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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Ethical leadership in a remote working context: implications for salesperson well-being and performance

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ABSTRACT

Employees are believed to benefit most from ethical leadership when they can directly interact with or observe a leader's ethical behaviors. Given the popularity of remote work in sales, many salespeople may be unable to observe the ethical behavior of a leader, producing a potential tension between this beneficial leadership style and remote work arrangements. We present two quantitative studies using samples of sales professionals to examine the indirect effects of ethical leadership on well-being and performance via employee affective commitment and the extent to which remote supervision influences these indirect effects. In studies 1 and 2, our findings offer support for our proposed mediation effects, such that ethical leadership indirectly relates to our outcomes via affective commitment. Further, remote supervision does not moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment. In study 3, we provide qualitative evidence to further probe this unexpected finding, discovering that remote ethical leaders often engage in behaviors to demonstrate their values. Therefore, results from all three studies indicate that remote supervision does not negatively impact the relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment and, in some cases, may be positive.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 April 2023

Accepted 4 October 2024

KEYWORDS

Ethical leadership; remote supervision; employee well-being; sales management; social exchange theory; media naturalness theory

Introduction

As sales organizations strive to attract and retain talent, the installation of ethical leaders is essential. The ethical leadership process is described as 'signaling behavior by the leader targeted at stakeholders comprising the enactment of pro-social values combined with expression of moral emotions' (Banks et al. 2021, 6). Ethical leadership has been linked to enhanced job satisfaction and performance (Park, Kim, and Song 2015; Schwepker 2015), improved employee well-being (Chughtai, Byrne, and Flood 2015), and reduced turnover intentions (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh 2011). The greatest impact, however, is thought to occur when employees can directly engage with or observe their leader's ethical actions in person.

The challenge for many sales organizations is that leadership and supervision are becoming increasingly remote. In 2023, remote sales positions saw the greatest increase in new job postings, up 48% from the previous year Babapour Chafi, Hultberg, and Bozic 2021. Many sales roles have historically involved some level of remote supervision, but the number of remote positions is steadily increasing. Remote work requires supervisor and subordinate interactions to occur via technology (e.g. Zoom, FaceTime, email),

potentially impacting the perceptibility of ethical behaviors. Scholars suggest that the growing reliance on communication technologies may hinder the socialization of sales employees, potentially diminishing the positive impact of ethical leadership for employees who are remotely supervised (Dugan, Ortiz Ubal, and Scott 2023; Hartmann, Chaker, et al. 2024b). As a result, scholars have made calls for research to investigate how companies should 'foster ethical values and work environments when interactions via technology are rapidly increasing' (Hartmann, Chaker, et al. 2024b, 662).

The present research seeks to investigate the impact of remote supervision on ethical sales leadership and employee outcomes. Given the increasing prominence of remote sales positions, organizations must understand how ethical sales leadership can be fostered through remote communications. The negatives of remote work are documented as salespeople often experience stress due to social isolation (Chaker et al. 2021), role ambiguity (Epler et al. 2023), and increasing dependence upon technology (Chawla et al. 2020). Conversely, the benefits of remote sales positions include increased flexibility, greater work-life balance (Babapour Chafi, Hultberg, and Bozic Yams 2021), and reduced commuting costs (Ferreira et al. 2021). Given the unique

dynamics of remote work and its impact on employees, it is crucial to understand how remote supervision influences perceptions of ethical sales leadership to maintain positive outcomes for sales organizations.

Specifically, this research examines the impact of remote supervision on perceptions of ethical sales leadership and the impact on employee well-being and performance by drawing upon two theoretical perspectives: (1) social exchange theory, which describes ongoing social interactions that develop into obligations based on the norm of reciprocity (Blau 1986; Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005), and (2) media naturalness theory, which proposes decreases in audible or visual cues in communication cause greater message ambiguity (Kock 2001). In two quantitative studies, remote salespeople are examined to understand the effects of ethical sales leadership on performance and well-being via affective commitment. Interestingly, the results suggest that remote supervision may not have the detrimental impact scholars have suggested. Rather, such supervision may be positive for some salespeople. To help explain this unexpected outcome, a qualitative study is conducted to gain insights into this phenomenon. Given recent calls to better understand the uncertain relationship between remote supervision and ethical leadership (e.g. Hartmann, Chaker, et al. 2024b), the current research seeks to provide insights to the growing number of sales organizations utilizing remote sales positions.

Theoretical background

Ethical leadership

Ethical leaders engage in signaling behaviors toward pertinent stakeholders, which include the expression of moral emotions and depiction of prosocial values (Banks et al. 2021). These behaviors create a more supportive work environment characterized by interactional fairness and followers' ethical behavior (Bedi, Alpaslan, and Green 2016). Additionally, ethical leaders set high standards for employee

conduct and provide clear behavioral expectations, which can improve employee engagement (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh 2011).

Ethical leadership has been linked to many positive employee outcomes such as job satisfaction and performance (Park, Kim, and Song 2015; Schwepker 2015), reduced turnover intentions (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh 2011), and well-being (Cheng et al. 2022; Sarwar et al. 2020; for more examples see Table 1). Common mechanisms found to facilitate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee outcomes include trust (Milind et al. 2019), moral obligation (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh 2013), job satisfaction (Kaffashpoor and Sadeghian 2020), and affective commitment (Demirtas and Akdogan 2015; Kim and Brymer 2011).

Additionally, intraorganizational characteristics like the adoption of remote work arrangements may alter the observation of ethical leadership. Banks et al. (2021, 9) call for research into the nature of ethical leadership signaling behaviors and their 'observability and reliability.' Research has shown that the interpretation of ethical signals matters, and varying contexts can alter the ways in which ethical leadership is perceived (Connelly et al. 2011; Gioia, Hamilton, and Patvardhan 2014). As remote work continues to evolve and become more common in the workplace, it is necessary to examine how technology-facilitated supervision may alter the observation, interpretation, and influence of ethical leadership on key employee outcomes (Hartmann, Chaker, et al. 2024b).

