

Ethical leadership (EL) and innovative work behavior (IWB) in public universities: examining the moderating role of perceived organizational support (POS)

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the moderating role of perceived organizational support in the relationship between ethical leadership and innovative work behavior (IWB) among public university academic staff.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a quantitative approach, the authors relied on structural equation modeling together with bootstrapping procedure using Process Macro of the SPSS to analyze data from a homogenous sample of 291 academic staff from the university education sector in Uganda.

Findings – The finding from bootstrapping procedure using Process Macro of the SPSS as statistic tool support perceived organizational support as a moderator in the ethical leadership–IWB relationship. In general, the present findings suggest that ethical leadership is associated with IWB via perceived organization support.

Practical implications – Enhanced IWB requires diverse and integrated techniques based on ethical leadership principles and perceived organizational support among employees.

Originality/value – There is increasing acknowledgement of the importance of ethical leadership in successful employee IWBs. Within this context, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no prior study has empirically explored the moderating role of POS in the relationship between ethical leadership and IWB.

Keywords Innovative work behavior, Ethical leadership, Perceived organizational support, Academic staff, Human resource management, Public universities, Moderating role

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The higher education industry is increasingly becoming a hub of innovation capability for a number of economies (Alpaydin *et al.*, 2018). To sustain its hi-tech innovative edge in the context of the international market, generally, policymakers, and organizational leaders world over and particularly Uganda, are evolving practices such as electronic library services that drive employees to adopt innovative work behaviors (IWBs) and therefore integrate innovation practices into the university-wide culture (Knezović and Drkić, 2021). Accordingly, scholars have started to explore mechanisms aimed at promoting employee IWBs in Uganda's context (Kasule *et al.*, 2015; Mugonya *et al.*, 2020). IWBs represent a process where a worker exceeds the basic responsibilities as well as the scope of central work requirements (Bin Saeed *et al.*, 2019).

While global literature is replete with studies that account for IWBs (Birdi *et al.*, 2016; Orth and Volmer, 2017; Özsungur, 2019; Ahmad *et al.*, 2021; Javed *et al.*, 2020), we argue that



the findings of these studies cannot fully account for IWB practices in Uganda's universities. To deal with this limitation, we defined and empirically tested a moderated model that specifies when and how perceived organizational support (POS) affects the influence of an ethical leader on his/her followers' IWBs. The inclusion of POS provides a motivating mechanism for ethical leaders to influence employees' innovative capability. The integration of POS in our IWBs moderated model is consistent with the assertion that employees' perception of support, and being valued, is an important aspect in the successful execution of ethical leadership (EL) practices (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). EL principles, such as trust, fairness and altruism, among others, implemented within a supportive organizational environment, induce motivation among followers to work harder, and nurture IWBs (Mokhber *et al.*, 2018).

Scholars within the field of leadership are advocating for exploration of EL principles that emphasize employees' IWBs (Ahmed Iqbal *et al.*, 2020). EL 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, p. 120). Emphasis of EL is on fair treatment of followers through appropriate care, participative decision-making and shared communication, which leadership attributes align well with organization's innovative culture (Mugonya *et al.*, 2020). EL values therefore form part of an effective leadership framework that can induce employees to engage in more constructive and positive organizational behaviors such as IWBs (Zahra and Ajmal, 2017). When ethical leaders exhibit employee-centered leadership behaviors such as character, integrity and motivation, employees can develop the ability and desire to engage in innovative work (Panaccio *et al.*, 2015). The need to explore the effects of EL is grounded in the theoretical arguments of the positive influence of known leadership types that emphasize management practices and organizational motivation (Dodge *et al.*, 2017). Judged from this perspective, EL can transform functioning of existing university-rigid and centralized decision-making structures to provide for employee involvement in decision-making and fair treatment, practices that can unlock employees' creative prospects (Zahra and Ajmal, 2017). As employees are perceived as drivers for institutional innovation, EL can be leveraged to unlock employees' potential toward innovative accomplishments.

Also, while there is universal agreement that EL facilitates IWBs (Bin Saeed *et al.*, 2019; Javed *et al.*, 2020), this strand of existing literature ignores POS' role in driving innovations within organizations, despite its importance (Sulaiman *et al.*, 2019). Central to our study, as universities are seen as innovative hubs, university employees who feel valued, cared for and supported by their organizations develop motivation to navigate challenges associated with innovation (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017; Musenze *et al.*, 2020). Based on the social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964), this study argues that social exchange relationship that develops as a result of POS yields high-quality workplace relationship (Blau, 1964; Karatepe and Mehmet, 2016). Therefore, from SET perspective, when employees feel supported and valued (POS), they feel obliged to repay the organization through trust, commitment and IWBs. Besides, studies have examined and established the positive influence of leadership styles on POS (Asgari *et al.*, 2020; Cooper *et al.*, 2018). Following this theoretical reasoning, we argue that EL behaviors make employees feel valued and supported because such leaders prioritize followers' expectations by demonstrating concern, fairness, and employees' well-being (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017). Albeit the reported central role of POS in IWB processes (Yildiz *et al.*, 2017), scanty studies examining such relationships in the higher education sector exist (Doğru, 2018).

