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Ethical Leadership and Employee Engagement Alongside Leader Trust and Psychological Safety in Vietnamese Smaller Enterprises

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ABSTRACT: Confidence in supervisors and perceptions of interpersonal risk may shape how employees engage with work. This study examined the associations among ethical leadership, trust in the leader, psychological safety, and work engagement in Vietnamese small and medium-sized enterprises. Of 346 questionnaires returned in a cross-sectional convenience survey, 334 were usable. Adapted five-point measures were examined using item analysis, exploratory analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. The measurement model had a comparative fit index of 0.951 and a root mean square error of approximation of 0.053. Composite reliability ranged from 0.914 to 0.972. Average variance extracted ranged from 0.605 to 0.761. All six direct paths were positive. Ethical leadership was associated with trust, psychological safety, and engagement, with reported regression weights of 0.246, 0.289, and 0.098, respectively. Trust was associated with psychological safety and engagement, with weights of 0.323 and 0.237. The weight for psychological safety and engagement was 0.387. Five paths had $p < 0.001$, and the leadership–engagement path had $p = 0.002$. The results show that leader trust and psychological safety each had a positive association with engagement within the same model. The cross-sectional design and the absence of indirect-effect intervals limit conclusions about the sequence of these relationships. The findings provide evidence from Vietnamese enterprises and identify leadership practices and workplace communication as topics for longitudinal assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Work engagement reflects how employees invest energy and attention in their work. Kahn (1990) described engagement as the investment of the self in a work role. Schaufeli et al. (2002) distinguished vigor, dedication, and absorption. These accounts direct attention to conditions that help employees participate fully in their work. Supervisors influence some of these conditions through the way they make decisions, respond to employee concerns, and handle mistakes. The importance of those practices can vary across workplaces and national settings.

Ethical leadership combines appropriate personal conduct with communication and reinforcement of ethical standards (Brown et al., 2005; Brown and Treviño, 2006). Employees can observe this conduct in decisions about assignments, accountability, and the treatment of colleagues. Leadership ethics research also addresses how managers put their stated values into practice (Ciulla, 2004; Khuntia and Suar, 2004). Interviews with executives and colleagues showed that judgments about executive ethics reflect both personal integrity and the active management of ethics (Treviño et al., 2003).

Social learning and social exchange explain how employees may respond to ethical leadership. Employees learn which behaviors are accepted by observing credible role models (Bandura, 1977). Fair treatment may also encourage employees to invest in the

work relationship, consistent with the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). In social exchange, these expectations develop over repeated interactions (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Both perspectives therefore place employees' interpretation of leaders' conduct at the center of the proposed associations.

Trust in the leader is one such interpretation. Trust concerns willingness to accept vulnerability on the basis of favorable expectations, with ability, benevolence, and integrity providing distinct foundations (Mayer et al., 1995). Cognition-based and affect-based trust can develop through different experiences, including reliable performance and personal concern (McAllister, 1995). Trust also reduces the complexity of uncertain social relationships (Luhmann, 1979). Meta-analytic evidence links leadership trust to employee attitudes and behavior, while emphasizing the importance of the referent being trusted (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Therefore, trust in an immediate leader should remain conceptually distinguishable from trust in the organization as a whole.

Psychological safety concerns a related but different judgment. It addresses the interpersonal consequences of speaking, asking for help, or admitting error (Edmondson, 1999). An employee may regard a supervisor as competent yet remain reluctant to challenge a decision in front of colleagues. Psychological safety consequently requires attention to the wider interactional setting, alongside the supervisor relationship. Reviews identify supportive relationships and leadership behavior as important antecedents, but also show variation across individuals, teams, and organizations (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017). Inclusive leadership research further connects openness and availability with employees' willingness to participate in creative work (Carmeli et al., 2010).

International evidence supports examining trust and safety together without assuming that their sequence is already established in every setting. Engelbrecht et al. (2014, 2017) linked ethical leadership, trust, and engagement in South African organizational research. Ng and Feldman (2015) found broad meta-analytic support for ethical leadership's criterion-related validity. In Malaysia, Basit (2017) examined psychological safety and felt obligation in the trust–engagement relationship among nurses. These studies identify plausible relational processes, but differ in populations, measurement, and model specification. A country-level meta-analysis also found that leadership–engagement relationships vary across national contexts and leadership approaches (Li et al., 2021).

