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Overcoming organizational politics and unlocking meaningful work through ethical leadership

Pilar Mosquera, Fernanda Bethlem Tigre and Miriam Alegre
Department of Management, ISEG Lisbon School of Economics and Management, Lisboa, Portugal

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Abstract

Purpose – New generations actively seek employment in organizations that resonate with their values, mission and sense of purpose. However, perceptions of organizational politics (POP) associated with unethical practices detrimentally affects meaningful work experiences and employee retention. Ethical leadership emerges as a critical factor in mitigating these negative effects. This study aims to propose a comprehensive model that examines the impact of ethical leadership on two crucial work outcomes: meaningful work and turnover intention. The mediating role of POP is explored, shedding light on the intricate dynamics within organizational contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – To test the model, the authors use a sample of 261 respondents who completed an online questionnaire shared on social networks. Partial least squares is used for data analysis.

Findings – Results evidence that ethical leadership reduces employees' POP, increases meaningful work and reduces turnover intention. One dimension of POP – communication – mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and work outcomes. Furthermore, meaningful work mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and turnover intention.

Practical implications – The study offers practical suggestions for managers to mitigate the negative impact of POP on meaningful work and employee retention.

Originality/value – This study adds to previous research by analyzing the separate and combined effects of ethical leadership on five dimensions of POP – communication, resources, decisions, reputation and relationships. Furthermore, this study adds empirical evidence on how POP influence meaningful work and employee retention.

Keywords Ethical leadership, Organizational politics, Meaningful work, Turnover intention

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Across the world, organizations are struggling to attract and retain employees (Al Aina and Atan, 2020) as their work values have changed (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2022; Bahadori *et al.*, 2021). Not only has it become more important for employees to do a meaningful work (Anderson *et al.*, 2017; Popaitoon, 2022) but also the job itself lost centrality in individuals' lives. Nowadays, employees are more individualistic and focused on their individual well-being, leading to more self-serving behaviors and, increased perceptions of organizational politics (POP) in the workplace (Anderson *et al.*, 2017; Hyusein and Eyupoglu, 2023; Twenge *et al.*, 2010). Considering the negative consequences of POP on employee retention (Ferris

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et al., 2019; Hochwarter *et al.*, 2020; Vigoda-Gadot and Talmud, 2010), further research that explores ways to reduce the negative effects of workplace politics is still in need (Hochwarter *et al.*, 2020).

Ethical leadership has emerged as a top priority for organizations, garnering growing attention from the scientific community, partly due to the emergence of corruption scandals and poor management practices that have put the credibility and reputation of organizations and their leaders at stake (Den Hartog, 2015; Ko *et al.*, 2018) and partly due to employees growing demands in terms of ethics (Anderson *et al.*, 2017; Den Hartog, 2015). Ethical leaders are known to promote a transparent and fair work environment that reduces employees' POP (Hyusein and Eyupoglu, 2023; Malik *et al.*, 2023), increases perceptions of having a meaningful work and promotes employees' retention (Bahadori *et al.*, 2021; Charles-Leija *et al.*, 2023; Lin and Liu, 2017). By contrast, leaders self-serving or deviant behaviors (e.g. taking the property of others work without permission) hinder creativity and increase employees' POPs (Khattak *et al.*, 2021; Michel and Hargis, 2017; Naseer *et al.*, 2016; Peng *et al.*, 2019). Nonetheless, there is still a lack of empirical research that examines the underlying processes that explain how ethical leadership influences outcomes (Kacmar *et al.*, 2013) and the existing literature lacks consensus (Bedi *et al.*, 2016).

Thus, this study contributes to the literature by proposing a broad model that informs the role of POP as a mechanism through which ethical leadership impacts on employees', meaningful work and turnover intention. This study also contributes to practice by giving managers and HR professionals suggestions to mitigate the negative impact of POP on the meaning of work and employee retention.

The study draws on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to explain how leaders act as role models for employees by shaping their values, attitudes and behaviors (Brown and Treviño, 2006). When leaders do not behave ethically, POP may be fostered (Kacmar *et al.*, 2013). We also apply to engagement theory (Kahn, 1990) to explain how POP can diminish employees' willingness to invest themselves in both their role and their organization. When employees perceive that their work environment is marked by political behaviors (e.g. gossip, backstabbing, misuse of power and improper use of relationships), they may feel that the value of their work is not important (Landells and Albrecht, 2019). Moreover, if employees feel less engaged with their organization, they will probably intent to leave (Memon *et al.*, 2016).

