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Empowerment and the quality of superior-subordinate relationships in the international business environment

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify and explore nature of superior-subordinate relationship and the different uses of empowerment in organizations where employees and managers are of different nationalities. The hypothesis formulated in the study was that a correct relationship fosters empowerment, but this is conditioned by whether or not the work environment is an international one.
The research was conducted using the CAWI technique on a non-randomly selected sample of 277 respondents, and confirms a positive correlation between empowerment and the quality of relationships, and also between empowerment and the type of relationship. Moreover, the perception of relationships is modified when an international working environment is considered. In all models, the formal relationship proves to be an irrelevant factor in the use of empowerment. As far as the origin of the superior is concerned, when the superior is a foreigner, the quality, and not the type of the relationship, is the crucial factor. However, an informal relationship becomes important when there are no foreigners. This may cause certain threats in a situation where the company expands internationally.

Keywords: employee empowerment, formal and informal superior-subordinate relation, quality of relation, international work environment, comparative analysis

Introduction

In the traditional approach to managing people, the manager's role is to plan, organize, motivate, manage and control employees. The manager often relies on excessively detailed examination of the subordinates' work and intervening in the way they perform tasks. In such situations, employees become only task performers, and their creativity and contribution to work and organization improvement is often limited. The introduction of empowerment could significantly improve employees' commitment and their relationships within the organization. Pistrui and Dimov (2018) indicate the need to move away from a traditional leadership. They underline the necessity to adapt organizations to the changing environment so that they can meet new challenges. The quality of the relationship and its type (formal or informal) seems to be of key importance here, as it enables management by empowerment, delegation of powers, and sharing of responsibility.

The main purpose of the article is to explore whether there is a relationship between empowerment and the superior-subordinate relationship in an international work environment. The main hypothesis formulated by the authors is that the use of empowerment depends on the quality and type of the relationship in an international work environment. The relationship between empowerment and employee relations has been studied (Gómez & Rosen, 2002; Liden, et al., 2000; May et al., 2004), while research in the international work environment is not widely discussed (Knezović & Drkić, 2021).

This paper is structured as follows. The first part explains the theoretical basis of the formulated main and detailed hypotheses. The key concepts adopted in the article

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include superior-subordinate relations (SSR), formal (FR) and informal relations (IR), international work environment (IWE) and employee empowerment (EE). Hypotheses are formulated based on a literature review, and then the assumptions related to the applied research method are described, the research process is discussed, and the research results are presented. The next part contains a discussion and conclusions from the study and indicates further research trends.

Theoretical foundations

Employee empowerment (EE)

Moving away from hierarchical structures and traditional ways of managing people, while delegating powers to team members, often helps to build positive relationships with employees, and this facilitates achievement of the envisaged goals. The executive level is empowered by conferring decision-making powers upon employees, giving them responsibility for their work, and providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills. This concept can be explained as enhancing and strengthening competencies and development opportunities, vesting with power, subjectification, emancipation, or awakening human strength. In management sciences, *empowerment* means creating conditions for employees in which they will feel encouraged to engage in the decision-making process, and thus also to perform tasks more independently (Menon, 2001, pp. 153–154). EE is closely related to management techniques and instruments, such as motivation, job enrichment, communication, trust, participative management, delegation, training and feedback, which makes it necessary to examine the concept and its managerial dimension from different perspectives (Pelit et al., 2011, p. 784). Yingying (2015) indicates that EE is more than just delegating rights and responsibilities, because employees can use their knowledge to actively improve products and processes in their own posts and in their teams. The advantages of employing these practices in management include quick identification and response to problems, creativity and undertaking new initiatives, as well as an increased number of solutions that improve quality (Trzcieliński et al., 2013, pp. 14–21). EE is used to motivate employees to use their knowledge in the tasks they perform to achieve the best results (Blanchard, 2007, pp. 57–58). Involving employees in the decision-making process means that they have a broader range of responsibilities, and are more aware of costs and can reduce the costs with regard to their own work. Empowerment is the delegation of power and rights in order to make employees more effective (Stankiewicz-Mróz, 2015, p. 172). Such working conditions, as well as cooperation with superiors, can be an opportunity for employees who do not perform managerial functions to prove themselves.

