Fostering Innovative Work Behavior: Ethical Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Proactive Personality

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Abstract
Innovation is vital for organizational success, driving socioeconomic change through new products, services, and business models. Employees, as key drivers of innovation, are encouraged to engage in innovative work behavior (IWB), which involves generating and implementing novel ideas to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage. The study explores the critical role of employee creativity and the factors influencing IWB, particularly in academic settings. Researchers argue that ethical leadership (EL) fosters a supportive environment that enhances IWB by valuing employee rights and dignity, thereby increasing productivity and innovation. EL's effectiveness, however, may vary based on contextual factors such as individual proactive personality, which influences how employees respond to leadership. Higher education institutions, facing globalization challenges, must promote IWB among academic staff to adapt to dynamic changes. This involves adopting new technologies, teaching methods and creating innovative research projects. Social exchange theory, social learning theory, and substitutes for leadership theory provide frameworks for understanding how EL impacts IWB. EL can enhance psychological safety, encouraging risk-taking and innovation, while proactive personality traits can substitute for leadership influence, driving innovation independently. This study contributes to the EL-IWB literature by examining the interplay of EL, psychological safety, and proactive personality in fostering IWB in academic settings.
Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Innovative Work Behavior, Psychological Safety, Proactive Personality.

Introduction
In the current business environment, which is swiftly changing, innovation has become inextricably linked with the survival and success of an organisation (Hazem & Zehou, 2019). It is an important means by which contemporary organizations strive for excellence and competitiveness (Oei et al., 2024). According to Gomes, Pinho, & Lopes (2024), innovation

not only results in the creation of new products, services, and business models, but it also induces socioeconomic change. Employees are essential in this process as they are the main catalysts for innovation and ultimately determine an organization's sustainable competitive advantage (Spiegelaere, Gyes, & Hootegem 2018). Employees are thus highly encouraged to participate in IWB since the success of organizations driven by innovation depends mostly on it (Bos-Nehles, Renkema, & Janssen, 2017). According to Rahim, Khalijah, Wan Nor Syazana, Fatanah, and Nurbarirah (2024), IWB is crucial for organizations globally.

The success of organizational innovation depends on employee creativity, which involves generating novel ideas, along with IWB, which encompasses both generating and implementing new ideas in the workplace (Martini, 2023; Volery & Tarabashkina, 2021; Scott & Bruce, 1994). This is due to the fact that people are in charge of creating, disseminating, responding to, and improving upon new ideas (Han, Ni, Hou & Zhang, 2023; Van de Ven, 1986). Thus, firms need to provide novel products and efficient, time-and money-saving procedures in order to grow and stay competitive (Zhang, 2022; Selamat & Zhang, 2019; Anderson, Potocnik, & Zhou, 2014). This is possible only if organizations monitor their employees' IWB (Mustafa, Coetzer, Ramos, & Fuhrer 2021; Cai, Lysova, Khapova, & Bossink, 2019). Since employees are an important source of innovation, the question becomes how to stimulate IWB, being employees' proactive behavior in creating and applying novel ideas at work (Volery & Tarabashkina, 2021). Nonetheless, comparatively little research has been done on the individual factors influencing employee creativity and IWB (Gomes et al., 2024).

