentive to its nurturing and facilitation.

Ethical leadership, as a distinct leadership paradigm, is distinguished by its inclination to encourage employees to venture into calculated risks that conform to the established framework of organizational policies. This form of leadership plays an indispensable role in ensuring alignment with the overarching objectives of the corporation (Duan et al., 2018). By advocating for ethical behavior and decision-making, ethical leaders grant employees the perception of their leaders as reliable, principled, and virtuous (Hoyt, Price, & Poatsy, 2013). This perception not only builds trust but also steers employees towards the realization of the organization's strategic goals, concurrently fostering a positive and constructive mindset among the workforce (Afsar & Shahjehan, 2018).

Moreover, ethical leaders demonstrate a profound respect for the diverse perspectives and approaches brought forth by their team members. Their interactions are characterized by integrity, virtue, consideration, and fairness, thus creating an inclusive and nurturing work environment (Northouse, 2021). In this environment, individuals are encouraged to freely express their creative ideas and contribute their unique insights. The mutual synergy between creativity and ethical leadership is substantiated by a wealth of research, consistently illustrating a positive correlation between the two dimensions (Asif et al., 2020). Ethical leadership, by virtue of its ethical foundation and supportive ethos, fosters a fertile ground for creativity to flourish, ultimately benefiting both the employees and the organization as a whole.
H1: Ethical Leadership is positively correlated with employee creative performance.

LMX as mediator between ethical leadership and feedback-seeking behavior

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory posits that the quality of relationships between leaders and their followers can be categorized into two distinct groups based on the level of reinforcement, support, trust, and the nature of these relationships (Singh & Rukta, 2018). Within this framework, endo-group members typically form cohesive and trusting relationships with their leaders, while exo-group members tend to have more formal or limited interactions with their leaders (Singh & Rukta, 2018). One pivotal factor that contributes to the cultivation of high-quality relationships within these groups is the ethical disposition of the leader (Niemeyer & Cavazotte, 2016). Ethical leaders, through their consistent demonstration of ethical values and behaviors, engender a sense of trust and support among their followers, ultimately leading to stronger and more cohesive relationships.

Furthermore, ethical leadership, in its ability to foster high-quality relationships, has a significant impact on feedback-seeking behavior. Ethical leaders are more likely to elicit trust and openness among their followers, making it easier for employees to engage in constructive behaviors such as seeking feedback (Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Misati, 2017). Conversely, leaders who exhibit emotionally and socially distant behavior can discourage employees from

taking risks, as a lack of trust and open communication may deter employees from seeking feedback or expressing their concerns (Edmondson, 1999; Kim et al., 2020).

Studies have indicated that ethical leadership is conducive to employees' willingness to voice their concerns and seek feedback, which, in turn, nurtures employee creative performance (Chen and Hou, 2016). Therefore, it can be inferred that a stronger association between employees and ethical leaders is likely to result in more proactive feedback-seeking behavior and, consequently, enhanced employee creative performance. Ethical leaders create an environment where trust, open communication, and positive relationships flourish, ultimately driving employee engagement and innovative contributions.

H2: The leader-member exchange has mediating relationship between ethical leadership and feedback-seeking behavior.

2. Employee Feedback Seeking Behavior as mediator between ethical leadership and employee creative performance

Drawing on the foundational principles of social knowledge and interaction, a substantial body of research underscores the role of ethical leadership in stimulating followers' creativity through various mechanisms, including daily interactions, role modeling, and the reinforcement process (Asif et al., 2020; Chen & Hou, 2016; Gu et al., 2015; Li, Lu, & Eliason, 2021; Northouse, 2021). Ethical leaders, by virtue of their trustworthiness and honesty, actively promote values that empower their employees (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Shakeel, Kruyen, & Van Thiel, 2018). They inspire and encourage employees to take the initiative for positive change, often employing coaching and mentorship as a means to facilitate this development (Tseng & Levy, 2019).