Organizations need survey measures that distinguish trust, psychological safety, and engagement before acting on employee feedback. Short digital questionnaires offer a practical way to collect such information, provided that the items retain their meaning when adapted to a new setting. The nine-item engagement instrument was developed through cross-national measurement research (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Trust measures should specify who is trusted. Psychological safety items should specify the workplace or team to which employees refer. A job demands–resources perspective also draws attention to workload and other resources that may affect engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Khuong and Dung (2015) studied 312 technicians in Vung Tau and reported relationships among ethical leadership, organizational justice, trust, and engagement. In Ho Chi Minh City, Nguyen et al. (2024) examined ethical leadership and psychological capital among 418 employees, with job satisfaction and organizational commitment as outcomes. These studies provide evidence on distinct work attitudes and psychological resources in Vietnam. For smaller enterprises, the question remains whether psychological safety has an association with engagement after accounting for trust in the leader.

The distinction matters for both measurement and interpretation. Employees may trust their supervisor and still anticipate criticism from colleagues if they report a mistake. Testing the two constructs in one model allows their associations with engagement to be estimated separately. The distinction also needs scrutiny at the item level because one ethical leadership item explicitly mentions trust. Cross-sectional data can estimate these relationships at a single time point. Establishing whether trust develops before psychological safety requires observations over time (Maxwell and Cole, 2007).

This study examines ethical leadership, trust in the leader, psychological safety, and work engagement among employees of Vietnamese small and medium-sized enterprises. It evaluates the measurement evidence for four constructs and estimates six direct associations in a structural model. The analysis addresses whether ethical leadership, leader trust, and psychological safety each have a positive association with work engagement when examined together.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Research design and conceptual specification

This cross-sectional survey examined employees of Vietnamese small and medium-sized enterprises. The structural model represented ethical leadership, trust in the leader, psychological safety, and work engagement as latent constructs. Social learning informed the role-modeling rationale, and social exchange informed the relational rationale. **Figure 1** shows the six hypothesized positive associations. Ethical leadership was hypothesized to relate to trust (H1), psychological safety (H2), and engagement (H4). Trust was hypothesized to relate to psychological safety (H3) and engagement (H6), and psychological safety to engagement (H5).

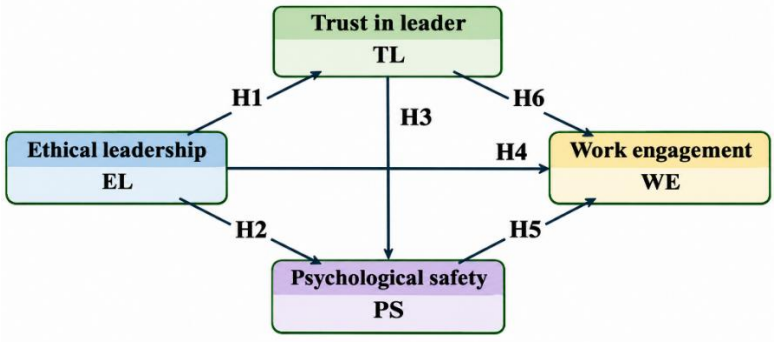


Figure 1. Hypothesized associations among ethical leadership (EL), trust in the leader (TL), psychological safety (PS), and work engagement (WE). Labels H1–H6 identify the six direct paths.

2.2 Participants and questionnaire administration

Employees were recruited through convenience sampling. Questionnaires were distributed in person and through Google Forms, with an emphasis on employees with substantial work experience. Of the 346 questionnaires returned, 12 were excluded as invalid and 334 were analyzed. The usable proportion was 96.53% of returned questionnaires. The number of employees invited was unavailable, so a recruitment response rate could not be calculated.

Gender, age, education, and work experience describe the sample. The reported model estimates associations at the employee level. Responses from employees who share a supervisor or enterprise may be correlated. Enterprise identifiers were unavailable for assessing this clustering.

2.3 Instrument development and construct measurement

Participants answered items on a five-point Likert scale. The ethical leadership items drew principally on Brown et al. (2005). The trust, psychological safety, and engagement measures were adapted from McAllister (1995), Edmondson (1999), and Schaufeli et al. (2006), respectively. Five experienced managers and experienced employees contributed to discussions about the questionnaire. Two items were removed and five were reworded during development.

