

EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP IN AND FOR LEARNING ORGANISATIONS: A THEORETICAL VIEWPOINT

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Abstract

Purpose – the purpose of this article is to reveal mechanisms of empowering leadership that foster and promote organisational learning.

Design/methodology/approach – in this article, the role of empowering leadership in promoting organisational learning is analysed, performing systematic and logical analysis of scientific literature.

Finding – Empowering leadership is beneficial for organisational learning because it contributes to a psychologically safe organisational culture that fosters employee creativity, knowledge creation and sharing. As a result, empowered employees are likely to be more engaged, committed, self-efficient and capable to lead themselves without external control. These behaviours and skills allow them to continuously adapt and improve which contributes to organisational learning. A learning organisation is one that has the inner capacity to adapt and adjust, innovate and improve itself which necessitates empowered self-efficient and self-leading employees contributing to its evolution.

Research limitations/implications – the scope of this article is limited because it is a theoretical review aiming to comprehend the effects of empowering leadership on organisational learning. Empirical investigation examining literature review findings is needed for practical implications.

Originality/value – the results of this paper may be useful for managers and leaders who seek to adjust managerial practises to fostering organisational learning and to discover its potential benefits.

Keywords: empowering leadership, employee empowerment, organisational learning, learning organisation.

Research type – viewpoint.

Introduction

Leadership, learning and various approaches to managing individual and organisational knowledge are not new to the world of science or business. They are subject to significant change in the face of crises and shocks, in response to technological and managerial advances, and to the changing expectations of employees and customers for organisations' work and products. To survive in such conditions, new skills and thinking patterns are needed that can cope with these challenges not only digitally, but also with cognitive, interaction and self-leadership skills.

The aim of this paper is to discuss, based on a theoretical analysis, the role of the learning organisation in the implementation of empowering leadership principles in organisations.

In line with idea that management is the ability to do the right things and leadership aims to do the right things (Sveiby, 2015), the paper follows Nonaka & Takeuchi's (2019) suggestion

to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage by creating knowledge rather than managing it. This is closely related to the ideas of empowering leadership and organisational learning about open, relatively flat organisational structures and distributed decision-making power. Moreover, knowledge creation to acquire wisdom requires the courage to admit mistakes and learn from them by committing to and engaging in the development of the organisation's strategic goals. The volatility of today's world requires creativity and continuous innovation, which in turn requires continuous learning and [re]creating the present.

Developed by the end of last century, the constructs of knowledge management, organisational learning and empowering leadership are important for business practitioners and researchers to the present. Knowledge sharing and behavioural obstacles to it has been studied quite actively in recent years. The study of Arain et al. (2020) analysed vertical knowledge hiding (in leader-follower dyads) and identified increased distrust of the leader in the context of knowledge workers as a result. Zada et al. (2022) indicated that servant leadership discourages knowledge hoarding by fostering psychological safety to accumulate knowledge and nurturing the atmosphere of mastery within teams. Koon (2022) established correlations of knowledge hiding strategies with organisational compassion and career success in multinational companies, whereas the research by Iqbal et al. (2022) found evidence that knowledge hiding is tied with perceived injustice in the workplace. Similarly, the study of Sulistiawan et al. (2022) showed that distrust and complexity of knowledge are among the most critical factors leading to knowledge hiding. Employees tend to hide knowledge to gain short-term performance improvement rather than invest in sustainable organisational development.

These findings elaborate on the complexity of knowledge sharing in terms of sustainable organisational and career development and innovation. Furthermore, they undermine the importance of organisational culture that is based on psychological safety, mutual trust and shared power between leaders and followers. This paper seeks to analyse the nexuses between empowering leadership and organisational learning from a theoretical perspective providing some insights on how leaders can support organisational learning by empowering their employees.

The paper consists of introduction, theoretical review of Empowering Leadership and Learning Organisation. and conclusions.

Empowering leadership: from leaders to followers and back

Modern leadership studies originated in the USA, where manufacturing companies in the early 20th century started to lack good managers. The qualities of a leader who could respond to these needs were studied in sociology, psychology and management. Having started with the traits of a leader at the centre of the organisation, later looking at their right skills and behaviours or dwelling into situational leadership, modern leadership tends to focus on strong relations with followers, promoting knowledge and innovation, and honing cognitive, strategic and interaction skills (Guzmán et al., 2020).

