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## The mediation mechanism of ethical climate in the relationship of ethical leadership and internal whistleblowing intention

Short Title: The mediation mechanism of ethical climate.....

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## Abstract

A Firm's unethical practices may deteriorate its performance, slow down its growth, and lastly affect the goodwill of the firm. Horseplay and malpractices significantly influence the organizations, humans, and even societies. The firm's employees can perform a crucial role in the finding of malpractices in the firm and they can report it to the upper authorities through proper reporting channels. But, due to the fear of retribution, they remain silent. In this regard, an ethical-leader can play a crucial function to motivate subordinates towards internal whistleblowing by providing them a moral atmosphere, so, they can report horse-play to the appropriate authorities without any fear. This research study investigates the effect of ethical-leadership on the internal whistle-blowing intentions and the mediation result of an ethical-climate between ethical-leadership and internal whistle-blowing intentions. Researchers collected data through a survey from the education sector. This study demonstrates the positive result of ethical-leadership on internal whistle-blowing intentions and ethical climate is positively mediated between the ethical-leadership and the internal whistle-blowing intentions. This research has also discussed Theoretical and practical implications.

**Keywords:** Ethical leadership, Ethical climate, and Internal whistleblowing intentions, Education sector.

## 1. Introduction:

The firm's unethical practices have been attaining attention for the last few years. Kreikebaum (2008) has stated that the firm's malpractices are a critical issue for the firm's growth and development that consist of moral, and economic aspects? Whistleblowing can be elaborated as "it is the act that informs the unethical and malpractices at the work-place" (Vinten, 1994). Whistle-blowing has been capturing the attention of media and press because it is being pressed across the world and it has become a critical issue for the researcher and firm's management since the last few years that how misconduct can be removed from the organization (R. L. Sims & Keenan, 1998). The Firm's wrongdoing may include violations which are mismanagement by the employees, wastage of the firm's funds, safety and health issues, sexual harassment, the wrong use of the firm's property, or use for their benefit and to accept bribes. Whistleblowing can be taken as the employee's response to an event that can be an productive way to stop unethical and malpractices in the firm (Gibbs, 2020).

Internal whistle-blowing intention helps the firm to quickly identify the illegal practices which will ultimately help the firm to correct them as earlier as possible, but it will not be implied or limited if the ethical leader does not reinforce the ethical behavior in the organization (Lewis, 2011). Internal whistle-blowing can be an opportunity for the firm to deal with unethical practices without external pressure and without fear of being published in the newspaper (Lewis, 2002) and precautionary measures can be easily taken against the unethical practices in the firm

(Chambers, 1995). On the other, if wrong and illegal practices are reported externally, it can affect the firm badly as it can damage the firm's reputation and also affect its financial standing because the firm can lose its market share and market goodwill (Bowen, Call, & Rajgopal, 2010). The firm must honor the workforce who report unethical and malpractices to the upper authority because they assist in eliminating unethical practices. In this regard, an ethical leader can train their employees and build loyalty in them which ultimately helps the organization to remove wrongdoings or illegal activity. The ethical climate prevailing in the organization can also add positive effects in stopping internal whistleblowing.

Organizations' illegal or wrong acts can negatively affect the organization in many ways as its potential customers, health/safety of employees, its potential investors, and society at large (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008). So, it is the moral obligation of the ethical leader that the internal whistleblowing intentions of employees must be regarded. An ethical leader plays its role on both government and organization levels to ethically remove wrongdoings or illegal acts under the ethical climate prevailing in the country or organization. A Firm's un-ethical practices may deteriorate its performance, slow-down its growth and lastly affect the good-will of the firm. There are seldom researches about ethical-leadership and internal whistle-blowing intentions, but no study on whistleblowing is conducted with the mediation mechanism of ethical climate. With the discovery of a new research model as ethical-leadership (EL), the ethical-climate (EC), and Internal whistle-blowing intention (IWBI), (after this abbreviation will be used), this article will address the following research gap. The motive of this study is to analyze the effect of EL on IWBI and through the mediation effect of EC.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Whistle-blowing:**