Moreover, ethical leaders are instrumental in cultivating an ethical work environment that fosters employee growth and development (Lu & Lin, 2014). Within this environment, employees are more inclined to seek feedback, recognizing it as a valuable resource for personal and professional improvement (Moss, Song, Hannah, Wang, & Sumanth, 2020). This proactive feedback-seeking behavior, in turn, propels employees toward higher levels of work achievement and performance (Grimes, 2018). The impetus generated by such proactive efforts is closely associated with elevated forms of thinking, which are conducive to the generation of practical and novel creative ideas (Sung & Choi, 2021). Consequently, it follows that the presence of feedback-seeking behavior among employees serves as an essential mediator in the relationship between ethical leadership and enhanced creative performance (Chen & Hou, 2016). In essence, ethical leadership not only encourages creativity but also fuels it through the facilitation of feedback-seeking behavior, ultimately resulting in a richer and more innovative work environment. Based on the arguments raised above it can be proposed:
H3: Ethical leadership (EL) and employee creative performance (ECP) are mediated by FBSB

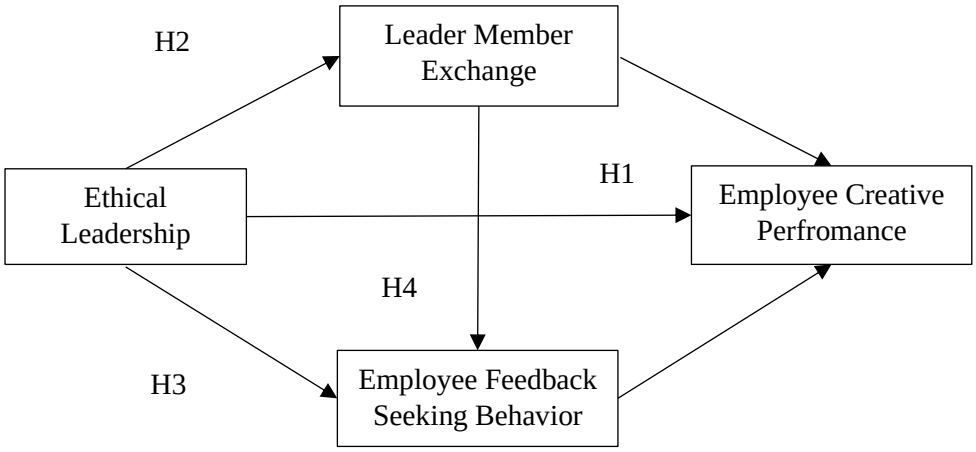
Serial Mediation of LMX and Employee Feedback-Seeking Behavior

Leaders play a dynamic and influential role in shaping the behaviors, critical thinking, and the overall organizational context within which employees operate (Eckardt et al., 2021). The leadership process is a multifaceted and intricate mechanism that links a leader's philosophies and behaviors to an individual's creative performance (Fischer, Dietz, & Antonakis, 2017; Hughes et al., 2018). Ethical leaders, in particular, exhibit a capacity to actively listen to their employees and respect diverse viewpoints, creating an inclusive and supportive environment that fosters creativity (Northouse, 2021). Furthermore, these ethical leaders create conditions

that nurture creative performance by valuing ethical considerations and ethical decision-making (Hughes et al., 2018; Ozsungur, 2019). Their understanding of employees' needs and their compassionate approach lead to the development of high-quality positive relationships between leaders and followers (Hassan, Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2013; Niemeyer & Cavazotte, 2016).

In the context of high-quality Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) relationships, employees are motivated to seek feedback as a means of meeting the expectations and requirements necessary to achieve excellence and distinction in their roles (Qian et al., 2017). This feedback-seeking behavior results in the acquisition of various novel ideas, information, and knowledge, which, in turn, can fuel creativity (Sijbom et al., 2018; Zhou, 2008). The synthesis of these elements suggests that ethical leadership sets the stage for high-quality LMX relationships, which, when combined with feedback-seeking behavior, become pivotal elements in the process of enhancing employee creative performance. Based on this literature, the current study proposes its final hypothesis, highlighting the intricate relationship between ethical leadership, LMX, feedback-seeking behavior, and employee creativity.

H4: Employee feedback-seeking behavior and leader-member interaction sequentially mediate between ethical leadership and employee creative performance.



The proposed model finds its foundation in the Social Exchange Theory, a valuable framework for comprehending how individuals interact within organizational settings. This theory posits that when leaders exemplify ethical behavior, they engender a sense of trust and reciprocity among their employees. In response to ethical leadership, employees often feel an obligation to reciprocate this positive treatment by investing extra effort, which, in turn, manifests as heightened levels of creative performance. Ethical leaders effectively establish a psychological contract with their employees, wherein the ethical treatment and support provided by the leader are reciprocated with increased commitment and superior performance. This concept aligns with the idea that employees are more inclined to channel their creative energies when they perceive their leaders as ethical and trustworthy.

