

# Impact of ethical leadership on organisational citizenship behaviour: Group- and individual-level mediators

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## Abstract

Numerous occurrences of unethical conduct by leaders over the last decade, as well as the proliferation of unethical conduct, have had detrimental effects on their respective organisations and businesses. The undesirable behaviour affects the ability of followers to voluntarily perform beyond contractual obligations. The article examines the impact of ethical leadership on organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB), focusing on individual- and group-level mediators. The domain of ethical leadership and its impact on OCB is not sufficiently investigated. The research focused on a South African state-owned company in the water services industry using a qualitative case study approach. The research findings identified group- and individual-level mediators and found that ethical leadership positively influences employee OCB. The research findings add to the literature on ethical leadership–OCB by examining how followers respond to the sequential mediation effect and by offering insight on integrating mediation variables.

## 1. Introduction

The South African State Capture Commission laid bare the numerous occurrences of unethical conduct by leaders over the last decade, as well as the proliferation of unethical leadership conduct, that had detrimental effects on their respective organisations and businesses. The unethical behaviour of leaders has become an existential problem for followers' performance. Research studies continue to indicate that organisations in developed and developing countries have been suffering from the unethical behaviour of their leaders (Jannat et al., 2022). Hauravi and Chilunjika (2023) also lament the high

prevalence rate of unethical behaviour in the public sector. This undesirable behaviour affects the ability of followers to voluntarily perform beyond contractual obligations.

Poor leadership styles are often one of the reasons for poor performance (Badarai et al., 2023). It can be argued that leaders in organisations are expected to display characteristics that exude values and principles of ethical leadership. Leaders are required to build a trusting relationship with their followers by engaging in behaviour that benefits the organisation. Research studies point to leader behaviour as a critical antecedent that can contribute to an effective organisational climate (Carsten et al., 2022). As a result, recent research suggests that ethical leadership continues to have a positive impact on followers and organisations (Yam et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022; Badarai et al., 2023).

According to ethical leadership theory (Brown et al., 2005), interpersonal behavioural relationships in the leader-follower relationship foster reciprocal behaviour, which tends to be followed by subordinates (Tourigny et al., 2019). It is argued that ethical leadership in leaders is central to fostering ethical behaviours among followers, and studies have found evidence of a linear effect of ethical leadership on the relationship between leaders and followers (Kim et al., 2024). Ethical leadership behaviour research in organisations shows a good relationship between the ethical behaviour of employees and leaders that has a positive effect on several behavioural outcomes (Kim et al., 2024).

In a similar vein, research showing how ethical leadership contributes to the wellbeing and performance of employees has increased (Amory et al., 2024). Ethical leadership is a factor that supports employees to experience intense feelings of competence and self-determination (Santiago-Torner et al., 2024). This allows the leader to maintain a balance between facets as a moral person and a moral manager (Santiago-Turner et al., 2024). Thus, fostering a culture that promotes and encourages employees to engage in voluntary behaviours in the form of organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB).

OCB is a key determining factor that leads to organisational effectiveness and the organisation's success (Yang & Wei, 2018; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Viera-Armas, 2019; Bolino et al., 2023). OCBs are valued for their advantages to organisations and individuals, as well as their role in advancing organisational objectives (Liang et al., 2023). Employees display OCB by demonstrating a personal interest in enhancing the abilities of others for effective organisational performance (Yua et al., 2018). Although OCB is conceptualised as personally and professionally rewarding, it can also be personally costly (Bolino et al., 2023). This is why the research focuses on understanding which behaviours influence employees to demonstrate OCB with ethical leadership as a catalyst. Ethical leadership is recognised as a predictor of OCB, and it is suggested that by creating organisational mediators, ethical leadership influences OCB (Tourigny et al., 2019). Mediators are variables that lie between the cause and effect in a causal relationship (Fritz & Lester, 2016). They are mechanisms through which a change in one variable causes a change in another variable. Mediators can act either as transmitters of ethical behaviours or as inhibitors of unethical behaviours due to their role as linking pins in the organisation (Wang et al., 2018).

Despite the important role of mediators in behaviour as a positive causal linking chain in respect of ethical leadership and OCB, it has been noticed in recent studies by Moore et al. (2019) and Owens et al. (2019) that there are mixed results (Wang et al., 2021). While past research offers various important insights into the role of mediators, there are fewer studies that concurrently explore individual-level and group-level mediators as mediation variables in determining the impact of ethical leadership on OCB. Research about how ethical leadership influences OCB by exploring individual-level and group-level mediators could draw more insight from a more nuanced analysis (De Roeck & Farooq, 2018).

