

# Ethical Leadership and Employees' Innovative Behavior: Exploring the Mediating Role of Organizational Support

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## Abstract

**Purpose-** The primary purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and innovative behavior of employees in Nepalese commercial banks with the mediating role of organizational support.

**Design/Methodology/Approach-** To examine the relationship between ethical leadership and innovative behavior, with organizational support as a mediator, a descriptive and causal research design was employed. Data were collected from a sample of 287 employees at various capacity levels within Nepalese commercial banks, using a convenience sampling technique.

**Findings-** This study reveals that ethical leadership significantly fosters innovative behavior among employees in Nepalese commercial banks, with organizational support serving as a key mediating factor. Strong organizational support amplifies this relationship by offering essential resources, encouragement, and a secure environment that nurtures creativity and innovation.

**Implications-** The findings of the study indicate that prioritizing ethical leadership training and strengthening organizational support systems can substantially boost employee innovative behaviour. This, in turn, contributes to enhance organizational performance and strengthens competitive advantages of the business.

**Originality/Value-** This study provides new insights into the impact of ethical leadership and organizational support system on innovative behavior. Further it supports for fostering a culture of innovation, which is critical for enhancing competitiveness in the banking sector.

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**Keywords:** *ethical leadership, innovative behavior, organizational support, Nepalese commercial banks, organizational success*  
**JEL Classification:** M12, O31, M54

## Introduction

In today's competitive business landscape, innovation is essential for securing organizational success and ensuring long-term sustainability (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Armstrong, 2000). To adapt to the changing market demands and trends, fostering employees' innovative behavior is vital, as it forms the foundation of innovation to the organization (Hau & Kang, 2016; Liu, 2017; Al-Bashayreh et al., 2022). Employee innovative behavior includes various dimensions such as originality, flexibility, idea fluency, and sensitivity to problems. This behavior is particularly important in the service industry, where teamwork and collaboration are essential, allowing team members to share insights and develop new service offerings based on customer feedback (Cheung & Wong, 2011). Consequently, organizations are increasingly committed to promoting innovative behavior among employees to enhance service and product quality, as well as overall organizational performance (Luoh et al., 2014).

To remain competitive and succeed in today's market, businesses must encourage individual innovation. Companies are continually exploring strategies to inspire their employees to think creatively and generate original ideas (Gu et al., 2015). Numerous studies have explored the factors influencing employee creativity to understand what promotes or inhibits innovation within organizations (Chaubey & Sahoo, 2022; Zhang et al. 2013). Among various leadership styles, ethical leadership stands out for its effectiveness in fostering creativity. Ethical leadership, characterized by fairness, shared power, a focus on people, and integrity which fosters creativity in organizations (Liu et al., 2023). Leaders who practice ethical leadership provide clear direction and support, identify and develop their employees' potential, and cultivate a strong dedication to the organization's vision and objectives (Metwally et al., 2019). Leadership emerges as a particularly significant factor in shaping employees' innovative behavior and driving overall organizational innovation. As noted by Prasad and Junni (2016), leadership is crucial in motivating employees to be creative and in providing the necessary resources for idea development.

The existing literature underscores the importance of ethical leadership in fostering employee innovation (Dhar, 2016; Javed et al., 2018). As corporate ethics continue to draw increasing attention, understanding how leaders can encourage innovation through ethical practices and the impact of ethical leadership styles on organizational outcomes has become essential (Tu et al., 2019). This study seeks to investigate the influence of ethical leadership on employee innovation specifically within the context of Nepalese commercial banks. Ethical leadership is closely tied to the social dynamics of an organization (Loi et al., 2015), suggesting that organizational support may serve as a mediating factor. To address current gaps in the literature, this research aims to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and employee innovation, considering the role of organizational support as a mediator in Nepalese commercial banks.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Ethical leaders are characterized by their unwavering commitment to moral principles, values, and vision. This commitment is reflected in their decision-making, performance expectations, and their initiatives to foster ethical conduct within their organizations. They establish a communication style characterized by trust, transparency, and sincerity, particularly concerning ethical standards. Their leadership approach is people-centered, reflecting a genuine concern for employees' well-being and a commitment to enhancing