Finally, the contingency theory of leadership (Nohria and Khurana, 2010) suggests that leader's effectiveness is contingent on certain conditions. We therefore propose POS (Simosi, 2012) as one of those conditions that can play EL's facilitating role for enhanced IWBs. From this standpoint, we explore when and how POS facilitates EL's influence for IWBs. Building on the dynamic componential model of creativity and innovation (Amabile and Pratt, 2016), we argue that EL-IWBs is moderated by social factors such as POS. Based on these theoretical insights, it can be argued that social factors such as EL behaviors influence employees' innovative capability through a motivating mechanism such as POS (Amabile and Pratt, 2016; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Accordingly, we advance the existing theoretical and empirical reasoning on employee IWBs in Uganda's higher education industry by exploring the likelihood that EL fosters IWBs through the facilitating mechanism of POS. Particularly, as ethical leaders exhibit caring traits for followers and embody participative decision-making approaches, employees might feel a higher sense of being valued, leading to high IWBs (Asgari et al., 2020). Leader's influence is therefore an essential factor in employees' perception of organizational support (Dawley et al., 2010). Moreover, Mokhber et al. (2018) found POS moderated the relationship between leadership and innovation. These results provide support for the use of POS as a potential moderator in the EL-IWBs relationship. The overall IWB theoretical moderated model is presented in Figure 1.

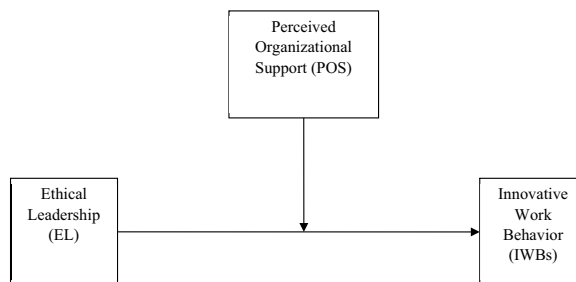
Our study provides several contributions. First, we provide theoretical support for the arguments by Nohria and Khurana (2010) that leader's effectiveness is contingent on certain conditions by examining POS as an influencing factor in the EL-IWBs sequence. We therefore find empirical support for the argument that POS strengthens EL effects on IWBs (Amabile and Pratt, 2016; Kurtessis et al., 2017). We further demonstrate that POS provides a motivating mechanism for EL to foster IWBs. Lastly, and of practical significance, we enrich the concepts of EL, POS and IWBs in Uganda's public universities. We particularly explore how EL, in contrast to the traditionally well-studied leadership styles, inspires followers to innovate in a significant manner. Consequently, our understanding of EL-POS and IWBs features is extended, especially in Uganda's higher education sector. We therefore aim to broaden the present understanding of Uganda's traditional settings by demonstrating that POS, a rare phenomenon in most Ugandan universities, has high prospect to influence employees' innovative capacity and work behaviors.

Theory and hypotheses development

Ethical leadership and employee innovative work behavior

IWBs signify worker's deliberate introduction or application of new ideas, processes, products and procedures to his/her work department, job role and/or organization (Hansen and Pihl-Thingvad, 2019; Prabowo et al., 2018). Such innovative behaviors accordingly

Figure 1.
Moderating effect of
perceived
organizational
support (POS) on
ethical leadership
(EL) and innovative
work behaviors
(IWBs)



comprise knowledge and social influences because workers must innovate through creative integration of prevailing knowledge and concurrently drum support for new ideas in the organization (Stoffers *et al.*, 2014). Stoffers *et al.* (2014) argue that knowledge-sharing induces a process of knowledge re-combination and re-amplification that drive IWBs. Organizations that endeavour to boost workers' IWBs must design and advance effective employee empowerment strategies that promote continuous learning and human resource development (Stoffers *et al.*, 2020). IWBs is a higher order construct whose process involves four basic dimensions of idea exploration, idea generation, idea struggle and idea implementation (Faraz *et al.*, 2018).

From existing theoretical insights, EL can motivate employees to innovate in a number of ways. As conceptualized, innovation is all about new idea generation to execute existing operations in a better and efficient way, and to translate these new generated ideas into opportunities (Amabile and Pratt, 2016). Viewed from this perspective, in the process of searching for new opportunities, employees might come up with ideas that elicit a range of opinions between them and their leaders (Cheung and Wong, 2011). Therefore, organizational employees require an ethical leader who is supportive of new ideas to enable them feel supported in performing their innovative duties (Amabile and Pratt, 2016; Özsungur, 2019; Ahmad *et al.*, 2021; Javed *et al.*, 2020).

Drawing on organizational support theory (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986), employees' work output is dependent on POS. Ethical leaders involve followers in decision-making process, provide sufficient resources including information, time and support necessary for IWBs (Reiter-Palmon, 2004). This support as well enhances employees' autonomy and freedom to engage in more innovative behaviors (Amabile and Pratt, 2016). It has been suggested that EL strengthens employees' perception regarding organizational belongingness as underpinned by virtues such as team effort-support, emphasis on fairness and equity, whilst safeguarding their uniqueness through attributes such as supporting varied contributions and aiding team members' contribution within the organization toward outcomes such as innovation (Randel *et al.*, 2018). EL's unique features re-model followers' perception of support and improve on their IWBs (Randel *et al.*, 2018). Besides, EL makes employees feel valued with fair treatment, which might translate into more innovative practices (Zahra and Ajmal, 2017). Based on SET (Blau, 1964), we argue that supervisor and subordinate relationships are dependent on reciprocity norms. Consequently, prior studies have found a significant link between EL and IWBs (Kasule *et al.*, 2015; Mugonya *et al.*, 2020; Zahra and Ajmal, 2017). Based on these theoretical insights, we propose that:

H1. Ethical leadership is positively linked to innovative work behavior.

