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Article

Coaching Ethical Values: An Empirical Investigation in Mentoring Dyads of the Relation Between Engaging Leadership and Ethical Organizational Values

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Abstract: This study explores the association between engaging leadership and the strength of an ethical organizational culture (EOC) in leader–follower mentoring dyads. In particular, we use an Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation model to test in a sample of 20 dyads the mediating role of relational variables (psychological safety, distrust, organizational identification and knowledge sharing) as reported by the mentees in the relation between engaging leadership and EOC. Our research shows that mentor–mentee perceptions of engaging leadership are positively correlated. Engaging leadership as reported by mentees was negatively related to distrust and positively to psychological safety, knowledge-sharing and organizational identification. Furthermore, engaging leadership as reported by mentors significantly reduced distrust and increased the strength of EOC, as reported by mentees and mentors. Although knowledge sharing strengthened the EOC, none of the indirect effects of empowering leadership on EOC were significant. The results underscore the importance of engaging leadership in strengthening trust, psychological safety and organizational identification, while highlighting the role of dyadic relationships in promoting a strong EOC.

Keywords: engaging leadership; ethical organizational culture; knowledge sharing; distrust; psychological safety



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1. Introduction

In today's organizational landscapes centered on trust and ethics, leadership is increasingly seen as a critical factor in fostering a strong ethical organizational culture (EOC, Roy et al., 2024). Engaging leadership provides a relational framework aimed at fulfilling fundamental psychological needs such as connecting, empowering, strengthening and inspiring (W. B. Schaufeli, 2015). Within this context, mentoring programs involving leaders and their followers are increasingly used as a strategic tool to strengthen interpersonal relationships (Ivey & Dupré, 2022; Grocutt et al., 2022) and promote ethical standards in organizations. Because ethical values are shaped by interactions between leaders and employees (Kaptein, 2011, 2015; Abuzaid et al., 2024), it becomes important to understand how this interplay unfolds in leader–follower dyads. Although the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical culture has been extensively researched (Huhtala et al., 2013; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Abuzaid et al., 2024; Argyropoulou & Lintzerakou, 2025), it remains unclear how other forms of leadership shape the emergence of a strong EOC (Roy et al., 2024). Leader–follower dyads are relational contexts that shape perceptions of work practices and facilitate the transfer of resources, including knowledge and social support

(Kim et al., 2020; Leroy et al., 2015; Tepper et al., 2018). Coaching behaviors are one of the key relational vehicles (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024a) that fosters the effective transfer of resources between leaders and followers, and explains how shared perceptions of work-related variables emerge and develops in such leader–follower dyads (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024b; Kim et al., 2020). Given the relevance of leader–follower interactions, modern organizations implement mentoring programs as formal ways to reinforce coaching in such leader–follower dyads. Because simple organizational interventions aimed at increasing the strength of EOC are not particularly effective (Blom & Curseu, 2024), more empirical explorations into the relational mechanisms related to the emergence of EOC are needed. In particular, the literature to date has not explored how relational mechanisms emerging in leader–follower dyads, such as psychological safety, knowledge-sharing, distrust and organizational identification, influence the emergence of EOC perceptions in these dyads. We collected data from a mentoring program implemented in a large organization in which mentor–mentee dyads were formed to address career challenges and dilemmas. In these dyads, we use Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation modeling (APIM) to explore the way in which these relational mechanisms explain the interplay between (shared) perceptions of engaging leadership and EOC. Our article presents one of the first empirical attempts to examine the role of shared perceptions of engaging leadership emerging in mentoring programs implemented in leader–follower dyads. The paper thus uses a novel methodological approach by exploring the interplay of engaging leadership and EOC in mentoring dyads, and highlights the unique role of mentoring programs in fostering the strength of EOC. By unraveling the mechanisms by which engaging leadership contributes to EOC, this article provides organizations with concrete starting points for designing interventions aimed at strengthening ethical norms. Our study also highlights the need for a more relational perspective in the exploration of how leadership shapes EOC, and we answer the call for more research to expand insights beyond ethical leadership and explore how other leadership styles (i.e., engaging) impact the emergence of EOC (Roy et al., 2024).

2. Theoretical Framework

Engaging leadership has its origins in Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000), stating that the key psychological needs for growth and well-being are autonomy, competence and connectedness. In the context of assessing engaging leadership as a source of work engagement, an additional dimension was included, namely, empowering or facilitating employees to perform their tasks and roles (Rahmadani et al., 2019). As such, engaging leadership evaluates four components tied to work engagement: strengthening, connecting, empowering (facilitating) and inspiring (W. B. Schaufeli, 2015; Van Tuin et al., 2021). Engaging leadership is therefore a relationship-oriented leadership style that emphasizes developing and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships between leaders and their followers (W. Schaufeli, 2021). There is a substantial body of evidence that the relationship between leaders and followers is not one-sided, but rather a dynamic and reciprocal process (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024a, 2024b; Kim et al., 2020; Leroy et al., 2015; Tepper et al., 2018). Followers can help shape leadership behaviors, while leaders in turn influence the behavior and attitudes of followers (Tepper et al., 2018). Through coaching, leaders can elevate the resilience of their followers (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024a), and authentic leaders can foster proactive behavior within their group (Leroy et al., 2015), while shared negative work experiences in leader follower–dyads increase the intention to leave the organization (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024b). Leader–follower interactions unfold in a cyclical and reciprocally reinforcing manner, such that followers, by mimicking the behaviors of their leaders, create a work environment that reinforces similar behaviors in their leaders (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024a, 2024b). Such reinforcing interactions in leader–follower dyads

highlight the complex and interdependent nature of leadership dynamics, and call for a dyadic analysis of leader–follower dyads in contemporary organizations (Güntner et al., 2020; Santarpia et al., 2025).

