



With great power comes shared responsibility: Psychological power and the delegation of authority



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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of delegation as a managerial tool, we know little about how leaders' characteristics affect their decision to delegate. In this paper, we demonstrate that, holding objective markers of power constant, a psychological sense of power predicts preferences for delegation. Specifically, individuals who feel relatively powerless are less willing to delegate decision making authority compared to those who feel powerful. We find support for this pattern in two studies. These results provide insight into the factors linking power and delegation.

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1. Introduction

The choices of when and how to delegate decision making authority have long been considered a key part of a leader's responsibility (Charness, Cobo-Reyes, Jimenez, Lacomba, & Lagos, 2012; Leana, 1986; Vroom & Yetton, 1973; Yukl, 1994), and the delegation of authority is associated with a host of important organizational outcomes such as employee satisfaction (Wagner, 1994) and team performance (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sim, 2013). Further, delegation has been identified as a crucial aspect of participative and empowering leadership (e.g., Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Kirkman & Rosen, 1997; Leach, Wall, & Jackson, 2003) that have been advocated as effective means of increasing outcomes including performance (Cohen, Chang, & Ledford, 1997; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006), customer satisfaction (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005) and creativity (Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Despite the prevalence and importance of delegation, surprisingly few studies have examined the antecedents of the decision to delegate (Bass, 1990; Oehmichen, Schult, & Wolff, 2015). Further, the limited research on this topic has focused nearly exclusively on social interactions between superiors and subordinates, or factors relating to the subordinates themselves (e.g., Leana, 1986; Richardson, Amason, Buchholtz, & Gerard, 2002; Yukl & Fu, 1999). Thus, we know little about how aspects of the superior in a relationship influences his or her decision to delegate.

In this paper, we explore how an important social-cognitive attribute—a psychological sense of power—influences the decision of

whether to delegate decision making authority to others. We distinguish between structural power, or the position or status that allows an individual to decide whether authority should be shared, and the psychological sense of power, or the degree to which an individual feels as though he or she has influence over the environment. We argue that, holding structural power constant, individuals who feel powerful are more willing to share their decision making authority with others. In contrast, individuals who feel relatively powerless are more likely to consolidate decision making authority and maintain primary control.

By exploring the relationship between psychological power and the delegation, we extend theory and research in a number of important ways. Most significantly, we are among the first to identify a link between characteristics of superiors and their inclination to share power with subordinates. In addition, we extend the influential literature on power to a novel and important domain by distinguishing between structural and psychological power among those in leadership roles, thereby demonstrating the importance of understanding matches and mismatches between these two types of power (cf. Anicich, Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2015; Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012). In the following sections, we first describe the construct of delegation, and then explore why feeling powerful or powerless may relate to the decision to delegate.

1.1. Power and delegation

Although widely acknowledged as a key aspect of the managerial role (e.g., Yukl & Fu, 1999), academic interest in delegation, or “a process whereby the manager transfers decision-making authority to a subordinate” (Leana, 1987, p. 228) as a unique construct has waxed and waned.

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More commonly, delegation is studied under the rubric of more general forms of management, such as empowerment or participative management (Yukl, 2012). This transfer of focus is unfortunate, as important unanswered questions about delegation in and of itself remain. In particular, we know little about the antecedents of the decision to delegate.

This is not to say that the topic is unstudied. However, the sparse work that has examined when delegation is likely to occur has nearly exclusively examined the effects of situational or relational factors in the decision to delegate. For instance, Yukl and Fu (1999) found that managers were most willing to delegate authority to competent subordinates who shared the supervisor's goals. They also demonstrated that aspects of the manager-subordinate relationship influenced the decision to delegate, as subordinates with positive exchange relationships with the supervisor were more likely to gain authority. These results were consistent with earlier work showing that other situational factors, such as supervisors' workloads and the importance of decisions, influence the decision to delegate (Leana, 1986).

Although this research has helped us to understand some antecedent factors affecting the decision to delegate, the role of supervisors' characteristics on delegation has been largely neglected. Limited exceptions include Leana (1986) who measured leaders' need for dominance and role perceptions and found no correlation between these characteristics and delegation, and Brandl and Pohler (2010) who found that CEOs' perceptions of their knowledge of Human Resource Management influenced the degree to which they delegated authority to their Human Resources department (see also Ling, Simsek, Lubatkin, & Veiga, 2008; Oehmichen et al., 2015). Thus, there remains a significant gap in the literature that limits our understanding of when delegation will occur.