Ethical leadership and perceived organizational support

EL 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, p. 120). Analysis of this definition reveals that ethical leaders are honest, trustworthy, fair, caring, engage in transparent open communication and provide followers with “voice”, that is, participative decision-making (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Ethical leaders are perceived as role models to the people they lead, and as such are expected to exhibit and promote robust ethical behaviors within the organization (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Conceptually, the term EL is underpinned by two important pillars *inter alia*: moral persons and moral managers. As a moral person, an ethical leader is expected to be fair, principled and exhibit concern for the

followers whilst, as a moral manager, an ethical leader sets, communicates and reinforces high ethical standards for followers to emulate (Brown and Treviño, 2006).

However, little empirical evidence exists in the literature for the theoretical proposition regarding the linkage between EL and POS (Sulaiman *et al.*, 2019; Zahra and Ajmal, 2017). Based on OST (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986), development of social exchange relationships between supervisor and employee is dependent upon trust and norms of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Blau (1964, p. 94) posits that, “social exchange tends to engender feelings of personal obligation, gratitude and trust.” In view of this, we suggest that as employees perceive honesty, fairness and care from their ethical leader, the more trust they develop, and accordingly reciprocate (Islam *et al.*, 2017; Luksyte, 2016). We therefore argue that such ethical treatment received by employees is judged as encouraging work experiences that could enhance POS levels. Ethical supervisors in leadership roles play a fundamental role in providing organizational resources and rewards for subordinates, and, as a result, are considered as a crucial source of organizational support (Wayne and Shore, 1997). Ethical leaders for that reason might provide benefits that followers could make best use of in their performance roles. Supportive behaviors emanating from ethical leaders aid followers perceive their contributions as being valued and that the organization cares about their well-being, and this might enhance POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). In light of these arguments, we propose that:

H2. Ethical leadership is positively related to perceived organizational support.

Moderation role of perceived organizational support

POS is conceptualized as the employees’ perception concerning the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986, p. 501). Grounded in OST, POS illustrates the importance of viewing employees as valued organizational assets (Islam *et al.*, 2017; Luksyte, 2016). Within this discipline, emerging research has emphasized organizational support as an essential element in employees’ willingness to contribute to organization’s success (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017). EL values represent an integral institutional component on which organizations can leverage to create a more innovation-supportive work environment (Chen *et al.*, 2016; Zahra and Ajmal, 2017). However, our theoretical understanding of the supportive mechanisms connecting EL to workers’ innovative practices (IWBs) remains underdeveloped.

We therefore propose POS as an organizational and situational variable that may moderate the effectiveness of ethical leaders in building robust IWBs amongst employees. As EL behaviors occur in organizational context, analysis of bi-variate effects of EL on IWBs, without considering organizational situation in which innovation thrives, would present an incomplete perspective on IWBs (Jung *et al.*, 2003, 2008; Oke *et al.*, 2009). It is therefore important to explore organizational aspects that might interact with leadership behaviors in facilitating employee innovative practices within organizations (Jung *et al.*, 2003). Considering its enormous motivational value, POS has become a topical subject to leadership and innovation literature (Mokhber *et al.*, 2018). Support derived from the organization and positive innovative behaviors are two central issues that might be determined by the perception that employees hold over organization’s existing practices, procedures, policies and the manner under which business is transacted within the organization. As a result, the organization would be perceived based on definite employee behavioral predispositions, attitudes and feelings (Jong and Hartog, 2003) which might facilitate innovation. IWBs are closely related to superiors’ leadership ethics, because ethical leaders establish organizational goals, make ethical decisions and, above all, motivate

employees (Tsai and Tseng, 2010). Organizational support provides ethical leaders with an opportunity to influence followers to ultimately contribute toward IWBs (Sulaiman *et al.*, 2019).

A perceived environment of support enables ethical leaders to make employees feel valued and supported through mechanisms such as shared communication, participative decision-making and development of employees' well-being, which might induce them to innovate (Dođru, 2018; Yildiz *et al.*, 2017). Albeit the central role of POS in IWB processes has been documented (Yildiz *et al.*, 2017), limited studies examining these aspects in this field (Dođru, 2018) exist. Extant review of literature revealed limited support for the moderation role of POS in the leadership-innovation studies (Mokhber *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, Pieterse *et al.* (2010) argue that studies involving moderators are necessary because of their consistency with the assumptions of contingency leadership theory that provides compelling evidence that leadership effectiveness on both employee and organizational outcomes (IWBs) depends on several situational factors such as POS (Amabile and Pratt, 2016; Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017; Nohria and Khurana, 2010). Despite this theoretical reasoning, little is known about the impact of moderator factors such as POS on the bi-variate effects of EL and IWBs. On the basis of this theoretical and empirical links, we propose that:

- H3.* POS moderates the positive relationship between ethical leadership and innovative work behavior.