The questionnaire contained 37 indicators: 10 for ethical leadership, 11 for trust in the leader, seven for psychological safety, and nine for work engagement. Trust is abbreviated TL in the tables and LD in the statistical diagrams. Engagement items address vigor, dedication, and absorption. Psychological safety items PS1, PS3, and PS5 are negatively worded. Item EL6 explicitly mentions trust, so it may overlap in content with the leader-trust scale.

2.4 Item analysis and exploratory structure

Corrected item–total correlations were examined before exploratory analysis of the 37 indicators. The methods description identifies principal axis factoring, while the exploratory output identifies principal component analysis. Both specify Promax rotation. The results are presented as a rotated solution. The stated retention criteria were loadings of at least 0.50, eigenvalues of at least one, and at least 50% explained variance. The two reported thresholds for corrected item–total correlations were 0.33 and 0.40. All retained items exceeded 0.40.

Sampling adequacy was assessed with the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin statistic and Bartlett's test. Principal component analysis and common-factor analysis produce different forms of exploratory evidence (Hair et al., 2019). Construct-specific Cronbach's alpha estimates were unavailable. Item–total correlations and composite reliability are therefore reported separately.

2.5 Confirmatory measurement and structural analysis

Confirmatory analysis used AMOS. The initial measurement model had a goodness-of-fit index of 0.820. Subsequent models included within-construct residual covariances selected from modification indices. Fit was evaluated using chi-square relative to its degrees of freedom, the goodness-of-fit index, the Tucker–Lewis index, the comparative fit index, and the root mean square error of approximation (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). Composite reliability and average variance extracted were used to assess reliability and convergence. Construct correlations were compared with the square roots of average variance extracted using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

The structural model estimated six direct paths. Path weights are denoted by B. The estimates are accompanied by standard errors, critical ratios, and p-values. The scale of the coefficients is unspecified in the available regression table. Indirect associations would require a separate estimate and an interval for each product of coefficients (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). The available output supports inference on the direct paths.

2.6 Statistical interpretation

The cross-sectional estimates were interpreted as associations within the specified model. A single questionnaire provides all four measures, so shared response tendencies may contribute to the estimated associations (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The exploratory and confirmatory analyses also appear to use the same respondent sample.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Sample composition

Table 1 summarizes the 334 respondents. Men accounted for 56.88% and women for 43.12%. Most respondents were aged 25–45 years (74.85%). Overall, 82.63% held at least a bachelor's degree, and 97.01% reported five or more years of work experience. The sample therefore mainly represents experienced and degree-qualified employees.

Table 1. Participant characteristics in the retained sample

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	190	56.88
	Female	144	43.12
Age	Under 25	10	2.99
	25 – 45	250	74.85
	Over 45	74	22.16
Education	Below college	30	8.98
	College	28	8.38
	Bachelor's degree	260	77.85
	Postgraduate	16	4.79
Experience	Under 5 years	10	2.99
	5 – 15 years	280	83.83
	Over 15 years	44	13.18

Percentages use 334 respondents as the denominator.

3.2 Item functioning and scale coverage

Table 2 summarizes the four scales, and **Table 3** lists the 37 items and their corrected item–total correlations. The coefficients ranged from 0.696 to 0.872 for ethical leadership, 0.778 to 0.891 for trust, 0.702 to 0.786 for psychological safety, and 0.676 to 0.826 for engagement. Every item exceeded 0.40. The correlations describe the alignment of individual items with their scale scores.

Table 2. Construct coverage and reported item diagnostics

Construct	Items	Scale foundation	Corrected item–total range
Ethical leadership	10	Brown et al. (2005)	0.696–0.872
Leader trust	11	McAllister (1995)	0.778–0.891
Psychological safety	7	Edmondson (1999)	0.702–0.786
Work engagement	9	Schaufeli et al. (2006)	0.676–0.826

All items used a five-point response scale.

