

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHICAL LEADERSHIP, JOB ENGAGEMENT, AND JOB PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The work environment in the public sector in Vietnam is attracting a lot of applicants every year. This study aims to fill the theoretical gap and provide more evidence on the relationship between ethical leadership, job engagement, and job performance of public servants in this country. We conducted this study through a cross-sectional survey using a purposive sampling technique (n=200). Multivariate linear regression analysis and moderator regression were applied to prove the hypotheses. Research results show that in the context of the public sector in Vietnam, both ethical leadership and work commitment positively impact the performance of public servants. Ethical leadership is a variable that moderates the relationship between job engagement and job performance. The results of this study continue to confirm the significant role of ethical leadership on work commitment and job performance as in previous studies.

Keywords: Job Engagement; Job Performance; Public Servant; Public Sector; Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is essential in facilitating the organizational environment and making employees ethical (Kirmeyer & Dougherty, 1988; Schmieder & Smith, 1996). Leadership ethics will attract and retain employees (Bandura, 1986) and alleviate the negative influence of dynamic masking on emotional expression (Xiaojun Lu & Mary E. Guy, 2014). An ethical leader will constantly convey the concept of exemplary ethics to employees and have a reasonable reward and punishment system to motivate and encourage employees promptly (Bandura, 1986). Ethical leadership converges the characteristics of motivation and inspiration, idealization of influence, and personal consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Xiaojun Lu & Mary E. Guy, 2014). Employee satisfaction and commitment are related to ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000), communication, and effectiveness performance (Duke, Goodman, Treadway, & Breland, 2009; Guy et al., 2008; Guy & Newman, 2004; Mann, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Morris & Feldman, 1996).

In Vietnam, leaders in the public sector must be loyal to the country, perform their duties according to the provisions of the law, be diligent, thrifty, have integrity, be fair, disciplined, cooperative, and creative (Ngo Thanh Can, 2018). However, Vietnam is well known globally for its complicated administrative organization, a large number of public servants, inefficient operations, corruption quite common, unresponsive to the needs of citizens and businesses (Gregory, 2016), known for crime in the public sector (Rand & Tarp, 2012; Nam Hoang Vu, Tuan Anh Bui, Ngoc Minh Nguyen, & Ngoc Hiep Luu, 2021). High levels of corruption and poor management are widely seen as obstacles to Vietnam's economic growth (Richard Record, 2005). Common types of corruption in Vietnam's public sector include informal payments and bribery. In addition, low wages and benefits and low motivation and incentives lead to high out-of-pocket spending, erode trust in the system, and reduce service efficiency. In a Vietnamese state with an imperfect rule of law due to a lack of resources to support progressive institutions, political and bureaucratic interference by the Vietnamese state in state-owned enterprises is for political gain rather than effective administration and poor governance (Cong Phuong, Dinh Khoi, & Phuoc Vu, 2020). There has been a growing protest that Vietnam's weak

governance and high corruption rates threaten growth and development (Richard Record, 2005). The implementation of regulations remains limited not only due to a lack of institutional capacity but also political commitment (Naher, Hoque, & Hassan et al., 2020). The Vietnamese government has also made many efforts to address this situation by applying good governance, such as reorganizing administrative agencies to be leaner. As a result, the contingent of public servants has professionalism, transparency, and accountability (Nguyen Phuong Mai, Hoang Van Hao & Nguyen Van Duy, 2016).