Mentoring programs within organizations facilitate not only the formal allocation of resources, but also create a formal communication environment in which the leader–follower interactions are fostered in order to facilitate career development for employees and increase their commitment to the organization (Johnson et al., 2023; Ivey & Dupré, 2022; Grocutt et al., 2022). At the same time, mentoring programs in which leaders coach followers create a formal platform on which the four dimensions of engaging leadership (strengthening, connecting, empowering and inspiring) become salient and can be effectively implemented. We argue that organizational mentoring programs are vehicles that harmonize leader–follower interactions, and we set out to examine the relational mechanisms that explain these functions in mentoring relationships as antecedents of ethical organizational culture in organizations.

Engaging leadership is primarily a relational construct, as it is focused on fostering connectedness and building a sense of emotional commitment, dedication and focus on mutual well-being (W. B. Schaufeli, 2015; W. Schaufeli, 2021; Van Tuin et al., 2021). Engaging leadership therefore plays a crucial role in strengthening ethical organizational culture by facilitating strong and authentic interpersonal relationships at work (Roy et al., 2024). As coaching is one of the key mechanisms that explains the contagion effects in leader–follower dyads (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024a), in the context of mentoring programs, we thus expect that in leader–follower dyads, perceptions of engaging leadership will be shared and will strengthen the ethical organizational culture.

Ethical organizational culture (EOC) refers to shared beliefs and values concerning what is acceptable and not acceptable organizational behavior from an ethical standpoint (Kaptein, 2011; Roy et al., 2024). In terms of assessment, the Corporate Ethical Virtues Models (Kaptein, 2008) assess EOC as a set of beliefs shared by employees that the organization creates the necessary conditions for ethical behaviors and conduct to emerge (DeBode et al., 2013; Manole et al., 2024). The CEV (Kaptein, 2008, 2011) describes eight dimensions of an EOC, including clarity, exemplary behavior, feasibility, supportability, sanctionability, discussability, congruency with management and supervisors, as well as transparency. Collectively, these eight dimensions provide a framework for assessing the strength of an ethical organizational culture (DeBode et al., 2013; Blom & Curseu, 2024; Roy et al., 2024). Engaging leadership can significantly strengthen the EOC by demonstrating consistent ethical behavior and creating a work environment in which ethical standards are clearly communicated and adhered to. Kaptein's research (Kaptein, 2008, 2011) shows that a strong ethical culture is characterized not only by the presence of ethical standards, but also by the extent to which these standards are modeled by leaders, and as such understood and accepted by employees. In mentor–mentee relationships, the mentor provides an important role model that can reinforce these norms (Roy et al., 2024), leading to increased perception of the strength of the EOC by both mentors and mentees. Mentoring provides a unique setting in which leaders can engage in coaching behaviors (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024a) and their model becomes salient, especially with respect to ethical conduct (Kaptein, 2011); therefore, we expect that such mentoring programs will ultimately lead to a greater perceived congruency between ethical norms and ethical behavior displayed by management. We thus expect that in mentoring dyads, the mentor and mentee perceptions of engaging leadership as well as the strength of the EOC tend to converge. We therefore hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1. *Engaging leadership perceived by mentors and mentees in a mentoring dyad are positively correlated (dyadic interdependence of engaging leadership perceptions).*

Hypothesis 2. *The strengths of EOC perceived by mentors and mentees in a mentoring dyad are positively correlated (dyadic interdependence of EOC).*

One of the relational mechanisms of engaging leadership is empowering employees, which is directly related to promoting their work engagement. W. Schaufeli (2021) states that an engaging leader is able to recognize employees' competencies and increase their self-confidence through positive feedback and appreciation. In a mentoring program, the mentor provides a context in which the mentee can recognize his or her strengths, which contributes to increasing the sense of personal effectiveness and promoting intrinsic motivation. The recognition of competence not only contributes to the psychological safety of the mentee, but also supports the process of professional development, as the mentee dares to voice his or her opinions and challenge his or her perspectives in order to focus on personal improvement (A. C. Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2017; Fatoki, 2024). This reinforcement mechanism creates a positive feedback loop, helping the mentee to feel valued, empowered and accepted, and strengthening their motivation to contribute to the organization as well as their compliance to the ethical norms and prescriptions. In a mentoring program, a mentor can encourage a mentee to proactively take responsibility for work and their own development, increasing their sense of control and autonomy. This empowerment mechanism not only strengthens the mentee's commitment to the organization, but also promotes the development of a strong EOC. W. Schaufeli (2021) emphasizes that employees who feel empowered exhibit more intrinsic motivation, and are therefore more engaged in their work and more committed to the organizational values, including the ethical norms and values. Empowerment therefore, brings both personal and organizational benefits, as it enhances employee effectiveness and the strength of EOC. We therefore hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3. *Engaging leadership perceived by mentors and mentees in a mentoring dyad is positively correlated with the strength of EOC reported by the mentors and mentees.*