Whistleblowing is mainly the combination of the verb "to blow" and the word "whistle". This expression has mainly this meaning "to blow the whistle" or "Whistle-blowing" is meant to disclose unethical practices (Sampaio & Sobral, 2013). Whistleblowing is defined as the disclosure of wrong-doings and un-ethical practices of persons or a group of persons through selected ways of the firm (Rachagan & Kuppusamy, 2013). IWBI helps the firm to quickly identify the malpractices which will ultimately help the firm to correct them as earlier as possible, but they will not be implied or limited if the ethical leader does not reinforce the ethical behavior in the organization (Lewis, 2011). IWBI discloses the illegal act or malpractices to the administration of the association and the external whistle-blowing intentions in which malpractices are disclosed to persons outside the organization. IWBI can be affected by different variables such as unethical behavior, unfair leadership, reward system failure, moral responsibilities, etc.

<b>Table 1</b>				
Previous studies on the consequences of Whistleblowers.				
Related Studies	Predictors	Mediators	Moderators	Outcomes
Alpkan, Karabay, Şener, Elçi, and Yıldız (2020)	Perceived ethical leadership & perceived distributive justice.	Trust in the leader.	None	Internal whistleblowing intentions.
Malik and Nawaz (2018)	Ethical Leadership.	Psychological Safety.	None	Internal whistleblowing intentions.
Cheng, Bai, and Yang (2019)	Ethical Leadership.	Perceptions of Organizational Politics.	Moral Courage	Internal whistleblowing intentions.
Y. Liu, Zhao, Li, Zhou, and Tian (2018)	organizational identification.	None	Perceived ethical climate and Proactive personality	Internal whistleblowing intentions.
Çemberci, Civelek, and Günel (2016)	Ethical Leadership.	Ethical Climate.	None	Organizational Commitment.
Lu and Lin (2014)	Ethical Leadership.	Ethical Climate.	None	Employee Ethical Behavior.
Mayer, Kuenzi, and Greenbaum (2010)	Ethical Leadership.	Ethical Climate.	None	Employee Misconduct.
Our Study	Ethical Leadership.	Ethical Climate.	None	Internal whistleblowing intentions.

## **2.2. Ethical leadership:**

EL is the appropriate behavior that is shown by the leader and is transferred by the leader to the sub-ordinates through communication, training, reinforcement of ethics, and decision making (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). EL is normally classified in two dimensions, the first one is a moral creature, and the other one is a moral administrator. In the first dimension which is a moral person, EL is normally perceived as a trusted person, who acts fair, he must be honest and behaves ethically (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012), and in the second dimension which is the moral manager, EL is supported by the ethical leader and unethical behavior is discouraged by the leader through his managerial actions, such as to reward a person for his ethical attitude, give a penalty to the person who is involved in unethical practices and he use two way transmission (Brown et al., 2005). Literature defines three features of an ethical-leadership. First, EL demonstrates ethical-behavior, second, the EL is ideal for the subservient, and third, EL also provides ethical ground to subservient (Brown et al., 2005).

## **2.3. The ethical climate:**

According to Victor and Cullen (1988), the EC has shared the apprehension of what is the right behavior which employee should show, and how the ethical-hobbles should be treated in the company. Victor and Cullen are the “Fathers of EC” and the construct of the EC was introduced by these researchers in 1987 (Victor & Cullen, 1988). According to Victor and Cullen (1988) Just like human corporates, it is believed that they have their own set of ethics which define their character. The firm’s history, the form of the organization, and the socio-culture environment of the firm are recognized as the determinants of the firm’s ethical climate. Ethical climate prostrates beneath the value system of the firm (Denison, 1996). The ethical climate of the firm is influenced by the self-interest, profit of the company, interest of the teams, their social responsibility, professional codes, the morality of individuals, set of rules and laws (R. R. Sims, 1992). Literature demonstrates the crucial role is played by the top management of the company both in the origination and succession of the company’s ethical climate (Schein, 1990) (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). The actual behavior of the top-management is the most crucial factor, “ what the top management do, and the culture they provide, organize and re-enforce, demonstrates the way how the lower-level employees act when the company faces the ethical hobbles. (R. R. Sims, 1992).