Given that the public sector in Vietnam is pervasive in corruption, as presented, does the relationship between ethical leadership and job satisfaction and employee commitment match with studies? This study aims to make additional contributions to research theory, providing more evidence on the relationship between ethical leadership and job satisfaction and commitment of public servants in the Vietnam context, testing the moderator of moral leadership in the relationship between job satisfaction and job engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Ethical leadership

Public service motivation is defined as a desire by employees to contribute to society (Perry & Wise, 1990). It manifests in compassion. In other words, it refers to an emotional response and empathy for others as self-sacrifice that reflects a shared desire to put the benefit of the community above personal interests (Vandenabeele, 2007). It is primarily concerned with one's sense of obligation, commitment, or identification with the value of public service (Vandenabeele, 2013). It manifests in an individual's willingness to engage in and contribute to improving public services (Perry, 1996). It is dedicated to the common good, exhibiting a sense of personal responsibility and dedication to society (Perry, 1996), including self-sacrifice (Anderfuhren-Biget, 2012). Studies have also found that public service motivations can change over time (Jacobsen et al., 2013; Kjeldsen, 2013; Oberfield, 2014) and vary between the types of public service providers and the level of professionalism (Kjeldsen, 2012). Public service motivation can be seen as an incentive for individuals to contribute to society and help others (Perry & Petereghem, 2008). It is a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes beyond self-interest involving the interests of a larger political entity and motivating such individuals to act appropriately whenever appropriate (Vandenabeele, 2007; March & Olsen, 1989).

Public servants' public service motivation is shown in their desire to advance their careers, do as little as possible, and optimize their organization's or department's budget. (Downs, 1967; Brehm & Gates, 1997; Niskanen, 1971; DiIulio, 1994; Perry & Wise, 1990). Public servants with a high public service motivation score are more prominent in the organization in terms of contributing to society and helping others. They are more willing to put their interests aside for the sake of society, such as risking their safety to help others (DiIulio, 1994; Perry & Wise, 1990), putting their self-interests aside, and fulfilling their societal obligations (Horton, 2008; Horton, 2008; Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry & Petereghem, 2008; Vandenabeele et al., 2013). Self-determination, autonomy, and external commitments (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Houston, 2011; Vandenabeele, 2013), as well as the desire to work hard for obligations, identification with core public values (Houston, 2011; Vandenabeele, 2013), individual behavioral promotion (Brewer & Selden, 1998; Wright, 2001; Grant, 2008), are all examples of public service motivation. The degree of public service motivation is higher in public organizations because those with high motivation are attracted to such environments and are less likely to quit. (Kjeldsen, 2012; Vandenabeele, 2008). Teamwork, effort, performance, expectations, and sacrifices are all aspects of public service motivation (Pinder, 2008; Taylor & Taylor, 2011; Kjeldsen, 2012; Vandenabeele, 2008; Perry & Petereghem, 2008; Perry & Wise, 1990; Andersen et al., 2014; Brewer & Selden, 2000; Naff & Crum, 1999; Kim, 2006; Leisink & Steijn, 2009; Vandenabeele, 2009), and it is a tool that public organizations can use to improve their performance (Steen & Rutgers, 2011; Alonso & Lewis, 2001; Petrovsky & Ritz, 2014; Ritz, 2009; Perry et al., 2010; Prebble, 2014; Wright & Grant, 2010). Public service motivation is not tied to a specific business, but rather to organizations that provide public

services (Houston, 2000). It may be found in everyone, not just those working in the public sector (Steen, 2008; Prebble, 2014).

Job Engagement

Job engagement is an individual's self-improvement investment in a role and involvement in their work (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Roberts & Davenport, 2002). On the negative side, job engagement is associated with burnout (Abraham, 1998; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 1998), withdrawal behavior (Grandey, 2000), and turnover (Goodwin, Groth, & Frenkel, 2011; Yanchus et al., 2010). On the positive side, people committed at work are passionate about their work, identify personal responsibility to the job, and are motivated. As a result, they tend to work harder and more effectively than others. In addition, they were more likely to produce the results that their clients and organizations wanted (Roberts & Davenport, 2002). Job engagement is related to job satisfaction (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Gursoy et al., 2011; Guy et al., 2008; Hsieh et al., 2012), emotional commitment (Seery & Corrigan, 2009), psychological health (Pisaniello, Winefield, & Elfabbro, 2012; Zapf, 2002), dedication (Kahn & Byosiore, 1992; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). In particular, it positively increases labor productivity (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). In addition, previous studies have shown that higher levels of work commitment lead to outcomes that organizations value. For example, people who engage in their work are more likely to respond to customer needs. Thereby, they improve customer loyalty, sales, and profits, have high levels of job engagement as well less likely to leave the organization, significantly reducing costs and disrupting revenue (Roberts & Davenport, 2002).