2. Literature review

2.1 Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership can be 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). Although related to other leadership styles (e.g. transformational, transactional, authentic, spiritual), ethical leadership has distinctive dimensions, namely, concern for justice and morality, sharing of power and the clarifying role of the leader about the expectations, responsibilities and performance of followers (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Other authors (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2009) highlight leadership characteristics such as altruism, transparency, trustworthiness, empathy, empowerment, community spirit, social responsibility and commitment to shared work. Finally, being an ethical leader means being both a moral person and a moral manager, i.e. someone who encourages employees to act morally (Ko *et al.*, 2018; Treviño *et al.*, 2000).

Ethical leaders are responsible for establishing a moral and exemplary organizational structure based on ethical and moral standards (Demirtas, 2015). According to social

learning theory (Bandura, 1977), ethical leaders serve as role models who tend to shape the behaviors of their employees, contributing to an equitable and participatory work environment where they are part of the decision-making process (Brown and Treviño, 2006; Mayer *et al.*, 2012; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2012). Ethical leadership involves a process of influence that encompasses the individual through the observation of patterns and behaviors that are perceived as legitimate examples to follow (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Ethical leadership also include procedural aspects of justice (e.g. fair decision-making) and distributive aspects of justice (e.g. establishing reward and punishment systems to hold employees accountable for unethical behavior) (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Brown and Treviño, 2006; Treviño *et al.*, 2003). By adopting an attitude of integrity and honesty, leaders gain respect and loyalty from employees, who will be more prone to contribute to an ethical environment (Adnan *et al.*, 2020; Ahmad *et al.*, 2021; Nemr and Liu, 2021).

2.2 Perceptions of organizational politics

POP "involves an individual's attribution to behaviors of self-serving intent, and is commonly defined as an individual's subjective evaluation about the extent to which the work environment is characterized by co-workers or supervisors who demonstrate such self-serving behavior" (Ferris *et al.*, 2000, p. 90). In different contexts and industries, POP result in a dysfunctional environment built on barriers to employee efficiency and effectiveness (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2017). More specifically, political behavior disrupts the natural flow of the work environment and damages employee motivation, enthusiasm and group identity, leading to a negative politicized environment (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). POP are shaped by a multitude of factors across individual, dyadic, group and organizational levels, highlighting the intricate interplay of forces within organizational settings (Ferris *et al.*, 2000).

Based on their own previous qualitative research (Landells and Albrecht, 2017), Landells and Albrecht (2019) propose five dimensions of organizational politics: building and using relationships (relationships); building personal reputation (reputation); controlling decisions and resources (resources); influencing decision-making (decisions); and the use of communication channels (communication). The first dimension (relationships) concerns people who cultivate relationships, ingratiate themselves with others and sometimes misuse these connections to circumvent organizational processes, all for personal gain; the second dimension (reputation) involves individuals undermining each other's credibility behind their backs and stabbing each other in the back to improve their own image, often by portraying others as incompetent; the third dimension (resources) considers the prioritization of building resources to increase personal power, often unfairly obtaining and allocating resources based on individual interests rather than organizational priorities; in the fourth dimension (decisions), people use their positions of authority to influence decisions for personal gain, abusing their power by making self-serving decisions and feigning consultation when decisions have already been made; and, finally, the fifth dimension (communication), gossip, as the primary mode of information dissemination, shapes people's interpretation and understanding of events within the organization, with rumors playing a central role (Landells and Albrecht, 2017, 2019). According to the authors, these five dimensions are not only consistent with previous measures of organizational politics but also extent them by including items related to influencing decisions and gossip, that had not been yet considered.

It has been argued (Hyusein and Eyupoglu, 2023; Kacmar *et al.*, 2013; Turi and Sarfraz, 2023) that ethical leaders can play a vital role in mitigating employees POP. Ethical leaders develop ethical strategies and actively prevent violations of the code of ethics fostering a

sense of unity in the workplace and, reducing POP (Hyusein and Eyupoglu, 2023). Therefore, we propose:

H1. Ethical leadership is negatively related to employee's POP.

Concerning the five dimensions of organizational politics, it is also proposed:

H1a. Ethical leadership is negatively related to employee's POP of communication.

H1b. Ethical leadership is negatively related to employee's POP of resources.

H1c. Ethical leadership is negatively related to employee's POP of decisions.

H1d. Ethical leadership is negatively related to employee's POP of reputation.

H1e. Ethical leadership is negatively related to employee's POP of relationships.

2.3 Meaningful work

Meaningful work is a positive and subjective individual experience (Yeoman, 2014). The concept of meaningful work is gaining increasing attention from both scholars and practitioners, due to its relevance in the organizational context, especially for human resource management (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017). Although still lacks consensus on a definition of meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012), it is commonly conceptualized as "a positive psychological state whereby people feel they make a positive, important, and useful contribution to a worthwhile purpose through the execution of their work" (Albrecht, 2013). This perception of work, as subjectively rewarding and valuable, aligns with personal values and beliefs and is influenced by job characteristics, work environment and relationships and experiences within a particular organization (Albrecht *et al.*, 2021; Bailey *et al.*, 2019). Jobs are meaningful when they provide task identity, task significance, skill variety, autonomy and feedback (Michaelson *et al.*, 2014).

