

Effect of ethical leadership on employee emotional stability during the time of crisis in the hospitality industry

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Abstract

Purpose – This research aims to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and employee emotional stability during a pandemic crisis in the hospitality industry, with a chain-mediating effect of perceived emotional support and employee satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses.

Design/methodology/approach – A three-stage data collection procedure was applied to obtain data from 765 full-time frontline employees from four to five-star hotels. The data were then analyzed using different statistical methods, including structural equation modeling and bootstrap analysis.

Findings – Results show that ethical leadership has a positive impact on employee emotional stability, and perceived emotional support mediates this association. Furthermore, perceived emotional support and employee satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses together play a chain-mediating effect in the link between ethical leadership and employee emotional stability.

Originality/value – This study adopts a new perspective of the theory of perception to build a unique model that explains a process leading to employees' emotional stability as a result of employees' perceptions and emotional feelings toward ethical leadership in the hospitality industry during an organizational crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords Ethical leadership, Emotional stability, Emotional support, Organization COVID-19 responses, COVID-19 pandemic

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Ethical leadership has been an important research topic in recent decades (Rasheed *et al.*, 2024; Wood *et al.*, 2021) and is defined as leadership that demonstrates ethical behaviors and delivers ethical standards and moral values to followers (Ko *et al.*, 2018). Ethical leadership can primarily be viewed as a positive leadership style that has a constructive influence on organizational and individual outcomes (Iqbal and Parray, 2025). However, when organizations are facing crisis and challenges, the role of ethical leadership in fostering positive outcomes for employees and organizations remains unclear in the current leadership literature (Iqbal and Parray, 2025; Knox *et al.*, 2025).

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The COVID-19 pandemic damaged global human health as well as the global economy (Meyer *et al.*, 2021). During the pandemic, many organizations laid off employees due to a dramatic decrease in both customers and revenue. Employees often felt emotionally exhausted due to increasing anxiety about potentially losing their jobs and fear of contracting the disease (Wong *et al.*, 2021). These negative emotions, as well as others, led to perceptions of an insecure future and had an adverse impact on employees (Joshi *et al.*, 2024; Park *et al.*, 2025). In such a dramatic situation, leader and management roles become even more important to help stabilize employees' emotions and help them overcome difficulties (Knox *et al.*, 2025). However, few studies have examined the influence of leadership in terms of ethical values and behaviors on employee perceptions and emotions in the time of organizational crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Iqbal and Parray, 2025; Pham *et al.*, 2024).

In the hospitality industry, researchers, including Vo-Thanh *et al.* (2022) and Yan *et al.* (2021), reported that hospitality employees perceived a high level of risk and experienced a high level of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the specific context of Vietnam hospitality, the damage caused by the pandemic was extremely serious (Dai Quang and Vo-Thanh, 2025), and the industry's tourists and employees experienced terrible anxiety during the crisis (Da Huynh and Duong, 2024; Vo-Thanh *et al.*, 2022). The need for care and support from leaders and organizations was vital to help hospitality employees during the pandemic (Vo-Thanh *et al.*, 2022; Yan *et al.*, 2021). Given the importance of this issue, research on the relationship between ethical leadership and employees in the field of hospitality management, especially in the Vietnamese market, has been scarce, leading to the need to examine the influence of ethical leadership on employee perceptions and emotions in the hospitality industry.

To fill these research gaps, this study aims to investigate the influence of ethical leadership on employee emotional stability during COVID-19, using a chain-mediating effect of perceived emotional support and employee satisfaction with organizational COVID-19 responses in the hospitality industry in Vietnam. In doing so, the present study will significantly contribute to extant literature by providing new insight into the direct and indirect effects of ethical leadership on employee emotional stability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study will provide important implications for researchers and practitioners in the hospitality industry, especially those in emerging economies such as Vietnam, regarding the influence of ethical leadership on employees when organizations face difficulties and crisis.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theory of perception and the research model

Perception is an essential part in human life that receives great attention from psychological researchers (Pitcher, 2015) and from this, the theory of perception (TOP) emerged and to explain human perception processes in both social and organizational contexts (Parsons, 2013; Pitcher, 2015). TOP states that an individual receives, organizes and interprets external stimuli through his or her receptors to form a meaningful picture of the world (Searle, 2015). This perception process influences and leads to motivations, emotions, attitudes and behaviors (Pitcher, 2015).

In the context of the hospitality industry during COVID-19, employees not only observed the direct impact of the crisis but also perceived and evaluated their leaders' behaviors and actions (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021). Employees' observations about their leaders serve as a driving factor that triggers and induces employees' perceptions and beliefs, which lead to their emotional feelings (Keselman and Saxe-Braithwaite, 2021). This process occurs in sequential steps, from observations of external stimuli to perceptions and beliefs to internal feelings (Pitcher, 2015). More specifically, employee observations of caring behaviors and decisions of ethical leaders (i.e. ethical leadership) lead to employee perceptions and beliefs about receiving physical and emotional support from the leaders (i.e. perceived emotional support)

(Filimonau *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, given the observations about ethical behavior and perceptions of support from leadership during the time of organizational crisis, employees may feel of trust and satisfaction in the ways leaders treated them and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. emotional feeling) (Vo-Thanh *et al.*, 2021). Employees may also have a sense of emotional stability because of their perceptions and feelings about ethical leadership (i.e. emotional feeling) (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021; Keselman and Saxe-Braithwaite, 2021). Therefore, in this study, emotional stability is treated as the result of a perception process and the process leading to employee emotional stability from their own observations, perceptions and emotional feelings toward their leadership during COVID-19 is explored. Thus, this study adopts TOP as a theoretical foundation to infer the relationships between variables and build the research model. Figure 1 presents the research model in this study.