Employees perceive their work as meaningful when they perceive that their efforts contribute to a greater whole beyond their own individual existence. When employees feel that their efforts actually make a difference, perceptions of meaningfulness in work emerge. Meaningfulness appears to be particularly prominent in the public sector, where professionals such as teachers and healthcare providers are strongly driven by the pursuit of meaningful contributions to society (Mostafa & Abed El-Motalib, 2020). Within Self-Determination Theory (SDT), meaningfulness is usually considered a precondition for fulfilling the need for autonomy. Indeed, complete autonomy implies that choices and actions are in line with one's personal values and beliefs. Engaging leaders can support the need for meaning by enthusing employees about a collective vision, mission or goal (empowerment). Moreover, they can recognize and relate individuals' personal contributions to the broader organizational interest, making employees feel valued and connected to the overarching purpose (W. Schaufeli, 2021; Van Tuin et al., 2021). This implies a deep understanding of both the weaknesses and the strengths of each individual, with leaders encouraging them to reach their full potential in a way that is most effective for them (Lin et al., 2020).

Engaging leadership plays a crucial role in promoting psychological safety (Blom & Curseu, 2024; A. C. Edmondson & Bransby, 2023), as leaders who provide support, are open to feedback and promote transparency create such an environment wherein individuals

can freely express ideas and concerns without fear of negative consequences. Psychological safety enhances team learning and performance, and is a critical factor in the success of organizations (A. Edmondson, 1999; A. C. Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Fatoki, 2024). Through repeated interactions and shared experiences, individuals develop a solid foundation of psychological safety. An environment in which employees do experience significant interpersonal risks or differences breeds distrust that undermines collaboration and reduces the effectiveness of teams (Lewicki et al., 1998). Engaging leadership, characterized by empathy, ethical behavior and authentic communication, reduces distrust by promoting relational transparency and mutual respect (Eva et al., 2020). This is consistent with theoretical frameworks that view trust as a key element in engaging leadership (Rahmadani et al., 2019). By creating a supportive and equitable environment, engaging leaders help employees work through the distrust that is inherent to interpersonal interactions (Schrujer & Curseu, 2021) and by mitigating distrust, they promote harmonious interpersonal relations and foster psychological safety.

Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), engaging leadership fulfills employees' basic needs for autonomy, competence and connectedness, which contributes to reducing distrust and increasing positive work-related outcomes, such as organizational identification and knowledge sharing. Engaging leaders create conditions that facilitate employees' social attachment, they boost their feeling of belonging to a larger social whole that is captured by social identification. Ashforth and Mael (1989) described organizational identification as part of generic social identification tendencies, and such conceptualization suggests that organizational identification can be assessed as the perceived cognitive closeness between an individual and the organization (Shamir & Kark, 2004; Cremers & Curseu, 2024; Tucaliuc et al., 2023). Engaging leaders create a culture of openness, where employees feel valued and empowered to share ideas and information without fear of negative repercussions. Employees are more likely to share knowledge and collaborate when they perceive their leaders as supportive and trustworthy (Carmeli et al., 2009; Santiago-Torner et al., 2024). Thus, engaging leadership fulfills employees' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and connectedness, which, according to SDT, are essential for strengthening organizational identification. By prioritizing employee well-being and aligning individual goals with organizational values, engaging leaders increase employees' emotional attachment to the organization (W. B. Schaufeli, 2015; W. Schaufeli, 2021; Van Tuin et al., 2021).

We therefore argue that engaging leadership, as experienced in mentor–mentee dyads, has a negative relationship with distrust and a positive relationship with psychological safety, knowledge-sharing and organizational identification, as reported by mentees. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. *Engaging leadership perceived by mentors and mentees in a mentor dyad is negatively associated with distrust (a) and positively associated with (b) psychological safety in relation to leaders, (c) knowledge sharing, and (d) organizational identification, as reported by mentees.*

Encouraging autonomy and competence, in addition to an elevated sense of belonging, increase work engagement (W. Schaufeli, 2021), defined as a state of mind in which employees are focused and absorbed in their work. Employee engagement is expected to reduce the likelihood of unethical behaviors (Kaptein, 2011; Cabana & Kaptein, 2021) and we explain this effect through the fulfilment of fundamental needs that increases employee attachment to the organization, as they experience pride and personal connection to the organizational context. Engaging leadership is therefore expected to foster social identification (W. Schaufeli, 2021), as it reduces the perceived cognitive distance between employees

and the organization. When employees are empowered to act, they are likely to perceive a greater overlap between self-perception and the organization or organizational unit to which he or she belongs (Shamir & Kark, 2004). Previous research reported a positive association between organizational identification and the strength of EOC (Manole et al., 2024); therefore, in line with the closeness arguments presented above, we expect that engaging leadership fosters organizational identification that in turn strengthens the EOC.