According to Michaelson *et al*. (2014), meaningful work is a moral issue that involves the moral management of other people in the workplace. Nevertheless, there is still paucity of research that relates ethical leadership to meaningful work (Demirtas *et al.*, 2017). Existing research (Demirtas *et al.*, 2017; Demirtas and Akdogan, 2015; Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2020; Wang and Xu, 2019) reported a positive relationship between ethical leadership or ethics-related practices and meaningful work. Ethical leaders increase the meaningfulness of work by recognizing that employees' tasks and functions have meaning and produce value that has a significant impact for the organization and the society (Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Ethical leadership is positively related to meaningful work.

Although, there is still little empirical evidence on how political organizational contexts influence meaningful work, the perception of unethical practices or deviant experiences or behaviors (e.g. manipulation, destructive criticism, disrespectful or unfair actions) makes employees question their role and willingness to invest in performing their organizational duties (Popaitoon, 2022) and leads to demotivation and frustration, whereas employees no longer perceive their work as valuable and meaningful (Kahn, 1990). Conversely, when leaders adopt good practices, they contribute to employees' perceptions of meaningful work and help them see how their work enables them to achieve long-term goals (Demirtas *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, we propose:

H3. Employee's POP are negatively related to meaningful work.

Concerning the five dimensions of organizational politics, it is also proposed:

H3a. Employee's POP of communication are negatively related to meaningful work.

H3b. Employee's POP of resources are negatively related to meaningful work.

H3c. Employee's POP of decisions are negatively related to meaningful work.

H3d. Employee's POP of reputation are negatively related to meaningful work.

H3e. Employee's POP of relationships are negatively related to meaningful work.

2.4 Turnover intention

Turnover intention predicts actual turnover and refers to a conscious and planned desire to leave a job within a short period of time (Shareef and Atan, 2019) and/or search for new employment alternatives (Aburumman *et al.*, 2020). Turnover intention is also defined as the psychological, cognitive and behavioral process of leaving the organization before the employee quits the company (Lotfi *et al.*, 2022).

Employees seek new employment for a variety of reasons, including job characteristics, relationships with colleagues, leadership style (Nuhn *et al.*, 2018), opportunities for personal growth, career progression, work–life balance and organizational practices and politics (Ak, 2018; Haar *et al.*, 2016). Because high turnover rates costs in terms of recruitment, training and low productivity, leaders must identify early signs of employee disengagement behaviors to take preventive action (Lin and Liu, 2017).

Ethical leaders create a work environment based on ethical behavior and two-way communication, which establishes fair and equitable treatment of employees (Palanski *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, when leaders demonstrate integrity and transparency in their actions and decisions, employees feel heard, valued and respected, which contributes to greater engagement and identification with the organization, resulting in lower turnover intention (Shareef and Atan, 2019; Suifan *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, we propose:

H4. Ethical leadership is negatively related to turnover intention.

People are constantly in search for meaning, identification and fulfillment at work and if they do not find it within their current organization, they may look for what they need outside it (Arnoux-Nicolas *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, when employees perceive their work as meaningful, turnover intention decreases (Charles-Leija *et al.*, 2023; Siahaan and Gatari, 2020; Vermooten *et al.*, 2019). Thus, we propose the following research hypothesis:

H5. Meaningful work is negatively related to turnover intention.

Politics adopted at the organizational level have also been found in the literature to be associated with turnover intention (Chang *et al.*, 2009). POP can severely affect employees and their willingness to invest in their role in the organization (Landells and Albrecht, 2019) and may, therefore, lead them to leave the organization (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the following research hypotheses are formulated:

H6. Employee's POP are positively related to turnover intention.

H6a. Employee's POP of communication are positively related to turnover intention.

H6b. Employee's POP of resources are positively related to turnover intention.

H6c. Employee's POP of decisions are positively related to turnover intention.

H6d. Employee's POP of reputation are positively related to turnover intention.

H6e. Employee's POP of relationships are positively related to turnover intention.