Given the important relationship between ethical leadership and OCB, the underlying mechanism through which ethical leadership influences OCB has not been fully explored (Huang et al., 2021). Hence, to respond to the determination, the study explored four research questions in the context of primary and secondary research. The primary research question was: What is the impact of ethical leadership on OCB? The secondary research questions in answering the primary research question were: What are the group- and individual-level mediators between ethical leadership and OCB? How can the group- and individual-level mediators' effects trigger changes in OCB? How are the group- and individual-level mediators influencing followers to take responsibility and engage in OCB in the context of ethical leadership?

The objective was to determine the impact of ethical leadership on OCB by identifying the group-level and individual-level mediators in the water sector organisation within the South African environment. This article expands the understanding of the impact of ethical leadership on OCB and seeks to make a contribution to ethical leadership and OCB research by providing a new dimension on the use of mediation variables in research by determining the group- and individual-level mediators.

## 2. Ethical leadership: Impact on follower behaviour in organisations

Despite the widespread interest and efforts to develop leadership strategies that promote ethical behaviour in organisations, the ongoing occurrence of leadership scandals in different leadership circles emphasises the importance of organisations recognising the value of ethical standards (Lee et al., 2019). The significance of ethical conduct demonstrated by organisational leaders has been amplified due to ethical lapses in the business environment (Ahmad et al., 2020a).

Ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005:120). The development on the body of literature on the definition of ethical leadership reflects that the definition of ethical leadership by Brown et al. has not changed (Ahmad et al., 2020b). Ethical leadership plays an important role in promoting desirable follower behaviours including organisational behaviour (Somers, 2021). The behaviour of leaders is important to address the ethical failures

experienced by organisations and the ethical behaviour of leaders is a catalyst to get followers to do what is right (Banks et al., 2021). Ethical leadership fosters a reputation for leaders who exhibit moral characteristics that impact the behaviour of subordinates (Kang & Zhang, 2020).

Ethical leadership is recognised as a notable style of organisational leadership that has effects on followers' attitudes and behaviours (Ahmad et al., 2020). However, because ethical problems in organisations have increased, and the ongoing news of corporate scandals in the corporate world, researchers are interested in understanding ethical leadership and its ramifications in organisations (Lee et al., 2019; Kim & Vandenberghe, 2020). According to ethical leadership theory, interpersonal behavioural relationships among employees foster reciprocal behaviour, which tends to be followed by subordinates (Tourigny et al., 2019).

Ethical leaders evolve their moral and developmental actions that can positively influence their followers (Miao et al., 2019). Moral dispositions such as attitudes and behaviours in leaders interact with various contextual factors to influence follower behaviour. The moral focus of ethical leadership through leaders' moral conduct influences the conduct of followers in organisations for the greater good (Sawhney et al., 2023). The role of the moral person relates to the ethical values of the leader. The moral dimension is about how the leaders use the tools they have because of their leadership position to promote ethical behaviour. As a result, ethical leadership is viewed as reflected in specific behaviours, through which the organisation's ethicality by the leader promotes and shapes the organisational environment to make it more ethical (Sawhney et al., 2023).

Organisations are repurposing their orientational strategic development along the lines of ethical leadership to enhance organisational behaviour (Ahmad et al., 2020). Ethical leadership influences almost all areas of the organisation by supporting critical processes and addressing people's attitudes and behaviours based on standards that enhance employee performance and commitment to organisations (Serang et al., 2024). Ethical leadership plays an important role in characterising the organisation's moving targets in the best possible ways (Serang et al., 2024). It is believed that ethical leadership promotes OCB through creating organisational mediators because it is recognised as a predictor of OCB (Tourigny et al., 2019). These organisational factors affect individual behaviour within the organisation and it is important to understand which factors drive subordinates to acquire appropriate behaviour that leads to increased OCB.

### 3. Organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB)

OCB represents a specific class of behaviours observable in the organisational environment (Alessandri et al., 2021). OCB is defined as individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognised by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organisation (De Geus et al., 2020). OCB can contribute to the efficient functioning of organisations and is important to the success of organisations and the people that work in them (Sun et al., 2018; López-Cabarcos et al., 2020).

OCB is considered necessary in the organisational behavioural literature, as it becomes an essential part of employee performance. This mode of employee behaviour yields important results in the organisation. It enhances organisational performance through efficiency and effectiveness. According to Khan et al. (2021), the volunteering behaviour that increases the efficiency of the organisation through the dedication of employees in a contemporary context remains relevant. Kiani and Baharmi (2020) state that OCBs are taken as an essential concern in managerial decisions. Managers value OCB since it can improve job satisfaction, organisational commitment, organisational performance, and performance quality. These variables are attitudes that are related to the performance of individuals in an organisation in the public sector (Kiani & Baharmi, 2020).