2.2 Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is defined as “fair, honest and principled individuals that use various forms of rewards, punishments, and communication mechanisms to influence their followers’ ethical behavior” (Bedi *et al.*, 2015). Ethical leaders often behave ethically and tend to be role models who display ideal behaviors to guide and motivate employee attitudes, emotions and behaviors in a moral manner (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). Brown *et al.* (2005) provided a comprehensive definition of ethical leadership that is widely accepted in literature: “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.” This definition demonstrates two key concepts in ethical leadership: first, ethical leaders are people who behave in ethical ways; and second, ethical leaders are responsible for conducting and promoting ethical behaviors in their organizations (Bedi *et al.*, 2015).

Extant literature has provided valuable evidence of the influence of ethical leadership on followers (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). Bedi *et al.* (2015) conducted a meta-analytical review of consequences of ethical leadership. By reviewing 147 studies on ethical leadership, a total of 15 different outcome variables were identified. Similarly, Ko *et al.* (2018) conducted a systematic review of 62 papers published from 2005 to 2015 and summarized a total of 40 different outcome variables of ethical leadership. The outcome variables identified in Bedi *et al.* (2015) and Ko *et al.* (2018) are listed in Table 1.

2.3 Employee emotional stability in the COVID-19 pandemic

Emotional stability denotes the tendency to be calm, patient, imperturbable and not to complain about personal anxieties (Hills and Argyle, 2001) and reflects an individual’s ability to maintain a stable affective state when facing uncertainty and risks (Watson and Clark, 1984). Emotionally stable people tend to experience positive emotions as they feel confident and respond calmly to stressful situations (Ren *et al.*, 2015). Emotional stability has been viewed as a positive source of employees’ mental health (Liu and Yu, 2019) because it reduces emotional exhaustion (David *et al.*, 2020), hypertension (Cheng *et al.*, 2017) and increases job and life satisfaction (Li and Ahlstrom, 2016), while enhancing

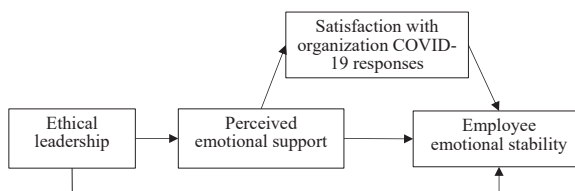


Figure 1. Research model. Authors’ own work

Table 1. Follower outcomes in ethical leadership studies

Studies	Follower outcome variables of ethical leadership
Ko <i>et al.</i> (2018) (n = 62 studies) 40 outcome variables	Ethical behavior, employee misconduct, organizational deviance, counterproductive behavior, unit unethical behavior, booking questionable journal entry, whistle-blowing, reporting unethical conduct, interpersonal deviant workplace behavior, bullying, incivility, moral efficacy, moral voice, organizational citizenship behaviors, helping, internal social capital, unit relationship conflict, leader–member exchange, job satisfaction, employee well-being at work, optimism, turnover intention, job search behaviors, emotional exhaustion, work engagement, effort, personal initiative, promotability, voice behavior, affective organizational commitment, normative organizational commitment, in-role job performance, extra role performance, life satisfaction, family satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors, corporate social responsibility, financial performance, firm performance, interorganizational conflict
Bedi <i>et al.</i> (2015) (n = 147 studies) 15 outcome variables	Perceptions of ethical climate, self-efficacy, ethical behavior, job satisfaction, organization commitment, affective commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, job performance, organizational identification, turnover intentions, relationship conflict, effort, voice, psychological well-being, work stress

Source(s): Authors' own work

feelings of happiness (Hills and Argyle, 2001). Prior studies have treated emotional stability as a psychological trait which is relatively stable (Watson and Clark, 1984). However, to reflect employee feelings during a time of organizational crisis, this study views emotional stability as a psychological state that employees experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The emotional stability in this study refers to employee feelings of calm, patience and positivity as they faced the impact of COVID-19.

In the hospitality industry, the duration and severity of COVID-19 generate high risk and uncertainty that exerted pressure and emotional strains on employees (Vo-Thanh *et al.*, 2022). In a recent study, Chong *et al.* (2024) reported that hospitality employees worried about job losses during the pandemic and the anxiety of job insecurity led to feelings of emotional instability and depression. Given the dramatic decrease in customers and revenue caused by the pandemic, many hospitality companies faced high uncertainty and ceased business (Song *et al.*, 2021). Unemployment and layoffs directly threatened hospitality employees and resulted in less income, a reduction of welfare benefits and in some cases no salary during the pandemic (Baum *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, COVID-19 had an extreme negative impact on physical health and hospitality employees' fear and stress were further increased by fears of infection (Wong *et al.*, 2021). Thus, negative emotions caused by the pandemic brought psychological tension and stress that required more caring and support from hospitality organizations and leaders (Haldorai *et al.*, 2024).

