ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR CREATIVITY AT WORK

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Abstract. With permanents global changes, organizations are increasingly required to promote employee creative behavior to deal with competitiveness keeping ethical leadership practices and responsible models of management. The purpose of this research is to investigate the effect of ethical leadership on creativity and estimates the mediating effect of organizational support for creativity in this relationship. A cross-sectional approach with a sample of 258 professionals, employees of different companies and economic sectors in the city of Lima, Peru, was employed. Valid and reliable instruments were used to assess the perception of the variables studied, and direct and indirect effects were tested using structural equation models. The results indicate that ethical leadership positively influences creativity both directly and through organizational support for creativity. This draws attention to the opportunity that leaders have to optimize organizational processes, procedures, and protocols oriented toward responsibility and respect for others to encourage creative behavior in employees. Furthermore, theoretical, and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: corporate responsibility, creativity, employees' creativity, ethical leadership, organizational support for creativity, productivity.

Introduction

In recent years, organizations have been facing continuous competition in rapidly changing environments. These dynamics require organizational leaders to identify and promote skills so that their companies can use innovation, responsibility, and sustainability to deal with environmental challenges (Cheng & Yang, 2019; Melnikas, 2019; Saleem et al., 2020; Suifan et al., 2018).

To address these challenges, creativity has been identified as a critical resource and an important source of competitive advantage (Ferreira et al., 2020; Sarooghi et al., 2015), as well as a skill that organizational leaders must be willing to foster in employees (Shalley & Lemoine, 2019). This means it is important to consider people's capacities and the characteristics of work environments that help foment creativity.

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Creativity, understood as the generation of new and useful ideas (Amabile & Pratt, 2016) and as a particular way of solving problems to produce something new and valuable (Anderson et al., 2014), has been found to be related to resource optimization, quality enhancement, process transformation and adaptation, and improvement in organizational capabilities and in productivity (Gong et al., 2009; Lim, 2016). Moreover, creativity has been shown to strengthen effective decision-making, continuous knowledge building, and innovation practices (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; de Lucia et al., 2016).

While creativity in organizations is determined by a number of variables, various studies (*e.g.* Gupta & Singh, 2015; Hirst et al., 2009; Shalley & Lemoine, 2019; Scott & Bruce, 1994; McMahon & Ford, 2013; Suifan et al., 2018) have revealed the relationship between leadership and creativity, indicating that in the process of generating new ideas, the ways in which those who manage and lead exert influence may predict employees' creative behavior and foster environments and cultures of creation, invention, and creative interaction among team members.

Conceptually, leadership has been understood as a process of intentional influence on other people to guide them, structure their activities and relationships within the organization, with the purpose of facilitating individual and collective efforts to achieve shared objectives (van Knippenberg, 2020; Yukl & van Fleet, 1992). Moreover, leaders in organizations play an essential role in influencing employees' perceptions of what is ethical and beneficial to the organization and employees (Yukl et al., 2013).

However, regarding the ethical behavior of leaders and its effect on the creativity of employees, more empirical evidence is required to establish whether this type of leadership and its characteristics directly influences employee creativity. On the other hand, and as suggested by some authors, it is necessary to demonstrate that in highly competitive scenarios and permanent demand for disruptive behavior, the moral development of leaders is an essential component to adapt to changes and promote innovation in organizations (Cheng & Yang, 2019; Feng et al., 2018; Gu et al., 2015; Sharif & Scandura, 2014).

In addition, it is important to consider that in their attempt to encourage creative behavior and motivate extraordinary problem-solving, leaders in organizations might be inducing risk-taking, rule-breaking (Neves & Eisenberger, 2014), and "out-of-the-box" thinking, which can give rise to moral conflict or dilemma in employees and lead to ethical issues (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Yidong & Xinxin, 2013). This is favorable to neither organizational sustainability nor their reputation (McMahon & Ford, 2013). Creative processes that are properly conducted demand restrictions and rules be applied, and those who lead these processes are responsible for their results and effectiveness.

Therefore, employees' perception of ethical leadership, 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),

becomes a factor that is relevant to the creativity they show and its corresponding impact on organizational results.