The pursuit of innovation and creativity in universities has prompted researchers to investigate various factors influencing them (Khan, Jan, & Anwar, 2022). The competitive atmosphere within universities often places academic staff under the pressure of "publish or perish", highlighting the necessity of continuous publication to uphold academic significance (Khan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there is a growing belief that this pressure can be counterproductive and should be substituted with a more positive approach like "publish and flourish" to cultivate a culture of growth and development (Lambovska & Todorova, 2021). To achieve this, universities should develop the IWB of academic staff by providing them with strong EL, which is effective in attaining leading aims focused on anticipated success (Musenze & Mayende, 2023). Since EL are thought to increase productivity by respecting the rights and dignity of their employees, EL has gained popularity in the higher education sector (Jia, Zhu, Zhang, Rasool, Asghar, & Chin, 2022). Empirical research on the linkages between EL and IWB in the higher education sector is gaining significant attention. In Pakistan (Khan, Khan & Jan, 2021); Uganda (Musenze & Mayende, 2023), China (Jia et al., 2022), United Kingdom (Purwanto, Purba & Sijabat, 2021), and Nigeria (Jibola, 2020), research studies have been conducted in variety of contexts and have produced a range of results. However, employees' IWB, which acts as an important employee outcome as well as a determinant of organizational survival (Curran & Walsworth, 2014), competitiveness, and long-term success (Ren & Zhang, 2015), has only received limited attention in EL literature (Ahmad, Gao, Su, & Khan, 2023).

The research by Tu and Lu (2013), and arguments from management scholars indicate a limited understanding of how EL influences employees' IWB (Ahmad et al., 2023). Previous studies have revealed that employees are more inclined to engage in innovative work when they feel encouraged to take risks without fear of negative consequences (Newman,

Donohue, & Eva, 2017). Tu et al (2019), suggest that due to the risks and uncertainties inherent in innovation, employees rely on their leaders to manage these challenges and prevent future repercussions. Effective EL, characterized by fostering honest relationships, promoting trust, and mutual respect, enhances employees' psychological safety, encouraging their participation in IWB (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). This article aims to contribute to the EL-IWB literature by examining how employees perceive psychological safety in relation to their innovative behavior.

Furthermore, recent research suggests that EL may not always be as effective in certain situations, as indicated by studies conducted by (Babalola et al., 2019; and Gok et al., 2017). The effectiveness of EL could be contingent on various factors, such as an individual's proactive personality. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of employee's personality traits in shaping their responses to leadership practices Guenter et al (2017), emphasizing the importance of understanding the circumstances under which EL can have varying impacts on different individuals (Taylor & Pattie, 2015). This article is particularly important because it addresses the role of employees as catalysts for innovation, highlighting the need to encourage proactive behaviors, thus offering a deeper understanding of how leadership strategies can be adapted to cater individual differences. It offers valuable insights for leaders and organizations aiming to boost innovation through a leadership approach grounded in ethics and integrity. Such an approach not only fosters a competitive edge but also ensures that the innovations generated are sustainable and closely aligned with the organization's core values. In today's complex and competitive markets, integrating EL and IWB is not just beneficial but essential for achieving long-term success and sustainability. The subsequent sections of this article will discuss factors that foster IWB among academic staff.

The Role of Higher Education Institution
Globalization has presented institutions in a variety of industries with obstacles over the last ten years, including increased performance standards (Rasdi et al. 2022). This is particularly true for the higher education sector, where university education is prioritised by governments all over the world (Qoraboyev, & Gimranova, 2021). Universities are part of the broader academic delivery system that performs fundamental functions of research and education (Zaremohzzabieh, et al., 2021; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). They contribute significantly to the development of the country as academic and scientific organizations that propel social and economic progress (Bayuo Chaminade, & Go¨ransson, 2020). Universities nowadays are expected to be innovative, self-sustainable and self-reliant (Khan et al., 2022). In the higher education sector, it is essential for academic staff to exhibit IWB in order to adapt to the ever-evolving changes and improvements in the field (Oke & Fernandes, 2020). This is because their responsibilities encompass both academic and administrative duties (Wahab et al., 2024). Academics should prioritize their academic responsibilities in order to introduce diversity to their respective fields creatively and innovatively (Khan et al., 2020). Consequently, one of the biggest challenges facing organisations today is helping employees develop and maintain their IWB (Al Wali et al., 2022). IWB can take various forms, such as adopting new technologies, implementing novel teaching methods, and creating innovative research projects (Asfar et al., 2021; Groselj et al., 2021). It involves persistently searching for new knowledge, investigating novel ideas, and trying out various strategies (Musneh & Roslin, 2021). This behavior is fundamental to the growth and development of the institution and the entire education system (Hosseini & Haghighi Shirazi, 2021).