Job performance

Job performance refers to employees feeling pressured to act effectively (Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2007), a personal contribution to accomplishing the organization's public mission (Boyne, 2002; Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). As a result, they think and act appropriately (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007), with responsiveness, fairness, accountability, and reliability (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). Job performance is the output of a process (Boyne, 2002; Andrew et al., 2010; Brewer & Walker, 2013; Walker et al., 2011; Atwater et al., 1998; Brewer & Selden, 2000; Delery & Shaw, 2001). It is influenced by four variables: ability, understanding of the job, environment, and individual motivation (Mitchell, 1982). There are different views on measuring job performance (Meier & O'Toole, 2013). Others argue that there is no objective measure because all performance measures are politically determined (Brewer, 2006). In measuring job performance, most researchers agree that both subjective and objective measures have their weaknesses but also their merits (Andrew et al., 2011; Brewer & Selden, 2000; Boyne, 2002; Conway & Lance, 2010; Spector, 2006; Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Andrews et al., 2006). Job performance is remote and, therefore, challenging to measure complex (Guest, 1997; Boselie et al., 2005), especially for public service providers (Boyne, 2002).

HYPOTHESES

Based on the above documents, the following hypotheses have been formed:

H1. There is a positive and significant relationship between ethical leadership and job performance in the public sector in Vietnam.

H2. There is a positive and significant relationship between job engagement and job performance in the public sector in Vietnam.

H3. Ethical leadership moderates the relationship between job engagement and job performance in the public sector in Vietnam.

RESEARCH METHOD

We conducted the research in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in September 2021. There are more than 100 government headquarters here. Full-time public servants who received government salaries participated in the study. In addition, we conducted in-depth interviews with public administration managers and psychology researchers to improve the questionnaire to suit the characteristics of the study participants. The questionnaire consists of 2 parts. Part 1 collects

demographic information such as age, gender, education, and occupation of study participants. Part 2 collects ethical leadership, job engagement, and job performance information. First, we used part of the Ethical Leadership at WorkScale (ELW) built by Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh (2011) to collect ethical leadership data consisting of 7 items. Next, we used a partially modified Job Engagement Scale built by Rich et al. (2010) to collect job engagement data consisting of 3 items. Finally, we used part of the Brief Self-report Scales built by Ramos, Pedro, Juan Ramón, Elena, & Linda (2019) to collect job performance data consisting of 5 items.

The English questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese by two professional interpreters. The translation process is carried out according to the rules to adapt between Vietnamese cultures. After a discussion between translators and experts, we created a Vietnamese version. This version was pre-tested on 40 participants selected to represent age, sex, education, and occupation demographically. Minor tweaks followed it to improve the question structure and make it easier to understand before using the formal survey. The questionnaire was sent directly to the respondents by the purposeful sampling method. As a result, 200 questionnaires were distributed, all of them returned. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the study participants.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of survey participants