Methods

Sample and procedures

Our sample in this research composed of academic staff from the seven public universities in Uganda in the higher education sector. This study setting was informed by the fact that universities have now become innovation hubs (Alpaydin *et al.*, 2018). Based on a quantitative research approach, data were collected through questionnaire survey at two different times. Simple random sampling was adopted to draw a total of 315 academic staff from 1,800 academic staff of public universities. A cover letter indicating the study's purpose and reassuring of the respondents of their confidentiality accompanied the tool. Also, the participants were reached with the assistance of the Directorate of Human Resources of public universities. The tools were distributed during official working days and hours, yet participation in the study was exclusively voluntary. To reduce the threat of common method bias (CMB), and to deal with the possible risk of causality because of the study's cross-sectional nature, we collected data in two waves with a 3-week interval between them. In the first wave (Time-T1), participants provided responses to questions measuring perceptions about confounding variables, EL and POS. In the third week, that is at Time-T2, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with IWBs. During T1, we presented to the participants with the tool, a process that yielded a total of 295 responses. Three weeks afterwards, all 315 academic staff were requested to respond to questions in the T2 questionnaire (IWBs), yielding a matched sample of 295 academic staff. However, 4 of these tools were purged because of incomplete data, and thus, the final and absolute sample comprised 291 participants.

Out of the 291 participants, 68% were male, 75% had a minimum qualification of bachelor's degree with an average age of 35.1 years and 55% of the participants had a cumulative working experience of more than 10 years. Consistent with related prior research by Islam *et al.* (2017), our survey tool was administrated in English as the communication medium because the respondents were literate, and thus judged knowledgeable to

comprehend the items as contained therein. To deal with the dangers associated with linguistic issues and improve the understandability of the tool, we conducted a pre-test, and based on the results, we were able to weed out ambiguous questions and improve on clarity of the final tool.

Measures

Ethical leadership

To measure academic employees' perception of EL, we relied on a 10-item, uni-dimensional scale (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Ko *et al.* (2018) have indicated that this is a popular and widely used scale for assessment of EL. Sample items include, "my supervisor listens to what employees have to say" and "our company's leader sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics." The response descriptors ranged from "1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α) statistic for this 10-itemed uni-dimensional scale was 0.80.

Perceived organizational support

To assess POS, we used a shortened six-item scale by Eisenberger *et al.* (1986). This measure has been extensively used and yielded robust results in terms of its high reliability and validity, moreover, in diverse contexts (Edwards, 2015). One sample item included "the organization shows great concern for me." The reliability coefficient (α) of the scale in this particular study was 0.82 well above the suggested minimum of 0.70 (Islam *et al.*, 2015), indicating that the scale posited superior reliability. The response descriptors ranged from "1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree."

Innovative work behaviors

Consistent with the theoretical reasoning of Janssen (2003), idea generation, idea promotion and application of the idea are recognized as behavioral elements that tap the construct of employee innovation in the organization. Accordingly, to measure these employee innovative behaviors, we adopted and modified items from the scale developed by Janssen (2003). A sample of question items comprised idea generation – "people are encouraged to express their ideas and concerns"; idea promotion – "we are encouraged to take risks in adapting policies and procedures" and applying the idea – "purposeful action is taken to delegate decision-making to the appropriate lower levels." The reliability coefficient statistic (α) of the scale in this particular research was 0.85, demonstrating strong construct reliability. The response options ranged from "1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree."

Analysis and results

Testing for common method bias/variance. According to Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), obtaining data from a single source and at the same point in time is potentially associated with the problem of CMB/common method variance (CMV), which might adversely affect the validity of results. To check for this probable threat, we collected data from different sources, that is, university lecturers and management. Moreover, through structural equation modeling (SEM), we created a common latent factor (CLF) to determine the common variance among the hypothesized relationships, and contrasted the standardized regression weights with and without CLF. The difference was less than 0.2, which demonstrated that CMB/CMV was not a major threat for this particular study.

Descriptive statistics. Results for the mean, standard deviation, correlation and reliabilities for all variables (EL, POS and IWBs) are presented in Table 1. The results

suggest that EL is significantly and positively associated with POS ($r = 0.567, p < 0.01$). Also, results demonstrate that EL and IWBs are positively and significantly correlated ($r = 0.544, p < 0.01$), implying that changes in EL bring about corresponding changes in IWBs. Additionally, results indicate that POS is significantly associated with IWBs ($r = 0.642, p < 0.01$).

Reliability and validity. Before testing for the study hypotheses through *AMOS v.20.0*, we performed a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to determine the robustness and suitability of the resulting measurement models. Scale items were used as indicators for all the study constructs, namely, EL, POS and IWBs. The overall fitness of the resulting models was assessed through comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), normed fit index (NFI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Our baseline model is a three-factor model comprising EL, POS and IWBs, as presented in [Table 2](#).

The distinctiveness of the proposed model was tested through comparison of our baseline model with various alternative models. The proposed baseline model fitted the data adequately well: $\chi^2 = 130.29, df = 116, p < 0.01$; NFI = 0.998, CFI = 0.989, IFI = 0.990, TLI = 0.993 and RMSEA = 0.020 contrasted with other probable alternative models, that is, two-factor and one-factor models. See [Table 2](#) for details. All the factor loadings for the base line model were acceptable and significant at $p < 0.001$. Also, the significant change in χ^2 of baseline model and all alternative models signify the assertion that the respondents could substantially distinguish the three constructs of EL, POS and IWBs very well. As shown in [Table 2](#) and [Figure 1](#), the hypothesized IWB model displayed a better fit compared to all other alternative model fits, thereby providing support for discriminant validity. In assessment of convergent validity, we relied on the guidelines of [Hu and Bentler \(1999\)](#) that propose acceptable cut-off for composite reliability (CR) as 0.60 and average variance extracted (AVE) of 0.50 and above. The CR stats ranged between 0.812 and 0.894, whilst the AVE for each of the constructs in this study exceeded 0.50. These results reveal