3. Hypotheses development

3.1 Ethical leadership and employee emotional stability during COVID-19 pandemic

Ethical leadership is likely to increase employee emotional stability in two ways: first, an ethical leader behaves ethically daily, in which his or her integrity, honesty, altruism and fairness are demonstrated in attitude and behavior (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Houston *et al.*, 2024) that act as a signal throughout an organization that the leader is trusted and dependable (Ko *et al.*, 2018). With trust and beliefs in the ethical values and behaviors of a leader, employees tend to believe that ethical leaders will take actions to best protect their employees when organizations face difficulties and challenges (Bedi *et al.*, 2015; Xie *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, employees are more likely to have feelings of security that stabilize their emotions during a crisis; and second, ethical leaders are responsible for conducting ethical standards and using reward and punishment to promote these standards throughout an

organization (Hoang *et al.*, 2023). To ensure ethical standards work effectively, leaders must respect and maintain justice and fairness with all employees (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Although companies faced high risk during COVID-19, these ethical standards worked effectively for committed ethical leaders (Shin, 2012).

According to TOP, ethical behaviors and standards of leadership are external stimuli that exert influence on employees' feelings (Pitcher, 2015). During the pandemic, employees observed and witnessed ethical behaviors from leaders and ethical standards set by ethical leaders have since become organizational norms, with employees holding a strong belief that leaders will not infringe upon and insist on ethical behaviors and standards (Houston *et al.*, 2024; Meyer *et al.*, 2021). Employees may also believe that leaders followed ethical standards and had strategies to secure employees' interests during the pandemic (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021; Xie *et al.*, 2024) and as a result, may have experienced stable emotional states supported by this leadership (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020). Ethical behaviors and standards conducted by leaders worked as a mechanism to provide security and insurance for employees when these companies faced difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021; Meyer *et al.*, 2021). Thus, according to TOP, it is expected that ethical leadership will have increased employee emotional stability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following hypothesis is proposed.

- H1. Ethical leadership is positively related to employee emotional stability during COVID-19.

3.2 Mediating role of perceived emotional support

Perceptions often play a critical role in a person's cognitive process and behavioral response (Pitcher, 2015) as they help individuals interpret and understand social relationships and act as a basis in forming emotions, attitudes and behaviors (Searle, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees often demanded both physical and psychological support (Meyer *et al.*, 2021): on the one hand, employees needed job and income security (Vo-Thanh *et al.*, 2021) while, on the other hand, they also needed to be kept safe and not contract COVID-19 (Wong *et al.*, 2021). In this case, emotional support from leaders and organizations helped employees overcome difficulties during the pandemic (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020).

One core characteristic of ethical leadership is altruism (Bedi *et al.*, 2015) as leaders with strong ethical beliefs care about employees' interests and take actions to ensure the best for their employees (Shin, 2012). Facing the COVID-19 crisis, ethical leaders tended to understand the negative effect the pandemic had on employees and often provided consolation, showed empathy and encouragement (Yang, 2014). Given their leaders' care and reassurance, employees may have believed that they were emotionally supported and motivated by their leaders (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021), and this perception helped increase employees' emotional stability and confidence (Keselman and Saxe-Braithwaite, 2021). Thus, according to TOP, when employees perceived care and consolation from leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, they tended to hold a perception of emotional support, which helped to stabilize their emotions during the crisis (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021; Keselman and Saxe-Braithwaite, 2021). The following hypothesis is proposed:

- H2. Perceived emotional support positively mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee emotional stability during COVID-19.

3.3 Mediating role of satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses

Leadership is often viewed as the representative of an organization because they are responsible for its policies and decision-making (Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2023) and stakeholders, such as investors, suppliers, customers, government agencies, communities and employees, often equate leaders and top management as an organization's image and agent (Northouse, 2021).

Notably, employees often believe that the way an organization functions and operates is reflected through its leader behaviors, decisions and conduct (Sadler, 2003). Given this belief, employees tended to perceive and view attitudes and behaviors of leadership during COVID-19 as their organizations' ethics and response (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021).

Perceptions of security and feelings of safety dominated employee thoughts and behaviors during the pandemic (Haldorai *et al.*, 2024) and, working and living during the crisis, employees often expected extra help and support from their leaders and organizations. In this case, perceptions of physical and emotional support from leaders may have exerted an influence on employees' feelings (Xie *et al.*, 2024). If employees perceive a lack of support and irresponsibility from leaders, they tend to feel disappointed and anxious and this may lead to dissatisfaction and unstable emotions. In contrast, employees feel satisfaction if they perceive leaders care and take action to protect them when faced with a crisis (Le and Phi, 2021), and those who believed their leaders and organizations did their best during the pandemic felt supported (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020). In other words, the perceptions about physical and emotional support from leaders motivated and triggered employees' feeling of satisfaction because they were seen as a good response to a crisis (Meyer *et al.*, 2021) and, consequently, employees tended to experience stable emotional states (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021). Thus, according to TOP, it is expected that perceptions of emotional support from leaders (i.e. perceptions) will increase employee feelings of satisfaction because of the ways leaders and organizations reacted to the COVID-19 crisis, which in turn enhances their emotional stability. The following hypothesis is developed.

- H3. Satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses positively mediates the relationship between perceived emotional support and employee emotional stability during COVID-19.

