

How Leader's Language Framing Affects Employees' Perceptions and Moral Judgment in Organizations

Authors : Cindy Carvalho

Abstract : Leaders play a crucial role in shaping employee behavior through their communication. Language is a powerful tool used by leaders to influence perceptions, frame actions, and shape organizational culture. While euphemisms and metaphors are widely used, their impact on unethical behaviors in organizational settings remains underexplored. This study investigates how euphemistic and aggressive (military) language in leaders' speeches can influence employees' perceptions and encourage unethical behaviors. Two studies were conducted using a between-subjects design where 200 participants for the first study and 280 participants for the second study, recruited through Prolific, were exposed to either a euphemistic or aggressive (military) version of a hypothetical CEO's speech. They evaluated their perception of the CEO and the company's attractiveness. In the second part, participants were presented with three vignettes describing each different daily business situation tainted with ethical issues and they were asked how likely they would engage in such behavior. The type of speech impacted the perceptions of the CEO, with the military version leading to participants judging the CEO as less trustworthy, fair, and moral. However, no significant difference in moral judgment or organizational perception was observed. Interestingly, younger participants and female participants rated the CEO more negatively compared to older and male counterparts. The findings suggest that language framing influences perceptions of leadership but may have a limited immediate impact on ethical decision-making. The study's limitations include hypothetical context, isolated focus on language, and lack of incentives. Incentives push participants to consider their responses carefully and align them with perceived norms, reducing biases like social desirability. Future research should examine real-world settings and consider factors such as age, gender, and experience to understand unethical behavior in organizations better.

Keywords : leadership communication, language framing, ethical behavior, euphemism

Conference Title : ICLM 2025 : International Conference on Leadership and Management

Conference Location : Zurich, Switzerland

Conference Dates : September 16-17, 2025