J Bus Ethics (2013) 115:33–44
DOI 10.1007/s10551-012-1373-8

Ethical Leadership and Subordinate Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Organizational Politics and the Moderating Role of Political Skill

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Received: 2 November 2011 / Accepted: 5 June 2012 / Published online: 16 June 2012

Abstract This paper posits that ethical leadership increases important organizational and individual outcomes by reducing politics in the workplace. Specifically, we propose that perceptions of organizational politics serve as a mechanism through which ethical leadership affects outcomes. We further argue that the modeled relationships are moderated by political skill. By means of data from 136 matched pairs of supervisors and subordinates employed by a state agency in the southern US, we found support for our predictions. Specifically, we found that perceptions of organizational politics fully mediated the relationship between perceptions of ethical leadership and helping and promotability ratings. In addition, political skill was found to moderate the direct and indirect effects.

Keywords Ethical leadership · Political skill · Organizational politics · Helping · Promotability ratings

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Much of the blame for the economic downturn occurring over the past several years has centered around organizations plagued by unethical leadership and behaviors. As a result, both managers and scholars have demonstrated a strong interest in promoting ethical behavior in organizations. This has been displayed through an increased emphasis on ethics in higher education as well as corporate codes of ethics (Avey et al. 2011; Brown and Mitchell 2010; Ruiz et al. 2011). Ethical leadership refers to the display of behaviors consistent with appropriate norms, which is visible through leader actions and relationships (Brown et al. 2005). Research focusing on ethical leadership has demonstrated its positive effects on prosocial behaviors (Mayer et al. 2010; Piccolo et al. 2010; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck 2009) as well as the negative effects that occur in the absence of ethical leadership (Mayer et al. 2010). Recently, researchers have noted the paucity of empirical work addressing the underlying processes that explain how ethical leadership affects outcomes (Brown and Trevino 2006b; Mayer et al. 2010). In response to this concern, we propose organizational politics as a key mediator in the ethical leadership–outcomes relationship.

Organizational politics have been defined as the use or exercise of power and involve activities that are undertaken with the intent of securing one's intended outcomes (Pfeffer 1992). While some researchers view the use of politics in a favorable light and see it as an effective way for work to be accomplished (Mintzberg 1983; Pfeffer 1992), others focus on the negative side of politics examining the numerous outcomes that occur for those who perceive high levels of politics in their organizations (e.g.,

Ferris and Kacmar 1992; Gandz and Murray 1980; Miller et al. 2008). It is the latter view that has received the most research attention. Specifically, this line of research has focused on identifying the negative outcomes associated with perceptions of politics (POP), defined as perceptions of individual behaviors that are not approved by formal authority and that have the potential to interfere with the achievement of organizational goals (Ferris et al. 2002).

Drawing on Brown and Trevino's (2006a) conceptualization of ethical leadership, we develop and test a model in which POP are positioned as a mediating variable through which ethical leadership affects outcomes (see Fig. 1). We posit that there is a negative relationship between ethical leadership and POP. This suggests that low levels of ethical leadership result in increased POP. Conversely, high levels of ethical leadership result in decreased POP. There also is a negative relationship between POP and our outcome variables of helping and promotability. The effects of high (low) levels of POP are decreased (increased) helping and promotability (i.e., supervisors' perceptions of the potential of their subordinates; Thacker and Wayne 1995).

While we believe that POP mediate the relationship between ethical leadership and key organizational outcomes, we also believe that this relationship will vary among individuals. Specifically, we propose that there are individuals who are better equipped to manage political environments: those who have political skill. Those with high levels of political skill possess social competencies that allow them to understand and influence others in order to accomplish both organizational and personal goals (Ferris et al. 2005a). As shown in Fig. 1, we suggest that political skill moderates these relationships because individuals with political skill have the ability to understand and shape their environment, and this weakens the negative outcomes normally associated with POP.

In developing our model, we draw on social learning theory (Bandura 1977) to explain how ethical leadership can encourage and support work environments free of politics (e.g., Brown and Trevino 2006a). The essence of social learning theory is that people learn by paying attention to the behaviors of attractive and credible role models, and subsequently imitate those observed behaviors. Brown et al. (2005) suggested that social learning theory is particularly well suited to the study of ethical leadership as individuals often look outside themselves for moral guidance. Moreover, in organizations where ethics can become clouded by a focus on the bottom line, leaders can provide clear communications regarding ethical behavior and set high ethical standards. They uphold these standards by punishing unethical behaviors and rewarding ethical behaviors. However, when leaders do not behave ethically, an environment is fostered in which politics may become prevalent. Hence, rewards may not always map to performance as leaders have the discretion to circumvent established rules and policies as they pursue their own self interest. In doing so, they may be conveying a message to followers that political behaviors are acceptable.

