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# Role Stress as a Mediator in the Relationship of Ethical Climate with Psychological Well-Being and Turnover Intention

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This study tested the relationship of ethical climate with psychological well-being and turnover intention considering the mediating role of role stress (role conflict and role ambiguity). Data were gathered from 230 employees of National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) who were selected by the stratified random sampling method. The instruments used in this study were Ethical Climate Scale, Psychological Well-being Questionnaire, Turnover Intention Questionnaire, and Role Stress Questionnaire. Structural equation modeling (SEM) through AMOS-18 and SPSS-20 was used for data analysis. The results indicated that the proposed model fit the data properly. Findings also supported the positive relationship of ethical climate with psychological well-being and the negative relationship of ethical climate with turnover intention. The mediating role of the role stress in these relationships was confirmed.

***Keywords***: ethical climate, psychological well-being, turnover intention, role stress

Ethics has become a ‘‘hot topic’’ because of the unfolding of numerous business scandals. This has resulted in an increased



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awareness that unscrupulous behaviors ultimately compromise the long-term viability of the firm (Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2008). Unethical practices affect businesses in a number of ways. First, consumers tend to shy away from products and services from organizations with unethical reputations. This affects current and future business thus hurting the value of the firm. Second, some unethical practices are also illegal or fraudulent, consequently increasing the firm's liability, financial risk, and costs. Third, unethical practices have a pervasive effect on employees' psychological health, attitudes and behaviors (e.g.,

Farkhani, Armoun, & Javidnia, 2013; Huhtala, Feldt, Lamsa, Mauno, & Kinnunen, 2011; Filipova, 2011; Deconic, 2010). In other words, the growing significance placed on the understanding of employees and their (un) ethical behavior within the organization has produced a great deal of interest in investigating employee perceptions of ethical climate within the organization (Riggle, 2007).

*Ethical climat.* Lewin (1939) was one of the first researchers to discuss the concept of perceived work climate when he discussed 'social climate'. Work climate involves both formal and informal employees' perceptions of organizational processes, practices, and policies and influences employees' attitudes and behavior (Deconic, 2010). In organizations, employees perceive work climate to be framed by organizational norms and conventions that exist within the structure and procedures of the organization (Martin & Cullen, 2006).

Ethical climate refers to a type of work climate that reflects organizational policies, procedures, and practices that have moral consequences. Victor and Cullen (1987) are the first researchers



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who introduce the construct of ethical climate. They define ethical climate as "the shared perception of what is correct behavior, and how ethical situations should be handled in an organization". According to Victor and Cullen (1987), ethical climate helps to determine not only issues that are considered to be relevant by the organization but also the criteria to be used to evaluate and respond to these issues. In their early research on ethical climate types, Victor and Cullen (1988) propose that, in general, individual's ethical behavior is guided by three standards: (1) egoism–wishing to maximize own interest, (2) benevolence–desire to do good, and (3) principle–an abstract desire to do what is right irrespective of the outcome or the impact on others. In identifying the different dimensions of ethical climate, Victor and Cullen (1988) also conceptualized three levels of analysis (local, cosmopolitan and individual) used by employees in decisions guiding their ethical behavior. The local level refers to the organization, cosmopolitan level concerns society at large and the individual level relates to personal beliefs. Based on this, Victor and Cullen (1988) conceptualized five primary dimensions of ethical climate in organizations which they named caring, independent, law and code, instrumental, and rules. Others view ethical climate as a uni-dimensional construct used to gauge employee's assessment of the presence and enforcement of codes of ethics, communication of ethical expectations to employees, corporate policies on ethics, and top management actions related to ethics (e.g., Stewart, 2011; Schwepker, 2001). According to Schwepker (2001), ethical climate refers to an employee's perceptions concerning their organization's rules, policies, values, and practices in an ethical context. The ethical aspect of organizational climate refers to the principles of



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right and wrong in an organizational context, and it creates conditions that help to explain and predict the (un)ethical behavior of managers and employees. These principles govern the exchanges of organizational members when they are engaged in organizational activities (Huhtala et al., 2011).