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(1) Gender	1.58	0.49	1						
(2) Age	31.18	3.32	0.24	1					
(3) Length of service	2.50	0.85	-0.032	0.775**	1				
(4) Education background	2.85	0.75	0.072	0.635**	0.583**	1			
(5) Innovative work behavior	2.94	0.93	-0.018	-0.014	0.017	-0.003	1		
(6) Ethical leadership	3.23	0.80	-0.031	-0.024	0.021	-0.007	0.544**	1	
(7) Perceived organization support	3.23	0.78	-0.075	-0.045	0.012	-0.092	0.642**	0.567**	1

Notes: $n = 291$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 1.
Mean, standard
deviations and
correlations

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$	NFI	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA
Three-factor model (baseline model)	130.29	116	1.12	-	0.998	0.989	0.990	0.993	0.020
Two-factor model ^a	433.22	134	3.23	302.92	0.849	0.890	0.891	0.874	0.080
One-factor model ^b	2,532.13	299	8.46	2,098.91	0.355	0.376	0.385	0.267	0.153

Notes: ^aEthical leadership and POS merged; ^ball are merged in one factor

Table 2.
CFA results:
comparison of
measurement models

satisfactory convergent validity for all the measurement models in this study. Overall, all these results provide support for construct validity of the scales used in this study. [Table 3](#) shows statistics for the item loadings, p -values, CR and AVEs for measurement model.

Hypotheses testing. We integrated the construct of POS as a moderation mechanism within the framework of the H_1 and H_2 . To test the hypotheses using centralized variables, we relied on bootstrapping procedure, using *Process Macro* of the SPSS as statistic tool. [Hayes \(2009\)](#) and [Hayes and Rockwood \(2020\)](#) argue that the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CI) should not include “zero” (0) as basic condition to determine the conditional indirect effect. Besides, we used 5,000 bootstrapping re-samples to compute bias-corrected CI. Bootstrapping procedure is considered as one of the most significant and suitable technique for testing intervening effects and conditional indirect effects ([Hayes, 2009](#)).

[Table 4](#) presents regression results from *Process Macro* statistical tool. The results show that EL positively accounts for a significant variation in IWBs ($\beta = 0.64, p < 0.001$) and 95% CI for this effect was (0.43, 0.86) ([Table 4](#)), providing support for H_1 .

Also, the results show POS as a significant predictor of IWBs [$\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001, 95\%$ CI (0.74, 0.30)] ([Table 4](#)), providing support for H_2 . H_3 postulated that POS moderated the relationship between EL and IWBs. The results in [Table 4](#) and [Figure 1](#) revealed that the interaction term between EL and POS was significant and positively associated with IWBs [$\beta = 0.12, p < 0.001, 95\%$ CI (0.05, 0.18)]. As well, incorporating the interaction term accounts for 1% additional variance in IWBs ($\Delta R^2 = 0.0106$). These results suggest that POS moderated the effectiveness of ethical leaders in promoting IWBs among university employees. This provides support for H_3 . Thus, based on the multi-group analyses with POS as the moderator, EL was only significantly and positively associated with IWBs when the POS environment was high, implying that the association between EL and IWBs strengthens in tandem with POS. Therefore, ethical leaders exhibit the highest levels of IWBs when the levels of POS are high, which is depicted by a highly inclined simple slope line that is significant at $p = 0.001$ level of significance.

As the interaction term in our IWB model was statistically significant, using Hayes' *Process Macros*, we probed for the interaction to better understand the nature of the moderated relationship between EL and IWBs ([Table 5](#)).

Consistent with Dawson's (2014) recommendations, we plotted the interactions using simple slopes. As seen from [Figure 2](#), the interaction pattern was as expected. The tests of the simple slopes indicated the relationship between EL and IWBs at the three levels of the moderator (POS). At -1 SD (2.27) on the centered POS variable (representing low POS), the relationship between EL and IWBs was positive and significant [$\beta = 0.92, SE = 0.04, p = 0.000, (0.83, 1.00)$]. Similarly, at the mean (that is, at 3.23) on the centered moderator variable (representing medium POS), the relationship was positive and significant [$\beta = 1.03, se = 0.03, p = 0.000 (0.97, 1.10)$]. Finally, at $+1$ SD (that is, 4.19) on the centered POS variable (representing high POS), the relationship was positive and significant [$\beta = 1.15, se = 0.05, p = 0.000 (1.05, 1.25)$]. Specifically, POS provided a facilitating role for ethical leaders to induce IWBs. Overall, H_3 is fully supported.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate how the relationship between EL and IWB is moderated by POS based on OST ([Eisenberger et al., 1986](#)) and SET ([Blau, 1964](#)). Consistent with OST, the study established that EL was positively and significantly linked to IWBs and that this basic relationship was moderated by POS. These findings reinforce [Dogru's \(2018\)](#) and [Yildiz et al.'s \(2017\)](#) assertion that a perceived supportive environment enables

