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Dedicated but exhausted? The role of ethical leadership for employee wellbeing in UK student unions

Josh Rivers, Neill Thompson, Debora Jeske

ABSTRACT

Building on previous leadership and well-being research, the aims of the present study were to investigate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee well-being (work engagement and emotional exhaustion) within student unions. We also considered the role of trust as a potential mediator in this relationship. Survey data was collected from 137 full-time employees working at student unions in the UK. Path model analysis revealed that trust in one's manager partially mediated the effects of ethical leadership and work engagement and emotional exhaustion. While trust increased work engagement and reduced emotional exhaustion, ethical leadership also had a significant indirect effect on both outcomes. An interaction between employee dedication and ratings for manager's ethical leadership suggested that more dedicated employees are less emotionally exhausted if their managers scored highly on ethical leadership. However, when the employees felt less dedicated to the job, managers' ethical leadership behaviours did not reduce employees' emotional exhaustion.
The study examined the effect of ethical leadership in student unions, adding to the very sparse research on the experience of full-time employees working for student unions.

KEY WORDS

non-profit, ethical leadership, trust, work engagement, dedication

JEL Code: J50, M54, O15

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1 INTRODUCTION

Non-profit employment in the UK topped 2 million employees in 2016, with half of these employees being employed in non-profit organisations with more than 500 employees (Statistica, 2017). A significant number of non-profit employees are also employed in the over 600 student unions that are member associations of the UK's National Union of Students (2017). But to date, very few studies have investigated the role of ethical leadership within non-profit settings (examples include Houston, 2007; Ogunfowora, 2014; Pierce, 2007). Early research into ethical leadership and its impact on non-profit organisations highlighted that ethical leaders are responsible for creating and sustaining a strong ethical climate in organisations (Houston, 2007). Yet very little is known about well-being in non-profit organisations, and the role that ethical leadership may play in promoting engagement and preventing emotional exhaustion among dedicated employees. The purpose of the current paper is to explore the role of ethical leadership within student unions and examine the influence of such leadership on employee well-being. The next section provides an introduction into student unions, followed by a general overview of research on ethical leadership and well-being.

1.1 A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO STUDENT UNIONS

The non-profit sector is usually made up of all organisations that are incorporated as non-profit entities (Leete, 2006). Student unions are an example of educational non-profit membership groups, the size of which depends on the location and scale of the potential membership (e.g., student body; see also Tschirhart, 2006). Student unions often share collective values or missions such as promoting social justice, activism, contributing to social change and making a difference in the community (Whitford, 2014). Members are subject to regulations

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and the boards of student unions are usually composed of elected officers, who are frequently supported by full-time employees responsible for the student union's operation in cooperation with the university and student body that the student union serves. It is the experience of the full-time employees at student unions in the UK that this research focused on.

Student unions in the UK historically originated around 1864 (Brooks et al., 2015), while student unions in the USA have been a feature at American universities for just over a hundred years (Solheid, 2012). In 2011 and 2012, student unions in the UK employed 17,034 part-time/student employees and 3312 permanent employees (Day, 2012). The number of permanent and full-time employees has continued to rise over the last few years (see also Brooks et al., 2015). This is due to the need for consistency and continuity in terms of how student unions are run (Brooks et al., 2015) and to maintain team morale, wider engagement, loyalty and commitment (M. Day, personal communication, 21 August 2017). Like many other non-profit organisations (Knapp et al., 2017), student unions rely on employees to achieve long-term goals, many of which may take more than one election year to achieve.

However, despite the increasing numbers of permanent employees, the annual changes in membership and management, trends such as student-as-consumer (see also Ball, 2012), the emphasis on a positive student experience, and the coinciding decline in autonomy when organising student activities (Brooks et al., 2016) creates a number of competing demands for these employees. This means many employees may be caught between two worlds: the university which hired them and the interests of the students who make up the majority of people involved in student unions. The agenda and priorities of the university and students may not always align, creating strained interactions between these parties (e.g., Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005; Whitford, 2014).

