

Article

Personality Characteristics as Predictors of the Leader's Ethical Leadership in Regular Times and in Times of Crisis

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Abstract: Personality traits broadly impact people's behavior and decisions in the organizational realm. One of the leading personality models suggests that people's personalities can be expressed by five dimensions: openness to experience, conscientiousness, pleasantness, extroversion, and neuroticism. While these characteristics are stable in most human lives, they are assumed to be more pronounced in times of crisis, since crises are weak situations. According to the situational strength theory, people are less aware of the desired rules and codes of conduct in weak situations. Thus, they tend to rely more on their traits and less on the existing procedures. The current work aimed to examine if, during a crisis, the personal characteristics of the manager will be more pronounced and thus have a larger influence on their ethical leadership. In three studies, we show a strong link between agreeableness and conscientiousness and the ethical leadership of managers. However, contrary to our hypotheses, the link between personality traits and ethical leadership is stronger in regular times and not during a crisis. Our findings emphasize the importance of characterizing managers' personality traits for organizations' sustainability. Second, they highlight how significant is the relationship between managers and their employees.

Keywords: Big Five personality traits; work motivation; COVID-19 and the workplace



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1. Introduction

This study examines the relationship between managers' characteristics and their ethical behavior towards employees during the corona crisis compared to everyday life. Personality traits have a great influence on peoples' decisions and behavior. This behavior is then reflected in daily life, but also in times of crisis. In the current work, we examine the relationship between personality traits and ethical behavior in times of a major crisis (e.g., the coronavirus crisis). First, we present an overview of the relevant personal characteristics, their stability, and how they are reflected in the workplace. Next, we explain what a crisis is and its potential consequences for the organization. Finally, we review the issue of managers' ethical leadership and its importance in the workplace.

According to the Cambridge English dictionary, a trait is: "a particular characteristic that can produce a particular type of behavior" (Cambridge English dictionary, n.d. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/trait> (accessed on 7 December 2020)). According to McCrae and Costa [1], interpersonal differences between humans may be explained by the five-factor model called the Big Five. The model refers to personality as unique and relatively stable patterns in peoples' lives [2]. Various factors such as genetics and environment may influence personality [3,4] and may even have the ability to predict behavior in different situations in life, i.e., performance at work [5]. The model indicates five main features of character indices that move across a spectrum, and each reflects a key part of how a person thinks, feels, and even behaves [6,7].

The first dimension is openness to experience. It refers to the range of areas of interest. People high in the openness index tend to be more curious about the world and towards

others, imaginative, broad-minded, eager to learn new things, and enjoy new experiences, that is, how open-mindedly they approach new experiences and are willing to explore and understand them. In addition, they tend to appreciate contemporary art, ideas, and values. In contrast, people who are low in this dimension, closed to experience, tend to be more conventional and find comfort in familiar things. Hence, they do not like change, do not enjoy new things, have low imagination, and dislike abstract or theoretical concepts [8,9].

The second dimension is conscientiousness, which is a measure of credibility. People high in conscientiousness tend to be more responsible, organized, reliable, and persistent. Therefore, they plan things in advance and consider how their behavior affects others. In addition, they tend to immediately complete important tasks, pay attention to the small details, and enjoy a set schedule. In contrast, people low in this dimension are spontaneous, easily distracted, disorganized, and unreliable. Therefore, they will not like structure and schedules, fail to return things or put them back where they belong, and often reject or fail to perform important tasks [9,10].

The third dimension is extraversion. This dimension refers to peoples' comfort level with relationships, and is characterized by excitability, sociability, talkativeness, assertiveness, and high emotional expressiveness [11]. People high in the extroversion index tend to be more sociable, assertive, and friendly. Being around other people helps them be more excited and have high energy levels. Therefore, they are also often happy and ambitious. Moreover, they tend to experience more positive emotions than introverted people and express them more easily. In contrast, introverted people tend to be more contemplative, restrained, shy, and quiet. Social events drain them in a way that often they will have to be away from people to "recharge" [9,12].

The fourth dimension is agreeableness, which refers to people's tendency to accept others' opinions. They allow other people in their lives the freedom of choice, and are more likely to accept their views. People high on agreeableness tend to be more cooperative, warm, reliable, polite, and have a great deal of interest in other people. Moreover, they tend to assist others in need and feel empathy and concern for others [11]. In contrast, people who are low in this dimension tend to be hostile and cold and take little interest in the feelings and problems of others. In addition, they might take offense at others' opinions and be manipulative to achieve what they want [9,13].

Finally, the fifth and last dimension is neuroticism. This dimension refers to the tendency to experience negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, or depression. People high on neuroticism tend to be more alert, anxious, nervous, depressed, insecure, and experience mood swings. Thus, they experience much stress, worry too much, struggle to bounce back after stressful events, and get upset easily [11]. In contrast, people low in this dimension tend to be emotionally stable, calmer, and more confident. Therefore, they will more easily cope with stress, rarely experience sadness or depression, won't worry much, and generally be very calm [12,14].