Furthermore, ethical leadership contributes to the creation of positive and trust-based leader-follower relationships, which can, in turn, facilitate feedback-seeking behavior. In high-quality Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) relationships, employees are more likely to feel supported and valued by their leaders, thus encouraging them to actively seek feedback and engage in

constructive interactions. Therefore, ethical leadership not only directly influences employee behavior but also indirectly shapes the quality of leader-member relationships, subsequently affecting feedback-seeking behavior, all within the framework of social exchange. Additionally, When employees perceive their leaders as ethical and supportive, they are more inclined to engage in feedback-seeking behavior as a way to reciprocate the positive treatment they receive. As employees actively seek feedback, they gain valuable insights that contribute to their creative performance. In this way, feedback-seeking behavior acts as a mediating mechanism, connecting ethical leadership to enhanced employee creative performance through the principles of social exchange. As employees seek feedback and develop their creative performance, it further reinforces the positive leader-member interactions.

Research Design

Participants and Methodolgy

Data were gathered once, indicating with respect to time horizon; it is a cross-sectional study in nature (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Separate questionnaires were delivered randomly to each leaders and their relevant subordinates to rate each other with the intent to eliminate common method biases. (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Data collection was employed online, and through physical visits from leaders and employees of software generating companies of Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, Peshawar, and Quetta registered at Pakistan Software Export Board PSEB (2018). Primarily, two hundred and twenty-seven (227) IT companies (software houses) were contacted. After data screening, one hundred and sixty (160) software houses were left. One employer rated his two subordinates; in return, two subordinates rated their one leader with two responses separately. Three respondents formed two dyads, each comprising one leader and one subordinate. Finally, three hundred and twenty (320) dyads were generated.

Moreover, a commonly suggested sample size of 210 to 250 is deemed adequate for dyadic data (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2020; Shah & Goldstein, 2006). Since our sample size is three hundred and twenty (320) dyads, each dyad is a unit of analysis; it falls in the recommended category, therefore, good enough to proceed with further analysis. First of all, to find out the scale,s validity and internal consistency a pilot study was steered as recommended by Straub (1989). The validity of each item for their latent constructs was checked through a significant correlation at the 95% confidence interval level. A significant association at the 95% confidence level was used to evaluate each item's validity for its latent constructs.While the reliability of the scale was above 0.7, signifying the scale’s reliability (Johnson & Christensen, 2019).

Measures

Ethical Leadership

The measurement scale provided by Brown et al. (2005) was applied to calculate the validity of ethical leadership ranging from strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=7. Among the items provided as examples were “My boss inform me when I commit an error at work." At the same time, the internal consistency reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for this study’s measure was .968

Employee Feedback Seeking Behavior

A seven-item scale ranging from never=1 to very frequently=7 was put into use to assess feedback-seeking behaviour (inquiry mode), integrating four items from Ashford and Black (1996) along with three items testified by Williams and Johnson (2000). The list of items provided as examples included “How frequently did your followers approach you for your

opinion on their work"? The scale has reported a coefficient of reliability (Cronbach's α=0.935).

Leader-Member Exchange

Leader-Member Exchange variable from the perspective of employee was computed by means of seven items LMX-7. Items were categorized by several features of the working affiliation between leaders and employees, devised by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). All seven items presented five different response choices on five-point Likert scales that were suitable for an individual item, frequency (1=Rarely; 5=Very often), agreement (1=Strongly disagree; 5= Strongly agree), quantity (1=None; 5= Very high / 1=Not a bit; 5=A great deal), intensity (1=Not at All; 5=Fully), affectivity (1=Extremely Ineffective; 5= Extremely Effective). One of its items was "What is the level of recognition by your leader about your potential?" The scale has testified to a coefficient of reliability (Cronbach's α=0.976).

Employee Creative Performance

The level of ECP was assessed using a scale devised by George and Zhou (2001). The rating scale employed in the study spanned from 1 (strong disagreement) to 7 (high agreement). Examples included the following: "My staff members are a terrific source of original ideas". Cronbach's alpha analysis revealed a high level of internal consistency reliability, with a coefficient of .977.