Hypothesis H2 states that ethical leadership exerts an indirect impact on employee emotional stability through perceived emotional support, while hypothesis H3 indicates that perceived emotional support has an indirect impact on employee emotional stability through their satisfaction with their organizations' COVID-19 response. Based on TOP (Pitcher, 2015; Searle, 2015), this study, integrating these hypotheses, posits that perceived emotional support and satisfaction with an organization's COVID-19 response will play a chain-mediating role in the relationship between ethical leadership and employee emotional stability. In particular, the logic of TOP can be used to infer that ethical leadership (i.e. external stimuli) first enhances perceived emotional support (i.e. perceptions) (Allal-Chérif *et al.*, 2021; Keselman and Saxe-Braithwaite, 2021), which in turn increases employees' satisfaction with an organization's COVID-19 response (i.e. emotional feeling) (Vo-Thanh *et al.*, 2021, 2022) and then enhances employee emotional stability (i.e. emotional feeling) (Keselman and Saxe-Braithwaite, 2021; Meyer *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H4. Perceived emotional support and satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses play a chain-mediating role in the link between ethical leadership and employee emotional stability.

4. Methods

4.1 Measures

Variable methods were adopted from existing literature with high validity and reliability. Specifically, ethical leadership was measured with a 10-item scale created by Brown *et al.* (2005) that has been widely used in the Western culture context and validated in the context of several Eastern countries (Avey *et al.*, 2012; Chen *et al.*, 2014). Perceived emotional support was measured using a 4-item scale developed for the entrepreneurship context by Stenholm and Nielsen (2019) and its wording was revised to fit within the COVID-19 pandemic context while still ensuring the original content. Three items from Vo-Thanh *et al.* (2021) were used to

measure satisfaction with organizational response to COVID-19 and have also been validated in both Western and Eastern cultures with high reliability and validity (Liu and Xi, 2021; Vo-Thanh *et al.*, 2021). Given the lack of established measures of emotional stability as a psychological state in the current literature, emotional stability was measured using a short version of a 6-item scale by Watson and Clark (1984), however, it should be noted that this scale was used to measure individuals' emotional traits (i.e. relatively stable attributes), whereas emotional stability in this study refers to the psychological state or emotional feelings an employee experiences during a time of organizational crisis. Therefore, this study refined the original scale by adding the question "To what extent do you feel this way generally during COVID-19?" before the items to measure respondents' feelings of emotional stability during the COVID-19 crisis. Because all respondents in a pre-test ($n = 20$ employees) reported good understanding and clarity of the measurement scale and the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.80, the researchers decided to use this measurement scale to measure employee emotional stability in the formal survey.

All items were measured with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Details of constructs and items are presented in Table 2.

4.2 Sample and data collection procedure

A survey questionnaire was used to collect data in this study, which followed McGorry (2000)'s example and adopted a backward translation method in the questionnaire design. Three bilingual translators were recruited with the first translator translating from English to Vietnamese and these results were translated back to English by the second translator. Both the English and Vietnamese versions of the questionnaire were then checked by a third translator. To ensure the questionnaire's quality, we invited 20 employees at a large hotel to participate in a pilot test, and all respondents reported that the questionnaire was clear and understandable. Thus, this questionnaire was used to conduct the formal survey with no further modification.

The sample for this study was full-time frontline employees from different hotels in three major cities, Ho Chi Minh, Vung Tau and Nha Trang, the largest tourism destinations in the south of Vietnam. A total of 30 different four- and five-star hotels were selected from a list of more than 12,000 hotels on Yellowpages.vn and Agoda.com. The survey was conducted from December 2020 to February 2021 with the assistance of a large consultant and market service company. The survey team, consisting of six market service staff and the researchers, contacted the chief executive officers (CEOs) and managers of the selected hotels for the survey administration. It should be mentioned that during the time of the survey, these hotels were open under the government's regulations. Using information provided by the hotels, telephone and face-to-face methods were utilized to collect data from frontline employees. A total of 800 respondents voluntarily agreed to participate in the survey and received small gifts for their participation. The data were collected in three stages: at Stage 1 (December 2020), data on the independent variable (ethical leadership) and respondents' information were collected; Stage 2 in January 2021 measures of mediating variables were gathered (perceived emotional support and satisfaction with an organization's COVID-19 response); and, finally, at Stage 3 (February 2021), data on the dependent variable (employee emotional stability) were collected. The survey team recorded measures of each respondent in the three stages to ensure the consistency of the measures and to reduce potential bias associated with a cross-sectional survey. To address ethical standards, the survey was conducted in accordance with the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles. Notably, respondents participated in the survey on a voluntary basis and completion of the survey was regarded as "informed consent." The final sample comprised 765 questionnaires, which accounted for 95.63% of the response rate. A small sample of 35 questionnaires was invalid and excluded from the final data because of incomplete values.

According to Kline (2011) and Hair *et al.* (2010), one way to calculate appropriate sample size is based on statistical rules and they also suggest that a rule of thumb for structural

Table 2. Measures of variables

Constructs	Items
Ethical leadership	<p>Brown et al. (2005) My supervisor:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Listens to what employees have to say (2) Disciplines employees who violate ethical standards (3) Conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner (4) Has the best interests of employees in mind (5) Makes fair and balanced decisions (6) Can be trusted (7) Discusses business ethics or values with employees (8) Sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics (9) Defines success not just by results but also the way they are obtained (10) Asks “what is the right thing to do?” when making decisions
Perceived emotional support	<p>Stenholm and Nielsen (2019)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Support and caring from supervisor had a broader meaning for me beyond the financial support during COVID-19 pandemic (2) Support and caring from supervisor increased my beliefs of me as an important employee in this company during COVID-19 pandemic (3) Support and caring from supervisor increased my engagement at work during COVID-19 pandemic (4) Support and caring from supervisor encouraged me during COVID-19 pandemic
Satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses	<p>Vo-Thanh et al. (2020)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) I am satisfied with the way that my company responded to COVID-19 (2) My company did everything that it could have in response to COVID-19 (3) My company took care of its employees’ needs resulting from COVID-19
Emotional stability	<p>Watson and Clark (1984) To what extent do you feel this way generally during COVID-19: (1 = not at all to 5 = extremely)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Excited (2) Enthusiastic (3) Active (4) Alert (5) Strong (6) Calm and relaxed

Source(s): Authors’ own work

equation modeling is “n/p,” where *n* is the number of items of the measures and *p* is the number of cases per item. The ideal sample size should be 1:10 (1 item with 10 cases). In this study, the total items of the measures were 23 items, which require at least 230 cases. As previously mentioned, the sample data in this study were 765 respondents, which exceeded the required number.