Variables	Item	Loadings	<i>p</i> -value	CR	AVE	Role of perceived organizational support		
IWB	<i>Idea generation</i>	0.70	0.001	0.862	0.76	691		
	Creating new ideas for difficult issues	0.76						
	Searching out new working methods, techniques or instruments	0.82						
	Generating original solutions for problems	0.76	0.001	0.894				
	<i>Idea promotion</i>	0.81						
	Mobilizing support for innovative ideas	0.75						
	Acquiring approval for innovative ideas	0.78	0.001	0.851				
	Making important organizational members enthusiastic for innovative ideas	0.72						
	<i>Idea realization</i>	0.75						
	Transforming innovative ideas into useful applications	0.76	0.001	0.820	0.81			
Introducing innovative ideas into the work environment in a systematic way	0.72							
Evaluating the utility of innovative ideas	0.80							
EL	Our leader conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner	0.83	0.001	0.820	0.81			
	Our leader defines success not just by results but also by the way that they are obtained	0.84						
	Our leader listens to what employees have to say	0.85						
	Our leader disciplines employees who violate ethical standards	0.76						
	Our leader makes fair and balanced decisions	0.85						
	Our leader can be trusted	0.80						
	Our leader discusses business ethics or values with employees	0.84						
	Our leader sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics	0.78						
	Our leader has the best interest of employees in mind	0.75						
	Our leader when making decisions asks "what is the right thing to do?"	0.87						
POS		0.75	0.001	0.812	0.78			
	My organization cares about my opinions	0.76						
	My organization cares about my well-being	0.79						
	My organization appreciates any extra effort from me	0.88						
	My organization cannot ignore any complaint from me	0.81						
	Even if I did the best job possible, my organization would fail to notice	0.72						
	My organization cares about my general satisfaction at work	0.77						
	<i>Idea generation</i>	0.70				0.001	0.862	0.76
	Creating new ideas for difficult issues)	0.76						
	Searching out new working methods, techniques or instruments	0.82						
Generating original solutions for problems	0.76	0.001	0.894					
<i>Idea promotion</i>	0.81							
Mobilizing support for innovative ideas	0.75							
Acquiring approval for innovative ideas	0.78	0.001	0.851					
Making important organizational members enthusiastic for innovative ideas	0.72							
<i>Idea realization</i>	0.75							

Table 3.
Item loadings,
p-values, CR and
AVEs for
measurement model
(continued)

MRR
46,5

692

Variables	Item	Loadings	<i>p</i> -value	CR	AVE
EL	Transforming innovative ideas into useful applications	0.76	0.001	0.820	0.81
	Introducing innovative ideas into the work environment in a systematic way	0.72			
	Evaluating the utility of innovative ideas	0.80			
	Our leader conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner	0.83			
	Our leader defines success not just by results but also by the way that they are obtained	0.83			
	Our leader listens to what employees have to say	0.84			
	Our leader disciplines employees who violate ethical standards	0.85			
	Our leader makes fair and balanced decisions	0.76			
	Our leader can be trusted	0.85			
	Our leader discusses business ethics or values with employees	0.80			
	Our leader sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics	0.84			
	Our leader has the best interest of employees in mind	0.78			
	Our leader when making decisions asks "what is the right thing to do?"	0.75			
	Our leader when making decisions asks "what is the right thing to do?"	0.87			
POS	My organization cares about my opinions	0.75	0.001	0.812	0.78
	My organization cares about my well-being	0.76			
	My organization appreciates any extra effort from me	0.79			
	My organization cannot ignore any complaint from me	0.88			
	Even if I did the best job possible, my organization would fail to notice	0.81			
	My organization cares about my general satisfaction at work	0.72			

Table 3.

Predictors	β	SE	Dependent variable – IWBs model	
			BC 95%CI Lower	Upper
Ethical leadership	0.64***	0.10	0.43	0.86
Perceived organization support	0.52***	0.11	0.74	0.30
Ethical leadership \times POS	0.12***	0.03	0.05	0.18
R^2	0.86			
R^2 -change	0.01			

Table 4.
Results for
moderation analysis

Notes: POS: Perceived organizational support; IWBs: Innovative work behavior; $n = 291$; *** $p < 0.001$

ethical leaders to make employees feel valued and supported through mechanisms such as shared communication, participative decision-making and development of employees' well-being, which might induce them to innovate. This study found that an environment of support within an organization enhances the effectiveness of ethical leaders for IWBs confirming appropriateness of OST to EL.

More importantly, POS that encourages a positive reciprocal relationship between staff and their organization, as well as a strong team support that promotes knowledge sharing in a re-assuring and supportive manner, generates a synergistic impact on the EL–IWB relationship. Therefore, while our results show that EL principles are associated with IWBs, an environment of support derived especially from the organization and peers provides a synergistic boost to IWBs. This finding is novel to EL literature because it sheds light on the value of integrating POS environment into EL process. The inclusion of POS as a facilitating factor for EL allows us to provide novel evidence for the IWBs. EL practiced within a perceived supportive environment is more likely to inspire employees in their innovative endeavors (Mokhber *et al.*, 2018).

The current research therefore extends the EL–IWBs link by positioning POS as an enhancer of the effectiveness of EL in the promotion of IWBs. The findings show that POS strengthens EL behaviors, thereby positively impacting IWBs. Therefore, as subordinates nurture a feeling of honesty, trustworthy and fairness, they perceive being more valued and cared for by their respective organization and this practice enhances their IWBs. Precisely, the findings demonstrate that POS has a facilitating role on EL in promoting IWBs.

