

Psychological empowerment and its relationship to trust in immediate managers

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationships between overall psychological empowerment, as well as its four aspects (meaning, impact, self-determination, and competence) as Spreitzer identifies, and bank managers' cognition and affect-based trust in their immediate managers. Certain demographic factors are taken into consideration as control variables to determine their effect on the relationship between psychological empowerment and trust. 220 bank managers in Ankara, Turkey participated in this study. The results show a significant relationship between cognition-based trust in immediate managers and overall psychological empowerment. Although cognition-based trust relates to meaning and competence aspects, affect-based trust is related to impact only. This study shows no relationship between any type of trust in immediate manager and self-determination. With demographic as control variables, only position has an impact on psychological empowerment.

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1. Introduction

A review of the literature shows that empowerment receives wide recognition as an important subject in management practices for several reasons. First, personnel empowerment is one of the fundamental elements of managerial and organizational effectiveness and that effectiveness increases when power and control are shared (Keller and Dansereau, 1995). Another reason is that some literature reports empowerment to be a facilitating factor in responding to environmental changes at the right time, such as meeting customer demands on time and increasing their satisfaction. Bowen and Lawler (1992: 33–34) stress that empowered employees become a great source of

service ideas. Empowered employees not only respond to customer needs directly during service delivery but also deal with dissatisfied customers during service recovery. Bowen and Lawler consider employees' increased job satisfaction, warmer and more enthusiastic interaction with customers and customer retention through word-of-mouth advertisement as the major benefits of personnel empowerment. The third reason why interest in the concept of empowerment has grown is the "beneficial results" of personnel empowerment, which in some studies have shown increases in sales and profit, cost reduction, higher customer satisfaction, fewer customer complaints, increased loyalty to the organization, increased effectiveness, higher numbers of customers, effective problem solving (as well as problem prevention) and increased coordination between functions (e.g., Spreitzer, 1995; Fulford and Enz, 1995; Klagge, 1998; D'anunzio and McAndrew, 1999; Siegal and Gardner, 2000; Sigler and Pearson, 2000; Niehoff et al., 2001; Alan and Sashkin, 2002).

What factors influence empowerment? Some researchers argue the importance of trust among employees as one of the conditions for the success of empowerment practices (e.g., Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998; Andrews, 1994; Mayer et al., 1995;

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Owen, 1996; Harari, 1999). A manager's trust in an employee, in particular, may be a prerequisite for the success of empowerment since trust is an attempt to enhance the efficacy of the employee. However, the literature rarely deals with the issue of an employee's trust in a manager and this approach reflects the traditional paradigm, which views trust from the perspective of the manager rather than that of the employee. This study examines the relationships between the individuals' perceptions of psychological empowerment and their cognition and affect-based trust in their immediate managers.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The concept of empowerment

Many studies of the concept of empowerment and just as many definitions of the term exist in the literature. No consensus occurs in defining the concept. Although empowering practices are very common in work environments, academic research on the meaning and results of this concept has not kept pace.

An investigation of the literature on empowerment reveals one point that could facilitate an acceptable definition of this concept. Most studies recognize that theory and practice utilize two different approaches to treat empowerment. The first approach named relational approach stresses environmental elements and defines empowerment as a set of managerial activities and practices that give employees power, control and authority (Bennis, 1984; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Conger, 1989). Studies building on this approach perceive empowerment as a form of participation and define empowerment as the transmission of power in organizations to those who are less powerful. Those who adopt relational approach define empowerment as the managerial activities and practices that give employees the right to use and control the resources of the organization (Niehoff et al., 2001). Proponents of this perspective express the concept of empowerment as efforts to increase employees' participation level in the decision making process, which means encouraging employees to participate more actively in the whole organization.

Chebat and Kollias (2000) compare empowering practices to Old Italian comedies. The common characteristic of these plays is that there is no written text, only a general idea related to characters, plan and scene. Some writers on empowerment think that for managerial behavior to empower employees managers should provide a positive emotional atmosphere, reward and encourage in visible and personal ways, express confidence, foster initiative and responsibility, and build on success (Conger, 1989). In the relational approach, the advantages of empowerment include increasing the problem solving capacity at the employee level, helping employees to realize their full potential (Klagge, 1998), sharing ideas regarding the organization's performance, presenting information that will affect organizational performance and direction, and giving employees the power to make decisions (Bowen and Lawler, 1992).

The second approach builds from employees' perceptions. In this approach, the concept of psychological empowerment is

emphasized. This approach reflects whether or not the employees perceive themselves as being empowered. (e.g., Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995). According to the theoreticians who approach empowerment from the employees' perspective, empowerment reflects the psychological situation of the employee. If employees do not behave as expected when power is transferred to them, then the employees are either not aware of the fact that they have power or else feel powerless. In this case, empowerment is a psychological variable involving employee's self-perceptions (Forrester, 2000). The current literature refers to this approach as the cognitive or motivational approach. The cognitive approach emphasizes open communication, emotional support to decrease stress and anxiety, inspired goals to increase loyalty and participation, rather than the transmission of power. The cognitive approach aims to increase the employee's feeling of self-efficacy (Hardy and Leiba O' Sullivan, 1998). Keller and Dansereau (1995) found that managers' acts increasing employees' feeling of self-efficacy also increased the latter's feelings of empowerment, justice and control. Conger and Kanungo (1988: 471–473) investigated the answers of questions such as "Are subordinates automatically empowered when authority and resources are shared?" and "Do empowerment techniques only consist of participation in and sharing of organizational resources?". They shift the concept of empowerment from the managerial practices component to the subordinates' perception level. Supporting the cognitive approach, Argyris (1998) criticizes empowerment practices, claiming that managers like personnel empowerment in theory, but that in practice they find the order-command model the best method. Then, empowerment practices are nothing more than an illusion or the emperor's new clothes. The cognitive approach, on the other hand, does not consider empowerment to be a personality trait transferred from one situation to another, but this approach sees empowerment as a concept emanating from the work environment and reflecting an individual's personal perceptions of self. This approach regards psychological empowerment as a continuous variable, by which individuals perceive themselves as more or less empowered rather than empowered or not empowered (Spreitzer, 1995). Spreitzer (1995) defines this concept as the psychological state that employees must experience for managerial empowerment interventions to be successful.

Building on these two approaches, empowerment comprises both environmental and individual elements. Robbins et al. (2002) state that the interaction between environmental elements and personal cognition, perceptions and attitudes, along with the way in which these elements affect employee's work behavior, constitutes empowerment. Spreitzer (1995) found a number of antecedents of empowerment, some of which were related to individual factors, while others were external to the individuals. To these, she added some variables at the work unit level (Spreitzer, 1996). Some of these are strong socio-political support from subordinates, work groups, peers, and superiors; access to information; a work climate focusing on participation; and work units with little role ambiguity. Corsun and Enz (1999) assert a relationship between an employee's feeling of psychological empowerment and the supportive work

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