Ethical leadership and affective commitment

Ethical leaders engage in normatively appropriate behaviors and express honesty, fairness, consideration, and respect for their followers. Banks et al. (2021) consider these behaviors, and the expression of moral emotions, as ethical signals aimed toward relevant stakeholders. The positive treatment stakeholders experience from ethical leaders stimulates

Table 1. Literature review: ethical leadership, employee well-being, and performance.

Citation	Sales Industry	Remote Sample	DV-Well-being	DV-Performance	Mediators	Moderators
Sarwar et al. 2020			X		Ethical culture*	
Chughtai, Byrne, and Flood 2015			X	X	Trust in supervisor*	
Li et al. 2014			X		Distributive justice*, Interpersonal justice*	Collectivism*
Yang 2014			X		Job satisfaction*	
Cheng et al. 2022			X		Perceived organizational support*	
Kaffashpoor and Sadeghian 2020			X		Job satisfaction*	
Schwepker 2015	X			X	Ethics training, Work group socialization, Ethical values	
					Personal-organization fit	
Schwepker and Schultz 2015	X			X	Value-enhancing behavior*	Caring ethical climate*
Badrinarayanan, Ramachandran, and Madhavaram 2019	X			X	Emulation*	Competence, Gratitude*
Milind et al. 2019	X			X	Trust*	
Limpo & Junaidi 2022				X	Job satisfaction*	
Park, Kim, and Song 2015				X	Psychological Ownership*	
Kim and Brymer 2011				X	Job satisfaction, Affective commitment*	
Ahmad & Al-Shbiel 2019				X	Psychological wellbeing*	
Walumbwa et al. 2011				X	Leader-member exchange*, Self-efficacy*, Org. identification*	
This article	X	X	X	X	Affective commitment*	Remote supervision

Note. * indicates significant finding.

feelings of being cared for (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005), further enhancing perceptions of quality social exchange (Brown and Treviño 2006; Walumbwa et al. 2011) and the reciprocation of prosocial behaviors.

As employees interact and share positive social exchanges with ethical leaders, they develop beliefs about whether the organization cares for them and values their contributions (Eisenberger et al. 1986). Social exchange theory proposes that when these beliefs are positive, employees may feel deepened obligations to the organization, thereby enhancing organizational commitment (Settoon, Bennett, and Liden 1996; Shore and Wayne 1993). Meyer and Allen (1984, 1991) identify three types of organizational commitment: commitment out of necessity (continuous), commitment from obligation (normative), and commitment that stems from a sense of belonging and personal attachment to an organization (affective). Specifically, affective commitment has been connected to ethical leader behaviors (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005; Kim and Vandenberghe 2021) and corresponds with a positive attitude toward, and emotional identification with, an organization (Singh and Gupta 2015). It is often considered a form of reciprocity toward the organization due to positive social exchanges (Taylor, Bedeian, and Kluemper 2012). This is thought to be, in part, due to the caring and honest nature of ethical leaders (Brown and Treviño 2006) and because employees perceive leaders as representatives of the organization itself (Eisenberger et al. 2010). Research has also found a positive association between ethical leadership and affective commitment (Neubert et al. 2009; Ruiz, Ruiz, and Martínez 2011). Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between ethical leadership in sales and affective organizational commitment.

Affective commitment and psychological well-being

Definitions of well-being include both the absence of illness and the presence of personal growth and optimal functioning (Meyer and Maltin 2010). Specifically, employee well-being describes employee perceptions of satisfaction with work and life, and positive psychological experiences regarding both (Zheng et al. 2015). Affective commitment has indeed been linked to several indicators of employee well-being including general well-being (Galais and Moser 2009), life satisfaction (Lu et al. 2009), and improved mental health (Grawitch, Tares, and Kohler 2007).

Employees who feel a strong affective commitment to an organization often have a positive attitude, identify with the company's values and goals, and exhibit loyalty (Mercurio 2015). In return, employees may expect recognition, support, and a positive work environment. This positive exchange of commitment and support can enhance well-being (Che, Zhu, and Huang 2022). As employees have more positive interactions with an organization in terms of ethical leadership, they are more likely to integrate the organization into their sense of identity (Meyer and Allen 1991) and experience positive emotions (Gupta, Agarwal, and Khatri 2016). The positive social exchange that employees experience with ethical leaders should induce greater emotional attachment to

the organization and improve psychological well-being. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2a: Affective organizational commitment is positively related to psychological well-being.

Hypothesis 2b: Affective organizational commitment mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and psychological well-being.

Affective commitment and job performance

Social exchange theory proposes that as an individual receives positive treatment from an ethical leader, they will feel increased emotional attachment and obligation to behave positively toward the leader and organization (Blau 1986; Singh and Gupta 2015). Employee effort increases in tandem with the level of emotional involvement and connectedness (Meyer and Allen 1991), which has been interpreted as a reciprocal manifestation of high-quality social exchange (Taylor, Bedeian, and Kluemper 2012). Employees reciprocate the positive behaviors they receive from their leader with increased commitment and effort.

High-quality social exchanges have been shown to impact performance through improved developmental opportunities and job satisfaction, facilitating greater work engagement and performance (Limpo and Junaidi 2022). Subordinates report greater empowerment when they have strong social exchanges with their leaders and are more likely to take initiative in improving their overall performance (Kim and Vandenberghe 2021). Indeed, studies have linked affective commitment to increased job performance (Meyer and Allen 1997; Swalhi, Zgoulli, and Hofaidhllaoui 2017). Research suggests the stronger the quality of the social exchange relationship, the greater employee performance will be, specifically increased sales (Bashaw and Grant 1994; Janssen and Van Yperen 2004). The positive treatment employees experience from ethical leaders will engender greater affective commitment toward the organization (Bedi, Alpaslan, and Green 2016; Neubert et al. 2009; Ruiz, Ruiz, and Martínez 2011) and, thus, greater job performance.