Engaging leaders effectively delegate responsibilities to their employees, which contributes to an increased sense of competence in effectively achieving their tasks (they are strengthening employees perceived competences). At the same time, these leaders facilitate openness and encourage employees to discuss ethical dilemmas and sensitive issues as they arise (W. B. Schaufeli, 2015). Engaging leaders are also sources of inspiration and role models by demonstrating ethical behavior that reinforces congruence between employees and management (Rahmadani et al., 2019). This is critical for fostering a shared moral compass within the organization, making it an important dimension of EOC. In addition, engaging leaders promote building strong interpersonal relationships within their teams, which not only strengthen cohesion within the group, but also create conditions for open communication on ethical issues. This dynamic creates a culture of transparency in which employees feel free to express ethical concerns and dilemmas (W. Schaufeli, 2021).

Communication therefore plays an essential role in alleviating distrust and creating a climate of psychological safety (Blom & Curseu, 2024; A. C. Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; A. C. Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In contrast, a lack of transparency or maintaining a closed communication climate can lead to uncertainty about leaders' intentions and capabilities, and as such can maintain a climate of distrust (Schruijer & Curseu, 2021). If leaders are unable to empower and facilitate their employees to perform their tasks, this can lead to potentially far-reaching consequences, including significantly undermining trust, which is seen as a critical pillar for effective collaboration and performance (Kutsyuruba et al., 2016). Distrust and trust are often conceptually linked, but are fundamentally different constructs with distinct implications. Distrust is likely to exist at the onset of social interactions (Schruijer & Curseu, 2021) and occurs when an individual or group is perceived as not sharing in the core values and norms of a certain cultural context (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). A climate of distrust is marked by relational skepticism and withdrawal, and through their relational focus (facilitating and connecting), empowering leaders are expected to mitigate the level of distrust in their teams and organizations. As such, we expect that distrust reduces the strength of EOC, as employees are not willing to engage with each other and discuss sensitive ethical issues if they experience a sense of relational distrust in the organization. All in all, we expect that engaging leadership reduces distrust and thus indirectly fosters the emergence of a strong sense of EOC.

Engaging leaders are distinguished by more than just their ability to communicate information effectively; they also demonstrate a pronounced openness to feedback and ideas from their team members. This interaction not only fosters a culture of inclusiveness, but also contributes substantially to strengthening interconnectedness and cohesion within teams, which is essential for harmonious team dynamics (W. Schaufeli, 2021). However, the success of knowledge-sharing within organizations depends on the extent to which knowledge is actually shared (Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2008). Voluntary knowledge-sharing can be encouraged as engaging leaders foster dyadic relationships among employees. This incentive creates mutual trust and encourages employees to share knowledge uninhibitedly. This social interaction, according to Blau's (1964) Social Exchange Theory, fosters reciprocity and cooperation. However, this willingness is affected by the quality of interpersonal relationships. When these social exchanges are disrupted, for example by negative experiences such as previously refusing help, this can lead to counterproductive

behaviors, including the deliberate withholding of knowledge (Connelly et al., 2012). Such behavior has profound effects on ethical organizational culture, as information exchange and transparency are essential for promoting ethical behavior and moral decision-making within organizations.

Engaging leadership thus plays a crucial role in facilitating knowledge-sharing, a process that is integrally linked to the establishment of a strong ethical organizational culture. Leaders are important sources of psychological safety (Fatoki, 2024; A. C. Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; A. C. Edmondson & Lei, 2014); in particular, engaging leaders who explicitly promote a culture of acceptance and mutual respect create a psychologically safe environment in which employees feel free to share knowledge and information without fear of negative consequences (Treviño et al., 1998). Harmonious interactions in leader–follower dyads foster positive reciprocal relationships promoting psychological safety and knowledge-sharing, which in turn strengthen cooperation and ethical behavior within an organization. In summary, we expect that knowledge-sharing, distrust, psychological safety and organizational identification are key relational mechanisms that explain the association between perceptions of engaging leadership and the strength of organizational ethical culture. We therefore hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 5. *Knowledge-sharing, distrust, psychological safety and organizational identification mediate the association between perceptions of engaging leadership and the strength of the organization’s ethical culture.*

Figure 1 provides an overview of the Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation (APIM) model that integrates the hypotheses specified earlier.