Appelbaum et al. (2014) stress that it has been determined that a team-based structure and a culture based on trust and open communication are the key factors in successful implementation of empowerment. Trust and effective two-way communication play an important role here (Stankiewicz-Mróz, 2015). Greasley et al. (2005) highlight the limitations in the use of empowerment that may exist in some industries, such as health and safety regulations (e.g. in construction). Another issue is connected with the diffusion of information. Bicudo de Castro and Sridharan (2022) found evidence for both direct and indirect positive effects between access to information and subordinate managers' performance. Access to some types of information not available before may also be perceived as a threat. Employees can use this information not only to perform tasks, but also to interpret tendencies and processes in the company that are beyond the scope of their duties. Empowerment may also evoke concerns among managers that transferring some competencies to their subordinates may mean that they are replaced by a subordinate at some point in the future.

Empowerment is not often studied from the employees' perspective. Usually, the focus is the manager's point of view. Conger and Kanungo (1988) were the first to formulate a definition of empowerment from the employees' perspective, as "a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information". They viewed EE from two perspectives: the psychological perspective, which focuses on employees' perception of empowerment and employees' inner natures, and the relational perspective, which focuses on sharing power and delegation of authority within the organization. The latter is the topic and subject of research in the article. Greasley et al. (2008) state that employees do not recognize the term "empowerment", nor do they consider the term "power" to apply to themselves. However, they are able to relate to associated concepts, notably "personal responsibility" and "control over their work". Other research points to the key importance of middle management for the use of empowerment.

In the light of the above considerations, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H_1: The perception of applied empowerment depends on the position held – the higher in the hierarchy the employee is, the higher the perceived level of EE.

Superior-subordinate relationship (SSR)

Interpersonal relationships occur in almost every sphere of human activity. In management sciences, the relationship is seen as business, functional, informational and technical ties in the organization (Klimas, 2013). There are interactions between co-workers who create the social reality in the workplace. Individual interactions form a sequence that creates a relationship (Pawłowska, 2006, p. 7). Leszczyński (2014, p. 9) believes that defining the concept of relations within the framework of management sciences, as well as in other fields, is particularly difficult, because it

eludes the institutional and organizational approach to the enterprise. As they involve people, relations are a common resource of both of them.

Considering the relations between employees, sometimes literary sources reduce them to the concept of communication (Bakar et al., 2007, p. 53), which can be a tool for building relationships, and sometimes even its effect (effective communication thanks to a good relationship). Thus, there is a temptation to use the concept of communication, as well as interaction (Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2010, p. 23) between the parties, or even management styles (Ślusarczyk, 2018, pp. 31–41), as a synonym for the term *relationship*.

The quality of the relationship, both on the level of entrepreneur-client and SSR, will be higher when both parties treat each other with understanding and have respect for the other party's needs. The low quality of the SSR is due to the economic exchange specified in the employment contract (transactional approach), where the formal requirements towards the employee and the financial benefits due to them are specified (Radstaak & Hennes, 2017, pp. 1–2). On the other hand, exchange based on a high-quality relationship significantly exceeds the formal requirements of the contract with the employee. It is characterized by trust, mutual respect, a form of mutual commitment, and affective attachment. The development of a specific type of relationship depends on a series of events shaping the division of roles between superior and subordinate, the way the manager communicates expectations and the extent to which the employee is willing or able to meet them (Breevaart et al., 2015, p. 755) as well as on factors such as stereotypical thinking of one or both parties or time pressure that is exerted on them in order to perform specific tasks (Dienesch & Liden, 1986, p. 621; Radstaak & Hennes, 2017, p. 2).

Munoz-Doyague and Nieto (2012, p. 128) claim that over time, the SSR becomes stronger, but it becomes more and more informal. Schein and Schein also point to the evolution of the SSR (2019). Since at the beginning of cooperation interactions are based mainly on the rules defined by the organization, FR prevail during this period. However, less formal interactions may also naturally occur during this period. Furthermore, considering that relationships develop over time, some of the FR established at the beginning of cooperation may be replaced by less formalized exchanges that are based on a higher level of trust and perceived as of higher quality. That makes empowerment easier. Another hypothesis was formulated based on these considerations:

H_2: There is a positive correlation between the use of EE and the type and quality of SSR.