We then apply social exchange theory (e.g., Mayer et al. 2009; Rosen et al. 2009; Walumbwa et al. 2011) to our model and argue that the political environments enabled by those low in ethical leadership cause a violation of the implied employment contract under which subordinates expect to work. This violation creates a negative reciprocation reaction by subordinates. Behaviors designed to respond to the perceived social exchange violation could be demonstrated through subsequent negative behaviors such as reduced helping and promotability evidence. However, one drawback of social exchange theory is the inherent assumption that fairness perceptions are equally salient across all individuals (Thau et al. 2007). To overcome this limitation of social exchange theory, we use uncertainty management theory (UMT) as a secondary approach to help explain the moderating effects of political skill. UMT suggests that issues of fairness become more salient under conditions of uncertainty (Lind and Van den Bos 2002). Political skill provides individuals with the ability to manage the uncertainty that is an intrinsic part of political environments such that they are more likely to perceive a balanced social exchange.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we propose and test a theory driven model in which we posit POP as a potential mechanism for how ethical

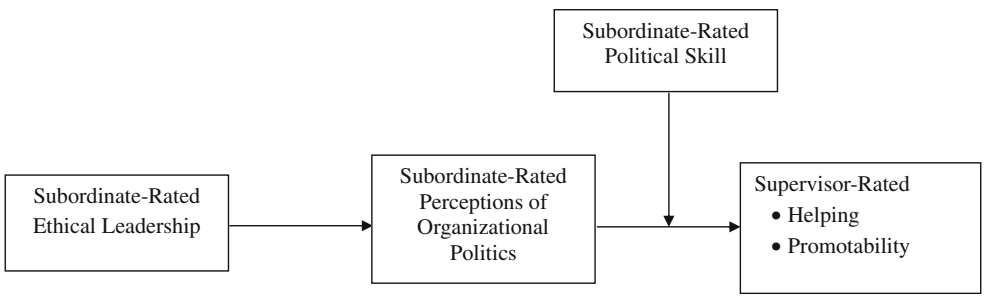

Fig. 1 Hypothesized model

leadership can affect individual and organizational outcomes. Expressly explicating a mechanism is a contribution as previous research addressing potential mediators of the ethical leadership–outcomes relationships is very limited (Mayer et al. 2010). A second contribution of this study is the application of UMT to explain a potential boundary condition of the translation of POP into negative outcomes. Specifically, we develop and test a theoretical model that suggests those who do not view politics as an obstacle, but rather as an opportunity, are less likely to experience the traditional negative outcomes associated with POP. Rather, they are able to skillfully manage the environment in which they work. By incorporating both a moderator and mediator in the ethical leadership–outcomes relationships, our model proposes a more complete picture of how ethical leadership affects the organization and those who are employed by it.

Theoretical Frameworks and Hypotheses

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (Bandura 1977) suggests individuals learn by focusing their attention on role models to determine the appropriate behaviors, values, and attitudes to display. In order for models to be effective, they must be legitimate, attractive, and credible (Brown et al. 2005). In organizations, effective models are those who hold high status, and possess the power to control rewards. According to social learning theory, employees can learn in two ways. First, similar to operant conditioning, learning can occur by direct experience of consequences. For example, a commissioned sales person may use high pressure sales tactics that result in higher sales volumes. The individual thus learns that this behavior results in a larger sales commission, and so elects to repeat these high pressure tactics with future customers. Learning also can occur vicariously which allows individuals to learn without directly experiencing consequences of their actions (Manz and Sims 1981). For example, an individual may witness a colleague being rewarded for implementing severe cost cutting measures that put employees at risk. Thus, the individual has learned the organization values profits over employee safety, and thus also implements additional risky cost cutting measures.

Once learning occurs, behavior is maintained to the extent that it is reinforced in the environment (Davis and Luthans 1980). An organization in which managers who violate the code of ethics are inconsistently punished may be encouraging higher levels of self serving or political behaviors. Managers and supervisors can learn when to use politics directly through experienced consequences as well as vicariously. When managers themselves have been rewarded in the past or have witnessed others being rewarded for non-sanctioned actions, the notion that political behaviors are an acceptable and possibly welcome part of their work environment is reinforced. Direct reports look to their supervisors for behavioral direction because leaders hold legitimate power and control resources. As suggested by social learning theory, employees take cues from their leaders regarding appropriate behavior in the workplace.

Ethical Leadership

Brown and Trevino (2006a) argued that ethical leadership largely influences followers' behaviors by establishing ethical standards and communicating them to employees. Leaders are considered ethical to the extent that their decisions are made for altruistic instead of selfish reasons (Brown et al. 2005). For example, ethical leaders treat their employees with respect and consideration. Further, they gain followers' trust to the extent that they reward normatively appropriate behavior and punish inappropriate behaviors (Brown et al. 2005).

Thus, work environments with strong ethical leaders are more likely to possess norms and policies that value and reward ethical conduct. Organizations characterized by strong ethical leaders are more likely to hold followers accountable and use discipline and punishments accordingly. Conversely, leaders who fail to punish unethical behaviors and apply rewards inconsistently may promote an environment that is conducive to political behaviors.