their job experiences by increasing the autonomy on the job (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2008). Brown et al. (2005) highlighted that ethical leadership involves modeling appropriate behavior and encouraging similar conduct in others through open communication, positive reinforcement, and fair decision-making. Ethical leaders are impartial, uphold integrity, and consider employees' needs while ensuring equitable treatment of their rights (Zhu et al., 2004). The impact of leaders on employees is profound, affecting their moods, motivation, performance, and overall behavior. Effective leadership is fundamentally rooted in ethical conduct and transparent communication (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Ethical leadership not only fosters a positive organizational culture but also shapes the ethical climate of the workplace (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Resick et al. (2006) identified six key traits of ethical leaders: integrity, ethical awareness, commitment to societal values, and the ability to inspire, support, and empower others while maintaining ethical responsibilities.

The organizational support theory propounded by Eisenberger et al. (1986) highlighted that active organizational support enhances employee well-being and fosters a positive view of the employer. This supportive environment motivates employees to reciprocate with improved performance and discretionary efforts that go beyond their regular duties. This concept is consistent with the socially embedded model of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005), which argues that work environments marked by trust, respect, and autonomy in decision-making promote proactive employee behaviors. Such supportive contexts not only increase job engagement but also stimulate creativity and innovation (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Niessen et al., 2012; Prem et al., 2017; Guan & Frenkel, 2018). When employees feel valued and respected, they perceive their well-being as important (Armeli et al., 1998). Gregory et al. (2010) highlighted that employees who receive genuine feedback and are encouraged to explore creative ideas are more likely to display innovative behaviors. Similarly, Afsar and Badir (2017) found that organizations that prioritize employee needs and well-being encourage proactive behaviors, such as innovative work behavior. Pohl et al. (2013) further argue that employees who believe their contributions are valued by the organization are more likely to exert extra effort towards achieving organizational goals.

Employee creative behavior is the capacity to generate novel and valuable ideas that solve problems, enhance task performance, and boost organizational outcomes (Al-Okaily & Al-Okaily, 2022; Amabile & Pratt, 2016). This behavior involves thinking innovatively, taking calculated risks, and challenging established norms (Bouckennooghe et al. 2015). To cultivate an environment that nurtures creativity, organizations must ensure several critical elements are in place. To foster employee creativity and innovation, organizations should allocate sufficient time and resources, offer targeted training to improve skills and problem-solving capabilities, establish clear and motivating goals, and implement a system of rewards and recognition for innovative contributions (Cheung & Wong, 2011). Creative employees play a vital role in gaining a competitive advantage, as they significantly enhance organizational value and exceed expectations in a dynamic work environment (Amabile, 1983; George, 2009). De Jong and Den Hartog (2007) identify three key factors that drive employee creativity and innovation: effective leadership, a supportive work environment, and robust organizational support.

Ethical leadership is pivotal in shaping employees' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes towards their work and overall work environment. Leaders who model ethical behavior and personal integrity can cultivate a positive workplace culture that not only enhances employee motivation but also encourages innovative

thinking (Amabile, 1983; George, 2009). Research shows that when employees perceive their leaders as ethical, they are more likely to engage in innovative activities (Cheng et al., 2014). This effect on innovation is further strengthened by the quality of the relationship between employees and their leaders (Javed et al., 2018). Additionally, ethical leaders foster creativity by reinforcing positive behaviors and setting an example for their teams (Chen & Hou, 2016; Gu et al. 2015).

