

**Empowering leadership and work engagement: the roles of self-efficacy
and identification with leader**

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Abstract: This research investigated the link between empowering leadership and work engagement using data from Turkey. Consistent with social exchange, social learning, and social identity theories, self-efficacy and identification with leader as mediators of the empowering leadership to work engagement relationship was examined. Results from 60 supervisors and 496 immediate direct reports revealed that empowering leadership was positively and significantly related to follower work engagement as rated by their immediate supervisors and that this relationship was fully mediated by self-efficacy and identification with leader. The implications of the findings for theory and practice are discussed.

Key words: Empowering leadership, work engagement, self-efficacy, identification with leader

Introduction

Empowering leadership involves sharing power to enhance employees' motivation and investment in their work (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). It is the process of implementing conditions that enable sharing power with an employee by delineating the significance of the employee's job, providing greater decision-making autonomy, demonstrating trust in the employee's capabilities, and providing employees with the freedom to act as flexibly as circumstances warrant (Arnold et al., 2000). These behaviors are conceptually highly relevant to work engagement. Empowering leadership occurs when leaders foster trust based relationships with subordinates, communicate a compelling vision to their employees, facilitate participative decision-making, coach subordinates to be more self-reliant, and show concern for their employees' personal problems (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999).

However, relatively few studies have tested how and why empowering leadership relates to follower work engagement, and if so, the mechanism through which empowering leadership relates to work engagement. An important exception is recent research by Tuckey, Bakker and Dollard (2012) that examined the roles of individual level cognitive demands and cognitive resources in the relationship between empowering leadership and follower work engagement. They found that by increasing both cognitive demands and cognitive resources, empowering leadership optimizes working conditions for the achievement of work-related goals and the development of follower competence and self-determination that, in turn, should stimulate engagement. Accordingly, the primary goal of the present research is to extend this early and more recent research by examining the roles of self-efficacy as a social learning process, and identification with leader as a social identity process in the empowering leadership–work engagement relationship.

Self-efficacy is defined as individuals' perceptions of their ability to execute a specific task and is a major component of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Identification refers to a feeling of oneness or belongingness to a person, particular group or institution (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer and Hogg, 2004), and is derived primarily from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981). Together, we argue that the reason why empowering leadership predicts work engagement is that empowering leadership behavior enhances followers' self-efficacy, and identification with the leader. In turn, high self-efficacy and identification with leader improve follower work engagement.

The purpose of this study is to examine how empowering leadership (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999) affects followers' work engagement. Further, the study concentrated on identifying mediating variables by which empowering leadership is related to work engagement. In this context, the study begins by a literature review of empowering leadership, work engagement, follower's identification with leader and self-efficacy, and

then will go on to development of hypotheses. Research methodology, analyses results and research model will take place at second section. The results of the analyses will be discussed and recommendation will be provided for managers and academician at the last section.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Empowering leadership and work engagement behavior

The concept of work engagement has gained momentum because of its predictive value for job performance (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). In their recent review, Macey and Schneider (2008) listed various different definitions of work engagement. We follow Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) operationalization, according to which work engagement is a positive, affective-motivational work-related state that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working. Dedication refers to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Finally, absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching from work (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). This definition encapsulates the concepts' state nature, meaning that engagement is not just a trait-like factor, but may vary even within the same person over time (Sonnentag, Dormann and Demerouti, 2010).

Leadership has been suggested as one of the single biggest factors contributing to employee work engagement (Harter et al., 2002). Empowering leadership can play an intrinsic and an extrinsic motivational role to stimulate work engagement. Intrinsically, we propose that empowering leadership behaviors help employees meet the basic need for self-determination or control (Ryan and Deci, 2000). By encouraging followers to use self-rewards, facilitating follower self-leadership, engaging in participative goal setting, and encouraging teamwork and independent action, empowering leaders transmit power to followers (Manz and Sims, 1987), and in doing so should enhance followers' capacity for self-determination and followers' feelings of mastery. Extrinsically, the outcome of a heightened sense of mastery and self-determination is enhanced motivation for task accomplishment (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Through delegation, consultation, and support, this enhanced level of motivation is combined with the capacity to succeed and achieve work-related goals. Thus, we propose that empowering leadership promotes follower work engagement through intrinsic and extrinsic motivational processes.