We contend that ethical leaders provide signals regarding whether organizational politics are acceptable. Ethical leaders make fair decisions and allocate resources based on policies which illustrate that their decisions cannot be manipulated by politics. These leaders may feel rather uncomfortable making decisions that are not guided by policies as unethical decisions are more obvious, especially to those harmed by the decisions. Thus, ethical leaders should reduce POP in the workplace. Alternatively, when the work environment is guided by unethical leaders, decisions may be made that benefit leaders themselves over the organization or others. Subordinates subsequently form judgments about the ethicality of their leaders by weighing their actions against what is morally acceptable (Tyler 1986). Employees may construe these self-serving behaviors as political and may then feel comfortable making their own decisions politically, rather than following appropriate norms and guidelines. Thus,

Hypothesis 1 Ethical leadership will be negatively related to subordinate ratings of POP.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory has often been used as an explanation for how individuals respond to positive treatment by the organization (Cropanzano and Byrne 2000). This idea originated with Blau (1964) who recognized that individuals have a social exchange relationship with the organization. This type of relationship is one in which the terms of the relationship between the individual and the organization are not clearly specified and remain informal. Under this exchange, individuals reciprocate positive treatment by the organization through task performance and extra role behaviors. Further, they trust that this hard work and effort will continue to be reciprocated by the organization (Molm et al. 2000; Moorman and Byrne 2005).

An underlying tenet of social exchange theory is the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960). Gouldner stated that the norm of reciprocity is universal and individuals are obligated to behave reciprocally. Hence, in order to maintain the exchange relationship, each party continues reciprocating and discharging obligations (Molm et al. 2007). According to Moorman and Byrne (2005), positive and expected allocation of rewards can be construed as a benefit which elicits an obligation to reciprocate.

Rosen et al. (2009) argued that the social context inherent in political environments conveys a message that the organization may be unable or unwilling to meet expected obligations because those engaging in political maneuvers put their own self interests first without regard for how these behaviors affect others. In such environments, individuals may form overall impressions that their promises or expectations will not be fulfilled. These impressions dilute the link between performance and rewards (Aryee et al. 2004). When individuals enter into relationships with an employer, they hold expectations about what they will receive in return for providing hard work and effort. Some may enter into the exchange anticipating future pay increases, opportunities, and/or promotions. To the extent these expectations are met, one might conclude the exchange relationship is equitable. Individuals may reciprocate by performing helping behaviors or performing their jobs so well that managers consider the job incumbents for promotions. However, the unpredictable nature of a political environment makes it difficult for employees to determine if their performance will result in desirable outcomes (Chang et al. 2009). If individuals invest their time and effort into the organization and the return is less than expected, the exchange relationship is inequitable. Individuals working under these conditions may elect to reciprocate in a negative manner (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005) and withhold citizenship behaviors and/or reduce performance.

Outcomes of POP

Helping

One dimension of organizational citizenship behavior (i.e., OCB) is helping. Helping behaviors refer to actions which fall outside of one's formal job responsibilities that contribute to organizational effectiveness (Smith et al. 1983). Examples of helping include assisting coworkers who have been absent, helping orient new employees to the organization, and helping those who have increased workloads. Much of the extant literature regarding helping relies on a social exchange framework (e.g., Cohen and Keren 2008; Lavelle et al. 2007; Moorman 1991). Applying social exchange theory, Witt et al. (2002) highlighted several reasons why POP may cause a violation of the social exchange relationship individuals have with the organization, and thus may discourage the performance of helping behaviors. First, political environments may be perceived as inequitable to the extent that some receive benefits as a result of political actions, while those who do not employ political behaviors do not receive benefits. They further argued that individuals would withhold OCB such as helping others because it would take away from their own ability to engage in more direct self-serving behaviors. Individuals in political environments would have an overriding focus on self promotion, thus leaving little time for helping others (Witt et al. 2002). Consistent with these views, we predict:

Hypothesis 2a POP will be negatively related to helping.

Promotability

Supervisor assessments of subordinate promotability are an important part of human resource management and succession planning (De Pater et al. 2009). When these decisions are made, supervisors are asked to predict whether employees would be able to perform at higher levels given existing information. Thus, research in the area of promotability has included assessments of areas outside of one's current job performance (De Pater et al. 2009). For example, Ferris and Judge (1991) suggested situational influences including ambiguous environments in which clear evaluation criteria do not exist may ultimately affect promotability ratings. They argued that in ambiguous environments, individuals have too few clues about which behaviors will create the impression of promotability. Social exchange theory suggests individuals will work hard in anticipation of future promotions. However, in political environments, promotions may be awarded on the basis of factors other than hard work. Thus, it is not surprising that extant research consistently indicates a negative

relationship between POP and performance (Kacmar et al. 1999; Kumar and Ghadially 1989; Vigoda 2000). For example, among a sample of public sector employees, Vigoda (2000) found those who perceived high POP engaged in higher levels of negligence with regard to their work tasks. Those who demonstrate negligence in the workplace would not be viewed as promotable. Therefore,

Hypothesis 2b POP will be negatively related to promotability.