Participants Demographics

By examining the respondent (employer) demographics Table.1. reveals that the sample is comprised of 271 males (84%) and 49 females (16%). Whereas 246 (77.9%) of respondents lie between 31-36 years of age. Accordingly, the qualification of most of the total sample size, 280 participants (90.6%) were in the age range of fourteen to eighteen years. The majority of the 274 responders (85.6%) have experience ranging from one to ten years. Although the respondents' (employees') demographics show that the sample is made up primarily of male employees (81.3%) and 60 female employees (18.8%). With a total of 182 participants, the majority of responders (56.9%) were between the ages of 21 and 25. The largest group of respondents (163 or 50.9%) held a bachelor's degree. Accordingly, 283 (82.8%) of the respondents had experience ranging from 1 to 10 years.

Pearson Correlation Coefficient

Table-2 demonstrates the findings of Descriptive along with Correlational statistics

Table. 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficient

	Mean	**Std.Dev**	**EL**	**EFBSB**	**LMX**	**ECP**
EL	3.9279	.93192	1			
EFBSB	3.9732	.80431	.689**	1		
LMX	4.6786	.70396	.732**	.723**	1	
ECP	4.9627	.93030	.837**	.757**	.770**	1

Significant positive correlations were observed among EL, EFBSB, LMX, and ECP, as evidenced by correlation coefficients of r=.689, 0.01, r=.732, <0.01, and r=.837, <0.01.The evidence depicts that EL causes an increase in LMX, EFBSB, and ECP. Likewise, employee feedback-seeking behavior (EFBSB) hold a significant and positive correlation with LMX (r =.723, <0.01) and ECP (r =.757, <0.01). This predicts that increase by one unit in EFBSB result in a positive improvement in LMX and ECP. Also, LMX has a positive association with ECP as their coefficient of correlation is (r =.770, <0.01). Decisively, Table.2 shows a strong

correlation between the analysed variables, making it ideal for the model's selection and prediction.

Measurement Model Analysis

To confirm the validity of the theoretical measurement model derived from the literature, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was utilized (Collier, 2020; Kline, 2013). The Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) statistical method was carried out, to estimate the goodness of fit between the observed data and the model predictions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). All loaded factors'items were over 0.7, signifying that all loaded observed variables accurately reflect their pertinent constructs (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). To get model Fitness Index, three redundant pairs of items with Modification Indices (MI) values of more than 30 were set as "free parameter estimates" (Collier, 2020).

To analyze and interpret the measurement model's values and compare these values with their threshold AMOS plugin has been used. These values were computed using the Chi-square (CMIN), TLI, CFI, RMSEA, IFI, and SRMR (Collier, 2020; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015; Hu & Bentler, 1999). TLI, CFI, and IFI requirements should all be higher than 0.90 (Byrne, 2013). The SRMR value should be lower than 0.05, while it is recommended that the RMSEA value should not exceed 0.08 (Kline, 2015). Table.6 elaborates the competing threshold for CFA, Chi-Sqr/df (2.500), CFI (.918), TLI (.914), IFI (.918), RMSEA (.069), and SRMR (.0298). Resultantly, this model was thought to be suitable for examining the study's intended hypothesis in more detail.

Reliability and Validity

The data's reliability and validity were checked using one of the AMOS 24 plugins (Gaskin & Lim, 2018). Table.3 demonstrates thresholds of composite reliability that are used for scale reliability (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). The thresholds for composite reliability (CR) should above 0.7 as per criteria presented by Henseler et al. (2015). All the acquired values of composite reliability of research variables are above 0.7, such as composite reliability values for ECP, EL, LMX, and EFBSB are 0.978, 0.969, 0.975, and 0.936, respectively, demonstrating the adapted scales' accuracy.

The table 3 shows that values of CR are greater than AVE, predicting no concern of convergent validity; thus, equipped with this pertinent information, we can move forward. As per recommended criterion of Fornell and Larcker's (1981) the value of Maximum Shared Variance (MSV), must not be greater than the value of AVE (Hamid, Sami, & Mohmad Sidek, 2017). According to Table.3, all construct values are lower than AVE values, like MSV for ECP (0.716), EL (0.716), LMX (0.613), and EFBSB (0.622) are as follows. Each construct's diagonal values (italicised and bold) are the √AVE having larger values than their parallel rows and columns' off-diagonal values which is correlation among study variables. This condition regarding discriminant validity is satisfied (Collier, 2020); therefore, the constructs understudy have discriminant validity that enables us to proceed further with analysis.

