



# Leadership empowerment behaviour on safety officer and safety teamwork in manufacturing industry



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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) Officer's perceptions of the relationship between leadership empowerment behaviour (LEB) and psychological empowerment (PE) leading to safety teamwork with the production team. Based on the lists of competent OH&S officers exhibited in the Malaysia Ministry of Human Resource's website, the participants were recruited. The proposed conceptual model was validated by first- and second-order confirmatory factor analysis of structural equation modelling (SEM). The results indicate a weak construct relationship between leadership empowering behaviour and officer's psychological empowerment. Furthermore, the findings on psychological empowerment were partially mediated. A proposed strategy for further study was recommended to confirm the PE mediating effect. Overall, effective safety teamwork in the manufacturing industry relates to the officer's psychological empowerment, safety commitment, and perceived organisational support.

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## 1. Introduction

In a study of corporate success for the Fortune 1000, Collins (2001) identified that the key factor in improving companies' performance was leadership. According to Shamir et al. (1993), leaders are known to have extraordinary effects in influencing their followers. In contrast, poor leadership skills can lead corporation to downfall in business, create conflicts between subordinates, failure to build team, perceived as arrogant and insensitive, betraying trust, and other negative effects of leader's behaviour (Leslie and Van Velsor, 1996; Baumeister and Bushman, 2011). It is because of leadership effects on the followers genre of leadership theoretical study never ceases to be developed until this era. In the past few years, leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Liden et al., 1997), transactional and transformational leadership (Bass, 1999; Eagly et al., 2003), charismatic leadership (House and Howell, 1992), leadership empowerment behaviour (LEB) (Arnold et al., 2000), and others were applied across various industries; the outcome revealed that the leadership behaviour is critical to outcome in organisations (Flin and Yule, 2004; Eid et al., 2012).

Focussing on leadership-safety in manufacturing sectors, there is dearth of study relating to leadership empowerment behaviour

(Arnold et al., 2000). Most empowerment studies were non-safety related. Among others, Cole et al. (2011) studied empowerment and team performance in automobile component manufacturing company, Germany; in light manufacturing, Robert et al. (2000) compared it with employees' job satisfaction in the United States, Mexico, Poland, and India; Siglera and Pearson (2000) examined organisational culture in textile plants in the United States. Thus, these studies implied that leadership empowerment is linked to workforce commitment and teamwork.

However, depending on the organisational situation, persons involved, and the nature of work, empowerment may create a dilemma that could lead to counterproductive in achieving the organisational goals (Paul et al., 2000); it differs culturally and by organisational power distance (Robert et al., 2000; Siglera and Pearson, 2000). In the latter, it is defined as the degree to which one accepts that power in institutions and organisations are distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2001). Evaluating safety leadership empowerment in country like Malaysia, a nation that topped the countries in the world in power distance (Sweetman, 2012) would be intriguing; more so, when manufacturing firms are bound by the national OH&S act and regulation. Complying with these requirements, at least a full-time competent OH&S officer must be employed. Generally, the officer's position is equivalent to senior supervisor level. The officer's competency is certified by the Ministry of Human Resource. The officer plays a significant role between management and other departments in promoting safety

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culture, coordinating as well as addressing safety issues, monitoring safety performance, and others (Wu et al., 2010). In correspondence to extensive theoretical work on the importance of empowering practices, to the date we found that there have been few empirical works on leader empowering behaviour of an OH&S officer in a manufacturing setting. The closest related study was Wu et al. (2010) who explored on OH&S professionals' roles in a telecommunication company in Taiwan, but on their contributions to safety culture in the company. Thus, in this study, we aim to evaluate OH&S officer's perceptions on leadership empowerment behaviour leading to psychological empowerment and safety teamwork.

This paper is organised and presented as follows. In the next section, a literature review is presented and the hypotheses were posited. In third and fourth sections, the research method and results were presented. Lastly, the findings are discussed with its implications, limitations, and proposed further study.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Leadership empowerment behaviour (LEB)

Arnold et al. (2000) constructed the Empowerment Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ) with the purpose of measuring effective leadership empowerment behaviour (LEB) in a team environment. In their first study, 8 classifications of leaders' behaviour were defined from qualitative interview. In the second quantitative study, 5 constructs were tested to be reliable and valid for measuring effective leadership of empowered teams. This five-factor model consisted of: leading by example (5 subscales), coaching (11 subscales), participative decision making (6 subscales), informing (6 subscales), and showing concern (10 subscales), totalling 38 subscales. The versatility of this instrument is applicable in empowered team environments, such as, task problem-solving, cross-functional, autonomous or self-managing team, including individuals.