## **3. Research Hypothesis:**

### **3.1. EC and IWBI:**

EL is meant to demonstrate the moral-behaviors and moral managerial operations in a firm (Brown & Treviño, 2006). EL plays a significant part in shaping the ethicality of sub-ordinates (Brown et al., 2005). The EL performs ethical behavior which will be a sample for their subordinates. People incline to assimilate their own-ethicality to other individuals and then they alter their ethicality accordingly (G. Liu & Ren, 2017). So, we can conclude that sub-

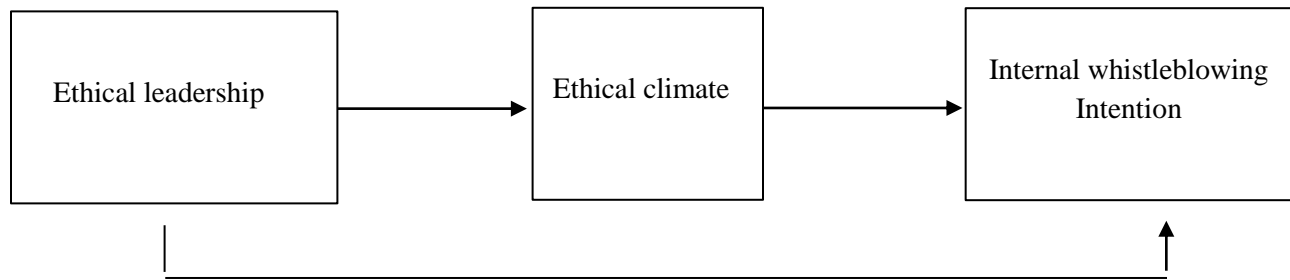
ordinates collate and regulate their ethicality according to the ethicality of their leader. Ethical leadership has a negative relationship with unethical behavior (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011) but is favorably affiliated with pro-social behavior (Brown et al., 2005). EL is normally classified in two dimensions, the first one is a moral creature, and the other one is a moral administrator. In the first classification which is a moral person, the EL is normally perceived as a trusted person, who acts fair, must be honest, and behaves ethically (Mayer et al., 2012 & Kuenzi, 2012). So, subordinates will change their behavior accordingly, and in the second dimension which is the moral administrator. Ethical behavior is supported by an ethical leader, and unethical behavior is discouraged by the leader through his managerial actions, such as to reward a person for his ethical attitude, give a penalty to the person who is involved in unethical practices and use two-way communication (Brown et al., 2005). So, an ethical-leader originates an ethical behavior within subordinates and raises the ethical traits among subordinates. Subordinates will consider that it is unethical to conceal malpractices. Ethical leaders always consider, “what is right” and “how we can follow the right,” they conceive whistle-blowers as important to the firm, regarding, encouraging, and even compensating whistle-blowers (Brown et al., 2005). The following hypothesis is constructed with the help of above discussion:

**H1:** The EL has a favorable and positive effect on the IWBI.

### ***3.2. The mediation effect of EC***

It is believed by the employees that the presence of un-ethical practices is the consequence of unawareness of administration than they are unwilling to correct it, so, subordinates believe that the company will regard, recognized, and reward the whistle-blowers because it is the contribution of subordinates toward company (Leung, 2008). EL plays an important part in shaping the ethicality of staff members (Brown et al., 2005). The EL performs ethical behavior which will be a sample for their subordinates. Subordinates discern ethical climate as an ethical atmosphere (Wang & Hsieh, 2012). Moral administration plays a crucial part in this regard because they are in the situation, they can easily observe their subordinates and at the same time, they can guide employees on what is the value and what is expected from them (Ashforth, 1985). The literature demonstrates that the ethical behavior of the subordinates is affected by the ethical climate of the firm (Valentine, Varca, Godkin, & Barnett, 2010). So, if whistleblowers are welcomed in the firm, as they are regarded, appreciated, and rewarded they will be intended to disclose un-ethical practices. A study by Bartels, Harrick, Martell, and Strickland (1998) showed that the ethical climate of the firm is negatively related to ethical-misconducts. Because employees report unethical practices to the management and management can take steps to remove unethical practices. The following hypothesis is constructed with the help of the above discussion:

**H2:** The EC positively mediates between the EL and the IWBI.

**Theoretical Framework****Figure 1:** Research Model**4. Theoretical consideration:**

In this study, we have underpinned the theory; (SLT) social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to know how internal whistleblowing intentions of followers are influenced by Ethical Leadership. Like, on the group-level, ethical leaders may create an ethical climate to motivate employees for reporting wrong-doings and at the individual level, ethical leaders build personal identification and can motivate them to report malpractices in the firm. SL theory is a theory of learning process and social-behavior which stated that by limitations and observations new behavior can be acquired. Furthermore, in the observation of behavior, learning can also be acquired by the observation of rewards and punishments, this way is known as vicarious reinforcement.

**5. Research Methods:****5.1. Research Participants and Samples:**

The target population for this research is all the teachers of the education sector of Punjab, Pakistan. According to the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, our sample size is 381. We have collected data in December 2020. We have collected data by distributing the questionnaire. By using a stratified sampling technique, we have collected data from three cities of Punjab (Sialkot, Lahore, and Islamabad). The demographic of the participants and socioeconomic factors of the sample revealed 56.66% males have solved the questionnaire and 43.34% females have solved the questionnaire. The teacher which has been teaching for 1 to 5 years' tenure are 73.10%, 5 to 10 year are 16.19%, 10 to 15 years are 6.79% and more than 15 years 3.92%.

<b>Table 2</b>		
Demographic attributes of respondents.		
Profile	Category	%age
Gender	Male	56.66%



	Female	43.34%
Tenure	1 to 5 years.	73.10%
	5 to 10 years.	16.19%
	10 to 15 years.	6.79%
	More than 15 years.	3.92%

## 5.2. Measures:

The authors have applied a questionnaire examination to test the proposed hypotheses of the study. The questionnaire is broken down into four parts. The first section was related to the participant's personal information such as name, gender, and tenure of teaching. In the second part, respondents were asked about ethical leadership. The third section was related to the items of ethical climate. The last part was covering the questions of internal whistleblowing intentions. The IWBI is measured with 4 items developed by (Park, Rehg, & Lee, 2005). The EL is evaluated with 10-items evolved by (Brown et al., 2005). In the end, the EC is measured with 14 items developed by (Tsai & Huang, 2008). "The Likert-scale employed in this study varies from 1 "strongly dis-agree" to 5 "strongly agree".

<b>Table 3</b>			
<b>Correlations</b>			
	Ethical-Leadership	Ethical-Climate	Internal whistle-blowing intentions
Ethical-Leadership	<b>0.78</b>		
Ethical-Climate	0.85***	<b>0.86</b>	
internal whistle-blowing intentions	0.74***	0.74***	<b>0.80</b>

Note: n= 383, Bold figures on the diagonal are the square roots of the AVE for constructs.

\*p < 0.01; \*\*p < 0.005; \*\*\*p < 0.001

## 6. Results

### 6.1. The evaluation model

To evaluate data, a two-way step technique is used (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). To test the reliability of the data we have assessed Composite reliability (CR) and checked Cronbach's  $\alpha$ . To determine the discriminate-validity and the convergent-validity, the Standard Factor Loadings (SFL) were calculated and the (AVE) average variance extracted (Avey et al., 2011) was tested. After confirming the evaluation model, the model of structural equation (SEM) was analyzed to determine the association among the three constructs of the study (EL, EC, and IWBI). For statistical evaluation of the study, SPSS 26, Smart PLS 3.0, and Amos 26 were utilized.