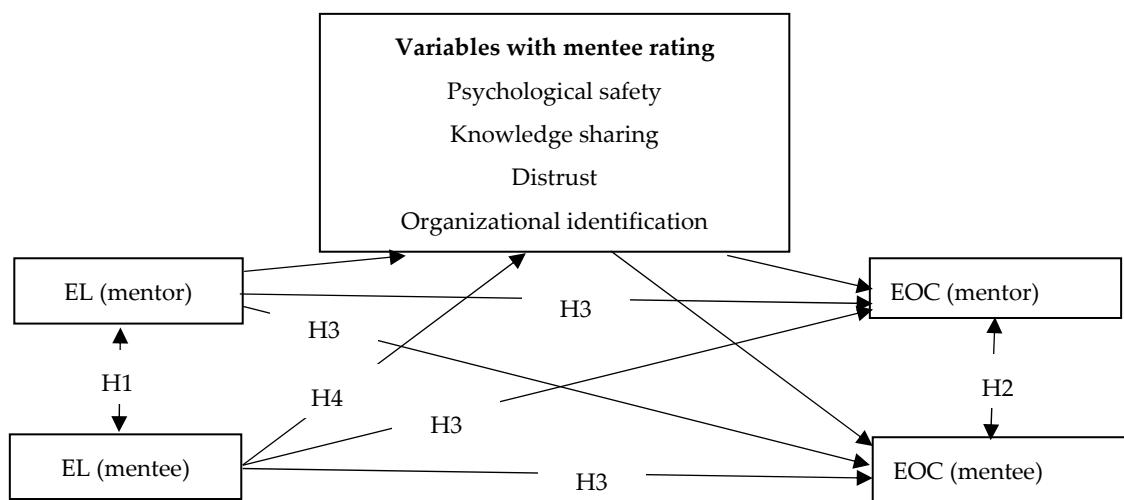


Figure 1. The overall theoretical model. Note: EOC = ethical organizational culture; EL = engaging leadership.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

We collected data in the context of a mentoring program implemented in a large organization, in which senior managers voluntarily participated in a coaching program and undertook mentoring activities with more junior employees. The mentoring program was an advanced talent development program focused on management orientation and leadership development. It provides participants with a structured learning environment in which they are supported in gaining hands-on experience in leadership tasks, change processes and strategic decision-making. Instead of a passive observation or orientation

internship, the mentoring required active participation, and the emphasis was on experiential learning, self-reflection and the development of an accurate self-perception regarding leadership competencies. A total of 81 employees participated in the mentoring program, and 64 agreed to participate in the study. Of these participants, we could match 20 dyads with complete data on the surveys. In the dyad interactions, mentees spent the equivalent of 41 (full work) days shadowing mentors. During this period, they were introduced to (almost) all facets of leadership in practice. The program ranges from bad-news talks to bilateral discussions with employees and (preparation for) appraisals. The data collected from these dyads were used for further analyses. To preserve anonymity, we did not collect personal data. Participants were asked to agree on a common code for the dyad and we used this code to match participants. The surveys were distributed online, participation was anonymous, participants could withdraw from the study at any time, and the study was approved by the Open Universiteit Ethical Review Board.

3.2. Measures

The strength of the ethical culture was evaluated by asking both mentors and mentees to complete the 32 items of the Corporate Ethical Virtues Model Scale short form (CEVMS) (DeBode et al., 2013). The items evaluated eight core ethical values (clarity, managerial congruence, managerial congruence, feasibility, supportability, transparency, discussability and sanctionability), and responses were noted on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree). Based on previous approaches (Blom & Curseu, 2024), we used a total score for the CEVMS scale as an indicator of the strength of EOC, and Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.92, indicating the very good internal reliability of the scale. Because of the limited sample size in our study, we will further use a total score for the strength of ethical organizational cultures, calculated as the mean item scores for the 32 items.

Engaging leadership was evaluated by asking both mentors and mentees to complete the engaging leadership scale (W. Schaufeli, 2021). This scale evaluates four facets of engaging leadership, namely, empowering ("My manager encourages team members to develop their talents as much as possible"), connecting ("My manager encourages cooperation among team members"), empowering ("My manager gives team members enough freedom and responsibility to perform their tasks") and inspiring ("My manager is able to enthuse team members with his/her plans"). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree) and the Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was 0.97, indicating the excellent reliability of the scale.

Knowledge sharing was assessed by asking the mentees to complete five items of the Knowledge Hiding Scale (Connelly et al., 2012). The mentees were asked to imagine a typical work situation in which a colleague asked them to answer some questions or request certain information, and reflect on their typical response using the five items of the scale (e.g., "When colleagues ask for advice I explain everything very thoroughly", rated from 1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.92, showing the very good reliability of the scale.

Distrust was evaluated by asking mentees to complete two items adapted from the Schrujjer and Curseu (2021) rating scale ("To what extent is the atmosphere within your organization distrustful", "To what extent is the atmosphere within your organization suspicious", answers recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = to a large extent)). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.74, indicating the adequate reliability of the scale.

Psychological safety in relation to leaders was assessed using the Psychological Safety Scale (A. Edmondson, 1999) adapted to capture the perceptions of safety in relation to the leaders (Blom & Curseu, 2024). Examples of items include "My leaders resent me when

I make mistakes” and “My leaders intentionally do things that undermine my efforts” (reverse coded), and responses were scored from 1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree. The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.87, indicating the good reliability of the scale.