*Psychological well-being*. The concept of well-being is used as a general mental health in the literature of psychology (Yörük & Yörük, 2012). In accordance to the term well-being, authors have made a conceptual distinction between subjective well-being (SWB) and psychological well-being (PWB). SWB is operationalized as involving high positive affect, low negative affect and high satisfaction with life. The construct of PWB was developed in response to a perceived failure of SWB to capture various humanistic concepts of well-being related to identity, meaning, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Psychological well-being focuses on more existential concerns and the way in which an individual interacts with the world. Psychological well-being can be operationalized in various ways, depending on which aspects of life are the focus of theoretical interest (Wood & Joseph, 2010). Psychological well-being started from the conviction that positive health is more than the absence of illness. In other words, psychological well-being is not merely lack of psychological damages but rather it depends on the presence of positive aspects such as positive emotion, a target in life, and a social cooperation (Huber, Suman, Biasi, & Carli, 2008). Ryff (1989) suggested that psychological well-being comprises what one needs to be psychologically well. Ryff (1989) defines well-being in terms of psychological functioning and personal growth and has distinguished six dimensions including autonomy, environmental



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mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Positive relations with others is developing and maintaining close relationships with different people, empathizing and caring about their happiness. Environmental control is shaping the environment and taking the opportunities to meet personal needs. Autonomy is the efforts to have individuality in the social environment and developing thoughts and codes of behavior according to personal standards in spite of social pressure. Life purposes is having aims in life and seeing a meaning in it. Personal growth is being aware of your capacity, making efforts to improve your skills and being open to new experiences (Eldeleklioglu, Yilmaz, & Gültekin, 2010).

According to Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach (2009), conflict of values (i.e., between personal values and those of the organization, or between the officially stated organizational values and the values in action) appears to be among the most prominent factors causing psychological disorders today. Unethical climate perceptions are posited to affect psychological well-being negatively, to the point that any feelings of obligation to the employer either fail to exist or vastly differ from the employer expectations (Martin & Cullen, 2006). Also according to Huhtala et al. (2011), if the culture of an organization is otherwise ethical, a lack of resources that would enable employees to behave and act according to the established ethical standards can be a threat to the employees' psychological well-being.

*Turnover intentions*. Turnover is defined as the "individual movement across the membership boundary of an organization". The concept "individual" refers to the employees within an organization and the notion of movement can be interpreted either



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as an accession or a separation of the company (Price, 2001). Organizations are continually trying to maintain their highly-skilled employees and to encourage them to improve their abilities. Corporations are always concerned about losing their experienced human capital due to the operational and financial implication that turnover brings to them. For example, the lack of retention ability in an organization has led to the loss of skilled and experienced employees (Heydarian & Abhar, 2011**)**. On the other hand, employee turnover affects organizations through money spent on exit interviews, administrative expenses, severance pay, recruiting, and training new hires (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Inderrieden, 2005).

This study utilizes turnover intentions as a proxy for actual turnover behavior. This is consistent with previous researchers' conceptualization of the direct relationship between turnover intentions and turnover behavior (Stewart, 2011), which indicates turnover intentions are the immediate psychological precursor to actual turnover (e.g., Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Turnover intent is defined as the reflection of the (subjective) probability that an individual will change his or her job within a certain time period (Sousa-Poza & Henneberger, 2002). Attitudinal theory suggests that individual evaluations of an object lead to attitudes which subsequently explain behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 2001). Hence, positive evaluations of a firm's ethical climate result in lower turnover intentions. Mulki et al. (2006) reported that employees who operate in an ethical climate, are happier with their jobs, and are less likely to quit.

*Role stress*. Job roles are defined as a pattern of behaviors that the organization requires from employees. In carrying out their jobs,



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employees often have to meet the behavioral expectations of other organizational members placing unique demands on each employee. Thus, job roles can lead to job strain primarily in the form of role conflict and role ambiguity (Rizzo, House Lirtzman, 1970). Role conflict relates to an employee's belief that his or her job requires meeting incompatible demands and expectations (Rizzo et al., 1970). Employees are particularly prone to role conflict because they are boundary spanners trying to meet company requirements and expectations that are often in conflict. On the other hand, role ambiguity reflects the degree to which employees are uncertain about their job functions, expectations and responsibilities (Rizzo et al., 1970). When employees perceive that the organization lacks guidelines that help them deal with ethical dilemmas, they are likely to develop role ambiguity. Riggle (2007) suggests that as employees perceive there to be a positive ethical climate within their organization, a reduction in role stress may occur as role expectations are becoming clearer. Recent research (for example, Deconic, 2010) has investigated and found evidence of a negative relationship between ethical climate and role stress. In stress theories, one common view is that stress results from a transaction between the individual and the environment. As already discussed, contradictory values between organization and employees create a conflict that induces stress. Subsequently, a conflict between employees personal ethics and the perceptions of top manager's ethical values has been found to increase stress (Mulki et al., 2008). Examining the ethical climate and role stress relationship is critical given the known negative effect of role conflict and role ambiguity on employees' job attitudes, behavioral intention, and psychological health (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Solomon, 2006).