Ethical leadership has been proven to cause positive attitudes and behaviors, pro-social conducts, and ethical behavior (Avey et al., 2011; Lu & Lin, 2014; Mayer et al., 2013; Wang & Sung, 2016) as well as the performance of tasks, work engagement, and the effort and initiative of employees (Bouckenooghe et al., 2015; Demirtas, 2015; Sharif & Scandura, 2014). It may foster greater commitment, engagement, and creative suggestions about processes, procedures, and products (Shin-Yih Chen & Hou, 2016; Wu et al., 2015).

Similarly, insofar as employees perceive organizational practices of support and recognition, actions such as the generation and communication of ideas are motivated; therefore, the perception of support can be considered a rather important component in the process (Bos-Nehles et al., 2017; Lukes & Stephan, 2017).

Specifically, organizational support for creativity, understood as the degree to which an employee perceives that the organization encourages, respects, rewards, and recognizes employees who exhibit creativity (Scott & Bruce, 1994; Zhou & George, 2001), is a factor linked to open expression of opinions, creative problem-solving, the effectiveness of creative behavior, initiative generation, development of cognitive skills, and innovation practices (Anderson et al., 2014).

Consequently, organizational support for creativity can be considered a factor that makes ethical leadership more effective, insofar as it reveals a context of collaboration, coherence, and equity, which, in turn, contributes to the reduction of potential ethical risks linked to the generation of new and creative ideas.

Considering the aforementioned and to explain the relationship between the variables, this study makes use of social exchange theory (Blau, 2017), which assumes that in social relations within organizations, when one party does something valuable for another, the receiving party tends to respond reciprocally.

According to this theory, ethical leaders treat followers fairly, and, in turn, followers seek to act in accordance with those leaders' expectations (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Ko et al., 2018). In this sense, if employees perceive that they are supported, recognized, and valued for their ideas, then a moral obligation to add value to organizational goals, tasks, and processes is established (Ahmed et al., 2013).

In this context, this study explains the relationship between leaders' ethical behavior and employees' creativity and establishes whether perceptions of organizational support for creativity are involved in this relationship. The scope of this study was predictive explanatory, and a non-experimental cross-sectional design was used (Creswell, 2014). Data analysis was performed with descriptive, correlational, and multivariate statistical techniques, including structural equations models, which allowed identifying causal sequences between the variables examined and establishing the proposed mediating effect of organizational support for creativity on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee creativity.

This study presents a twofold novelty: on the one hand, the theoretical-conceptual approach to ethical leadership is considered a relatively recent model within the organizational leadership research field. This approach is valuable because, in creativity research, both the leader influence and organizational support are no included frequently as relevant variables.

On the other hand, correlational studies generally examine the relationship between two variables, leaving aside the effects of third variables. In this study, a multivariate analysis

technique was used to explore the mediating role of organizational support for creativity in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee creativity. In this way, the proposed model involves additional elements that enrich the comprehension of creativity in organizational contexts.

The results of this study contribute to ethical leadership knowledge because provide an understanding of how the characteristics of ethical leadership can promote employees to be creative through organizational support. Second, this study utilized social exchange theory to explain how ethical leadership influences employee creativity through the mediation of organizational support for creativity. Third, the implications of this research can help organizations to improve understand and develop key knowledge of ethical leadership that can enhance employee creativity.

1. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

The theoretical model proposed for this study indicates that ethical leadership has a direct and positive effect on employees' creativity, as well as an indirect effect through organizational support for creativity. Indeed, the positive effect of ethical leadership on organizational support for creativity is evident. It is also noted that organizational support for creativity has a positive effect on employees' creativity.

1.1. Ethical leadership and employees' creativity

Ethical leadership is related to the enhancement of creative practices and "cultures of creativity and innovation" in organizations as well as to commitment and intrinsic motivation at work (Kim & Brymer, 2011; Sharif & Scandura, 2014; Sumanth & Hannah, 2014). Ethical management involved in the formal and informal assignment of activities, as well as in new tasks and challenges, provides employees the opportunity to envision and conceive of ideas that creatively contribute to the processes of the organization.