Identification was assessed with a single graphical item that captures the perceived closeness between the employee and the organization (Shamir & Kark, 2004), a parsimonious measure for organizational and team identification that was extensively used in organizational research (Cremers & Curşeu, 2024; Tucaliuc et al., 2023).

4. Results

The means, standard deviations and correlations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations.

	Average	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Engaging leadership (mentee)	4.0667	0.73826	1						
2. Engaging leadership (mentor)	3.8333	0.82894	0.468 *	1					
3. Psychological safety towards leader (mentee)	6.1917	0.78598	0.854 **	0.597 **	1				
4. Knowledge sharing (mentee)	4.4300	1.72934	0.514 *	0.239	0.318	1			
5. Distrust (mentee)	1.6000	0.55251	−0.770 **	−0.675 **	−0.814 **	−0.483 *	1		
6. Organizational identification (mentee).	4.5500	0.94451	0.624 **	0.134	0.489 *	−0.011	−0.414	1	
7. EOC mentee	4.6825	0.64465	0.776 **	0.649 **	0.692 **	0.563 **	−0.672 **	0.456 *	1
8. EOC mentor	4.4656	0.71080	0.153	0.703 **	0.409	0.115	−0.468 *	−0.154	0.340

Notes: EOC = strength of ethical organizational culture; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Because our observations were not independent (we collected data in mentor–mentee dyads), we used the Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation model (APIM, Coutts et al., 2019; Ledermann et al., 2011) to test our hypotheses because this model captures the interdependence of observations between the two members of the dyad. The APIM approach estimates indirect effects accounting for the non-independence of evaluations received from partners in a dyad. As we hypothesized, there was a positive association between the assessments received from the mentors and mentees for the independent and dependent variables, and so the APIM method allows for the adequate testing of our hypotheses. Moreover, MEDYAD is a versatile tool that allows the testing of indirect effects when the mediators are assessed by one member of the dyad, as was the case with distrust, psychological safety, knowledge sharing and organizational identification. In the APIM analyses, we included two variables that were rated by both members of the dyad, namely, their perceptions of engaging leadership and their perceptions regarding the strength of EOC. As expected, perceptions of engaging leadership were positively and significantly correlated within the dyads ($r = 0.47$, $p = 0.04$), allowing us to conclude that Hypothesis 1 was supported. Perceptions of the strength of the EOC were also positively correlated in the mentor–mentee dyads, yet the correlation was not significant ($r = 0.34$, $p = 0.14$). We can therefore conclude that Hypothesis 2 was not supported by the data. Moreover, engaging leadership perceived by leaders was positively and significantly correlated with the strength of EOC reported by followers ($r = 0.65$, $p = 0.002$), as well as by the leaders ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, the engaging leadership reported by followers was positively and significantly associated with the strength of EOC reported by followers ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$), and although the association with the EOC reported by the leaders was positive, it was not statistically significant ($r = 0.15$, $p = 0.52$). We can therefore conclude that Hypothesis 3 received partial support.

Although the second hypothesis was not supported, given these positive associations within dyads between both the independent and dependent variables, we continued with the APIM model and conducted our analyses using the MEDYAD macro for SPSS (Coutts et al., 2019). The APIM model considers the covariance between the assessed variables within the mentor–mentee dyads, and estimates the association between engaging leadership assessed by both members in the dyad and the variables assessed by the mentees, namely, psychological safety in relation to the leader, knowledge-sharing, distrust, and organizational identification. The APIM model also estimates the association between the independent variables and mediators on the one hand, and the dependent variables assessed within the dyads (the strength of EOC) on the other. The results of the APIM analyses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the APIM analyses.

Variable	Variables with Mentee Rating				EOC Mentee	EOC Mentor
	Psychological Safety	Knowledge Sharing	Distrust	Organizational Identification		
Constant	2.09 ** (0.54)	−0.45 (2.18)	4.40 *** (0.43)	1.69 (1.05)	−0.67 (1.82)	3.22 (2.65)
Engaging leadership (mentee)	0.78 *** (0.14)	1.20 * (0.55)	−0.44 *** (0.11)	0.92 ** (0.27)	0.22 (0.32)	−0.54 (0.47)
Engaging leadership (mentor)	0.24 † (0.12)	−0.005 (0.49)	−0.27 * (0.10)	−0.23 (0.24)	0.40 * (0.14)	0.49 * (0.21)
PS to leader (mentee)					0.12 (0.26)	0.43 (0.38)
Knowledge sharing (mentee)					0.16 * (0.07)	0.001 (0.11)
Distrust (mentee)					0.36 (0.32)	−0.27 (0.46)
OI (mentee)					0.19 (0.14)	−0.15 (0.20)
R ²	0.78	0.26	0.72	0.42	0.79	0.63
F	29.87 ***	3.05 †	21.81 ***	6.19 **	8.16 ***	3.76 *

