



Ethical leadership and remote work; The mediating role of job autonomy, self-efficacy, and a benevolent ethical climate

Liderazgo ético y teletrabajo; el rol mediador de la autonomía laboral, la autoeficacia y un clima ético benevolente

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Received January 23, 2024; accepted April 4, 2024
Available online April 11, 2024

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine how ethical leadership influences telework and whether job autonomy, self-efficacy, and a benevolent ethical climate explain this association. The object of the investigation is the Colombian Electricity Sector. The sample is made up of 273 men and 175 women with university studies, the statistical analysis is carried out through a multiple mediation process. The results show that ethical leadership is proactively related to the potential benefits of teleworking through the causal effect of the three mediating variables. The ethical leader transfers confidence, balance, and support, which affects the follower's ability to use their criteria autonomously and face obstacles with high self-efficacy. Likewise, when the ethical leader progresses through a climate that takes interest in the group as the highest consideration, it is easy for, in addition to limiting work stress, to significantly influence the work/family axis, gender equality, retention of key personnel or in the reduction of work absenteeism, which are some potential benefits associated with teleworking. In conclusion, efficient self-management when coupled with a habitat of moral conduct that takes into account group interests and social responsibility adjusts the ethical leader with the advantages of a virtual work environment.

JEL Code: M10, J01, J20, J21, J24

Keywords: ethical leadership; work autonomy; self-efficacy; benevolent ethical climate; teleworking; ethics

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Peer Review under the responsibility of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Resumen

El propósito de este estudio es determinar cómo el liderazgo ético influye sobre el teletrabajo y si la autonomía laboral, la autoeficacia y un clima ético benevolente explican esta asociación. El objeto de la investigación es el Sector Eléctrico Colombiano. La muestra está constituida por 273 hombres y 175 mujeres con estudios universitarios, el análisis estadístico se realiza a través de un proceso de mediación múltiple. Los resultados muestran que el liderazgo ético se relaciona proactivamente con los beneficios potenciales del teletrabajo a través del efecto causal de las tres variables mediadoras. El líder ético transfiere confianza, equilibrio y apoyo lo que repercute en la capacidad del seguidor para utilizar sus criterios de forma autónoma y afrontar obstáculos con una alta autoeficacia. Asimismo, el líder ético cuando progresa a través de un clima que tiene como máxima consideración el interés por el grupo es fácil que, además de limitar el estrés laboral, influya significativamente en el eje trabajo/familia, en la igualdad de género, en la retención del personal clave o en la reducción del absentismo laboral que son algunos beneficios potenciales asociados al teletrabajo. En conclusión, la autogestión eficiente cuando se une con un hábitat de conductas morales que tiene en cuenta los intereses de grupo y la responsabilidad social ajusta al líder ético con las ventajas de un entorno virtual de trabajo.

Código JEL: M10, J01, J20, J21, J24

Palabras clave: liderazgo ético; autonomía laboral; autoeficacia; clima ético benevolente; teletrabajo; ética

Introduction

Colombia is experiencing a highly volatile situation where inflation has been the highest in the last twenty-two years. New governmental expectations, energy transition, and aggressive domestic policies have generated a deep uncertainty that has weakened the country's economy. In addition, social complexity, marked by informal labor and increased violence, shapes an ambiguous future that forces organizations to seek answers through ethical management, which is absolutely necessary. Leadership conducted with credible behavior is probably the right one to face a stage where remote work will remain a critical option (Martin et al., 2022). State policies promoted since 2022 seek to move the country away from coal, oil, and gas in favor of totally clean energy, involving an investment of close to 34 billion dollars.

Given the above, the Colombian Electricity Sector is disoriented because it does not know its real role in all this transformation and if remote work will be the best form of labor management to face challenges that must be supported by ethical conduct.

In this phase, the leader acquires a primary role in organizational ethical circulation and cultivating moral principles beyond the strictly institutional framework (Wen et al., 2021). Therefore, ethical leadership, characterized by preserving the rights of its followers, is ideal for influencing policies that can improve the Electricity Sector's self-esteem and sense of responsibility concerning the country's social needs (Páez & Salgado, 2016). Accepting personal capabilities (self-esteem) is a regulating element

of the job climate since it is key to successfully facing certain stressful situations in a framework of ethical commitment.

A person with low self-confidence can hardly face an ethical conflict without surrendering to the contextual pressures of a constantly changing sector and its social outlook. Therefore, the employee needs to focus their energy on the changes required by the community through a climate of trust and acceptance in which values, both personal and institutional, have the same direction, and thus make it possible to give special value to equality, autonomy, and respect for people's welfare (Santiago-Torner & Rojas-Espinosa, 2021).

On the other hand, the Colombian Electricity Sector has promoted an initiative since 2015 that seeks to address the main weaknesses found in Principle 10 of the United Nations Global Compact. Among them, it highlights an ethical leadership style that promotes all institutional criteria to neutralize bribery through risk maps, control of assets laundering, or prevention of restrictions on free competition.

The ninth ethics forum of the Colombian Electricity Sector in May 2021 highlighted the need to make meaningful changes in three directions: a) select people based on criteria of moral integrity, b) ensure that leadership and ethical climates are the priority lines along which the entire electricity industry of the country moves and grows, and c) evaluate whether the ethical leader, by their characteristics, can enhance remote work and its associated benefits.

The Colombian Electricity Sector is unique because its workforce comprises highly educated professionals. This theoretical competitive advantage can be key to adapting to a virtual work environment. Decentralized work alternatives seek employees who are sufficiently autonomous to amplify their strengths. The highly educated employee usually faces complex tasks requiring independence to streamline processes and make technical knowledge a differential factor.

The ethical leader is important and differs from other leadership styles by displaying normatively appropriate behavior through personal actions and inter-individual relations (Brown, 2005) that can boost the individual capabilities of professionals with a strong academic background. The ethical leader communicates with the follower, seeking to build a climate of emotional safety based on democratic behaviors and relationships of trust that lessen any pressure to expedite processes without the indispensable ethical accountability. Psychological security is an emotional state in which employees affirm their confidence levels. This positive context allows the employee to have the freedom to offer different points of view, admit mistakes, and assume that discrepancy is part of personal growth. Psychological safety enhances empathetic relations by reducing the fear of understanding and sharing feelings with others.