As mentioned above, the five traits remain stable for most of a person's life [9]. Studies find a strong relationship between peoples' behavioral characteristics and their performance in the workplace [15,16]. For example, extrovert employees are better at jobs requiring personal versus interpersonal interactions. In contrast, employees high in neuroticism have difficulty adapting to unexpected or changing demands from the workplace, leading to burnout and conflict. In addition, highly conscientious employees have high levels of knowledge at work, as they are likely to learn more and thus obtain more professional knowledge [17]. Employees high in openness to experience may cope more effectively with organizational changes, while agreeable workers may be more successful in jobs requiring interpersonal orientation (such as customer service). In addition, these employees tend to be more obedient and abide by the rules and regulations of the organization [5,18]. Therefore, understanding personality traits may assist organizations in predicting employees' behavior and enable them to leverage it to their advantage. For example, organizations can adapt different tasks to the employee's personality. Thus, the organization may opti-

mize employees' motivation and performance and, at the same time, the organization's effectiveness., especially in times of crisis [19,20].

However, how personality is translated into behavior also depends on the strength of the situation. According to situational strength theory [21,22], situational strength is how norms or standards dictate appropriate behavior. The strength of the situation can be described in four aspects. First, clarity refers to the degree to which the clues about duties at work and responsibilities are available and clear to employees. Clear roles produce powerful situations because employees immediately understand what they need to do. Second, consistency refers to the degree to which clues about work obligations (that employees must meet) and responsibilities are compatible. Positions with high consistency constitute strong situations because all the clues point to the same desired behavior. Third, constraints refer to the extent to which peoples' freedom to decide or act is limited by forces beyond their control. Roles with many constraints represent strong situations, as employees have limited autonomy under these conditions. Finally, implications relate to the extent to which decisions or actions have important consequences for all members of the organization. Jobs with a significant impact represent strong situations because the environment is likely to be rigidly constructed to protect against mistakes employees may make during their roles [23,24].

When people face a strong situation, it is clearer what are the appropriate behaviors [23]. These behaviors must be adapted to overt or covert rules, policies, and procedures [25]. Routinely, an organizational environment is considered a strong situation [26]. Organizations tend to use laws and procedures to influence the behavior of employees according to their needs [27]. Moreover, a strong situation serves as a tool to moderate unwanted behaviors of employees [24]. Therefore, managers make it clear to the employee what are the desirable and undesirable behaviors. Thus, in strong situations, which are dictated by laws and procedures, personality traits are less expressed [28]. Consider, for example, a situation in which a manager gives specific instructions for completing a task and at the same time threatens the employees with deduction pay if they do not follow instructions. This situation causes employees to "suppress" their natural behaviors and follow instructions.

Moreover, strong situations are characterized by high agreement among employees in the organization regarding the most important work requirements and accepted norms of behavior [29,30]. For example, organizations that emphasize individual rather than group work may lead team players to adapt their behavior.

In contrast, weak situations include fewer clear rules and procedures. Thus, when the workplace constitutes a weak situation, employees have no clear rules to follow, less desirable behavior is expressed, and personality traits are more visible [23]. In addition, people do not share a common perception of the common practices [29]. As a result, people tend to rely more on their personality, which better predicts behavior [31]. This means that people have more room to express themselves than in strong situations, which dictate behavior [32].

In the current work, we argue that times of crises constitute weak situations. A crisis is an irregular, unexpected, and unplanned event that poses a threat to the stability of the system [33,34]. Moreover, crises might threaten an organization's high-priority goals [35]. Crises can have a short- or long-term effect, and they also depend on the amount of damage that can be inflicted. The damage can occur for a few days, weeks, months, years, or even permanently [36]. Situations of crises interrupt the normal operation of organizations, and impact employees, customers, stakeholders, and investors [37]. Usually, crises escalate quickly, and the organization does not have enough time to respond. Moreover, in catastrophic situations such as times of crisis, there is high ambiguity [38], which leads to unclear procedures and blurs the roles and responsibilities of employees and managers. Because times of crises are vague and less obvious, they don't seem to fit the definition of strong situations.

Therefore, it can be argued that crises will lead people to behaviors that are more in line with their personality traits and less in a way that conforms to the accepted guidelines and norms in the organization [39]. For example, when the corona crisis started, no definite rules dictated the desired conduct. In such situations, employees might not get sufficient guidance on how to proceed, what work they should prioritize first, and whether the outline of their work will continue as usual or change (e.g., work from home). Usually, organizations do not expect a crisis [40]. Thus, they are not always ready for it. When a crisis occurs, the organization faces a new, unfamiliar situation requiring resources and skills. Because the organization did not have an estimated appraisal of the impact of the crisis and how it could be addressed, as it progressed, it operates in a new and unfamiliar situation [41].