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*Mediating role of role stress*. If the organizational climate lacks a well-defined set of ethical standards, it can be a key source of stress for employees and eventually lower well-being. If employees do not feel able to discuss ethical issues with peers and superiors, they often experience the stress of being morally on their own. Employees can feel uncertain about the obligations they have and about what the morally appropriate behavior is, if there are no clear and conventionalized moral standards in the organization (i.e., ethical climate). As a consequence, this can lead to reduced psychological well-being and health (Huhtala et al., 2011).

On the other hand, ethical climate demonstrates a firm's commitment to ethics and provides employees unambiguous information about the firm's ethical expectations. Since ethical climate provides employees with cues about behaviors that are appropriate and acceptable in the organization, thus reducing role stress (Schwepker and Hartline, 2005). A fundamental premise of role stress theory is that lower role stress leads to lower turnover (Rizzo et al., 1970). Recently, a research study has shown that the ethical climate–turnover intention relationship is mediated by role stress (Jaramillo et al., 2006).

The purpose of the current study is to expand on the prior research by examining the mediating roles of role conflict and role ambiguity in the relationship of ethical climate with psychological well-being and turnover intention (see Fig. 1). The proposed model states that ethical climate has direct positive effect on psychological well-being, direct negative effects on turnover intention, role conflict and role ambiguity (hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 4). Further, role conflict and role ambiguity mediate the relations of ethical climate



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with psychological well-being and turnover intention (hypotheses 5, 6, 7, 8).

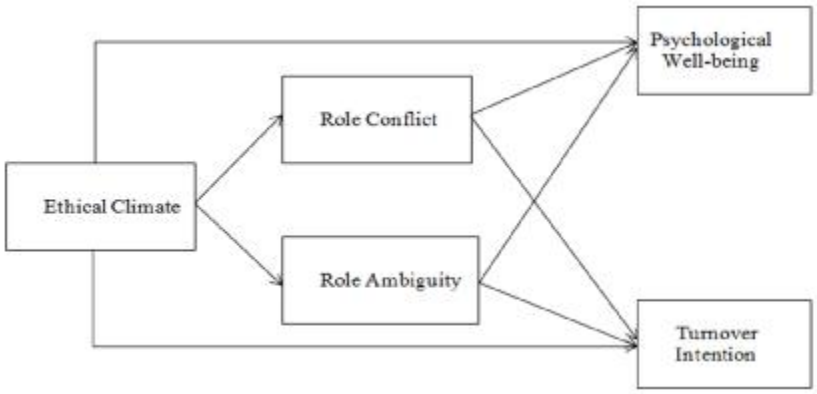



**Figure 1**
**The Research Proposed Model**

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were 270 employees of National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) in Tehran, Iran who were selected by the stratified random sampling method. Questionnaires were distributed to 270 employees. Altogether, 230 questionnaires were returned and analyzed. The response rate was 85%. Of the employees in the final sample 57.4% were men, the average age was 41 years, and the average tenure was 18 years. In addition, 20% possessed a high school diploma, 35.7% had a bachelor degree and 44.3% had a master and doctoral degree.



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**Measures**

*Ethical Climate.* The 7-item questionnaire developed by Schwepker (2001) was used for the assessment of ethical climate. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived ethical climate. Schwepker (2001) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .86 for this questionnaire. In the present study Cronbach's alpha was .85. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) provided evidence for construct validity of this questionnaire in the present study.