Hypothesis 3a: Affective organizational commitment is positively related to employee job performance.

Hypothesis 3b: Affective organizational commitment mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee job performance.

The moderating role of remote supervision

Sales managers have traditionally had to oversee geographically dispersed teams, with remote supervision limiting their ability to provide immediate and impactful feedback. Remote supervision differs from in-person supervision since it is facilitated through technologies like email, instant messaging, texting, and video calls. While these mediums offer convenience and benefits, reliance on them can impede spontaneity and the conveyance of tone, nuance, and emotional cues that in-person supervision and communication can offer (Kock 2011). In-person supervision allows for

more regular, personal interactions that facilitate greater trust and social bonding (Sussex 2008). Environmental distractions and technology disruptions can likewise lead to the misinterpretation of cues and increase communication ambiguity in less natural mediums (Chamorro-Premuzic 2020; Kock 2011).

Remote leaders must invest additional effort in clearly articulating messages that, in face-to-face settings, could easily be conveyed through social presence and nonverbal cues (Madlock 1970). In a face-to-face setting, subtle changes in tone of voice, body language, and spontaneous feedback help communicate intent and build rapport naturally. However, when leading remotely, these cues are often lost or muted, forcing leaders to rely more heavily on written or digital communication, likely discounting the effectiveness of the sales manager. Due to this discounting effect, sales managers likely need to be more deliberate in their interactions, ensuring clarity, emotional tone, and context are not misunderstood. Additionally, distant leaders must find alternative ways to foster team cohesion and trust, which would typically emerge more organically in an in-person environment.

Fortunately, advances in technology have significantly enhanced remote communication capabilities allowing for improved conveyance of nuance and tone in messages. Clear video communications (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams) enable users to see facial expressions, gestures, and body language, which are crucial for inferring meaning and intent (Nguyen and Canny 2009). Enhanced with audio, the ability to hear tone of voice helps users convey and interpret emotion and humor (Rodero and Mas 2020). Videoconferencing allows for real-time and synchronous communication, which more closely resembles in-person interactions without delays between message transmissions (Irani 2019). With reliable high-speed internet, managers and employees can communicate in ways that closely mimic the richness of face-to-face communication.

We have proposed that ethical leadership influences employee well-being and performance via affective commitment, but the mediums through which leaders coach and communicate to followers are also influential (Hui, Law, and Lau 2021; Jones, Woods, and Guillaume 2016). When

leaders engage in remote supervision, or when the degree to which coaching communications are facilitated by technology is higher (Hui, Law, and Lau 2021), we expect ethical leader behaviors to become less perceptible and beneficial to followers. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 4: Remote supervision moderates the positive relationship between ethical leadership and affective organizational commitment such that the relationship is weaker when remote supervision occurs more often.

The proposed structural model is presented in Figure 1 and tested in the following studies with two unique samples of remote salespeople. The results are discussed, and a qualitative study then follows to help explain the unexpected finding. The theoretical and practical implications of the research, limitations, and potential avenues of future research are also presented.

Study 1

To test the validity of the hypothesized model, a large-scale data collection was conducted via an online survey. The following sections outline the administration and validation procedures that were employed.

Measures

Established scales were used to measure all constructs. All items were measured using seven-point Likert scales unless otherwise noted. We adopted scales on ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005), affective commitment (Meyer, Allen, and Smith 1993), psychological well-being (Zheng et al. 2015), and job performance (Peterson 2020). Control variables were also included to help ensure existing known influences were taken into account (Bernerth et al. 2018). Thus, salesperson age, experience, and gender were controlled. The modality (in-person or remote) of the interaction between salesperson and supervisor was measured using a single question in which survey respondents were asked, ‘In the last year, were coaching sessions with your direct supervisor primarily in-person or were they primarily

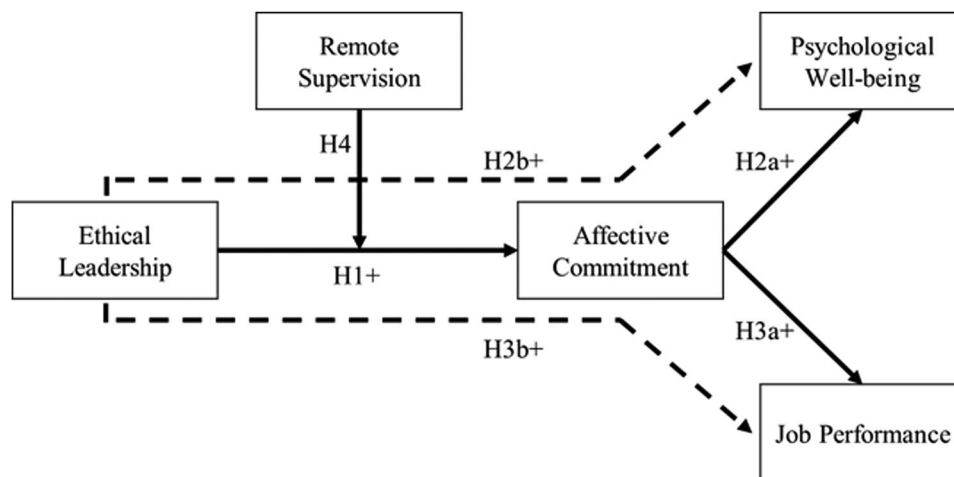


Figure 1. Conceptual model (studies 1 and 2).

done remotely via email/phone?’ Coaching is used as the assessment of supervisor interaction as it ‘is a comprehensive and distinctive way of being related to others in an enterprise’ (Evered and Selman 1989, 27), and critical to the development of ethical leadership behaviors (Bashir and Hassan 2020). Participants indicated their responses on a slider scale with any number between 0 (primarily in-person) and 100 (primarily remote) available. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) can test moderation with continuous variables rather than require the artificial dichotomization of moderator variables (e.g. moderation via multi-group analysis). A continuous variable is ideal for assessing moderation through PLS-SEM, as maintaining the continuous nature of a variable (rather than dichotomizing) maintains its natural scale and variance; this is appropriate given that employees are rarely fully remote or fully in-person but rather fall somewhere in between. In turn, this property of testing moderation via PLS-SEM benefits the statistical power of the analysis (Hair et al. 2017; 2019).