Table 3. Retained items and corrected item–total correlations

Item	Administered item wording in English	Item total r
EL1	Your leader always listens to employees' opinions.	0.827
EL2	Your leader takes measures to deal with employees who violate ethical norms.	0.696
EL3	Your leader always maintains an ethical way of living and behaving.	0.765
EL4	Your leader cares about employees' legitimate interests.	0.827
EL5	Your leader makes fair and balanced decisions.	0.862
EL6	You can trust your leader.	0.726
EL7	Your leader often discusses ethics and work values with employees.	0.826
EL8	Your leader sets an example of right and ethical behavior.	0.790
EL9	Your leader evaluates success not only by results but also by how the results are achieved.	0.829
EL10	When making decisions, your leader considers what is ethically right.	0.872
TL1	You and your leader have an open relationship in which you can share ideas, feelings, and expectati with each other.	0.891
TL2	You can openly discuss with your leader the difficulties you encounter at work and believe that y leader will listen.	0.841
TL3	You and your leader would both feel a sense of loss if one of you were no longer working with the ot	0.822
TL4	If you shared a problem with your leader, you believe your leader would respond positively and with c	0.879
TL5	You believe that you and your leader have invested considerably in the working relationship betw you.	0.841
TL6	Your leader performs work with professionalism and a sense of responsibility.	0.856
TL7	Based on what your leader has demonstrated, you trust your leader's competence and preparation.	0.889
TL8	You can trust that your leader will not make your work difficult through carelessness.	0.778

Item	Administered item wording in English	Item total r
TL9	People who work with your leader generally trust and respect the leader.	0.835
TL10	People who frequently work with your leader regard the leader as trustworthy.	0.878
TL11	You believe there is no need to worry excessively or to monitor your leader closely because you trust way your leader does the job.	0.802
PS1	If I make a mistake at work, I worry that it may be held against me.	0.733
PS2	Employees can openly raise problems and difficult issues at work.	0.716
PS3	Employees in the unit are sometimes rejected or not accepted because of differing views characteristics.	0.760
PS4	I feel safe taking risks at work.	0.786
PS5	I find it difficult to ask others in the unit for support when needed.	0.702
PS6	I believe that no one in the unit deliberately undermines my efforts.	0.735
PS7	My unique skills and abilities are valued and given room to be used at work.	0.768
WE1	You feel full of energy when you work.	0.791
WE2	You feel strong and vigorous when you work.	0.777
WE3	You can keep working for long periods when the job requires it.	0.798
WE4	You feel that your work is meaningful and valuable.	0.771
WE5	I feel enthusiastic about my work.	0.807
WE6	My work inspires me.	0.780
WE7	When I am working, I feel that time passes very quickly.	0.676
WE8	I am completely focused on my work when I am working.	0.826
WE9	I find it hard to detach myself from my work when I am working.	0.757

EL = ethical leadership. TL = trust in the leader (LD in the statistical diagrams). PS = psychological safety. WE = work engagement. PS1, PS3, and PS5 are negatively worded.

The psychological safety items cover speaking up, asking for help, inclusion, and recognition. Engagement items cover vigor, dedication, and absorption. The model represents engagement as a single factor. It also combines the cognitive and affective aspects of leader trust.

3.3 Exploratory measurement evidence

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin statistic was 0.951. Bartlett's test yielded $\chi^2(666) = 11{,}926.728$, $p < 0.001$ (**Table 4**). The rotated solution retained four groups and explained 72.040% of the variance. Rotation converged after five iterations. The available salient loadings ranged from 0.670 to 0.955 (**Table 5**). The four groups corresponded to trust, ethical leadership, engagement, and psychological safety.

Table 4. Sampling adequacy and exploratory solution diagnostics

Diagnostic	Reported result
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin statistic	0.951
Bartlett's chi-square	11,926.728
Degrees of freedom	666
Probability	<0.001
Retained groups	4
Explained variance (%)	72.040
Promax rotation iterations	5

The exploratory output reports a Promax-rotated solution.