1.2 ETHICAL LEADERSHIP, TRUST AND WELL-BEING

Ethical leadership has been defined as "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" (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Two dimensions of ethical leadership were identified. First, the leader as a moral person. In other words, the focus is on the personality and attributes of the leader as an upright, fair, and principled decision maker who shows genuine concern and care for others (Brown & Trevino, 2006). It is the role of the ethical leader to articulate and embody organisational values (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2008). Second, the leader as a moral manager who models ethical behaviour, communicates ethical standards and holds the followers responsible for ethical actions.

Existing research suggests that ethical leadership can have positive outcomes for employees, including enhanced well-being (Liu et al., 2010), increased job satisfaction (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2009), improved task performance (Mayer et al., 2012), and increased job dedication (Mayer et al., 2009). Ethical leadership has also been related to increased work engagement and decreased emotional exhaustion (Chughtai et al., 2015) as well as employee well-being (Kalshoven and Boon, 2012). Furthermore, poor leadership skills have been linked to increased employee stress (Densten, 2005). Leadership behaviours may also influence the experience of meaningfulness of work and the social identification of employees with the purpose of the organisation.

The relationship between employee well-being is also likely influenced by both leadership and trust. Managers who are capable and benevolent and act with moral integrity (traits that may also be prescribed to ethical leaders as, see also Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2014) tend to promote trust (Brown et al., 2005; Chughtai et al., 2015). This, in turn, promotes work engagement (Cheng et al., 2014). This suggests that trust may mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and well-being. When employees feel that they have their manager's trust, they also feel confident that they will be supported should they encounter any job-related difficulties, which in turn strengthens their own sense of self efficacy, and ultimately can stimulate engagement and reduce likelihood of exhaustion (Xanthopolou et al., 2007). When employees have low trust in their manager, they may also be less engaged in the workplace and report elevated levels of exhaustion (Huhtala et al., 2014).

The relationship between leadership, trust and well-being was explored by Olinkse and Hellman (2017). These authors examined how employees reacted to the leadership behaviours of managers on the experience of their employees in an American non-profit. When the managers' leadership was perceived to be a source of enhancement (e.g., source of support and energy), employees reported better well-being and lower burnout. What is more, employee engagement strongly correlated with less employee exhaustion (Olinske & Hellman, 2017). This suggests that the experience of engagement and exhaustion is subject to the relationship employees have with their managers.

In addition to well-being, work engagement may also be higher when a manager exhibits ethical leadership qualities and engenders trust among his or her employees. Work engagement has been defined as a positive, fulfilling work related state of mind (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Work engagement has been differentiated in terms of employee vigour, dedication and absorption. Vigour refers to the energy and effort employees put into their work; dedication encompasses enthusiasm and strong work involvement; wile absorption reflects the extent to which an employee is fully immersed in their work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Empirical research has shown that employees with high levels

of engagement in the workplace have enhanced job satisfaction (Saks, 2006), improved health and well-being (Schaufeli et al., 2008) and superior performance to employees with low engagement (Rich et al., 2010).

1.3 INVIGORATION AND EXHAUSTION PERSPECTIVE

In order to understand the relationship between well-being of employees and leadership in non-profit organisations, we introduce two perspectives: the invigoration and exhaustion perspective (Steffens et al., 2017). We briefly outline how these two perspectives and research on the positive and negative effects of identification and stress at work.

The positive association between social identification with various employee outcomes is also known as the invigoration perspective (Steffens et al., 2017). Research has shown that stronger organisational and social identification can reduce the experience of strain at work (van Dick & Wagner, 2002), the likelihood of burnout (Steffens et al., 2014), and support task performance in stressful situations (Häusser et al., 2012). High-performing individuals also tend to cope better with stress, particularly when they feel socially included (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). This suggests that greater social identification can have positive outcomes for the individual at work, particularly in terms of their health.