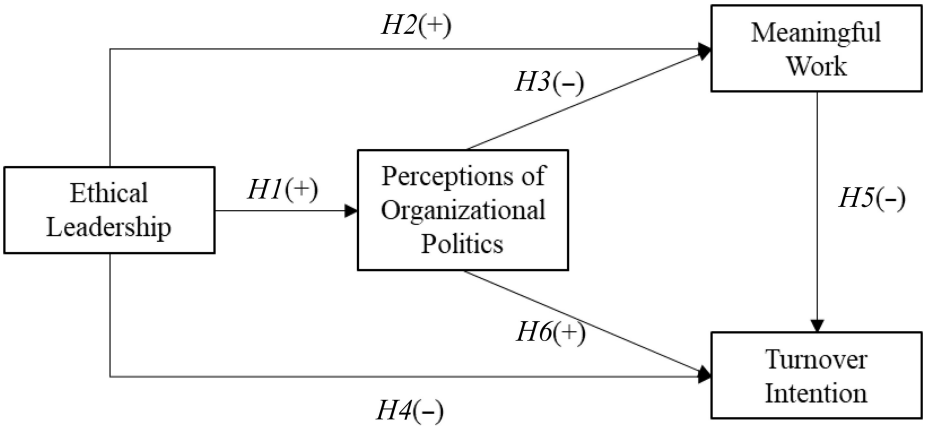
Based on the literature review and the hypotheses formulated above, we propose the following research model (Figure 1).

3. Methods

To test the hypotheses in the research model, structural equation modeling (SEM) based on partial least squares (PLS) was used. PLS provides parameter estimates that maximize the explained variance (R^2 values) of the dependent constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2011). The method supports the explanation of the target constructs in the structural model, has high statistical predictive power, and it can also be used for exploratory and confirmatory theory testing (Hair *et al.*, 2011). In addition, PLS provides a more reliable and general model than covariance-based SEM being less affected by model misspecification in some subparts of the model (Henseler *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, preliminary normality tests using SPSS® software through the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and Shapiro–Wilk indicate that the data are not normally distributed, suggesting that the use of PLS is appropriate because it does not assume that the data are normally distributed but uses nonparametric bootstrapping (Hair *et al.*, 2011).

3.1 Data collection and sample

The data used in this study came from an online survey, which generated a total of 371 responses. However, 110 responses were excluded because they were incomplete or did not meet the predefined criteria of the respondent being currently employed, resulting in 261 valid responses. A pretest phase was conducted to ensure the correct interpretation of the questions and to detect possible errors (Sarantakos, 1998). The survey was shared via social networks (e.g. LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook).



Source: Figure by authors

Figure 1. Research model

To minimize the common method variance bias, questions were counterbalanced, respondent anonymity was guaranteed and Harman's single-factor test was performed (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). All items in the study were forced to load on a single nonrotated factor that explained 30.3% of the variance and did not account for most of the variance in the variables tested. In addition, we used the full collinearity assessment approach of Kock (2015) to test if all the variance inflation factor (VIF) values were lower than the 5.0 threshold. Only one item from the turnover intention scale presented a VIF above 5.0, being therefore excluded. After this procedure, common method bias does not appear to be an issue in the study.

In terms of sample characteristics, 60.95% are female, the majority are young with less than 35 years old (51.3%) and have higher education (58.6%). Most respondents work in the private sector (60.2%), do not hold a leadership position (63.6%), have a permanent employment contract (73.3%) and have been working in the organization for more than three years (50.2%). Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the respondents.

3.2 Measures

Ethical leadership was measured by the 10-item ethical leadership scale, developed by Brown *et al.* (2005) that evaluates the employees' perceptions of their leader's ethical behavior.

To measure employees' POP, a 15-item scale developed by Landells and Albrecht (2019) was used, consisting of five dimensions: building and using relationships (relationships); building personal reputation (reputation); controlling decisions and resources (resources); influencing decision-making (decisions); and the use of communication channels (communication).

The Work as Meaning Inventory scale, developed by Steger *et al.* (2012), was used to measure perceptions of meaningful work. This scale consists of 10 items and is divided into three subscales: "positive meaning" (four items), "meaning making through work" (three items) and "greater good motivations" (three items).

Finally, turnover intention was measured by the three-item scale from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann *et al.*, 1979).

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive analysis

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations and factor loadings of the items that were retained, after excluding those who presented low reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2011).

4.2 Measurement reliability and validity

Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were used to assess the reliability of the constructs. Table 3 shows that all variables have an acceptable or good level of internal consistency, as they are all above 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2019; Nunnaly and Bernstein, 1994).

