



**When good leaders break bad: Moral licensing
and ego depletion consequences of ethical
leader behavior**

Abstract:

The ethical leadership literature has predominantly focused on the benefits of ethical leader behaviors for subordinates and teams, but what might be the effects of such behaviors for the leaders themselves? Drawing from ego depletion and moral licensing theories, I will present empirical results that suggest ethical leader behavior may

come at some cost to the leaders who exhibit it. Using a multi-wave design that tracked behavior over consecutive days, it was found that leaders' displays of ethical behavior were positively associated with increases in abusive behavior the following day. This association was mediated by increases in depletion and moral credits stemming from leaders' displays of ethical behavior. These results suggest that attention is needed to balance the benefits of ethical leadership for recipients against the challenges that such behaviors pose for leaders, which include feelings of mental fatigue and psychological license and ultimately abusive interpersonal behaviors.