	Occupation											
	Police		Court staff		Diplomatic staff		Judicial officer		Tax officer		Teacher	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Female	21	22.1%	13	13.7%	16	16.8%	16	16.8%	12	12.6%	17	17.9%
Male	15	14.3%	25	23.8%	13	12.4%	24	22.9%	12	11.4%	16	15.2%
25-30 years	5	13.9%	10	27.8 %	7	19.4%	5	13.9%	5	13.9%	4	11.1%
31-35 years	6	14.3%	5	11.9%	1	2.4%	13	31.0%	6	14.3%	11	26.2%
36-40 years	7	26.9%	4	15.4%	2	7.7%	4	15.4%	4	15.4%	5	19.2%
41-45 years	6	18.8%	6	18.8%	12	37.5%	3	9.4%	2	6.2%	3	9.4%
46-50 years	8	25.8%	3	9.7%	5	16.1%	10	32.3%	2	6.5%	3	9.7%
above 50 years	4	12.1%	10	30.3%	2	6.1%	5	15.2%	5	15.2%	7	21.2%
BA	11	15.9%	20	29.0%	10	14.5%	11	15.9%	8	11.6%	9	13.0%
MA	16	22.5%	10	14.1%	8	11.3%	13	18.3%	8	11.3%	16	22.5%
PhD	9	15.0%	8	13.3%	11	18.3%	16	26.7%	8	13.3%	8	13.3%

RESEARCH RESULTS

Reliability analysis

We used Cronbach's Alpha test reliability of items. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient has a variable value in the interval [0,1]. Based on a coefficient to eliminate junk variables avoids creating misleading factors when analyzing exploratory factor analysis. If a measurement variable has a total correlation coefficient of Corrected Item - Total Correlation ≥ 0.3 , that variable meets the requirements (Cronbach, 1951; Taber, 2018). The verification criterion is that Cronbach's Alpha coefficient must be greater than 0.6, and the correlation coefficient of

the sum variable in each scale must be greater than 0.3 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Table 2 shows that the scales of the factors all meet the standards. Therefore, all the rankings of the elements are reliable and used for subsequent factor analysis.

Table 2: Summary of Reliability and Relative Minimum Variables of Scales

Scales	Number of variables observed	Reliability coefficients (Cronbach Alpha)	The correlation coefficient of the smallest total variable
E-leadership	7	0.866	0.586
J-Engagement	3	0.722	0.563
T-Performance	5	0.832	0.597

After testing Cronbach's Alpha, we use exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to evaluate the factor's unidirectional, simultaneous, and discriminant values. EFA was used by extracting the Principal Components Analysis and Varimax rotation to group the factors. With a sample size of 200, the factor loading of the observed variables must be greater than 0.5 to converge on the same factor and distinguish it from other factors. In addition, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) coefficient, which is an index used to consider the adequacy of factor analysis, must be in the range of $0.5 \leq \text{KMO} \leq 1$ (Cerny & Kaiser, 1977; Kaiser, 1974; Snedecor, George, Cochran & William, 1989). Table 3 shows that all factor loading coefficients of the observed variables > 0.5 ; Bartlett test with Sig. = 0.000 with KMO coefficient = 0.912. EFA extracted 15 items into 3 factors with Eigen Value > 1 and cumulative percentage variance = 60.076%. Thus, the research model consisting of 2 independent variables and 1 dependent variable.