In evaluating OCB in the public sector, De Geus et al. (2020) discovered that more studies focused on the links between antecedents and OCB than on the outcomes of OCB. OCB consequences are important in understanding the impact of ethical leadership on OCB through individual- and group-level mediators. De Geus et al. (2020) added that future research should focus on the outcomes of OCB to explore its value. The value of OCB in every public system is crucial as it can significantly impact the general wellbeing and progress of individuals.

Individuals within a group form a critical link in the performance of organisations (Blondheim & Smech, 2019:111). Alessandri et al. (2021) argue that the beneficial outcomes associated with OCBs, for single workers and groups of workers, are considerable. Individuals are catalysts that drive the success of organisations (Alessandri et al., 2021). Individuals who observe OCB among employees in an organisation have a sense of hope and confidence in their own ability to replicate the behaviour they have observed. Herlina et al. (2020) emphasise the point that one of the influential organisational behaviours is OCB. Herlina et al. (2020) suggest that, through OCB, discretionary decisions without formal rewards are made and contribute to the effectiveness of the organisation. Davison et al. (2020) make the point that organisations need employees who engage in innovative and spontaneous activity that goes beyond role prescriptions.

According to Sheeraz et al. (2021), OCB is empirically proven to increase efficiency and stimulate the effective functioning of an organisation. Individual cooperative actions are displayed through voluntarily devoting personal resources for the benefit of the organisation (Meynhardt et al., 2020). The cooperative actions of the individuals were borne out of the discretionary extra-role behaviour of the individuals displayed in the organisation. Individual personal attributes in the form of skills and capacities are important predictors of OCB. Improvements in organisational performance are linked to OCB (Singh & Singh, 2011).

According to Kiani and Baharmi (2020), OCBs are considered an important consideration in managerial decisions. Managers value OCB because it can boost job happiness, organisational commitment, organisational performance, and performance quality. These factors are attitudes associated with individual performance in an organisation (Kiani & Baharmi, 2020). OCB benefits individuals and organisations by simplifying maintenance functions, freeing up resources for productivity, boosting service quality, and improving

performance (Reizer et al., 2020). OCB is valuable because it enables individuals to respond quickly to customers' demands and willingly execute things that are not part of their official work responsibilities. Employees who engage in OCB provide support to benefit co-workers and the organisation, but there is no guarantee of being granted rewards for such voluntary behaviour (Eguma & Gabriel, 2021). Establishing insight into what implies the cause-and-effect relationship is imperative.

Causal relations are important to understand the effects of mediators between ethical leadership and OCB. Mediating variables in OCB have been more widely used, and the commonly used mediators are from among the employee antecedents of OCB (De Geus et al., 2020). The relationship between antecedents and OCB might sometimes depend on mediating variables (Ingrams, 2020). Organisational characteristics, job characteristics, and employee characteristics are mediation mechanisms in the relationship of OCB. Perceptions of mediating variables have been linked with a wide range of employee attitudes and organisational behaviour (Zayed et al., 2020).

Different mediating variables appear to function as significant mediators of OCB relationships, according to empirical findings and theories (Na-nan et al., 2020). De Geus et al. (2020), on the other hand, are of the view that mediating effects can also have a negative impact on OCB. Benuyenah (2021) questions whether individual-level OCB positively impacts on group-level OCB or vice versa. Wang et al., (2022) found that mediating relationships between various antecedents have a significant impact on OCB. It is important to understand whether different variables play a bridging role as mediators in the influence process (Narzary & Palo, 2020).

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research context

The field of OCB is lacking in several crucial areas for its advancement. Specifically, there are gaps in contextualisation with various public policy and public service domains, as well as in the diversification and strengthening of research designs (De Geus et al., 2020). The ethical scandals involving government employees have highlighted the need for more research on ethical leadership in the public sector (Qing et al, 2019). The researchers identified the water sector as a suitable environment to gain an understanding of the connection between OCB and ethical leadership, specifically in the context of Africa. The population of the research comprised an organisation and employees in a state-owned company in the water sector located in a province in the Republic of South Africa. The intention of the research setting was to focus on specific characteristics of the population that would be of interest, provide answers to the primary and secondary research questions, and address the gaps identified (Rai & Thapa, 2015). The mediation variables were explored via a sampling of participants who had leadership responsibilities at management and supervisor levels. The participants represented the demographic that included control variables such as age, gender, education, and tenure.



