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An integrative model of the empowerment process

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Abstract

Employee empowerment theory and research lacks a single, unifying model capable of integrating the multiple levels of activity and complex relationships that characterize the empowerment process. The model proposed in this paper describes the empowerment process from intervention design to subsequent employee behavior. The dynamics of the empowerment process are presented as reflecting the interaction between the localized work environment and the individual employee, within the broader organization context. We argue that the definitions presented in this paper can serve to integrate and unify the literature and research on empowerment. Links between the organization context, the local work environment, intervening perceptions and attitudes, and specific components of psychological empowerment are suggested. The role of individual differences within these relationships is also described. Finally, we discuss implications for researchers and managers.

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1. Introduction

The empowerment literature lacks a set of well-accepted and consistently applied definitions of the important elements in the empowerment process. For example, the definitions of empowerment itself vary widely across scholars. Many studies define empowerment as intrinsic task motivation (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) or motivation reflective of the person–environment fit (Zimmerman, 1990). In other literature, empowerment has been defined as perceptions (Parker & Price, 1994) and as commitment-based designs (Spreitzer, 1996). Researchers have also defined empowerment in terms of job structure—the transfer of power or authority (e.g., Burke, 1986; Kanter, 1977)

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and/or job support structures such as the sharing of resources and information (e.g., Blau & Alba, 1982; Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). Empowerment has also been described as dependent on management or leadership actions (e.g., Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Block, 1987) and human resource practices such as training programs or reward systems (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Lawler, 1986). And, finally, empowerment has been used with reference to behavioral or performance-related outcomes (e.g., Zimmerman, 1990). These varied definitions and approaches have made it difficult to compare and integrate empirical findings across empowerment studies. A model that integrates all of these definitions of empowerment would bring much needed organization to this literature.

Fundamental to this lack of common definitions is a belief that empowerment is a single, easily defined construct, when, in fact, empowerment is an on-going process, taking place in a dynamic environment, involving many elements that operate at different levels of analysis. Much of the work in this field has focused on only portions of the overall empowerment process, viewing each in isolation and consequently providing an incomplete picture of the dynamics of the process. For example, much of the empowerment literature has been criticized for considering psychological or motivational issues at the expense of actual job structure changes in the environment that might provide employees with more power (e.g., Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). It has been suggested that future research must determine the local work unit elements that affect the individual cognitions in order to extend our knowledge of the macro–micro links (Spreitzer, 1996). The broader organization context will also have important influences on the success of the empowerment process (e.g., Heller, 1973). Historical and cultural elements within their specific organization context must be taken into consideration when predicting or attempting to explain employee responses to empowerment interventions (Marchington, Wilkinson, Ackers, & Goodman, 1994). Although past research in empowerment has somewhat inconsistently alluded to the roles of various attitudes and perceptions, we believe these elements define a critical set of intervening variables that link contextual components to psychological empowerment.

This purpose of this paper is to present a framework that will integrate and extend the current literature by clarifying the role of important contextual, environmental, cognitive, and behavioral variables in the empowerment process, thus, fulfilling the suggested need (Zimmerman, 1990) for the integration of all relevant levels of analysis. We propose that the empowerment process is best represented by an expanded focus that incorporates both environmental and individual-level elements. In the model proposed in Fig. 1, we have sought to represent the most important of these elements as they act and interact to influence employee behaviors on the job. The specific relationships proposed throughout the paper have been enumerated on the figure and in the discussion below for clarity. We propose that the most critical step in the empowerment process is the creation of a local work environment within a broader organizational context that will provide both an opportunity to exercise one's full range of authority and power (i.e., empowered behaviors), as well as the intrinsic motivation within employees to engage in that type of behavior (i.e., psychological empowerment). Relationship #2 in Fig. 1 reflects the proposed link between the broader organization context and elements in the local work environment (i.e., job structure, human resource practices, and local management actions). Important employee perceptions (i.e.,

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