	CR	**A_{vg}.VE**	**M_{xm}.SV**	**MaxR(H)**	**ECP**	**EL**	**LMX**	**EFBSB**
ECP	0.978	0.773	0.716	0.980	**0.879**			
EL	0.969	0.760	0.716	0.970	0.846***	**0.872**		
LMX	0.975	0.847	0.613	0.976	0.783***	0.748***	**0.920**	

EFBSB	0.936	0.676	0.622	0.937	0.789	0.717	0.753	**0.822**

Table. 3. Model Reliabilty &Validity Matrices

Model Fitness Measures of Alternative Model (AM) and Measurement Models(MM)

Table.4 explicated the model fit indices for the measurement model, wherein CMIN/DF is between 1 and 5, CFI, TLI, and IFI have values higher than 0.90, along with measures of RMSEA which is less than 0.08; The hypothesized study model is a perfect fit as compared to default model as this fit the observed data as well as all the thresholds were met with their set criteria (Byrne, 2013; Henseler et al., 2015; Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008).

Alternative models were also evaluated by combining different factors of the study. Three more models were proposed like, a three-factors model, a two-factors model, and one with one-factor model. The factors LMX and EFBSB were retained as two independent factors while the variables ECP and EL were combined into one component. Further, a two-factor model that aggregated the EL and ECP' observed variables into a single latent variable and the LMX and EFBSB items into a single construct was executed. By combining all factors into a single variable, another one-factor model was also run. Table.4 exhibits that the alternative model fit indicators are not good enough originally than the proposed model model fit indicators. In comparison to 3-factor, 2-factor, and single-factor models, the proposed model was good, according to all four fitness measures of the CMIN, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA in the table.

Table.4. MM & AM

Model	Group of Factors	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	IFI	RMSEA
Model.1 (MM)	4-Factors: EL,EFBSB,LMX,ECP	3.146	.908	.914	.908	.078
Model.2 (AM)	3-Factors: EFBSB, LMX kept separately while combining EL, ECP into one factor	2.99	.898	.900	.902	.076
Model.3 (AM)	2-Factors: EL, ECP were merged into one, while merging EFBSB, LMX into another factor	2.86	.910	.889	.911	.075
Model.4 (AM)	1-Factor: EL, ECP, LMX, EFBSB combined into one factor	2.98	.908	.887	.907	.072

Note: EL (Ethical Leadership); **LMX** (Leader-Member-Exchange); **EFBSB** (Employee Feedback Seeking Behavior); **ECP** (Employee Creative Performance).

Common Method Variance Assessment

The most recommended Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) technique has been employed to compute the common method biases with a recommended criteria having a value not less than .85 (Henseler et al., 2015). Since the estimated value of each variable is within the suggested threshold value, Table.5's data analysis demonstrates that the study's participants answered the questionnaire honestly. Resultantly, discriminant validity is established once more, as there are no warning issues for this HTMT analysis.

Table.5. Hetrotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio Analysis

	EL	EFBSB	LMX	ECP
EL	1			
EFBSB	.723	1		
LMX	.753	.757	1	
ECP	.801	.792	.788	1

Structural Model

Statistics on model fitness are shown in Table 6.The values of CMIN/DF for common factor analysis also known as MM and structural model (SM) are 3.146 and 2.729, respectively. While statistical values of CFI for CFA and SM are as follows 0.914 and 0.927. Whereas statistical values of TLI for CFA and SM correspondingly are 0.908 0.932. As well as IFI for CFA (.914) and SM (.933) and RMSEA by (Hooper et al., 2008) for CFA (.078) and SM (.074) got acquired the mandatory threshold. At the same time, the value of SRMR of MM (.0295) and SM (.0287) lies within the range. Hence this model is deemed to be suitable for investigating hypothesized relationships among study variables.