Hypothesis 1: Empowering leadership is positively related to work engagement.

The roles of identification with leader and self-efficacy

Research on identification with other individuals and groups has increased dramatically over the past decade (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer and Hogg, 2004). The concept of identification has been discussed in the literature based on two different meanings, one describing a state and the other a process (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006). Identification is that part of an individual's identity that derives directly from his or her association with an entity, such as a group or organization.

One's self-concept is affected by recognizing that one shares similar values and beliefs with the entity; alternatively, one can change and develop the self-concept so that one's values and beliefs become more similar to the entity (Pratt, 1998). As a process, identification refers to aligning one's identity with some entity, such as one's work group (Kreiner et al., 2006). Although identification has been frequently conceptualized in the literature as referring to the definition of self vis-a-vis some group, occupation, profession, or organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), recently Sluss and Ashforth (2007) broadened the conceptualization of identification to encompass interpersonal relationships and their influence on identity and

identification in the workplace. Specifically, the interpersonal level of identification focuses on one's role-related relationships, such as between supervisors and their direct reports. To this end, they posited two related aspects of an interpersonal level of identification: relational identity and identification. They defined relational identity as the “nature of one's role–relationship, such as manager–subordinate,” and relational identification as the “extent to which one defines oneself in terms of a given role–relationship” (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007:11).

Den Hartog and De Hoogh (2009) asserted that more empowering leaders' relational orientation should encourage followers to personally identify with both the leader and their organization. This is because such leaders place a premium on interdependent relationships with direct reports. For example, according to Sluss and Ashforth (2007) typology of relational identification, because empowering leaders are transparent, know and express where they stand on important issues, values, and beliefs, and they convey these through actions and deeds, their followers would be more likely to identify with his or her values and beliefs and internalize them as their own (Laschinger and Finegan, 2005). Similarly, by setting a personal example of working standards and balance in making critical decisions, empowering leaders are expected to evoke a deeper sense of identification among followers that tends to make them aspire to be like the leader in behaving openly and ethically, while in the process elevating followers' own self-awareness.

Drawing upon the research reviewed above, we also expect higher identification with one's supervisor will relate positively to the level of follower motivation to engage in activities that pursue the supervisor's work agenda. Followers who identify more strongly with their leaders will also tend to be more dedicated to and involved with their work because they associate what they do on the job with a prototype with which they identify personally. Therefore, we expect a mediating role of identification with the leader on empowerment leadership and work engagement relationship.

Hypothesis 2: Identification with the leader mediates the relationship between empowerment leadership and follower's work engagement.

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in his/her ability to perform a particular behavior successfully or to control one's environment. Drawing on Bandura's (1986) concept of self-efficacy, Conger and Kanungo (1988) viewed empowerment as “a process whereby an individual's belief in his or her self-efficacy is enhanced” (p. 474). In their perspective, empowerment is an enabling process rather than a delegating process, which is just one condition for empowering workers (Hakimi et al., 2010). Furthermore, Conger and Kanungo (1988) suggest that enabling processes involve creating conditions for promoting task motivation through a process of enhancing self-efficacy. According to Conger and Kanungo (1988), empowerment is defined as “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information” (p. 474). Accordingly, empowered employees feel that they can perform their work competently, which in turn influences their task initiation and persistence. Furthermore Arnord et al. (2000:250) stated that leaders who exhibit more empowering behaviors are concerned with “the process of implementing conditions that increase employees' feelings of self-efficacy and control, and removing conditions that foster a sense of powerlessness”.

Hypothesis 3: Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between empowerment leadership and follower's work engagement.