Notes. PS = psychological safety; OI = organizational identification; EOC = ethical organizational culture. Non-standardized coefficients are shown in the SE table in parentheses; † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Distrust reported by mentees was negatively and significantly predicted by both ratings of engaging leadership (for mentees $B = -0.44$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$ and for mentors $B = -0.27$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = 0.01$), fully supporting Hypothesis 4a. Psychological safety in relation to leaders was positively and significantly predicted by engaging leadership reported by both mentees ($B = 0.78$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$) and mentors ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = 0.06$); therefore, Hypothesis 4b was also supported. Knowledge sharing was only positively and significantly predicted by engaging leadership rated by mentees ($B = 0.121$, $SE = 0.55$, $p = 0.04$); therefore, Hypothesis 4c was only partially supported. In addition, engaging leadership had a significant and positive association with organizational identification reported by mentees ($B = 0.92$, $SE = 0.27$, $p = 0.003$), providing partial support for Hypothesis 4d. The strength of EOC as assessed by mentors was significantly and positively predicted by engaging leadership reported by mentors ($B = 0.49$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.03$), while the strength of EOC reported by mentees was positively and significantly predicted by engaging leadership reported by mentors ($B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = 0.02$), as well as by knowledge-sharing reported by mentees ($B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.05$). Although these results point to partial mediation paths, none of the estimated indirect effects were significant; therefore, Hypothesis 5 was not supported by the data.

5. Discussion

Our research makes an important contribution to insights into the effects of engaging leadership on the strength of EOC by providing initial empirical evidence concerning the mediating role of distrust, knowledge sharing, organizational identification and psycholog-

ical safety as key relational factors that explain the association between engaging leadership and EOC in mentor–mentee dyads. Starting from the argument that coaching is a key vehicle that explains social influence processes unfolding in leader–follower dyads (Caniëls & Curseu, 2024a), we argued that interpersonal exchanges in mentor–mentee dyads are essential for the emergence of EOC. We examined the influence of engaging leadership within mentor–mentee dyads on various relational and work-related outcomes, including psychological safety, distrust, knowledge sharing and organizational identification, and their impacts on ethical culture. The results of our study support the claims that perceptions of engaging leadership and EOC were positively correlated within the mentor–mentee dyads. These findings make important theoretical contributions that call for more relational approaches so as to deepen the understanding of the relationship between leadership and EOC. Building on such relational approaches, Lin et al. (2020) also suggested that empowering leadership has differential effects on knowledge hiding at the team level compared to the dyadic level. It is therefore paramount to explore the effect of leadership on the emergence of EOC at different relational interfaces, including in leader–follower dyads. Moreover, our results show that mentors' perceptions of engaging leadership were also positively associated with the perceived strength of EOC, supporting the role of engagement in the emergence of EOC.

Our results confirm the findings of previous literature highlighting the importance of engaging leadership in reducing distrust (Eva et al., 2020). The negative and significant effect of engaging leadership on distrust within the mentor/mentee dyad supports the claim that leadership characterized by empathy, consistency and transparency can reduce interpersonal barriers. In addition, as expected, psychological safety was positively influenced by perceptions of engaging leadership held by both the mentor and mentee. Such results point out the need for more relational approaches in the exploration of psychological safety at different relational interfaces in organizations.

Engaging leadership has a direct positive influence on knowledge sharing, although this effect is limited to mentees' perceptions, a result that extends previous insights into the role of empowering leadership on knowledge hiding in teams (Lin et al., 2020). This pattern of results is also congruent with the results on mentees' perceptions that correlated more strongly with psychological safety (than those of mentors), as the higher the perceived psychological safety, the more likely it is that knowledge is shared. An explanation of the actor-only effect of engaging leadership on knowledge sharing (significant for mentees only) could be that relationships in mentor–mentee dyads are not fully reciprocal, and thus the mentee trusts the mentor more than vice versa. In any case, this result highlights the role of perception in fostering a culture of open communication within dyads (Carmeli et al., 2009). At the same time, predictions regarding organizational identification were largely found to be in line with what we have hypothesized, showing that engaging leadership strengthens employee emotional attachment to the organization (Ryan & Deci, 2000; W. B. Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). This effect is also limited to mentees (actors), and the partner effect of mentors was not supported. Psychological safety and distrust are variables with a stronger relational component that are more salient in mentor–mentee dyads, while knowledge-sharing as a behavioral tendency and organizational identification as an individual sense of belonging to the organization are less salient in mentor–mentee dyads. Future research could further explore, using relational approaches, the way in which shared perceptions of engaging leadership in leader–follower dyads impact on various work-related outcomes and attitudes.

Our research shows that none of the estimated indirect effects are significant; therefore, the last hypothesis received no empirical support. A plausible explanation can be found in the research of Cabana and Kaptein (2021), showing that EOC can be described as a (team-

level) differentiated culture that is created by colleagues working frequently with each other in a team and less frequently with colleagues outside the team. Close interpersonal relations that unfold in teams reinforce core values, as well as shared assumptions and behaviors, within the team to a greater extent than more sporadic interactions, such as those in a mentor–mentee dyad. An explanation of the lack of significance could possibly have to do with the fact that perceptions of safety, distrust, as well as knowledge-sharing and identification are impacted by a broader range of factors, and less by engaging leadership behaviors. Moreover, interactions in mentor–mentee dyads could produce different perceptions within the leader–follower dyads than outside this relational entity. The increased attention devoted to the mentee could lead to a positive assessment of the relationship with the mentor, and may not impact directly on the identification with the organization as a whole. Future research could further explore the extent to which engaging leadership shapes the emergence of EOC via the quality of the relationship within the dyad, as well as via the quality of external ties the mentees have in their teams and organization.