The convergent validity of the model's latent variables was assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE). As shown in Table 3, all constructs had AVE values greater than the minimum acceptable value of 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2011, 2019). To complement the assessment of the convergent validity of the measurement models, we checked whether all the indicators had significant factor loadings ($t > 3.29$; $p < 0.001$) (Hair *et al.*, 2014, 2019). Table 2 informs that this is the case, ensuring the convergent validity of the model (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

The discriminant validity of the measurement models was analyzed using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio criterion, which suggests that correlation values must be below 0.9 to exist

Table 1. Sample demographics

Demographic variables	*N*	%
Sex		
Female	159	60.9
Male	102	39.1
Age		
<35 years	134	51.3
≥35 years	127	48.7
Higher education		
No	108	41.4
Yes	153	58.6
Marital status		
Single/divorced/widowed	133	51.0
Married/ De facto union	128	49.0
Sector		
Public	98	37.5
Private	157	60.2
Others	6	2.3
Type of contract		
Permanent	191	73.2
Temporary	70	26.8
Leadership position		
Yes	95	36.4
No	166	63.6
Time in the organization		
≤3 years	130	49.8
>3 years	131	50.2

Source: Table by authors

discriminant validity between two reflective constructs (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). As shown in Table 4, all values are below 0.9, ensuring the presence of discriminant validity in the measurement models (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

4.3 Model estimation analysis

As there is evidence of validity and reliability in the measurement models, the structural model was analyzed to test the hypothesis (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). Figure 2 presents the significant path coefficients, calculated using the bootstrapping procedure and the R^2 explanatory power (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

Table 5 presents all direct significant relationships, as they all have *t*-values greater than 1.96 ($p < 0.05$) (Hair *et al.*, 2014). According to the results in Table 5, there is a negative and significant association between ethical leadership and the different dimensions of the POP: communication ($\beta = -0.257$, $p < 0.01$), resources ($\beta = -0.351$, $p < 0.01$), decisions ($\beta = -0.372$, $p < 0.01$), reputation ($\beta = -0.309$, $p < 0.01$) and relationships ($\beta = -0.254$, $p < 0.01$), thus validating hypotheses *H1a*, *H1b*, *H1c*, *H1d* and *H1e*. Moreover, ethical leadership establishes a positive and significant relationship with meaningful work ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.05$),

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and factor loadings

Items	Mean	Std deviation	Loading	*t*-Test	*p*-Value
Ethical leadership					
EL1	3.927	0.954	0.805	29.970	0.000
EL4	4.019	0.851	0.739	17.489	0.000
EL5	3.728	0.892	0.829	31.239	0.000
EL6	4.019	0.869	0.835	38.564	0.000
EL7	3.460	1.074	0.773	23.747	0.000
EL8	3.625	1.038	0.856	42.536	0.000
EL9	3.728	1.017	0.851	46.118	0.000
EL10	3.452	1.129	0.803	29.690	0.000
Perception organizational politics					
Relationships					
POP1	3.226	1.164	0.903	43.266	0.000
POP2	3.149	1.095	0.901	37.528	0.000
POP3	3.218	1.098	0.899	44.911	0.000
Communication					
POP4	3.226	1.046	0.755	14.163	0.000
POP5	2.789	1.117	0.886	34.759	0.000
POP6	2.513	1.000	0.768	14.962	0.000
Reputation					
POP7	2.843	1.159	0.905	58.588	0.000
POP8	3.057	1.152	0.926	54.599	0.000
POP9	3.092	1.117	0.922	69.547	0.000
Decisions					
POP10	3.203	1.032	0.905	52.787	0.000
POP11	3.061	1.045	0.910	56.217	0.000
POP12	3.222	1.015	0.868	37.714	0.000
Resources					
POP13	3.011	1.030	0.884	40.758	0.000
POP14	3.057	1.090	0.898	45.668	0.000
POP15	2.950	1.010	0.908	65.959	0.000
Meaningful Work					
MW1	3.625	1.045	0.844	35.523	0.000
MW2	3.992	0.893	0.785	24.501	0.000
MW4	3.816	0.856	0.730	16.397	0.000
MW5	4.069	0.702	0.710	15.607	0.000
MW6	3.946	0.874	0.703	15.556	0.000
MW8	3.602	1.048	0.854	47.973	0.000
Turnover intention					
TI1	2.502	1.344	0.902	56.657	0.000
TI3	2.249	1.261	0.924	93.537	0.000