Figure.2. Structural Model

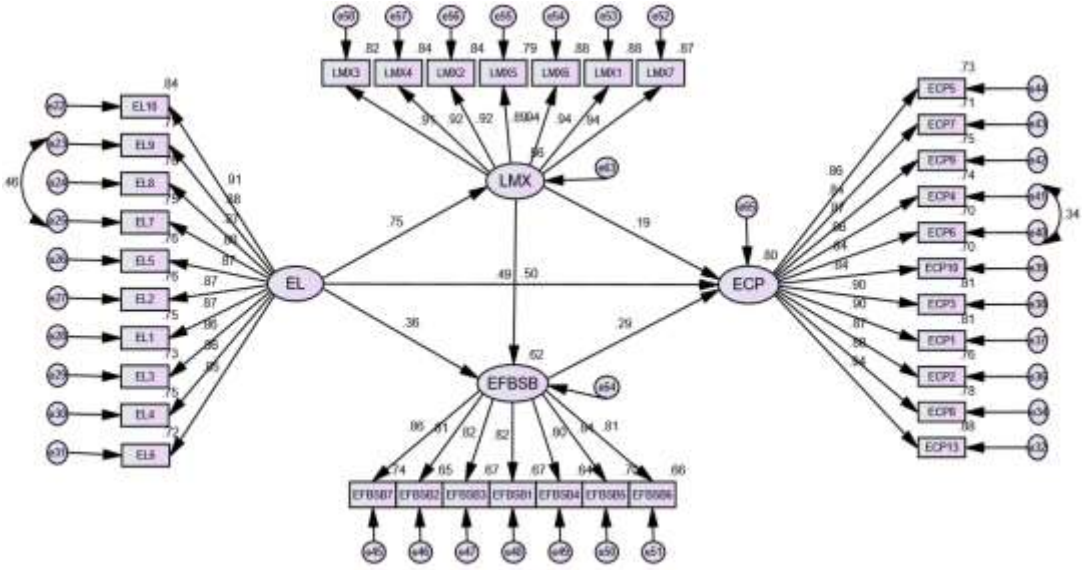


Table.6. Model Fitness Indices for both MM &SM

	CMIN/DF(≤5.0)	CFI (≥ 0.9)	TLI (≥ 0.9)	IFI (≥ 0.9)	RMSEA (≤0.08)	SRMR
Measurement Model(CFA)	3.146	.914	.908	.914	.078	.029
Structural Model (SM)	2.729	.927	.932	.933	.074	.028

Hypothesis Testing and Mediation Analysis

The results shows that EL is certainly associated with ECP as β=.495, at p< .01, consequently the H1 is sustained. The out put of mediation analysis revealed the indirect influence of EL on ECP by way of LMX was ascertained to be positive (β =0.246, t=13.74,

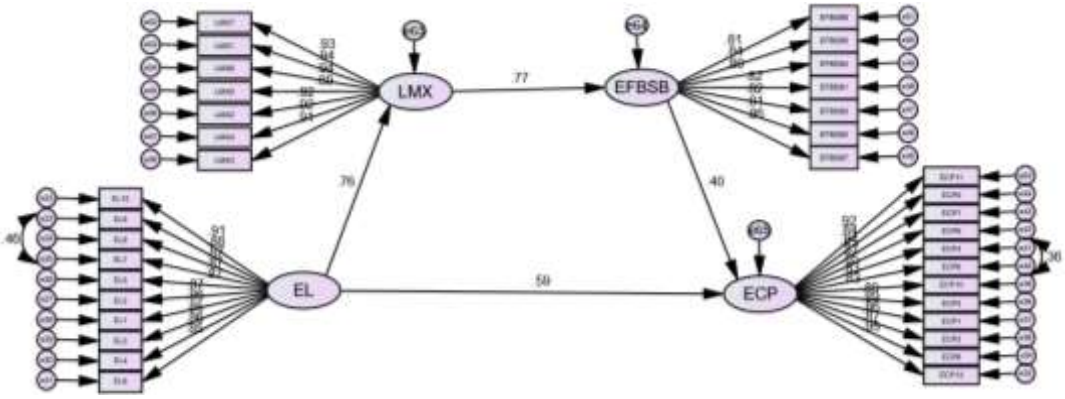
p=0.01). Also, with our indirect test of EL on ECP, the lower bound (LB) at a 95% confidence interval (CI) level is 0.162, and the upper bound (UP) is 0.331. Since there is no zero between the LB and UB CI, this shows significant indirect effects, supporting H2. Furthermore, the direct effect of EL on ECP in the mediator LMX's presence was also found to be significant (β =0.591, p=0.001). Since both the p-values of unstandardized indirect and direct effects are significant, LMX is partially mediated between EL and ECP. The summary of the mediation analysis is revealed in Table.8