Most studies that analyzed the effect of ethical leadership on employees' creativity report positive relationships (Chughtai, 2016; Duan et al., 2018; Javed et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2013; Mehmood, 2016; Shafique et al., 2020; Tu et al., 2019). Although two studies found a curvilinear relationship between these two variables, indicating that an adjusted perception of ethical leadership is required to motivate creativity (Feng et al., 2018; Mo et al., 2019), it can generally be inferred that leaders identified as moral individuals and promoters of ethical practices at work influence the creative actions of employees by appreciating their ideas, communicating effectively, building team confidence, inspiring innovative actions, strengthening their commitment to reaching goals and rising to the challenge, and behaving consistently with the organization's moral values, all of which generate in their employees reciprocity as reflected in their open, spontaneous, and free expression of creative, new ideas (Feng et al., 2018; Kalshoven et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2013; Ng & Feldman, 2015). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between ethical leadership and employees' creativity.

1.2. Ethical leadership and organizational support for creativity

In general, followers' assessment of their leaders is associated with their perception of organizational support, since leaders serve as representatives of the organization (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017; Suifan et al., 2018). In particular, the normative behaviors of guidance and care that can be observed in ethical leaders are reported to be associated with the perception that they support their followers' expression of ideas (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2012). In addition, the recognition and reward practices adopted by leaders toward employees who exhibit exceptional conducts tend to promote the perception of organizational support for this conduct (van Gils et al., 2015).

Similarly, on one hand, it has been shown that ethical leaders seek to establish work environments characterized by integrity and responsibility, providing support to employees, fomenting an atmosphere of trust, and reducing the risks posed by creative behavior (Loi et al., 2012; Tu et al., 2019). On the other hand, by encouraging pro-social behavior such as sharing creative ideas, suggesting changes, and helping others with problem-solving, ethical leaders influence employees' perception of the organization and their understanding of the organizational support mechanisms that are offered (Newman et al., 2014; Sacramento et al., 2008). Therefore, the following hypothesis can be established:

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between ethical leadership and organizational support for creativity.

1.3. Organizational support for creativity and employees' creativity

The support received by employees from the organization to carry out their duties, tasks, and responsibilities is a critical aspect of management as it contributes to the achievement of individual and work team results (Appu & Kumar Sia, 2015; Riggle et al., 2009). When managers specifically support employees' creative actions, it leads to the strengthening of innovation (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Anderson et al., 2014) and the generation of creative performance environments (Houghton & DiLiello, 2010).

Organizational support, when identified by employees as developmental experiences, helps predict creativity (Ibrahim et al., 2016), and when organizational support for conditions conducive to creativity includes resources (people, equipment, tools), motivation (encouraging new conducts, practices, and decision-making), and management processes (training, provision of rewards, follow-up), the impact on employees' ability to come up with and express ideas is effective (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017).

On one hand, organizational support for creativity promotes cooperation and communication, which are critical factors for the creation and exchange of knowledge (Avey et al., 2011; Carmeli et al., 2013), and, at the same time, it nurtures employees' creativity and sustains the search for innovation. On the other hand, when employees perceive that the organization values creative actions, these actions are validated, and creative performance is fostered by the establishment of relationships, roles, commitments, and challenges (Zhou & Hoever, 2014).

It can also be noted that employees are more committed to creativity if the organization ensures that creative actions are valuable, openly communicates this value, institutes

a culture that reinforces it, and effectively manages creativity (Mirzaee & Ghaffari, 2018). Similarly, creative conducts and practices are encouraged when employees' ideas are seriously considered or when novel ideas are identified as an opportunity for employee advancement (Yuandon et al., 2014).

Therefore, when employees perceive a high level of organizational support, they may exhibit behavior valuable to organizations to reciprocate the organization's benevolent treatment (Smith et al., 2019; Haque Talukder, 2019). If the organization provides high levels of support for creativity, it directs employees toward taking a proactive attitude in dealing with uncertainties and generating new ideas and ways of doing things to adapt and improve. Based on the above, the following is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive relationship between organizational support for creativity and employees' creativity.