Employees working for non-profit organisations such as student unions are known to be motivated by the social mission of their work (Macy, 2006). Many seek opportunities for more exciting and stimulating work as well as quality of good work relationships (Onyx & Maclean, 1996). Managers benefit from having such motivated employees and may then be better positioned to ensure that their work remains meaningful, challenging and creates positive work relationships. This may reinforce the employees' positive social identification with their work, while also ensuring they remain healthy and productive. In this case, employees may be positively invigorated and thrive on stress, buffered by the quality of their relationships and commitment to a common goal.

Negative health outcomes due to social identification have also been linked to the *exhaustion perspective*. In other words, increased social identification has a dark side. It has been associated with excessive involvement in the form of workaholism (Avanzi et al., 2012), increasing the likelihood of poorer employee well-being and health-damaging effects (Steffens et al., 2017). These effects may be more pronounced when individuals feel they cannot meet the standards of their group (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). Poor well-being is linked to emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001) and lower employees' work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2008).

The *exhaustion perspective* (Steffens et al., 2017) may also be very relevant to the non-profit sector, including student unions. Recent statistics from the UK's Office of National Statistics (2017), based on data collected in the 2016 Labour Force Survey, showed that the sickness absence rates for employees in non-profit organisations is higher (2.4 compared to 1.7) than the rates for employees in the private sector. The sickness absence rate is based on the percentage of working hours lost to employee sickness. Non-profits included charities, voluntary organisations and trusts. Almond and Kendall (2006) also state the importance of paying attention to well-being in non-profits, noting that non-profit employees in the UK are somewhat more likely to have unpaid overtime, which would contribute further to the exhaustion perspective through workaholism. These circumstances, alongside the structural characteristics of student unions (e.g., features such as flat hierarchies are common to many non-profit organisations; see also Knapp et al., 2017), may also limit pay and promotion opportunities while simultaneously increasing the pressures to provide excellent support to student union members.

2 GOALS OF PRESENT PAPER AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The current paper addresses several knowledge gaps. First, to date, the experience of full-time employees in student unions in higher education in the UK has been explored in very few studies to date (e.g., Brooks et al., 2015; 2016). Second, non-profit organisations have been neglected in leadership research (McMurray et al., 2010). And third, relatively little research has investigated the influence of ethical leadership on employee well-being, particularly in student unions.

The research therefore expands on a small set of studies in this area such as Binder (2016), Chughtai et al. (2015), Kalshoven and Boon (2012). And finally, the present research will extend the area by investigating trust in manager as a potential alternative mediating variable. Few studies have investigated the impact of trust on engagement and exhaustion; with the ones that have suggesting positive trust in manager can increase engagement and reduce exhaustion (Chughtai & Buckley, 2011; Chughtai et al., 2015).

The present study examined the following hypotheses:

H1: Ethical leadership is a positive predictor of the trust that employees place in their manager.

H2 and H3: Trust predicts employees' work engagement (H2) and emotional exhaustion (H3) in a positive and negative manner, respectively.

Social identification and meaningfulness of one's work may not necessarily exist in a vacuum. The effects of these on well-being measures may be influenced via the prominent workplace features (either leadership or community aspects) that either promote or inhibit good relationships. We were particularly interested in the aspect of trust as this requires significant investment of time to be established. In the context of student unions trust in supervisors may be critical as the permanent staff face annual turnover and changes due to the annual election of new officers each year.

H4a and H4b: Trust in manager mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' work engagement (H4a) and emotional exhaustion (H4b).

Given the importance of dedication in non-profit settings, we further propose that dedication may play an important role in influencing relation to exhaustion, a relationship that is attenuated by the type of ethical leadership employees experience in the workplace (in line with the invigoration perspective).

H5: When employees show more dedication and have a manager who exhibits ethical leadership behaviours, they are also less exhausted than employees who are less dedicated and have a less supportive manager.

3 METHOD

The present study used a survey-based design to collect data from a cross-sectional sample of employees working for UK student unions. The model proposed in our hypotheses are tested using path analysis following preliminary psychometric data screens. The next section outlines the data collection process, participants, and specific measures included in our survey.