Table.8. Mediation Analysis

Path	DβWith Med	IβWith Med	Confidence Interval		P-value	Parameter
EL-> LMX-> ECP			L Bound	U Bound		Partial Mediation
	0.591***(0.001)	0.246	0.162	0.331	.001	
EL-> EFBSB-> ECP	0.574***(0.001)	0.262	0.170	0.394	.001	Partial Mediation

The study assessed the mediating position of Employee Feedback Seeking Behavior (EFBSB) in the interaction between EL & ECP. The outcomes of the mediating analysis revealed that the indirect effect of EL on ECP through EFBSB was assessed to be positive (β =0.262, t=9.74, p=0.01). Also, with our indirect test of EL on ECP, the lower bound (LB) at the 95% confidence interval (CI) level is 0.170, and the upper bound (UB) is 0.394. Since there is no zero between the LB and UB CI, this shows significant indirect effects, supporting H3. Furthermore, the direct impact of EL on ECP in the presence of EFBSB as a mediator was also found to be significant (β=0.575, p=0.001). Since both the p-values of unstandardized indirect effect and direct effect are significant hence, EFBSB is partially mediated between ethical leadership (EL) and ECP. The results of analyzing the mediation is exhibited in Table-8.

Figure.3. Serial Mediation



The indirect effect of EL on ECP through LMX & EFBSB was positive (β =0.217, t=12.08, p=0.01). Also, with our indirect test of EL on ECP, the lower bound (LB) at the 95% confidence interval (CI) level is 0.137, and the upper bound (UB) is 0.326. Having no zero between the LB and UB CI, demonstrates significant indirect effects, hence, supporting H4. Furthermore, the direct effect of EL on ECP in the presence of mediator LMX & EFBSB was also found to be significant (β =0.592, p=0.001). Since both the p-values of unstandardized indirect effect and direct effect are significant hence, LMX & EFBSB have serial partial mediation between EL and ECP. The summary of the serial mediation analysis is presented in Table.9.

Path	DβWith Med	IβWith Med	Confidence Interval		P-value	Parameter
EL-> LMX-> EFBSB-> ECP			LB	UB		
	0.592***	0.217	0.137	0.326	.001	
	(0.001)					Partial Mediation

Table.9. Serial Mediation Results

Discussion and Conclusion

Employees have a significant place among crucial stakeholders. Employees' perceptions about their leader's demeanour hold a good or negative impact on their conduct, thus making this research of creativity in connection to employees a critical one (Javed, Iqbal, Iqbal, & Imran, 2021). Employees generate new ideas and perform well when they feel psychologically safe and without hesitation and fear of their supervisor (Eckardt et al., 2021). As stated by Zhao, Xu, and Pang (2022) that highly creative individuals may choose immoral means while seeking solutions to creative tasks. Therefore this study emphasizes that there is a need for an ethical leader who provides psychological protection and keeps them away from malpractices while generating creative ideas.

The findings suggest that leaders may create either direct or indirect influence and increase or decrease the quality of creative performance (Gong et al., 2018). Evidence suggests that in promoting creative performance of employee ethical leadership is a critical factor (Asif et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). The outcomes of this research are congruent with the concept that an ethical leader encourages employees to take the chance, listens to their suggestions, do not undermine the resultantly, the employee infers impulsive notions and anticipates psychological security in return. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research divulge that having a perception about leader to be ethical employees' tendency to seek feedback is amplified as ethical leadership has a direct relation with feedback-seeking behavior (Qian et al., 2017). As the study findings of Lam et al. (2017) and Sijbom et al. (2018) propounded that feedback-seeking behavior and employee creative performance has a strong association with each other. Based on these intriguing findings, it is asserted that the affiliation between ethical leaders and feedback-seeking behavior is raised if LMX lies among them; for this purpose, leaders must maintain a good-quality relationship with their employees (Qian et al., 2017). The current study's outcomes also confer to the body of literature on LMX that, high quality of LMX stimulates creative performance (Han & Bai, 2020; He et al., 2021).