One of the recent leadership styles examined in this paper is Empowering Leadership (hereafter referred to as EL), an approach that emerged at the end of the 20th century and is associated with empowering followers to lead themselves. Developed to tackle increasing competitive pressures from foreign markets in the US and changes in employees' expectations of their work, EL is characterized by leaders sharing power, motivating their employees and fostering their autonomy (Guzmán et al., 2020; Vu, 2020). As indicated by Na-Nan et al., (2020), this can be achieved through showing concern and demonstrating care for employees' well-being as well as providing support, developing leaders and followers through coaching to improve competence and performance. Open communication and informing followers is also

essential to EL because followers are empowered by including them in decision-making which foster a sense of ownership and motivation. This is supported by supervisors who lead by example demonstrating the desired leadership traits through their daily actions and behaviours. Increased entrepreneurial behaviour, innovativeness, engagement and meaningful work are beneficial for both organisations and employees. Self-efficient employees can develop desired competences through promoted person-job fit (Kim & Beehr, 2023) simultaneously driving great results to their employers.

Approaching the 21st century, business theorists and practitioners have begun to focus on employee empowerment, with an increasing focus on promoting performance through voluntary followership. Leadership is no longer only about getting others to do things, but about getting them to want to do them. Leaders' success is determined by their ability to inspire and influence followers without external incentives such as punishments or rewards, which are associated with traditional management with hierarchical structures rather than current relational approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2020, XVI). This approach has emerged because of social change, which has led to flattening organisational structures, flexibility, customer orientation, and improvements in quality and efficiency (Liu, 2015). It is even more important nowadays due to increasingly complex business environments which demand engagement, innovation and intellectual capability from all levels of organisation members.

Empowering leaders impact their followers by sharing power, motivating and encouraging their initiatives, keeping them focused on their goals, supporting their self-efficacy, and inspiring them to learn self-leadership. Amundsen & Martinsen (2014) highlight that the success of EL is based on the corresponding reaction of followers: beyond feeling psychologically empowered, they also need to show results, as empowerment includes well-being and behaviour.

The idea of leading through empowerment relates to the view that true leadership comes from within individuals, and that the outside can, at best, spark or sustain the flame of true, inner leadership. This perspective suggested that leaders' achievements should be measured in terms of their ability to maximise the contribution of their employees by letting them decide their own destiny, rather than in terms of their power to sway others to their side. As suggested by Liu (2015), EL is unique leadership style by its focus on the self-leadership of followers rather than the nature of their control. This differentiates empowering from enabling which relates to controlled sharing of power to accomplish certain tasks. Empowering indicates trust in employees and their readiness to lead themselves.

Self-leadership and self-efficacy: the traits of empowered followers

According to social exchange theory, power asymmetry impacts relationships between individuals as a control mechanism with two characteristics: first, having power means controlling others, and second, being able to pursue one's goals independently of others (Liu, 2015). In this model, power refers to the freedom to make decisions, and empowerment is a resource allocation strategy that can reduce dependence on those who hold power. In modern organisations, this is achieved by flattening out hierarchical structures and organising work in a way that engages and empowers employees.

In psychology, the notions of power and control are used in the context of expectations and motivation. It is natural for individuals to seek power, to strive to influence and control others, so this psychological mechanism fits well with the tools and methodologies offered by EL, which can help to enhance employees' intrinsic motivation by satisfying their natural need for self-determination and perceived self-efficacy (ibid; Forrester, 2000).

Self-leadership is an object of scientific interest applicable and beneficial in various organisational settings. Associated with self-efficacy, job performance and job attitudes (Harari et al., 2021), it is closely linked to personal development, learning and higher performance as a result (Goldsby et al., 2021). It is also tied with resilience and determination to achieve one's learning goals in remote learning settings (Durnali, 2020) and innovative creative orientation towards personal achievements at work (Knotts et al., 2022). Next to motivating effects, Sjöblom et al. (2022) found self-leadership can help prevent burnout through increased psychological safety.

Another element of empowering leadership is followers' self-efficacy, a construct developed by the psychologist Albert Bandura in 70-ies in the attempt to develop a unified theory of behaviour change. The theories' shift from external factors towards the cognitive ability was driven by the discovery of behavioural change impacted by observation and predicting the reactions of others to one's actions. The ability to predict the consequences of one's behaviour motivates one to change it according to the situation and one's goals (Bandura, 1977). Reinforcing self-efficacy provides individuals with motivation and confidence to try to deal with any arising situation (ibid).