**Table 4**

<b>Confirmatory Factor Analysis</b>		
<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>SFL</b>
Ethical Leadership Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$ CR = 0.94 AVE = 0.61	My senior listens to what employees have to say.	0.75
	My senior disciplines employees who violate ethical standards.	0.75
	My senior conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner.	0.71
	My senior has the best interests of employees in mind.	0.78
	My senior Makes fair and balanced decisions.	0.81
	My senior can be trusted.	0.82
	My senior discusses business ethics or values with employees.	0.77
	My senior sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics.	0.81
	My senior defines success not just by results but also the way they are obtained.	0.82
	My senior asks “what is the right thing to do?” when making decisions.	0.79
Ethical Climate Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$ CR = 0.95 AVE = 0.74	What is best for everyone in the institution is the major consideration here.	0.74
	The most important concern is the good of all the people in the institution as a Whole.	0.78
	Our major concern is always what is best for the other person.	0.74
	In this institution, people are expected to follow their own personal and moral beliefs.	0.71
	In this institution, people are guided by their own personal ethics.	0.72
	Each person in this institution decides for themselves what is right and wrong.	0.73
	In this institution, the law or ethical code of their profession is the major consideration.	0.77
	In this institution, people are expected to strictly follow legal or professional standards.	0.79
	People are expected to comply with the law and professional standards over and above other considerations.	0.80
	Successful people in this institution go by the book.	0.81
	People in this institution strictly obey the institution's policies.	0.80
	People are expected to do anything to further the institution's interests, regardless of the consequences.	0.84
	There is a room for one's own personal morals or ethics in this institution.	0.76
In this institution, people protect their own interests above all else.	0.74	
Internal Whistle	I would report it to my immediate supervisor.	0.83

Blowing Cronbach' s $\alpha$ =0.85 CR = 0.90 AVE = 0.65	I would report it to an upper level of management in the organization.	0.77
	I would use the official reporting channels inside of the organization.	0.84
	I would report it by using internal procedures	0.88

Overall Model fit: chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) = 773.82,  $\chi^2/df$ = 2.23,  $p < 0.001$ , CFI= 0.94, NFI= 0.90, RMSEA= 0.06

First, the evaluation model was anticipated by Confirmatory Factor Analysis. All the variables of the study were loaded with their corresponding measurement-items and variables for correlation analysis were authorized (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

To test the reliability of the data we have assessed Composite reliability (CR) and checked Cronbach's  $\alpha$ . Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value for all the variables are ranging from 0.85 to 0.95. Cronbach's alpha  $\alpha$  of all the variables is meeting the minimum requirement which is 0.70. Composite reliability (CR) of all the contracts are ranging from 0.90 to 0.95 which is more than the standard value of CR that is 0.70. This analysis shows that data is fully reliable now we can go for validity.

Items of standardized factor loading are varied from 0.71 to 0.88, which is more than standard and the level of significance is 0.70. All the values of the Average variance extracted are between the range of 0.61 to 0.74 and the level of significance is 0.50. In summary, high reliability and high validity are demonstrated by the research data.

In order to estimate the fitness of the model for confirmatory factor analysis, the Chi-square test and several fit indices were performed. Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) was 773.82. The  $\chi^2/df$  was 2.23. The comparative-fit index (CFI) value was more than the recommended standard value by (Bentler, 1990) which was 0.94. The RMSEA was 0.06, and the Normed-fit index value was also significant which was 0.90. The statistical findings showed that the models' overall fitness was acceptable.

**Table 5**

<b>Main Effect</b>			
<b>Hypothesized Path</b>	<b>Path Coef</b>	<b>T Value</b>	<b>P Value</b>
Ethical Leadership -> Whistle Blowing	0.38	14.08	0.00001
Ethical Leadership -> Ethical Climate	0.86	172.09	0.00001
Ethical Climate -> Whistle Blowing	0.42	15.79	0.00001

### 6.2. The Structure equational model:

The evaluations of the parameters showed that EL is favorably and significantly affecting the IWBI ( $b=0.38$ ,  $t=14.086$ ) as appeared in the main effect of Table 5. The influence of EL on EC ( $b=0.86$ ,  $t=172.09$ ) and the EC on IWBI ( $b=0.42$ ,  $t=15.79$ ) is positive and significant. So, the H1 and H2 both were also supported.