Sample and procedure

Data was collected through an online survey of sales professionals in the United States. An initial sample of 275 salespeople was obtained through a Prolific survey panel. Prolific has been used in prior sales (Schaarschmidt, Walsh, and Evanschitzky 2022) and ethics (Wynes 2022) research and has been shown to produce high-quality data (Peer et al. 2021). After the removal of participants with incomplete surveys or failed attention checks, a final sample of 258 salespeople was used in the analysis. Table 2 describes the participants’ demographics and work profiles.

The use of single-source data raises the concern of common method bias (CMB), although previous studies have used self-reported data in investigating ethical concerns and performance (Badrinarayanan, Ramachandran, and Madhavaram 2019; She and Li 2023). We addressed these concerns via procedural adjustments and statistical analysis (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). Procedural remedies include different scale points, anchor labels, and positive and negative items. We also followed Kock’s (2015) method to test for CMB through a full collinearity assessment approach. All factor-level VIFs were below the 3.3 level, as recommended by Kock, and indicated ‘the model can be considered free of common method bias’ (Kock 2015, 7).

Evaluation of the measurement model

To analyze the data, we utilized PLS-SEM with SmartPLS version 4.0.8.5 (Ringle, Wende, and Becker 2022). PLS-SEM is commonly used in sales (e.g. Guenzi and Nijssen 2021; Munyon et al. 2021) and ethics (e.g. Glavee-Geo, Engelseth, and Buvik 2022; Lussier, Hartmann, and Bolander 2021) research. We assessed the convergent validity of the measurement model through analysis of factor loadings, average variance extracted, and composite reliability (Hair, Howard, and Nitzl 2020). All but three of the outer loadings were

above the acceptable 0.70 level (see Table 3 for items and loadings; Collier 2020). We retained these items due to their validation in previous studies. The average variance extracted for each construct suggests convergent validity (Collier 2020; Fornell and Larcker 1981). The composite reliability for each construct was above the 0.70 rule of thumb (Hair et al. 2019; see Table 4). HTMT ratios also showed support for discriminant validity with all constructs below 0.85 (Hair et al. 2017; see Table 5).

Evaluation of the structural model

To assess the structural model, we followed the steps recommended by Hair et al. (2017). To examine multicollinearity, we used the VIF statistic. All VIF values were less than 3. Thus, multicollinearity did not seem to be an issue (Hair et al. 2017). Next, we examined the path coefficients. Table 6 provides the results of our hypothesis testing. We found a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment ($\beta = .547, p = < .001$), providing support for hypothesis 1. We also found support for a positive relationship between affective commitment and psychological well-being ($\beta = .224, p = .006$) and affective commitment and performance ($\beta = .203, p = .021$). This supports hypotheses 2a and 3a.

Hypotheses 2b and 3b suggest that affective commitment is a mediator between ethical leadership and the outcomes of psychological well-being and performance. We found support for affective commitment as a mediator of the relationship between ethical leadership and psychological well-being ($\alpha\beta = .123, p = .010$), and the direct relationship between ethical leadership and psychological well-being was also significant ($\beta = .430, p < .001$). Partial mediation exists when both the direct and indirect relationships are significant. Thus, we found support for hypothesis 2b. We also found support for affective commitment as a mediator for the relationship between ethical leadership and performance ($\alpha\beta = .111, p = .026$). The direct relationship between ethical leadership and performance was not significant ($\beta = .142, p = .106$), providing evidence for full mediation and supporting hypothesis 3b. Contrary to existing research, we failed to find support for H4 and the moderating role of remote supervision ($\beta = .099, p = .077$) on ethical leadership to affective commitment.

Post hoc analysis

Given the non-significant impact of remote supervision as a moderator, we sought to conduct a post hoc analysis to better understand the impact of age on this finding. As such, we analyzed the hypothesized relationships for participants under age 35 ($n=191$) and for those age 35 and older ($n=67$). We found a significant positive moderating impact of remote supervision on the relationships between ethical leadership and affective commitment ($\beta = .134, p = .033$) for younger participants but not for older participants ($\beta = .025, p = .851$).

Table 2. Study 1 and 2 sample information.

Variable	Study 1		Study 2	
	<i>n</i> =258	%	<i>n</i> =155	%
Tenure with supervisor (Years)				
Less than 1	79	31%	27	17%
1 to 3	102	40%	43	28%
3 to 5	38	15%	39	25%
5 to 10	27	10%	30	19%
Over 10	8	3%	16	10%
Sales experience (Years)				
Less than 1	24	9%	3	2%
1 to 3	60	23%	25	16%
3 to 5	57	22%	19	12%
5 to 10	61	24%	40	26%
Over 10	53	21%	68	44%
Age				
Under 20	1	0%	1	1%
20 to 29	141	55%	43	28%
30 to 39	79	31%	48	31%
40 to 49	22	9%	30	19%
50 to 59	10	4%	21	14%
Over 60	5	2%	11	7%
Education				
Some high school	0	0%	0	0%
High school	51	20%	48	31%
Bachelor's degree	167	65%	81	52%
Master's degree	23	9%	18	12%
PhD or higher	2	1%	2	1%
Trade school	14	5%	6	4%
Gender				
Female	181	70%	58	37%
Male	71	28%	92	59%
Other	6	2%	5	3%
Remote Supervision				
0 to 25%	75	29%	58	37%
26 to 50%	27	10%	26	17%
51 to 75%	32	12%	20	13%
76 to 100%	123	48%	51	33%

Table 3. Factor loadings.