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

This study was completed in May 2013. A research team consisting of 6 doctoral students visited 60 branches of 6 private commercial banks in different regions of Turkey. In their first visit, they gave information about the aim of this study to the employees in their offices. Employees wishing to participate in this study were requested to send their names and branches by e-mail to the research team members. In the second visit (a week later), all respondents were invited to a meeting room in their departments. A randomly selected group of employees completed the empowering leadership, self-efficacy and identification with supervisor scales (9 - 12 employees per bank branch, totaling 600). Those employees' superiors (branch manager) completed the work engagement scale (1 manager per branch, totaling 60) in their offices. Branch managers' reports of work engagement instead of employee reports were used in order to avoid same-source bias. Forty-one percent of the employees were female with an average age of 29.36 years. Moreover, 69 percent of the branch managers were male with an average age of 36.93 years. The response rate of the study was 83 percent.

Analyses and Results

Empowering leadership was measured by 15-item scale developed by Arnold et al. (2000). Sample items include, "Sets a good example by the way he/she behaves" and "Gives all followers a chance to voice their opinions. The average score of responses from respondents was used to compute this measure. Coefficient alpha was .89. Identification with one's supervisor ($\alpha = .86$) was measured using 10 items developed by Kark et al. (2003). These items measured the extent to which individual followers identified with their immediate supervisor. A sample item is, "I view the success of my supervisor as my own success." Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The 17-item scale of Salanova, Agut and Peiro (2005) was used to measure work engagement, composed of vigor (6 items), dedication (5 items), and absorption (6 items). All items were scored on a 5-point frequency rating scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Examples of items include the following: for vigor, 'In my job, I feel strong and vigorous'; for dedication, 'I am enthusiastic about my job'; for absorption 'Time flies when I'm working'. Work engagement was hypothesized in this study at the construct level, and we used composite score of three dimensions to represent work engagement. Finally, we used Spreitzer's (1995) three-item measure of self-efficacy ($\alpha = .81$). Sample items include, "I am confident about my ability to do my job" and "I have mastered the skills necessary for my job."

Previous studies have indicated that age, gender (e.g. Mauno et al., 2005; Rothbard, 2001) and organizational tenure (e.g. Allen, Poteet and Russell, 1998) were related to voice behavior and work engagement. Accordingly, in order to reduce the influence of confounding effects, gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age and organizational tenure (in years) were controlled.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations of the study variables. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses in this study. The mediating roles of self-efficacy and identification with leader were analyzed by using procedures for testing multiple mediation outlined by MacKinnon (2000); a straightforward extension of Baron and Kenny's (1986) causal step approach. This procedure involves estimating three separate regression equations. Since mediation requires the existence of a direct effect to be mediated, the first step in the analysis here involved regressing work engagement on empowering leadership and the control variables. The results presented in Table 2 (model 2) show that empowering leadership is significantly and

positively related to work engagement ($\beta = .33, p < .001$), thus providing support for the direct effect of empowering leadership on employee work engagement (Hypothesis 1).

As the mediation hypotheses in this study imply that empowering leadership is related to both self-efficacy and employee identification with leader, the first part of the second step in the mediation analysis involved regressing self-efficacy, identification with leader and the control variables on empowering leadership. The results in Table 2 indicate that empowering leadership has significant, positive relationship with both self-efficacy ($\beta = .23, p < .01$) and identification with leader ($\beta = .29, p < .01$), thus offering support for the main effects of empowering leadership on self-efficacy and employee identification with leader.

In addition, in forwarding the mediation hypotheses, positive relations between self-efficacy and employee identification with leader and work engagement was presumed. The second part of the second step of the mediation analysis, therefore, involved regressing work engagement on self-efficacy and employee identification with leader. Results reported in Table 2 (model 3) confirm the two presumed relationships. They indicate that self-efficacy has a significant, positive relationship to work engagement ($\beta = .20, p < .01$) and show that employee identification with leader is positively related to work engagement ($\beta = .26, p < .01$).