4.2 Design and sampling

This article adopted a qualitative single case study research method with a non-probability sampling method using a purposive sampling technique to make up the respondents who would provide the data. The researchers used one organisation, a water board, which fell within the category of water services. A case study offers in-depth and credible results because of the nature of qualitative data collection and the analysis methods (O’Neil & Koekemoer, 2016). The rationale for this research was the exploration of how ethical leadership impacts OCB through group- and individual-level mediators. Data were collected from the water board by using semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, records, reports, and performance assessments. An e-mail was sent to the water board requesting assistance with recruiting willing participants. Ethical clearance was granted by the ethics committee of the university associated with the researchers.

The recruited sample of participants consisted of 15 online individual interviews and four focus group interviews of four individuals per focus group. Guest et al. (2017), in a study on water resources, found that fewer than 16 interviews were enough to identify common themes. Similarly, Hagaman and Wutich (2017) also found that 16 or fewer interviews were enough to identify common themes. The 31 participants in the present study were enough to achieve research credibility and generalisation. All 31 participants selected for the interviews had worked for the water entity for an average of not less than 5 years.

The participants included executive directors, senior managers, managers, specialists, practitioners, scientists, and engineers at the various levels of the organisation. Table 1 lists the profile of the participants, which includes the age, years of service, gender, qualification, and designation.

Table 1: Participants’ profiles

Participant information		
Information	Categories	No. of participants (n=31)
Age	25-35	7
	36-45	15
	46-55	7
	56-60	2
Years of service	0-10	9
	11-20	19
	21-30	3
	31-40	0
	41-50	0
Gender	Female	6
	Male	25
Qualification profile	Engineers	18

Participant information		
Information	Categories	No. of participants (n=31)
	Legal services	2
	Business management	7
	General	4
Designation profile	Executive director	2
	Senior manager	8
	Manager	7
	Scientist	10
	Practitioners	4

The process was twofold and involved individual interviews, focus group interviews, and prepared questions guided by identified research themes emanating from the literature review consistent with the research questions. The research questions of this study were: 1) What is the impact of ethical leadership on OCB? 2) What are the group- and individual-level mediators between ethical leadership and OCB? 3) How can group- and individual-level mediators' effects trigger changes in OCB? 4) Are the group- and individual-level mediators influencing followers to take responsibility to engage in OCB in the context of ethical leadership?

#### 4.3 Data collection

The article collected data using a non-probability sampling method with a purposive sampling technique. The participants' confidentiality was guaranteed and emphasised in a consent letter. Once the willing participants were confirmed, another e-mail was sent to them requesting them to indicate their availability and preferred method for conducting the interviews. All participants who confirmed their participation opted to conduct the interviews through a virtual platform, namely MS Teams. The interviews were conducted between October 2021 and March 2022.

The interviews were scheduled for an hour, but varied from 20 minutes to 50 minutes. Before the recording of the interview, the researchers asked the participants for permission to record the conversation. The purpose of the recording was explained to the participants, namely that it was to enable the researchers to recall an accurate account of the interview for purposes of data analysis. The researchers used a mobile device for recording the interviews. The researchers employed two methods in the process of recording the interviews: taking notes and audio recording. The interview was guided by an interview schedule from which the same questions were posed to the participants, respectively. The recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber.



4.4 Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify themes emanating from the primary and secondary research questions. This widely-used model is explicitly not linked to a pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and is considered appropriate when investigating a diverse data set reflecting a range of experiences and attitudes. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be used across various epistemologies and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves discovering patterns and themes in the data. The data were analysed using the ATLAS.ti software, a qualitative analysis tool. The technique involved coding of data, searching for themes, refining the themes into sub-themes, and reporting the findings. The researchers also started identifying the themes and patterns during the data-gathering stage by taking notes in the research journal.

The process of discerning themes and patterns persisted through the analysis of the transcripts. The transcripts were examined to ascertain the responses pertaining to the research questions. The approach was conducted to ensure the facilitation of clear identification of coding themes. The coding of research themes was important to capture the essential aspects of the data in relation to the study questions (Alam, 2020). The researchers utilised the codes and quotations to discern themes that could be associated with the responses obtained from the interviews. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the themes and sub-themes from the individual and focus group interviews.