Compassion is also closely related to empathy as it intentionally seeks to reduce human suffering through closeness and support in difficult situations. The ethical leader is key in all these processes

(Mahsud et al., 2010). In addition, the ethical leader intentionally promotes moral principles by becoming a credible and achievable role model (Aftab et al., 2022). Therefore, the influence of the ethical leader may be more visible in professionals who, because of their training, are more open to building their emotional competencies through a certain freedom to make decisions.

The ethical leader transfers much of the importance of the productive process to the follower, delegating the necessary self-management capacity in virtual work environments (Lyttelton et al., 2020). This type of leadership influences and energizes the job climate with methods based on credibility, caring relations, fair treatment, and integrity (Babalola et al., 2018). Therefore, this positively impacts remote work by giving the follower a leading role in carrying out their competencies in an autonomous environment where it is possible to perfect their performance (Shafique et al., 2019). At the same time, it avoids excessive emotional regulation of the follower by favoring honest interaction and two-way feedback that stops possible burnout associated with the demands of remote work (Lee et al., 2021).

Given the above, ethical leadership helps safeguard follower resources by decreasing staff turnover intentions or absenteeism (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Raftar-Ozery, 2018).

Similarly, some variables facilitate the relation between ethical leadership and remote work. That is, they explain in detail how and why their association occurs. Specifically, this study focuses on three mediating elements: job autonomy, self-efficacy, and a benevolent ethical job climate.

The ethical leader motivates the follower to explore their job's configuration and propose a reorganization where they can progress naturally and completely autonomously (Santiago Torner, 2022a). Being autonomous strongly impacts the follower's positive attitude, which reduces stress, increases commitment, and improves performance (Ilyas et al., 2020). Thus, non-dependence on external control results in higher self-efficacy (Kang & Zhang, 2020). Autonomy and self-efficacy, linked to a perceived contextual factor such as an ethical climate, favor bonds of trust and reaffirm the follower's moral values (Li et al., 2022).

Ethical leadership restructures the achievements and disappointments of the employees in such a way that it turns them into a source of learning and self-confidence. Therefore, self-confidence and confidence in the environment motivate the employees and change their perception of self-efficacy, making it easier for them to be more constant and competent when facing new challenges (Aftab et al., 2022). Self-efficacy acts on the employee as a tool for good management, and that ability is essential in remote work (Mihalca et al., 2021). Finally, self-efficacy, in addition to suggesting individual stances, is also aligned with the follower's learned behavior and beliefs; therefore, self-efficacy, ethical leadership, and the climate surrounding them share specific traits and shape part of the employee's integrity (Wen et al., 2021).

The manager's ethical stance is crucial in maintaining a moral climate for the organization's members (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). Naturally, one of the main functions of the ethical leader is to influence the follower. To this end, both social responsibility and institutional image are decisive from the point of view of transparent leadership (Javed et al., 2018). Therefore, the attitude of the ethical leader promotes a culture that supports and encourages moral behaviors (Shafique et al., 2019).

Hence, an ethical climate becomes a competitive advantage and is part of sustainable organizational advancement (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). A work environment defined through moral attitudes and a predominant psychological perception of ethical content constitute the sociocultural structure of a fair, honorable, and benevolent job climate (Teng et al., 2020). Moreover, remote work aims not only at a better work-life balance but also at a sustainable environment and inclusion of vulnerable people (Dima et al., 2019). Consequently, it has strong implications for group interest or corporate social responsibility, such as a benevolent ethical climate (Gates et al., 2021; Kimata & Takahashi, 2022).

As previously explained, the analyzed topic was born during the annual conferences held by the Colombian Electricity Sector, specifically in the ethical transparency forum in May 2021. This initiative, undertaken by electricity companies and institutions, seeks to fight corruption from and for the Colombian Electricity Sector. In this regard, there are doubts about the influence of ethical management within a virtual work environment and what factors can dynamize this relation. Therefore, this study aims to identify how an ethical leadership style is related, in terms of possible advantages, to remote work and its benefits. For this purpose, three mediating constructs are used: job autonomy, self-efficacy, and a benevolent ethical climate.

This research aims to fill multiple knowledge gaps and is original from several points of view. First, the role of leadership within a virtual work environment (E-Leadership) is a little-analyzed issue (Contreras et al., 2020). Only Lee (2009) evaluates ethical leadership within an online work context (E-ethical leadership). Secondly, the link between ethical leadership and job autonomy (Dhar, 2016), self-efficacy (Ilyas et al., 2020) or ethical climate (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015) have been studied; nevertheless, a conceptual model that integrates the three variables and explains in a meaningful way the relation between the ethical leader and the benefits associated with remote work is original, which may represent an important advance to understand how ethical leadership is related to the theoretical benefits of remote work and under what circumstances it is more effective.

Theoretical framework

Ethical leadership and remote work

Some authors suggest that the combination of integrity, ethical standards, and fair treatment of employees are the cornerstones of ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005). The proposal of this management style intentionally seeks ethical behavior leading to shared responsibility, which in some ways distances it from other initiatives such as, for example, servant, spiritual, or authentic leadership. Nevertheless, the conceptual outline of an ethical leader includes different values that may be relevant and possibly have not been carefully considered. For example, principles and convictions such as altruism, compassion, honesty, fairness, service, justice, and understanding are probably not adequately measured, which generates theoretical confusion and strongly limits their exact conceptualization.

The notion of ethics associated with leadership began in the late 1960s through Raymond Baumhart's (1969) descriptive study of the moral behavior of managers. Nevertheless, despite their limitations, the ethical leader tends to be concerned about the welfare and self-development of their followers. In this respect, remote work presents diverse alternatives for employees to balance their professional and personal lives while optimizing their temporal and spatial adaptability (Martin et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the ethical leader needs to influence the follower from a moral behavior perspective for the reciprocal relation established by remote work to be effective (Wen et al., 2021).