No organization is immune to possible crises [42]. For the organization, the question is usually not whether there will be a crisis but when and what kind of crisis will occur. The crisis can be described across several characteristics: size, duration, the source of its cause, responsibility, emergency response, rehabilitation, and solution. There are many types of crises organizations can face. Natural disasters, which occur because of natural phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, storms, or any other act of nature. Technological crises, which occur because technology has become more complex and closely linked. As a result, the chances of malfunctioning increased. In addition, financial crises happen when an organization is hit by the sudden loss of a large amount of money. Financial issues such as bankruptcy, revenue losses, inflation, or sudden change in trends in the market can cause financial crises in organizations. Finally, crises can result from violations committed in the organization, such as discrimination, violence, rumors spreading, and deliberate destruction [26,43].

Importantly, crises can significantly affect organizations' sustainability [36,44,45]. If the crisis is not managed effectively, it might disrupt the organization's normal business activities, damage its reputation, weaken its ability to compete in the market, and disrupt the execution of its strategic plan [35,46]. A crisis can cause psychological stress to all involved, especially the manager [47]. While dealing with crises, the manager can experience uncertainty, confusion, chaos, and even panic. Moderate stress levels enhance problem-solving ability, while high levels distort the sense of reality and contaminate sound decision-making. When dealing with crises, managers and the organization system are pushed to their limits [36]. Thus, if organizations do not know how to manage a crisis and deal with it properly, they may experience numerous difficulties in overcoming it [48,49]. Therefore, the antecedents must be considered to manage the crisis efficiently [36].

Winston and Patterson [50] define leaders as people who select, equip, train, and influence their followers. Thus, leaders help direct followers to the organization's mission and objectives. The trait theory emphasizes the leader's traits (physical and personality characteristics, competencies, and values) [51]. This can also be called "The Trait Theory of Leadership," which assumes that people inherit certain qualities and traits which make them better suited to leadership [52].

When managing crises, managers need to demonstrate appropriate behaviors, defined as ethical leadership [53]. Ethics is a philosophical term from the Greek word "ethos," which means character or custom. Ethics is derived from a variety of religions, philosophies, and cultures. It is also a system of moral principles that influence how people make decisions and conduct their lives. Ethics "guides" people on how to live a good life, what are their privileges and responsibilities, and what is "right" and "wrong" [54,55]. Good behavior meets the norms and values defined by society and is called ethical behavior [56].

Ethical leadership demonstrates normative and ethical conduct in the organization [57]. Ethical leadership includes behaviors that the manager shows to employees, such as fairness, integrity, orientation to people, and more [58]. These behaviors form the basis for ethical behavior in the organization and show what is acceptable and what is not. Most employees look at people they consider significant for ethical guidance [55]. Thus, when managers treat their employees fairly and honestly, they demonstrate ethical behavior

and create the basis for ethical conduct in the organization, by setting standards and expectations that honesty and fairness are proper behaviors.

Ethical leadership is essential for the organization's sustainability [59,60]. Organizational sustainability is the organization's ability to maintain and be consistent in its operations, leading to increased performance, profitability, and customer and employee satisfaction [61]. Ethical leadership leads to behaviors that advance organizational performance, productivity, and profitability while benefiting the organization and its employees [62]. As a result, these behaviors contribute to organizational sustainability [63]. Moreover, ethical leadership greatly impacts employees' motivation and performance [64], and it is consistent with their own ethical behavior [65]. In the workplace, managers have a great responsibility for how they behave. Because employees are likely to follow their managers and show similar patterns of behavior [57,66,67], managers must pay attention to their ethical behavior [68–72].

Studies show a direct connection between ethical leadership and the manager's characteristics [67,73]. Personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability were positively related to the manager's ethical leadership. In contrast, openness to experience and extroversion negatively affected ethical leadership [68]. So, managers high on conscientiousness may exhibit more ethical leadership toward employees than extroverted managers. In the current work, we argue that the manager's characteristics are more pronounced during a crisis. This is because crises are weak situations characterized by ambiguous regulations and procedures. Due to the increased ambiguity, managers are more likely to rely on their characteristics and less according to the rules of the organization. Thus, we hypothesize that during the corona crisis, the personal characteristics of managers will have a larger influence on their ethical behavior relative to regular times.