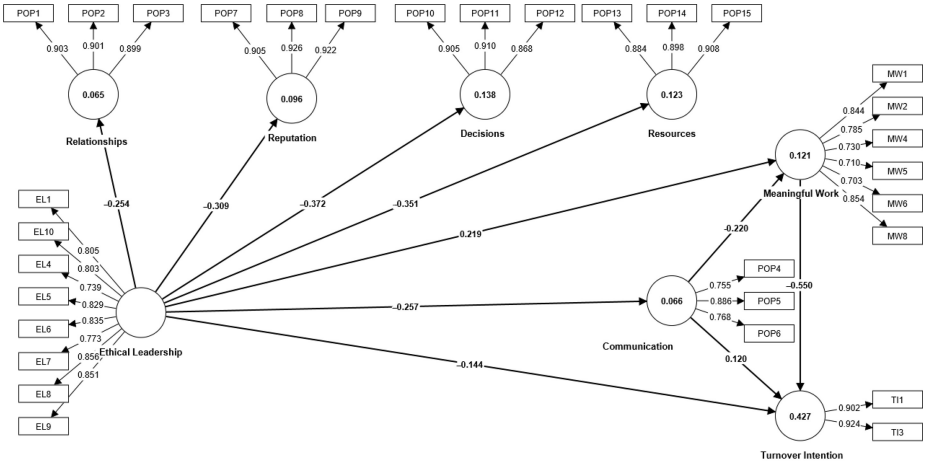
Source: Table by authors

which validates *H2*, as well as a negative and significant association with turnover intention ($\beta = -0.144$, $p < 0.05$), which validates *H4*. Regarding meaningful work, it is negatively and significantly related to turnover intention ($\beta = -0.550$, $p < 0.01$), validating *H5*. Finally, communication has a negative and significant relationship with meaningful work ($\beta = -0.220$, $p < 0.01$) and a positive and significant relationship with turnover intention ($\beta = 0.120$, $p < 0.05$), validating *H3a* and *H6a*, respectively.

Table 3. Reliability and convergent validity

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Ethical leadership	0.926	0.939	0.660
Communication	0.727	0.846	0.648
Decisions	0.875	0.923	0.800
Relationships	0.884	0.929	0.812
Reputation	0.906	0.941	0.842
Resources	0.879	0.925	0.804
Meaningful work	0.867	0.899	0.599
Turnover intention	0.801	0.909	0.834

Source: Table by authors



Source: Figure by authors

Figure 2. Final structural model

Table 4. Discriminant validity (heterotrait–monotrait)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ethical leadership (1)								
Meaningful work (2)	0.292							
Communication (3)	0.310	0.327						
Resources (4)	0.379	0.244	0.726					
Decisions (5)	0.408	0.295	0.780	0.882				
Reputation (6)	0.335	0.186	0.773	0.773	0.838			
Relationships (7)	0.279	0.193	0.751	0.798	0.775	0.841		
Turnover intention (8)	0.372	0.712	0.398	0.291	0.326	0.282	0.263	

Source: Table by authors

Table 5. Significant direct effects

Hypothesis		β	f^2	*t*-test	*p*-value
H1a	Ethical leadership → communication	−0.257	0.071	4.575	0.000
H1b	Ethical leadership → resources	−0.351	0.141	6.683	0.000
H1c	Ethical leadership → decisions	−0.372	*0.160*	6.633	0.000
H1d	Ethical leadership → reputation	−0.309	0.106	5.818	0.000
H1e	Ethical leadership → relationships	−0.254	0.069	4.531	0.000
H2	Ethical leadership → meaningful work	0.219	0.051	3.481	0.001
H3a	Communication → meaningful work	−0.220	0.052	3.861	0.000
H4	Ethical leadership → turnover intention	−0.144	0.032	2.508	0.012
H5	Meaningful work → turnover intention	−0.550	*0.465*	12.112	0.000
H6a	Communication → turnover intention	0.120	0.022	2.322	0.020

Note: Values in italic correspond to moderate/strong effects
Source: Table by authors

To assess the effect size of each predictor, f^2 is calculated. Table 5 shows that all effects are weak, except for the strong effect of meaningful work on turnover intentions ($f^2 = 0.465$) and the moderate effect of ethical leadership on decisions ($f^2 = 0.160$) (Cohen, 1988; Henseler *et al.*, 2009).

Regarding the significant indirect effects (Table 6), meaningful work plays a mediating role between communication and turnover intention ($\beta = 0.121$, $p < 0.01$), as well as between ethical leadership and turnover intention ($\beta = -0.121$, $p < 0.05$). The relationship between ethical leadership and turnover intention is mediated by communication and meaningful work ($\beta = -0.031$, $p < 0.05$).

The coefficient of determination (R^2) of the endogenous constructs provides information about the explanatory power of the model (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2014). The results show that the model explains 42.7% of the variance in turnover intention, 13.8% in decisions, 12.3% in resources, 12.1% in meaningful work, 9.6% in reputation, 6.6% in communication and 6.5% in relationships (Table 7).

Finally, the blindfolding procedure calculate the predictive relevance of the structural model, Stone-Geisser's Q^2. As the $Q^2 > 0$ for all endogenous constructs (Table 7), the model has predictive relevance (Hair *et al.*, 2011).

4.4 Demographic analysis

Finally, to test the impact of demographic characteristics on the relationships between the different variables studied, a multi-group analysis was performed. Two groups were considered for each variable, gender (female/male), age (<35/≥35 years), marital status (single, divorced or widowed/married or in a *de facto* union), higher education (yes/no), seniority (≤3/>3 years), sector (public/private), contractual relationship (permanent/temporary) and holding a leadership position (yes/no). The results show that there are no significant differences in terms of gender, education, seniority and sector.