Social Exchange Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Substitutes for Leadership Theory

EL is a crucial factor in promoting IWB among employees. According to social exchange theory (SET), the relationship between leaders and employees plays a significant role in fostering innovation. When employees trust their leaders and perceive them as ethical leaders, they are more likely to engage in innovative tasks with optimism (Guo, Jin, & Yim, 2023) and effort (Yu, Mai, Tsai, & Dai, 2018). The SET states that, when leaders provide their employees with pertinent resources, they establish an emotional bond that encourages employees to repay the favor (Li et al., 2019; Blau, 1964). EL plays a significant role in this context. Superiors who exhibit EL, offering support, respect, and integrity, foster a positive reciprocal relationship (Ahmad et al., 2023). When employees perceive their leaders as ethical, they are more likely to feel valued and supported, leading to increased confidence and willingness to engage in innovative behaviors (Khan et al., 2021). Consequently, staff will repay their superiors by becoming active members of the workplace and enhancing their creative thinking (Javed, Abdullah, Zaffar, ul Haque, & Rubab, 2019). Research indicated that EL leads to higher levels of employee engagement and job satisfaction, which are critical for fostering innovation (Kim & Park, 2020). Indeed, it has been suggested that the cooperation and support of superiors, as seen in EL, can enhance IWB among subordinates (Liu et al., 2023; Bannay & Hadi, 2020).

Additionally, Bandura's (1977), social learning theory (SLT) suggests that employees learn expected behaviors by observing their work environment and superiors as individuals tend to learn by watching others and imitating their behavior (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018). If an employee observes their superior engaging in IWB, they are more likely to adopt such behavior, seeing it as a role expectation (Wahab et al, 2024). EL enhances this learning by setting a positive example. Ethical leaders demonstrate behaviors that align with organizational values and goals, creating a model for employees (Kalshoven, & Den Hartog, De Hoogh 2011). This modelling is effective because ethical leaders are seen as credible and trustworthy, increasing the likelihood that employees will emulate their behaviors. Studies show that EL is positively associated with employees' willingness to take risks and pursue new ideas, as they feel secure and trusted in their work environment (Jia et al., 2022; Wen, Wu, & Long, 2021). Ethical leaders foster psychological safety, encouraging employees to experiment and innovate without fear of negative consequences, which is crucial for promoting IWB (Edmondson, 1999). Moreover, ethical leaders take accountability for their actions, clearly communicating organizational goals and expectations to their teams (Kalshoven et al., 2011). This transparency helps employees understand the importance of innovation and aligning personal goals with organizational goals.

Substitutes for leadership theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) suggests that employee, task, and organizational characteristics can moderate or replace the need for direct leadership. Based on this perspective, some contextual factors such as employees' characteristics can substitute or neutralize specific leader behavior by eliminating the need for leadership across situations (Gok et al., 2017). Employee characteristics like high intrinsic motivation, proactive behavior, and a strong commitment to ethical standards reduce the need for continuous ethical guidance from leaders. These employees naturally engage in innovative behaviors without needing direct relationship (Schmitt, Den Hartog, & Belschak, 2022). Proactive employees, in

particular, take initiative and drive innovation themselves, further diminishing the need for leadership intervention (Kilic, & Gök, 2023; Jada, Mukhopadhyay, & Titiyal, 2019).

Innovative Work Behavior
IWB involves creating and implementing innovative ideas to improve task, group, or organizational performance (Li et al., 2019). Employees contribute to innovation by generating new ideas, sharing them, and working on their implement implementation (Choi, Kang, & Choi, 2021; Janssen, 2000). The innovation process includes three stages: idea generation, dissemination, and implementation. In the idea generation stage, employees identify opportunities or issues needing solutions (Vaiopoulou, & Stamovlasis, 2022). During idea dissemination, employees persuade others to adopt their innovative ideas by leveraging their expertise and forming suportive relationships (Coun, Edelbroek, Peters, & Blomme, 2021). The final stage, idea implementation involves turning these ideas into practical, evaluable actions (Gkontelos et al., 2022).