Variable		Study 1	Study 2
Ethical Leadership			
EL1	...listens to what employees have to say	0.883	0.889
EL2	...disciplines employees who violate ethical standards	0.465	0.411
EL3	...conducts his/her personal life in an ethical manner	0.794	0.881
EL4	...has the best interests of employees in mind	0.910	0.803
EL5	...makes fair and balanced decisions	0.873	0.871
EL6	...can be trusted	0.925	0.893
EL7	...discusses business ethics or values with employees	0.873	0.746
EL8	...sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics	0.824	0.882
EL9	...defines success not just by results but also the way that they are obtained	0.740	0.744
EL10	...when making decisions, asks "what is the right thing to do?"	0.783	0.877
Affective Commitment			
AC1	I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization	0.918	0.812
AC2	I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own	0.693	0.678
AC3	I do not feel a strong sense of "belonging" to my organization (R)	0.736	0.873
AC4	I do not feel "emotionally attached" to this organization (R)	0.717	0.829
AC5	I do not feel like "part of the family" at my organization (R)	0.850	0.920
AC6	This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me	0.862	0.837
Job Performance			
PERF1	Producing a high market share for your company	0.963	0.916
PERF2	Making sales of those products with the highest profit margins	0.774	0.748
PERF3	Generating a high level of dollar sales	0.870	0.870
PERF4	Quickly generating sales of new company products/services	0.800	0.890
PERF5	Identifying and selling to major accounts	0.589	0.756
PERF6	Producing sales or blanket contracts with long-term profitability	0.655	0.753
PERF7	Exceeding all sales targets and objectives during the year	0.768	0.766
Psychological Well-being			
WB1	I feel I have grown as a person	0.789	0.696
WB2	I handle daily affairs well	0.758	0.831
WB3	I generally feel good about myself, and I'm confident	0.594	0.703
WB4	People think I am willing to give and to share my time with others	0.699	0.572
WB5	I am good at making flexible timetables for my work	0.611	0.743
WB6	I love having deep conversations with family and friends so that we can better understand each other	0.587	0.511

Table 4. Construct reliability and validity.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha		rho A		Composite Reliability		Average Variance Extracted	
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2
AC	0.92	0.93	0.92	0.93	0.91	0.93	0.64	0.69
EL	0.95	0.95	0.96	0.96	0.95	0.95	0.67	0.66
PERF	0.92	0.84	0.93	0.85	0.92	0.84	0.61	0.47
WB	0.83	0.93	0.84	0.94	0.83	0.93	0.46	0.67

Note: Affective Commitment (AC); Ethical Leadership (EL); Job Performance (PERF); Psychological Well-being (WB).

Table 5. Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio.

Construct	Study 1				Study 2			
	AC	EL	PERF	WB	AC	EL	PERF	WB
AC								
EL	0.52				0.55			
PERF	0.29	0.25			0.32	0.39		
WB	0.46	0.54	0.50		0.45	0.50	0.56	

Note: Affective Commitment (AC); Ethical Leadership (EL); Job Performance (PERF); Psychological Well-being (WB).

Table 6. Test of hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Study 1			Study 2		
	Beta	T-stat	p-value	Beta	T-stat	p-value
Direct Relationships						
H1 EL → AC	0.55	10.77	<.001	0.56	8.03	<.001
H2a AC → WB	0.22	2.75	0.01	0.26	2.58	0.01
H3a AC → PERF	0.20	2.32	0.02	0.12	1.21	0.23
Indirect Relationships (Mediating/Moderating)						
H2b EL → AC → WB	0.12	2.59	0.01	0.15	2.49	0.01
H3b EL → AC → PERF	0.11	2.22	0.03	0.07	1.16	0.25
H4a EL*RS → AC	0.10	1.77	0.08	0.02	0.24	0.81
H4b RS x EL → AC → WB	0.02	1.63	0.10	0.01	0.22	0.83
H4c RS x EL → AC → PERF	0.02	1.41	0.16	0.00	0.18	0.86

Note: Affective Commitment (AC); Ethical Leadership (EL); Job Performance (PERF); Remote Supervision (RS); Psychological Well-being (WB).

Study 1 discussion

In study 1, consistent with social exchange theory, we found direct and indirect relations between ethical leadership, psychological well-being, and job performance. However, contrary to media naturalness theory, we found that remote supervision did not significantly impact the relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment. The results of the post hoc study suggest that age is an important factor: younger employees may perceive a stronger connection between ethical leadership and affective commitment when remotely supervised. Given this unexpected finding, we conducted a second study with a new sample to see if the results would hold. We also incorporated a time-separated design in study 2 to address concerns with CMB arising from the cross-sectional nature of study 1. Time-separated surveys are an effective procedural remedy for reducing CMB (MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2012; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012) and, in our case, improving the methodological robustness of study 2 and enabling stronger tests for our effects of interest.

Study 2

Measures

Ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005), affective commitment (Meyer, Allen, and Smith 1993), remote

supervision, psychological well-being (Zheng et al. 2015), job performance (Peterson 2020), and the control variables were measured using the same scales as utilized in study 1. Ethical leadership, remote supervision, and the control variables were collected at time 1, affective commitment at time 2, and psychological well-being and job performance at time 3.

Sample and procedure

We surveyed 159 sales and marketing professionals through a Prolific survey panel. Participants completed three time-separated surveys, each separated by about one week. After removing participants with incomplete surveys, a final sample of 155 remained. Please see Table 2 for participant information.