In organizational settings, self-efficacy is a desired trait of leaders and employees, especially in times of change and uncertainty. Research indicates that self-efficient employees demonstrate organisational citizenship behaviour associated with commitment, engagement and readiness to take responsibility (Anfajaya & Rahayu, 2020). In the context of learning, self-efficacy has been found to enhance personal agency which relates to increased learners' persistence, effort and self-regulation (Graham, 2022) which are important to achieve learning results. Competent and knowledgeable employees have been found to demonstrate better applicability of their expertise if they possess sufficient self-efficacy. Osagie et al. (2022) found positive correlations between Corporate Social Responsibility and leadership, empowerment, organisational learning and systems connectivity. In remote work settings, Sjöblom et al. (2022) established positive correlations between employees' self-efficacy, well-being and sense of meaningful work mediated by increased psychological safety.

EL combines effects on employee well-being and intrinsic motivation with pragmatism to achieve tangible results, including the increasingly important aspect of business and career sustainability. Important elements of EL, self-leadership and self-efficacy are important competences for employees themselves. Being creative, proactive and resilient enables them to plan their careers and help them to adapt to their new jobs which is an essential skill in the job market. Readiness to work efficiently without control or external incentives turns followers to empowered self-leaders who are willing to take responsibility, engage and commit.

Learning organisation

In recent years, organisations around the world have experienced rapid and impactful change, influenced by technological advances, social digitalisation trends and environmental uncertainties. Like all other revolutionary changes, digital transformation involves an intensive adaptation or redesign of the organisation (Fülöp, Breaz, He., Ionescu, Cordos ir Stanescu, 2022) which requires contribution of all organisational units towards a common goal.

Considering these rapid changes, ability to learn, use and create knowledge is becoming increasingly important for maintaining and increasing competitiveness in the labour market where current companies operate in knowledge-based information, economy, and society (Firsova et al., 2021). Innovation, ideas, and intellectual abilities increase business value more than ever. Readiness to learn and initiate change is among the most important success factors in this context.

Organisations learn by identifying and solving problems and errors which mean to any knowledge hindering organisational learning. Learning itself takes place by combining understanding and insight with action (Argyris, 2003). There are two distinct types of learning: first, linear solutions to a single problem (single loop learning). Associated primarily with classical stable organisations, single loop learning is less advantageous to the dynamic knowledge-based organisations that require deeper holistic understanding of the reasons the problem occurred (double loop learning). Double loop learning indicate organisational desire to know a lot about a lot of things, which is often realised in informal conversations between colleagues or partners and can provide important insights for responding flexibility to change (Simonin, 2017). This type of learning requires sustainable knowledge management and creation practises in all organisational levels which, in turn, is much easier when the employees are engaged, committed and empowered by their supervisors. According to Argyris (2003) the main obstacle for holistic learning is the single-loop learning. Being faster and easier, it is often driven by professionals who know their job and seek to upkeep their position fearing mistakes when trying something new.

The notion of Learning Organisation, summarizing principles of organisational learning is associated with systems thinker Peter M. Senge who combined research to his framework of five disciplines essential for organisations that seek to thrive sustainably and aim for strategic competitive advantages. Organisational learning needs to involve all levels of staff, and an approach that not only solves problems but also provides a full picture of the causes and consequences of behaviour is important to ensure continuity of processes (Senge, 2006). Fluent teamwork, systems thinking, a focus on the individual, changes in individual thinking, learning, and behaviour are essential for a Learning Organisation. These goals are achievable through continuous practice of the proposed organisational disciplines or disciplines (ibid, 5-10): *Systems Thinking* promotes a holistic understanding of behaviours and their impacts for effective change. *Personal Mastery* refers to continuous self-improvement and clarity of common well communicated vision. *Mental Models* focus on understanding and controlling deep-seated mental patterns and biases. *Shared Vision* involves inspiring and aligning team members around common future goals. Finally, *Team Learning* promotes collective problem-solving and organisational learning through dialogue and overcoming interaction barriers.

