

## **ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEES INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOUR IN SELECTED TERTIARY INSTITUTION IN NIGERIA.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study examined Effect of Ethical Leadership on employees' innovative work behavior in selected tertiary institution in Nigeria. As it affects employee innovativeness. The study used survey research design. The population of the study was 953, with a sample size of 282. determined scientifically using Taro Yamane formula. The research employed purposive and simple Random sampling technique. Structured questionnaire was used for data collection, and regression analysis was adopted to test the postulated hypotheses using SPSS version 21. The study findings revealed that Ethical leadership has positive significant effect on employees' creativity of selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The findings also indicates that ethical leadership had positive significant effect on idea fluency of selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The study concludes that ethical leadership have positive significant effect on employee innovative work behavior in selected tertiary institution in Nigeria. The study recommends that Management of tertiary institutions should stress on ethical guidance, fairness, integrity, justice, responsibility and accountability, role modeling and support people orientation, to promote innovation (creativity) through ethical leadership. Tertiary institutions should adopt ethical leadership training programs to assist ethical leaders in communicating their openness and acceptance of employees' innovative ideas, recognizing and appreciating employees' creative and innovative work behavior, and to avoid potential control effect of excessive ethical leadership on employee initiative and creativity.

**Keywords: Ethical leadership, Innovativeness, Employee, Creativity**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In today's dynamic business space, organizations across the world, prioritize innovative work behavior to thrive in turbulent environments. Innovative work behavior is defined as intentional actions that contribute to new ideas, processes, or products, and is crucial for organizations' survival and competitiveness, it fosters progress and provides a competitive edge (De Jong and Den Hartog 2010). To achieve this fundamental role of employees' innovative work behavior, ethical leadership is crucial. Tertiary institution in Nigeria plays a crucial role in driving innovation and economic growth. However, many of these institutions face challenges in

fostering a culture of innovation among employees. Ethical leadership has been identified as a key factor that can influence employees' innovative work behavior. Ethical leaders demonstrate behaviours such as fairness, integrity, transparency, honesty, consistency in words and action, trustworthiness (moral character) can create a positive work environment that encourage innovation. In addition, the demonstration of ethical awareness of understanding ethical principles, considering multiple perspective, responsible decision making, empowerment and transparency, accountability and responsibility for mistakes and shortcoming have continue to account for innovation of employees in most institutions. However,

despite the importance of the dimensions of ethical leadership to innovative work behavior, most leaders in Nigerian tertiary institutions still lack moral character of integrity, honesty, inability to take responsible decisions, empowerment and transparency, lack of accountability and responsibility still create concerns in the minds of Nigerians. In today's competitive business environment.

Innovation has emerged as a crucial factor for organizational success and sustainability (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Armstrong, 2000). Innovative work behavior among employees is necessary to keep pace with changing trends and market demands and forms the basis for organizational innovation (Hau & Kang, 2016; Liu, 2017; Al-Bashayreh et al., 2022). Innovative behavior among employees is characterized by several dimensions, including originality, flexibility, idea fluency and problem sensitivity. Moreover, employee creative and innovative behavior is observed to sustain, develop, and breed innovation that eventually leads to a firm's competitive advantage (Ye et al., 2022). For that reason, the subject of employee creative and innovative behavior has become paramount to both business practitioners and academics alike. While the benefits of employee creative and innovative behavior are well documented in the extant literature, there remains some void on the antecedents of employee creative and innovative behavior, particularly related to organizational leadership in some organizations in Nigeria.

Despite a concerted interest by researchers in ethical leadership and its effects on employee creative and innovative behavior, most of these studies investigated these two constructs as unidimensional constructs. Besides, cross-examination of the state of literature indicates a paucity of studies that interrogates the influence of ethical leadership on employee creative and innovative behavior as high-order constructs in the empirical literature.