3.1 PROCEDURE

The email addresses of potential participants were obtained from around 200 university websites in the United Kingdom. Only full-time student union employees were invited to participate via email. The participants had to be at least 18 years old or above to participate. Upon completion of the consent forms, participants were requested to complete measures regarding their engagement and emotional exhaustion in the workplace. They were also asked to rate the ethical leadership style and trust of their manager. Finally, the survey asked participants for demographics and concluded with a debrief sheet. The survey took on average 10 minutes to complete.

3.2 PARTICIPANTS

The online survey was accessed by 149 participants, 137 of which completed the survey (81 female and 53 male employees; three individuals did not reveal their gender). Participant age was 28 on average (M = 28.10, SD = 8.77; age ranged from 19 to 63 with the median being 24). Only 13.9% of participants were between 19 and 21 years old, more than 86.1% of participants were therefore older than most undergraduate students. Almost all respondents were working full-time (n = 119), only a small number worked part-time (n =15) or did not disclose their employment status (n = 3). Nineteen participants did not provide any information about their employer. Participants were not asked to specify their exact job title (if temporarily elected or permanent employee at the time of the survey). The remaining participants (n = 118) worked for 61 different student unions in the UK. Forty-eight of these were named but removed from the analysis to ensure all participants remained anonymous. A small group of 13 participants listed acronyms or simply listed 'student union' as employer.

3.3 MEASURES

Several measures were used to assess leadership and engagement. Unless otherwise specified, all composites represented the mean across all items in each measure.

Ethical leadership. This construct was measured by using the 10-item Ethical Leadership Scale developed by Brown et al. (2005). A sample item is: "Disciplines employees who violate ethical standards." All items featured a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*. The alpha reliability for this scale was 0.93 (M = 3.87, SD = 0.75).

Trust in one's manager. Trust was measured by the five-item Affective Trust Scale by Yang and Mossholder (2010). A sample item is "I'm confident that I could share my work difficulties with my manager." Items were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha for the scale in the current study was 0.94 (M = 4.08, SD = 0.94).

Work engagement. This construct was measured with the nine item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) by Schaufeli et al., (2006). A composite was created based on three items from each of the three

sub-dimensions of work engagement: vigor (sample item: "At my work, I feel bursting with energy"), dedication (sample item: "My job inspires me") and absorption (sample item: "I get carried away when I am working"). All the items were measured on a seven-point response scale ranging from 0 = *Never* to 6 = *Always*. Cronbach's alpha for the aggregated scale combining all three subscales was .91 (M = 4.12, SD = 0.86). The subscales for dedication (α = .84, M = 4.48, SD = 0.99), vigor (α = .85, M = 3.67, SD = 1.03), and absorption (α = .77, M = 4.23, SD = 0.88) also performed well.

Emotional exhaustion. This construct was assessed with five items taken from the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (Schaufeli et al., 1996). A sample item is "I feel used up at the end of the workday." The items were scored on a seven-point scale ranging from 0 = *Never* to 6 = *Always*. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the current study was 0.92 (M = 2.72, SD = 1.44).

Demographics. This included two questions regarding participants' age and gender.

4 RESULTS

The descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities and correlations between the measures are depicted in Table 1 below. Please note that both age and gender were unrelated to work engagement and not significant covariates. As a result, these variables were dropped as control variables in the analysis. Due to the high correlation between ethical leadership and trust, we used LISREL to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis. The model fit statistics for a one-factor structure incorporating all items under one factor suggested poorer fit ($\chi^2(90) = 309.80$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .13, 90% CI [.12, .15], SRMR = .06, CFI = .87, and NFI = .83). All items did, however, load onto the one factor ($t > 1.96$, $p < .05$). Our results support a two-factor structure (one for trust and one for leadership) even before we considered correlations between the indicators of each scale ($\chi^2(89) = 193.23$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .09, 90% CI [.07, .11], SRMR = .05, CFI = .94, and NFI = .93; $\Delta\chi^2 = 116.57$, $p < .05$). The two factors were significantly correlated with one another ($p < .05$) as observed in the correlations. All indicators loaded significantly onto their assigned factors (t-values > 1.96, p<.05). The model fit improved further as soon as we allowed modifications between items of the same subscale as well as the first trust item and allowing it to load onto ethics. As a result, we retained the two measures rather than merging them into one scale.

