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Empowering leadership: Construct clarification, conceptualization, and validation of a new scale

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Stein Amundsen [a,b,*], Øyvind L. Martinsen [c]

[a] Faculty of Education and Social Work, Lillehammer University College, Norway
[b] Faculty of Social Sciences and Technological Management, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway
[c] Department of Leadership and Organizational Behavior, Norwegian Business School, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss key aspects of empowering leadership as a basis for conceptualizing and operationalizing the construct. The conceptualization resulted in eight behavioral manifestations arranged within three influence processes, which were investigated in a sample of 317 subordinates in Study 1. The results supported the validity and reliability of a two-dimensional, 18-item instrument, labeled the Empowering Leadership Scale (ELS). In Study 2 ($N = 215$) and Study 3 ($N = 831$) the factor structure of ELS was cross-validated in two independent samples from different work settings. Preliminary concurrent validation in Studies 1 and 2 found that ELS had a positive relationship to several subordinate variables, among others self-leadership and psychological empowerment. In Study 3 ELS was compared with scales measuring leader–member exchange (LMX) and transformational leadership. Discriminant validity was supported, and moreover, ELS showed incremental validity beyond LMX and transformational leadership when predicting psychological empowerment.

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1. Introduction

The notion of empowerment was introduced in the field of management in the 1980s, and seems based on a need for an organizational concept that could promote employee productivity (Bartunek & Spreitzer, 2006) relative to fundamental technological and commercial changes that took place both in businesses and the public sector (Fernandez & Moldogaziev, 2011; Hill & Huq, 2004). These changes led to, among others, increased customer/client orientation, more flexible, flattened, and decentralized organization designs, and improvements in quality and efficiency for most organizations. The nature of work has also changed substantially in the last decades by becoming more complex and cognitively demanding (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007), and highly skilled and educated "knowledge workers" have become the core of a rapidly growing segment of the workforce (Parker, Wall, & Cordery, 2001).

In this changing "landscape" empowering leadership (EL) has emerged as a particular form of leadership, distinct from other approaches such as directive, transactional, and transformational leadership (Pearce et al., 2003). At its core, employee empowerment involves enhanced individual motivation at work through the delegation of responsibility and authority to the lowest organizational level where a competent decision can be made (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). As such, EL may generally be defined as "behaviors that share power with subordinates" (Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2010, p. 531). Despite a growing interest in investigating different implications of EL (e.g., Randolph & Kemery, 2011; Raub & Robert, 2010), only a few scale development studies have been published on the construct itself (Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, & Drasgow, 2000; Cox & Sims, 1996; Konczak, Stelly, & Trusty, 2000; Manz & Sims, 1987). The EL measures that have been most frequently employed during the last decade may be categorized into three groups. The first group includes studies (e.g., Dewettinck & van Ameijde,

* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Education and Social Work, PO Box 952, Lillehammer University College, N-2604 Lillehammer, Norway.
E-mail address: stein.amundsen@hil.no (S. Amundsen).

2011; Raub & Robert, 2010) that employed the Empowering Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ) developed by Arnold et al. (2000), or studies (e.g., Hakimi, van Knippenberg, & Giessner, 2010) that used the Leader Empowering Behavior Questionnaire (LEBQ) developed by Konczak et al. (2000). This first group also includes studies (e.g., Boudrias, Gaudreau, Savoie, & Morin, 2009; Boudrias et al., 2010) that employed a combination of both measures. The second group includes studies (e.g., Tekleab, Sims, Yun, Tesluk, & Cox, 2008; Vecchio et al., 2010; Yun, Cox, & Sims, 2006) that used EL measures based on the Self-Management Leadership Questionnaire (SMLQ) developed by Manz and Sims (1987), and/or the Strategic Leadership Questionnaire II (SLQII) originated by Cox and Sims (1996) and later analyzed by Pearce and Sims (2002). These two latter measures seem to be based on the superleadership approach of EL, which in particular has focused on facilitating subordinates' self-leadership (Manz & Sims, 2001). The third group consists of studies (e.g., Wallace, Johnson, Mathe, & Paul, 2011; Zhang & Bartol, 2010) that employed an EL scale developed by Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp (2005).

