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EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP ON EMPLOYEE LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS: DECISION-MAKING AND AUTONOMY AS MEDIATORS

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Abstract

Vast amounts of research have been done on the antecedents of leadership behaviors viewed from an individual perspective (i.e., personality and individual differences). However, few have looked through the social perspective. Furthermore, several others have delved into the influence of leaders as an antecedent to employee leadership behaviors. Empowering leadership has achieved great attention in recent literature due to its consistent ability to empower employees through encouraging decision-making and autonomy of employees. Hence, the study investigates empowering leaders as being able to develop leadership behaviors among their employees and hypothesizes that empowering leadership will lead to leadership behaviors. One hundred and eighty-four full-time employees within Malaysia (Female = 113; 61.4%, Mean age = 27.32) participated in the study. Results show a significant effect of empowering leadership on employees' autonomy, decision-making, and leadership behaviors. Mediation analyses show autonomy and decision-making mediated empowering leadership and employee leadership behavior. Within the Asian context, empowering leadership is a viable leadership style in developing and nurturing employee leadership behaviors. Decision-making and autonomy should be characteristics for leaders to focus on developing future leaders. Future studies may include how other leadership styles, such as transformational leadership play a role in employee leadership behavior within the organization.

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1. Introduction

Leaders play a pivotal role in any organization, group, or team as a leader is the one who facilitates the processes in achieving specific goals and objectives. Identifying potential leaders, thus, has become an important aspect in leadership literature. Leadership is often defined by the traits, qualities, and behaviors of the leader (Horner, 1997). Past research on the predictors of leadership have been done on personality traits such as the Big 5 (Judge et al., 2002) and individual characteristics such as self-esteem, emotional stability and cognitive ability (Ensari et al., 2011), both of which refer to leadership as an innate characteristic of an individual. For example, Judge et al. (2002) found that extraversion was strongly related to leadership emergence. Ensari et al. (2011) also found extraversion to be a strong predictor, along with individual differences such as creativity, authoritarianism and intelligence.

1.1. The influence of empowering leadership on employee leadership behavior

Empowering leadership is defined as "the extent to which supervisor expresses confidence in their employees' abilities, emphasize the significance of their employees' work, involve their employees in decision-making, and reduce or remove bureaucratic constraints on their employees" (Zhang & Zhou, 2014, p. 150). Recent studies have found that empowering leadership significantly relates to positive employee behaviors (Kim et al., 2018; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2017). Empowering leadership consists of elements such as encouragement, cooperative action, opportunistic thinking and independent behaviors (Vecchio et al., 2010). Literature has found that empowering leadership leads to higher job performance (Ahearne et al., 2005) and the ability to empower employees (Spreitzer, 1995). The use of empowering leadership entails the transfer of leadership from the leader to the member (Kim et al., 2018) as it encourages supportive and prosocial behaviors while preventing the occurrence of workplace conflicts among employees.

Leaders, especially empowering leaders, can influence the behaviors of their employees greater than any other sources in an organization (Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2017). We propose that empowering leadership entails important leadership development behaviors that allow employees to grow not only from work aspects but endows the ability to climb the ladder and one day, become a leader. Empowering leadership seeks to empower employees and provide them with the confidence needed to carry out tasks successfully. Such leadership style does not focus on power and control. Rather, its focus is on employee development and providing them with the opportunity to showcase their abilities (Lee et al., 2018). Albrecht and Andreetta (2011) stated that empowering leadership is a leadership style that allows employees to emulate empowerment and be nurtured to their full potentials. In other words, empowering leadership allows employees to take up some responsibility. All in all, these empowerments allow employees to develop leadership qualities. Hence, Hypothesis 1 states that empowering Leadership will lead to higher employee leadership behaviors.

1.2. Influence of empowering leadership on decision-making and autonomy

Autonomy is defined as a basic psychological need to have ownership over one's own behaviors, along with a sense of volition within one's actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 231). Decision-making is defined as "the selection of a course of action from among two or more possible alternatives in order to solve a

given problem" (Trewartha & Newport, 1982, p. 148). Autonomy and decision-making have been described as two key components of empowering leadership (Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011). Past research has found empowering leadership to be consistently related to the promotion of autonomy and decision-making among employees. Empowering leadership promotes a high level of autonomy within employees and has been found to be a key component of empowerment (Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011). According to Liu et al. (2011), autonomy is conceptualized as a form of intrinsic motivation that acts as the driving force of psychological empowerment. This relationship between autonomy and empowerment has been found to lead to many positive outcomes such as lower turnover rates (Liu et al., 2011), higher team performance (Taggar et al., 1999), and higher leadership emergence among the employees (Oh, 2012).