**Table 2: Themes and sub-themes emerging from qualitative semi-structured interviews (individuals)**

Themes	Sub-themes
The impact of ethical leadership on OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Understanding ethical leadership</li><li>▪ Understanding OCB</li><li>▪ Effects of ethical leadership on OCB</li><li>▪ Impact of ethical leadership</li></ul>
Group- and individual-level mediators between ethical leadership and OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Individual behaviour that promotes positive behaviours in employees</li><li>▪ Group behaviour that promotes positive behaviours in employees</li><li>▪ Individual behaviour that promotes OCB</li><li>▪ Group behaviour that promotes OCB</li></ul>
Group- and individual-level mediators' effects triggering changes in OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Influence of discretionary behaviour on employees' OCB</li><li>▪ Impact of discretionary behaviour on employee OCB</li></ul>
Group- and individual-level mediators' influence on followers to take responsibility and engage in OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Influence of discretionary behaviour on followers</li><li>▪ Influence of mediators on OCB</li></ul>

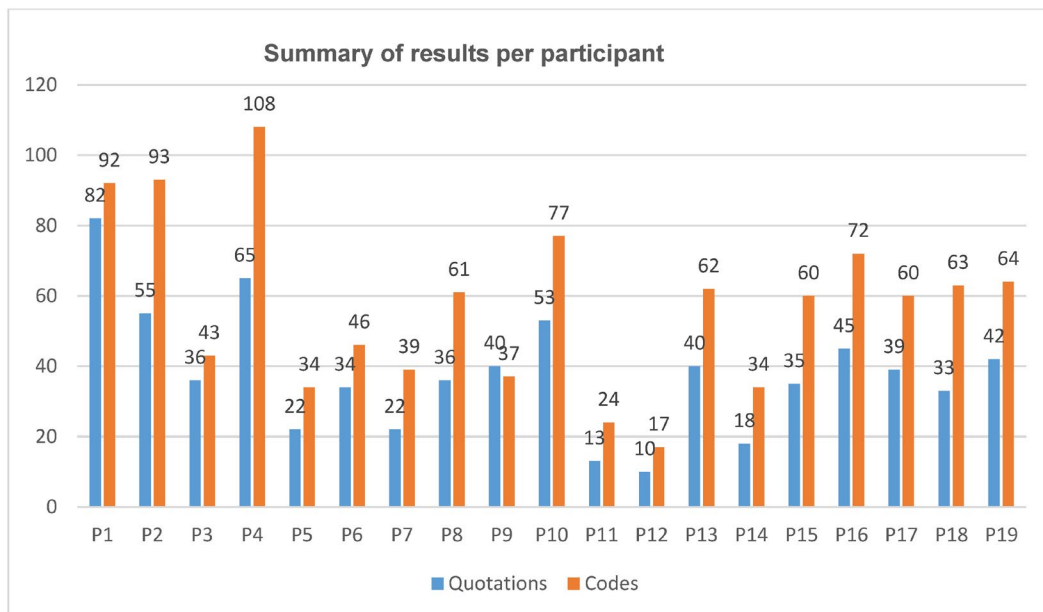
**Table 3: Themes and sub-themes emerging from qualitative semi-structured interviews (focus groups)**

Themes	Sub-themes
The impact of ethical leadership on OCB	Effects of ethical leadership on OCB
Group- and individual-level mediators between ethical leadership and OCB	Discretionary group and individual behaviour that promotes OCB
Group- and individual-level mediators' effects triggering changes in OCB	Impact of discretionary behaviour on employee OCB
Group- and individual-level mediators' influence on followers to take responsibility and engage in OCB	Influence of mediators on followers' OCB

As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, four themes emerged from the individual and focus group interviews, respectively. The tables also reflect that 16 sub-themes emerged from the individual and focus group interviews.