Table 5. Reported salient coefficients in the rotated four-group solution

Item	TL	EL	WE	PS
TL1	0.944	—	—	—
TL2	0.869	—	—	—
TL3	0.873	—	—	—
TL4	0.933	—	—	—
TL5	0.875	—	—	—
TL6	0.879	—	—	—
TL7	0.955	—	—	—
TL8	0.767	—	—	—
TL9	0.860	—	—	—
TL10	0.904	—	—	—
TL11	0.825	—	—	—
EL1	—	0.865	—	—
EL2	—	0.790	—	—
EL3	—	0.825	—	—
EL4	—	0.871	—	—
EL5	—	0.891	—	—
EL6	—	0.760	—	—
EL7	—	0.859	—	—
EL8	—	0.855	—	—
EL9	—	0.853	—	—
EL10	—	0.896	—	—

Item	TL	EL	WE	PS
WE1	—	—	0.802	—
WE2	—	—	0.820	—
WE3	—	—	0.759	—
WE4	—	—	0.708	—
WE5	—	—	0.863	—
WE6	—	—	0.895	—
WE7	—	—	0.884	—
WE8	—	—	0.768	—
WE9	—	—	0.800	—
PS1	—	—	—	0.859
PS2	—	—	—	0.670
PS3	—	—	—	0.946
PS4	—	—	—	0.894
PS5	—	—	—	0.806
PS6	—	—	—	0.746
PS7	—	—	—	0.702

Dashes indicate unavailable loadings.

3.4 Confirmatory measurement quality and fit

Table 6 summarizes the measurement and structural fit indices. The measurement model had $\chi^2/df = 1.940$, a Tucker–Lewis index of 0.947, a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.951, and a root mean square error of approximation of 0.053. The goodness-of-fit index was 0.845. The chi-square test rejected exact fit ($p < 0.001$). **Figure 2** shows the four measurement factors and their item loadings. The fit indices describe a model that includes post hoc residual covariances.

Table 6. Fit of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation model (SEM)

Index	CFA	SEM	Interpretation
Chi-square / df	1.940	1.940	Fit summary
Chi-square probability	<0.001	<0.001	Exact fit rejected
Goodness-of-fit index	0.845	0.845	Goodness-of-fit statistic
Tucker–Lewis index	0.947	0.947	Incremental fit statistic
Comparative fit index	0.951	0.915	Figure 3 reports 0.951
Root mean square error of approximation	0.053	0.053	Confidence interval unavailable

The structural model diagram (**Figure 3**) reports $\chi^2(615) = 1193.076$ and CFI = 0.951. The structural fit summary gives CFI = 0.915.

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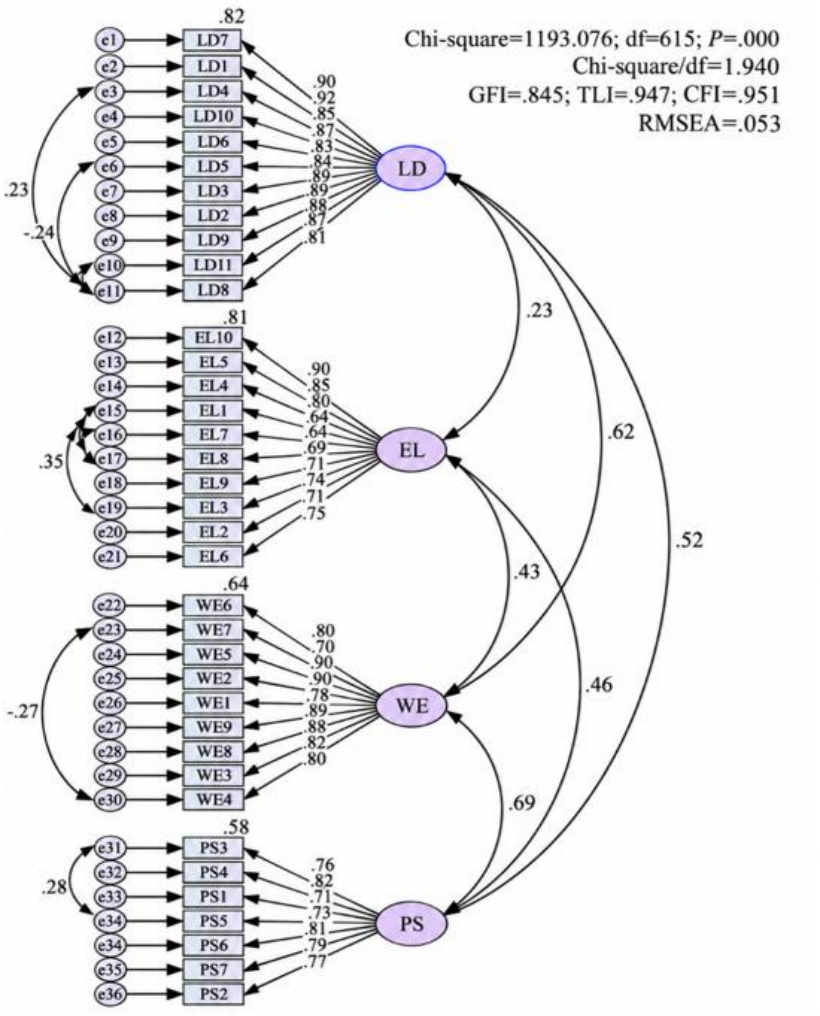


