



Influences on employee preferences for empowerment practices by the “ideal manager” in China

Romie F. Littrell*

Department of International Business, Auckland University of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

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Abstract

Attitudes toward employee empowerment by Chinese and expatriate managers and supervisors, as measured by the “tolerance of freedom” factor of the LBDQXII, of staff and management in a group of hotels in China are discussed. The case deals with a longitudinal study from 1996 to 2002, from the initiation of a management contract with a London-based hotel chain through a significant reduction of participation of expatriate managers from 1999 to 2002. Data is presented from 1999 to 2002 measuring employee and management opinions concerning empowerment. Follow-on studies from 2003 to 2005 provide comparisons from outside Henan Province. Results of the study indicate a positive attitude toward employee empowerment on the part of supervisor-level employees, with a lower, but still positive opinion of the practice exhibited by higher-level managers. This positive attitude is lower for empowerment than for other managerial leader behaviour sets.

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Keywords: Employee; Empowerment; China

Verité en-deça des Pyreneés, erreur au-dela.—There are truths on this side of the Pyreneés that are falsehoods on the other.—Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, 1533–1592, from Hofstede (1993).

*Tel.: +64 9 921 9999x5805; fax: +64 9 921 9990.

E-mail address: romielittrell@yahoo.com.

1. Introduction

In the paper, I deviate from the usual process and first discuss introductory issues, followed by the operationalisation of empowerment prior to the literature review, in order to map the definition to the review concerning empowerment in general and attitudes toward empowerment in China; then I will discuss the design of the data collection, the results of the analysis, and follow with discussion and conclusions.

This study presents results of surveys administered to attempt to assess opinions concerning employee empowerment by managers and supervisors from an organization in China in 1999 and 2002 in Zhengzhou, Henan Province; in 2003 in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province; in 2004 in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, and 2005 in Macau. The data were collected from random business people in Suzhou and Guangzhou, and primarily from hotel and casino employees in Macau and Zhengzhou.

Conventional wisdom proposed in academic and professional journals is that empowering employees anywhere, globally, leads to improvements in employee satisfaction at work and enhances relationships with customers, suppliers, other employees, supervisors, and management; see e.g., Fawcett, Rhoads, and Burnah (2004), Glen and Gordon (2002), Sun (2002), Huyton and Sutton (1996). Tubbs and Schulz (2006) in presenting a taxonomy of global leadership competencies, indicate “effectively utilizing empowerment” to be a component of the meta-competency “teamwork and followership”, supported by Bradley, Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson (2004).

A further indication of the value of employee empowerment is successful management of customer relations; for example, “service failure recovery” (SFR) is closely related to employee empowerment practices. SFR is defined as all service related mishaps or problems (real or perceived) that occur during a customer’s experience with a firm (Magnini & Ford, 2004). In this context, service recovery is the process by which a firm attempts to rectify a service delivery failure. According to Magnini and Ford, there are five areas that must be specifically addressed in service recovery training programs to effectively arm employees at Chinese hotel properties with the ability to address customer satisfaction. These areas are:

- Information processing.
- Emotional responses.
- Instilling guest confidence.
- *Employee empowerment*.
- The correlation between employee satisfaction and SFR efforts.

Effective managing of employee empowerment is generally indicated as a critical factor in successful management of organizations.

However, Pang, Roberts, and Sutton (1998) presented results of a study of Chinese employees at a Beijing hotel designed to determine attitudinal and behavioural patterns, and found that the western concepts of corporate culture, including empowerment, met with strong resistance from many Chinese employees who believed foreign ideals and concepts were not to be trusted. Additionally, in their survey of the China hotel industry, Zhang and Wu (2004) state, “The concept of staff empowerment has yet to be adopted in China, although there are tentative steps being made in this direction”. The subjects in this study indicated some preference toward managers behaving in ways that empowered

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