Table 1: Correlations between all measures

	Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.	Ethical leadership	1							
2.	Trust in one's manager	.79**	1						
3.	Work engagement	.22**	.21*	1					
4.	Dedication §	.30*	.28**	.93**	1				
5.	Vigor §	.20*	.19*	.91**	.82**	1			
6.	Absorption §	.08	.06	.82**	.65**	.57**	1		
7.	Emotional exhaustion	-.25**	-.27**	-.38**	-.36**	-.49**	-.15	1	
8.	Age	.01	-.01	-.02	-.01	.01	-.04	-.30**	1

Note. N = 137; * p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. § Work engagement subfacet. Cronbach alpha reliabilities for observed variables are in parenthesis in the diagonal. Missing data was replaced using scale means (n = 2).

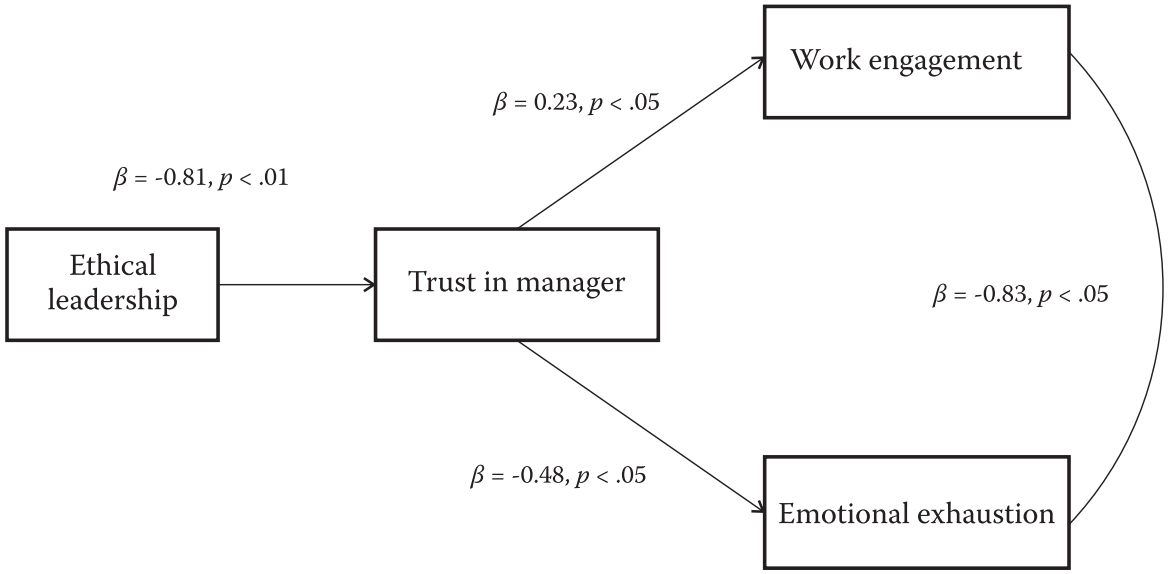
4.1 HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Our hypotheses specified several relationships. First, ethical leadership predicts trust in manager (H1). Second, trust predicts employees' work engagement and emotional exhaustion (H2 and H3). Our mediation hypothesis (4a/4b) proposed that trust in one's manager would mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and emotional exhaustion. All hypotheses were tested using a path model (LISREL 9.20). The results for the hypothesized model were as follows: $\chi^2(2) = 1.01$, $p = .60$, RMSEA = .000, 90% CI [.000; .139], CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .016. CFI values of .95 and above are considered as indicating good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), whereas RMSEA values less than .06 with the confidence interval upper limit not exceeding .08 signify a good model fit (MacCallum et al., 1996).