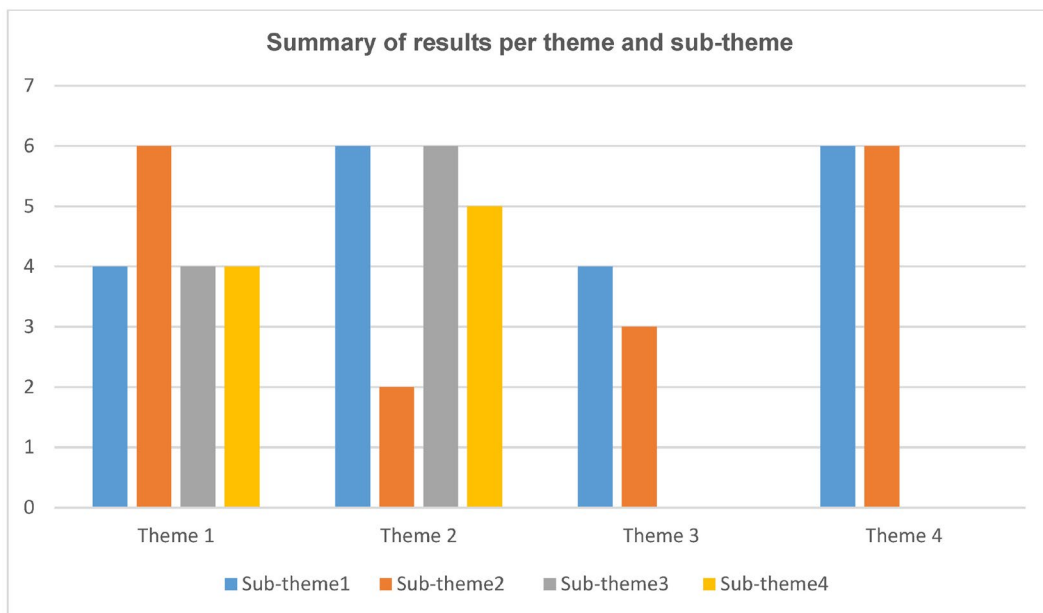
## 5. Results

The data analysis provides insight into the reasons why participants display certain behaviour. Inductive thematic analysis revealed four key themes that were evidenced across the individual and focus group participants. The results are presented from the perspective of the responses of the participants contrasted against the quotations and the codes that are dominant from the transcripts. The results indicate that there were 679 quotations and 1087 codes from 19 participants inclusive of individual and group participants. Figure 1 summarises the different quotations and codes per participant. The chart indicates that the interviews produced more codes than quotations. The dominant density of codes was from Participant 4 and the least dominant density was from Participant 12. Figure 2 reflects the results of the themes and sub-themes, respectively, and is presented for completeness.



**Figure 1: Summary of results per participant**

From the participants' perspective, it is evident that the most prevalent constructs, with a frequency of 108 codes, are accountability and responsibility, as well as increased trust and loyalty in employees.



**Figure 2: Summary of results per theme and sub-theme**

To determine whether ethical leadership indeed influences OCB, social learning theory was followed to analyse the behaviour of individuals in the context of the water board. Four themes and 12 sub-themes emerged from the responses in the research interview derived from the research question. The sub-themes' results were presented using the view of the participants linked to codes. Table 4 presents the summary of themes, sub-themes, and codes.

**Table 4: Themes, sub-themes, and codes according to thematic analysis**

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
The impact of ethical leadership on OCB	Understanding ethical leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Above reproach</li> <li>▪ Behaviour that reflects positive attitudes</li> <li>▪ Conscious of values and morals</li> <li>▪ Moral values, traits and behaviour</li> </ul>
	Understanding OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Above and beyond employment contract</li> <li>▪ Behaviour that is not part of formal employment</li> <li>▪ Outside job description for greater good</li> <li>▪ Going extra mile to task</li> <li>▪ Helping others and going beyond call of duty</li> </ul>
	Effects of ethical leadership on OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Behaviour that reflects positive attitudes</li> <li>▪ Ethical relations translate to good performance</li> <li>▪ Poor organisation support affects ethical leadership</li> <li>▪ Relations between ethical leadership and OCB</li> </ul>
	Impact of ethical leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ethical behaviour is foundation of any organisation's existence</li> <li>▪ Ethical leadership influences job satisfaction</li> <li>▪ Ethical leadership promotes ideal world</li> <li>▪ Reciprocate behaviour by employees</li> </ul>
Group- and individual-level mediators between ethical leadership and OCB	Individual behaviour that promotes positive behaviours in employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accountability leads to effective performance</li> <li>▪ Fairness and consistency</li> <li>▪ Honesty and transparency</li> <li>▪ Integrity</li> <li>▪ Loyalty, trust, and discipline</li> </ul>
	Group behaviour that promotes positive behaviours in employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Discretionary group behaviour</li> <li>▪ Accountability and transparency</li> </ul>
	Individual behaviour that promotes OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accountability and transparency</li> <li>▪ Confidence, belonging, loyalty, and supportiveness</li> <li>▪ Consistency, inclusivity, and communication</li> <li>▪ Fairness, transparency, and equality</li> <li>▪ Honesty, trustworthiness, and fairness</li> <li>▪ Positive attitude and faith in organisation</li> </ul>
	Group behaviour that promotes OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accountability and transparency</li> <li>▪ Collective responsibility</li> <li>▪ Loyalty and transparency lead to commitment</li> <li>▪ Respect and transparency</li> <li>▪ Transparency and fairness</li> </ul>