The ethical leader considers the employees and preserves their rights and the legal framework that protects them (Markey et al., 2021). Therefore, the follower becomes aware of the value of the work itself and of the leader's sincere interest in improving their living conditions, which translates into greater responsibility and a shared sense of a work context that is fair, honorable, and marked by relations of trust (Lyttelton et al., 2020). Indeed, the natural framework provided by remote work enhances the characteristics of the ethical leader inclined to convey to the follower a strong sense of autonomy and genuine communication that favorably adjusts both performance and engagement (Shafique et al., 2019). In addition, ethical leadership tends to resolve some disadvantages associated with remote work, such as lack of support or fragility in cooperative work (Wen et al., 2021).

Of course, the ethical leadership style is oriented toward cohesion through a benevolent and moral treatment that encourages mutual trust within a work team. It seeks an affinity between results and collective well-being (Özsungur, 2020). Finally, the ethical leader influences and supports the follower through horizontal communication. Of course, empathetic and effective communication mitigates unwanted effects of remote work, such as isolation, and becomes an effective transmitter of ethical values (Babalola et al., 2018). Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Ethical leadership is significantly associated with the potential benefits of remote work.

Ethical leadership, job autonomy, self-efficacy, and remote work

Ethical leadership seeks to provide the follower with the greatest number of opportunities to explore and optimally design their job (Shafique et al., 2019). The ethical leader empowers the employee to decide how to approach most tasks autonomously, facilitating responsible behavior (Dhar, 2016). The ethical leader conveys corporate indicators through principles and expectations, consolidating the employee's competence and developing an autonomous sense of control that allows them to use their own judgment (Kalshoven et al., 2013).

Therefore, the ethical leader builds a framework of options so the follower can autonomously and voluntarily define the most viable work activities to achieve organizational objectives (Liu et al., 2020). In addition, the ethical leader places something as valuable as their trust in the follower, strengthening the leader/member relation and actively impacting non-traditional margins of autonomy. Of course, trust is the key element that harmonizes relations within a virtual work context (Contreras et al., 2020).

Similarly, ethical leadership orients the followers' positive attitudes toward daily tasks so they can incorporate their achievements and disappointments as a source of growth and self-confidence (Ashfaq et al., 2021). Identifying behaviors and emotions strengthens the individual and allows them to transform fragile behaviors into states of mind that reaffirm their confidence to achieve the desired goals (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Confidence naturally transfers to the follower the adaptive and reactive competencies needed to face obstacles with high self-efficacy (Ilyas et al., 2020).

Generally, the ethical leader transfers feelings of balance, support, and respect that induce greater commitment in the follower, which tends to provoke optimistic and efficient responses (Aftab et al., 2022). Therefore, self-efficacy becomes an indispensable resource, and more so in virtual work environments, which influences employee well-being through resilient attitudes that enable them to address workloads without burnout successfully (Mihalca et al., 2021). Furthermore, Ilyas et al. (2020), relying on the social learning theory updated by Bandura et al. (2001), consider that the ethical leader acts as a contextual factor that helps to adjust the follower's self-efficacy.

Because of the above, the ethical leader stimulates self-esteem, dynamic attitudes, and moral focus through a value-based identity that enables followers to be more self-effective in a setting, such as remote work, characterized by high autonomy (Aftab et al., 2022). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are put forward:

Hypothesis 2: Job autonomy significantly mediates the relation between ethical leadership and the potential benefits of remote work.

Hypothesis 3: Self-efficacy significantly mediates the association between ethical leadership and the potential benefits of remote work.

Ethical leadership, benevolent ethical climate, and remote work

Social responsibility has become a business necessity that links corporate identity with transparency in management (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). Therefore, the values associated with the ethical leader are critical to building a work environment that positively influences organizational members through moral perspectives (Markey et al., 2021). Recent studies demonstrate the positive effect of ethical leadership on prosocial behaviors (Arshad et al., 2021).

Practically speaking, the main function of ethical leadership is to be able to transcend; that is, to have the ability to manage effective changes with individual actions and bonds of trust that become inspiring models for the employee (Brown et al., 2005). Of course, ethical leadership plays a central role when an organization wants to develop a culture in which its policies and values are based on standards of rectitude and integrity (Shafique et al., 2019). An ethical work climate becomes possible when the employee perceives a meaningful and persistent moral disposition in organizational methods and practices (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). From this point of view, the ethical leader is an indispensable condition for an organization to develop through moral models. Nevertheless, the social and cultural habitat and the organizational structure are other factors in constructing an ethical climate (Victor & Cullen, 1988).

Ethical climates are constituted through dimensions that may or may not be compatible with ethical leadership. For example, the principled ethical climate is guided by personal ethics and rules and procedures such as the current legal system. In contrast, the selfish ethical climate tends to make decisions without considering the consequences; it prioritizes personal and corporate interests above all other considerations. Therefore, the Colombian Electricity Sector, which is essentially supportive, focuses on a benevolent ethical climate. This type of climate prioritizes concern for others through a strong corporate social responsibility akin to ethical leadership and individual care that pursues remote work from the outset (Contreras et al., 2020).

Therefore, the ethical leader becomes an institutional indicator emitting constant signals as interpretative filters, which help to disseminate policies and procedures that establish ethical conduct in the organization (Ouakouak et al., 2020). Specifically, the ethical leader influences from a solidarity perspective, with a clear concern for the welfare of followers and all society members (Blome & Paulraj, 2013). For that reason, the ethical leader acts as an ideological authority that seeks to understand the

effects of organizational behavior through benevolence; that is, they analyze the consequences and not the intentions (Ilyas et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a clear affinity between the characteristics of an ethical leader and a benevolent climate (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015).

At the same time, ethical leadership, a benevolent climate, and remote work converge from different points of view. To this end, ethical leadership is personal and social; consequently, it establishes close relations with the follower, which has a meaningful effect on their psychological safety (Markey et al., 2021). In addition, the ethical leader encourages bonds of trust through friendship in the workplace, which is also an essential part of a benevolent ethical climate (Kimata & Takahashi, 2022). Likewise, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work has entrenched work-friendship relations with a clear identification of employees with an unstable context and its effect on each of the family groups that make up organizations (Gates et al., 2021).

On the other hand, a benevolent ethical climate encourages voluntary social responsibility initiatives because it is centered on the community and its interests (Blome & Paulraj, 2013). To this effect, the leader's ethical stance significantly influences the subordinate's perception of social responsibility. Indeed, the ethical leader frequently engages in socially responsible institutional activities (Tourigny et al., 2019). Nevertheless, followers only take risks and perform better when they believe corporate decisions are fair and consider not only the organization but all stakeholders (Metwally et al., 2021).