The estimated path coefficients revealed that ethical leadership predicted trust in one's manager (b = .76; t = 11.12, $p < .01$), in line with the high correlation observed between these two constructs and in support of H1. Trust, in turn, was a positive predictor of work engagement (b = .21; t = 2.55, $p < .05$) and a negative predictor of emotional exhaustion (b = -.33; t = - 2.51, $p < .05$), in line with H2 and H3. As expected, both work engagement

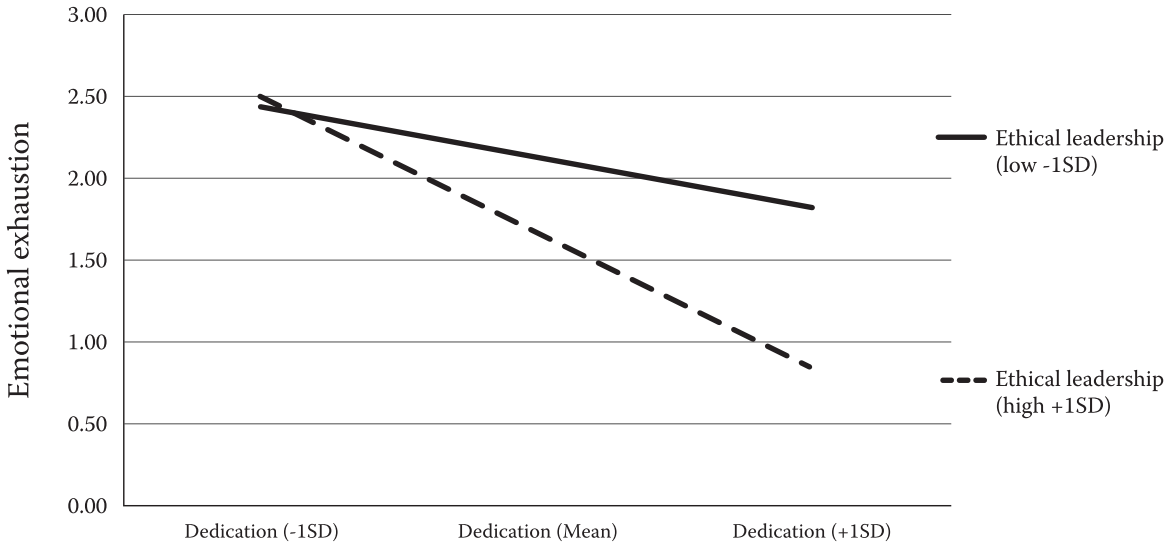
and exhaustion were negatively correlated (b = -.62; t = - 4.23, p < .05). Ethical leadership also had a significant indirect effect on engagement and (b = .16; t = 2.49, p < .05) and emotional exhaustion (b = -.35; t = -3.26, p < .05). This suggests partial mediation, rather than full mediation, but is still in support of H4a and H4b. The standardized path coefficients are listed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Mediation model



In line with the proposed mediation model, we further proposed an interaction (H5) between dedication and leadership in relation to exhaustion. This analysis was tested using multiple regression. Both dedication and ethical leadership were expected to predict exhaustion, although the specific effects were expected to depend on the degree to which employees were dedicated and also had a manager who was morally supportive. The analysis also included covariates such as demographics and employment. These were entered in the first step of the regression model and predicted a significant amount of variance in exhaustion (R 2 = .10, p = .001). Both dedication and ethical leadership were entered in the second step and explained a significant amount of variance in exhaustion (R2Δ = .17, p = .001). Dedication was a significant predictor (β = -0.57, p < .001). Ethical leadership also played a significant role in explaining employee exhaustion (β = -0.31, p = .042). In addition, a significant amount of variance was explained by the interaction between both predictors (R2Δ = .03, β = -0.35, p = .017). All variables explained 28.7% of the overall variance associated with emotional exhaustion (R2 = .32, $R2_{adj}$ = .29, F(6, 128) = 9.98, p < .001). The interaction is outlined in Figure 2. Those employees who were highly dedicated (+1SD on the dedication axis) but rated their managers low on ethical leadership also reported much higher emotional exhaustion than dedicated employees who found their manager who shared an interest in them as a person and manager (high ethical leadership).