[Table 3](#) shows the respondents’ demographic information.

4.3 Analysis methods

The sample data were analyzed using two different statistical methods. The process began with descriptive statistics and reliability being analyzed using SPSS 20. [Hair et al. \(2010\)](#) stated that

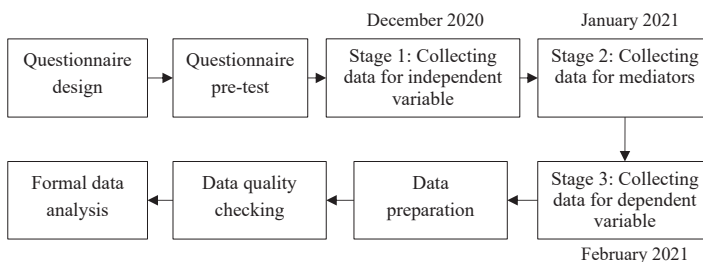
Table 3. Respondents' characteristics

Variable	Frequency	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	257	33.6%
Female	508	66.4%
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	214	28.0%
Single	550	71.9%
<i>Age</i>		
20 and below	142	18.6%
21–30	452	59.1%
31–40	120	15.9%
41 and above	51	6.7%
<i>Income (per month)</i>		
Under 300 USD	495	64.7%
300-under 600 USD	200	26.1%
600-under 900 USD	46	6.0%
900 USD or above	24	3.1%
<i>Education</i>		
High school or below	215	28.1%
College	530	69.3%
University or above	20	2.6%

Note(s): $n = 765$
Source(s): Authors' own work

covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) with AMOS statistical software can provide accurate estimation and robustness test for models with large sample data, and Reinartz *et al.* (2009) suggested that CB-SEM should be used for models with a sample size of at least 250 cases. Given that this study had a large sample size ($n = 765$), the CB-SEM using AMOS was adopted to perform confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), analyze validity of measures and test hypotheses. In hypothesis testing, this study was controlled for respondents' characteristics that may affect the dependent variable. The control variables included age, gender, education, income and marital status (Bajrami *et al.*, 2021; Vo-Thanh *et al.*, 2021).

Figure 2 shows a flow chart of the data collection and analysis procedure.

**Figure 2.** Summary of data collection and analysis procedure. Authors' own work

5. Results

5.1 Data screening procedure

Before analyzing the data, we checked for the univariate and multivariate assumptions of the sample data (Hair et al., 2010; Kutner et al., 2005). Results of Box plots, Scatter plots, Durbin–Watson, Brown–Forsythe and VIF tests show that the quality of the sample data was good since there were no violations of normality, linearity, autocorrelation, heteroscedasticity and multicollinearity assumptions (Kutner et al., 2005). Thus, the sample data were used for a formal analysis.

5.2 Reliability and validity analysis

We followed Kline (2011)’s example and conducted a series of CFAs. As illustrated in Table 4, the hypothesized model shows a good model fit: $\chi^2/df = 503.880/224 = 2.370$, GFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.91 and RMSEA = 0.078. These results suggest a good fit between the hypothesized model and the sample data of this study.

Reliability. This study used Cronbach’s α to test reliability. According to Hair et al. (2010), Cronbach’s α should be 0.60 or above. As shown in Table 6, Cronbach’s α for variables were 0.92 (ethical leadership), 0.92 (perceived emotional support), 0.82 (satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses) and 0.90 (employee emotional stability). These values were greater than the cutoff value of 0.60, providing evidence for reliability of all the measures.

Discriminant and convergent validity. Discriminant validity were tested using model comparison as suggested by Kline (2011). Results in Table 4 illustrate that when combining variables, these models indicated a very poor model fit and, as such, only the hypothesized model shows a very good model fit. Furthermore, Table 5 shows that all square roots of AVE were greater than all correlation coefficients between variables (Hair et al., 2010). These results provide support for the discriminant validity of the measures.