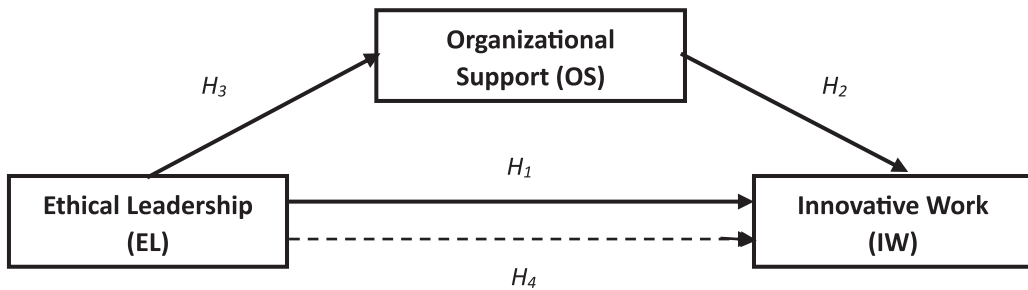
Ethical leadership is pivotal in nurturing employee creativity and innovation within organizations. Leaders who model ethical behavior through rewarding positive actions, involving employees in decision-making, demonstrating fairness, and making impartial decisions can significantly stimulate creativity (Al-Okaily et al., 2021; Al-Okaily et al., 2022; Amabile, 1983; Brown et al., 2005; Poff, 2010). By exhibiting high moral standards, ethical leaders enhance employees' perceptions of organizational support. According to Brown et al. (2005), such leaders positively impact employees' commitment to the organization. Consistent ethical conduct from leaders strengthens employees' loyalty and dedication, fostering a supportive organizational culture. Organizational support is essential for fostering employee innovation and creativity. The previous studies highlighted that when employees feel emotionally connected to and identified with their organization, they are more likely to engage in innovative behavior (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015). Thus, creating a work environment that enhances emotional attachment and loyalty can effectively stimulate innovation.

Additionally, ethical leadership is instrumental in boosting employee creativity. Feng et al. (2018) assert that ethical leaders, by upholding moral values, providing support, and fostering an environment of constructive feedback, trust, and fair decision-making, create conditions that enhance creativity. This alignment between ethical leadership and organizational support not only strengthens employee commitment (Demirtas and Akdogan, 2015) but also stimulates creativity (George, 2009). In essence, promoting ethical leadership and a supportive organizational climate can substantially elevate employee creativity and innovation.

Ethical leadership, organizational support, and employees' innovative behavior are interrelated and significantly influence each other. Employees' innovative behavior is essential in organizations as it promotes creativity and facilitates the development of new ideas, processes, and products, contributing to a competitive edge and organizational growth. Promoting innovation allows organizations to stay adaptable to changing market dynamics, enhance operational efficiency, and better meet customer demands. Ethical leadership and strong organizational support are key drivers of innovative behavior. They create a supportive and inclusive environment where employees feel secure in sharing and experimenting with new ideas. When leaders exhibit integrity and organizations offer the necessary resources and encouragement, employees are more likely to engage in creative problem-solving and take proactive steps to develop innovative solutions. Given this context, the study aims to explore the mediating role of organizational support in the relationship between ethical leadership and employees' innovative behavior within Nepalese commercial banks. A theoretical model is proposed based on the theoretical and empirical foundations discussed above, as depicted in Figure 1, with the following hypotheses outlined.

**Figure 1**

*Theoretical framework*



Based on the above findings, the following hypotheses were proposed for this study:

**H1:** Ethical leadership significantly influences the innovative work behavior of employees.

**H2:** Organizational support significantly affects the innovative work behavior of employees.

**H3:** Ethical leadership has a significant impact on organizational support.

**H4:** Organizational support mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and innovative work behavior of employees.

**Methods**

This study employed a descriptive and casual comparative research design to achieve the stated objectives. The population of this study is all the employees who are working in different capacities of Nepalese commercial banks. The sample size for this study was 287 employees selected on convenience basis. The data were collected through an administered questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A total of 341 questionnaires were distributed, of which 304 were returned (the response rate was 89%). Finally, 287 responses were used for data analysis, and 17 were removed because of multiple non-responses. Hoe (2008) argues that a sample size exceeding 200 is ideal for multivariate data analysis as it enhances the statistical power to accurately detect true effects and relationships among variables. Ethical leadership, organizational support and innovative work behaviour were measured as latent variables comprising 5, 5 and 7 items, respectively. PROCESS Macro, which offers various models for analyzing mediation effects and the relationships among the constructs has been applied in this study. To enhance internal reliability, Cronbach’s alpha test by Cronbach (1951) was used with the results showing values greater than 0.7 being reliable for data analysis as recommended by Taber (2018). The values for the variables are presented in table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Reliability analysis*

Variables	Cronbach’s Alpha	No. of items	Remarks
Ethical Leadership	0.898	5	Reliable
Organizational Support	0.877	5	Reliable
Innovative Work Behavior	0.926	7	Reliable