Figure 2: Interaction between employee dedication and ethical leadership



Please note that while the model remained significant overall when trust was included as an additional covariate in the first step of the model, the influence of ethical leadership on exhaustion was no longer significant (β = -0.03, p = .912). This suggests that trust is intimately related to ethical leadership construct (in terms of discriminant validity). This interpretation is in line with the high correlation between trust and ethical leadership.

5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to understand the role of ethical leadership among managers in relation to employee well-being among employees in student unions (see also McMurray et al., 2010). The present study examined how employees perceived their managers (ethical leadership and trust) and how these ratings impacted their self-reported work engagement and emotional exhaustion. Additionally, this study sought to examine the mediating role of trust in these relationships. The relationships between these variables were tested using a path model. In addition, we considered the importance of good leadership in relation to emotional exhaustion and dedication among employees.

The results of the path model confirm the importance of ethical leadership on trust perceptions (H1). In addition, trust effectively predicted both employee outcomes - work engagement (H2) as well as emotional exhaustion (H3). In addition, trust mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and these two indicators of employee well-being at work. The results suggest that good ethical leadership not only increases engagement (H4a) but can also reduce emotional exhaustion (H4b). Further results confirmed (H5) that ethical leadership plays a key role in terms of the degree to which highly dedicated employees experience emotional exhaustion. More dedicated employees actually reported less exhaustion when they considered managers to exhibit more ethical leadership behaviours (in support of the *invigoration perspective* proposed in the social identification literature, see Steffens et al., 2017). When the employees appear to be less dedicated the quality of the leadership appears to have little impact on their rather high level of emotional exhaustion.

These findings support the notion that ethical leadership can play an important role in encouraging employee well-being, specifically, by reducing emotional exhaustion. However, the results also suggest that there are limits to the degree to which leadership alone influences employee well-being (as demonstrated by the results for H5). Positive leadership behaviours alone may not be able to address wider social exclusion, effort-reward imbalances or lack of resources in the workplace (see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Siegrist, 1996; Stirling et al., 2011). The present research also supports the findings of Chughtai et al. (2015) and highlights the importance of ethical leadership in improving employee well-being in non-profit organisations. This is an important finding as employees with poor well-being are less productive and have higher rates of absenteeism (Schaufeli et al., 2008), a concern also for the non-profit sector in the UK (see statistics reported by the UK's Office of National Statistics, 2017). Our findings regarding the role of dedication provide another level of insight into why ethical leadership behaviours may be important when managing employees in non-profit settings – and in what circumstances. Therefore, the findings of the present research suggest paying attention to how managers are perceived (e.g., in terms of their ethical leadership qualities) may represent an effective starting point intervention for improving employee well-being, specifically; work engagement and emotional exhaustion within non-profit organisations.

5.1 CONCEPTUAL AND PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTION

Our results lend support to the *invigoration perspective* proposed in the social identification literature (see Steffens et al., 2017). Strong social identification with a non-profit organisation might, in the absence of good self-regulation, lead dedicated employees to exhaust themselves for the good of their cause, but at the cost of their health. Our findings suggest that the adoption of an ethical leadership style by managers could reduce the negative impact and support coping of employees (Lu & Guy, 2014).

Our results furthermore suggest that ethical leadership behaviour may play a relevant role in promoting work engagement and reducing the risk of emotional exhaustion by building trust in student union settings. Managers in non-profit organisations, especially those under performance and financial pressures such as student unions, may reflect on how to reduce strains and help employees to pace themselves. This may also help to reduce the likelihood that employees in student unions report higher overtime than their counterparts in the UK's private sector (Almond & Kendall, 2006). In line with this, it may be important to assess job stressors. A decline in job dedication might be an early warning sign that the employee may be prone to more stress in the future.