Table 4. Model comparison analysis

Constructs/model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	χ^2/df	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
<i>Thresholds</i>				<3	>0.90	>0.90	<0.08
Hypothesized model	530.880	224		2.370	0.911	0.910	0.078
Three-factor model	1868.667	227	1337.787***	8.232	0.809	0.873	0.097
Three-factor model	2017.084	227	1486.204***	8.886	0.792	0.862	0.102
Three-factor model	2600.069	227	2069.189***	11.454	0.726	0.817	0.117
Two-factor model	2722.428	229	2182.678***	12.460	0.714	0.801	0.129
Two-factor model	2831.212	229	2283.222***	12.339	0.711	0.811	0.125
One-factor model	3195.974	230	2665.094***	13.896	0.687	0.771	0.130

Note(s): $n = 765$, ** $p < 0.01$, “GFI = goodness-of-fit index, CFI = comparative fit index, RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation,

One-factor model: combine all constructs,

Two-factor model: combine ethical leadership with perceived emotional support, satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses with employee emotional stability,

Two-factor model: combine ethical leadership with “satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses”, perceived emotional support with employee emotional stability,

Three-factor model: combine ethical leadership with perceived emotional support,

Three-factor model: combine ethical leadership with “satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses”,

Three-factor model: combine “satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses” with employee emotional stability,

Hypothesized model: include ethical leadership, perceived emotional support, “satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses” and employee emotional stability

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 5. Descriptive statistics and discriminant validity

Variables	Means	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Ethical leadership	3.75	0.72	0.73			
2. Perceived emotional support	3.65	0.82	0.46**	0.87		
3. Satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses	3.91	0.77	0.41**	0.52**	0.78	
4. Employee emotional stability	3.76	0.75	0.56**	0.47**	0.46**	0.79

Note(s): $n = 765$, ** $p < 0.01$. The values on the main diagonal are square roots of AVE
Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 6. Results of measurement model

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Ethical leadership (EthL)	EthL1	0.64***	0.92	0.53	0.92
	EthL2	0.70***			
	EthL3	0.70***			
	EthL4	0.75***			
	EthL5	0.80***			
	EthL6	0.78***			
	EthL7	0.77***			
	EthL8	0.78***			
	EthL9	0.64***			
	EthL10	0.71***			
Perceived emotional support (PES)	PES1	0.87***	0.92	0.75	0.92
	PES2	0.81***			
	PES3	0.90***			
	PES4	0.89***			
Satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses (SOCOR)	SOCOR1	0.83***	0.82	0.61	0.82
	SOCOR2	0.77***			
	SOCOR3	0.73***			
Employee emotional stability (EES)	EES1	0.73***	0.91	0.61	0.90
	EES2	0.79***			
	EES3	0.78***			
	EES4	0.80***			
	EES5	0.81***			
	EES6	0.78***			

Note(s): $n=765$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source(s): Authors' own work

Furthermore, according to [Kline \(2011\)](#) and [Hair et al. \(2010\)](#), composite reliability (CR) values should be above 0.70 and average variance extracted (AVE) values should be higher than 0.50, indicating that convergent validity is acceptable. As indicated in [Table 6](#), CR values ranged from 0.82 to 0.92, and AVE values ranged from 0.53 to 0.75, which provides evidence for convergent validity of the measures.

5.3 Common method variance and non-bias response analysis

To manage common method variance (CMV) bias, different methods were used: first, at the data collection stage, the researchers used three waves to collect data; second, the study conducted a Harman's 1-factor test, and it appeared that a single factor accounted for 12.10% of variance which was less than the cutoff value of 50% ([Podsakoff et al., 2003](#)); and third, this

study followed Mackenzie and Podsakoff (2012) and adopted a marker variable to test the CMV problem. The marker variable was “blue attitude,” which is theoretically unrelated with variables in this study (Simmering et al., 2014) (example items included “I prefer blue to other colors” and “I like blue clothes”). Results indicate that the marker variable was not significantly associated with any other variables in this study and the CMV was less than 1%, which suggests that CMV was not a serious problem (Griffith and Lusch, 2007).

To check the non-response bias, the researchers compared the sample data of respondents who completed questionnaires in the first five days and those in the last five days. Results indicate that there was no statistical significance between early respondents and later respondents on all variables. Thus, non-response bias was not a significant issue in this study.

5.4 Hypothesis testing analysis

This study adopted SEM with AMOS 24 to test the proposed hypotheses. The fit indices of the hypothesis testing model were very good: $\chi^2/df = 2.817$, GFI = 0.966, CFI = 0.954 and RMSEA = 0.079. Results of hypothesis testing are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 indicates that among control variables, only age was positively related to emotional stability ($\beta = 0.032, p < 0.05$). This result indicates that employees who were older tended to have higher levels of emotional stability. Furthermore, Figure 3 shows that ethical leadership was positively related to employee emotional stability ($\beta = 0.410, p < 0.001$), providing support for hypothesis H1.

Figure 3 also reveals that ethical leadership was positively related to perceived emotional support ($\beta = 0.694, p < 0.001$), which in turn was positively related to employee emotional stability ($\beta = 0.289, p < 0.001$). To test the mediating role of perceived emotional support, this study followed the example of Preacher et al. (2007) and conducted a bootstrap analysis with 1,000 samples and a 95% confidence interval. Results indicate that the indirect effect of ethical leadership on employee emotional stability through perceived emotional support was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.318, p < 0.001, 95\%$ and CI = [0.235, 0.375]). Thus, hypothesis H2 was supported.