Because of the above, trust in the organization is decisive for the follower's behavior to be aligned with a leadership style and a benevolent climate, both of which are ethical (Tourigny et al., 2019). Moreover, the last two years have brought remote work closer to socially responsible policies. Remote work has encouraged trusting relations by reducing formal control measures, which improves the work-family axis and engages the follower responsibly (Metwally et al., 2021).

Likewise, the ethical leader has a clear predisposition toward certain benefits, actions, and outcomes that integrate all community members (Sharma et al., 2019). Indeed, the ethical leader is characterized by a manifest orientation toward improving the organizational context, and the group interest becomes a long-term sustainable focus (Lumpkin & Achen, 2018). Of course, the organizational context is the key factor influencing ethical decision-making, community-oriented behavior, and group interest that a benevolent ethical climate prioritizes (Blome & Paulraj, 2013).

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, remote work has boosted collective interests and cooperative behaviors through strong organizational identity (Kimata & Takahashi, 2022). To conclude, work models whose strategy is based on job autonomy and self-efficacy foster satisfaction among employees. In addition, they facilitate close relations and strengthen group interest and friendship among its members (Demir et al., 2011). Therefore, this hypothesis is put forward:

Hypothesis 4: A benevolent ethical climate significantly mediates the association between ethical leadership and the potential benefits of remote work.

Methodology

Study type

The research design is quantitative, cross-sectional, non-experimental, and correlational-causal. According to Sánchez Flores (2019), it represents an interaction between at least two variables in a defined and specific context.

Participants

The sample consisted of 448 professional workers linked to six organizations in the Colombian Electricity Sector. The sample was calculated probabilistically by clusters with a confidence level of 95%. Sampieri (2018) considers probability samples essential in cross-sectional research designs, specifically those that intend to estimate correlational-causal variables. A cluster sampling was purposively chosen.

The Colombian Electricity Sector has encapsulated most sampling units in certain geographical locations. Therefore, according to the estimation of the sector studied, the clusters were the five most important cities in the country, in similar proportions. The Stats iq™ vs. 202 software was used. Like the SPSS software, it is used for different general statistical analyses; however, Stats iq™ has unique features for sample calculation that SPSS does not have.

The distribution obtained was as follows: 273 men and 175 women. Among the respondents, 8 work remotely one day per week, 3 men (.67%) - 5 women (1.12%); 137 two days per week, 91 men (20.31%) - 46 women (10.27%); 100 three days per week, 66 men (14.73%) - 34 women (7.59%); 72 four days per week, 39 men (8.71%) - 33 women (7.37%); 131 five days per week, 74 men (16.52%) - 57 women (12.72%). In addition, 314 people (70%) consider that their working day has been extended by remote work. In terms of age, 84 (18.8%) are between 18 and 29 years old; 164 (36.6%) between 30 and 39 years old; 119 (26.6%) between 40 and 49 years old; 69 (15.4%) between 50 and 59 years old; 12 (2.6%) between 60 and 69 years old. Regarding job stability, 280 (62.5%) have more than 4 years of service. 188 (42%) have no children, and 100% have completed university studies; 257 (57.46%) have postgraduate qualifications.

Tools

Ethical leadership: It is assessed with the unidimensional scale suggested by Brown et al. (2005) composed of 10 questions and a reliability of .94. Used by Sharma et al. (2019) through a 7-point Likert scale and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.91. It measures the concept of institutional leadership and its link with ethical attitudes regarding its behaviors, interactions, and communication, transmitting trust to the follower.

Job autonomy: The unidimensional scale proposed by Spreitzer (1995) is used, composed of 3 questions and a reliability of .72. Used by Kalshoven et al. (2013) using a six-point Likert scale and a Cronbach's Alpha of .79. It assesses the follower's control over the tasks they perform and their ability to be able to decide independently.

Self-efficacy: It is measured through a unidimensional scale formulated by Schaufeli et al. (1996) composed of 6 questions and a reliability of .74. It is initially used with a 7-point Likert scale. Applied by Salanova and Schaufeli (2000) with the same scale and a reliability of .78. It evaluates the follower's opinion regarding their capabilities and whether they are sufficient to achieve the expected objectives.

Benevolent Ethical Climate: Part of the multidimensional scale proposed by Victor and Cullen (1988) is used. Using dimension number 1, which is the center of analysis, the individual, the local, and the cosmopolitan cohabit with the benevolent moral criterion belonging to dimension number 2. Composed of 11 items in 3 subscales: (1). Friendship (3 questions) with a Cronbach's alpha of .58. (2). Group or team interest (4 questions) with a Cronbach's alpha of .75. (3). Social responsibility (4 questions) with a Cronbach's alpha of .84. It evaluates how to improve the general interest of the entire organizational community. The scale used by Santiago-Torner (2023c) through a 6-point Likert scale and an internal consistency of .88. The initial scale uses a 5-point Likert scale and shows an overall Cronbach's alpha of .85.

Remote work: Unidimensional scale designed by Illegems et al. (2001), composed of 11 questions and a Cronbach's Alpha of .90. Applied by Santiago-Torner et al. (2023a, 2023b) or Santiago Torner (2023e, 2023f) with an internal consistency of .87. Potential positive aspects of remote work are measured.

Procedure

The approximate time to complete the survey was about forty minutes. The main researcher, in the initial phase, presented the objectives of the study for about ten minutes and specified the importance of reading

the questions carefully so that the answers were clear. Finally, emphasis was placed on the option of voluntary withdrawal and the confidentiality of the data provided.

The timeline was as follows. In May 2021, the research project was presented to the community action committee of the Colombian Electricity Sector (the ninth forum of collective action of ethics and transparency). These forums promote a level playing field through a joint effort and good measures that enable fighting corruption from and for the Colombian Electricity Sector.

Between June and July 2021, the companies participating in the research project were selected according to their geographical location and importance within the sector. In July 2021, this research successfully passed an ethics committee according to the guidelines established in Spain.