Ahearne et al. (2005) explained that empowering leaders focus on involving members in decision-making processes in the workplace. Conger and Kanungo (1988) describe empowering leaders to be leaders who empower their subordinates by giving them more power to make decisions. Empowerment — a key component of empowering leadership — among employees is commonly associated with employees making positive and desirable decisions. According to Tao et al. (2018), empowered employees are more likely to make decisions and involve themselves in corporate social responsibilities intentionally. Hence, Hypothesis 2 states that empowering leadership will lead to an increase in (a) autonomy and (b) decision-making.

1.3. Decision-making and autonomy lead to an increase in employee leadership behaviors

Autonomy has also been found to predict outcomes closely related to leadership behaviors. For instance, studies done by Kuvaas et al. (2014) found that perceived job autonomy moderated the relationship between work goals and performance. Work performance is a common outcome of positive leadership behaviors, such as that portrayed by charismatic and directive leaders (Hwang et al., 2015). According to Feldman (1989), autonomy can be used to build leadership potential among employees and has also been found to play an important role in improving morale and motivation among employees along with control among leaders.

In addition, it is common to associate effective leaders with effective decision-making skills. Needless to say, leaders frequently make challenging decisions that may affect their employees, clients, stakeholders and even their company (Kase, 2010). Vroom and Yetton (1973) describe the relationship between decision-making and leadership as the effective leadership behavior utilized in the different situations and scenarios that the leader faces. A wide range of studies suggests an association between decision-making and leadership, stressing on the importance of appropriate decision-making in every situation. Hence, Hypothesis 3 states that (a) Autonomy and (b) decision-making will lead to an increase in leadership behavior individually.

1.4. Autonomy and decision-making as mediators between empowering leadership and employee leadership behavior

Putting everything together, we propose that empowering leadership is beneficial to employee leadership behavior due to the two essential characteristics displayed; autonomy and decision-making. Past studies have been able to utilize autonomy in the development and identification of leadership behaviors (Feldman, 1989; Taggar et al., 1999). As such, empowering leadership and autonomy is proposed to lead

to an increase in employee leadership behaviors. Hence, Hypothesis 4 states that (a) Autonomy and (b) decision-making mediate empowering leadership and employee leadership behaviors.

2. Problem Statement

Recent literature has stated that the development of leadership takes more than innate characteristics. Leadership skills, for example, are dependent on the consideration and initiation of the structure of an organization (Saal & Knight, 1988). It may also develop through experiences, both formal and informal (Brooks & Chapman, 2018). This refutes previous literature that states leadership is innate and not influenced by outer contexts. Despite such suggestions, there is still a lack of studies done on the development of leadership from a social context. One of which was found that leadership training using instructor-led classroom training, with subsequent coaching, team building, and experiential learning are able to effectively yield positive leadership behaviors (The Center for Leadership Studies, 2016).

3. Research Questions

The current study seeks to explore how leadership behaviors can be developed among employees within the supervisor-employee relationship. We take into account that with the frequent interaction between supervisors and employees, the supervisor plays a vital role in developing employees' leadership behaviors. One of the most recent leadership styles is empowering leadership. We propose that empowering leadership has the ability to develop employees' leadership behavior through two essential components: autonomy and decision-making (Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011).

4. Purpose of the Study

We conduct the study in Malaysia, where leaders here have a high influence on employees (Ansari et al., 2004). More importantly, most literature on leadership has been done within the Western context, which may be different from the Asian context. No studies have so far provided insight on how leadership styles may enhance employees' leadership behavior among Asian work settings. Hence, the findings from this study that looks at leadership behavior will be beneficial for the implementation and development of such leadership styles within the Asian context.

To conclude, the present study attempts to contribute to past research on employees' behavioral outcomes of leadership such as that of Lapointe and Vandenberghe (2017) and Raub and Robert (2010), as well as the growing body of research regarding the development and effects of leadership in an Asian context. The proposed model is illustrated in Figure 1.
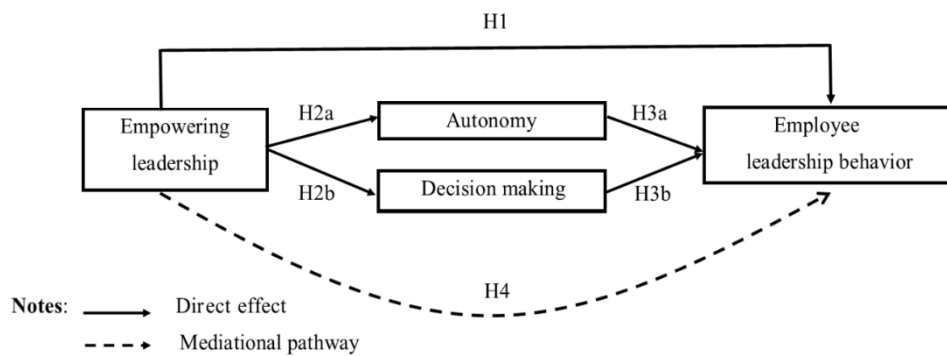
Figure 01. Research model