Figure 2. Four-factor confirmatory measurement model, with indicator loadings and residual covariances. LD denotes trust in the leader. A displayed p-value of .000 represents $p < 0.001$.

Composite reliability ranged from 0.914 to 0.972, and average variance extracted ranged from 0.605 to 0.761 (**Table 7**). In **Table 8**, each square root of average variance extracted exceeds the corresponding construct correlations. Trust and engagement had the largest correlation in that table (0.642), followed by trust and psychological safety (0.608). The psychological safety–engagement correlation was 0.532. The coefficients displayed between constructs in **Figure 2** differ from those in **Table 8**. The Fornell–Larcker comparison applies to the correlations tabulated in **Table 8**.

Table 7. Composite reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Items	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Leader trust	11	0.972	0.761
Ethical leadership	10	0.954	0.676
Work engagement	9	0.943	0.648
Psychological safety	7	0.914	0.605

All values are retained from the reported reliability table. Composite reliability is distinct from Cronbach's alpha.

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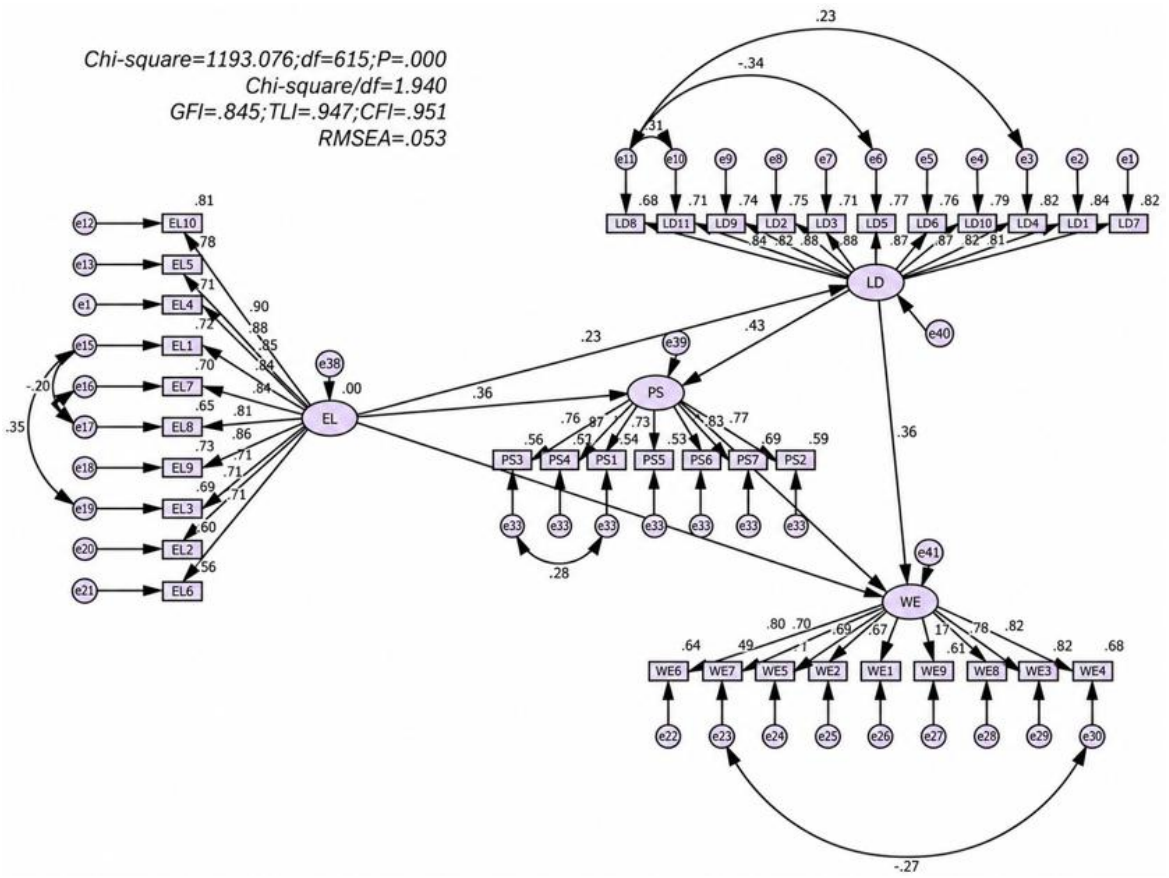