Between August and December 2021, the confidentiality, data protection, and voluntary withdrawal agreements were signed, and the objectives were presented. Finally, between January and March 2022, data were collected from the six participating organizations through a survey (Microsoft Forms). The scale used was a six-point Likert scale (strongly agree - strongly disagree).

Data analysis

Initially, possible outliers that could alter the exploration of the results were sought through the probability identifier ($<.001$) with the SPSS v.25 statistical program. Concerning the normality of the variables, the values of skewness and kurtosis are demarcated; the five variables are below 2, which, according to Kline (1998), indicates normality. At the same time, the homogeneity of variances test is carried out, and it is deduced that there is homoscedasticity ($p > .05$). Likewise, the multicollinearity index (Variance inflation factor) and tolerance index are between 1.1 and 1.4, which affirms the absence of collinearity.

Subsequently (Table 1), the Cronbach's alpha of the five variables studied together with means, standard deviations, and the different Pearson correlations are reviewed. The confirmatory factor analysis (AMOS v.26) was also performed. Table 2 shows the relation between ethical leadership and some benefits associated with remote work. Next, in the PROCESS v.3.5 macro, the mediation study is performed (Table 3) through model 6 (mediation of two or more variables) proposed by Hayes (2018), with a bootstrapping methodology with 10 000 samples and a confidence index of 95% (Table 2). This technique seeks to establish intervals that generate confidence and help better understand the mediating variables' role as they evaluate their indirect effect.

The indirect effect between a and b is considered to be relevant when between the lowest confidence interval (LLCI) and the highest confidence interval (ULCI), the value 0 does not appear (Hayes, 2018). The GPower v.3.1 program measures the statistical intensity, and the AMOS v.26 macro

is used to construct the mediation figures. Figure 1 shows the results of the regression analysis with unstandardized coefficients.

Results

Reliability analysis

Initially (Table 1), the confidence ranges of the five variables analyzed are checked. The Cronbach's alphas are between .83 and .94, representing good internal consistency. Finally, means, standard deviations, and the different Pearson correlations are verified between .258 and .546. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), the associations achieved are high, intermediate, or low according to the following series (.51 to 1; .31 to .50; .10 to .30).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N	M	SD	LET	LA	AUT	BEC	TEL
Ethical Leadership (LET)	.94	10	51.60	4.22	.830				
Job Autonomy (LA)	.86	3	14.91	2.54	.280*	.790			
Self-efficacy (AUT)	.83	6	29.81	3.82	.314*	.368*	.810		
Benevolent Ethical Climate (BEC)	.88	11	55.08	4.05	.546*	.262*	.371*	.610	
Remote work (TEL)	.91	11	55.70	4.92	.258*	.266*	.271*	.217*	.730

Notes: The table shows the calculation of descriptive information and Pearson correlations, and discriminant validity (diagonal) is also included. (N) Number of items. (M) Mean. (SD) Standard deviation. Significant correlations *($p < 0.05$) CI (95%) (n=448). Source: created by the author

Table 2 highlights the importance of ethical management as it significantly influences the potential benefits of a virtual work environment.

Table 2
Ethical Leadership - Remote work benefits relation

Variable	Remote work benefits	Results
Ethical Leadership	Decreases absenteeism	.121*
	Limits work stress	.126*
	Retains key staff	.147*
	Reduces duplication of tasks	.151*
	Moderate distractions	.168*
	Increases flexibility	.192*

Contributes to gender equality	.227*
Increases productivity	.245*
Mitigates staff turnover	.255*
Increases the quality of recruited staff	.272*
Improves the work/family axis	.351*

Notes: Significant correlations *($p < 0.05$) CI (95%) (n=448)

Source: created by the author

Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is performed with the following absolute fit indices (macro Amos v.26.). (χ^2), likelihood ratio; (χ^2/gl), chi-square concerning degrees of freedom; (GFI), goodness-of-fit index; (RMSR), root mean square residual; (RMSA), root mean square error of approximation. These values indicate the level at which the model can predict the covariance matrix examined. Other incremental fit factors are also used: (IFI), incremental fit index; (NFI), normed fit index; (CFI), comparative fit index. These values contrast the proposed model with another one that does not usually explain the relation between variables. It is worth mentioning that the CFA confirms the validity of the proposed theoretical model.

From the results: $\chi^2 = 711.35$, $p < 0.01$; $\chi^2/\text{gl} = 2.34$; GFI = 0.921; IFI = 0.948; NFI = 0.938; CFI = 0.947; RMSEA = 0.0541; RMSR = 0.0538 it is concluded that the fit is acceptable. $\chi^2/\text{gl} < 3$; IFI, NFI, GFI, CFI > .90; RMSEA < .006; RMSR < .008 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Validity analysis

Mediation analysis and hypothesis confirmation

Table 3 shows the mediation process with unstandardized regression coefficients; the assessment is through the PROCESS macro, with confidence intervals of 95% and 10 000 bootstrapping samples. The design through its R^2 explains 35% of the variance ($R = .593$; $R^2 = .352$; $F = 80.085$; $p = .001$). Its f^2 (power statistical results) is high .610 (high > .35). The margins used (LLCI; ULCI) cannot include 0 to be relevant.

In order to contrast the different hypotheses, the following analyses are performed: The total effect c confirms H1 ($B = .136$; $ES = .058$; $p < .005$) (relation between Ethical Leadership and Remote Work). Direct effects a_1 and b_1 verify H2 ($B = .056$; $ES = .014$; $p < .005$); ($B = .698$; $ES = .194$; $p < .005$) (mediation Job autonomy). Effects a_2 and b_2 verify H3 ($B = .100$; $ES = .017$; $p < .005$); ($B = .543$; ES

=.162; $p < .005$) (mediation Job self-efficacy). Effects a3 and b3 verify H4 ($B = .403$; $ES = .035$; $p < .005$); ($B = .190$; $ES = .080$; $p < .005$) (mediation Benevolent ethical climate).