The international work environment (IWE) and the superior-subordinate relationship

Employee management poses several dilemmas when the organization is international. The issue of expatriation of specialists and managers as well as the related challenges are addressed by Purgał-Popiela (2012), who described the frequent practice of companies operating on foreign markets, which takes place in the short, medium, and long term. Delegated employees perform functions related to parallel operations in two organizational units. Foreign missions are aimed at solving the problem of the competency gap between local employees and those employed at the headquarters, developing the organization in the area of management, controlling and coordinating activities and processes, transferring knowledge and skills, as well as preparing employees for future roles by enabling them to gain international experience. The misalignment of expectations of superiors in the corporate headquarters and subordinates or co-workers in the host branch, experienced by the expatriate, may be the source of the problem with building relationships.

These issues are related to cultural differences, starting from the language of communication, preferred forms of communication, existing extra-organizational cultural differences (customs, traditions, norms), as well as personality features of individual employees. Multinationality, and thus multiculturalism, in organizations can lead to tolerance, empathy, openness, willingness to cooperate, or creativity, but it can also be the source of a number of problems, especially in organizations that do not have managers experienced in functioning in an IWE (Bartlett, 1982; Gregory, 1983). As a result, the superior could be perceived from the perspective of a number of features, including the country of origin and the national culture (Hofstede, 2000). Globalization brought with it economic, but also socio-cultural changes, leading to the assimilation of many cultures and creating a sense of mixed culture among people around the world (Kwok-Bun & Peverelli, 2010) and cultural homogenization (Hopper, 2007).

Apart from the specific country of origin of the superior and considering the process of evolution of the relationship - from formal to less formal over time and the superior and the subordinate getting to know each other, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H_3: The type and quality of the SSR have an impact on empowerment in an IWE.

Research method

In order to verify the hypotheses, a CAWI survey was conducted among employees and superiors in 2022. People invited via Linkedin.com and working students studying for master's degrees at economic universities in Poland and Croatia took part in the survey. Therefore, the research tool was prepared in Polish and English. Students, especially future business leaders, may be appropriate research subjects for that issue (Ahmed et al., 2003; Fukukawa et al., 2007; Peterson & Merunka, 2014). The questionnaire in English was verified in terms of methodological correctness (Harzing, 2005). Due to the adopted research subject area, the method of purposive selection of respond-

ents was applied (criterion: a working person whose direct or indirect superior is a person from a different country than the respondent). Finally, the surveyed group included both people meeting this criterion and those who had no direct or indirect contact with a foreign superior, making it possible to compare the opinions of the two groups.

The snow bowling method was also applied to achieve a higher response rate and a more homogeneous group (Heckathorn, 2011).

The questionnaire for the study was built on the basis of the Menon scale (2001), Juchnowicz (2012), Glińska-Neweś (2017), a tool developed by Kumar Pradhan and Panda (2021) and May et al. (2004) (appendix, Table 1), and fourteen in-depth individual interviews with managers of international corporations conducted before the quantitative study[1]. Four items from the research tool developed by Kumar Pradhan and Panda (2021) were used to analyze the perceived level of EE. Four items to measure whether the relationship was formal or informal were based on interviews with managers and their perception of the superior-subordinate relationship. Seven items were constructed based on the Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) LMX questionnaire. The presented conclusions were based on fifteen items measuring the level of perceived empowerment as well as formality and quality of the superior-subordinate relationship.

The responses to the items were used to estimate arithmetic averages. Each time, the created index consisted of at least two opinions that were used to examine the respondent's attitude towards a given issue. Correlation and regression analysis were applied, similarly to Serrenho et al. research (2022).