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

A total of 184 full-time working Malaysian employees (Mage = 27.32 years; SD = 7.18) from the private service sector participated in the study. Participants were majority female (N = 113; 61.4%) with an ethnic distribution of 57.6% Chinese, followed by 25.5% Malays and 14.1% Indians. Furthermore, a majority of the participants (78%) has had at least one year of working experience, and 80.5% earns at least RM5000. Participants were recruited using a snowballing sampling method through two social networking websites: LinkedIn and Facebook. Participants were asked to complete the survey then submit. All information was kept private and confidential and no personal information was asked.

5.2. Instruments

Empowering leadership was measured using the Leadership Empowerment Behaviour (LEB) developed by Ahearne et al. (2005), this questionnaire consisted of 12 items and was completed by participants to assess their perception of their leader's ability in empowerment. Items were scored using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The four dimensions are: enhancing the meaningfulness of work (three items; original alpha is α = .89), fostering participation in decision-making (three items; α = .86), expressing confidence in high performance (three items; α = .85) and providing autonomy from bureaucratic constraints (three items; α = .79). An example of an item is, "My manager helps me understand the importance of my work to the overall effectiveness of the company."

Autonomy was measured using the Work Autonomy Scale (WAS) developed by Breaugh (1985), containing nine items to assess employees' autonomy in the workplace (Waymer, 1995). This questionnaire uses a 7-point Likert Scale whereby, 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree. According to Waymer (1995), the scale has a coefficient alpha of .87. An example of an item is, "I am able to choose the method(s) to use in carrying out my work".

Decision-making was measured using the Decision-making Scale (DMS) developed by Mayfield and Mayfield (2016), which includes nine items to assess the employee's decision-making ability. The scale uses a 5-point Likert Scale whereby, 1 indicates "Strongly Disagree", and 5 indicates "Strongly Agree". The original scale has a Cronbach's alpha score of .94. (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2016). An example of an item in this questionnaire is, "I feel comfortable making important decisions".

Employee leadership behavior was measured using the Leadership Behaviour Description Questionnaire Form XII (LBDQ XII) developed by Stogdill (1963), that was designed to assess the employees' leadership behavior. This scale uses a 5-point Likert Scale whereby, 1 indicates "Never", and 5 indicates "Always". An example of an item from this questionnaire is, "I assign group members to particular tasks".

6. Findings

Hypothesis 1 hypothesizes that empowering leadership will be positively related to leadership behavior. Through a linear regression analysis, results indicate that empowering leadership has a significant positive relationship with leadership behaviors (F (1, 182) = 21.12, p < .001, r2 = .104). An increase in 1 SD of empowering leadership will lead to a .32 increase in employee leadership behaviors. As such, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2 hypothesizes that empowering leadership will lead to an increase in (a) autonomy and (b) decision-making. Through linear regression analyses, results indicate a significant positive relationship between empowering leadership and autonomy (F (1, 182) = 140.15, p < .001, r2 = .660). A 1 SD increase in empowering leadership will lead to a .66 increase in autonomy. Furthermore, results indicate a significant positive relationship between empowering leadership and decision-making (F (1, 182) = 46.984, p < .001, r2 = .453). As such, hypotheses 2a and 2b are supported.

Hypothesis 3 hypothesizes that (a) autonomy and (b) decision-making will individually lead to an increase in leadership behavior. Through linear analyses, results indicate that autonomy and leadership behaviors also had a significant positive relationship (F (1, 182) = 28.98, p < .001, r2 = .137). A 1 SD increase in autonomy will lead to a .37 increase in leadership behaviors. Furthermore, results indicate a significant positive relationship between decision-making and leadership behaviors (F (1, 182) = 118.58, p < .001, r2 = .628). A 1 SD increase of decision-making will lead to a .63 increase in leadership behaviors. This shows that decision-making leads to an increase in employee leadership behaviors. Results support hypotheses 3a and 3b.