This article emphasized IWB, encompassing all three stages, as studies show these activities collectively contribute to innovation (Wang et al., 2015). While most IWB research (e.g. Zhou & George, 2001; Oldham & Cummings, 1996) focuses on idea generation, a holistic approach that includes all stages of IWB is more effective for fostering organizational innovation (Anderson et al., 2014). IWB is essential for initiating new ideas and processes within organizations, leading to new products, methods and management systems (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). Innovative employees boost organizational performance and ensure long-term survival and competitiveness (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). According to Prameswari et al (2020), and Waheed et al (2017), IWB is crucial for achieving organizational goals.

Employee IWB is influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors refer to personal characteristics, creativity and the ability to engage in innovation, and external factors include factors about work environment and the support of managers (Nguyen, 2022). Internal (individual) factors including problem-solving styles (Scott & Bruce, 1994), cognitive styles (Yang & Zhang, 2012), and openness to experience (Tan et al., 2019). As for external (organizational context-related) factors, such as organizational culture and climate (Scott & Bruce, 1994), leadership (Tu & Lu, 2013), human resource management (Alfes et al., 2013), and job characteristics (Oldham & Cummings, 1996).

Ethical Leadership
Leadership is fundamental for smooth functioning and success of any organization (Manzoor, Zhang, & Ma 2023). It guides employees toward achieving corporate goals while fostering an environment conducive to innovation and job satisfaction (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024). Leaders shape the workplace atmosphere and are seen as role models and providers of a nurturing work environment. This role includes offering support, inspiration, and resources for employees to thrive, highlighting the importance of effective leadership in cultivating a positive organizational culture (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024).

Effective leaders create an innovative environment by fostering a supportive and encouraging atmosphere, significantly influencing employees' willingness to engage in innovative practices, embrace creativity, and take calculated risks (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024). Leadership is thus a crucial research topic across disciplines such as management, history,

communication, and psychology (Rast et al., 2018). Leadership has been defined in various ways. Ndalamba, Caldwell and Anderson (2018), described it as influencing employees through ethical and moral duties, cognitive abilities, and actionable plans. Ekstrand et al (2018), define it as the ability to influence the employees to achieve the goals and facilitate an organizational environment conducive to those goals.

Recently, there has been increased attention on the ethical behavior of leaders due to corporate scandals and ethical failures. EL is crucial as it helps prevent scandals and promotes ethical practices (Waldmanet et al., 2017). Leaders are expected to act as role models and any failure in this regard can harm the organization (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Research shows EL's usefulness beyond ethical outcomes (Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Misati, 2017) enhancing organizational citizenship behavior, performance, commitment, and creativity (Taylor and Pattie, 2015). Ethical leaders, being honest, trustworthy, and caring are positively perceived by employees, who see this as organization support, viewing themselves as valued assets (Qi et al., 2019). Such positive feelings predict behavior including IWB (Musenze & Mayende, 2023; Ahmed et al 2021; Ahmed et al., 2020). Since IWB involves idea exploration, generation and implementation (Arain et al., 2020), ethical leaders can motivate and stimulate employees to search for, create and implement innovative ideas (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Psychological Safety
Psychological safety refers to a state there is no risk or uncertainty associated with voicing opinion, proposing new ideas, or solutions (Edmondson, Kramer, & Cook, 2004). Tu et al (2019), argues that given the inherent risks and uncertainties of innovation, employees rely on their leaders to manage these risks and prevent negative consequences. A psychological safe environment is characterized by high interpersonal trust and mutual respect, allowing people to express their differences and propose new ideas (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009) without fear of embarrassment or criticism (Edmondson et al., 2004). Employees who feel psychologically safe are less fearful of negative repercussions when taking risks or presenting their opinions, encouraging them to engage in innovative activities (Liu et al., 2023). Edmondson et al (2004), identify three behaviors that leaders can promote to enhance psychological safety: being available and approachable, soliciting team members' opinions and feedback, and modelling openness and fallibility.