In the current business environment, which is swiftly changing, innovation has become inextricably linked with the survival and success of an organization (Hazem & Zehou, 2019). It is an important means by which contemporary organizations strive for

excellence and competitiveness (Oei et al., 2024). According to Gomes, Pinho, & Lopes (2024), innovation not only results in the creation of new products, services, and business models, but it also induces socioeconomic change. Employees are essential in this process as they are the main catalysts for innovation and ultimately determine an organization's sustainable competitive advantage (Spiegelaere, Gyes, & Hootegeem 2018). Employees are thus highly encouraged to participate in innovative work behavior since the success of organizations driven by innovation depends mostly on it (Bos-Nehles, Renkema, & Janssen, 2017). According to Rahim, Khalijah, Wan Nor Syazana, Fatanah, and Nurbarirah (2024), innovative work behavior is crucial for organizations globally. Ethical leaders provide direction and guidance to teams, recognize employees' potential and build commitment to organizational vision and collective goals (Metwally et al., 2019). According to the existing literature, ethical leadership encourages people to be innovative (Dhar, 2016; Javed et al., 2018) and it is important to understand how leaders may foster employee innovation through ethical practices as well as the effects of ethical leadership style on organizational outcomes given the growing concerns about corporate ethics (Tu et al., 2019).

Despite the importance of innovation in driving economic growth, many tertiary institutions in Nigeria struggle to foster a culture of innovation among employees. The lack of innovative behavior among employees can be attributed to the absence of ethical leadership demonstration such as fairness, transparency, integrity, responsibility among others. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and employee innovative behavior in selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

The study examined the Effect of ethical leadership on employees' innovative work behavior in selected companies in Nigeria. The specific objective aims to:

1. Assess the effect of moral character on employees' creativity of selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

2. Evaluate how justices and fairness affects employee idea fluency in selected tertiary institution in Nigeria.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Concept of Ethical Leadership**

Ethical leadership is defined as the practice of exhibiting behavior that is universally considered morally right, both in personal conduct and in interactions with others, coupled with promoting such behavior among subordinates via effective communication, reinforcement, and ethical decision-making processes (Brown et al., 2005). This leadership style is distinguished by a set of core characteristics, including trustworthiness, honesty, openness, credibility, and fairness, all driven by an underlying motivation of altruism. Ethical leaders are also noted for their people-oriented approach, fostering empowerment and encouragement among their teams (Resick et al., 2006), and are committed to making balanced and caring decisions that consider the well-being of all stakeholders (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Such leaders inherently gravitate towards moral and equitable decision-making practices, significantly influenced by their dedication to transparency and a strong commitment to ethical values. This, in turn, contributes positively to the overall well-being of employees, creating a work environment where ethical standards are upheld and promoted (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). The comprehensive embodiment of these traits in ethical leadership not only fosters a culture of trust and integrity within organizations but also encourages a more inclusive and supportive workplace, ultimately enhancing organizational performance and employee satisfaction. Under the influence of ethical leadership, employees are inherently motivated to reassess the intrinsic value of their work, a process catalyzed by cognitive engagement that fosters the development and implementation of innovative ideas aimed at achieving organizational objectives.

### **Employee Innovative Work Behavior**

Employee innovative work behavior refers to the capacity of employees to produce new and unique ideas in order to solve problems, achieve their tasks efficiently and enhance