In addition, Figure 3 shows that perceived emotional support was positively related to satisfaction with an organization’s COVID-19 responses ($\beta = 0.643, p < 0.001$), which in turn was positively related to employee emotional stability ($\beta = 0.262, p < 0.001$). The bootstrap analysis also shows that the indirect impact of perceived emotional support on employee

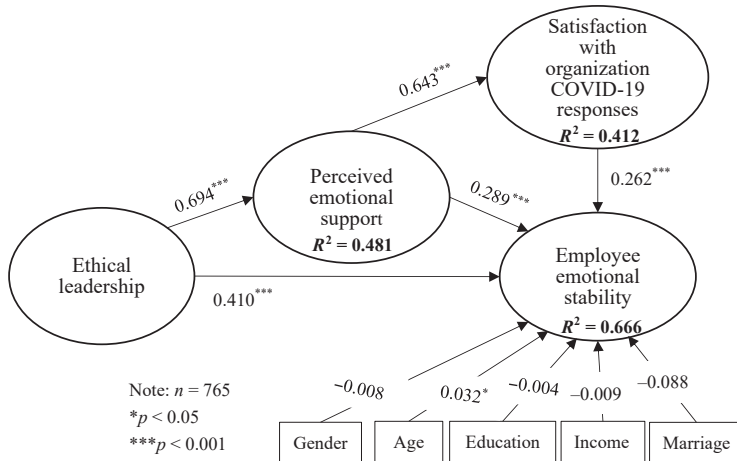


Figure 3. Results of hypothesis testing. Authors’ own work

emotional stability through satisfaction with an organization's COVID-19 responses was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.150, p < 0.001, 95\%$ and $CI = [0.111, 0.197]$). Thus, hypothesis H3 was supported.

Finally, the chain mediating effects of perceived emotional support and satisfaction with organization COVID-19 responses were tested using bootstrap analysis (Preacher *et al.*, 2007). Results indicate that the indirect impact of ethical leadership on employee emotional stability through perceived emotional support and satisfaction with an organization's COVID-19 response was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.160, p < 0.001, 95\%$ and $CI = [0.118, 0.206]$). Thus, hypothesis H4 was supported.

6. Discussion and implications

6.1 Discussion of main findings

First, within the COVID-19 pandemic context, several organizations cared only about profits and had a high intention to lay off their employees (Chong *et al.*, 2024). However, given the importance of employees as an organization's valuable resource, protecting and caring for employees should have been a key strategy when managing the COVID-19 crisis (Meyer *et al.*, 2021). This study found a direct positive influence of ethical leadership on employee emotional stability during the pandemic ($\beta = 0.410, p < 0.001$), consistent with studies by Allal-Chérif *et al.* (2021), Haque (2021) and Keselman and Saxe-Braithwaite (2021), that suggested the important role of ethical leadership in fostering employees' motivations and emotions during COVID-19. These studies demonstrated that moral behaviors and ethical standards of leaders encouraged employees and induced positive emotions when they were facing challenges and difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, findings also suggest that when leaders behaved ethically and conducted ethical standards consistently in their organizations, employees tended to feel emotionally stable. That is, leader's ethical behaviors and standards act as a mechanism that provides protection and assurance for employees during a crisis.

Second, our findings show that perceived emotional support positively mediated the link between ethical leadership and employee emotional stability ($\beta = 0.318, p < 0.001$). Prior studies, such as Filimonau *et al.* (2020), Katsaros (2024), Meyer *et al.* (2021) and Muñoz *et al.* (2023), have suggested that employees often perceive help and support from organizations and leaders, which is closely related to employees' emotional feeling and anxiety. Therefore, top management's commitment and support helped to reduce employees' psychological tension and inspire positive feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with these studies, our findings imply that the ethical behaviors of leaders, such as altruism and care, increased employees' perceptions that they receive emotional support from leaders. During the pandemic, ethical leaders may have provided consolation, encouragement and confidence for employees to overcome difficulties during the crisis employees may have had stable emotions as a result.

Third, this study finds that satisfaction with an organization's COVID-19 response positively mediated the relationship between perceived emotional support and employee emotional stability ($\beta = 0.150, p < 0.001$), which echoes works by Chong *et al.* (2024), Haldorai *et al.* (2024), Meyer *et al.* (2021) and Vo-Thanh *et al.* (2021). These studies demonstrated that employees' perceptions of physical and emotional safety increased their feelings of satisfaction and reduced anxiety during the pandemic. Our findings indicate that when employees receive physical and emotional support from leaders, they tend to be satisfied with the ways leaders and organizations responded to COVID-19. A possible explanation is that caring and ethical behaviors from leaders made employees feel confident, satisfied and encouraged along with the belief that leaders representing an organization were going to take care of and protect them during the COVID-19 crisis. In this case, caring and protecting employees also constituted the ways leaders and organizations responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the feelings of satisfaction helped to stabilize employees' emotions during the crisis.

Finally, a chain-mediating effect of perceived emotional support and satisfaction with an organization's COVID-19 responses was found in the link between ethical leadership and employee emotional stability ($\beta = 0.160, p < 0.001$). This finding implies that ethical behaviors and standards of leaders act as a protective mechanism that shapes employees' perceptions about caring and supportive behaviors from leaders and trigger employees' positive emotions, including satisfactory feelings about the ways leaders and organizations responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, employees are more likely to experience a stable emotional state because they believe that support from leaders and the way organizations responded to COVID-19 helped them overcome difficulties during the crisis. Studies by [Chong et al. \(2024\)](#), [Pham et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Xie et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasized the important role of ethical leadership in fostering employees' motivations, emotions and behaviors during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, our findings enhance these studies by clarifying the serial mediating effect of perceived emotional support and satisfaction within an organization's COVID-19 responses in the link between ethical leadership and employee emotional stability.