*Role Stress*. Participants were asked to report their perceived role stress on a 6-item Role Stress Scale (Rizzo et al., 1970). The scale is comprised two subscales. A 3-item subscale assessing role conflict, and the other 3-item subscale assessing role ambiguity. All responses were obtained on a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with lower scores indicating lower levels of perceived role stress. Rizzo et al.(1970) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .74 and.71for role conflict and role ambiguity respectively.In present study Cronbach's alpha for role conflict and role ambiguity were .68 and .71 respectively. In addition, Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) provided evidence for construct validity of this questionnaire in the present study

*Psychological Well-being*. An 18-item scale designed by Ryff (1995) was used for assessment of employees' psychological well-being. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher levels of psychological well-being. Ryff (1995) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .81 for this scale. In present study Cronbach's alpha was .76. In addition, Confirmatory factor analysis



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(CFA) provided evidence for construct validity of this questionnaire in the present study.

*Turnover Intention*. A 3-item questionnaire developed by Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh (1979) was used for the assessment of turnover intention. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher levels of turnover intention. Camman et al. (1979) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .78 for this scale. In present study Cronbach's alpha was .75.In addition, Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) provided evidence for construct validity of this questionnaire in the present study.

## Results

Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and correlations between research variables are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1**

**Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Research Variables**

| Variable | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Ethical climate | 22.16 | 4.61 | _ | | | | |
| 2. Role conflict | 7.6 | 1.88 | -.49** | _ | | | |
| 3. Role ambiguity | 7.65 | 2.1 | -.62** | .36** | _ | | |
| 4. Psychological well-being | 65.61 | 5.96 | .65** | -.69** | -.77** | _ | |
| 5. Turnover intention | 7.53 | 2.61 | -.59** | .57** | .68** | -.63** | _ |

****P<0.01**



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Structural modeling results suggested that the hypothesized model fit the observed data adequately, $\chi^2$ =2.68 ; df=2 ; $\chi^2$/df=1.34 ;GFI=.99 ; CFI=1 ; TLI=.99 ; NFI=.99 ; RMSEA=.03. All of the hypothesized relationships were supported based on the structural modeling results. The structural model and standardized parameter estimates shown in Figure 2 indicate that hypotheses1, 2, 3 and 4 regarding the direct paths were supported.

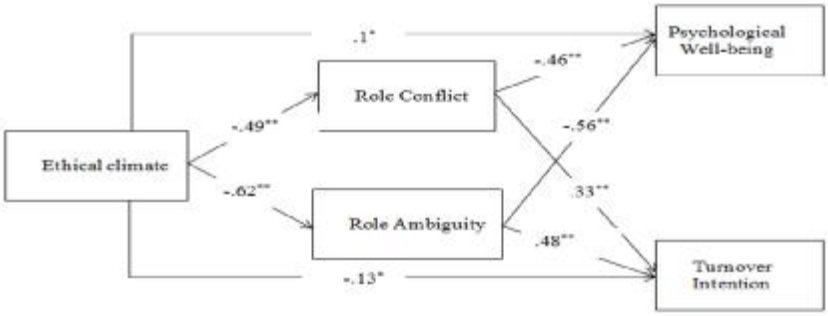



**Figure 2**
**Structural Model with Standardized Coefficients**

Because of the proposed mediation effects (H5 to H8), bootstrapping procedure was used to determine the significance of these effects. Bootstrapping procedure (using 2000 re-sampling) was used to determine the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals around these effects. A confidence interval that did not span zero indicated a statistically significant effect. Tables 2 and 3 indicate the results for bootstrapping analysis.



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**Table 2**

**Results for Bootstrapping Analysis: Effects on Psychological Well-being**

| | Data | Boot | Bias | SE | 95% Confidence interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Total | .7393 | .7404 | .001 | .0609 | .62 | .8627 |
| Through Role Conflict | .2918 | .2923 | .0005 | .0431 | .2091 | .3778 |
| Through Role Ambiguity | .4475 | .4481 | .0006 | .043 | .3667 | .5365 |

**Table 3**

**Results for Bootstrapping Analysis: Effects on Turnover Intention**

| | Data | Boot | Bias | SE | 95% Confidence interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Total | -.2627 | -.2624 | .0003 | .0301 | -.3258 | -.2066 |
| Through Role Conflict | -.0941 | -.935 | .0006 | .0166 | -.1293 | -.0644 |
| Through Role Ambiguity | -.1686 | -.1689 | -.0003 | .0227 | -.2159 | -.1265 |

As shown in Tables 2 and 3, the confidence interval did not span zero which indicates statistically significant mediating effects. The emerged pattern suggests the mediating role of role stress.