Both the ELQ and the SMLQ were developed inductively based on data from settings characterized by external leadership of self-managing work teams. The SLQII seems also largely to be related to team leadership or shared leadership (e.g., Pearce & Sims, 2002). Vecchio et al. (2010) argued that work conditions generally do not "move in the more radical direction of creating a genuine self-managed team structure" (p. 531). This observation highlights the importance of studying EL at the individual level in more traditional hierarchical structures wherein leaders relate to individual employees to a greater extent than teams. The LEBQ and Ahearne et al.'s scale seem to be developed with the individual level as a reference point. However, the discriminant validity of the LEBQ relative to other related leadership approaches was not assessed by Konczak et al. (2000), whereas Ahearne et al.'s measure was not validated beyond an unrestricted maximum-likelihood factor analysis to examine its dimensionality and an assessment of the concurrent validity relative to the outcome variables in their study. Thus, we believe that a well validated measure developed in an individualized context may add value to future research on EL. Moreover, Arnold et al. (2000) noted that there is little theory focusing on the role of effective empowering leader behavior, which seems equally valid today. We therefore aimed to fill some of this lack and additionally identify key mediators of EL.

Accordingly, the main purpose of the present paper is, at the individual level of analysis, (1) to theoretically underpin and define EL as guideline for (2) conceptualization and operationalization of the construct, (3) to identify central mediators, and (4) to build, refine, and validate a new instrument to measure the construct. We investigate the psychometric properties and validity of the new EL measure through three studies representing different work settings. In the first study we analyze behaviors that may theoretically be included in the superordinate construct of EL, and additionally investigate the initial concurrent validity of the new measure relative to subordinates' self-leadership, performance, work effort, and job satisfaction. In our second study we replicate the factor structure obtained in Study 1, and assess the concurrent validity further relative to subordinates' psychological empowerment and creativity. In the third study we replicate the factor structure once again in a new independent sample, and we investigate the discriminant and incremental validity for the new scale when compared with other popular and well researched measures of leader behavior that may be associated with empowerment.

2. Theoretical underpinning of empowering leadership

2.1. Central influence processes of empowering leadership

EL involves a transfer of power from top management to knowledge workers with high autonomy and who are able to take initiative and make decisions about daily activities (Ford & Fottler, 1995). Accordingly, such work characteristics require particular forms of leadership, and in this regard EL has been proposed to be a more effective approach compared with among others, directive, transactional, and transformational leadership (Liu, Lepak, Takeuchi, & Sims, 2003). Considering that leadership in general is described as a process of influencing others (Yukl, 2010), to empower is more about giving influence to than having influence over. In fact, scholars (e.g., Houghton & Yoho, 2005; Manz & Sims, 2001) have suggested that subordinates develop relatively less dependence from EL compared with directive, transactional, and transformational leadership. In such perspective facilitation and support of autonomy is a key characteristic of EL.

The justification to support autonomy is particularly found in research on Hackman and Oldham's (1976) job characteristic model and in self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985). For example, in a comprehensive meta-analysis of the work design literature by Humphrey et al. (2007) autonomy was found to be the only motivational characteristic for which the 95% confidence interval (CI) did not include zero for the relationship with objective performance. Moreover, research on the SDT model has shown that an autonomy-supportive managerial style yields a variety of positive subordinate outcomes, including performance evaluations, task motivation, and psychological adjustment on the job (e.g., Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Deci et al., 2001). Other relevant theoretical sources supporting the role of autonomy and self-direction include behavioral self-management theory (e.g., Thorenson & Mahoney, 1974), self-leadership theory (e.g., Manz, 1986), and social cognitive theory (e.g., Bandura, 1986).

We suggest that empowering leaders in particular can affect subordinates' autonomy through three different but related influence processes. The first is the classical socio-structural approach that involves sharing power and delegating formal responsibility and authority (e.g., Burke, 1986). This approach has similarities with related perspectives such as participative leadership and employee involvement (e.g., Lawler, 1986; Likert, 1961). However, providing subordinates with formal autonomy may not necessarily be sufficient; subordinates should also develop adequate motivation for working autonomously. Conger and Kanungo (1988) noted this assertion, and pointed out that "delegating or resource sharing is only one set of conditions that may (but not necessarily) enable or empower subordinates" (p. 474), and advocated that empowerment alternatively should be