In considering which characteristics of the superior may influence the decision to delegate, it is helpful to think about the process of delegation itself. Intrinsically, delegation requires the relinquishment of power on the part of the superior, as she has extended the authority to make strategic decisions to others (Leana, 1987). In this way, delegation inherently involves a loss of control (Hales, 1999; Richardson et al., 2002). This is important because this loss of control will likely be more salient to and difficult for some leaders than to others. One factor that has been shown to influence preferences for control is the psychological sense of power, and thus we explore the role of a psychological sense of power on delegation.

Feeling powerful, as an intrapersonal state, is distinct from ostensible signals of objective power, such as hierarchical status within an organization (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). For example, a top executive may feel powerless to effect culture change within her organization, whereas an entry-level employee may feel powerful due to her ability to influence others in her workgroup. Regardless of one's formal position, feeling powerful is associated with a range of important outcomes, including taking action, pursuing one's own goals, and expressing true feelings (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Hecht & LaFrance, 1998; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003).

Most germane to the present research, feelings of power relate to individuals' fundamental need to believe that they have personal control over their lives (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). Specifically, individuals who feel relatively powerless believe that they lack control over their environment (Fast et al., 2009; Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014). As a result, these individuals possess stronger motivation to control their environments as a way to mitigate their perceived lack of power (Inesi, Botti, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2011). We argue that among high status but psychologically powerless individuals, this search for control may manifest in a desire to maintain primary decision making authority. In contrast, high-status individuals who feel powerful and thus are less motivated to increase control over their environments may be more likely to share responsibilities with others. Taken together, we propose that independent of actual power, individuals who feel relatively powerless will be less likely to delegate decision making authority compared to those who feel relatively powerful.

We tested this prediction in two studies. In our first study, we measured individuals' sense of power and found that it predicted preferences for a shared decision-making environment. In our second study, we established the causal role of psychological power in this relationship by inducing feelings of power and relating them to preferences for delegation.

2. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to directly measure feelings of psychological power, and to link this sense of power to preferences for delegation of decision making authority.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

We recruited 238 individuals (70% female) through a behavioral laboratory affiliated with a large European business school. The population from which our sample was drawn consists of business school students and staff, as well as other members of the local community. Participants completed this study as part of a larger data collection effort and were paid a total of £1.25 British pounds for their participation.

2.1.2. Procedure

We first measured participants' psychological sense of power. They were next asked to imagine that they were a manager in charge of supervising a number of people (i.e., a structural position of power). Finally, participants completed a scale designed to measure the decision making authority they would delegate to their subordinates.

2.1.3. Power measure

We measured feelings of power using a scale developed by Anderson, John, and Keltner (2012). Participants indicated the extent to which they believed that they had influence over others by responding to eight items on a seven-point scale (higher numbers indicating a greater sense of power). Sample items include: "In my relationships with others, I can get them to listen to what I say," and "In my relationships with others, I think I have a great deal of power." Scale reliability in this study was $\alpha = 0.88$.

2.1.4. Delegation of authority

We operationalized delegation of authority as the extent to which participants endorsed the Theory X approach to leadership (McGregor, 1957). Those who endorse a Theory X perspective believe that employees should be separated from the organizational decision making process, and that it is the role of managers to limit employee autonomy by closely monitoring subordinates' behavior (McGregor, 1957, 1960). Lower endorsement of Theory X behaviors support the delegation of responsibility and decision making authority to employees. Our prediction is that individuals who hold positions of structural power but who feel relatively powerless would more strongly support a Theory X perspective.

To measure support for Theory X, participants completed a five-item scale developed by Kopelman, Protas, and Falk (2010). Sample items include "The amount of responsibility given to employees should be limited and controlled," and "If anything is to get done, the manager has to make the decision." Support for each statement was indicated on five-point scales, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of Theory X. Scale reliability in this study was $\alpha = 0.65$.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Preliminary analyses

Men ($M = 4.95, SD = 0.88$) felt marginally more powerful than did women ($M = 4.72, SD = 1.01$), $F(1, 236) = 3.29, p = 0.07$, Cohen's $d = 0.24$. Men ($M = 3.13, SD = 0.69$) and women ($M = 3.01, SD = 0.67$) did

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