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Group- and individual-level mediators' effects triggering changes in OCB	Influence of discretionary behaviour on employees' OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trust and loyalty among employees</li> <li>▪ Open, honest, and fair</li> <li>▪ Positive attitudes of employee</li> <li>▪ Transparent, honest, and non-corruptible</li> </ul>
	Impact of discretionary behaviour on employee OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accountable and responsible</li> <li>▪ Valued by the organisation</li> <li>▪ Unethical behaviour affects employees negatively</li> </ul>
Group- and individual-level mediators' influence on followers to take responsibility and engage in OCB	Influence of discretionary behaviour on followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Efficiency in resolving problems</li> <li>▪ Fairness and commitment</li> <li>▪ Kindness, respect, and empathy</li> <li>▪ Positive, good attitude, and consciousness</li> <li>▪ Social impact</li> <li>▪ Sense of belonging</li> </ul>
	Influence of mediators on OCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Affects OCB positively</li> <li>▪ Collective accountability</li> <li>▪ Encourages being supportive</li> <li>▪ Honesty and transparency</li> <li>▪ Motivates to go above and beyond</li> </ul>

Based on the results, the quotations and the codes reflected the frequency of the views of the participants in response to the research questions. The interpretation of the frequency of the views was based on the number of quotations and codes per participant as reflected in Figure 1. The number of quotations and codes reflected that some tenets of behaviours illustrated by the views of the participants were more dominant and others were less dominant. The analysis of the results is discussed from the context of the findings from the four themes, 12 sub-themes, and 56 codes.

### 5.1 Impact of ethical leadership on organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB)

The results indicated that ethical leadership has a considerable influence on employee conduct, and that specific qualities linked to ethical leadership improve employees' OCB within the organisation. This assertion was highlighted in responses of the participants:

I would say an ethical leader is influential to their individual employees, so, how that leader conducts themselves in the work environment that would be influential in how their employees then conduct themselves. [Participant FG3]

And I will say if one had the correct ethical leadership skills that will positively influence the OCB of employees in the organisation. [Participant FG1]

Ethical leadership as a leadership style influenced employees to engage in positive behaviour, which affects employees' positive emotions, which, in turn, positively relates to followers. One participant expressed this view:

And I have seen when certain things come out, in newspapers around unethical issues so I would say ethical leadership has a huge impact on employees. [Participant 2]

The effects of ethical leadership were linked to organisational support and ethical organisational climate. This could be seen from the view of a participant:

You know ethics, I mean ethical behaviour, it is the foundation of any organisation's existence. [Participant FG4]

Key attributes associated with ethical leadership enhance the OCB of employees in the organisation. A participant supported this view by indicating:

And I will say if one had the correct ethical leadership skills that will positively influence the OCB of employees in the organisation. [Participant FG1]

The significant point to note from the analysis was that the impact of ethical leadership on OCB was mediated by various variables. This is demonstrated by the view of a participant:

The first question where we talk about positive virtues like we explained the trust, loyalty, and discipline, and so forth from ethical leadership. [Participant 12]

The conclusion was that ethical leadership positively affected the OCB of employees. According to one participant:

And I will say if one had the correct ethical leadership skills that will positively influence the OCB of employees in the organisation. [Participant FG1]

The finding regarding the impact of ethical leadership is consistent with the findings by Gamarra and Giroto. who found that a leader's ethical behaviour can positively affect employee outcomes in terms of OCB (Gamarra & Giroto, 2021).

## 5.2 Group- and individual-level mediators between ethical leadership and OCB

Participants perceived transparency and accountability as a variable related to group behaviour:

I think the behaviour of being transparent. If you are open and transparent. [Participant 2]

So I think that ethical leadership affects OCB tremendously because ethical leadership goes with transparency, it goes with accountability. [Participant FG3]

Upon further analysis, the researchers discovered that the behaviour categorised as individual behaviour in the sub-theme of individual behaviour was also consistent with the behaviour categorised as group behaviour in that the participants when answering questions highlighted the same behaviours for both sub-themes. The discovery revealed that accountability and transparency manifested as individual and group behaviour, stemming from the sub-themes of individual behaviour and group behaviour:

So some things like transparency, accountability, integrity are more on the side of the leadership, and it is their actions that will now positively or negatively influence OCB.

[Participant FG4]

This demonstrated a correlation between accountability and transparency within a water sector organisation. A response from a participant support this view:

So I think that ethical leadership affects OCB tremendously because ethical leadership goes with transparency, it goes with accountability, it goes with a clear direction in communication and commitment to what has been set down as the way to do business.

[Participant FG3]

The findings indicate that employees displayed conduct that contributed to OCB through voluntary discretionary group actions. This assertion is supported by a view:

So some things like transparency, accountability, integrity are more on the side of the leadership, and it is their actions that will now positively or negatively influence OCB, but confidence, belonging, loyalty supportive will now be the response of OCB effects to whatever the leadership is adopting.