1.4. Mediating effect of organizational support for creativity on the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' creativity

Although some studies have identified mediating variables in the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' individual creativity in organizational contexts, in the literature reviewed, no studies analyzing the particular effect of organizational support for creativity on this relationship were identified. The identified individual or relational mediating variables reported include shared knowledge and self-efficacy (Ma et al., 2013), voice behavior (Shin-Yih Chen & Hou, 2016), psychological empowerment and willingness to take risks (Duan et al., 2018; Javed et al., 2017), intrinsic motivation (Feng et al., 2018), and trust in the leader (Javed et al., 2018; Mehmood, 2016). Considering the important effect of organizational support for creativity on employees' creative behavior, as well as the relationship between organizational support and ethical leadership, it is believed that as ethical leaders succeed in promoting a supportive organizational environment for creativity, employees tend to behave creatively at work. Consequently, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 4: Organizational support for creativity mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' creativity.

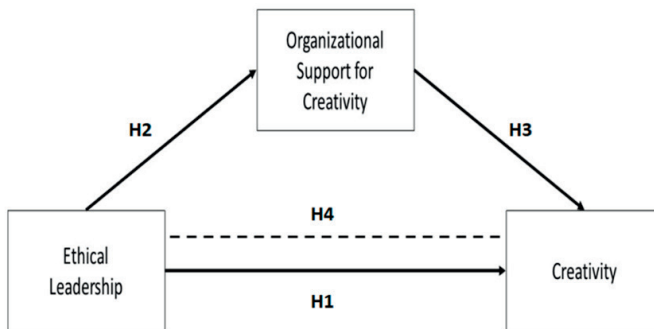The hypothesized relationships are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Proposed study model (source: created by authors)

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

This study applies a cross-sectional approach with a purposive sample consisting of 258 professionals employed by different organizations in different economic sectors in the city of Lima. The sample size was determined regarding the characteristics of the three-factor model (*i.e.*, ethical leadership, organizational support for creativity, and creativity). According to Hair Jr. et al. (2013), the minimum sample required in this scenario must be 100 or more participants. However, larger samples generally produce more stable results that are more likely to be replicable. The demographic and work characteristics of the sample are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic and work characteristics of the study participants (n = 258) (source: created by authors)

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Female	131	50.8
	Male	127	49.2
Age	18 to 29 years old	88	34.1
	30 to 39 years old	126	48.8
	40 years old or over	44	17.1
Marital status	Single	166	64.3
	Married	74	28.7
	Other	18	7.0
Highest academic degree held	Bachelor's degree	107	41.5
	Graduate degree	151	58.5
Academic field studied	Engineering	95	36.8
	Management and economics	90	34.9
	Social sciences, humanities, and law	65	25.2
	Others	8	3.1
Organization size	Small and medium	120	46.5
	Large	138	53.5
Tenure	Less than one year	44	17.1
	One to five years	145	56.2
	More than five years	69	26.7
Labor contract	Fixed-term	61	23.6
	Indefinite	162	62.8
	Personal services	28	10.9
Job position	Operational	61	23.6
	Managerial	152	58.9
	Executive	32	12.4
Time working with current boss	Less than one year	77	29.8
	One to five years	157	60.9
	More than five years	24	9.3

2.2. Procedure

The questionnaires were translated and back translated from English to Spanish, and after a pilot experiment, were applied. Data collection was carried out in groups of 20 participants on average. Initially and before each application, the researchers explained the purpose of the research, ethical considerations, the option to withdraw from the study, and acceptance of the informed consent text. All participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of the information gathered. Participation was voluntary, without any kind of compensation. A self-administered paper-and-pencil survey was conducted to obtain information on the variables involved in the study.

The data were analyzed with International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) *SPSS* software, version 25, for the descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha). IBM *Amos* software, version 25, was also used for structural equation modeling. Finally, the mediating effect was estimated with Preacher's and Leonardelli's (2010–2021) interactive calculation tool, based on the equation developed in MacKinnon and Dwyer (1993) for the Z-test proposed by Sobel (1982).

2.3. Measurement instruments

The first part of the survey included items to collect participants' socio-demographic information and information regarding relevant characteristics of their respective organizations and work life. The second part consisted of a set of three instruments measuring the variables studied. Respondents were asked to answer the questions using Likert-type scales.

Ethical leadership was assessed using the ethical leadership scale (ELS) created by Brown et al. (2005), which consists of 10 items rated from 1 "strongly disagree" to 6 "strongly agree". Some examples of scale items include "My boss listens to what employees have to say" and "My boss behaves ethically". In this research, the ELS showed high reliability (Cronbach's alpha 0.942).