In the final step of the mediation analysis, work engagement was regressed on empowering leadership, self-efficacy, identification with leader and the control variables. As predicted, results (model 4) indicate that the relationship between empowering leadership and work engagement remains significant but its regression coefficient is substantially reduced at the final step when self-efficacy and identification with leader are entered into the equation ($\beta = .26, p < .01$). At the same time, the effect of self-efficacy ($\beta = .19, p < .05$) and employee identification with leader ($\beta = .22, p < .01$) on work engagement remained significant. Complementing the causal step approach, a Sobel test was conducted to determine the significance of the mediated effect of empowering leadership on work engagement via self-efficacy and identification with leader. The results confirm the mediating effects of self-efficacy ($z = 2.93, p < .01$) and of identification with leader ($z = 3.16, p < .01$). Together, these results suggest that self-efficacy and identification with leader mediate the relationship between empowering leadership and employee work engagement, a pattern of results that supports Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations ^a

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	29.36	2.13						
2. Gender	0.59	.41	.09					
3. Tenure (years)	4.69	1.12	.21**	.03				
4. Self-efficacy	3.63	.83	.12	.01	.11			
5. Identification with leader	3.96	.63	.13	.10	.12	.16*		
6. Empowering leadership	3.13	.93	.14	.09	.07	.26**	.31***	
7. Work engagement	3.32	.99	.11	.12	.06	.21**	.28**	.39***

^a $n = 496$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2 Results of the Standardized Regression Analysis for the Mediated Effects of Empowering Leadership via Self-efficacy and Identification with leader ^a

Variables	Self-efficacy	Identification with leader	Work engagement			
			Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Age	.11	.12	.10	.09	.09	.06
Gender	.01	.09	.11	.08	.06	.03
Tenure (in years)	.09	.11	.07	.06	.03	.01
Empowering leadership	.23**	.29**		.33***		.26**
Self-efficacy					.20**	.19*
Identification with leader					.26**	.22**
R^2	.36	.49	.09	.13	.19	.18
Adjusted R^2	.32	.46	.06	.12	.17	.17
ΔR^2			.09**	.08**	.03*	.00
F	6.26***	9.12***	1.33*	3.72**	9.39***	9.69***

^a $n = 496$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the relationship between the empowering leadership style and employees' work engagement. The results revealed that employee perception of servant leadership was positively related to employees' work engagement, which supported hypothesis 1. The most remarkable result to emerge from data is that employees' self-efficacy and identification with leader affected the relationship between empowering leadership and work engagement. So, hypothesis 2 (employee's self-efficacy mediates the servant leadership and work engagement relationship) and hypothesis 3 (employee's identification with his or her leader mediates the empowering leadership and work engagement relationship) are fully supported. These findings are consistent with the literature on leadership and work engagement. Although there are only a few studies examining the empowering leadership-employee voice behavior (Yoon, 2012) and voice behavior and work engagement (Cheng et al., 2013) in literature; empowering leadership-work engagement relationship and the mediator effects of self-efficacy and employee's identification with his or her leader on that relationship are examined and revealed for the first time through that study, which differentiates this study from others.

This study shows that leaders can influence existing working conditions as well as interact with the work environment to determine how the work is actually experienced by employees. In particular, to promote work engagement, organizations should be interested in leaders who support followers to assume responsibility, encourage them to find solutions without always getting a stamp of approval, urge team members to work with each other without direct supervision, and push them to seek out learning opportunities.

There are two broad options to achieve this end. First, organizations can identify people who are likely to act in ways to empower others and place these people in leadership roles. A variety of methods may be suited to this purpose. For example, simulation exercises could be used as part of the selection process. Likewise, the use of behaviorally anchored rating scales for performance appraisal could identify prospective empowering leaders from within the existing employee base. Second, organizations can develop existing leaders, or those with leadership potential, so that they can effectively adopt an empowering leadership style. Field (e.g., Starlicki and Latham, 1996) and laboratory (e.g., Howell and Frost, 1989) studies have shown that specific leadership behaviors can be acquired through training, in turn affecting follower attitudes and performance.

This study was conducted on private commercial banks of Turkey; therefore, findings might not be transferable to all types of organizations. Thus, it is recommended that further

researches can be conducted on organizations in sectors other than banking sector and in different countries for the generalizability of findings. Another limitation of this study is that conclusions about the direction of causality in the model cannot be drawn since a cross-sectional design was utilized in the study. Longitudinal research is needed, therefore, to firmly establish the direction of causality for the model presented here.

Biography

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