## Results

### *Demographic Profile of the Respondents*

Table 2 revealed the respondents' profile. Out of the total respondents 58.89% were male and 41.11% female. Marital status revealed that 73.52% were married while 26.48% were unmarried. In terms of age, 15.68% belongs to below 30, 41.81% belongs to age group 30-40, 34.15% belongs to 41-50 and 8.36% belongs to the age group above 50. Regarding academic qualification, 21.25% have passed 10+2 level, 42.51% have completed bachelor degree and 36.24% have above bachelor degree. In terms of job position, 21.25% of the respondents were working at assistant level, 41.12% at officer level and 35.19% at manager level. Job experience table shows that, 30.31% had up to 5 years of experience, 45.65% had 5-10 and 24.04% had more than 10 years of Job experience. In summary, this demographic profile highlights a predominance of male individuals with officer level employees.

**Table 2**

<i>Respondents' Profile</i>		N=287
<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	169	58.89
Female	118	41.11
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	211	73.52
Unmarried	76	26.48
<b>Age</b>		
Below 30	45	15.68
30-40	120	41.81
41-50	98	34.15
Above 50	24	8.36
<b>Academic Qualification</b>		
10+2 Level	61	21.25
Bachelor	122	42.51
Above Bachelor	104	36.24
<b>Job Position</b>		
Assistant Level	68	23.69
Officer Level	118	41.12
Manager Level	101	35.19
<b>Job Experience</b>		
Up to 5 Years	87	30.31
5-10 Years	131	45.65
Above 10 Years	69	24.04

The descriptive analysis and correlation coefficients of the study variables have been presented in table 3. Measured on a five-point Likert scale, the mean values for Ethical Leadership (EL), Organizational Support (OS), and Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) were 3.36, 3.07, and 3.30 respectively, indicating that all these factors are perceived as satisfactory within their organizations. The Pearson correlation coefficient results show that all the variables are significantly related to each other.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Analysis and Correlation Coefficients*

	Mean	SD	OS	EL	IWB
OS	3.07	0.9416	1		
EL	3.36	0.9161	0.188**	1	
IWB	3.30	0.9638	0.651**	0.206**	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

EL- Ethical leadership, IWB- Innovative work behavior, OS- Organizational support

The mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) with a sample size of 287. The study examined the relationships between ethical leadership (EL) as the independent variable, organizational support (OS) as the mediator, and innovative work behavior (IWB) as the dependent variable.

**Table 4**

*Regression analysis of EL on OS*

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	P
0.1883	0.0354	0.8593	7.4595	1.00	285.00	0.0069
<b>Model</b>						
	Coefficient	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.3249	0.2472	9.4036	0.0000	1.8374	2.8124
EL	0.1935	0.0708	2.7312	0.0069	0.0538	0.3331

**Table 5**

*Regression analysis of EL and OS on IWB*

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	P
0.6565	0.4310	0.5337	76.5064	2.0000	284.0000	0.0000
<b>Model</b>						
	Coefficient	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.0642	0.2335	4.5583	0.0000	0.6039	1.5245
EL	0.0916	0.0569	1.6105	0.001	-0.0205	0.2037
OS	0.6495	0.0553	11.7420	0.0000	0.5404	0.7586

The analysis as per table 5 revealed that the direct effect of EL on IWB was statistically significant ( $b=.0916, p = .001$ ), indicating significant relationship between EL and IWB. Hence, H1 that states ethical leadership significantly influences the innovative work behavior of employees is supported. The results further demonstrate that OS is a significant predictor of IWB ( $b = .6495, p<.001$ ), confirming a positive relationship between OS and IWB. Therefore, H2 stating that organizational support significantly affects the innovative work behavior of employees is supported. Moreover, the result as per table 4 shows that EL significantly predicts OS ( $b=.1935, p=.0069$ ), indicating a positive relationship between EL and OS. Hence, H3 that states ethical leadership significantly influences the organizational support is supported. Finally, the mediation analysis as per table 5 indicates that OS partially mediates the relationship between EL and IWB, as evidenced by the significant indirect effect ( $b=.1257, 95\% \text{ CI } [.0197, .2290]$ ). Hence H4 i.e. organizational support (OS) mediates the relationship between ethical leadership (EL) and innovative work behavior (IWB) is supported.