Evaluation of the measurement model

To analyze the data, we utilized PLS-SEM with SmartPLS version 4.0.8.5 (Ringle, Wende, and Becker 2022). We followed the same modeling approach as study 1. Convergent validity was assessed through the analysis of factor loadings, average variance extracted, and composite reliability. Outer loadings were above the acceptable 0.60 level (see Table 3; Hair et al. 2017) with the exception of three items, which were retained due to their inclusion in previously validated scales. The average variance extracted for each construct was deemed acceptable according to Collier (2020) and Fornell and Larcker (1981). Composite reliability for each construct was above 0.70 (Hair et al. 2019; see Table 4). HTMT ratios also showed support for discriminant validity with all items below 0.85 (see Table 5; Hair et al. 2017).

Evaluation of the structural model

The VIF statistic was under 3 for all constructs, suggesting that multicollinearity was not an issue (Hair et al. 2017). Table 6 provides the results of the hypothesis tests. Similar to study 1, we found significant positive relationships between ethical leadership and affective commitment ($\beta = .562, p < .001$) and affective commitment and psychological well-being ($\beta = .260, p = .009$), providing support for hypotheses 1 and 2a. However, we did not find support for the relationship between affective commitment and performance ($\beta = .120, p = .225$). Hypothesis 3a was not supported in study 2, although it was in study 1. Similarly, we found mixed results when testing for mediation. Hypothesis 2b was supported by affective commitment partially mediating the relation of ethical leadership and psychological well-being ($\alpha\beta = .146, p = .013$); however, hypothesis 3b was

not supported as affective commitment did not mediate the relationship of ethical leadership and performance ($\alpha\beta = .068$, $p = .248$). We also found significant direct effects between ethical leadership and well-being ($\beta = .375$, $p < .001$) and performance ($\beta = .301$, $p = .005$). Mimicking the results of study 1, remote supervision was not found to significantly moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment ($\beta = .018$, $p = .812$).

Study 2 discussion

Our two studies offer complementary insights into the relationships between ethical leadership, remote supervision, and important employee outcomes. First, both studies supported the positive relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment. Second, we found support for the positive relationship of ethical leadership on psychological well-being and performance. Both studies supported partial mediation between ethical leadership and psychological well-being via affective commitment. Study 1 supported full mediation between ethical leadership and job performance via affective commitment, while study 2 supported a direct relationship between ethical leadership and job performance with no mediation from affective commitment. Third, remote supervision did not impact the relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment.

To probe the underlying reasons for this surprising finding regarding the moderating role of remote supervision, we conducted a third study in which we interviewed remote salespeople. Given the assertion of previous research that ‘ethical leadership depends on direct interaction or observation’ (Ko et al. 2018, 112), this qualitative approach sought to uncover potential explanations as to why remote supervision may not be as detrimental to salesperson well-being and performance as previously thought.

Study 3

Research approach

Given the unexpected findings from the empirical research, we adopted a qualitative approach to help provide insights into the phenomena. The use of explanatory sequential designs is recommended to help explain the findings of

quantitative research through the voice of qualitative participants (Johnson 2015). This method is well suited to examine contextual realities and perceptions that may be challenging to uncover through survey research (Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick 2006). Additionally, the use of qualitative interviews can help enrich our understanding of a phenomenon when paired with quantitative research (Rapp et al. 2020). Given the challenges of understanding the impact of remote leadership on perceptions of ethical leadership and the impact on employee commitment, a qualitative research design was an appropriate choice.

Data collection

To understand how salespeople perceive their managers’ ethical behaviors when they have reduced in-person communication, semi-structured interviews were conducted. A theories-in-use approach was adopted due to its suitability for ‘extending extant perspectives and addressing ambiguities’ (Zeithaml et al. 2020, 35). Sales scholars have recently employed this approach to explore topics such as: price negotiations (Cardy et al. 2023), sales system shocks (Hartmann, Chaker, et al. 2024a), and salesperson motivations (Good, Hughes, and Wang 2022). Participants were recruited from professional networking sites (e.g. LinkedIn) or by a research team member with a personal connection. In total, 14 subjects with remote work responsibilities ranging from 30% to 100% participated in the interviews (see Table 7 for participant details). This approach was chosen for its flexibility, capacity to gather in-depth data, and suitability for facilitating a nuanced understanding of the phenomena (Kallio et al. 2016; Peters and Halcomb 2015). Each interview lasted approximately 30 min. To ensure consistency during the interviews, an interview guide was developed using theoretical thematic analysis from the quantitative study (Braun and Clarke 2006). The interviews were conducted through Zoom (Version 5.17.11) and were recorded and transcribed with participant consent.

Analysis

Interview recordings and transcripts were thoroughly reviewed, and the data was coded for common themes and collated. Next, utilizing latent thematic analysis, coded

Table 7. Qualitative participant composition.

Participant	Position	Industry	Gender	Years of Experience
1	Outside Sales	Commercial Equipment Rental	F	4
2	VP of Digital Sales	Mass Media Communication	M	25
3	Sr. Business Development	Technology	M	7
4	Sales Representative	Software Infrastructure	M	8
5	Group Sales Executive	Sports and Entertainment	F	2
6	Field Sales	Outdoor Power Equipment	M	6
7	Senior Director	LED Lighting	M	25
8	Event Sales Director	Commercial Interior Design	F	5
9	Product Manager	Information Services	F	4
10	Sales Director	Software	F	4
11	Channel Sales	HR Services	F	3
12	Account Manager	Financial Services	M	22
13	Business Development Manager	Analytics, AI, Data Management	F	5
14	Sales Senior Manager	Digital Business Services	M	19

extracts were examined again for underlying ideas and conceptualizations related to media naturalness and social exchange theories. Additionally, the thematic analysis was informed by a constant comparison method, where emerging themes were continuously compared against new data to refine and validate the themes. This iterative process helped capture the participants' nuanced experiences and perspectives. The themes were then refined for coherence and distinctness. Illuminative extracts were compiled to highlight key themes in our research.