Organizational Politics as a Mediator

While research addressing ethical leadership has demonstrated a wide variety of outcomes (Avey et al. 2011; Dadhich and Bhal 2008; Mayer et al. 2009; Neubert et al. 2009), very little research has examined or offered an explanation or mechanism by which ethical leadership leads to favorable outcomes. We suggest that POP may provide an explanation for the relationships between ethical leadership and these outcomes. In support of this contention, Vigoda-Gadot (2007) examined POP as a mediator in the transformational leadership–OCB relationship, and argued that transformational leaders use a transparent decision making process thereby reducing POP among workers. Additionally, POP have been found to mediate the relationships between organizational culture and additional employee effort and leader satisfaction (Toor and Ofori 2009). We contend that POP work in a similar manner in the ethical leadership–helping and ethical leadership–promotability relationships. Therefore,

Hypothesis 3 POP will mediate the relationships between ethical leadership and (a) helping and (b) promotability.

Political Skill

Politically skilled individuals are socially astute, and can adjust their behavior according to the situation (Ferris et al. 2007). Further, these individuals are able to adapt their behavior to those around them to appear sincere and genuine. Early organizational politics researchers viewed political skill as an essential asset to be effective (Mintzberg 1983; Pfeffer 1981). Ferris et al. (2005a) later more explicitly described the characteristics of politically skilled individuals, and how these individuals, at all levels throughout the organization, can influence others in order to achieve their own and/or organizational outcomes. Politically skilled individuals are able to capitalize on the opportunity to promote their own interests (Andrews et al. 2009; Harris et al. 2007) and are able to get things done. Those who are politically skilled are socially aware, are able to network with others effectively, can understand situations, and are able to adapt their actions appropriately in the workplace (Ferris et al. 2005a, b). Politically skilled individuals receive higher task and contextual performance ratings (Bing et al. 2011) and promotability ratings (Gentry et al. 2012). Finally, they manage interactions in ways which promote the accomplishment of organizational goals (Blass and Ferris 2007).

In an early framework of POP (Ferris et al. 1989), control and understanding were proposed as moderators of the POP–outcomes relationships. The model suggested that individuals would be less susceptible to the negative consequences of POP if they understood the political environment and/or had control over their environment. UMT holds that people have a need for predictability and are uncomfortable with uncertainty (Lind and Van den Bos 2002). Uncertainty affects individuals' perceptions and feelings and threatens their sense of self (Thau et al. 2009). They become worried about control in their lives and the potential outcomes that might result. Uncertainty has been associated with undesirable individual and organizational outcomes including stress, lower performance, and burnout. When uncertainty is high, UMT suggests that individuals may focus on ways to reduce the uncertainty, deal with the discomfort, and/or manage it effectively (Thau et al. 2009).

Political skill is one such variable that provides individuals with the ability to reduce uncertainty inherent in political environments. Further, it enables individuals to reduce the negative outcomes associated with uncertainty and enhance the associated positive outcomes. We suspect individuals high in political skill subscribe to the view that organizational politics are not negative (Mintzberg 1983) because they are able to control their environment and make it more predictable. These individuals view POP as an opportunity and as a legitimate way to accomplish their goals, thereby weakening the POP–outcomes relationship. However, individuals low in political skill do view politics negatively (e.g., Gandz and Murray 1980) because they are unable to control their environment and view it as more uncertain. Thus, low politically skilled individuals experience more uncertainty resulting in a stronger POP-outcomes link.

Hypothesis 4 Political skill will moderate the relationships between POP and (a) helping and (b) promotability such that the negative associations will be weaker under conditions of high political skill.

Integrating the logic associated with Hypotheses 3 and 4 produces a moderated-mediation framework in which POP is posited to mediate the relationships between ethical leadership and the two outcomes, and political skill moderates the POP-outcomes links. POP explain the relationships between ethical leadership and helping and

promotability (H3), but because the relationship between POP and helping and promotability is predicted to be weaker when political skill is higher (H4), we predict that the mediated relationships captured by Hypothesis 3 are weaker when political skill is higher. Stated formally:

Hypothesis 5 Political skill will moderate the indirect relationships between ethical leadership and (a) helping and (b) promotability such that the indirect effects of ethical leadership (through POP) will be weaker under conditions of high political skill.

Method

Procedure and Sample

Respondents were employees of a semi-autonomous branch of the state government responsible for handling statewide disease-related health issues (e.g., TB, HIV). We collected data over a 3-week period. To begin data collection, the director of the branch sent an email to all employees ($N = 209$) 1 week prior to beginning the data collection encouraging them to participate. In accordance with the proposal approved by both the state's and the university's Institutional Review Boards, this email described the purpose of the study, the fact that results would be confidential, and that participation was voluntary. Next, potential respondents received a personalized email from one of the researchers that again explained the study's goals, addressed how their confidentiality would be handled, and provided a link to the survey website. The email requested that the respondents follow the link and complete the survey on company time during the following month. Because data collected from the subordinates' supervisors were to be matched, respondents were required to include the name of their immediate supervisor on their surveys.