Organizational support for creativity was estimated with four items inspired by the scale of support for innovation by Siegel and Kaemmerer (1978), adapted by Scott and Bruce (1994) and Zhou and George (2001), and calculated from 1 "strongly disagree" to 6 "strongly agree". Examples of the items include "In the company I work for, creativity is encouraged" and "The organization publicly recognizes people who are innovative". This instrument showed high reliability (Cronbach's alpha 0.906).

Creativity was measured with a 13-item scale aimed at determining the degree to which individuals display certain creative behaviors. It was proposed by Scott and Bruce (1994) and adapted by Zhou and George (2001). It used a scale from 1 "never" to 6 "always", including items such as "I suggest new ways to achieve goals and objectives" and "I dare to take risks". The questionnaire showed high reliability (Cronbach's alpha 0.953).

3. Results

On average, participants reported high levels in all three variables assessed (Table 2). The highest mean was obtained for creativity, and the lowest was for organizational support for

creativity. The heterogeneity of values (standard deviation) was highest in organizational support for creativity and lowest in creativity. All three variables presented significant positive bivariate correlations at moderate levels, thus supporting the proposal to examine the relationship within a structural equation model.

Table 2. Mean, standard deviations, and correlations (source: created by authors)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Ethical leadership	4.74	1.01	(0.942)		
2. Organizational support for creativity	4.40	1.19	0.498**	(0.906)	
3. Creativity	4.93	0.72	0.376**	0.438**	(0.953)

Note: n = 258. ** $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed). Values on the diagonal are Cronbach's alpha.

The structural equation model showed an adjusted representation of the relationship among the variables of ethical leadership, organizational support for creativity, and creativity (Figure 2). The result of the chi-squared test and degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF) was 1.11, indicating goodness of fit. Goodness of fit was also obtained for the normed fit index (NFI) and comparative fix index (CFI), in which estimates of 0.95 and 0.99 were obtained, respectively. Similarly, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) tended toward zero, confirming the proper fit of the analyzed model (Hair et al., 2013).
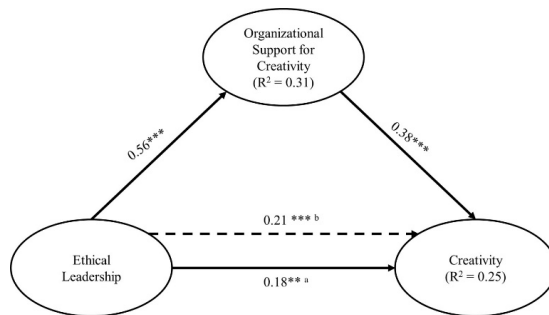

Figure 2. Structural equation model. Model adjustment index: chi2(274) = 304.31 p = 0.10; chi-squared test and degrees of freedom = 1.11; normed fit index = 0.95; comparative fix index = 0.99; root mean square error of approximation = 0.02; *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.05$; a: direct effect; b: indirect effect (source: created by authors)

In the structural equation model, it is observed that ethical leadership has a total effect of 0.39 on creativity. This total effect results from the addition of the direct effect of ethical leadership on creativity (0.18 $p < 0.05$) plus the indirect effect of ethical leadership on creativity mediated by organizational support for creativity (0.21 Sobel test = 4.13 $p < 0.001$). Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 4 are accepted.

Furthermore, the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational support for creativity was significant (0.56 $p < 0.001$); therefore, hypothesis 2 is accepted. Likewise, organizational support for creativity and employees' creativity showed a significant relationship (0.38 $p < 0.001$), which leads to the acceptance of hypothesis 3.

In summary, the model analyzed confirms the hypotheses proposed. This result leads to the conclusion that organizational support for creativity partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and creativity. This means that ethical leadership predicts employees' creativity directly and indirectly through organizational support for creativity.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that while ethical leadership exerts a direct effect on creativity, it also has an indirect effect on creativity when employees perceive that the organization supports creative behavior.