Hypothesis 4 hypothesizes that (a) autonomy and (b) decision-making mediate empowering leadership and employee leadership behaviors. Hypothesis 4 predicted autonomy to be a mediator between empowering leadership and employee leadership behavior. The mediation effect was tested using the parameter estimate from the value of the direct effect between empowering leadership and autonomy (β = .79, SE = .07), and the parameter estimate was used to estimate the relation of autonomy and employee leadership behavior with empowering leadership in the model (β = .30, SE = .06). We tested the significance of the indirect parameter estimate using tthe Monte Carlo test to determine the significance of the indirect parameter estimate. Empowering leadership was found to have a significant effect on employee leadership behavior through autonomy (95% confident interval [CI], lower level [LL] = .1405, upper level [UL] = .3424). Since the effect of empowering leadership on employee leadership behavior was significant in the presence of the mediator (autonomy) in the model, this indicates that the effect was partially mediated. Secondly, decision-making was predicted to be a mediator between empowering leadership and employee leadership behavior. The mediation effect was tested using the parameter estimate of the value of the direct effect between empowering leadership and decision-making (γ = .25, SE = .04), and the parameter estimate

was used to estimate the relation of decision-making and employee leadership behavior with empowering leadership in the model ($\beta = 1.09$, SE = .10). We tested the significance of the indirect parameter estimate using a Monte Carlo test to determine the significance of the indirect parameter estimate. Empowering leadership was found to have a significant effect on employee leadership behavior through decision-making (95% confidence interval [CI], lower level [LL] = .1778, upper level [UL] = .3776). Since the effect of empowering leadership on employee leadership behavior was significant in the presence of the mediator (decision-making) in the model, this indicates that the effect was partially mediated. Results of the study can be seen in Figure 02.
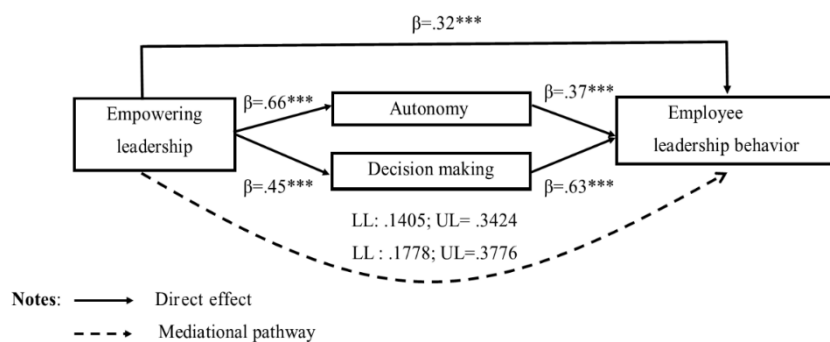
Figure 02. Final model

This study's objective is to investigate how leadership styles, specifically empowering leadership are able to increase employees' leadership behavior. In addition, the study investigates how elements of empowering leadership (i.e., autonomy and decision-making) are able to mediate the relationship between empowering leadership and employee leadership behavior.

This study found that empowering leadership leads to an increase in leadership behaviors among employees. Supporting previous literature (Ensari et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2002), empowering leadership is one of the best leadership styles when it provides employees with opportunities to carry out tasks successfully and confidently. Other leadership styles such as transformational leadership and servant leadership, while beneficial to employees' work outcomes, their focus is on the leaders, not the employees. Empowering leaders seek to empower their employees by providing them with autonomy and decision-making opportunities as well as making their job more meaningful (Lee et al., 2016). Literature states that it is becoming one of the most important leadership styles in motivating employees and spurring them to perform better at work.

The study also found that autonomy and decision-making mediate empowering leadership and employee leadership behavior. Autonomy allows employees the ability to have control or independence over their own work and does not necessarily relate to leadership behaviors. Decision-making allows employees to make decisions, which is an important characteristic of a leader (Vroom & Yetton 1973). When empowering leaders empower the employees by providing them with autonomy and decision-making, the employees are then expected to carry out their tasks and decide the best way to do those tasks well, and so exhibit similar leadership behaviors. Hence, employees will display employee leadership behavior.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

The findings of this study brought about several contributions to the field of leadership research as well as implications to the current theories. Firstly, as described by Horner (1997), past studies surrounding the antecedents of leadership behaviors have been done on the notion that leadership is solely innate or inborn. However, the results shown in this study implied that leadership could be taught and consequently learned. This is consistent with more recent studies that have addressed leadership as a skill that can be learned and acquired through formal and informal experiences (Brooks & Chapman, 2018; Horner, 1997; Stogdill, 1963). In the context of leadership in the workplace, through frequent communication, formal and informal experience of the employees, empowers employees to develop leadership behaviors.