During the time the survey portal was open, we asked supervisors to provide ratings for our dependent variables. Specifically, supervisors rated each of their direct reports' promotability and helping. To help insure confidentiality, we asked the supervisors to complete ratings for all of their subordinates without knowing which, if any, of their subordinates had responded. The supervisors' survey was set up as a spreadsheet. Column headings were the names of subordinates. The items for the dependent variables appeared in the first column. The matrix design of the survey allowed supervisors to read an item and then rate each of their subordinates as they moved across the row. This design also allowed for easy comparisons among their subordinates. One of the authors went onsite to administer the pen-and-paper supervisor survey.

Our final sample size was 136 (64 % response rate). We arrived at this sample by eliminating surveys with missing data as well as those that could not be matched to a supervisor survey. The subordinate sample was 65 % female, had an average age of 44.98 years, an average job tenure of 4.39 years, and an average organizational tenure of 6.95 years. Fifty-one supervisors provided ratings for the 136 subordinates, resulting in an average of 2.67 ratings per supervisor. The supervisor sample was 56 % female, had an average age of 49.74 years, an average job tenure of 6.10 years, and an average organizational tenure of 8.99 years.

Measures

All of the survey items were responded to on a five-point Likert scale. Unless otherwise noted, the anchors for the items were strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Items in the scales were averaged to create an overall mean for each scale and coded such that high values represent high levels of the constructs.

Subordinate Measures

Perceptions of Organizational Politics Perceptions of organizational politics were measured by Hochwarter et al.'s (2003) six-item scale ($\alpha = 0.90$). A sample item is "There is a lot of self-serving behavior going on."

Political Skill We measured political skill by a six-item measure ($\alpha = 0.72$) developed by Ahearn et al. (2004). A sample item is "It is easy for me to develop good rapport with most people."

Ethical Leadership We measured perceptions of ethical leadership by Brown et al.'s (2005) 10-item scale ($\alpha = 0.94$). A sample item is "My supervisor disciplines employees who violate ethical standards."

Supervisor Measures

Promotability We measured the supervisor's perceptions of the promotability of their direct reports with four items ($\alpha = 0.88$). Three items came from the Thacker and Wayne (1995) promotability measure (e.g., "If I had to select a successor for my position, it would be this subordinate"), and one item ("I believe that this subordinate has high potential.") from the Harris et al. (2006) study was added to tap overall future promotability.

Helping We used Liden et al.'s (2004) three-item scale to measure co-worker helping behavior ($\alpha = 0.86$). A sample item is "This individual helps others when their work load

increases even though it may not be formally required by the job." The anchors on the five-point scale ranged from 1 (not at all characteristic) to 5 (very characteristic).

Analysis Approach

We tested the hypotheses by MacKinnon et al.'s (2002) regression framework for analyzing mediation models and Edwards and Lambert's (2007) extension of that framework to analyze mediation models that also specify moderating effects—in Edwards and Lambert's parlance, our model constitutes a *second stage moderation model*. This approach allowed us to examine the complete model depicted in Fig. 1 as well as the specific linkages associated with our hypotheses. Following the recommendations of Mooney and Duval (1993) and Shrout and Bolger (2002), we evaluated all effects by constructing bias-corrected confidence intervals by means of the bootstrapped estimates from 10,000 samples.

Results

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables in this study. As indicated, the correlations between POP and the outcome variables and the associations between ethical leadership and our consequences were significant and in the expected directions. Further, the correlation between POP and ethical leadership was negative and significant indicating that employees who perceived their work environment as political were more likely to view their supervisor as unethical.

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) on the scales used in our study to establish discriminant validity and confirm the expected factor structure of our scales. To conduct our CFAs, we used LISREL 8.80, a covariance matrix as input, and a maximum likelihood estimation. We estimated a 5-factor measurement model, with one factor representing each of our scales. Fit indices showed that the model fit the data ($X^2(367) = 465$, $p < 0.01$, CFI = 0.97; NNFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.04) and all of the standardized loadings were significant ($p < 0.01$). Next, we estimated several alternative nested models to compare to our measurement model based on the highest correlations in Table 1. The first combined the ethical leadership and POP scales into one factor creating a four-factor model. The fit for this model ($X^2(371) = 1{,}006$, $p < 0.01$, CFI = 0.92, NNFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.11) was not as strong as the measurement model and the Chi-square difference test was significant ($X^2_{\text{diff}}(4) = 541$, $p < 0.01$) demonstrating discriminant validity for these two scales. The second alternative model combined the promotability and helping scales into one factor creating a four-factor model. The fit for this model ($X^2(371) = 506$, $p < 0.01$, CFI = 0.96, NNFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05) was not as strong as the measurement model and the Chi-square difference test was significant ($X^2_{\text{diff}}(4) = 41$, $p < 0.01$) demonstrating discriminant validity for these two scales. The final alternative model combined all of the scales from the subordinates in one factor and all of the scales from the supervisor in one factor. The fit for this two-factor model ($X^2(376) = 1219$, $p < 0.01$, CFI = 0.89, NNFI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.13) was not as strong as the measurement model and the Chi-square difference test was significant ($X^2_{\text{diff}}(9) = 754$, $p < 0.01$) demonstrating that the source of the data for the scales is not a significant factor in our results.