2. Study 1

Study 1 explores the connection between the Big Five personality traits of managers and their ethical leadership. According to the claim that a crisis will moderate the relationship between personality traits and ethical leadership, and based on the rationale presented above, we hypothesized that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there would be a high correlation between ethical leadership and all five personality traits (Agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness to experience, and extroversion), as follows:

H1: *There will be a positive correlation between the managers' agreeableness level and their ethical leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

H2: *There will be a positive correlation between the managers' conscientiousness level and their ethical leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

H3: *There will be a positive correlation between the managers' neuroticism level and their ethical leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

H4: *There will be a negative correlation between the managers' openness to experience level and their ethical leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

H5: *There will be a negative correlation between the managers' extroversion level and their ethical leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

One hundred and two individuals who currently work, have a direct supervisor, and have work seniority of at least one month participated in the study. Fifty-nine were female, and forty three were male. Two participants did not complete the questionnaire, and two did not meet the threshold requirement for job seniority and were thus excluded from the final analysis. The sample size was not predetermined; rather, we aimed to get as

many participants as possible (and at least 100) during a three-week timeframe. The ages ranged from 20 to 66 years, with a mean age of 36.9 (SD = 11.76). The seniority ranged from 6 months to 40 years, with a mean of 7.5 years (SD = 8.7). Participation was completely voluntary and contingent upon signing a consent form. The participants were recruited via posts on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. During data collection, COVID-19 protocols (e.g., masks, social distancing) were followed, and participants were debriefed in writing at the end of the study.

2.1.2. Design and Procedure

Participants were presented with a Qualtrics web-based questionnaire composed of four blocks (see in full in Appendix SA). The first block was composed of a variant of the Big Five Inventory (BFI) scale [74]. Specifically, participants were required to rate their managers and not themselves. The BFI includes 44 items that are aimed to examine extraversion (“is talkative”), agreeableness (“tends to find fault with others”), conscientiousness (“does a thorough job”), neuroticism (“is depressed, blue”), and openness (“is original, comes up with new ideas”). For each item, the participants were required to indicate how much they think it represents their manager, on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The second block includes the Ethical Leadership Measure [75]. Here too, the participants were required to answer the questionnaire about their manager. The questionnaire measures morality and fairness (“makes sure that his/her actions are always ethical”), role clarification (“explains who is responsible for what”), and power sharing (“allows subordinates to influence critical decisions”). The questionnaire includes 17 items to which the participants have to indicate the extent it reflects their manager’s behavior on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The third block included the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) [57]. In fact, the ELS is a shorter tool (10 items) that measures the ethical leadership of the manager. For each item, the participants needed to indicate how much it represents their manager, on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The ELS was used to test if we could use a shorter version to get a reliable measure of ethical leadership.

Finally, the fourth block included demographic questions such as gender, age, marital status, number of children, religion, and seniority. The order of blocks was identical to all participants, who completed the questionnaire at home with no time constraints. Completing the survey took approximately 10 min. After completion, participants were debriefed.

2.2. Results and Discussion

To check the reliability of our questionnaire, we calculated the internal consistency of each of the Big Five personality traits and the two ethical leadership questionnaires. In the Big Five, the internal consistency of all five traits was high: Cronbach’s alpha (Extraversion) = 0.72, Cronbach’s alpha (Agreeableness) = 0.93, Cronbach’s alpha (Conscientiousness) = 0.88, Cronbach’s alpha (Neuroticism) = 0.88, and Cronbach’s alpha (Openness to experience) = 0.83. Similarly, the internal consistency of the ELS (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.91) and the ELM (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.94) was very high. In addition, we found a strong and significant correlation between the short and the long measures of ethical leadership ($r = 0.86, p < 0.0001$). Thus, we used the shorter (ELS) version as our dependent variable in this and the following studies.

To test our hypotheses, we ran a stepwise regression analysis predicting ethical leadership based on the five personality traits (see Table 1). This analysis revealed that the best model includes only agreeableness (BETA = 0.476, $t(100) = 6.149, p < 0.0001$) and conscientiousness (BETA = 0.449, $t(100) = 6.508, p < 0.0001$). This model explains 72.1% of the variance in the ethical leadership of the manager ($F(2, 100) = 132.984, p < 0.0001$). The remaining Big Five traits were excluded from the model ($p_{\text{Extraversion}} = 0.161, p_{\text{Neuroticism}} = 0.724, \text{ and } p_{\text{Openness to experience}} = 0.092$). This pattern of results supports H1 and H2, but not H3–H5. Specifically, we found that managers with high levels of agreeableness and conscientious-

ness exhibit higher levels of ethical leadership. However, contrary to our hypotheses, there was no correlation between ethical leadership and the remaining personality traits. This pattern of results suggests that ethical leadership in times of crisis is connected only with agreeableness and conscientiousness, but not with all Big Five personality traits.

