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

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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,
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
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