To further explore the discriminant validity of these scales, we followed the procedure outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981) by calculating the square root of the average variance explained for each of the scales in our study. This value represents the variance accounted for by the items that compose the scale. We present these values on the diagonal in Table 1. To demonstrate discriminant validity, this value must exceed the corresponding latent variable correlations in the same row and column. If this

Table 1 Correlations, means, and standard deviations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Subordinate scales							
1. Perceptions of organizational politics	2.77	0.91	**0.78**				
2. Ethical leadership	3.99	0.71	−0.52***	**0.78**			
3. Political skill	4.00	0.51	−0.17 *	0.27**	**0.54**		
Supervisor scales							
4. Helping	4.03	0.77	−0.27**	0.28**	0.03	**0.75**	
5. Promotability	3.47	0.86	−0.36***	0.38***	0.05	0.56***	**0.71**

Listwise $N = 136$. Values on the diagonal are the square root of the average variance explained which must be larger than all zero-order correlations in the row and column in which they appear to demonstrate discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981)

* $p < 05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

condition is met, the variance shared between any two constructs (i.e., the correlation) is less than the average variance explained by the items that compose the scale which demonstrates discriminant validity. As shown in Table 1, this condition is met for all of our scales.

We tested the hypotheses by regressing (1) POP on ethical leadership and (2) the dependent variables on ethical leadership, POP, political skill, and an interaction term consisting of the POP × political skill cross-product. The regression results, which are presented in Table 2, show that these equations explained 26 % of the variance in POP ($p < 0.01$), 14 % ($p < 0.01$) of the variance in helping, and 22 % ($p < 0.01$) of the variance in promotability. The first column of Table 2 shows that ethical leadership negatively predicted POP ($b = -0.66$, $p < 0.01$). The significant beta demonstrates support for Hypothesis 1. Hypotheses 2a and 2b predicted POP would be negatively related to helping and promotability. As seen in the second and third columns in Table 2, both of these main effects were significant and in the direction expected: organizational politics negatively predicted helping ($b = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$) and promotability ($b = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$). These significant betas demonstrate support for Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b predicted POP would mediate the relationships between ethical leadership and the two outcome variables explored in this study, helping and promotability. The indirect effects of ethical leadership on helping and promotability consist of the product of the effects associated with the tests of H1 and H2a and H2b, respectively. These values are $-0.66 \times -0.17 = 0.11$ for helping and $-0.66 \times -0.24 = 0.16$ for promotability. To test the significance of the indirect effects that we calculated, we created bias-corrected 95 % confidence intervals for these estimates. Neither of the confidence intervals contained zero, suggesting that ethical leadership was indirectly associated with helping and with promotability. Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported.

The final row in Table 2 shows that after controlling the main effects of POP, political skill, and ethical leadership, the POP x political skill interaction term explained significant incremental variance in helping ($p < 0.01$) and promotability ($p < 0.01$). To confirm that the form of these interactions aligned with our predictions, we graphed our results (see Fig. 2). As these graphs demonstrate, when political skill was lower, POP negatively predicted helping (simple slope $= -0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and promotability (simple slope $= -0.38$, $p < 0.01$). When political skill was higher, POP was unrelated to helping (simple slope $= -0.05$, n.s.) and promotability (simple slope $= -0.11$, n.s.). Hypotheses 4a and 4b were supported.

We tested the moderated indirect effect hypotheses (H5a and H5b) by means of Edwards and Lambert's (2007) procedures for examining second-stage moderation effects. Table 3 summarizes the results of the moderated indirect effect calculations. These results show that the indirect effect of ethical leadership on the dependent variables (through POP) was significant at lower levels of political skill for helping ($\rho = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$) and for promotability ($\rho = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), but not at higher levels of political skill for helping ($\rho = 0.03$, n.s.) or for promotability ($\rho = 0.07$, n.s.). The graphical depictions of the moderated indirect effects, shown in Fig. 3, provide support for our hypotheses. Consistent with Hypotheses 5a and 5b, respectively, the indirect effect of ethical leadership on helping and promotability was stronger when political skill was lower.

Table 2 Regression results for perceptions of organizational politics, promotability, and helping

	POP	Promotability	Helping
Ethical leadership	−0.66**	0.30*	0.17
POP		−0.24**	−0.17*
Political skill		0.04	0.08
POP × political skill		0.27*	0.23*
Equation R^2	0.26**	0.22**	0.14**

$N = 136$. Tabled values are unstandardized regression coefficients

POP perceptions of organizational politics

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Discussion

In this paper, we argued that POP are one mechanism through which ethical leadership impacts outcomes. Using the tenets of social learning (Bandura 1977) and social exchange theories as guides (Blau 1964), we posited that one of the implicit expectations of employees is an ethical workplace. Organizations that fail to provide ethical leadership may in fact induce a political work environment. Leaders who are viewed as unethical by their subordinates run the risk of decreasing the positive reciprocity obligation (i.e., a downturn in helping and hard work that leads to promotability) due to an increase in POP. However, we also demonstrated that these results are contingent upon the level of political skill possessed by the subordinate. Subordinates with high levels of political skill do not view a political environment as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to utilize their skills. By means of uncertainly management theory, we argued that politically skilled individuals are able to use their skills to make an uncertain environment seem less uncertain, by providing them the power to understand and control their environment. A significant moderating effect of political skill was found for both the direct and indirect effects outlined in our model.