Table 1. Stepwise regression analysis predicting ethical leadership based on the Big Five personality traits in Study 1.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	0.209	0.213		0.978	0.330
Agreeableness	0.425	0.065	0.476	6.508	0.0001
Conscientiousness	0.484	0.079	0.449	6.149	0.0001
Model summary					
Model	R	Adj. R ²	SE of the estimate	F	Sig.
	0.852	0.72	0.482	167.211	0.0001

3. Study 2

Study 1 showed that during the COVID-19 crisis, agreeableness and conscientiousness served as strong predictors of the ethical leadership of the managers during the pandemic. In Study 2, we aimed to examine if the predictive power of the Big Five personality traits is different in regular times than in times of crisis. To do so, we replicated Study 1, but this time we asked participants to report their manager's ethical behavior during the corona period and before it started. Based on the theoretical framework presented above, we hypothesized that (H6) the correlation between ethical leadership and the five personality traits would be stronger during the COVID-19 pandemic than before the pandemic started.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

One hundred fifty individuals who currently work, have a direct supervisor, and have work seniority of at least one month participated in the study. A total of 109 were female, and 41 were male. The sample size was not predetermined; rather, we aimed to get as many participants as possible (and at least 100) during a three-week timeframe. The ages ranged from 18 to 59 years, with a mean age of 33.9 (SD = 8.8). The seniority ranged from 1 to 33 years, with a mean of 7.1 years (SD = 6.9). Participation was completely voluntary and contingent upon signing a consent form. The participants were recruited via posts on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. During data collection, COVID-19 protocols (e.g., masks, social distancing) were followed, and participants were debriefed in writing at the end of the study.

3.1.2. Design and Procedure

Participants were presented with a Qualtrics web-based questionnaire composed of four blocks (see in full in Appendix SB). The first two blocks were composed of the same variant of the BFI scale [74] and the short ELS [57] as in Study 1.

The third block included a distraction task, used to ensure that the participants' responses to the questionnaire in the first phase would have as little effect as possible on their answers in the fourth block. In the task, participants were presented with ten square matrices composed of small squares in two colors—green and orange. The images were displayed for only 3 s. After the picture disappeared, participants were asked to indicate which color was more dominant (had more cells in the matrix).

The fourth block included the same ELS [57] as in the second block. Half of the participants were required to rate the ethical leadership of their manager during the corona crisis in the second block and before the corona in the fourth block. For the other half, this

order was reversed. Finally, the participants were required to answer several demographic questions as in Study 1.

3.2. Results and Discussion

To check the reliability of our questionnaire, we calculated the internal consistency of each of the Big Five personality traits and the ELS. In the Big Five, the internal consistency of all five traits was high: Cronbach's alpha (Extraversion) = 0.73, Cronbach's alpha (Agreeableness) = 0.90, Cronbach's alpha (Conscientiousness) = 0.85, Cronbach's alpha (Neuroticism) = 0.85, and Cronbach's alpha (Openness to experience) = 0.79. Similarly, the internal consistency of the ELS before the corona crisis (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90) and during (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94) was very high.

To test our hypothesis, we ran two regression analyses to predict the ethical leadership of the manager before and during the corona crisis based on the five personality traits. To make sure that the two models use the same parameters, we did not use stepwise regression. Before the pandemic (upper panel of Table 2), the model was highly significant ($F(5, 125) = 47.910, p < 0.0001, \text{Adj } R^2 = 64.3\%$). However, as in Study 1, only agreeableness ($\text{BETA} = 0.362, t(129) = 4.376, p < 0.0001$) and conscientiousness ($\text{BETA} = 0.472, t(129) = 6.741, p < 0.0001$) were significant predictors. Similarly, during the pandemic, the model was significant too ($F(5, 125) = 29.174, p < 0.0001, \text{Adj } R^2 = 52.0\%$), albeit the R^2 was somewhat lower than in the first model (lower panel of Table 2). Again, the only significant predictors were agreeableness ($\text{BETA} = 0.480, t(129) = 5.0001, p < 0.0001$) and conscientiousness ($\text{BETA} = 0.274, t(129) = 3.369, p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Regression analyses predicting ethical leadership before (upper panel) and during the corona crisis (lower panel) based on the Big Five personality traits in Study 2.