Managers may wish to identify potential sources or causes of stress for the decline in dedication to ensure their

support is effective and they meet the expectations of their employees. In addition, higher work engagement from an ethical leader may also encourage employees to speak up and voice their concerns (Cheng et al., 2014). This can be very helpful as it might enable managers to assess whether low engagement and thus greater emotional exhaustion are outcomes of an imbalance between job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Managers may also be more effective leaders if they participate in team building and emphasize their role as part of the social group. This interaction may also enable them to notice those employees who are very committed but who are not managing their own health sufficiently. Being closer to the teams they are supporting may also enable managers to identify and address stress due to effort-reward imbalance (Siegrist, 1996; see also Stirling et al., 2011) that may arise when employees make significant efforts to support the non-profit organisation but the effort is not noticed, rewarded or acknowledged. Managers need to be able to identify early signs of over-commitment as this might trigger emotional exhaustion, and maybe even burnout (e.g., Steffens et al., 2014). Being good listeners and communicators is key for the ethical leader (Pierce, 2007). These skills may be a particularly important also for managers in non-profits as these organisations often rely on the good will of their employees.

A number of studies have noted that managerial resignations from non-profit organisations may be traced back to leadership and relationship issues with the board or chairpersons in non-profit organisations (e.g., Olinske & Hellman, 2017; Peters & Wolfred, 2001). Our findings suggest ethical leadership may be important as a means to support non-profit employee well-being and work engagement. Training programs for managers in student unions could incorporate a stronger leadership and ethics component (Brown et al., 2005) and help to identify ways to recognise dedication but also reduce the likelihood of exhaustion among employees.

5.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

A number of limitations exist. These concern the reliability and common-method variance inherent in self-report surveys (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Schwarz, 1999). Much of the literature about non-profit employees is based on self-reports (Leete, 2006). Future research should aim to utilize objective measures of well-being indicators rather than self-reports alone (e.g., by using HR records listing absence days or physiological indicators, Liu et al., 2010). Similarly, the high correlation between trust and ethical leadership suggests a significant conceptual overlap in some respects. It would be interested to consider additional components that may mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee outcomes to assess the robustness of the indirect effects when trust is substituted with another concept that may be affected by leadership as well (e.g., such as role identification or work centrality).

A second concern regards the difficulties that arose given the small, single cross-sectional sample and the lack of context information. The small number of participants from each student union did not allow for nested or multi-level modelling, unfortunately. However, if we had asked for role descriptions, tenure, the actual roles and responsibilities, it would have been relatively easy to identify individuals, a risk that we could not justify. While we invited only full-time employees to participate, it is potentially possible that elected officials participated without the researchers' knowledge. In addition, in order to maintain anonymity and the small number of participants from each student union, we were unable to assess whether or not individual employees in one and the same student union evaluated their managers similarly or not.

One final issue regards our assumption about causality. It is also possible for exhaustion to trigger less dedication, rather than the other way around. In addition, we did not obtain measures to assess the role and effect of peer and collegial support at work (see McMurray et al., 2012). As most student unions are relatively small and employ very few permanent employees, our results were based on cross-sectional information from employees working for a number of different student unions. As a consequence, the results may not generalize across all student union contexts and more work is required to assess the robustness of the results when these contextual variables are also taken into context.

More research on the *invigoration* and the *exhaustion perspective* (Steffens et al., 2017) is needed to better understand other potential leadership, self-regulation and support mechanisms behind employee well-being in non-profit settings. Future research in this area could consider the role of social identification on dedication in non-profit organisations while also examining managerial as well as social support. Especially given the evidence that non-profit employees seek meaningful, challenging work and learning opportunities (Macy, 2006; Onyx & Maclean, 1996), social identification may be particularly strong among these employees.

6 CONCLUSION

The findings in this study demonstrate that there is an association between good ethical leadership and increased employees' work engagement in student unions. This confirms the importance for non-profit organisations to establish ethical leadership in order to promote employees' work engagement. Our results also highlight the key role of trust as a contributing factor, particularly in maintaining employee wellbeing (Liu et al., 2010). More work in this area could be helpful as it may identify important lessons for non-profits on how to engage, retain and motivate employees within their non-profit organisations (see also O'Louglin, 2006; Stirling et al., 2011).

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