Respondents' profile

277 respondents took part in the survey and 106 met the criterion of a direct or indirect foreign superior. That structure made it possible to compare the perception and attitude towards empowerment, considering not only the position in the organization but also internationality context. The characteristics of participants of the research is presented in Table 2 (appendix).

Results

Use of empowerment

Empowerment is an integral element of managing employees and engaging them to achieve the goals of the organization. The conducted study shows that EE is an element of employee management. The data in Table 3 (appendix) prove that there are differences in the perception of empowerment depending on the occupational position and the work environment. Higher average values were obtained in the group of employees in decision-making positions (DMP) and where the superior was a foreigner.

In order to test the hypothesis about a significant difference in the perception of EE depending on the occupational position and the work environment, a one-factor analysis of variance of independent samples was conducted. This demonstrated that the compared groups significantly differed statistically in the case of three out of four opinions (excluding *EE3* – no statistically significant differences). This means that the occupational position and the presence of a foreign superior makes a difference to the evaluation of opinion on empowerment, measured on a scale from 1 to 5.

The test conducted to compare the average values between the groups considering the work environment type shows that the statistically significant differences concern three opinions – except for opinion *EE3*. Furthermore, statistically significant differences occur only between employees in decision-making and executive positions or in an independent specialist position.

Another observation is that in almost all categories of the comparison, employees in executive positions feel a lower level of empowerment – the average value is lower than in the case of decision-making employees (the only exception is in item EE3 – here the value is higher for executive employees). In all situations, as far as responsibility for the results of work is concerned, the average value is the highest in the DNP respondents group – close to or above 4.4. When EE is considered by respondents from that group, the awareness of it and assessment is lower, below 4.0, but still higher than in the executive employees (EP) group. Another issue should be also noted – in the case of opinion *EE3* – no statistically valid differences were observed. This might be explained by the fact that employees may play a dual role – both as executive and decision-making persons, and this is why the average value in the case of decision-making persons is lower than in other opinions in that segment of respondents.

Quality of relations (QR) and type of SSR and EE

The SSR is a complex construct. It was measured using the LMX7 scale. Based on opinions used to measure the quality and type of relationships and EE, the indices were estimated as arithmetic averages. The created series of data were used for correlation analysis using the Pearson correlation index (appendix Table 4).

They indicate a moderate correlation between the quality of relation (QR) and the use of EE. However, considering the type of relationship, the FR and the QR

[1] Among the respondents who gave online interviews in 2021–2022, i.e. during and shortly after the pandemic and numerous restrictions, there were medium-level and senior managers working in international organizations: Construction Manager, Operations Manager, Captain of a Sea Ship, Production Manager, Purchasing Manager, IT and Implementation Director, HR Team Manager, Commercial Director, Export Director, CFO, Managing Director, Managing Director, CFO, Managing Director.

show weak correlation in the opposite direction. The FR is therefore inversely correlated with EE and with the QR. This would mean that an FR does not foster good QR. The obtained results raise the question of whether there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the relations and empowerment (appendix, Table 5).

In addition, considering the country of origin of the employees, a stronger relationship between the QR and EE is observed when the supervisor is a foreigner, and there is a stronger inverse correlation between the FR and QR.

A hypothesis was formulated that the type and quality of the relationship should affect EE. The results of the regression analysis (adjusted $R^2 = 0.255$) presented in Table 5 show that EE is positively influenced by the QR and its informal nature, while the formal relationship is the variable excluded from the model.

A positive impact of only QR on EE in the case of an IWE is also confirmed (adjusted $R^2 = 3.62$). In the model where there are no foreigners in the work environment (adjusted $R^2 = 0.228$), the QR and its informal nature affect EE (appendix, Table 6).

Discussion of results

Klagge (1998) concludes that organizations should perceive middle managers as "bridges" rather than "blockages" to the implementation of empowerment. The presented results confirmed that the perception of EE depends on the position occupied in the organization. Secondly, employees in DMP notice EE to a greater extent. It seems that this is related to the type of EE used, which in their case may be of a formalized nature, while employees in EP are not empowered in the same way. It is possible that in their case, EE is more informal and may result, for example, from experience in a given position or seniority in the organization.