Table 3
Mediation Analysis

Effect	Route	β	p	ES	LI	LS
Direct effect of LET on LA	a1	.056	.001	.014	.027	.084
Direct effect of LET on AUT	a2	.100	.001	.017	.067	.133
Direct effect of LE on BEC	a3	.403	.001	.035	.335	.471
Direct effect of LA on AUT	d21	.401	.001	.054	.294	.507
Direct effect of LA on BEC	d31	.304	.008	.115	.079	.530
Direct effect of AUT on BEC	d32	.404	.001	.095	.217	.590
Direct effect of LA on TEL	b1	.698	.001	.194	.317	1.079
Direct effect of AUT on TEL	b2	.543	.001	.162	.224	.861
Direct effect of BEC on TEL	b3	.190	.017	.080	.034	.347
Direct effect of LET on TEL	c'	.058	.382	.067	.189	.072
Total effect of LET on TEL	c	.136	.020	.058	.013	.110
Indirect effect of LET on TEL through LA	a1b1	.039	<0.05	.047	.012	.076
Indirect effect of LET on TEL through AUT	a2b2	.054	<0.05	.020	.020	.098
Indirect effect of LET on TEL through BECs	a3b3	.077	<0.05	.037	.010	.155
Indirect effect of LET on TEL through LA and AUT in series	a1d21b2	.012	<0.05	.006	.003	.026
Indirect effect of LET on TEL through LA and BEC in series	a1d31b3	.003	<0.05	.002	.000	.009
Indirect effect of LET on TEL through AUT and BEC in series	a2d32b3	.008	<0.05	.005	.001	.019
Indirect effect of LET on TEL through LA, AUT, and BEC in series	a1d21d32b3	.002	<0.05	.001	.000	.005

Notes: Table shows: (LET). Ethical Leadership; (LA). Job autonomy; (AUT). Job self-efficacy; (BEC). Benevolent Ethical Climate; (TEL). Remote work. ($R^2 = .352$). The statistical strength (f^2) is high (.611). CI (95%) ($n=448$). Source: created by the author

Figure 1 shows that the three mediating variables (Job Autonomy, Self-Efficacy, and Benevolent Ethical Climate) have a causal relation with both the independent variable (X) - Ethical Leadership and the dependent variable (Y) - Remote Work. Mediation is relevant as it seeks theoretical explanations that help to understand why a certain variable (independent) influences another (dependent).

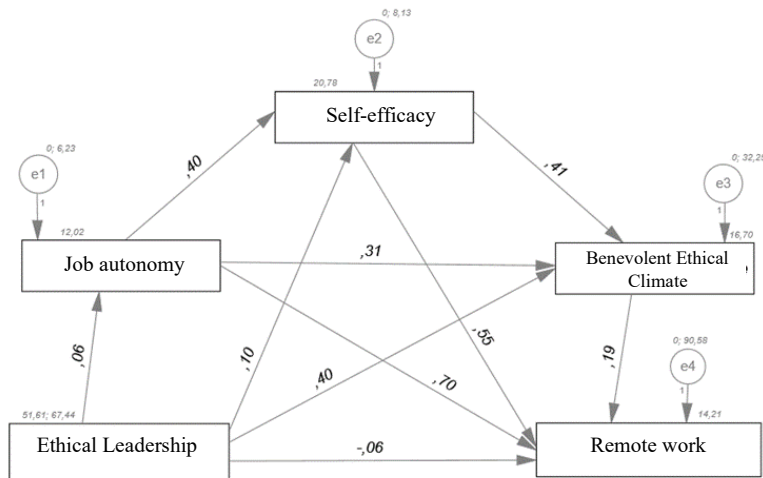


Figure 1. Statistical diagram of the unstandardized coefficients study model

Notes: The figure shows the proposed statistical plot of mediation (model 6), two or more variables. Ethical Leadership is negatively associated with Remote Work as the three mediating variables (Job Autonomy, Self-Efficacy, and Benevolent Ethical Climate) largely explain their relation. In addition, important non-hypothesized relations are established, e.g., job autonomy is associated with self-efficacy, benevolent ethical climate, and remote work's potential benefits. On the other hand, self-efficacy is related to a benevolent ethical climate and the benefits of remote work. Finally, ethical leadership has a strong relation with a benevolent ethical climate, but, in contrast, this climate related to friendship, group interest, and corporate social responsibility is significantly but weakly associated with the benefits of remote work.

Source: created by the author (AMOS)

Discussion of results

An important challenge facing the Colombian Electricity Sector is verifying the sustainability of remote work and analyzing how a style of ethical leadership influences it due to its special dynamics. In this regard, the first major finding of this research is the link between ethical leadership and the potential advantages of remote work (Hypothesis 1). This relation, without being particularly strong, is statistically significant. All the associations established in this research are representative but not particularly high.

Remote work is an option that promotes greater flexibility and self-regulation of tasks (Lyttelton et al., 2020). Therefore, it is a suitable means for the ethical leader to trust the follower by delegating to him/her the power to self-manage their functions and resources (Wen et al., 2021). The possibility of adapting work activities improves employee job satisfaction, commitment, and self-esteem (Markey et al., 2021; Santiago Torner, 2023b). In addition, remote work, through job autonomy, intensifies the

follower's capacity for self-control, which impacts their performance and sense of organizational belonging (Martin et al., 2022).

In this regard, ethical leadership is related to an increase in employees' perceived effectiveness through a dynamic, respectful, and compelling attitude (Babalola et al., 2018). Ethical leadership enhances the follower's job performance through affective bonds, open communication, and shared understanding that improves learning and incites the follower to imitate the leader's behaviors (Shafique et al., 2019). In this regard, two-way communication, adjusted to a climate of trust, broadens the sense of belonging and effective relation to the task (Özsungur, 2020).

Similarly, remote work is associated with uninterrupted cognitive demands, such as information management, problem-solving, or decision-making (Dolce et al., 2020). Consequently, when remote work requires constant and excessive intellectual involvement, it can result in emotional exhaustion, i.e., a state in which the demands exceed the employee's resources (Almonacid-Nieto et al., 2020).

Thus, ethical leadership becomes supportive because it establishes clear ethical standards, and when followers adhere to them, they are less susceptible to overestimating or holding back their emotions (Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, through genuine concern for the followers, the ethical leader fosters their self-control and prevents them from misrepresenting or suppressing their emotional state, which mitigates potential burnout through sincere relations and strong organizational rootedness (Zhou et al., 2020). By linking with virtual work environments, the ethical leader establishes positive states of mind that reduce stress, limiting absenteeism, staff turnover, or loss of key personnel (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Raftar-Ozery, 2018).