Regarding age (<35/≥35 years), significant differences were observed in the relationships between ethical leadership and four dimensions of POP: decisions, relationships, reputation and resources ($p < 0.05$). Ethical leadership has a greater negative impact on several dimensions of POP for those aged under 35 years: decisions ($\beta_{<35} = -0.525$; $\beta_{\geq 35} = -0.209$), relationships ($\beta_{<35} = -0.408$; $\beta_{\geq 35} = -0.099$), reputation ($\beta_{<35} = -0.421$; $\beta_{\geq 35} = -0.217$) and resources ($\beta_{<35} = -0.505$; $\beta_{\geq 35} = -0.216$).

Table 6. Significant indirect effects

Relationships	β	*t*-test	*p*-value
Communication → meaningful work → turnover intention	0.121	3.599	0.000
Ethical leadership → meaningful work → turnover intention	−0.121	3.378	0.001
Ethical leadership → communication → meaningful work → turnover intention	−0.031	2.759	0.006

Source: Table by authors

Table 7. Explanatory power and predictive relevance of the model

Variables	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Q^2
Communication	0.066	0.062	0.054
Resources	0.123	0.120	0.113
Decisions	0.138	0.135	0.127
Reputation	0.096	0.092	0.085
Relationships	0.065	0.061	0.052
Meaningful work	0.121	0.115	0.066
Turnover intention	0.427	0.420	0.097

Source: Table by authors

For marital status (single, divorced or widowed/married or in a *de facto* union), significant differences were also found in the relationship between ethical leadership and two dimensions of POP: decisions and relationships. Ethical leadership has a stronger negative effect on decisions ($\beta_{sing,div,wid} = -0.481$; $\beta_{mar,dfu} = -0.231$; $p = 0.039$) and on relationships ($\beta_{sing,div,wid} = -0.376$; $\beta_{mar,dfu} = -0.136$, $p = 0.032$), for those who are single, divorced or widowed.

Finally, there were significant differences in the relationship between ethical leadership and decisions ($p < 0.05$), being stronger the negative impact of ethical leadership on decisions for those who do not hold a leadership position ($\beta_{lead} = -0.206$; $\beta_{no\ lead} = -0.464$).

5. Discussion

Ethical leadership has a negative and significant effect on employees' POP, confirming *H1*. It has already been suggested that ethical leaders develop strategies to prevent ethical violations, fostering workplace unity and reducing POP (Hyusein and Eyupoglu, 2023; Kacmar *et al.*, 2013; Turi and Sarfraz, 2023). Our findings indicate that ethical leaders effectively mitigate all POP dimensions – communication, resources, decisions, reputation and relationships – confirming *H1a*, *H1b*, *H1c*, *H1d* and *H1e*, respectively. This underscores the importance of ethical leadership in fostering a healthier organizational climate.

Results also show that the effect of ethical leadership on four POP dimensions – decisions, relationships, reputation and resources – is stronger for those who are under 35 years older. Older employees may have an advantage in dealing with organizational politics due to their experience and professional maturity. They may have already developed strategies that allow them to be more agile in problem-solving and decision-making, regardless of the existing leadership style (Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2014; Brown and Treviño, 2014). Thus, providing an ethical organizational culture is more relevant for younger employees

(Pade and Sulíková, 2023). As most of the younger respondents were single, it is not surprising that the effect of ethical leadership on decisions and relationships is also stronger for those who are not married. In addition, the negative relationship between ethical leadership and POP decisions is stronger for those who do not hold a leadership position. These employees must trust in their leaders as spokespersons to ensure that decisions are made fairly and morally as they have more power and influence in the organizational culture (Byun *et al.*, 2018; Malik *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, it is possible that when they perceive their leaders as ethic, their POP decisions are lower.

It has also been confirmed a positive and significant impact of ethical leadership on meaningful work as it has been suggested by Demirtas *et al.* (2017), confirming *H2*. Employees who perceive their leaders as ethical, believe that leaders pursue organizational goals beyond personal interests and, therefore, believe that their work creates value, leading to higher levels of meaningful work (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Michaelson *et al.*, 2014; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2012; Steger *et al.*, 2012).

This study relies on engagement theory (Kahn, 1990), to explain the relationship between POP, meaningful work and turnover intentions, as POP has been shown to exert a significant impact on employees' propensity to engage in organizational roles (Landells and Albrecht, 2017). However, the results show that communication is the only POP dimension that plays a significant role in both meaningful work and turnover intentions (*H3a* and *H6a*), reinforcing the interpersonal aspect among the POP dimensions.

