



Trust and psychological empowerment in the Russian work context

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ABSTRACT

For Russian organizations to achieve global competitiveness it is suggested that they must adopt the most appropriate forms of leadership and organization to encourage the necessary competencies to achieve these ambitions. In this conceptual paper we illustrate that Russian organizational leaders can stimulate improved organizational effectiveness through their encouragement of psychological empowerment amongst managers. In so doing, Russian managers experience intrinsic motivation to take greater responsibility for organizational performance. We propose that managers' experience of psychological empowerment is related to their trust in organizational leaders since studies suggest that trust is a critical psychological state that determines the success of the empowerment process. Whilst the concepts of trust and psychological empowerment have extensive literatures there is limited examination of the relationship between the two constructs in different cultural settings. Our contribution is to illustrate the importance of trust as an antecedent to psychological empowerment within Russian organizations, an environment characterized by high power distance and collectivism. A number of management implications derive from our study.

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1. Introduction

A major goal following Vladimir Putin's election to President of the Russian Federation in 2000 was to secure a place in the global economic community. A critical challenge for Russia's competitiveness remains in improving the microeconomic capability of the economy and the sophistication of local companies and local competition (Porter, 2003). For Russian organizations to compete successfully they need to adopt the most appropriate forms of leadership and organization to develop competencies to achieve these ambitions (Kets De Vries, 2000), since approaches to organisation and leadership differ in different cultural settings (Christopher et al., 2000; Fey, Pavlovskaya, & Tang, 2004). High power-distance and collectivism in particular characterise the Russian enterprise environment (Hofstede, 1980; Ralston, Holt, Terpstra, & Kai-Cheng, 1997; Ronen & Shenkar, 1985; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Vadi & Vereshagin, 2006; Wagner & Moch, 1986).

The competitive global environment demands the utilization of employee capabilities and potential in the organization through leaders' use of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational techniques (Chan, Taylor, & Markham, 2008). Psychological empowerment acts as an intrinsic motivator allowing employees to take personal ownership of their jobs, to exercise self-determination, satisfy their need for power and to reinforce their personal self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1989). Trust has been suggested as a critical psychological state that determines the success of the empowerment process (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

This conceptual paper examines how Russian managers' cognitive and affect-based trust in their leaders is an important antecedent to their feelings of empowerment. Whilst a number of studies link the constructs of trust and psychological empowerment, (Bandura, 1989; Chan et al., 2008; Costigan et al., 2007; Ergeneli, Saglam, & ve Metin, 2007; Mayer et al., 1995)

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there has been limited examination of the relationship between the two constructs in different cultural settings. Additionally, whilst extant studies in the domain of trust focus on the relational notion of trust in exchange dyads, there is little investigation of employees' assessments of trust in their immediate manager (Ergeneli et al., 2007). Consequently, our contribution to the literature is to illustrate the importance of trust as an antecedent to psychological empowerment within Russian organizations through our exploration of Russian managers' assessments of leader trustworthiness.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section presents the theoretical background of our study and conceptual model. We detail the context of our study and present the constructs of our model establishing the importance of managers' psychological empowerment in improving organizational effectiveness during transition to a market economy. We follow with a discussion of how managers' cognitive and affect-based trust in leaders is essential for the development of their feelings of empowerment. We highlight propositions which illustrate how our concepts are linked and propose that the constructs' are mutually reinforcing. We conclude with some of the managerial implications that derive from our study and present the limitations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Russian cultural context

In times of organizational change it is necessary for employees to take initiative, risk, stimulate innovation and cope with high uncertainty (Spreitzer, 1995). This is certainly the case as Russian organizations progress their ambitions for global competitiveness (Kets De Vries, 2000). However, the authoritarian style invoked by organizational leaders; common in Russian organizations is purported to constrain individual initiative, empowerment, creativity and innovation (Fey and Denison, 2003; Fey et al., 2004; Linz, Good, & Huddleston, 2006). 'One man leadership' was the basic principle of soviet enterprise through democratic centralism (Vlachoutsicos, 1997). Manager conformance and not simply performance was fundamental under the old Soviet regime. Providing incentives in Russian organizations for risk taking behaviour or problem resolution was uncommon amongst lower level managers (May, Bormann-Young, & Ledgerwood, 1998). State control of organizations meant that these managers became resourceful in securing their own survival and futures in an environment of extreme scarcity and harsh punishment where the organization was regarded as a separate entity for which they had a commitment and loyalty to its performance (May et al., 1998; McCarthy & Puffer, 2002; McCarthy, Puffer, Vishanski, & Naumov, 2005). Consequently, Communist control produced managers who lacked accountability and responsibility for decisions and outcomes, since many situations were beyond their control (May et al., 1998). The group took priority over the individual within a culture marked by extreme conservatism, risk avoidance and a strong tendency to maintain stability (Vlachoutsicos, 1997). This work environment prevails owing to the engrained Russian Collectivist Value System (RCVS) which has tended to be an enduring part of Russian life and an obstacle towards change (Vlachoutsicos, 1997). Yet, as Russian organizations attempt to reposition themselves as market driven enterprises, managers are being given greater authority and responsibility for organizational performance as the business community has begun to understand that certain leadership styles and behaviours could be the source of competitive advantage (Alexashin & Blenkinsopp, 2005; Gratchev, Rogovsky, & Rakitski, 2007). However, it is suggested that managers are held accountable for performance without stimulation of motivation and initiative (Fey et al., 2004). Consequently, Russian managers find themselves in an uncertain position where they are simultaneously affected by their cultural inheritance from the Soviet era as well as being influenced by non-Russian models of management, involving innate Western values. It is therefore necessary that leadership approaches and management practices adopted in the Russian context energize managers by building faith in their ability to accomplish meaningful goals (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) and that are at the same time sensitive to the cultural inheritance.

A high power-distance culture as displayed in Russia is associated with the extent to which the less powerful members of the organization accept and expect that power is distributed unevenly (Elenkov, 1998). High power-distance is explained by a long history of Russian organizational leaders possessing a very high degree of power over the destinies of subordinates (Alexashin & Blenkinsopp, 2005). Consequently, high power-distance has an important influence on managers' willingness to accept and exercise discretionary power granted by organizational leaders and as such has implications for the development of employees' feelings of empowerment (Humborstad, Humborstad, Whitfield, & Perry, 2008; Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, & Lawler, 2000). Whilst Russian employees expect an autocratic leadership style and accept the legitimate power of leaders, they also expect their organization to take care of them like a family does (Elenkov, 1998). Reliance upon personal networks of trusted friends and colleagues is important (McCarthy & Puffer, 2002; Vadi & Vereshagin, 2006) since work behaviour is still very much influenced by the RCVS (Fey & Denison, 1998; Vadi & Vereshagin, 2006; Vlachoutsicos, 1997).

Conforming to the RCVS, employees subordinate their personal goals to the goals of some collective, for example co-workers, (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). The behaviour of employees relates therefore, to goals that are consistent with a particular group and as such, reactions to leadership approaches will be based on group consensus (Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998; Vlachoutsicos, 1997). Consequently, collectivism may act as an obstacle to change.

Faced with this work environment, any attempt by organizational leaders to introduce management initiatives designed to progress Russian organizations along the path of transition must be sensitive to the culture which, on the one hand, is characterized by an autocratic 'one leader' style of management, and on the other hand, where collectivism tends to prefer the maintenance of stability. We argue that for Russian leaders to improve managerial and organizational effectiveness, psychological empowerment of managers' is beneficial. Thus, in the context of our study we are basing our exploration of the constructs of our model from the perspective of managers as subordinates to organizational leaders. From this perspective we propose that

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