Secondly, the findings in this study implied that specific leadership styles have an impact on the likelihood an individual portrays leadership behaviors and possibly emerge as a leader. Past studies have rarely delved into the specific social experiences an individual may encounter with a leader that could contribute to different behavioral outcomes. This study builds on the basis of SLT (Bandura, 1977) that behaviors can be learnt through direct or indirect social interactions, specifically in the context of empowering leadership and leadership behaviors in the workplace. This, in turn, contributes to a more concrete understanding of the framework of leadership development, allowing us to include the influence of leadership as another antecedent of leadership behaviors.

Furthermore, the findings of this paper also implied that specific facets of empowering leadership might have varying degrees of effects on different employee behaviors. As previously stated, decision-making opportunities and autonomy are important facets of empowering leadership. More importantly, this study found that decision-making accounted for a greater variance of leadership behavior than autonomy. However, empowering leadership does not solely utilize decision-making opportunities and autonomy, as there are likely other components of empowering leadership that may influence employees' behaviors. For example, a major component of empowering leadership is promoting psychological empowerment, and likely the act of doing so in the workplace will also lead to different behaviors among employees. According to Albrecht and Andreetta (2011), psychological empowerment among employees under an empowering leader increased work engagement.

Lastly, the results in this study bring implications for a more in-depth investigation of decision-making and autonomy being possible mediators to the relationship between empowering leadership and employee leadership behaviors. Furthermore, with recent studies regarding the investigation of the mediating effects of different traits between leadership styles and work outcomes and behaviors, this study may be able to contribute to this field of research due to its similar nature.

6.2 Practical implications

The findings of this study also have several practical implications. Firstly, this study implies that empowering leadership is a viable leadership style to use when attempting to develop leadership behaviors among employees. This outcome adds to our understanding of how leadership behaviors develop among employees. One does not necessarily have to learn a specific set of skills to develop leadership behaviors. Simply having a leader who exercises empowering leadership over a period of time can have similar results. As such, when attempting to develop leadership behaviors among employees, a leader should choose to employ an empowering leadership style.

6.3 Strength and limitations

The majority of the studies surrounding organizational research have been conducted in Western contexts, leaving literature in the context of Asian cultures lacking. This study expands on organizational research done in Asian contexts. Additionally, this study was done among a Malaysian sample. According to Jogulu and Ferkins (2012), due to the rapidly changing economy and working environment, Malaysia offers fresh new environments for research. Furthermore, this study contributes to the expansion of leadership research as it delved into a slightly different perspective on the development of leadership behaviors as compared to the increasing recent literature investigating work outcomes and leadership styles. Instead, this study focuses on the behavioral outcomes of leadership styles.

Furthermore, due to the cross-sectional nature of the current study, the exact direction of the causality between variables cannot be fully determined. It is possible for one to portray high levels of leadership behaviors already and thus given more decision-making opportunities and autonomy at work. Additionally, the study cannot determine long term effects as it solely utilizes data from one point in time, due to its nature, and is therefore, subject to change with time.

6.4 Future direction

Future research is required to build a more concrete framework in identifying leadership potential among employees as well as the antecedents of leadership behaviors. Research surrounding leadership has been recommended to "shift the focus upstream" (towards the antecedents) (Bommer et al., 2004) since such research allows a better view on how employees may be developed into future leaders. This does not only allow us to identify employees with the potential to emerge as leaders better but also provide useful information when developing future leadership development programs.

This study may be further expanded to include other leadership styles that are motivating such as transformational leadership that aims to inspire their members with a sense of purpose, and in the ways in which these leadership styles may allow employees to cultivate leadership behavior. While we argue that transformational leadership does not promote autonomy and decision-making as well as empowering leadership, components and characteristic of transformational leadership may lead to higher employee leadership behavior. Comparison of different and/or contrasting leadership styles along with their effectiveness in developing leadership behaviors can also be studied.

7. Conclusion

The current study investigates the effects of empowering leadership on employee leadership behavior. It further examines autonomy and decision-making as mediators between empowering leadership and employee leadership behavior. The results show that empowering leadership can lead to higher employee leadership behavior through autonomy and decision-making. This study highlights the importance of leadership behaviors in developing future leaders, rather than only focusing on the innate characteristics of individual as past literature states. Other leadership styles can be investigated to see how their behavioral aspects may help to enhance or suppress employee leadership behavior.

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