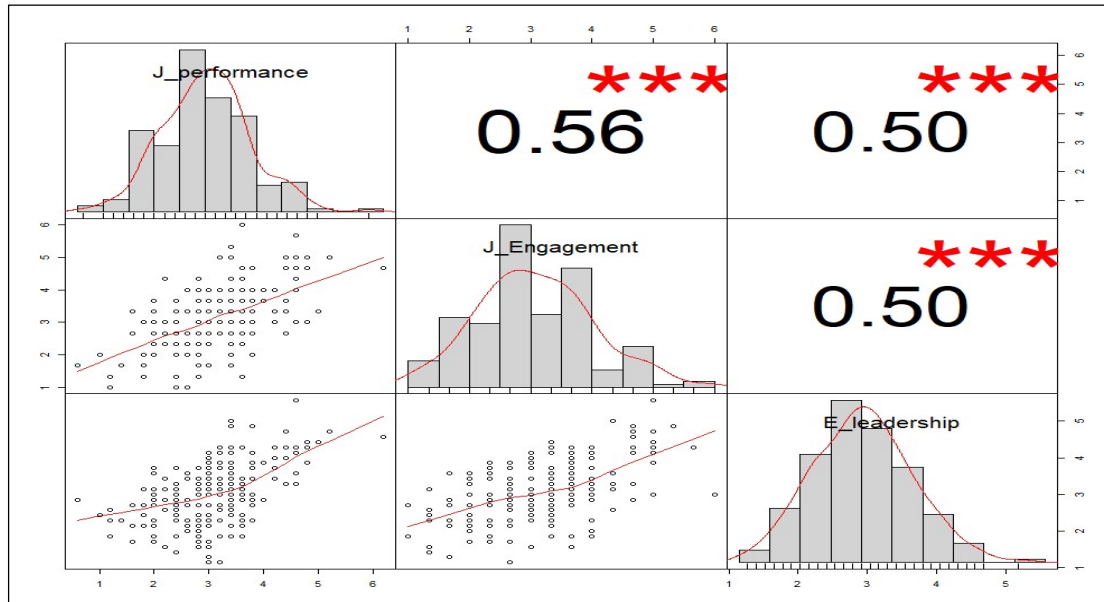
Table 3: Exploratory factor analysis

Rotated Component Matrix ^a			
	Component		
	1	2	3
E_leadership6	.749		
E_leadership3	.731		
E_leadership2	.728		
E_leadership5	.718		
E_leadership1	.695		
E_leadership4	.682		
E_leadership7	.656		
J_performance1		.750	
J_performance4		.738	
J_performance2		.737	
J_performance5		.712	
J_performance3		.683	
J_Engagement2			.789
J_Engagement3			.787
J_Engagement1			.690
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.			
a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.			

Pearson correlation analysis

We used Pearson correlation analysis to analyze the correlation between quantitative variables. Figure 2 shows, with the 95% significance level, that the correlation coefficient indicates that the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable is statistically significant (Sig. < 0.05). The magnitude of the correlation coefficients ensures that the multiple linear regression and the moderator regression model are valid in the next step.

Figure 2 Pearson correlation analysis results



Linear regression analysis and Moderation regression

Multivariable linear regression analysis tested the relationship between two independent variables, J_Engagement, E_leadership, and one dependent variable, J_performance (model1). Moderation regression analysis to determine the E_leadership variable moderates the relationship between J_Engagement and J_performance variables (model2). We convert the data of E_Leadership and J_Engagement variables by center data procedure before moderator regression analysis. Table 4 shows that all the proposed hypotheses are accepted, which means that both the independent variables have a statistically significant impact on the dependent variable. Model1 has $R^2 = 0.381$ and model2 has $R^2 = 0.367$. This result proves that both the multivariate linear regression model and the moderation regression model fit the data set model1 = 0.381 % of the total variance and model2 = 0.367%% of the total variance. Model2 shows that the E_leadership variable positively moderates the relationship between J_Engagement and J_performance variable. The increase or decrease of the E_leadership variable makes the relationship between the J_Engagement and J_performance variable increase or decrease respectively.

Table 4 The results of regression analysis

Dependent variable:		
J_performance		
	(Model1)	(Model2)
J_Engagement	0.382*** (0.058)	
E_leadership	0.305*** (0.069)	
E_leadership		0.210*** (0.066)
J_Engagement		0.369***

		(0.055)
E_leadership:J_Engagement		0.092* (0.051)
Constant	0.929*** (0.202)	2.954*** (0.053)
Observations	200	200
R ²	0.381	0.367
Adjusted R ²	0.375	0.357
Residual Std. Error	0.679 (df = 197)	0.688 (df = 196)
F Statistic	60.593*** (df = 2; 197)	37.900*** (df = 3; 196)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.0	