Before the Pandemic	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	0.648	0.455		1.422	0.157
Agreeableness	0.320	0.073	0.362	4.376	0.0001
Conscientiousness	0.522	0.077	0.472	6.741	0.0001
Extraversion	0.090	0.080	0.071	1.126	0.262
Neuroticism	−0.112	0.076	−0.109	−1.471	0.144
Openness to experience	−0.054	0.084	−0.045	−0.643	0.521
Model summary	R	Adj. R^2	SE of the estimate	F	Sig
	0.811	0.643	0.504	47.910	0.0001
During the Pandemic	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	−0.394	0.600		−0.657	0.513
Agreeableness	0.482	0.096	0.480	5.001	0.0001
Conscientiousness	0.344	0.102	0.274	3.369	0.0001
Extraversion	0.110	0.106	0.076	1.044	0.298
Neuroticism	0.023	0.100	0.020	0.229	0.819
Openness to experience	0.142	0.111	0.103	1.278	0.204
Model summary	R	Adj. R^2	SE of the estimate	F	Sig
	0.734	0.52	0.664	29.174	0.0001

To test the difference between the predictive power of the two models, we used a measure for comparing correlations from a dependent sample [76]. This analysis revealed a marginally significant difference between the two models ($z = -1.783, p = 0.07$). However, this pattern of results suggests that before the pandemic, the correlation between the two

personality traits and the ethical leadership of the manager was stronger than during the pandemic. Therefore, this result does not support H6.

4. Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 show a strong link between agreeableness and conscientiousness and the ethical leadership of the manager. However, contrary to our hypothesis, this link was weaker during a crisis than in the time before the crisis. Importantly, Studies 1 and 2 were conducted during an active wave of the coronavirus (that is, during the crisis). Thus, the ethical leadership of the managers was measured in retrospect. This might have affected the employees' choices, despite the distraction task. Fortunately, due to a high vaccination rate during the beginning of 2021, there was a relatively long period in which people in Israel believed that the corona crisis was over. Thus, we were able to measure ethical leadership not during a crisis, but rather during a "normal" period. Based on our claim that a crisis will moderate the relationship between personality traits and ethical leadership, we predicted that (H7) after the COVID-19 pandemic, the correlation between ethical leadership and the Big Five personality traits will be weaker.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

Four hundred forty-seven individuals who currently work, have a direct supervisor, and have work seniority of at least one month participated in the study. A total of 349 were female, and 97 were male. The sample size was not predetermined; rather, we aimed to get as many participants as possible (and at least 100) during a three-week timeframe. The age ranged from 18 to 68 years, with a mean age of 34.5 years ($SD = 10.8$). The seniority ranged from 1 week to 35 years, with a mean of 6.8 years ($SD = 8.0$). Participation was completely voluntary and contingent upon signing a consent form. The participants were recruited via posts on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. During data collection, COVID-19 protocols (e.g., masks and social distancing) were followed, and participants were debriefed in writing at the end of the study.

4.1.2. Design and Procedure

Participants were presented with a Qualtrics web-based questionnaire composed of three blocks. The first block included the same variant of the Big Five Inventory (BFI) scale [74] used in the previous studies. Similarly, the second block included the ELS [57]. However, the participants were asked about the behavior of their manager previously—during "regular" time and not during the corona crisis. Finally, the third block included the same demographic questions as in Studies 1 and 2.

4.2. Results and Discussion

To check the reliability of our questionnaire, we calculated the internal consistency of each of the Big Five personality traits and the ELS. In the Big Five, the internal consistency of all five traits was high: Cronbach's alpha (extraversion) = 0.75, Cronbach's alpha (agreeableness) = 0.89, Cronbach's alpha (conscientiousness) = 0.84, Cronbach's alpha (neuroticism) = 0.86, and Cronbach's alpha (openness to experience) = 0.76. Similarly, the internal consistency of the ELS (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90) was very high.

To test our hypothesis, we ran a stepwise regression analysis predicting ethical leadership based on the five personality traits (see Table 3). This analysis revealed that the best model includes agreeableness ($BETA = 0.424$, $t(449) = 12.281$, $p < 0.0001$), conscientiousness ($BETA = 0.389$, $t(449) = 11.019$, $p < 0.0001$), openness to experience ($BETA = 0.107$, $t(449) = 3.038$, $p < 0.005$), and extraversion ($BETA = 0.083$, $t(449) = 2.556$, $p < 0.0001$). This model explains 64.6% of the variance in the ethical leadership of the manager ($F(4, 446) = 205.871$, $p < 0.0001$). Neuroticism was the only trait excluded from the model ($p_{Neuroticism} = 0.735$). The reason might be that people high on neuroticism tend to be more stressed and worry too much. Thus, during the corona crisis, they were less occupied with work and more

about the consequences of the crisis (e.g., fear of getting infected, getting vaccinated, and their employment stability; [11]). Therefore, the neurotic manager doesn't have the time to think about his employees during a crisis.

Table 3. Stepwise regression analysis predicting ethical leadership based on the Big Five personality traits in Study 3.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	−0.260	0.151		−1.721	0.086
Agreeableness	0.408	0.033	0.424	12.281	0.0001
Conscientiousness	0.431	0.039	0.389	11.019	0.0001
Openness to experience	0.136	0.045	0.107	3.038	0.03
Extraversion	0.091	0.036	0.083	2.556	0.011
Model summary					
Model	R	Adj. R ²	SE of the estimate	F	Sig.
	0.805	0.65	0.469	205.871	0.0001

Importantly, although ethical leadership in regular times is explained by more traits (4) than during a crisis (2), the explained variance is smaller (64.6% relative to 72.1% in Study 1). However, a comparison of correlations from independent samples [76] revealed that this difference is only marginally significant ($z = 1.351, p = 0.18$). This pattern of results does not support H7.

