COMMENTARY

What's ethics got to do with it? Manager behavioral modeling in virtual environments

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In their focal article, Hu et al. (2021) discuss two subthemes that have emerged in the information and communication technology (ICT) literature: "(a) an emphasis on using technology to do work away from the physical work location" and "(b) using technology to move away from face-to-face interactions and toward alternative forms of media for work communication purposes" (p. 371). In this commentary, I propose one critical missing element related to both subthemes: accounting for ethical behavior.

Several ethical perspectives must be considered in a remote work environment. For example, pace and high demands can sometimes drive remote employees to take part in unethical behaviors, especially if they are fearful of losing their jobs (Schwepker & Good, 1999). Ethical behavior is important in maintaining long-term customer relationships (Gundlach & Murphy, 1993), and it has a positive effect on customer satisfaction and trust (Roman & Ruiz, 2005). It is the responsibility of the manager to form the operational and cultural foundations of ethical team performance in the pursuit of company and personal goals.

A manager's ethical leadership influences an employee's emulation intentions, which in turn, influences both employee behavior and performance (Badrinarayanan et al., 2019). Social learning theory is used as a theoretical foundation in the study of ethical leadership, and it is useful in understanding an employee's reaction to ethical leader behavior. According to Brown & Treviño (2005), a subordinate emulates the ethical behavior of the manager through observational learning, imitation, and identification.

When managers use an ethical leadership style, they are perceived as worthy targets for emulation by employees. In turn, their perceived worthiness of being followed serves as a motivational force for influencing outcomes and behavioral performance (Badrinarayanan & Ramachandran, 2019). Managers who provide an example of what they want to see will facilitate improvements in the adoption of ethical practices by those on their team. However, if the manager is remote, how will subordinates observe a proper example of ethical behavior? Without proper reinforcement, employees can lapse and start to behave unethically.

Can a remote manager coach ethical behaviors virtually?

The role of a manager is one of leadership. An ethical leader builds people. Managers are important in fostering employee ethical behavior because they are keepers of acceptable standards and practices. A manager needs to spend time coaching each member of their team on topics like ethical behavior (Singh et al., 2015). Coaching is a formal process that uses one-on-one meetings to help employees discern hidden issues that impede performance so that higher levels of success

can be achieved (Hawes & Rich, 1998). Good coaching is all about helping the individual employee overcome bad habits, find motivation, and unlock potential (Dahling et al., 2016).

Both managers and their teams agree that coaching skills are among the most important characteristics that effective managers must have (Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2008) because coaching directly affects an employee's belief that they have the necessary skills to do the job well, which will ultimately increase job performance (Farrell, & Hakstian, 2001). However, the dynamics of one-on-one coaching are changing due to technological advances that are increasingly digitizing business practices. With a geographically dispersed workforce, face-to-face meetings are being significantly curtailed. Such meetings are being replaced by virtual communication. However, it is yet to be determined whether managers can effectively coach ethical behaviors virtually via technology like Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

An effective leader of a virtual team must be nimble, flexible, and able to understand the challenges of manging employees remotely. Managers must be clear and consistent when coaching their employees, even more so when doing so virtually. Employees suffer when they are deprived of routine feedback. Video conferencing technology like Zoom or Microsoft Teams allows for face-to-face communication when employees are working remotely, so managers can provide positive or constructive feedback on a regular basis. However, both managers and employees need to be trained on the use of the software to ensure that the technology does not serve as an obstacle to effective communication.

Conclusion

Though this would seem to be an important topic because many professionals have shifted toward working remotely, the focal article by Hu et al. (2021) does not discuss how ethical behaviors can be conveyed by using technology like Zoom or Microsoft Teams in a remote working environment. Ethical leadership must be transmitted during virtual coaching sessions to empower ethical behavior among employees.

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