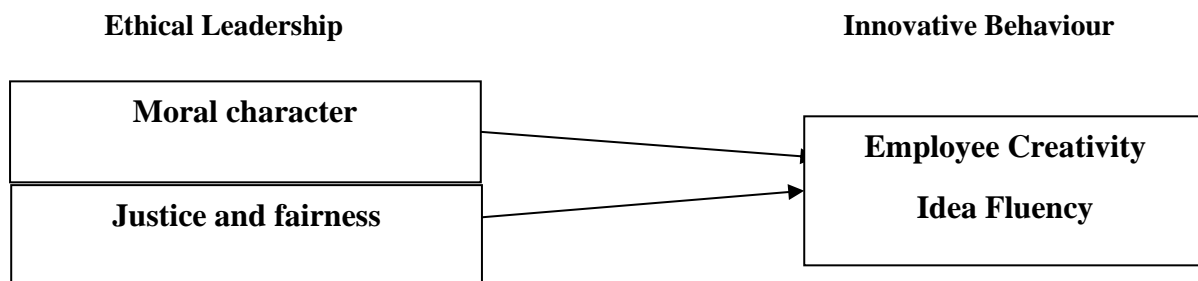
organizational performance (Al-Okaily & Al-Okaily, 2022; Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Creativity entails thinking outside the box, pursuing risky strategies and confronting authority figures (Baucus et al., 2008). To create a supportive environment for organizational creativity, the organization must offer several factors, such as allocating time and resources, offering training opportunities to enhance competencies and problem-solving skills, establishing clear objectives and vision and developing a reward and recognition system to recognize employees who have exerted innovative efforts (Cheung & Wong, 2011). Creative employees provide a competitive advantage to organizations by creating added value and contributing extra effort in a vigorous work environment (Amabile, 1983; George, 2009). De Jong and Den Hartog (2007) identified three contextual elements acting as motivators for individual employee creativity and innovation in organizations: leadership, the work environment and organizational support.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The study is anchored on Social Exchange Theory. Ethical Leadership is a crucial factor in promoting IWB among employees. According to social exchange theory (SET), the relationship between leaders and employees plays a significant role in fostering innovation. When employees trust their leaders and perceive them as ethical leaders, they are more likely to engage in innovative tasks with optimism (Guo, Jin, & Yim, 2023) and effort (Yu, Mai, Tsai, & Dai, 2018). The SET states that, when leaders provide their employees with pertinent resources, they establish an emotional bond that encourages employees to repay the favor (Li et al., 2019; Blau, 1964). Ethical leadership plays a significant role in this context. Superiors who exhibit EL, offering support, respect, and integrity, foster a positive reciprocal relationship (Ahmad et al., 2023). When employees perceive their leaders as ethical, they are more likely to feel valued and supported, leading to increased confidence and willingness to engage in innovative behaviors (Khan et al., 2021). Consequently, staff will repay their superiors by becoming active members of the workplace and enhancing their creative thinking (Javed, Abdullah, Zaffar, ul

Haque, & Rubab, 2019). Research indicated that EL leads to higher levels of employee engagement and job satisfaction, which are critical for fostering innovation (Kim & Park, 2020). Indeed, it has been suggested that the cooperation and support of superiors, as seen in EL, can enhance IWB among subordinates (Liu et al., 2023; Bannay & Hadi, 2020). Additionally, Bandura's (1977), social learning theory (SLT) suggests that employees learn expected behaviors by observing their work environment and superiors as individuals tend to learn by watching others and imitating their behavior (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018). If an employee observes their superior engaging in IWB, they are more likely to adopt such

**Conceptual Framework**



**Source: Researcher's Framework**

### **Empirical Review**

Liu et al (2023) examined How Ethical Leadership Cultivates Innovative Work Behaviors in Employees? Psychological Safety, Work Engagement and Openness to Experience. Survey research was conducted. The survey data were collected from 397 full-time employees of various service industry companies operating in China in two stages with a two-week gap. SPSS and AMOS were used to assess the study hypotheses. First, SPSS 22.0 was used to test the reliability of variables and conduct descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis, and AMOS 22.0 was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis. Second, Version 22 of SPSS and the PROCESS macro were used to analyze mediation, moderation, and conditional process effects. The results indicated that ethical leadership was positively related to employees' innovative work behavior. Ethical leadership significantly positively affects employees' innovative work behaviors by mediating psychological safety and work engagement. Moreover, the results

behavior, seeing it as a role expectation (Wahab et al, 2024). EL enhances this learning by setting a positive example. Ethical leaders demonstrate behaviors that align with organizational values and goals, creating a model for employees (Kalshoven, & Den Hartog, De Hoogh 2011). This modelling is effective because ethical leaders are seen as credible and trustworthy, increasing the likelihood that employees will emulate their behaviors. Studies show that EL is positively associated with employees' willingness to take risks and pursue new ideas, as they feel secure and trusted in their work environment (Jia et al., 2022; Wen, Wu, & Long, 2021).

showed that openness to experience plays a moderating effect in the positive relationship between work engagement and employees' innovative work behavior. Finally, openness to experience moderates the indirect relationship (via work engagement) between ethical leadership and employees' innovative work behavior. This research contributes to the existing literature on ethical leadership and provides a reference for companies to stimulate employees' innovative work behavior.