6.2 Theoretical implications

These findings contribute to academic research in several ways. This study sheds new light on the influence of ethical leadership on employees' outcomes in the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to advance knowledge about the important role of ethical leadership in shaping and influencing employees' perceptions and feelings during an organizational crisis, which had been unexplored in current literature. In addition, prior studies, such as [Ilyas et al. \(2020\)](#), [Kuenzi et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Naeem et al. \(2020\)](#), mainly used social exchange theory, social cognitive theory and social learning theory to determine the issue of ethical leadership but this study adopted and extended TOP ([Pitcher, 2015](#); [Searle, 2015](#)) to investigate the influence of ethical leadership on employee outcomes. The adoption of TOP helped to explain clearly a sequential process leading to employees' emotional stability because of their observations, perceptions and feelings toward their leadership during COVID-19. Moreover, this study not only sheds new light on the direct effect but it also clarifies the indirect effect of ethical leadership on employee emotional stability during the pandemic through the chain-mediating mechanism of perceived emotional support and satisfaction with an organization's COVID-19 responses. This unique research model enriches the current literature to better understand the complex relationship between ethical leadership and employees during a crisis. Furthermore, given the scarce evidence on the effect of ethical leadership on employees in the hospitality industry in extant literature within the COVID-19 pandemic context, our findings provide implications for future research examining the issue of ethical leadership in the specific context of the hospitality industry in emerging countries during an organizational crisis.

6.3 Managerial implications

The findings of this study suggest important practical implications for hospitality organizations and their leadership, particularly during times of crisis. Ethical leadership is shown to play a vital role in shaping employees' positive perceptions and stabilizing emotional responses. Therefore, in terms of policy and strategy, it is recommended that hospitality organizations develop strategies and policies that encourage leaders to demonstrate ethical behaviors and adhere to ethical standards in order to support positive employee perceptions and emotional stability during times of crisis. On one hand, leaders should base their decision-making on strong moral principles and ethical standards that account for both employee and organizational interests. By serving as role models and demonstrating ethical behavior through consistent actions and decisions, leaders reinforce integrity across all levels of the organization. It is essential that they honor commitments, promote fairness and actively mitigate bias, as these practices contribute to the development of an ethical organizational

climate and encourage employees to engage in responsible behavior. Moreover, leaders should show genuine care by providing both physical and emotional support, listening attentively to employees' concerns and committing to protecting them—especially during times of organizational crisis, as such actions not only strengthen trust but also affirm the leader's dedication to employee well-being. On the other hand, hospitality organizations should establish and maintain clear ethical standards for both leadership and employees and these standards should explicitly outline acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. It is crucial that both leaders and employees become familiar with and adhere to these ethical guidelines, as they serve as a framework for shaping and motivating the attitudes and behaviors of individuals at all levels. By doing so, organizations can ensure alignment with their core values and foster a culture of integrity and responsibility.

In addition to policy and strategy, training and education should be planned and executed for leaders and employees to build and maintain moral values and ethical standards in organizations. More specifically, hospitality companies can partner with ethical institutions or professional experts who provide ethical training programs. These programs should be provided on a regular basis to nurture and shape leadership and employees' ethical attitudes and behaviors. Ethical training may make ethical behaviors become natural characteristics of leaders to the extent that they behave in an ethical manner and their decision-making is based on ethical standards. By emphasizing training and education, hospitality companies can develop ethical leadership and hiring and developing ethical leaders should be an important strategy of human resource management. Hospitality organizations should implement strategies to recruit ethical leaders and can create ethical criteria and select candidates based on specific standards.

Furthermore, managers of hospitality companies should be aware of employees' perceptions, emotions and behaviors when organizations face threats and crisis. Normally, when organizations face difficulties and crisis, employees often experience a negative feeling, including fear, which may lead to unstable emotions and negative behaviors. Thus, to help employees overcome these negative perceptions and emotions, managers should put more effort into building moral values and pursuing ethical behaviors. Through the demonstration of ethical standards and norms, leaders can send out a strong signal and commitment that they care about and support employees, and this helps to promote and stabilize employees' emotions, especially if organizations face crisis and threats.

Moreover, when an organization faces a crisis, it is suggested that hospitality organizations and leaders should proactively diagnose and improve their own ethical behaviors. From the management and development of an employee perspective, leadership should have strategies to shape employee's positive perceptions and improve their emotional feelings. In this case, it is necessary for leaders to clearly demonstrate ethical behaviors, such as caring, providing help, engaging in altruism, showing empathy, expressing admiration and encouraging employees. Similarly, during the time of organizational crisis, ethical decisions should also be carefully and immediately considered by leaders and organizations.

6.4 Limitations and future research

Although this study was carefully designed with tremendous effort, several limitations should be addressed for future research. First, cross-sectional survey data may have a disadvantage in testing the causal relationship between variables, and future research should seek to obtain longitudinal data or use experiments to test the causal relationship between the variables in the research model. Second, this study collected sample data only from the hotel industry, and the findings are applicable to just a single industry. Future research should collect data from other industries to test the generalizability of the results from this study. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on a global scope but this study only tested our research model from an emerging country (i.e. Vietnam). Future research should validate our research model in other countries within the context of a certain crisis. Fourth, the measures of the constructs in

the research model in this study were developed in Western culture. Although several researchers have adopted and validated these constructs in non-Western countries, their reliability and validity should be further refined and validated in the specific context of the hospitality industry in Vietnam. Although this study has carefully conducted the pilot test and considered the suitability of the constructs in the research model, it is suggested that future research, if possible, should develop different measurement scales for these constructs in their specific cultural context. Finally, future research should extend this study by obtaining data relating to work behaviors or intentions of employees, which will further consolidate the managerial implications of the current study.

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