Figure 3. Structural model linking ethical leadership, leader trust (LD), psychological safety, and work engagement. The fit indices and path labels are those displayed in the diagram.

Table 8. Construct correlations and the Fornell–Larcker comparison

Construct	TL	EL	WE	PS
Leader trust	0.872	—	—	—
Ethical leadership	0.340	0.822	—	—
Work engagement	0.642	0.412	0.805	—
Psychological safety	0.608	0.509	0.532	0.778

Diagonal entries are square roots of average variance extracted. Entries below the diagonal are construct correlations.

3.5 Structural relationships

All six direct path estimates were positive (**Table 9**). Ethical leadership was associated with trust (B = 0.246, SE = 0.059), psychological safety (B = 0.289, SE = 0.041), and engagement (B = 0.098, SE = 0.032). Trust was associated with psychological safety (B = 0.323, SE = 0.039) and engagement (B = 0.237, SE = 0.032). Psychological safety was associated with engagement (B = 0.387, SE = 0.053). The leadership–engagement path had p = 0.002. The other five had p < 0.001. **Figure 4** displays these six estimates.

Table 9. Direct structural paths and reported significance tests

Hypothesis	Path	Weight (B)	Standard error	Critical ratio	p
H1	EL → TL	0.246	0.059	4.135	<0.001
H2	EL → PS	0.289	0.041	6.989	<0.001
H3	TL → PS	0.323	0.039	8.188	<0.001
H4	EL → WE	0.098	0.032	3.065	0.002
H5	PS → WE	0.387	0.053	7.363	<0.001
H6	TL → WE	0.237	0.032	7.321	<0.001

B = reported regression weight. The coefficient scale was unspecified in the regression table.

The positive direct paths support H1–H6 as associations within the specified model. The available coefficient information limits comparisons of their relative magnitude. Indirect-effect confidence intervals were unavailable.

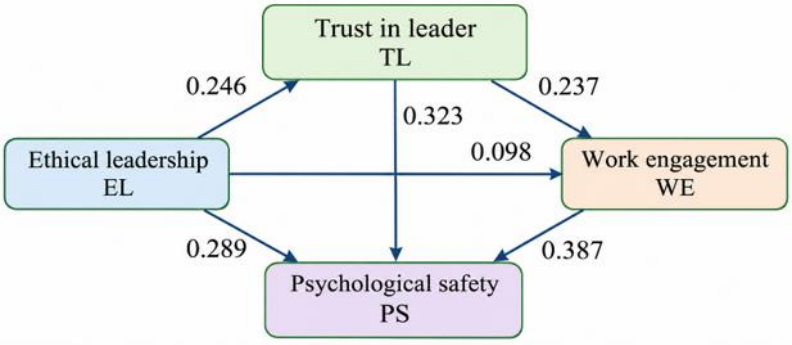


Figure 4. Construct-level diagram of the six direct regression weights listed in Table 9. EL = ethical leadership, TL = trust in the leader, PS = psychological safety, and WE = work engagement.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Ethical leadership and workplace relationships

Ethical leadership was associated with engagement after accounting for leader trust and psychological safety. The pattern suggests that supervisory conduct and employees' relational experiences each warrant attention when assessing engagement. The cross-sectional design leaves the direction of those relationships open.