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## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the mediating roles of role conflict and role ambiguity (role stress) in the relationship of ethical climate with psychological well-being and turnover intention.

The first hypothesis that ethical climate relate positively to psychological well-being, was supported. This result supports previous research findings (Huhtala et al., 2011; Martin and Cullen, 2006; Lemmergaard & lauridsen, 2008). Both the person-organization fit model (Chatman, 1989) and Leiter–Maslach model for burnout (Leiter and Maslach, 2000) postulate that a conflict of values between an organization and its employees impairs individual psychological well-being. According to Martin and Cullen (2006), unlike job attitudes which implies a directed, affective focus from the employee to the organization, psychological well-being entails an internal affective state. Research and theory suggests that such psychological well-being as a response to organizational climate may be the product of trust, cooperation, cohesion, autonomy, mutual support, or various combinations of these (Lemmergaard & lauridsen, 2008). The result is also consistent with the job resources model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004): job resources play the key role in attaining psychological well-being. Ethicality can be one form of organizational supportiveness, which is seen to promote the well-being and health of the personnel in an organization that values the well-being of its employees (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). This gives reason to conclude that ethical climate is a positive resource for psychological well-being, providing a favorable context for it to flourish. In general, employees will be more psychologically



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healthy if they work in more qualified climate. In other words, the clear objectives, reward mechanisms, procedures and roles and better human communication in the organization will affect employees' psychology positively.

The results also showed that ethical climate has a negative relationship with turnover intention (H2). This finding is consistent with the results of some studies (Farkhani et al., 2013; Filipova, 2011; Mulki et al., 2006). According to organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1990), justice perceptions affect employees' job attitudes and behavioral intentions. In particular, Filipova (2011) stated that perceptions of organizational justice affect turnover intention. Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, and Vera Park (1993) stated that when policies and procedures are perceived as fair, they are also likely to be perceived as ethical. Therefore, climates that foster adherence to fair rules and procedures, and law and codes are likely to positively enhance employee-affective orientations and reduce employee intentions to quit the job. When people believe that the organization endorses unethical behaviors and attitudes such as lying, cheating, and stealing, employees likely have less concern for others and for the organization as a whole and, as a result, greater turnover intention (Martin & Cullen, 2006).

Negative relationships of ethical climate with role conflict and role ambiguity were indicated in the present study (H3 & H4). This is consistent with the findings of Decinic (2010); Mulki et al. (2008) and Riggle (2007). The members of an organization need guidelines on how to act in ethically challenging situations. Our results supported this notion from the viewpoint of managers' reports of stress: if the ethical organizational climate was experienced deficient, employees faced ethical dilemmas more



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frequently and felt more stress in these situations at work. It can be assumed that the existence of a clear ethical climate in an organization reduces ambiguities and conflicts when confronted by ethical issues, as there is an awareness of the expected norms of behavior in these situations; subsequently, this can also reduce the amount of stress experienced by employees. Researchers have noted that organizations are likely to create role stress for workers when they fail to adequately communicate their expectations to them. Failure to communicate expectations is likely to be high when they are ethical in nature. This is because standards for judging what is right and wrong are based on social expectations that are neither universal nor static (Schwepker & Hartline, 2005). A positive work climate where organizational values are in line with employees' moral expectations has been shown to lessen potential conflicts and thus reduces stress. Boundary spanning employees experienced a high degree of role conflict when dealing with ethical situations. Recent studies of marketing managers and employees have shown that reduced conflict among workers happen when they perceive the climate to be highly ethical (mulki et al., 2008).

Supporting the mediating role of role conflict and role ambiguity in the relations of ethical climate with psychological well-being and turnover intention (hypotheses 5, 6, 7, 8) is consistent with the findings of Mulki et al. (2008) and Jaramillo et al. (2006). Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) predicts that employees may experience inequity distress due to lack of consistency between their ethical value system and the unethical work environment. As a result, this can lead to reduced psychological well-being and health. On the other hand, whenever



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there is a balance between these elements, stress will reduce, and as a consequence, psychological well-being will promote.