Noorizan and Nomahaza (2024) studied Fostering Innovative Work Behavior: Ethical Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Proactive Personality. The study explores the critical role of employee creativity and the factors influencing IWB, particularly in academic settings. Researchers argue that ethical leadership (EL) fosters a supportive environment that enhances IWB by valuing employee rights and dignity, thereby increasing productivity and innovation. EL's effectiveness, however, may vary based on contextual factors such as individual proactive personality, which

influences how employees respond to leadership. Higher education institutions, facing globalization challenges, must promote IWB among academic staff to adapt to dynamic changes. This involves adopting new technologies, teaching methods and creating innovative research projects. Social exchange theory, social learning theory, and substitutes for leadership theory provide frameworks for understanding how EL impacts IWB. EL can enhance psychological safety, encouraging risk-taking and innovation, while proactive personality traits can substitute for leadership influence, driving innovation independently. This study contributes to the EL-IWB literature by examining the interplay of EL, psychological safety, and proactive personality in fostering IWB in academic settings.

Masianoga and Chakauya (2023) The study is aimed at investigating the curvilinear relationship between ethical leadership and employee creative and innovative behaviour in a South African State Owned Enterprise. The central argument of this paper is that ethical leadership can influence employee creative and innovative behavior in the workplace. One hypothesis was posited and to empirically test the hypothesis, a sample data set of 160 was used. The data from 160 respondents comprising managers and employees was collected using predeveloped questionnaires and analyzed through structural equation modelling and multiple regression techniques conducted with the Smart-PLS statistical software. The hypothesis was found to be significant and supported. Drawing from the study findings, managerial implications are Table 3.1: The spread of the population

Institution	Male	Female	Total
Dorben Polytechnic Bwari	162	64	226
National Open University Bwari	135	38	173
Veritas	122	60	182
Zuba College of Education Abuja	267	105	372
Total	686	267	953

Source: Online Source 2025

The study sample size was 282, determined scientifically using Taro Yamane formula. The research made use of purposive and simple random sampling techniques. The study employed questionnaire for data collection. The study instrument consisted of two parts. The

discussed, and limitations and future research directions are suggested. Overall, this study provides tentative empirical support that employee creative and innovative behaviour can be influenced by ethical leadership in South Africa: a context that is often less researched.

Peerasut etal (2024) examined unpacking the relationship between ethical leadership and innovative work behavior: A moderated mediation model this study delves into the significant role of innovative work behavior among bankers in achieving competitive superiority and addressing contemporary business needs. It uncovers a research gap in understanding the influence of bankers' innovative work behaviors and the factors driving these behaviors. This study proposes to examine ethical leadership's direct and indirect effects on innovative work behavior through the mediating role of bankers' resilience and the moderating role of a manager's gender. The study collected perceptual cross-sectional data from employees across Thailand's ten largest commercial banks via self-administered questionnaires, analyzing 960 responses using structural equation modeling.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed survey research design, the population of the study is 953 which constitute staff of Veritas University Bwari, National Open University Bwari {Dutse}, Dorben Polytechnic and college of Education Zuba. The spread of the population is shown on the table 3.1.

first part covered the demographic characteristics of the study sample. The second part covered the variables of the study, which were divided into two main variables: the independent variable ethical leadership and the dependent variable is innovative behavior. To



measure the variables of the study, the five-point Likert scale was relied upon (strongly agree, agree, moderate degree, disagree, strongly disagree) and expresses the following values (5, 4, 3, 2, 1), respectively. Cronbach Alpha was used to test the research instrument for content validity and reliability. The study reported a validity index of 0.786 and overall reliability of 0.721 for the variables under consideration which was adequate for the study. 20% questionnaire was added to the sample size making it 338 to ensure the sample size was return. The study independent variable is Ethical leadership proxies by Moral character, justice and fairness while the dependent variable is innovative behavior proxies with creativity, and idea fluency.