Theoretical implications

The present research explored, first, the EL–IWBs relationship, and second, the existence of IWBs with regard to the support provided by the organization (POS). Evidence from this study support a strong-positive and significant relationship between EL and IWBs, which is consistent with the works of Mugonya *et al.* (2020), Özsungur (2019), Ahmad *et al.* (2021) and Javed *et al.* (2020). Also, this study established that a supportive environment within the organization enhances ethical leader’s effectiveness in promoting IWBs, confirming suitability of the contingency theory to successful realization of IWBs. More importantly, organizational support that promotes a positive reciprocal affinity between the workers and their respective organizations generates a robust effect on EL/IWBs relationship. This study provides an empirical response to the call by Wang *et al.* (2015) of the need to investigate the supportive determinants of employees’ IWBs. By demonstrating that EL improves employees’ innovative capabilities, we bridge this gap in existing innovation literature. EL therefore serves as a precursor for employees’ IWBs by enhancing POS and reassuring employees to intellectually map out alternative problem-solving mechanisms.

This study recognizes POS as a critical contingent aspect that affects the effect of EL on employees’ IWBs. Prior studies have suggested that organizational factors such as POS may impact the effectiveness of EL (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). We provide evidence for this conjecture by demonstrating that POS moderated the relationship between EL and IWBs such that the strength of the association is high for employees’ perception that they are highly valued by the organization. Our findings show that leaders and employees’ perception of being valued and cared for should be taken into consideration to better

Table 5.
Conditional indirect
effects at specific
value of moderator
(POS) and
independent variable
(ethical leadership):
±1 SD

Dependent variable – POS	Conditional indirect effect	SE	BC 95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
Innovative work behavior	–1 SD (2.27)	0.92	0.83	1.00
	+1 SD (4.19)	1.15	1.05	1.25

Notes: BC: Biased corrected; CI: Confidence intervals (for 5,000 bootstrap resamples); SE: Standard error; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

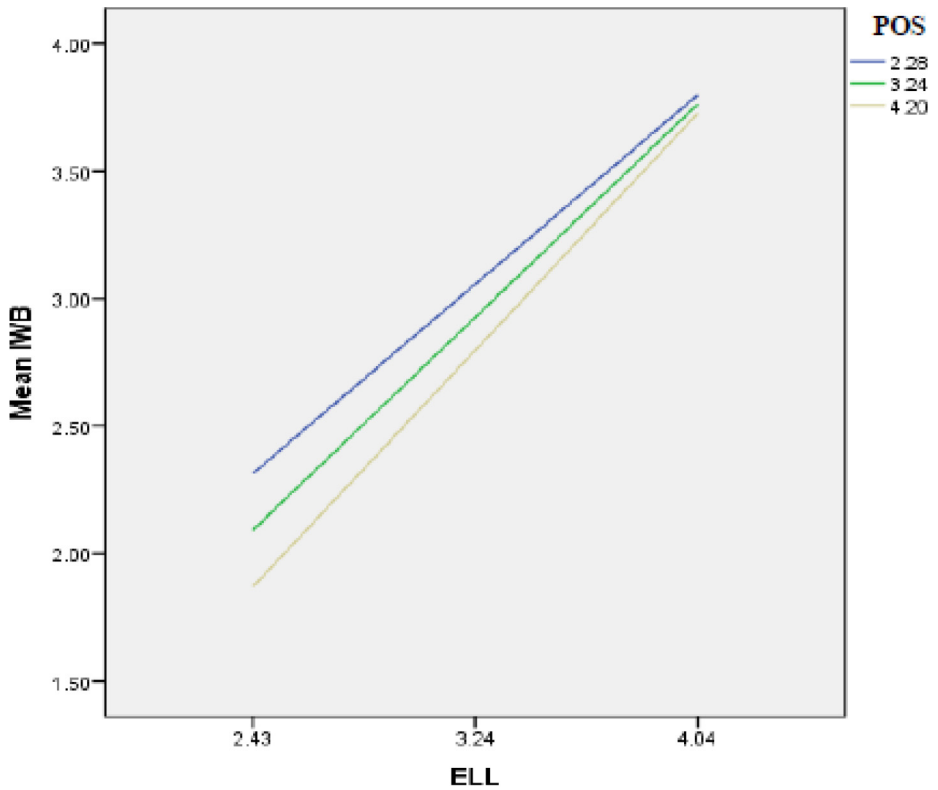
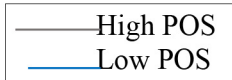


Figure 2.
Interaction effect



understand factors that influence employees' outcomes for IWBs. This study advances literature on EL by supporting the traditional SET (Blau, 1964) with new theoretical insights from the OST (Eisenberger et al., 2001). In so doing, we expand its theoretical range to explain support-based results that depend on employees' POS.

Second, POS allows contribution to both EL and innovation literature by suggesting that POS significantly strengthens the relationship between EL and IWBs. Notably, this study answers calls by Jung et al. (2003), Jung et al. (2008) and Oke et al. (2009) for more research on how organizational context might boost and/or hamper the effects of EL on employees' IWBs. Specifically, this study provides proof that POS moderates EL-IWBs relationship. This finding implies that the presence of EL *per se* might be insufficient to cause substantial variations in employee IWBs. Therefore, POS boosts the desirable employees' IWBs. That is, when employees perceive a supportive environment, ethical leaders may generate more benefits to enhance their capabilities and motivation, thereby enhancing their IWBs. EL might provide benefits that followers could make best use to better their innovative capabilities. Supportive behaviors emanating from ethical leaders enable followers perceive their contributions as being valued, and that the organization cares about their well-being,

which might boost POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011), and translate into high employee innovations (Mokhber *et al.*, 2018). When employees have a low perception of organizational support, irrespective of the desirable ethical behaviors exhibited by their leaders, they might not engage in organizational innovation practices. On the basis of this, POS is an integral element in furthering the role of EL in momentous IWBs.