A premise of the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) is that psychological disorder and exhaustion occurs when employees believe that they do not have adequate resources to meet the job demands (Mulki et al., 2008). The defining of an organization's ethical climate provides clear norms and expectations, as well as preconditions and support for ethical behavior. This reduces both the prevalence of ethical dilemmas and the stress caused by these dilemmas (i.e., ethical strain) and thus leads to better psychological well-being. Equity theory (Adams, 1965) proposes that individuals who perceive themselves as either under-rewarded or over-rewarded will experience distress and that this distress may lead to efforts to restore equity within the relationship. According to Adams (1965), when employees experience inequity distress they will be likely to engage in a variety of behaviors to restore equity (e.g., leave the organization, change work outputs, and so on). Utilizing role stress theory, Jaramillo et al. (2006) argued that the perception of an ethical climate provides employees with cues as to appropriate behavior, which reduces role conflict, role ambiguity, and results in fewer turnover intentions. Official organizational policy concerning ethical situations, as well as confidence that the organization will maintain its ethical codes, likely results in less role stress felt by employees on handling ethical situations. Elimination of this stress by an ethical climate likely results in lesser turnover intention (Stewart, 2011).



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## Conclusion

This research provides additional empirical evidence in support of the notion that ‘‘good ethics’’ is ‘‘good business’’. This study showed that an ethical climate results in lower stress, greater psychological well-being, and a lower level of turnover intention. In conclusion, it is important for an organization to invest in time, knowledge and resources into developing and establishing its ethical norms and practices, in order to decrease stress, increase psychological well-being and prevent that its employees intend to turnover.

Researchers have recognized that fostering a positive ethical climate is not only the ‘‘right thing to do’’ but also a sound business practice (Mulki et al., 2008). Therefore, both employees and managers need guidelines for how to act in ethically challenging situations. Fostering ethical climate requires substantial managerial attention, that is, conscious actions to create an environment in which desired ethical norms can emerge and flourish.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although the study findings lent overall support to the proposed model, there are some limitations that should be noted. First, the data were collected through self-report measures. Survey data may not adequately portray the complexity of employees’ perceptions of work environments. A combination of self-report questionnaires and objective assessments would be ideal. Second, given the cross-sectional design of this study, causal relationships among the variables cannot be established. Longitudinal studies should be employed to test the hypotheses. Longitudinal research clarifies cause and effect relationships. Finally, because the participants



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were employees of NIOC, thus, these results cannot be generalized without taking this into consideration.

**Practical Implications**

Ethical climate is one of the most manageable factors that can be used to influence ethical behavior (Weeks & Nantel, 2004). Development of trust, commitment, and effort among all stakeholders is possible when an organization is seen as being ethical (Mulki et al., 2006). Also, a positive ethical climate that provides objective ethical guidelines makes employees feel good about their job and promotes meaningful work that goes beyond the descriptions of interesting and satisfying (Parboteeah & Cullen, 2003). In addition, ethical climate positively influences the moral thinking of employees thus making them socially responsible corporate citizens (Vitell & Paolillo, 2004).

A strong ethical climate occurs when supervisors and top managers actually ‘‘walk-the-walk’’ and hold themselves to high ethical values and behaviors (Grojean, Resick, Dickson &Smith, 2004). Supervisors can change employee attitudes by taking simple actions such as circulating a code of ethics and clarifying ethical expectations (Weeks & Nantel, 2004). Also, managers can create a positive ethical climate by incorporating such expectations into the reward system (Murphy, 2004). In addition, research findings stress the importance of communicating organizational ethical expectations to employees. Communication is critical because it helps boundary spanning employees to objectively assess whether organizational ethical values are consistent with their own personal values (Jaramillo et al., 2006). This assessment is likely to result in perceptions of congruency between organizational expectations and



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individual employee attitudes, thus leading to positive job attitudes (Schwepker, 2001). Finally, it is generally understood that compliance with law and regulations is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ethical business practice (Michaelson, 2006). Organizations can promote a culture that encourages conduct and commitment to comply with ethical codes. However, effective EC is possible when employees internalize ethical values, go beyond what the rules compel and voluntarily do what is right. Manager`s success in aligning the ethical compliance expectations with employees` ethical values can create an effective ethical organizational climate.

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