5. General Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between managers' personality traits and ethical leadership, as perceived by their employees. Understanding the personality trait of the manager is important because of the potential for influencing employee behavior [57]. Previous research examined the link between the personality traits of managers [77] and their ethical leadership [53]. However, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to examine this link during a crisis versus regular times.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

In general, all three studies found a strong relationship between agreeableness and conscientiousness to ethical leadership. Thus, it seems that these two personality traits have a strong relationship with ethical leadership both in times of crisis and in normal times. People high on agreeableness tend to be more cooperative, warm, reliable, polite, and have a great deal of interest in other people [11]. These people tend to be nicer and more reliable, mainly because they desire to maintain positive relations with others [78], be considerate, trustworthy, understanding, and responsive to the needs and goals of others [57,68]. Thus, agreeable people tend to exhibit more ethical behavior towards others [58]. However, contrary to our hypothesis, we found that the link between agreeableness and ethical leadership was stronger in normal times rather than in times of crisis. Previous research shows that agreeableness is negatively linked with voice behavior [79], that is, behaviors that aim to make changes and challenge the status quo [80]. Thus, it might be that during crises, managers who need to attend to more pressing matters and lead to organizational change, have less time and energy to invest in their relationship with the employees.

In addition, people high in the conscientiousness dimension tend to be organized, efficient, goal-oriented, and persistent [9,10]. Conscientiousness is also strongly linked to job performance [81]. Here too, we found a stronger link between conscientiousness and ethical leadership during regular times than in times of crisis. Since conscientiousness represents dependability, responsibility, need for achievement, rule-following, and preference for structure [82–84], managers high in conscientiousness might experience

trouble solving problems that are non-routine and ambiguous. Since times of crisis are highly dynamic and ambiguous [38,85], rule-abiding and structure-following managers might find it difficult to adapt to the changing environment, thereby risking organizational success. In crises, such meticulous managers may focus on surviving the crisis and creating a work environment with centralized authority, while ignoring the interpersonal aspects of the work environment [86,87].

Psychologists identify agreeableness and conscientiousness as being generally correlated with prosocial behavior (e.g., volunteering work or helping a neighbor carry groceries; [88]). This can explain the strong link between ethical leadership and these traits and why managers with these personality traits tend to exhibit more ethical behaviors toward employees in regular times and crises.

Association between openness to experience and extroversion to ethical leadership was found only in normal times but not during crises. People high in the openness index tend to be more curious about the world and other people, imaginative, broad-minded, eager to learn new things, and enjoy new experiences [8,9]. In addition, people high in the extroversion index tend to be more sociable, assertive, and friendly. Being around other people helps them be more excited and have high energy levels. Moreover, they tend to experience more positive emotions than introverts and express them more easily [9,12]. During the corona crisis, there was a complete lockdown, and many workers were forced to work from home or in capsules. Thus, the connection of managers with their employees was interrupted. In line with social learning theory [89], ethical leadership depends on direct interaction or observation. Direct interactions and observations are crucial for both direct imitation effects and indirect learning. Thus, during the corona crisis, it may be harder for managers to exhibit ethical leadership toward their employees [90]. Although we did not ask our participants if they worked from home or not, two of our studies were conducted during one of the lockdowns in Israel, and many workers could not come to the office. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the weaker link between the managers' personality traits and ethical leadership was due to the unique consequences of the corona crisis, which reduced social contact in the workplace.

Interestingly, no association was found between neuroticism and ethical leadership both in times of crisis and normal times. People high in neuroticism tend to be more alert, anxious, nervous, experience mood swings, depressed, and insecure [11]. This is because they are hostile and distant, and focus on negative aspects of others and themselves [91]. In addition, people high in neuroticism experience lower life satisfaction and emotional stability [92,93]. Moreover, neuroticism is negatively related to effective work and performance under conditions of stress and conflict [94]. As a result, neurotic managers may be less perceived as role models [58]. In addition, since neurotic managers have trouble maintaining effective interpersonal relationships and creating a positive work environment even in regular times [95], it should not be surprising that this personality is not connected with ethical leadership.