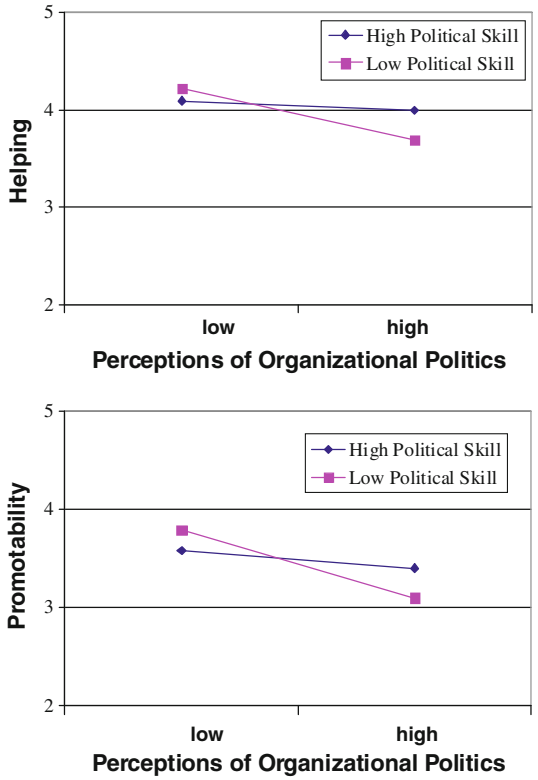

Fig. 2 Moderating effect of political skill on the relationship between POP and promotability and helping

Table 3 Indirect effects of ethical leadership on dependent variables (through POP) at low and high levels of political skill

	Promotability	Helping
Low political skill	0.25**	0.19*
High political skill	0.07	0.03
Difference	0.18*	0.16*
Hypothesis	H5b	H5a

Indirect effects refer to the indirect effects of ethical leadership on dependent variables through POP. All effects were tested for significance by means of bias-corrected confidence intervals from 10,000 bootstrapped samples. Difference refers to the absolute value of the difference of the effects (direct or indirect) at high and low levels of political skill

POP perceptions of organizational politics

Our findings contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, our findings mesh with and extend previous theoretical and empirical research efforts. We found that perceptions of unethical leadership trigger individuals' POP. Thus, supervisors' failure to behave ethically increased employee POP. In turn, these individuals reduced their helping behaviors as well as actions that might have caused their supervisors to rate them as promotable. The ethical tone of supervisors' direct or indirect actions set the stage for politics thereby reducing favorable responses from employees. Previous studies have shown the associations between ethical leadership and consequences, but less is known about the intermediary mechanisms that translate ethical leadership to positive outcomes. Our results revealed that POP, a previously unexamined mediator, served as an explanatory mechanism between ethical leadership and subordinate outcomes.

Second, our results demonstrate the usefulness of political skill as a means of neutralizing expected negative outcomes in political work environments. Subordinates who possess political skill see past negative workplace environments and focus on their goals. Individuals who possess political skill most likely view the political work environment in the same way Mintzberg (1983) and Pfeffer (1981) did: as a necessary requirement to get things done.

Finally, our study contributes to the literature by integrating UMT with social exchange theory. While social exchange theory allowed us to explain the main effects between ethical leadership and the outcomes of interest, it failed to provide an explanation for the moderating effect of political skill. For this, we turned to UMT. The tenets of UMT indicate that people crave predictability and are uncomfortable with uncertainty (Lind and Van den Bos 2002). When uncertainty arises, individuals feel threatened and worried and look for ways to manage their discomfort (Thau et al. 2009). We argued that these feelings would be stronger for those who lacked political skill as they are less able to manage the uncertainty in a political work environment than those with political skill. Dovetailing UMT and social exchange theory provided us the opportunity to propose and test a more complex and realistic picture of the workplace.

Limitations and Strengths

There are limitations of this study that need to be acknowledged. The first is our sample. All of our data came from one organization, which limits the generalizability of our findings. In addition, the organization from which the data were collected was a governmental agency. Research has shown differences between government run organizations and private organizations (e.g., those owned by shareholders) (Boyne 2002). For example, private organizations have more flexibility when hiring and firing employees than governmental agencies, but governmental employees pay for this benefit through lower salaries. Another limitation is the specific OCB measure used; helping. As Organ et al. (2006) noted, almost thirty different sub-dimensions of citizenship behavior have been identified in the literature. Thus, it is unclear whether other forms of OCB would work similarly. Future research incorporating a broader range of citizenship behavior dimensions is necessary to address this limitation. Finally, although we included two outcomes, some may view