Findings

The findings from the interviews suggest that the impact of remote supervision on ethical leadership may not be as profound if key actions are taken by the manager. Specifically, managers may be able to mitigate the negative impact of remote supervision through (1) consistent and transparent communication, (2) in-person interaction, (3) modeling integrity, and (4) establishing and enforcing ethical standards. Next, we present our findings and provide excerpts from the interviews as support.

Consistent and transparent communication

Consistent and transparent communication was noted as beneficial in impacting the ethical perception of supervisors. As observed by an early-career group sales executive, 'The more consistent and transparent the communication, the better.... The more you communicate, even if it's just to check in, the more trust is built' (P05). This sentiment was further echoed by a software sales director, as she stated, 'Communication is really a big foundation of trust. And if you don't communicate things out well and just kind of make decisions without vetting it out with the appropriate people internally, that's when things start to erode trust in general' (P10). Additionally, a product manager noted they especially appreciated regular 'check-ins when there is content that is helpful to me and to my job' (P09).

Employees who cannot meet face-to-face can still receive feedback and instructions from their manager, but perhaps even more crucially, they can provide feedback in return. Maintaining open, direct communication is essential for ensuring employees feel heard and valued, while also giving managers more opportunities to build meaningful connections with remote workers. Regardless of the communication channel, supervisors who communicate with candor and honesty signal to employees that they have 'their best interest in mind' (P03). An early-career product manager indicated that when supervisors make 'a concerted effort' to maintain 'open communication and transparency', they felt 'more fully supported in an ethical environment' (P09). This helps explain why remote supervision does not weaken the relationship between ethical leadership and affective commitment. Managers and employees are now able to communicate more seamlessly and instantaneously through technologies that were not available even a few years ago. The widespread availability of digital communication tools allows for frequent and transparent interaction despite

geographical dispersion, thus enabling managers to demonstrate these values.

In-person interaction

Participants also identified occasional in-person interaction with supervisors as beneficial for understanding their values and ethics. An early-career group sales executive noted, 'When you're in the office, you get to see the way that someone else operates in the way that they do their job and the ethics that they follow in what they do. And I think that that creates a greater window for trust as well' (P05). While remote supervision may be beneficial for younger employees, research suggests that being able to witness the ethical behaviors of a manager in person is beneficial in fostering employee commitment. Face-to-face interactions provide clear communication and non-verbal cues, making it easy for leaders to demonstrate integrity and transparency. This visibility often strengthens the perception of ethical leadership, which can be harder to convey through remote channels, particularly for older employees that may not be as comfortable using the latest technology.

Participants also noted gatherings and team-building activities outside of the office as helpful in getting to know supervisors. An early-career channel sales representative for a payroll company described how 'team building activities and being able to do things in a non-work environment' helped build stronger relationships with her supervisor and teammates, such that they all 'became friends on a certain level' (P11). In informal settings, leaders can demonstrate consistency in their values and actions, helping employees trust that a manager's ethics in the workplace are genuine and extend to other contexts. This consistency likely strengthens the sense of ethicality and authenticity in leadership, which positively impacts an employee. Organization type and the degree of geographical dispersion among employees may inhibit in-person interaction. However, our results suggest that occasional in-person interaction, even social activities outside of the office, allows employees to assess their supervisor's ethical leadership and may yield positive results for an organization.

Modeling integrity

Modeling integrity was also influential in signaling ethical leadership to employees. A vice president of digital sales for a media company noted the importance of observing leaders asking ethical questions. When leaders make decisions, this participant noted the salience of three questions: 'Is it good for the customer? Is it good for the salesperson? Is it good for the company? And if we can answer all three, ... then it's a good decision' (P02). When employees see their boss consistently model integrity, it reinforces perceptions of ethical behavior by demonstrating that the leader's actions align with their words. This visible commitment to doing the right thing sets a positive example, encouraging others to uphold similar values. It likely strengthens the leader's credibility and solidifies their reputation as an ethical role model.

Conversely, observing leader actions that go against stated company principles can have the opposite effect. A sales

representative for a technology company stated, 'If they're going to tell you, you know, these are our principles, our values, etc., and they don't follow them – it's very hypocritical. So, I think over time, when I see leaders acting ethically, it makes me feel confident in the place that I'm in' (P04). When employees observe their manager failing to model integrity, it undermines trust and damages perceptions of ethical behavior. Inconsistencies between the leader's words and actions can erode credibility. This disconnect can lead to a work environment where ethical standards are seen as flexible or insincere. Despite varying levels of remote supervision, it appears ethical leadership can still be accessed and perceived by employees when leaders model integrity across various communication channels.

Establishing and enforcing ethical standards

Establishing and enforcing ethical guidelines by managers was also found to enhance perceptions of ethical leadership. A sales director for a large software company shared that his managers were 'very rigid on ... how we screen specific employees, and really any and everyone that comes into the business. We have a framework that we use, and one of the five pieces of that framework is ethics and how they align to putting customers' and prospects' needs over their own individual needs' (P10). This illustrates that the way the results are obtained matters to management and should be considered important to everyone. This sentiment is echoed by an account manager who stated he was able to infer ethics were important to his manager because employees were 'given clear standards of what sort of ethical behavior is expected' (P12). The development and enforcement of ethical guidelines by managers strengthens perceptions of ethical leadership by providing clear standards for behavior that align with the organization's values. When managers actively uphold these standards, they demonstrate a commitment to fairness and integrity, fostering trust among employees. This consistency between stated ethics and actions reinforces the leader's credibility, encouraging a culture of accountability and ethical conduct throughout the team.