Third, this IWB moderation model that is grounded on two major euro-leaning theories, i.e. OST (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986) and SET (Blau, 1964), was tested using data from a low developing country, “Uganda” and specifically, public universities. Lately, very limited empirical studies have examined EL behavior and its influence on staff outcomes in developing countries such as Uganda. Uganda is a communal-based society faced with differing political and economic challenges, consequently, establishing a unique environment for this investigation. Remarkably, the study findings showed that EL can be more effective in organizations such as universities within a country characterized with such a unique setting and/or environment. These findings demonstrate that EL can be important across a spectrum of diverse cultures.

Building on prior work, this study sheds new light on managing university employees’ IWBs through provision of an ideal and definite context for recognizing and exploring how EL and POS mutually enhance employees’ IWBs. Particularly, as higher education industry is highly structured, that is, being too bureaucratic, meaningful innovation processes will demand a sustained change in leadership roles from leading to helping followers undertake more self-directed activities that stimulate their importance in universities’ creative discourse and process. To offer a robust and a more extensive understanding of employees’ IWBs in Uganda, studies ought to consider the valuable role of ethics in leadership, besides a leadership type that emphasizes follower’s well-being, that is, EL (Walumbwa, 2009; Sulaiman *et al.*, 2019). This is because EL’s unique features re-shape followers’ perception of support and improve on their IWBs as they feel a sense of importance (Randel *et al.*, 2018). Also, success in innovation hinges on the degree to which employees are granted autonomy to exercise their creative abilities (Wang *et al.*, 2015). These theoretical insights place a duty on both scholars and practitioners to devise mechanisms aimed at reversing the traditionally hierarchical management structures so as to create innovative space and climate.

Practical implications

This study suggests important implications for practice and or management. First, the findings signal the significance of providing a supportive organizational environment for effective implementation of EL principles. Study evidence suggest that organizations must develop an environment of support that include worker peer support for effective implementation of EL principles. When employees perceive lack of organizational and co-worker support, then benefits of EL principles may not be realized.

Second, this study expresses to university management of the need to prioritize EL as a fulcrum for their human capital management practices. Whilst several practices *inter alia* recruitment and selection, staff training and development, among others, exist and are associated with employees’ innovative capabilities, leadership stands out. EL training programs in the areas of accountability, individual and moral justification, competing values to promote ethical decision-making, among others, must be embedded in the EL training programs. Considering the influential role of leadership on employee behavior, both hiring and promotion decisions must integrate ethics as an essential feature, especially for strategic and middle-level positions on the organization’s structure.

Third, the important finding of the moderating effect of POS between the basic relationship of EL–employee IWBs provides important implications for both supervisors and subordinates. This finding reveals the fundamental value of POS for enhancing employee IWBs. Because POS represents personal perceived motivation on employees' part, management needs to recognize the importance of an employee supportive environment, if they are to benefit from ELs' influence on employees' IWBs. Management therefore needs to embrace POS practices such as shared communication, employee-centered leadership, flexible work practices and just employee treatment, among others (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001). As employees perceive an environment of support from their organizations, their performance capabilities rise and are able to match the demanding work schedules which might lead to innovation. POS is even more valued in the presence of ethical leaders. The value of POS may even be higher under the direction of highly ethical leaders because of their higher tendency to punish unethical behaviors while rewarding ethical behaviors that are strongly associated with innovation.

Finally, to arouse employees' culture and sense of innovativeness, organizations could rely on several sources of innovation, which might be individual or contextual, rather than focusing on a sole factor. This implication is based on the current findings that suggest that an integrated innovation model involving the constructs of EL and POS can lead to enhanced IWBs. Management must, therefore, recognize that POS complements EL in driving innovation within organizations. We, therefore, suggest that besides promoting EL to boost IWBs among employees, organizations are urged to create a workplace characterized by high POS to promote high levels of IWBs.

Conclusions, limitations and areas for future research

Success of higher education industry, specifically public universities, is leveraged on their capability for sustainable innovation. Therefore, investigation of the factors impacting IWBs is fundamentally relevant. EL is widely acknowledged as one of such most significant aspects of IWBs. In the field of empirical studies on EL and IWBs, inconsistency of findings is rife, providing justification for investigation of process variables such as moderators, in an effort to clarify the EL–IWBs relationship. This study explores the moderating role of POS in explaining how it facilitates EL to stimulate IWBs. The findings provided support for POS as a relevant moderator in the association between EL and IWBs at the employee-level analysis. This research might therefore induce future studies to consider IWBs studies at institutional level, and more importantly in the setting of private universities.

The contribution of this study must be judged in light of the limitations. First, the sample for this study was drawn from public universities in Uganda, and therefore, the findings may only be generalizable to that sector. Future studies are therefore needed to corroborate this study with multi-industry and country samples. Second, this study used self-rating scales, yet, use of such scales to measure IWB might have higher mean statistics, also called higher leniency error, as well as restricted range termed as-lower variability error in the score (Thornton, 1968). Finally, this study relied on a cross-sectional research design that only allows for examination of statistical relationship at a single point in time, and statements regarding the direction of the hypothesized relationships can only be made in terms of consistency of findings with the proposed effects in the theoretical development. In light of this, future research should consider adopting longitudinal approach to methodically examine the theoretical links hypothesized in our study.

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