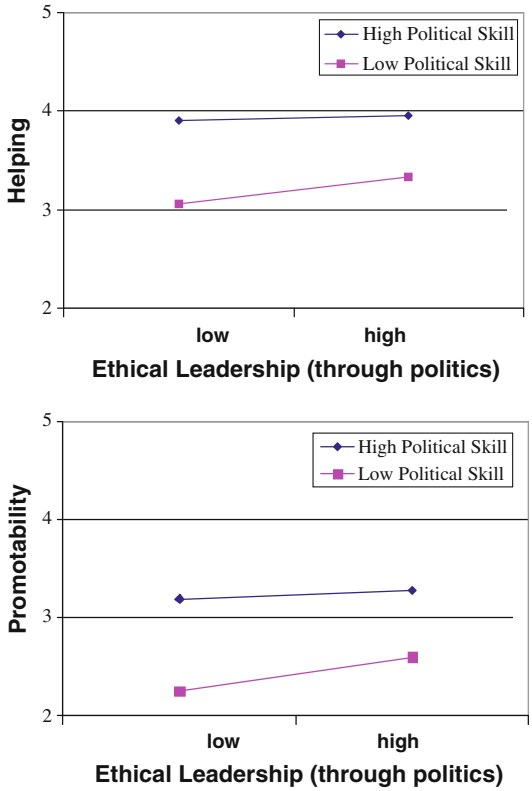

Fig. 3 Indirect effect of ethical leadership on promotability and helping (through POP) at high and low levels of political skill

the fact that we only incorporated a sample of the potential outcomes that could be included as a limitation. Thus, expanding the model to include other variables that have been connected to POP is an important next step.

In addition to these limitations, the study also had strengths. One strength is the fact that we collected data for the predictors and criterion variables from different sources. Employing such a design helps mitigate the potential for common method variance (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Another strength lies in our use of validated scales for our focal constructs. More faith can be placed in the relationships uncovered because the constructs were measured reliably and validly. It also is important to note that the analyses we conducted are state of the art. The Edwards and Lambert (2007) approach allows for a test of the mediating effect of each component of the model as well as moderation of the entire mediating effect. Using this analysis technique provided us an opportunity to test a complex set of relationships that better reflect reality by involving joint and varied associations between these variables (Johns 2006).

Implications for Practice

Our findings suggest several possible implications for organizations to consider. First, it may be advisable for organizations to take political skill into consideration when staffing (Ferris et al. 2005a, b) given the buffering effect it has on negative outcomes typically associated with POP. Politically skilled individuals are better able to navigate political environments which may make them effective members of the organization. Further, certain departments and divisions may be more or less political, and managers should be aware that a mismatch between the POP and political skill levels of employees could result in negative outcomes. It also may be possible to teach specific tactics (e.g., networking skills) to help those with lower levels of political skill enjoy the benefits of possessing higher levels (Ferris et al. 2005a, b). For example, Blass and Ferris (2007) suggested that political skill is among the most important skills learned from mentors in the organization for developing leaders. Another consistent finding put forth in the literature and reconfirmed by our study is the fact that, in general, perceptions of organizational politics lead to negative outcomes. Thus, taking steps such as implementing and using fair policies and procedures may limit the POP behavior by employees. Finally, ethical leadership has been found to produce positive outcomes for organizations (Brown and Trevino 2006a). However, our study indicated that these outcomes may occur by reducing POP. Conversely, a lack of ethical leadership may increase POP thereby undermining these positive effects. Therefore, we suggest conducting audits to monitor the ethical and political perceptions of employees and reminding leaders that being an ethical leader and setting the tone at the top can help minimize POP in their workplaces and enhance citizenship. Additionally, when making decisions about who should be promoted to leadership positions, the ethics of individuals need to be weighed along with other important criteria. Although technical expertise and job experience are important criteria, an employee's ethics (which would shape their ethical leadership if promoted) should not be dismissed as ethical leadership impacts subordinate outcomes.

Future Research

Our findings highlight a variety of future avenues for research. First, while POP proved to be a useful mediator in our model, there are other constructs that could serve in this role. For example, various forms of justice also may serve as mediators. An absence of ethical leadership may decrease feelings of procedural and distributive justice which may lead to individuals trying to rebalance the relationship by engaging in negative behaviors (i.e., deviance) or withholding potentially useful behaviors (e.g., OCBs). Unethical leaders also may affect outcomes by reducing interactional justice.

Another new path for researchers to consider is incorporating additional moderators. Political skill served as a buffer

for the negative outcomes associated with POP because those who possess it better understand and can influence the work environment. Other personality characteristics may play a similar role. Core self-evaluation, which represents fundamental evaluations that people form concerning themselves, other people, and the world in general (Judge and Bono 2001), is one such trait. Individuals with high core self-evaluations are internally motivated to succeed and readily find ways of doing so (Judge et al. 1998). Such individuals may be able to shut out threatening work environments in order to stay focused on their goals.

In conclusion, this study provides theoretical and empirical support for POP as a mediator of the ethical leadership–outcomes relationships and political skill as a moderator of these relationships. Ethical leadership goes hand in hand with reducing POP in the workplace. Ethical leaders serve as important role models and set and reinforce the behavioral norms that help to establish and guide corporate cultures. By focusing on enhancing workplace ethics, organizations can make improvements in important outcomes that benefit both the organization and the individual.

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