Table 4 shows that, with 95% confidence level, the hypotheses proposed by the research team were accepted. Specifically, model1 shows that variable J_Engagement has the strongest impact on variable J_performance with regression weight ($\beta = 0.382$) and 95% confidence level (p.value = 0.000), second is the variable E_leadership with regression weight ($\beta = 0.275$) with 95% confidence level (p.value = 0.000). Model2 shows that the variable E_leadership moderates the relationship between the variable J_Engagement and J_performance with regression weight ($\beta = 0.092$) and has a 95% confidence level (p.value = 0.050), which means that the increase or decrease of ethical leadership leads to a corresponding increase or decrease in the relationship between job engagement and job performance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, the research results (Table 4) show that Hypothesis H1 is accepted. Furthermore, there is a positive and significant relationship between ethical leadership and job performance in the public sector in Vietnam. This result further confirms that ethical leadership helps employees reduce negative impacts and increase work performance, similar to previous findings outside of Vietnam by Grandey (2000), Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Zerbe (2000), and Weiss & Cropanzano (1996). When employees see their leader as a role model and motivate them to go further, they will put more effort into getting the job done (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership increases employee satisfaction (Cyril & Girindra, 2009; Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, & Zivnуска, 2011).

Secondly, Table 4 shows that Hypothesis H2 is accepted. There is a positive and significant relationship between job engagement and task performance in the public sector in Vietnam. This result is similar to the findings by Rich, Lepine, & Crawford (2010) and Roberts & Davenport (2002). Thus, in the context of the public sector in Vietnam, public servants are committed to work very passionately, identify individual responsibilities for work, and are motivated to work. This result further confirms that if employees have a higher work commitment, it will increase work efficiency (Roberts & Davenport, 2002; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007).

Thirdly, Table 4 shows that hypothesis H3 is accepted. In the Vietnam context, ethical leadership moderated the relationship between job engagement and task performance in the public sector in Vietnam. This result further shows that ethical leadership positively affects mental life, emotional commitment (Seery & Corrigan, 2009) and mental health (Pisaniello, Winefield, & Elfabbro, 2012; Zapf, 2002), employee dedication (Kahn & Byosiore, 1992); Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2006). Despite the overwhelming number of public servants and rampant corruption, highly ethical leadership motivates employees to have an increasing tendency to commit to work, making them work only and more efficiently than others. These resources are similar to the findings outside Vietnam by Roberts & Davenport (2002) related to job satisfaction and performance (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Gursoy et al., 2011; Guy et al., 2008; Hsieh and associates, 2012).

Finally, the results of this study imply that the Government of Vietnam needs to see the critical role of leadership ethics in the relationship between work commitment and the

performance of public servants. With these results, the Vietnamese Government needs to have a strategic good governance strategy to promote leadership ethics in the public sector (Pung, Tran, Vermeulen, & Knoben, 2021). In addition, attention should be paid to the negative aspects of work commitment when leadership morale is low, related to burnout, as in previous studies outside Vietnam (Abraham, 1998; Brotheridge) & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 1998).

LIMITATIONS

As with other pilot studies, this study has limitations that should be considered when discussing the results. First, our survey method reflects respondents' subjective perceptions of the investigated questions. The subjectivity of data has some inherent disadvantages that are unavoidable in surveys (Pakpour, Gellert, Asefzadeh, Updegraff, Molloy, & Sniehotta, 2016). We collected data over a single period, so there are certain limitations in analyzing and evaluating the results (Xin & Zhanyou, 2019). Future research should combine cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. The purposive sampling method has certain limitations, not fully reflecting population characteristics (Lin et al., 2016; Strong et al., 2018). We carried out this research in the context of Vietnamese culture. Therefore, asking for more general statements by applying development research models and research conclusions to other countries, regions, and cultures (Sun et al., 2012). Further research should consider demographic factors such as age, gender, and occupation to understand better the role of ethical leadership in the commitment and performance of public servants in Vietnam. Moreover, Table 4 shows that R^2 of model 1 and model 2 has a low rate (<0.5), affecting research reliability. Therefore, the following study will increase the sample size so that R^2 has an appropriate ratio.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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