This study also found that ethical leadership has a negative and significant effect on employee turnover intention, as previous research pointed out (Basar and Filizoz, 2015; Benevene *et al.*, 2018; DeConinck, 2015; Elçi *et al.*, 2012; Suifan *et al.*, 2020), confirming *H4*. Finally, *H5* is also confirmed, showing that when employees perceive their work as meaningful, it reduces turnover intentions in line with other studies (Charles-Leija *et al.*, 2023; Siahaan and Gatari, 2020).

6. Conclusions

This study analyzes a comprehensive model aimed to assess the influence of ethical leadership on two work outcomes – meaningful work and turnover intention – mediated by POP. The proposed model explains 42.7% of employees turnover intention and 12.1% of meaningful work, suggesting that ethical leaders influence employee's attitudes and behaviors, as stated by Palanski *et al.* (2014). To increase employee retention it is, thus, important for leaders to invest in organizational strategies that promote equal, fair and ethical treatment and mitigate unethical behaviors (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2022; Demirtas *et al.*, 2017; Lin and Liu, 2017; Palanski *et al.*, 2014). To provide a healthier work environment and avoid the existence of deviant and counterproductive practices that jeopardize the well-being of employees, ethical leaders need to promote an ethical culture based on trust, honesty and mutual respect (Bahadori *et al.*, 2021).

This study adds to previous research by analyzing the effects of ethical leadership on the five dimensions of POP proposed by Landells and Albrecht (2019) – communication, resources, decisions, reputation and relationships. Considering that ethical leadership has a greater negative impact on decisions (especially for those aged under 35 years of age) and communication dimensions of POP, leaders must adopt a close and empathetic stance, be able to listen to the needs and concerns of each employee and clearly communicate what they expect from their work, while taking full responsibility for their actions and decisions (Brown and Treviño, 2014).

As proposed, POP mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and meaningful work. The study contributes to the literature by providing evidence that communication is the

only POP dimension that affects meaningful work and turnover intention. Thus, it is necessary for managers to ensure that ethical standards are clearly articulated and understood by everyone, to address the misinformation and rumors caused by speculation that gives rise to misperceptions about the politics adopted (Abu Bakar and Omillion-Hodges, 2019; Kacmar *et al.*, 2013).

Furthermore, this study also shows that meaningful work has also a significant negative effect on turnover intention, as suggested by the literature (Arnoux-Nicolas *et al.*, 2016). When employees perceive that their work does not have a clear purpose and it is not aligned with their personal values, or that their tasks do not contribute significantly to the organization's goals, they are more likely to seek new opportunities in other organizations where they are able to grow and add value (Charles-Leija *et al.*, 2023). Thus, to increase employee retention, leaders should provide working environments were employees may experience meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2020; Shafique *et al.*, 2018; Shareef and Atan, 2019). Besides, results also evidence that ethical leaders should be responsible for mitigating employees' negative perceptions of communication channels by promoting two-way communication politics that are adjusted to their values, needs and ways of working (Abu Bakar and Connaughton, 2023).

The study offers practical suggestions for managers and HR professionals to mitigate the negative impact of POP on the meaning of work and employee retention. Some suggestions include investing in leadership training that focuses on awareness of ethical practices, dilemmas and social responsibility; developing personalized career development programs; using open communication channels to report concerns about inappropriate or unethical practices, provide constructive feedback and mitigate misunderstandings; implementing a code of conduct that defines expectations for ethical behavior and inclusion; integrating ethical criteria into performance evaluation systems; and establishing a fair compensation system that is aligned with good ethical performance standards and relies on significant employee contributions. Therefore, HR managers should be concerned with promoting, developing and retaining ethical leaders who can instill ethical behavior in the organization (Brown *et al.*, 2005).

The limitations of the study include the size of the sample and the use of a convenience sample, which limits generalizations. Another limitation is the use of a questionnaire survey, which can lead to response bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). To mitigate these effects, future studies could include a social desirability scale or integrate other data collection methods (e.g. interviews) to enrich the information collected and make the responses more reliable.

Given the importance of POP communication dimension in this study, it may be interesting to analyze in future research the extent to which ethical leadership communication can influence the politics set at the organizational level and their impact on employee perceptions and behaviors (Abu Bakar and Connaughton, 2023; Abu Bakar and Omillion-Hodges, 2019). It may also be useful to recognize other potential mediators or moderators that support the relationship between ethical leadership and different outcomes to strengthen the generalizability of the topic (Hochwarter *et al.*, 2020; Hyusein and Eyupoglu, 2023).

For leaders to be role models of ethical behaviors, as it has been suggested by social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), close interpersonal interactions between leader and follower are required (Piccolo *et al.*, 2010). Future studies could examine to which extent role modeling behaviors depend on the type of interaction (i.e. physical, online, hybrid), quality of relationships between leaders and followers and the duration of the relationship between them.

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Corresponding author
Pilar Mosquera can be contacted at: pilarconde@iseg.ulisboa.pt