



Two faces of empowering leadership: Enabling and burdening



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ABSTRACT

Despite prior work primarily focused on positive outcomes resulting from empowering leadership, scant research in this realm has questioned and examined whether, in all cases, more empowering leadership is actually associated with more desirable outcomes. Based on the cost of autonomy and role theory perspectives, the current study proposes that beyond an *enabling process* of empowering leadership enhancing followers' self-efficacy and performance, there is a *burdening process* in which specific empowering behaviors of the leader increase followers' job induced tension, which in turn diminishes the positive influence of empowering leadership on followers' work role performance. The results generally support these contrasting notions, suggesting that there are two faces, enabling and burdening, of empowering leadership. Implications for future research and professional practice on empowering leadership are also discussed.

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Despite all the talk and the change programs, empowerment is still mostly an illusion. (Argyris, 1998).

With recent changes in the work environment in response to increasingly competitive demands for higher performance, and elevated organizational needs for their employees to cope with constant change in the external environment (Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), employee empowerment has received noticeable attention in organizational research and practice (Chen, Sharima, Edinger, Shapiro, & Farh, 2011; Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims, 2013; Martin, Liao, & Campbell, 2013; Maynard, Gilson, & Mathieu, 2012; Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011; Spreitzer, 1995; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006). Within this uncertain and dynamic organizational context, employees are expected to engage in adaptive and proactive behaviors above and beyond their formal work roles (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007; Martin et al., 2013). As such, the notion of empowerment has become important in organizational research because it enables employees to increase effectiveness of their formal work roles by fostering autonomy and self-responsibilities (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Spreitzer, 1995) and further promoting proactive behaviors to alter and expand initial role cognition (Martin et al., 2013).

The management and leadership literatures have consistently recognized the important role of the leader in influencing employee empowerment (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, & Drasgow, 2000; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Lorinkova et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2013; Pearce & Sims, 2002; Sims, Faraj, & Yun, 2009). Empowering leaders motivate individuals to break out of inactive mindsets, take risks and enhance their self-responsibilities, leading them to be accountable for their outcomes

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(Yun, Cox, & Sims, 2006). Specifically, empowering leadership refers to a set of behaviors of the leader who shares power or allocates more responsibilities and autonomy to his or her followers through enhancing the meaningfulness of work, expressing confidence in high performance, promoting participation in decision making, and providing autonomy from bureaucratic constraints (Ahearne et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2011; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

While previous research on this topic extols the enhanced internal motivation of followers and the positive effects resulting from empowering leadership (Ahearne et al., 2005; Srivastava et al., 2006; Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2010; Zhang & Bartol, 2010), it remains unclear whether more empowering leadership is mostly advantageous to its targets and associated with desirable outcomes. Reflecting this notion, several scholars cautioned about the potential negative effects of leader empowerment (Forrest, 2000; Honold, 1997; Wilkinson, 1998). For example, Conger and Kanungo (1988) argued that unregulated empowerment practices exerted by a leader could result in followers becoming overconfident, causing them to make tactical or strategic errors. Moreover, based on the normative decision model, Vroom and Yetton (1973) and Vroom and Jago (1978) suggested that the decisions made through leaders' participative decision processes would not always be more effective than those made through autocratic decision processes; rather it depends on the situational demands.

In their study, Lorinkova and colleagues (2013) demonstrated that teams managed under an empowering leader showed lower early-stage team performance than those led by a directive leader, as characteristics of empowering leadership, such as fostering explicit coordination procedures to team members and focusing on learning-oriented goals rather than performance-oriented goals, could result in initial performance costs to the team. Further, in an organizational-level study, Staw and Epstein (2000) showed that firms using employee empowerment, one of the popular management techniques, gained higher reputation of management quality compared to their counterparts, but did not significantly benefit from empowerment in terms of their economic performance.

These notions and mixed results of empirical studies imply that a comprehensive understanding of empowering leadership and its effects cannot be achieved without considering both positive and negative aspects of empowering leadership in organizations in general and in the leader-follower relationships in particular (i.e., enabling and burdening process of empowering leadership). Conceiving and testing potential divergent aspects of empowering leadership and its effects would aid to explain why empowering leadership is still considered an "illusion" by some (Argyris, 1998). Thus, in the present study, mainly focusing on the effects of leaders' empowering behaviors on their followers, we propose and empirically test the notion of two faces of empowering leadership, the positive face that has been consistently studied, as well as the paradoxically, or contrasting, negative aspects of empowering leadership.

Drawing from the empowerment theory suggested by Conger and Kanungo (1988), on the one hand, some features of empowering leadership may positively relate to followers' self-efficacy which in turn increases followers' work role performance, i.e., an *enabling process*. On the other hand, specific characteristics of empowering leadership may also play a significant role in influencing followers' job induced tension which in turn may decrease followers' work role performance, i.e., a *burdening process*. We propose this negative, unconventional aspect of empowering leadership by applying the cost of autonomy (Langfred & Moye, 2004) and role theory (Kahn, Donald, Wolfe, Quinn, & Robert, 1964) perspectives. The notion of the cost of autonomy suggests that the downside of the cognitive distraction of autonomy would be individuals' strain associated with the task or work, i.e., job induced tension (Langfred & Moye, 2004). Accordingly, an increased extent of followers' autonomy via empowering leadership may also increase followers' strain level, inhibiting the positive effects of empowering leadership on work-related outcomes. Moreover, according to role theory (Kahn et al., 1964), receiving extra assignments and additional responsibilities from a higher position agent (e.g., leader) interferes with individuals' role perceptions that were previously constructed, increasing individuals' role stress (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Thus, followers' role stress, which could be induced by their leader's empowering behavior, possibly leads them to experience job-induced tension, which in turn will hinder the ability to harness the positive effects of empowering leadership on work-related outcomes most effectively.

Overall, we offer two key contributions here. First, we contribute to the empowering leadership literature by explicitly providing a conceptual framework which could explain the negative side of empowering leadership. Even though the need to examine negative and unexpected aspects of empowering leadership has been voiced previously (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015), a conceptual framework which could explain those aspects sufficiently has not been suggested, inhibiting the comprehensive understanding of empowering leadership. Drawing from the cost of autonomy and role theory perspectives, our work helps further understand the negative aspect of empowering leadership conceptually. Second, as past research in this realm has not been conclusive, and in fact there are mixed results, the approach here takes a balanced view, suggesting a simple and tight model, and empirically examining both the upside and downside of empowering leadership by using a more rigorous test of ideas. To test our model of the paradoxical mechanisms of empowering leadership, we used several different statistical methodologies: path-analysis, bootstrapping analysis, and Bayesian simulation analysis using non-informative prior distributions (details provided below).

By suggesting and empirically examining these paradoxical mechanisms of empowering leadership, we expect the current research fills an important space in the empowering leadership literature both conceptually and empirically. Unveiling the two faces of empowering leadership could contribute to an integrated understanding of empowering leadership; thus allowing for a more nuanced view of the association between empowering leadership and its effects.

The model and hypotheses (developed in the subsequent section) of the current study are summarized in Fig. 1.

Hypotheses development

Empowering leadership

As a key approach to leadership, empowering leadership refers to a process of sharing power, and allocating more autonomy and responsibilities to followers through a specific set of leader behaviors that entails enhancing the meaningfulness of work,

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