

Unethical leaders create corrupt employees

Submitted by: BlueSky Public Relations Ltd

Tuesday, 15 December 2020

Ethical leadership can reduce the prevalence of corrupt behaviour in an organisation, new research from BI Norwegian Business School (<https://www.bi.edu/>) confirms.

Ethical leaders are good role models, stimulate ethical conduct, and use reward and punishment to decrease unethical behaviour, such as corruption, a specific form of unethical behaviour characterised by a misuse of power.

Doctoral candidate M. Untung Manara, supervised by Associate Professor Suzanne van Gils, a lecturer in management communications and ethics, and colleagues at Maastricht University, examined the effect of ethical leadership on corruption in two studies. They were specifically interested in whether ethical leaders could help change the behaviour of employees specifically prone to unethical behaviour. The first study surveyed 321 employees from various job sectors, including construction, health care, and education, measuring the relationship between ethical leadership and corruption. The results showed that greater ethical leadership is related to reduced corrupt behaviours, such as taking money from an organisation for personal benefit.

The second study was an experiment involving 146 participants who were randomly assigned to watch a video of either an ethical leader or unethical leader. After watching the video, participants played a 'corruption game': Two players would bid against each other to win a prize while a third allocated the prize to the highest bidder. The players have the option to offer a bribe to the allocator to ensure they get the prize regardless of their actual bid. Participants also had their thinking style assessed. The study showed that ethical leadership directly relates to reducing followers' corruption, as participants were less likely to bribe if they had watched the ethical leader prior to playing the game. Furthermore, ethical leadership reduced corruption due to followers of ethical leaders engaging in a more intuitive thinking style. This means followers with an ethical leader engage in less deliberate thinking and intuitively avoid unethical behaviour.

Dr van Gils says,

"I am particularly glad to be part of this important project aiming to reduce corruption and contributing to accountability in organisations. This is an important global goal and one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Our study provides practical insights by showing that organisations and governments can promote ethical leadership to prevent corruption in organisations. Followers under ethical leadership learn from their leaders what behaviour is ethically rewarded or punished, have explicit ethical norms, and trust their ethical leaders. Furthermore, our findings show that ethical leaders create a context where people intuitively refrain from choosing unethical behaviour, and that this is effective for those employees who are more prone to unethical behaviour."

These findings were published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

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For more information, a copy of the research paper, or to speak with the researchers, please contact Kyle Grizzell at BlueSky Education on 07904706136 or kyle@bluesky-pr.com