Also, where the countries of origin of a superior and a subordinate are different, DMP believe to a greater extent than employees in EP that they are satisfied with the applied empowerment. Employees who do not have a foreign superior feel less independence and responsibility for their tasks. At the same time, research shows that they feel responsible for the results of teamwork, which might seem confusing. Perhaps this is because this team involvement and sharing of responsibility is not formalized, or this is not clearly articulated by the supervisor. Another explanation may concern noticing the importance of EE in general.

The conclusions regarding the QR and the type of QR in the IWE and in the context of EE are especially interesting. The results show that the QR is crucial for employees' perception of the use of EE. At the same time, the study shows that the FR is an irrelevant factor for EE, regardless of the work environment. This may mean that when EE is formalized, its "causative force" in terms of motivation takes on a different, institutional character. Thus, a person with greater co-responsibility for the performed tasks can be expected to have the tools to influence the team. There are also questions whether the IR which emerged as a factor fostering EE in a non-internationalized work environment, will contribute to achievement of the goals of the department or organization, because the IR between the supervisor and the employee indicates their privileged position. If the quality or type of a manager's relationship with individuals differs, team members may be informally divided into *in-group* and *out-group* employees. The first of these groups will have greater freedom of action, while the latter will be obliged to operate within strictly defined formal rules (Lunenburg, 2010, pp. 1–3). The criteria for the aforementioned division of subordinates are crucial. If they are objective (e.g. seniority, maturity and employee experience, or their work performance), empowerment is not used by the selected people to meet their individual needs at the expense of the company. In addition, other people have a real chance of becoming empowered in the future, which can be motivating for them. A separate issue that could be clarified by further research is why IR are not important in the environment of multinational enterprises. Therefore it needs to be examined whether this is due to further standardization and greater equality in establishing the rules of cooperation in these organizations, or whether it is the effect of a barrier between superiors and subordinates of different countries of origin, caused by cultural or language differences or, for example, limited trust related to the perception of a foreign manager as an *emissary of the corporate headquarters*.

Conclusions

The presented literature studies and research results lead to the conclusion that EE is an important tool for motivating employees, which is related to the quality of SSR. A good or proper relationship will foster the use of EE. For EE, it is not important whether the relationship is formal, because it is based on premises other than hierarchy and formalized processes in the organization. However, for EE to take place, micromanagement should be replaced by employee empowerment, which means delegating and allowing people to make many decisions independently. Managers should be open to the opinions of their team members, or even include them in the leadership circles, or at least provide feedback after receiving those opinions.

Despite certain related risks and fears, EE can be an important tool for a manager, not only in the effective implementation of the goals set for their team but also in building relationships with employees through applying management methods that the employees will perceive as modern and different from those which they have experienced before. This will increase the level of their job satisfaction and reduce their will to change their place of employment.

Limitations

Like most research studies, though this study provides further evidence for the extant literature, there are also a few limitations. First, the respondents are

mainly working students and the average age of research participants is 32 (standard dev. = 11.98).

As with any research that uses a non-randomly selected sample, its limitations must be taken into consideration. Data were collected through a convenience sample, which was not representative of the population. In future investigations, the authors recommend replication of research because only through empirical replications can researchers pragmatically assess the reliability, validity, and generalizability of research findings (Peterson & Merunka, 2014). Also, in order to verify the obtained results, considering the possible impact of culture, it is worth conducting research in international organizations, covering individual countries. This would enable the identified relationships and cause-and-effect links to be assessed in a wider group of respondents, and also in terms of the updated determinants of national cultures. We suggest replicating our study in other European countries, for example due to the observed socio-economic differences in Europe itself (*International differences*…., 2015).

The presented research results also indicate further, recommended research directions, and these include:

- the impact of effective communication on building a superior-subordinate relationship, taking into account the level of the manager's knowledge of the language of the host country or a foreign language adopted as a corporate one by both parties to the relationship;
- the impact of empowerment on employees' job satisfaction and the will to remain in the organization or leave it;
- verification and reasons for the varying importance of informal relations in the environments of international and local enterprises.

The appendix is available in the online version of the journal.

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