[Participant FG4]

### 5.3 Group- and individual-level mediators' effects triggering changes in OCB

The analysis revealed that the participants perceived trust and loyalty among employees as factors that mediate the relationship that triggers changes in OCB. A participant reflected this by indicating:

I believe that will cause more trust and loyalty within the employees themselves who work at the organisation as well.

[Participant 12]

The results also suggest that the positive attitudes of employees act as a mediator in the relationship between discretionary behaviour and employees, as can be observed from a view by a participant:

Acceptance of the people around you and just plain a positive attitude, let's bring the positivity out of everyone. [

Participant 14]

The other variables that acted as mediators were openness, honesty, fairness, transparency, and non-corruptible. This was displayed from a view of a participant:

So, it is important that everybody understands that whatever we are doing it must come with responsibility and honesty.

[Participant FG2]

There was a perception that the influence of discretionary behaviour leads to a favourable attitude among employees. The impact of discretionary behaviour on employees was mediated by their sense of accountability, responsibility, and the extent to which they felt valued by the organisation.



So, if you work in a certain team and all of you guys have like-mindedness like virtues such as trust, loyalty, and discipline, usually if one member of the group is happy, like-minded people will be happy at the same time. [Participant 12]

Another variable that had a mediating impact was the detrimental effect of unethical behaviour on employees. The results also demonstrated that the participants comprehended the detrimental impact of unethical conduct on employees. This was reflected in a response:

And unethical behaviour has serious consequences for an organisation. [Participant 7]

#### 5.4 Group- and individual-level mediators' influence on followers to take responsibility and engage in OCB

The findings demonstrated how the participants evaluated the behaviour that influences followers to assume responsibility and engage in OCB. Efficiency in resolving problems was considered a behaviour that influences followers to assume responsibility and participate in OCB as reflected:

Efficiencies and effectiveness is approved with regards to processes, and which leads to successful results of the organisation. [Participant 14]

Social impact emerged as a behaviour that has an influence on the behaviour of followers. Leaders in the organisation are responsible for creating a sociable environment that improves the behaviour of followers and encourages them to take responsibility for the organisation's actions, as can be seen from a participant's view:

So, if it is an organisation and there are things that we are questioning, and we do not know what is going on, we tend to withdraw ourselves as part of a collective. [Participant 2]

The findings indicate that several characteristics, including efficiency and social impact, have an influence on followers' willingness to take responsibility and engage in OCB.

## 6. Conclusion

Research that is certainly extensive acknowledges the importance of ethical leadership and OCB, however, it does not fully comprehend the intricate ways in which these two phenomena interact with each other at different levels (Tourigny et al., 2019). The research article enhances existing knowledge in the field of ethical leadership and OCB by investigating mediation variables at various levels, anchored on social learning theory.

This article extends the dynamic link of mediation variables by concurrently studying their impact at the individual and the group levels. Previous studies only evaluated the impact of mediation variables at an organisational level or at an individual level. This study has the distinction of examining the impact of mediation variables at both levels simultaneously.

The findings support and expand the understanding of mediation variables by establishing that variables such as accountability, transparency, efficiency, fairness, a positive or good attitude, social impact, and sense of belonging influence the impact of ethical leadership on OCB as group-level and individual-level mediators. This is an important contribution to the understanding of how social learning theory influences the impact of ethical leadership on OCB based on the same mediation variable, but at the group- and individual level of an organisation.

The findings confirm the assumption made by social learning theory, which states that individuals or groups that are the primary source of an individual's positive and negative rewards will have the largest influence on the individual's behaviour (Chia et al., 2021).

The article contributes to the literature on ethical leadership and OCB by introducing the impact of ethical leadership on OCB in the water sector in the context of South Africa. This provides new knowledge about the cultural and environmental contexts of previous research findings related to the conceptual definitions of ethical leadership and OCB, and how the impact is viewed across cultures and environments. The findings have practical implications for leaders and followers in the water sector because leaders can use an ethical leadership style to promote OCB of their followers to enhance organisational performance.

This research was conducted using ethical leadership as a leadership style. Future studies may also apply other leadership theories in determining the promotion of OCBs in entities in the water sector. A study including an in-depth case study of state-owned enterprises would provide more knowledge and new perspectives on how contextual factors, leadership dynamics, and challenges are characterised in the South African context. Finally, ethical leadership can improve the performance of followers through adopting OCB-aligned behaviour. This means that the water sector entities should increase the involvement of employees in activities that promote OCB behaviour.

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