The study model is stated as shown below:

$$CRE = \beta_0 + \beta_1 MCHT + \varepsilon \text{-----1}$$

$$IDF = \beta_0 + \beta_2 JAF + \varepsilon \text{-----1}$$

Where: CRE = Employees' Creativity, MCHT = Moral Character, IDF = Idea Fluency, JAF = Justice and Fairness,  $\beta_0$  = Regression Intercept,  $\beta_1$  = Coefficient of Moral Character,  $\varepsilon$  = Error term.

Data were analyzed using simple regression analysis through the help of SPSS version 21 to test the hypotheses and 5% level of significance was set as the basis for acceptance and rejection.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 4.1: Response Rate

S/N	Faculty	No of Questionnaire Administered	No of Questionnaire Returned	Percentage (%) of Questionnaire Returned
1	Dorben Polytechnic Bwari	86	77	22.78
2	National open university Bwari	84	67	19.82
3	Veritas University Bwari	79	51	15.09
4	Federal College Of Education Zuba	90	87	25.74
	Total	339	282	83.43

Source: Survey Data, 2025

Table 4.1 shows that out of the 339 copies of the questionnaire that were administered to the staff of the selected tertiary institutions, 282 were retrieved, constituting 83.43 percent response rates were used for the analysis. Out of these, 77 of them representing 22.78 percent were retrieved from staff of Dorben polytechnic, 67 of them representing 19.82 percent were retrieved from staff of National Open University. 51 of the respondent

representing 15.09 percent were retrieved from staff of Veritas University, and 87 of them representing 25.74 percent were retrieved from staff of the College of Education Zuba.

### 4.2 Test of hypotheses

i. HO1: Moral character do not have significant effect on employees' Creativity of selected tertiary institution in Nigeria

Table 4.2: Model Summaryb

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.682a	.465	.462	.589

a. Predictors: (Constant), moral character

b. Dependent Variable: employee creativity

Source: SPSS Statistical Software (Version 21).

Table 4.3: ANOVAa

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	89.432	1	89.432	256.74	.000b
	Residual	103.186	280	.368		
	Total	192.618	281			

a. Dependent Variable: employee creativity

b. Predictors: (Constant), moral character

Source: SPSS Statistical Software (Version 21).

Table 4.4: Coefficientsa

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.134	.046		4.352	.000
	Moral Character	0.725	.043	.682	16.02	.000

Dependent Variable: employee creativity

Source: SPSS Statistical Software (Version 21).

In Table 4.2 revealed a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.682, the dependent variable (employee creativity) and independent variable (moral character) have a positive and strong relationship. In addition, the R-Square or coefficient of determination value indicates how much the independent variable will explain the dependent variable. The r-square of 0.465 (46.5%) in the model description table above indicates that 46.5% of the changes in employee creativity is explained by ethical leadership (MCHT= Moral character, JAF= Justice and fairness.) 53.5% could attributed to factors outside ethical leadership.

Decision rule: if the relevant result is less than 0.05, the null statement can be dismissed. If the relevant result is greater than 0.05, the null statement should be acknowledged, meaning that the regression models greatly determine the HO2: HO2: Justice and fairness do not have significant effect on employee idea fluency in selected tertiary institution in Nigeria.

dependent variable (employee creativity), as seen in the ANOVA table. The related F-value is 256.74 and the p-value is 0.000. Since 0.000 is smaller than 0.05, this suggests that the result is significant. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected, and we can infer that Ethical leadership has a significant impact on employee creativity. As observed in the regression coefficient table, Ethical leadership (moral character) has a significant effect on employee creativity, as shown by the coefficient of 0.725, as an improvement in ethical leadership leads to a 72.5 percent increase in employee creativity. The regression coefficients table shows that the result is significant as the sig value is less than 0.05 (i.e.  $0.000 < 0.05$ ) this means that ethical leadership (Moral character) has significant effect on employee originality in selected Tertiary institutions in Nigeria

Table 4.5: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.641a	.411	.408	.614

a. Predictors: (Constant), Justice and fairness

Dependent Variable: idea fluency

Source: SPSS Statistical Software (Version 21).