With LEB, several studies provided that sufficient evidence which empowered employees were associated with higher employee performance and satisfaction (Vecchio et al., 2010; Dewettinck and van Ameijde, 2010; Martínez-Córcos et al., 2012). However, depending on the research objectives, most studies did not adapt the complete instrument. For instance, Martínez-Córcos et al. (2011), used ELQ to examine the effects of empowering leadership on safety participation in the two Spanish nuclear plants and found that this leadership style enhanced workers' safety participation behaviours. The authors adapted only 17 of the original 38 subscales due to time constraints: 3 subscales for leading by example, 4 for coaching, 3 for participative decision making, 4 for informing, and 3 for showing concern. Interestingly, in a cross-cultural research on a U.S.-based multinational that specialises in light manufacturing and operating in three countries, Robert et al. (2000) used 15-item ELQ and found that empowerment was negatively associated with satisfaction in India but positively associated with the United States, Mexico, and Poland. The disparity in these findings evokes further studies on empowering leadership in other developing countries, like Malaysia.

### 2.2. Psychological empowerment (PE)

In the extant literatures of empowerment, researchers categorised the studies into two main approaches: situational and psychological (Spreitzer, 1995; Arnold et al., 2000). In situational approach, it involves the assessment of higher-level management delegation of power to employees and the outcome of employees' decision making (Yang and Choi, 2009). In the latter, it incorporated

the psychological cognitions (Spreitzer, 1995; Baird and Wang, 2010). Most researchers used psychological empowerment (PE) approach to assess the nature of empowerment and individual employee's cognitive feelings in relation to his/her contributions to the organisation (Menon, 2001; Yang and Choi, 2009; Boudrias et al., 2009). Indeed, one survey of 406 manufacturing companies found that the effects of psychological empowerment programs were mixed and inconclusive (Waterson et al., 1999). Several authors have suggested that unless the conditions are favourable, PE can be weakened. Such conditions comprise of employees' traits, ability, involvement, dominant cultural values, among others (Spreitzer, 1996; Forrester, 2000; Yukl and Becker, 2007). This includes the fact that empowering trivial tasks to employee that lack skills and knowledge will be ineffective. The effect of OH&S officer's psychological empowerment on safety tasks in manufacturing environment has yet to be determined. They are trained personnel with knowledge and skills in Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S). The findings on the consequences of empowerment relating to their commitment, perceived organisational support, and safety teamwork will add to safety literatures.

The PE construct consists of a set of four cognitions dimension of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. The overall dimensions measure the degree of the felt empowerment of an individual's work role and context (Spreitzer, 1995). The author first tested PE construct on industrial sample and found that the Cronbach alpha was 0.72, indicating that the overall reliabilities of the dimensions were acceptable. When PE was used in service organisations, Dewettinck and van Ameijde (2010) found that PE is positively related to affective commitment and job satisfaction with alpha values of 0.83–0.91, and mediated between leadership empowerment behaviour and affective commitment. Similarly, Boudrias et al. (2009) also revealed that PE mediated behavioural empowerment with alpha 0.83. In short, the multidimensional measure of PE can be used as predictors or mediators of different anticipated outcome of empowerment, affective domain, and primarily on performance domain and even for different level of employees in an organisation (Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer et al., 1997).

### 2.3. Relationships between LEB and PE

In leadership literature, Sims et al. (2009) discussed how the characteristics of empowering leader were derived from the theories of participation and self-management. Such leader focuses on influencing others, encourages initiative, self-responsibility, self-problem solving, self-confidence, and others. In brief, this leadership type empowers their followers' self-leadership capabilities. Nevertheless, Sims et al. (2009) further explained that depending on a particular situation, a leader could be directive or empowering. In a critical situation, directive leadership is practical. However, in a non-critical situation, where employees have some degree of experience and expertise, empowering leadership functions better. As such, in this study, the assumption is made in a situation where safety practices in manufacturing environments are functioning daily, leader empowering on OH&S staff's responsibilities would be effectual.

Moreover, an earlier study by Spreitzer (1996) had deduced that such leadership behaviours could contribute to individual or team's perceptions of psychological empowerment (PE). In this perspective, Spreitzer (1996) suggested that the effectiveness of empowering leader's behaviour and psychological empowerment of the follower could be measured with a nomological framework that linked these two constructs. In line with this, Dewettinck and van Ameijde (2010) did a study on employee behavioural intentions to stay in the organisation and found that constructs were generalizable across different working contexts, including individualised setting.

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