Likewise, the ethical leader transfers satisfying experiences that are transformed into resources for the follower to use and transfer to the family sphere thus improving, in this way, the work-family axis (Zhang & Tu, 2018). To this end, remote work can be considered a psychosocial benefit if there is a balance between resources and demands since its characteristics reaffirm the reconciliation between work and family (Dolce et al., 2020). This research identifies a high male and female perception that remote work favors a better fit between professional work and family needs. This can also be attributed to the common notion that the prevalent leadership within the Colombian Electricity Sector is ethical. At the same time, the intersection between ethical leadership and remote work fosters a climate of trustworthy, principled, and benevolent followers (Zhang & Tu, 2018).

Finally, Carli (2020) specifies that remote work equates domestic responsibilities between men and women, which tends to reduce the gender gap. From this perspective, ethical leadership can act as an agent of change with an approach that helps diversity, inclusion, and gender equality (Neves et al., 2018). Leaders play a central role in stabilizing and creating new cultures (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995). Therefore,

through equitable and honest socioemotional treatment, ethical leadership can reduce the potential gender gap at the institutional level (Babalola et al., 2018).

From a similar perspective, ethical leadership is associated with a breadth of job autonomy and favors its mediating character (hypothesis 2), consistent with Dhar (2016) and Liu et al. (2020). To this end, task characteristics are a potential moderator in the relation between leadership and follower behavior (Kalshoven et al., 2013). Consequently, the ethical leader fosters a context of shared relations and complete communication where the follower can choose the most appropriate work behaviors for him/her, determine the distribution of activities, or organize initiatives with other followers (Kang & Zhang, 2020). The interdependence between ethical leader and member (LMX) builds strong bonds of trust, generating a sense of ownership, shared purpose, and responsibility, along with a wide autonomy that integrates all the components of this relation (Dhar, 2016).

Therefore, through tolerant and open communication, the ethical leader develops autonomous spaces where trust is the factor that normalizes the link with virtual work environments (Contreras et al., 2020).

Additionally, ethical leadership is associated with self-efficacy and enhances its mediating nature (hypothesis 3), consistent with Ashfaq et al. (2021). Thus, the ethical leader participates in the follower's work experiences, enabling them to intercede so that both successes and failures strengthen their confidence and optimize their self-efficacy (Walumbwa et al., 2011). The ethical leader facilitates a constructive work context where the followers increase their perseverance, are less unstable, and ultimately more self-efficacious as they can face challenges with responsibility and autonomy (Ilyas et al., 2020).

Therefore, the ethical leader consolidates the employee's standards of conduct through ethical behaviors and influence in communication that the follower mimics (Ashfaq et al., 2021). The ethical leader becomes a transmitter of moral values that enable the follower to think strategically, and this process of continuous improvement refines their beliefs of appropriateness and self-efficacy (Aftab et al., 2022). In addition, ethical leaders emphasize the importance of processes and not just outcomes, which reduces the follower's stress and makes them more self-efficacious. Therefore, the main intention of the ethical leader is to build the employee's potential through safe environments and constant feedback, leading to higher self-efficacy (Walumbwa et al., 2011).

Similarly, self-efficacy is a key personal resource in remote work as it significantly reduces the relation between workloads and emotional exhaustion (Van Slyke et al., 2022). The self-efficacious employee is more structured, which enables them to focus on the proposed goals and be more resilient, i.e., able to readjust their performance regardless of the difficulties they may encounter to achieve a goal

(Raghuram et al., 2003). This explains the relation between ethical leadership, self-efficacy, and remote work.

Finally, ethical leadership and benevolent ethical climate (hypothesis 4) are relevantly linked, amplifying this specific climate's mediating capacity. This result coincides with Demirtas & Akdogan (2015). Regarding this relation, the ethical leader influences followers' behavior through their position and authority (Brown et al., 2005). In addition to structuring and transmitting an institutional vision, leadership shapes the organization's culture (Javed et al., 2018).

Ethical climate is a prominent part of corporate culture (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Therefore, it is reasonable to think that the ethical leader fosters the general involvement of followers with ethical behaviors and procedures that help build a climate where guidelines and interpretations are shared (Ouakouak et al., 2020). More specifically, the benevolent ethical climate is related to caring for followers and all members of society in general; that is, it focuses on the consequences and impact of the organizational approach (Santiago-Torner, 2023d).

The ethical leader with implicit characteristics such as respect, moral integrity, social responsibility, or altruism transfers their moral and personal values through constant interactions with the follower, inspiring a pattern of understanding and benevolent behavior (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). The ethical leader systematically influences followers through intervention processes where learning ethical behaviors is conducive to building a benevolent ethical climate (Shin, 2012). Continuously expanding organizations seeking strategic advantages and a responsible image are called on to establish a culture that supports and fosters ethical behaviors (Lu & Lin, 2014). Therefore, through social transmission and benevolent influence, the ethical leader imbues ethical principles and actions that engage the entire organization to model, in a supportive manner, an ethical climate based on benevolence (Mayer et al., 2010).

Likewise, the benevolent ethical climate is based on three main axes: friendship, group interest, and social responsibility (Teng et al., 2020). Authors such as Gates et al. (2021) clarify that the COVID-19 era has strengthened friendship relations in virtual work teams. Indeed, work friendships can foster trust, guidance, and a strong expectation of emotional care (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018).

Ethical leaders are emotionally intelligent and insist on characteristics such as empathy, social skills, or relation management based on trust and friendship (Lumpkin & Achen, 2018); that is, they stimulate social competence. In addition, the benevolent climate emphasizes cohesion, teamwork, and group interest over individual interest (Prati et al., 2009). In the last two years, remote work has fostered a strong organizational identity linked to group interests (Kimata & Takahashi, 2022).

In this regard, the ethical leader pays individual attention to each of their followers and prioritizes the group's interests, needs, and expectations (Sharma et al., 2019). Remote work has

redesigned the internal criteria of corporate social responsibility (CSR), dynamizing plans to promote important aspects such as gender equality or the work-family axis (Metwally et al., 2021), also evidenced in this research. Similarly, ethical leadership and a benevolent ethical climate, through the personal and organizational values that represent them, have a meaningful impact on CSR (Saha et al., 2020).

