Job autonomy in higher education, a mediator between empowering leadership and engagement (0174)

Eyvind Helland, Marit Christensen, Siw Tone Innstrand
NTNU, Norway

Within higher education, there is a trend towards managerial-style leadership that focus on effectivity (Bakker et al., 2010). In this paper, we suggest that if having engaged employees in higher education is a goal, empowering leadership is more appropriate. We assert that empowering leadership is a subtle form of leadership (see Bryman, 2007) that can replace direct supervision and control with a respect for the professionalism of academics. In this paper, we will investigate whether and how empowering leadership relates to both autonomy and work engagement.

Empowering leadership is the process of giving or sharing power with an employee or enabling an employee to do something (Stang, 2003). While there are other facets, we specifically investigate empowering leadership in terms of the degree to which subordinates perceive that their closest leader encourage participation in important decisions, promote voicing differing opinions, and encourage development of skills (Dallner et al., 2000).

As theoretical framework, we use the motivational process of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the motivational process, satisfaction of basic psychological needs, such as autonomy, create work engagement (Ryan and Deci 2000). Work engagement we define as a positive and satisfying mindset that is distinguished from other states of mind by its absorption, dedication, and vigor towards ones work (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Job autonomy refers to the degree to which employees can organize and manage when and how they ought to do their specific tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Tuckey, Bakker and Dollard (2012) suggested that empowering leadership lead to increased work engagement

through helping fulfill basic psychological needs such as job autonomy. Thus, we predict that *autonomy mediates a positive relationship between empowering leadership and engagement*.

Methods

This study is cross-sectional and uses multivariate statistical analysis on survey self-report data (n = 6466). We used structural equation modeling and the mediation procedure prescribed by Zhao et al. (2010) to test the hypothesis in form of preliminary results. Slightly more than one-third (37%) were academics, fifteen percent doctoral research fellows, almost half (44%) were technical or administrative staff, while four percent held a supervisory position of some kind.

We measured engagement with the Norwegian version (Nerstad, Richardsen and Martinussen 2010) of the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). Empowering was measured leadership using the three-item Empowering Leadership Scale (Dallner et al. 2000). Lastly, we measured autonomy using the four-item Job Autonomy Scale (Näswall et al. 2010). We controlled for age and gender.

Results

Table 1 reports the correlations, Cronbach's alphas, standard deviations, and means of the constructs of this study.

Table 1
Correlation matrix and Cronbach's alpha bolded (N = 6466)

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Engagement	5.60	1.35	**.93**			
2. Empowering Leadership	3.77	1.04	.40*	**.90**		
3. Job Autonomy	3.79	.85	.53*	.66*	**.75**	
4. Age			.09*	.02	-.10*	-
5. Gender			-.01	-.13*	.06*	.02

*p < .05

The structural model supported the hypothesis that job autonomy mediates a positive relationship between empowering leadership and engagement ($a \times b = .31$, $p < .001$, $CI = .29$ to .33). Further, the relationship between empowering leadership and engagement was significant ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$), suggesting a partial mediation. The variance in autonomy explained by empowering leadership was 44 % whereas autonomy and empowering leadership explained 32 % of the variance in engagement.

Discussion

The preliminary results of this study support the motivational process of the JD-R model. That satisfaction of a basic human need, autonomy, mediates a positive relationship between empowering leadership and engagement. In other words, that for employees in higher education, empowering leadership increases work engagement through job autonomy. However, we advise caution in inferring causality due to the cross-sectional design. Longitudinal design and qualitative research must triangulate this finding to add support to a causal interpretation. In addition, we have not accounted for shared environment in this study, which future research should explore.

We acknowledge that how higher eduaction is organized probably influence if leaders can be empowering. For example, the degree of decentralized influence to the departmental level, what leaders have the mandate to do, and how many employees a leader has responsibility.

On a related note is the question of what leaders ought to do. Especially in context of the traditional academic virtue of autonomy, wherein perhaps leadership is seen as limiting of autonomy. The results of this study could therefore be seen as paradoxical because having an empowering leader may prove to increase higher education employees' perceived degree of autonomy.

Conclusion

The preliminary results of this study provide support for that job autonomy partially mediates a positive relationship between empowering leadership and work engagement. Whereas caution is advised concerning inferring causality, the results support that empowering leadership increases work engagement through satisfaction of the basic human need of autonomy. Longitudinal design and qualitative research should be implemented in future research to ascertain the validity of this interpretation. However, this study may prove to be a step in the direction of showing whether empowering leadership can replace a trend towards control regimes and direct supervision with one that promotes work engagement and autonomy.

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