This confirms the influence that ethical behavior and supportive contexts within organizations have as factors to which employees respond with open, collaborative expressions of creative engagement that can contribute to development and innovation when carrying out tasks, projects, and activities at work (Ahmed et al., 2013; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Ko et al., 2018).

Therefore, ethical leaders, through the support mechanisms for creativity provided by the organization, establish an environment of integrity and trust, which can help reduce the risks of behaving creatively (Hoyt et al., 2013; Neves & Eisenberger, 2014).

Likewise, as a phenomenon of social exchange, it can be observed that ethical leadership and perception of organizational support, by generating trust and friendly environments for creativity, increase the probability that employees will respond reciprocally with positive attitudes and genuine creative expression (Ibrahim et al., 2016).

In addition, it was noted that when employees perceive ethical characteristics, ethical behavior, and support in leaders, they also recognize the organization's support for risk-taking when it comes to thinking and acting creatively. This confirms that to the extent that ethical leaders engage in harmonious relations, respect employees' ideas, and promote ethical behavior, there is a positive perception of the organization as a promoter of creativity to which employees will respond consistently (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2012).

It was also confirmed that organizational support for creativity, as expressed in resources, motivation, and management processes, tends to strengthen employees' creative actions, as reported by Ibrahim et al. (2016) and Perry-Smith and Mannucci (2017). In the same way, and according to Amabile and Pratt (2016) and Houghton and DiLiello (2010), creative behaviors such as problem-solving, the proposal of alternatives in the face of difficulties, and thinking outside of the box in order to solve workplace challenges can depend on the support provided by the organization.

Conclusions, implications, and limitations of the research

This study was designed to analyze the effect of ethical leadership on employees' creativity and the mediating role of organizational support for creativity. It is concluded that having ethical leaders and support for creativity from the organization encourages a diversity of ideas, perspectives, and actions in the workplace and motivates employees to innovate. Ethical leadership, through its explicit moral approach, explains how ethical leaders, through the

organization's mechanisms, such as support for creativity, foment appropriate behavior favorable to the broader organizational objectives, such as the development of employees' creativity.

It can also be concluded that employees' creativity can sometimes be expressed as a challenge to rules or authority, but by having leadership that directs such expressions ethically and by relying on clear organizational resources and processes, not only can creativity be motivated, but also the organization can be protected from associated ethical risks.

The results of this study draw attention to the opportunity that leaders have to optimize organizational processes, procedures, and protocols oriented toward responsibility, sustainability, equity, dignity, and respect for others to encourage creative behavior in employees. Leaders' behavior should demonstrate integrity in line with practices and procedures that support innovation, and if ethical thinking is involved in all tasks, challenges, and problems related to productivity, the effect will be favorable for organizational sustainability.

With regard to management, it is suggested that organizations should increase incentives for ethical leadership, eliminate communication barriers regarding dilemmas and ethical issues, and ensure that workers receive supportive working conditions, as well as follow-up and feedback on their creative contributions. Creativity should lead to creation, and it should also help employees who propose ideas not to give up on them but rather to seek to transform those ideas into reality. If this process is led ethically and with organizational support, then it is more likely to be achieved.

Likewise, it is the ethical responsibility of leaders to lead employees to put forth their best creative effort, guided by principles, values, and respect for rules, all of which impact the sustainability, reliability, and reputation of the organization.

Finally, if innovation processes are to be strengthened in organizations, those in charge of administering, leading, or managing must strive to be models of normative conduct and encourage and establish appropriate practices that motivate creative actions within a framework of moral development. This ethical deployment of leaders must be encouraged within organizations by creating conditions of trust and allocating resources that allow employees to resolve the dilemmas that arise when they have disruptive ideas and thoughts, which will lead to the creation of cultures of ethical creativity and responsible and sustainable innovation.

The main limitations noted in this study that should be considered in subsequent studies are the following: the study was based on cross-sectional data, which gives a sample of just one point in time; in future studies, measurements can be made at different points in time to identify whether the variables change over a period or periods of time. Second, this study specifically included workers with university degrees: graduate students from a management training school. In subsequent studies, it is suggested that other levels of training and work experience be included. Finally, this study did not consider particular cultural aspects; it is recommended that in later, related studies, aspects of cultural diversity be taken into account to establish whether there are differences along these lines.

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