The association between ethical leadership and trust is consistent with Ng and Feldman (2015) and Engelbrecht et al. (2017). Fair decisions may help employees judge a supervisor's reliability, and attention to employee concerns may signal benevolence (Schoorman et al., 2007). Schaubroeck et al. (2011) and Yang and Mossholder (2010) distinguish different bases and targets of trust. The single trust factor in this study combines cognitive and affective elements.

Consistent responses to questions and mistakes may make workplace interactions more predictable. Psychological safety concerns whether employees can take interpersonal risks, such as raising a problem or admitting an error (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson and Lei, 2014). The ratings here describe individual perceptions. Establishing a shared team climate would require evidence that employees within teams agree.

4.2 Comparison with Vietnamese and international evidence

The direction of the leadership and trust associations is consistent with evidence from technicians in Vung Tau (Khuong and Dung, 2015). Differences in sampling and measurement limit comparisons of coefficient size. Nguyen et al. (2024) examined psychological capital in relation to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The present model focuses on engagement and treats interpersonal safety as a separate construct.

Engelbrecht et al. (2014) examined leadership, trust, and engagement in South Africa. Basit (2017) examined trust, psychological safety, and felt obligation among Malaysian nurses. The latter study illustrates how perceived obligations may provide an additional explanation for engagement. Frazier et al. (2017) also found that psychological safety relates to a range of workplace antecedents and outcomes. Differences between work settings limit conclusions about how these relationships develop over time.

A meta-analysis found variation in leadership–engagement relationships across countries and leadership styles (Li et al., 2021). The Vietnamese data here describe one convenience sample. Stratified sampling and tests of measurement invariance would help assess whether the patterns differ by industry, ownership, or enterprise size.

4.3 What the joint model contributes

Trust and psychological safety were correlated and each had a positive path to engagement. Trust concerns expectations about the supervisor. Psychological safety concerns the anticipated consequences of speaking up or taking other interpersonal risks. Leader openness may help employees participate in work tasks (Carmeli et al., 2010). The Fornell–Larcker comparison provides preliminary evidence of separation. Item-level checks would help assess overlap, particularly for the leadership item that mentions trust (Henseler et al., 2015).

A sequential explanation requires an estimate and uncertainty interval for the indirect path (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Repeated measurements could test whether changes in leadership precede changes in trust, psychological safety, and engagement (Maxwell and Cole, 2007).

4.4 Implications for management practice

Managers can make fairness visible by explaining task allocations and appraisal criteria, applying rules consistently, and following up on concerns. Hassan et al. (2014) linked ethical leadership to willingness to report ethical problems in a government agency. In smaller enterprises, a pilot could test whether these practices help employees raise problems and participate in improvements.

Leaders can invite employees to raise concerns in team meetings and explain how reports will be handled. A confidential channel may help employees who are reluctant to speak publicly. Workload and task resources also matter for engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Evaluations of leadership practices should account for these working conditions.

A pilot could track changes in confidential employee feedback alongside participation in reporting or process improvement. Repeated observations and a comparison group would help distinguish changes associated with the pilot from changes occurring across the organization.

4.5 Measurement and inference limitations

Convenience recruitment and the concentration of experienced, degree-qualified employees limit generalizability. The single-time self-report design is vulnerable to shared method variance and reverse causation (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Enterprise identifiers were unavailable, so clustering could not be assessed. The discrepancy between the stated extraction method and the exploratory output limits interpretation of the rotated solution.

Post hoc residual covariances can improve in-sample fit. Independent data would help assess whether the measurement structure replicates. The differences in structural fit and construct-level coefficients across the diagrams and tables also limit comparisons between outputs. Future analyses could report full standardized estimates, residuals, and tests of measurement invariance.

5. CONCLUSION

In this sample of 334 employees, ethical leadership, trust in the leader, and psychological safety were positively associated with work engagement. The findings support examining leader behavior, trust, and perceived interpersonal risk together when assessing engagement in smaller Vietnamese enterprises.

Fair decisions and credible responses to employee concerns are practical priorities that enterprises can evaluate.

Convenience sampling, single-time self-reports, and discrepancies among the statistical outputs limit the conclusions. Evidence for sequential mediation requires direct estimates of the indirect paths and repeated measurements. Independent validation and longitudinal studies could clarify how the relationships develop over time.

USE OF GENERATIVE AI

OpenAI Codex was used for language editing.

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