Ethical leaders, by interacting with employees with honesty and openness, foster mutual respect and trust among leader and followers (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). They show genuine concern for their employees, respect their interests, and provide both instrumental and emotional support (Tu et al., 2019). Ethical leaders play a crucial role in building respect and mutual trust within organization (Shafique, Ahmad, Kalyar, 2020; Tu et al., 2019), contributing to a climate of psychological safety (Men, Fong, Huo, Zhong, Jia, & Luo, 2020). Additionally, ethical leaders are perceived as altruism, upholding high ethical standards, honesty, and commitment. This perception makes employees feel more secure in sharing new ideas within the organization (Kalyar, Usta, & Shafique 2020; Shafique et al., 2020]. Therefore, EL is essential for promoting employees' psychological safety and encouraging IWB.

Proactive Personality

Proactive individuals are more likely to initiate behaviors to solve work-related problems without waiting for a leader's instructions (Li, Chen, & Crant, 2022; Bateman & Crant, 1993). In contrast, less proactive individuals tend to seek leadership direction before taking initiatives and engaging in risk-taking tasks (Guenter et al., 2017). A proactive personality is characterized by the tendency to take the initiative to influence one's environment and improve current circumstances (Crant, 2000; Bateman & Crant, 1993). This aligns with the goals of proactive individuals, who seek to create positive changes and remove inefficiencies, thereby continuously improving and shaping their environment (Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005).

Innovative behavior often results in difficulties with detachment from innovation-related tasks for employees with high levels of proactivity (Ng & Wang, 2019). Proactive individuals tend to depend less on leader instructions and thus serve as substitute for perceived EL (Ahmad et al., 2023). As a result, these employees frequently engage in risk-taking activities like IWB without needing motivation from ethical leaders (Li et al., 2022; Bateman & Crant, 1993), unlike their less proactive counterparts (Guenter et al., 2017). Such proactive employees are not easily influenced by situational constraints and are inclined to take initiative and engage in risky actions (Guenter et al., 2017). Therefore, the perceived EL has minimal influence on their risk-taking behaviors like IWB.

Conclusion
In conclusion, innovation has become a cornerstone for organizational success and survival in today's dynamic business environment. Employees are pivotal in driving innovation, necessitating a focus on their IWB. While IWB involves idea generation, dissemination, and implementation, its effectiveness hinges on various internal and external factors, including leadership style. EL plays a significant role in fostering a supportive environment that encourages psychological safety, essential for promoting IWB. Ethical leaders build trust and mutual respect, reducing the fear of taking risks and enabling employees to voice and implement new ideas without fear of negative repercussions. However, the influence of EL on IWB is not universal and can be moderated by individual traits like proactive personality. Proactive individuals, who are self-driven and less reliant on leader direction, may exhibit high levels of IWB regardless of EL, acting as substitutes for leadership. Conversely, employees with lower proactive tendencies might require the motivation and support provided by ethical leaders to engage in innovative behaviors. In the context of higher education, particularly in Malaysia, fostering IWB among academic staff is critical for institutions to remain competitive and innovative. The role of universities in driving social and economic advancement underscores the need for strong EL to cultivate an environment where academic staff can thrive and contribute to institutional innovation. Empirical studies across diverse cultural settings affirm the importance of EL in enhancing IWB, although the interplay of psychological safety and proactive personality requires further exploration. Overall, the integration of EL, psychological safety, and proactive personality into organizational practices can significantly enhance IWB, thereby ensuring sustained organizational growth and competitiveness in the evolving business landscape.

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