Lastly, it is important to note that our main hypothesis that individual characteristics will be more pronounced during crises was not supported. This hypothesis was based on the surmise that the corona crisis is a weak situation with fewer clear rules and procedures. As suggested by the situational strength theory [21,22], weak situations lack clear norms and rules, and thus people have to rely more on their personality characteristics. In line with this rationale, it has been argued that leaders' character plays a crucial role in organizations' ability to deal with crises [20]. However, in light of the clear restrictions and government regulations during the pandemic [96], it might be that COVID-19 is a unique crisis that might constitute a strong situation [97]. Thus, as suggested by our findings, people might rely less on their personality traits relative to regular times and other types of crises. Of course, this should be examined in future research.

5.2. Practical and Social Implications

The main purpose of the study was to test whether managers' characteristics are more pronounced during a crisis. We hypothesized that during the corona crisis, the individual characteristics of managers would have a larger influence on their ethical behavior, relative to regular times. Ethical leadership is highly important for the organization's sustainability [36,44,45], and employees look at people they consider significant for moral guidance [55]. Managers who exhibit ethical behavior toward their employees improve their relationship with them, and increase organizational trust. As a result, employees are more likely to stay in the organization longer [98].

Understanding the connection between managers' personality traits to ethical leadership is highly important for the sustainability of organizations. Ethical leadership predicts important organizational outcomes such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and organizational commitment (OC), satisfaction with the supervisor, and perceived leader effectiveness [57,68,73]. Furthermore, positive manager–employee relationships encourage productivity and cooperation among workers [99]. Contrary, poor relationships can directly impact employee performance and retention [100]. Consequently, ethical leadership can affect employee retention.

Thus, our study has broad practical implications for the workplace. First, it emphasizes the importance of characterizing managers' personality traits for organizations' sustainability. That managers' personality traits are linked to ethical leadership [57], demonstrates that knowledge about the managers' Big Five traits has a direct value in the workplace. By considering managers high on certain personality traits, organizations can ensure their managers will exhibit ethical leadership and improve organizational performance [101]. As a result, ethical leadership can affect employees' behavior and lead to organizational flourishing and sustainability [102].

In addition, our study highlights the importance of the relationship between managers and their employees. Managerial behaviors greatly impact employees and the organization [57]. Prime examples are higher job performance [103], job satisfaction [104], and dedication [57]. In crises, the managers are responsible for leading the organization to safety and executing the crisis management plan [105]. Understanding the behavior of managers may make it possible to predict certain situations in advance and even prevent future crises or make it significantly easier to deal with them [106,107]. Consider, for example, an organization dealing with cybersecurity breaches and hacks. Such a situation puts the organization at risk of leaking classified materials, so they must execute a crisis management plan. Hiring managers high on conscientiousness might ensure they will be focused, reliable, and "get the job done" [108].

5.3. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

There are some limitations to our study that should be taken into consideration. First, the study was done based on employee reporting. We did not measure personality traits from the managers' perspective. For example, in the Big Five Questionnaire, employees reported how they think their manager behaves. Thus, future research should examine the correlation between the managers' self-reports vs. that of the employees. Second, the seniority of employees in our studies ranged from a few weeks to many years. It can constitute a limitation, because employees who work in the organization for a short time (e.g., only a week) do not necessarily know their manager well enough compared to more senior employees. Third, the employees retrospectively reported on their managers' behavior, and thus their accuracy might be reduced [109,110]. Still, Study 3 was conducted between lockdowns, when the crisis was contained. The fact that the results in Study 3 were similar to those of the previous studies undermines the effects of this limitation. Finally, we focused on managers' personality traits and behavior during the corona crisis and regular times. Since the corona crisis is unique in its effect on people, the workplace, and society as a whole [111], future research should examine the robustness of our findings

in different types of crises. By understanding the unique effects of crises of various kinds, organizations can be more prepared to deal with them [112].

5.4. Conclusions

In the last two years, employees and managers faced one of the most intense and long-lasting crises in history. Dealing with it introduced many challenges to both individuals and organizations. In the current work, we examined the effect of personality traits, which broadly impact people's behavior and decisions in organizations [15,16], on the ethical leadership of managers. Personality traits are stable in most human lives; however, they are assumed to be more pronounced in times of crisis, since crises are weak situations in which people are less aware of the desired rules and codes of conduct [23]. Thus, people tend to rely more on their traits and less on the existing procedures.

In three studies, we found a strong link between agreeableness and conscientiousness and the ethical leadership of managers during a crisis. However, ethical leadership after the crisis was correlated with four out of the five major personality traits. Thus, the link between personality traits and ethical leadership seems stronger in regular times and not during a crisis, at least during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. These results have important implications for the workplace. First, it highlights how significant is the relationship between managers and their employees. Second, it emphasizes the importance of characterizing managers' personality traits for organizations' sustainability and show that personality traits may help understand the effect of crises, and predict how employees will react to such situations in the future.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su14169800/s1>, Appendix SA, Study 1 questionnaire. Appendix SB, Study 2 questionnaire.

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