

Empowered employees are more proactive—even when they don't trust their leader

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New research confirms that employees with empowering leaders are more proactive and, for the first time, shows that this effect occurs by increasing "role breadth self-efficacy"—defined as the confidence to do a variety of tasks beyond the job description. The research further shows that when subordinates trust the leader's competency, the leader's power sharing behavior increases the subordinates' role breadth self-efficacy. However, contrary to what might be expected, the researchers propose that when subordinates trust the leader's competency, it is less necessary for the leader to share their power to motivate proactive behaviors. The study, published today in *Frontiers in Psychology*, provides practical recommendations on empowering leadership for managers and organizations.

"Despite the well-documented benefits of proactive behavior, the question of how to promote employee proactivity in the workplace is relatively under-explored," says one of the study's authors,

Dr Yungui Guo from China's Zhoukou Normal University, School of Economic and Management. "Our research elaborates a theoretical model that explains why, and when, empowering leadership might promote this."

A proactive workforce can strongly influence business effectiveness and competitiveness. Several studies demonstrate that proactive behaviors - like taking charge, seeking feedback and building social networks—can improve organizational creativity, processes and job satisfaction, among other benefits.

Proactive behavior has been associated with empowering leadership, where managers share power with their subordinates and grant them a fair amount of autonomy. However, the details of how empowering leadership influences proactivity have not previously been investigated.

"Most studies on empowering leadership focused at the team rather than the individual level, and did not separate out the influence of the leader from the employee's personality," says Guo. "The mechanism by which empowering leadership encourages proactivity has also not been studied in detail."

To provide deeper insight into this, the researchers surveyed 280 leader-follower dyads from a large state-owned Chinese company. The surveys assessed the level of empowering leadership in supervisors, while subordinates were assessed for proactive behavior, trust in leader competence, proactive personality and role breadth self-efficacy.

The data confirm that empowering [leadership](#) is positively related to proactive behavior, even after controlling for proactive personality. The researchers also show how this works: sharing

power leads to higher role breadth self-efficacy in subordinates, which in turn encourages their proactive [behavior](#).

The research additionally shows that the mediating effect of role breadth self-efficacy is stronger when employees have high trust in their leader's competence.

"When you think your leader is capable, you may view their sharing of power as an opportunity to learn new things," explains Guo. "This gives you confidence to go beyond your job description - which increases your experience and mastery of different skills."

"In contrast, a low level of trust might make you suspect that delegating power is a way for the leader to shift responsibility. In this case you may be less willing to take on additional tasks."

However, contrary to what might be expected, the research suggests that it is less necessary for trusted leaders to share their power in order to motivate subordinates' proactive behaviors.

"If you view your leader as incompetent, you may prefer to make your own decisions than follow what he or she tells you to do," explains Guo. "Therefore, empowered employees with lower level of trust in leader competency are more likely to seize opportunities to exert more proactive behaviors."

The findings have several implications for management.

"Leaders can foster proactivity by sharing [power](#) and adopting empowering behaviors, such as advising subordinates to search for solutions themselves or as a team," says Guo.

"Organizations could also train leaders on how to effectively empower employees, or even selectively recruit and promote managers with a higher tendency to empower their subordinates."

Organizations could also improve proactivity by paying attention to role breadth self-efficacy.

"Role breadth self-efficacy could be used as a selection criterion in the hiring process.

Organizations can also foster this by encouraging job rotation and information sharing," says Guo.

One limitation of the study is that it only assessed Chinese leaders and subordinates—so the findings may not be applicable across all countries and cultures.

"China was especially suitable for our empirical setting, because it is a country where employees' work behaviors are significantly influenced by their leaders," says Guo. "Future studies should utilize a larger and multinational sample to validate our findings."

More information: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01802](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01802)

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