If we discuss mentor–mentee dyads as stand-alone relations, interpersonal differences may also play a role in the degree of congruency emergent in such dyads. If the partners in a mentor–mentee dyad differ in terms of personality traits, cognitive structures or specific relational needs, such dyads may lead to less congruence in terms of perceptions of EOC. Moreover, if the mentee has particular needs that the mentor cannot or will not meet, or if the mentee seeks little social support or interaction with the mentor, the degree of congruence in a dyad is likely to be lower. The consequence of this interpersonal divergence will lead to lower levels of perceived psychological safety, resulting in less need, within the dyad, for knowledge sharing, relative to the team in which these employees work. This will also maintain (a degree of) distrust within the dyad and the workplace in general. If, as a result, less of the same (ethical) norms and values are experienced within this dyad, it is likely that the perception of organizational identification will be different. Future research could disentangle between multiple identification foci (Cremers & Curşeu, 2024) by distinguishing the identification with the organization from the identification with the work group, and the degree of prototypicality of the mentor as a representative of this organization or the workgroup. Such research designs, using referent-shift methods to assess multiple identification foci in organizations (Cremers & Curşeu, 2024), could disentangle different identification tendencies that employees have, and different paths through which engaging leadership shapes the emergence of EOC.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

Although our study makes an important contribution to the literature on engaging leadership and EOC, there are some limitations that require further research. First, we focused on leader–follower mentoring dyads; therefore, the sample size is relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. We received complete data from half of the mentoring dyads that were contacted in a single organization, and future research could use larger sample sizes, from multiple organizations and longitudinal designs, to more robustly replicate these relationships. Second, observations were based on self-perceptions, which are prone to reporting bias, such as giving socially desirable responses. Incorporating more objective assessments or external observations could provide valuable additional insights. The data were collected in a single organization, and future research could test this model in different organizational contexts and using larger samples of leader–follower dyads. Another concern is the role of cultural and contextual factors in moderating the relationships observed in this study. Given the growing globalization of organizations, future research could focus on how cultural differences affect the perception and effectiveness of engaging leadership in dyadic relationships.

5.2. Practical Implications

The results of this study provide important guidance for managers who play a key role in promoting both organizational identification and (fostering) a strong EOC. Although previous research emphasized the role of formal ethical programs in the emergence of EOC (Kaptein, 2015; Roy et al., 2024), our findings show that a strong EOC does not emerge from policies alone. Leaders should actively engage with followers and communicate a compelling ethical vision with the aim of strengthening the employees' commitment to shared ethical goals. Such practices include communicating an inspiring and shared vision, interacting empathetically with their team members, and acting consistently in accordance with the organization's values. By consistently embodying organizational ethical values, engaging leadership is not just a leadership style, but it encapsulates a behavioral repertoire that motivates employees to identify with the organization and act ethically. Fostering a culture of integrity is therefore crucial. Managers should not only promote ethical standards, but also act as role models by incorporating these standards into their daily work behavior. Managers also play a crucial role in strengthening organizational identification by creating an inclusive work environment in which employees feel valued and their personal values are aligned with those of the organization.

Our results show a significant partner effect of engaging leadership, as perceived by the mentors, on the strength of EOC as reported by mentees; therefore, awareness and consistency in engaging leadership behaviors are paramount. In summary, this means that there must be consistency between what leaders say and what they do. This is a critical factor in building trust among employees. Leaders who act inconsistently, for example by preaching ethical principles but failing to live up to them, undermine not only their own credibility, but also the credibility of the organization as a whole. They must therefore play an active role in communicating the organization's core values and how these values guide daily work.

6. Conclusions

This paper answers the call for research to extend the insights into how different leadership styles impact on the emergence of EOC (Roy et al., 2024) by exploring the interplay between perceptions of engaging leadership and EOC in leader–follower dyads involved in a formal mentoring program. The results show that engaging leadership as evaluated by the mentors was positively associated with the strength of EOC reported by mentors as well as mentees. Further, engaging leadership, as rated by mentees, was negatively associated with distrust, and positively with psychological safety, knowledge-sharing and organizational identification. Psychological safety and distrust are explained by actor and partner effects, while knowledge sharing and organizational identification were only explained by actor effects of engaging leadership perceptions. These results point out the relevance of engaging leadership as a prerequisite for a strong EOC in organizations, and open new avenues for exploring (using relational theoretical lenses) the mechanisms that explain this association in mentoring dyads.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

EOC	Ethical Organizational Culture
APIM	Actor Partner Interdependence Mediation model
MEDYAD	Mediation analysis with distinguishable dyadic data
CEVMS	Corporate Ethical Virtues Model Scale

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