General discussion

The recruitment and retention of skilled and motivated salespeople has become a critical challenge for companies in the current labor market. Companies have addressed this issue by cultivating ethical work environments that prioritize salesperson well-being, nurturing both sustained productivity and peak performance. The present research suggests that affective commitment acts as a mediating mechanism that allows ethical sales leadership to influence a salesperson's outcomes. Further, when appropriate managerial actions are taken, remote supervision does not have a negative impact on workers as research suggests. Salespeople have typically worked remotely to some extent, requiring sales managers to oversee geographically dispersed teams. Thus, while they have shown themselves to be effective at managing from a distance, the shift to fully remote supervision from partly remote may be discounted because they already have

experience supervising remotely. Any prior experience sales managers and employees have working remotely would mean they have likely developed the skills and habits needed to effectively perform in their roles. As a result, the transition to fully remote work and supervision may be seen as a continuation or slight adjustment rather than a significant change, making it potentially less disruptive and easier to adapt to. Collectively, these results produce several important implications for both research and practice.

Theoretical implications

Research suggests employees are inclined to perceive themselves as participants in a social exchange relationship at work due to the supportive and caring treatment they receive from an ethical leader (Brown and Treviño 2006). With social behavior being a critical component of the exchange process (Kirkman et al. 2002), it is logical to assume that without in-person contact, the ability of a manager to build trusting relationships would be hampered. This assumption fits with media naturalness theory, which suggests remotely managing employees may hamper the ability of an ethical leader to be perceived as credible and legitimate. The ability to perceive signs of ethical leadership directly affects how employees feel its influence (Banks et al. 2021; Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984). Individuals not communicating in person, as frequently occurs when working remotely, are unable to read each other's body language, tone of voice, and other nonverbal cues that are crucial in understanding the true intent behind a message.

Our findings did not support this perspective, as ethical leadership did relate to important employee outcomes and was not hampered by remote supervision. Given the technological advances in recent years, remotely managing employees has become more natural and seamless than ever before. The current research provides support that ethical leadership is important across broad contexts and that remote supervision does not adversely impact it, and in some cases may be beneficial. The results of the qualitative study suggest that social information processing theory may be relevant to remote work environments. Social information processing theory explains how people develop impressions and social relationships over time, and it is regularly used to understand interactions in virtual environments (Farrer and Gavin 2009; Yan and Wang 2018). It suggests that social cues, such as input from supervisors, strongly influence the formation of perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Thus, unlike other media communication theories, social information processing suggests the information presented by managers' and organizations' actions are impactful on employees, even when employees are remotely supervised.

Managerial implications

The results of the current research provide important insights for sales managers. Even without in-person interaction, sales managers can effectively convey ethical signals by displaying prosocial behaviors and moral emotions with remote salespeople. Our results underscore the importance of consistent and intentional communication of ethical values, irrespective of the

communication medium employed. While the findings also suggest that in-person communication is not a prerequisite for transmitting ethical signals from managers to subordinates, it is important to acknowledge the enduring value of in-person interactions within the sales function. Regular in-person coaching sessions (e.g. ride-along, role-play) can provide opportunities for clear communication, feedback, and support (Woodburn 2024). This direct exchange of ideas and perspectives strengthens the manager-employee relationship by promoting transparency, honesty, and accountability. In-person meetings with managers are impactful, even if the interaction is during a social event. Meetings do not have to be in a formal work setting, but even engaging with employees at a happy hour or social outing can be beneficial to employees. By prioritizing in-person interactions, sales managers can cultivate a strong ethical foundation with their remote sales teams, leading to positive employee outcomes.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that managers can solidify their role as ethical leaders by modeling integrity and enforcing clear ethical guidelines. By aligning their actions and decision-making with organizational values, managers reinforce their credibility as ethical leaders and role models. Conversely, inconsistencies between words and actions can erode trust and diminish the perceived ethicality of leadership. Finally, by establishing and enforcing ethical standards, managers help facilitate a culture of accountability. Implementing structured frameworks to guide behavior and reassure employees that ethical conduct is a priority, can foster perceptions of ethical leadership, even in remote supervision contexts.

Limitations and future research

While our results offer valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge the limitations in our research. Study 1 utilized a cross-sectional survey design, and performance was based on self-reported data. We followed questionnaire design recommendations provided by Lindell and Whitney (2001) and MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012) to reduce potential CMB; post hoc tests suggested it is not a problem. Future research could extend these findings by working with industry partners that would allow researchers to use company-provided data to measure a variety of outcome variables, such as more objective indicators of performance.

Further, our research did not consider the manager's communication competency, which significantly impacts the productivity, job satisfaction, and overall well-being of their employees (Penley et al. 1991). Effective communication promotes trust, clarity, and alignment that would amplify the positive effect ethical leadership has on employee outcomes, while poor communication can lead to confusion, frustration, and disengagement (Frigotto and Rossi 2012; Ruck and Trainor 2012). Future research should explore how managers' communication skills impact the transmission of ethical leadership behaviors to their subordinates.

Additionally, we recognize that different measures can be used to operationalize the constructs in the research. We encourage future researchers to use different operationalizations of the constructs studied. Prior studies in the

organizational literature have determined that 'coaching is a comprehensive and distinctive way of being related to others in an enterprise' (Evered and Selman 1989, 27) and is critical to the development of ethical leadership behaviors (Bashir and Hassan 2020). For this reason, we believe that coaching modality is a good way to measure the construct of remote supervision; however, we understand that researchers could prefer another way to operationalize this construct.

Conclusion

The prevalence of remote work arrangements in sales organizations highlights the need for scholarly and practical research on the efficacy of pivotal leadership styles in the absence of direct supervision. Our research, underscoring the powerful impact of ethical leadership, indicates that this leadership style can overcome inherent issues when managing employees remotely. By embodying ethical leadership, which is characterized by integrity, transparency, and a commitment to the well-being of employees, sales managers can effectively navigate the complexities of remote work arrangements where in-person interactions are limited.

Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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