Sobel Test (Z)						
Hypothesis	Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	Z value	P value	Status
H2	Ethical Leadership	Ethical Climate	Internal Whistle-Blowing Intentions	15.72	0.00001	Accepted

## 7. Discussion:

A firm's malpractices are a critical issue for the firm's growth and development that consist of moral and economic aspects (Kreikebaum, 2008). Whistle-blowing is the act that informs the illegal and unethical practices of the work-place" (Vinten, 1994). According to our findings, the EL has a positive impact on the IWBI and the EC has proved a good mediator between the EC and the IWBI. Cheng et al. (2019) This study supporting our findings, the EL has a positive effect on IWBI. A study by Wen and Chen (2016) found a positive relationship between the EC and the IWBI in China. A study conducted in Indonesia on the accountants found that the EL has in-significant results on external whistle-blowing intentions, but the EL has a favorable result on IWBI (Cintya & Yustina, 2019). A study conducted on the banking sector of Pakistan demonstrates a positive and favorable relationship between EC and whistle-blowing intentions (Malik & Nawaz, 2018). The study of Lu and Lin (2014) found that the EC positively and significantly mediates between the EC and employee ethical-behavior which is relatively close to our model. The EC positively mediates between the EL and employee-misconduct (Mayer et al., 2010). The study of Çemberci et al. (2016) has found that the EC is a significant mediator between EL and organizational commitment. These previous researches are close to our model and all these studies have found the ethical climate as a significant mediator, so, these studies are supporting our results.

## 8. Theoretical and practical Implications:

There are several theoretical considerations in this research. Firstly, the mediator is supported between the EL and the IWBI. Secondly, our research is also contributing to the ethical climate literature. This research has shown a significant result with the help of the mediator, how ethical climates positively, and significantly mediates between ethical leadership

and internal whistle-blowing intentions. On the contrary, the practical implication is that this research is also helping the leaders that how they can motivate their sub-ordinates to report unethical practices of the firm/institution. So, they can easily pinpoint the malpractices when they receive an ethical climate prevailed in the institution, and when they know that our firm rewards and honors the whistle-blowers, then they will intend to report wrong-doings. In the end, this research is providing its contributions to the study of (Mayer et al., 2010). This study elaborates that when an ethical leader with the help of an ethical climate can reinforce ethics, employee's misconducts can be removed but our study contributes in this sense that when the ethical leader welcomes whistleblowers, who report un-ethical practices and they also receive an ethical climate under which they have no fear of firing, only then they are willing to report malpractices of the firm. It is believed by the employees that the presence of unethical practices is the consequence of unawareness of the administration than they are unwilling to correct it, so, subordinates believe that the company will regard, recognized, and reward the whistle-blowers because it is the contribution of subordinates toward company (Leung, 2008). So, the management can eliminate malpractices, horseplay, and misconducts when employees report these un-ethical practices to the upper management.

## **9. Conclusion:**

This study is conducted to investigate the effect of EL on IWBI and the mediation effect of EC, whether the EC is positively mediating or not. This research has used a 383-sample size, data collected from the education sector of Punjab, Pakistan. This research has found that ethical leadership has positively and significantly influenced the employee's internal whistle-blowing intentions. This research has also found that the EC is positively mediating between EL and IWBI. So, this research has found EC as an effective mediator between the EL and the IWBI. In conclusion, an ethical leader, with the help of an ethical climate can motivate employees to report unethical practices so these malpractices can be removed by the management.

## **10. Limitations, and the future direction:**

Our study has several limitations. Firstly, we have conducted cross-sectional research. So, Future researchers would conduct longitudinal studies for more authentic results. Secondly, we have collected data from the education sector of the Punjab province of Pakistan. So, the future researcher can collect data from other sectors and the whole country for more generalizability and authentic results. Future researchers can also introduce a new mediator "Moral Courage" with an ethical climate to test the joint effect between ethical leadership and internal whistle-blowing intentions. Furthermore, future researchers can add the other dimension of the whistle-blowing " external whistle-blowing intention" (Nayir & Herzig, 2012) with internal whistle-blowing intentions.

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