

# The Burden of Ethics; Curvilinear Effects of Ethical Leadership on Employee Stress

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## **Abstract:**

Although much is written about the effects of ethical leadership on follower moral behavior and job performance, research on the subjective experience of being a follower of a moral leader is scarce. In the current study, we explore how extremely high levels of ethical leadership can induce stress, and how this interacts with moral identity. In Study 1 (N=212) we show through a vignette design that ethical leadership has a curvilinear relationship with job stress, such that job stress is at its lowest point at moderate levels of ethical leadership, while low and extremely high levels of ethical leadership correspond to higher job stress. Moreover, the effect of ethical leadership interacted with moral identity, such that the effect was stronger for those low in moral identity. In Study 2 (N=184) we replicated this effect in a field study, confirming that the curvilinear pattern from Study 1 is particularly pronounced among those low in moral identity. Implications for research on job stress and insights on the differences in findings between the studies are discussed.