The benevolence and personal values of the leader can make the difference for CSR initiatives to advance from the personal to the corporate (Hemingway & MacLagan, 2004). This explains why ethical leadership through a benevolent climate is related to remote work, which is a major finding and broadens the range of factors that positively foster virtual work environments.

Conclusions

The ethical leadership style strongly impacts remote work, which represents a major finding for the Colombian Electricity Sector and for a global process that seeks to better understand what factors foster sustainability and optimize virtual work environments. To this end, the ethical leader, from a moral, personal, and administrative perspective, provides psychological security, trust, autonomy, and knowledge sharing to followers (Wen et al., 2021). These characteristics are essential for transitioning from face-to-face to virtual work and for the sustainability of remote work as a continuous work option (Lee, 2021).

As a decentralized and autonomous alternative, remote work requires high personal accountability that the ethical leader transmits through ethical reciprocity and influence (Babalola et al., 2018). In addition, the ethical leader deploys a climate of support and consideration toward their followers through constructive observations and interactions (Markey et al., 2021) that stimulate a positive employee self-evaluation regarding their capabilities and competencies. This factor is essential to engage and retain key personnel in virtual work environments (Parent-Lamarche, 2022). Finally, the ethical leader, as an agent of change, limits the remote worker's emotional exhaustion by preventing them from repressing their emotions (Lee et al., 2021), which establishes positive moods and satisfying experiences that strengthen the work-family axis (Carli, 2020) and tends to decrease gender gaps (Neves et al., 2018).

At the same time, job autonomy, self-efficacy, and a benevolent ethical climate significantly mediate the relation between ethical leadership and remote work, constituting this article's second major finding. To that effect, ethical leadership empowers the follower to fully assume all the responsibilities of their profession (Shafique et al., 2019). Indeed, job autonomy provides the employee with a new context to analyze the job design and all its linked processes (Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, remote work, when it has ethical leadership and increases the scope of follower autonomy, contributes to higher performance, engagement, job well-being, and satisfaction (Contreras et al., 2020). Of course, ethical leadership aligns

with remote work by eliciting broad trust from followers and favoring their autonomy (Almonacid-Nieto et al., 2020).

In the same way, ethical leaders stand out for their ability to enable their followers to group all their work experiences; in such a way, they become a seed that stimulates and expands their self-efficacy (Ashfaq et al., 2021). Ethical leadership shapes a work environment where positive attitudes help followers focus on the task effectively (Aftab et al., 2022). Accordingly, the relation of equity between ethical leader and follower is transformed into an optimistic mood status that fosters shared supportive bonds and high personal self-efficacy (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Moreover, in remote work, self-efficacy is a resource that helps to contain any stressor linked to workloads or possible social isolation (Van Slyke et al., 2022).

Finally, the benevolent ethical climate triangulates the relation between ethical leadership and remote work. To this end, the ethical leader acts as a conducive and benevolent driver in raising awareness of an ethical climate (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). To that effect, a benevolent ethical climate is more concerned with the impact and influence of organizational behavior (Blome & Paulraj, 2013). Moreover, its focus is on employees and society (Lu & Lin, 2014). Therefore, the ethical leader shapes a habitat of moral and ethical behaviors that consider group interests, which incentivizes the development of a benevolent ethical climate (Shin, 2012). To conclude, a benevolent ethical climate and remote work are integrated through the relations of friendship and trust (Gates et al., 2021), group interest (Kimata & Takahashi, 2022), and social responsibility (Metwally et al., 2021).

Practical implications, limitations, and future research

The results of this research have several practical implications. First, the sector studied comprises highly academic professionals, which becomes a competitive advantage. In this regard, remote work is an opportunity to promote an even more flexible management of human resources. The possibility for the follower to have the opportunity to choose when and how to work improves commitment, satisfaction, efficiency, and retention of qualified personnel (Wen et al., 2021). Nevertheless, for this to happen, the organization must have strong relations of trust. Trust increases the ease of adaptation and flexible strategies. Moreover, from an economic approach, it reduces organizational vulnerability and refines forecasts about subsequent behaviors (Shafique et al., 2019).

Therefore, one of the main functions of the ethical leader is to generate trusting environments that reduce uncertainty and encourage the follower to take risks in a supportive and psychologically safe environment (Ashfaq et al., 2021).

Similarly, organizational culture is largely influenced by values and beliefs absorbed through a parallel national culture. Within this context, Colombia is a country that has undergone abrupt and continuous changes during the last fifty years. Therefore, it is important to establish methods to better understand personal and organizational ethical behaviors over time to improve them. Ethics is not an aspiration but a formula for continuous improvement (Isaac Mostovicz et al., 2011). To this end, it is possible to transmit good measures organizationally as a learning process contributing to ethical behavior. An ethical leadership style and a climate that favors the inclusion of moral standards will favor ethical assimilation and transfer (Lu & Lin, 2014).

Likewise, the ethical leader has the necessary competencies to combine positive interpersonal dynamics and a focus on principles and responsibilities. Of course, ethical identity in organizations is not only born from the decrease of amoral measures but also from a culture that generates continuity and awareness of ethical performance (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Therefore, the ethical leader can make the follower aware of the emotions identified during ethical dilemmas and let them act as a lever to consolidate ethical, collective, and individual development. Empathy and compassion are indispensable aspects that can be learned and consolidate moral identity.

This research has a major weakness: the conditional process model, subject to a cross-sectional design, cannot draw accurate conclusions about causality. Nevertheless, limitations evidenced in other studies—for example, the influence of common method variance—have been mitigated. This drawback arises when collecting the different variables, whether dependent or independent, through a single source. Partially following the indications of Podsakoff et al. (2012), six information providers are used.

In addition, to exercise some control over the contextual effect, the surveys are distributed on different days, and the order of the questions is mixed because each organization has its own questionnaire. What is not possible is to measure the dependent and independent variables at different times. In addition, to minimize social desirability bias, two independent procedures are used: (1) the surveys are completely anonymous, and (2) the importance of answering correctly is stressed in previous meetings.

Regarding future research, several moderating mechanisms may also explain the relation between ethical leadership and remote work. For example, a principled climate, psychological safety, or intrinsic motivation due to ethical management may function as meaningful resources that amplify the potential benefits of a virtual work environment.

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