Table 4.6: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	76.248	1	76.248	202.35	.000b
Residual	105.504	280	.377		
Total	181.752	281			

a. Dependent Variable: idea fluency  
Predictors: (Constant), justice and fairness  
Source: SPSS Statistical Software (Version 21).

Table 4.7: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.045	.042		3.912	.000
Justice and fairness	0.693	.043	.641	14.23	.000

Dependent Variable: idea fluency  
Source: SPSS Statistical Software (Version 21).

Table 4.5, the correlation coefficient (R) is 0.641, for the dependent variable (idea fluency) and independent variable (Ethical leadership) have a positive and strong relationship. In addition, the R-Square or coefficient of determination value indicates how much the independent variable affect the dependent variable. The r-square of 0.411 (41.1%) in the model overview table indicates that 41.1 percent of the changes in idea fluency is explained by ethical leadership (Moral character, Justice and fairness) while 58.9% is caused by other factors not noted by the model.

Decision rule: if the relevant result is less than 0.05, the null statement can be dismissed. If the relevant result is greater than 0.05, the null statement should be acknowledged, meaning that the regression models greatly determine the dependant variable (idea fluency), as seen in the ANOVA table. The related F-value is 202.35 and the p-value is 0.000. Since 0.000 is smaller than 0.05, this suggests that the result is significant. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected, and we can conclude that Ethical leadership has a significant effect on employee idea fluency. As seen in the regression coefficient table. The coefficient of 0.693 indicates that ethical leadership has a significant effect on idea fluency, with a rise in ethical leadership resulting in a 69.3% increase in reputation. The regression coefficients table shows that the result is significant as the p-

value of 0.000 is less than 0.05 (i.e.  $0.000 < 0.05$ ) this implies that ethical leadership (Justice and fairness.) has significant effect on employee idea fluency in selected Tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

### Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of ethical leadership, on employee innovative work behavior in selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria. In particular, two hypothesis was postulated and tested. The findings in hypotheses one revealed that ethical leadership has positive and significant effect on employee creativity (innovation). The findings revealed dimensions of ethical leadership such as moral character, fairness and justice of leaders significantly affect employee innovative behavior of selected tertiary institution. The findings show a very strong positive correlation (r) 0.725 between ethical leadership and innovative work behavior (creativity). The regression coefficients shows that the result is significant as the significance value is less than 0.05 (i.e.  $0.000 < 0.05$ ) this means that ethical leadership (Moral character, Justice and fairness) has significant effect on employee creativity in selected Tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Hypotheses two also revealed that Ethical leadership has positive significant effect on idea fluency of selected tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The study



revealed a strong positive relationship of 0.693 between ethical leadership and idea fluency. The regression coefficients table shows that the result is significant as the p-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05 (i.e.  $0.000 < 0.05$ ) this implies that ethical leadership (Moral character, Justice and fairness) has significant effect on employee idea fluency in selected Tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The findings of the research work agreed with the findings of Liu et al (2023) who examined how Ethical Leadership Cultivates Innovative Work Behaviors in Employees, Noorizan and Nomahaza (2024) who studied Fostering Innovative Work Behavior: Ethical Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Proactive Personality, Peerasut et al (2024) examined unpacking the relationship between ethical leadership and innovative work behavior.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

The study determined Effect of ethical leadership on employees' innovative work

behavior in selected tertiary institution in Nigeria. The study concludes that ethical leadership have positive significant effect on employee innovative work behavior. In selected tertiary institution in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

i. Management of tertiary institutions should stress characteristics such as ethical, fairness, integrity, justice, responsibility and accountability, role modeling and support, people orientation, to promote positive innovation (creativity) through ethical leadership.

ii. In addition, tertiary institutions should adopt ethical leadership training programs to assist ethical leaders in communicating their openness and acceptance of employees' innovative ideas, recognizing, and appreciating employees' creative and innovative behavior, and avoiding the potential controlling effect of excessive ethical leadership on employee initiative and creativity.

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