The study findings highlight that factors, employee feedback-seeking behavior and leader-member exchange hold partial mediating impact on ethical leadership and creative performance. However, the proposed mechanism (EL-LMX-EFBSB-ECP) has rarely been investigated in the past (Hughes et al., 2018; Ozsungur, 2019). Hence, employee feedback-

seeking behavior (FBSB) and LMX relationship play the role of serial mediators among ethical leadership (EL) and creative employee performance (ECP). The direct relation is proven to be associated with creative performances; hence, this study is supported empirically by previous studies (Abbas, Rafi, Dost, & Ali, 2021; Bedi, Alpaslan, & Green, 2015; Gong et al., 2018; Mertens, Schollaert, & Anseel, 2021). This research underscores the intricate web of relationships within the context of ethical leadership, feedback-seeking behavior, and creative performance, providing a valuable contribution to the existing literature and offering practical insights for organizations seeking to cultivate creativity and innovation among their employees.

Practical Implications

Ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in catalyzing the enhancement of employee creative performance within the Pakistan software industry. Given the inherent demand for innovative solutions in software development, ethical leadership serves as a potent catalyst for nurturing a culture of trust, transparency, and accountability. To capitalize on this potential, software organizations should make strategic investments in leadership development programs that place a strong emphasis on cultivating ethical leadership qualities. By nurturing leaders who consistently exhibit ethical behavior, such as fairness, honesty, and transparency, organizations can foster a work environment where employees feel empowered to explore and implement creative ideas. This, in turn, not only elevates the quality of software development but also contributes to the cultivation of a positive organizational culture and heightened levels of employee morale.

Furthermore, within the software industry, where teamwork and collaboration are of paramount importance, the cultivation of high-quality leader-member exchange (LMX) is imperative. Software development frequently involves intricate projects that necessitate effective communication and collaboration. To foster a culture of feedback-seeking behavior among employees, organizations must prioritize the cultivation of robust LMX relationships. Leadership development programs should be strategically geared toward equipping leaders with the requisite skills to build trust, provide unwavering support, and communicate openly with their teams. This approach is instrumental in facilitating feedback-seeking behavior, resulting in more effective problem-solving, superior software solutions, and heightened employee engagement.

In addition, the utilization of ethical leadership as a catalyst for driving employee creative performance hinges upon the recognition of feedback-seeking behavior (FBSB) as a pivotal factor. Organizations should be proactive in nurturing a culture that actively encourages the exchange of feedback and empowers employees to seek and provide it. Ethical leadership should serve as a foundational pillar of this cultural ethos, as leaders who adhere to ethical principles are more likely to inspire trust and create an environment conducive to feedback exchange. Leadership development programs within the software industry should center around the cultivation of ethical leadership qualities and the promotion of feedback-seeking behaviors. This approach not only nurtures an environment primed for creativity and innovation but also leads to the development of improved software solutions and elevated job satisfaction levels.

In the specific context of Pakistan's software industry, acknowledging the dynamic interplay between ethical leadership, feedback-seeking behavior, and leader-member interaction is imperative. To fully harness the cascading effects of ethical leadership on creative performance, organizations must actively foster a culture where these variables are nurtured

in unison. Leadership development programs should assign top priority to ethical leadership and the cultivation of high-quality leader-member relationships. Leaders should be encouraged to actively engage with their teams, creating an atmosphere characterized by trust and open communication. The emphasis on feedback-seeking behavior should form a central facet of this approach. By recognizing and proactively acting upon this interplay, organizations are well-positioned to enhance the quality of software development, spur innovation, and maintain a highly motivated and productive workforce.

Limitations and Future Directions

It is indispensable to redefine the concept of creative performance as a continual mechanism from incremental adaptation to fundamental breakthroughs. Due to this fact, the ambition of many scholars has been to accentuate creative performance; its research and development in manufacturing and service sector concern (Sijbom et al., 2018). Thereby, todays' era of competitive environment companies creative workers should go from industries other than the software industry to the field of agricultural technology for generalizing the findings of current research in other fields as well.

Due to the hindrance of collecting data at the team and managerial levels, the central theme of the current study has been on creative performance at the individual level only. To this end, this research can prove to be future research at the multi-level by considering the same predictor or some other variables as key situational factors affecting the team and organizational levels. This study brings new opportunities for researchers to probe into various factors to improve ethical leadership effectiveness. Because this factor has been ignored in the past, demanding further need for its exploration (Jaiswal & Dhar, 2015; Sarooghi et al., 2015). Consequently, to generate perfect association between ethical leadership and creative performance, future research should be anticipated its multidimensional structure along with exploring the effects of each dimension individually. For subsequent research, some other factors must be exploited in the hypothetical model in order to explicate the process of creative performance in a comprehensive way to assess whether there arises divergent outcomes.

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