**Table 6**

*Summary of total, direct, and indirect effects of EL on IWB*

Hypotheses		Path	Effect	SE	Result
H1	Direct effect: EL-> IWB	c'	0.0916	0.0569	Supported
H2	OS -> IWB	b	0.6495	0.0553	Supported
H3	EL -> OS	a	0.1935	0.0708	Supported
H4	Mediated effect: EL -> OS -> IWB	c (axb)	0.1257	0.0531	Supported

The results of the mediation analysis reveal that EL has indirect impact on IWB through OS. They also establish that the total effect of EL on IWB is channeled through OS, which means that indirect effects are critical in understanding the effects of EL on IWB. The findings emphasize the significant role of EL in influencing IWB through the mediation of OS. These results provide valuable insights for developing targeted interventions and underscore the need for further research to explore other potential mediators or moderators.

## Discussion

The study aimed to examine the influence of ethical leadership on the innovative work behavior of employees in Nepalese commercial banks. Ethical leadership was chosen as a focal point due to its significant impact on fostering innovation among employees. The findings indicated a positive relationship between ethical leadership and employees' innovative behaviors, aligning with the model proposed by Scott and Bruce (1994), which highlights leadership as a critical factor in enhancing employee innovation. This conclusion is further supported by the works of Brown and Trevino (2006) and Jin et al. (2022), which emphasize the role of ethical leadership in promoting positive behaviors, including innovation. Ethical leadership is recognized as one of the most effective leadership styles for encouraging innovation among subordinates. Leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior and maintain honest relationships with their subordinates create a perception of integrity and support. This fosters a sense of importance and value among employees, motivating them to strive for innovative achievements that contribute to organizational success (Ilyas et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2021).



Social exchange theory, first introduced in the early 1960s, underpins the positive relationship between ethical leadership and employees' innovative behavior (Blau, 1964). According to Brown and Trevino (2006) and Avey et al. (2011), this theory suggests that organizational members' recognition of a social exchange relationship increases when leaders demonstrate a balance between decision-making and integrity. Such ethical conduct by leaders fosters positive reciprocal behaviors among subordinates, including innovative behavior (Zahra et al., 2017). This aligns with the findings of Liden et al. (1997), who argued that subordinates are more effective in their roles when they maintain healthy relationships with their leaders. When ethical leaders provide meaning to subordinates' roles and enhance the value of their work, it encourages subordinates to perceive this positive treatment, leading them to build strong, affective relationships with their leaders and demonstrate greater commitment (Bouckennooghe et al., 2015; Iqbal, 2020). Consequently, this dynamic promotes greater innovation and adaptability to change among employees. Therefore, ethical leadership fosters positive employee behaviors, including innovation, supported by organizational support (Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Dhar, 2016; Brown & Mitchell, 2010).

The study also explored the relationship between organizational support and employees' innovative behavior. The findings revealed that organizational support significantly enhances employees' propensity to engage in innovative practices. This can be attributed to the fact that innovation demands a high level of employee involvement and participation, which is only achievable when there is substantial organizational backing. Marrow (1993) highlighted that striving for achievement and innovation, along with a strong desire to improve performance, is a key characteristic of committed employees. This view is supported by numerous studies, including Allen and Meyer (1991), which found that committed employees exhibit a strong sense of belonging and loyalty to their organizations. Such characteristics motivate employees to remain with the organization, align themselves with its goals, and actively participate in organizational activities. This includes engaging in continuous research and development efforts aimed at generating innovative ideas to enhance organizational performance (Armstrong, 2000; Nehmeh, 2009; Khan et al., 2010).

The findings of the study revealed that organizational support serves as a partial mediator between ethical leadership and employees' innovative behavior. This suggests that ethical leadership fosters a more civil workplace environment characterized by respect, politeness, and consideration for others. According to Laschinger (2012), a workplace that embodies civility promotes positive behavioral outcomes, such as enhanced organizational commitment. When employees perceive strong organizational support, they are more likely to engage actively, put in extra effort, and respond more effectively to challenges with greater energy and enthusiasm. This increased energy encourages a deeper emotional connection among employees, motivating them to go beyond their formal roles and think creatively to achieve their goals (Chen & Aryee, 2007; Rank et al., 2009; Wu, 2019; Wen et al., 2021; AL-Sous et al., 2023).