Ideas of Learning Organisation remain relevant because they lead to innovation, flexibility and resilience in the face of change and uncertainty, and research in recent years has confirmed the value of the principles of Learning Organisation. The ability to learn enhances competitiveness, and the collective success of learning outcomes and continuous improvement helps to thrive in dynamic environments (Wells, 2021). Diverse and targeted learning is important for organisational learning. Šneiderienė et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of improving skills, competences, performance and experience of the members of a learning organisation. Organisational learning and development can be ensured through the proper distribution and interpretation of information, the creation and sharing of knowledge, and the development of organisational memory. Organisational environment conducive to learning is supported and enhanced by appropriate information and knowledge management solutions and teamwork.

Organisational environment that fosters learning is beneficial to both organisation and its employees. Choi (2020) found that a supportive organisational culture for learning indirectly and positively affects employees' perceived success and performance of their organisation. This relationship is further strengthened by empowerment as a mediator, which makes it easier for empowered employees to add value through their work and to improve the organisation's performance. The culture of a learning organisation can also be a culture that can be used to build interdisciplinary collaborative networks that are strengthened by a shared

vision, together with technological solutions for sharing knowledge and information (Dirani et al., 2021). A study conducted in Poland by Wiśniewska et al., (2021) examined the benefits of Learning Organisation principles for enhancing employees' perceived employability. Employees were found to most value sustainable practical aspects of organisational learning, i.e., ability to learn from their mistakes or through shadowing, self-development, incentive systems (reinforcing commitment to improving competences), and feedback on performance. Lithuanian researchers Skrickienė et al. (2018) have also found similar employee preferences in public sector, with organisational learning being rated the highest, followed by team learning and individual learning the lowest, showing that employees are willing to learn practical skills and competences relevant to their work, especially at an organisational level. Lifelong learning is also characterised by self-directed, reflective learning using knowledge acquired from a variety of sources, including virtual (Neelam et al., 2020). As employees worldwide face the need to adapt to remote or hybrid working and learning solutions, their flexibility to adjust is essential for their wellbeing and careers.

Next to single-loop learning, malfunctioning knowledge management among employees create additional burden on organisational learning. Knowledge hiding and hoarding (Silva de Garcia et al., 2022) indicate organisational culture is insufficiently supporting and promoting learning. Because of this, employees may tend to hide knowledge they possess and refuse to share it with others who need it. Such behaviour is linked to the organisational climate and the relationships and influence it creates between employees (who tend to behave like others under uncertain circumstances). Alternatively, employees hoard their knowledge because of lacking motivation to share it with others, and the fear to lose power without getting anything in return (Hess, 2022). Knowledge hoarding can be minimised by supporting collaboration, digital transformation and team activities.

Research findings demonstrate the universality of the Learning Organisation principles across sectors. These principles evolve as they are updated and adapted to different types of organisations at different stages of their life cycle as environmental conditions change. At the same time, there is also a loosening of the interpretation of Learning Organisation by applying rather abstract ideas of the construct to the specificities of a particular situation or organisation. This is particularly relevant in the context of the constraints on social life caused by the pandemic and the effects of the “new normal” afterwards, which have forced a rethinking of previous models of social and professional life and a change in existing arrangements. Such changes, together with the need to reassess and adjust organisational learning, have been triggered by rapid technological and socio-economic changes, amplified by the pandemic, polycrisis and economical slow-down. It requires organisations to reimagine their working models and products, adapting managerial practices and targets towards readiness to innovate and change. Empowering employees to co-own such transformations may provide organisation with competitive advantage and much more innovations. Psychologically safe workplace fosters learning, knowledge creation and sharing thus allowing leaders and followers to thrive while delivering results.

Conclusions

Empowering leadership is a relational leadership approach that seeks to foster an environment based on trust where employees feel capable of making decisions and innovate independently. Empowering leaders build trust by providing feedback and supporting the development of their employees, ultimately promoting their self-efficacy and self-leadership. Granting authority to employees enhances their psychological empowerment and cultivates a supportive culture that nurtures resilience, creativity and change. On the other hand, such

environments are based on responsibility taking, knowledge sharing, engagement and commitment to common organisational goals regardless of position or business role.

Empowering leadership is particularly beneficial for organisational learning. As learning organisations are those that continuously transform and reinvent themselves, they need organisational culture that promotes knowledge creation and sharing, ability to change and adjust, thus constantly improving. Empowering leadership contributes to this by creating a psychologically safe environment where employees feel encouraged to share ideas, take risks, innovate and learn from their shared experiences. In working this way, they perceive organisational performance and can adjust to its needs easier. Collaborative innovative culture enables continuous growth and competitive advantage of the organisation.

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