## **Conclusion**

This research paper provides valuable insights into how ethical leadership and organizational support collectively influence innovative behavior among employees. The research establishes that ethical leadership, characterized by integrity, fairness, and concern for employees, plays a pivotal role in shaping a work environment that fosters creativity and innovation. Leaders who exhibit ethical behavior set a

positive example for their subordinates, building a culture of trust and open communication, which are critical elements in encouraging employees to think creatively and share novel ideas.

The findings demonstrate that ethical leadership does not only directly impact employees' innovative behavior but also exerts an indirect influence through organizational support. This mediating role of organizational support is crucial, as it underscores the importance of a supportive environment in translating ethical leadership into innovative outcomes. When employees perceive that their organization values their contributions, provides adequate resources, and offers encouragement, they are more likely to feel empowered and motivated to engage in innovative activities. This perception of support enhances their sense of belonging and commitment to the organization, which in turn fosters a more innovative mindset. The study implies that organizations should focus on developing ethical leadership qualities in their leaders to create a trustworthy and supportive work environment that fosters innovation. Additionally, enhancing organizational support by providing resources, recognition, and encouragement is essential for amplifying the positive effects of ethical leadership on employees' innovative behavior. This study may be limited by its focus on a specific organizational or cultural context, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other industries. Additionally, the potential subjectivity in measuring organizational support, as employees may perceive it differently based on their experiences, could affect the reliability of the study.

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## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

Dear Respondents,

We cordially request you to participate in our research on ***Ethical Leadership and Employees' Innovative Behavior: Exploring the Mediating Role of Organizational Support***. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. The findings will not identify individuals, and all information obtained from the survey will be used only in aggregate form in compliance with research ethics. We would be grateful if you could spare a moment of your valuable time to complete the following questionnaire.

### Part I: Please tick the appropriate bracket

Authors

Gender: Male  Female

Marital Status: Married  Unmarried

Age: Below 30 Year  30-40 Year  41-50 Year  Above 50 Year

Academic Qualification: 10+2 Level  Bachelor  Above Bachelor

Job Position: Assistant Level  Officer Level  Manager Level

Job Experience: Up to 5 Years  5-10 Years  More than 10 Years

**Part II: Questionnaire on Independent Variable (Ethical Leadership (EL))**

Please respond the questions below using 1-5 scale. (1- Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3- Neutral, 4 – Agree and 5 - Strongly Agree)

Code	Items	1	2	3	4	5
EL1	My supervisor demonstrates integrity and ethical conduct in all decision-making processes.					
EL2	The leaders in my bank encourage transparency and honesty in communication.					
EL3	I feel that my manager holds themselves accountable for their actions and decisions.					
EL4	The leaders in my bank demonstrate fairness and equity in their decision-making.					
EL5	I trust my manager to make decisions that are in the best interest of both the organization and its employees.					

**Part III: Questionnaire on Dependent Variable Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB))**

Using 1-5 scale, please respond to the questions below:

Code	Items	1	2	3	4	5
IWB1	I often come up with new and creative ideas to improve work processes					
IWB2	I actively promote my innovative ideas to colleagues and supervisors.					
IWB3	I take initiative in implementing new ideas at work.					
IWB4	I am willing to take calculated risks to pursue innovative solutions.					
IWB5	I regularly find new ways to solve problems at work.					
IWB6	I collaborate with others to develop and implement innovative ideas.					
IWB7	I am open to changes and new approaches in my work.					

**Part IV: Questionnaire on Mediating Variable (Organizational Support (OS))** Using 1-5 scale, please respond to the questions below:

Code	Items	1	2	3	4	5
OS1	The bank provides a supportive environment that encourages me to generate and implement innovative ideas.					
OS2	I feel that my bank invests in resources and tools that enable innovative thinking and problem-solving.					
OS3	The bank recognizes and rewards employees for demonstrating innovative behavior.					
OS4	I feel empowered by my bank to take initiative and drive innovative projects.					
OS5	My bank provides training and development opportunities that enhance my ability to innovate.					

Thank you for your participation!