Empowering project teams: Towards an integrative conceptualisation of empowerment

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Abstract

Despite its long history, empowerment still remains a diffuse concept; a characteristic that has retarded its development and appropriate use. The theoretical underpinnings of empowerment are explicated in order to provide a thorough understanding and the much needed clarity. Towards this, two distinct approaches to the empowerment concept, structural and psychological, are differentiated and their complementarities articulated. Integrating the managerial or organisational acts/practices supportive of empowerment (structural approach) and employee cognition of empowerment (psychological approach) presents a unifying perspective that facilitates better understanding of the dynamics of the empowerment process. A multilevel perspective that exposes a paradox of empowerment in project teams is also explored and the implications for research and practice of such an integrative-multilevel conceptualisation consequently outlined.

Keywords

Empowerment climate, project team, psychological empowerment, social cognitive theory, structural empowerment.

1 Introduction

The project-based nature of the construction industry, characterised by high task interdependence both within and between work groups, particularly offers an ideal climate for the empowerment of employees (Greasley *et al.*, 2005). Empowered working is especially inherent in the way projects are run as autonomous profit centres (Beardsworth *et al.*, 1988; Loosemore *et al.*, 2003; Walker, 2002). Dainty *et al* (2002) however contend that the lamentable performance record of the construction industry reflects an underutilisation of empowerment, contrary to the popular perception that the industry has often empowered its workforce and project delivery teams. The imperative question that arises from the foregoing therefore is, if the *modus operandi* of the construction industry is so conducive for the application of empowerment and has the potential to invoke the much needed performance improvement, how come so little evidence exists of its actual use within the industry? That, empowerment remains a diffuse and poorly defined concept (Dainty *et al.*, 2002), widely misunderstood (Rudolph and Peluchette, 1993) and predisposed to conflicting interpretations in both academic and management practice discourse, may account for its underutilisation. Indeed, Simon (1990) asserts that empowerment is a concept that confuses even as it inspires. The lack of clarity as to what empowerment entails and how it comes about is further compounded by its subservient treatment, where it then becomes an empty rhetoric or a fortunate by-product (Psoinos and Smithson, 2002).

Consequently, few studies have actually examined the empowerment construct directly; the few that do produce impressionistic findings (Koberg *et al.*, 1999). Within the construction industry context in particular, empowerment research is still piecemeal and fragmented, often characterised by exploratory one-off case studies. Findings regarding the level of empowerment of project participants or project teams, and how that impacts work outcomes are either unavailable or unreliable. An exception being Liu and Fellows (2006) who recently explored the work empowerment of quantity surveyors in Hong Kong and how that impacts organisational commitment. To encourage empirical enquiry, this paper explores the theoretical underpinnings of empowerment, in order to provide the much needed clarity. An integrative-multilevel framework that provides a more unifying explanation of the dynamics of the empowerment process is subsequently proposed.

2 Development of Conceptual Framework

Empowerment as a management concept has roots in such substantive issues as intrinsic motivation, job design, participative decision-making, social learning theory and self-management concepts (Liden and Tewksbury, 1995). Against this background, empowerment has been described as "the stepchild of a grand heritage" (Forrester, 2000, p. 67). Yet, the variety of its roots predisposes it to varying conceptualisations. It has been described by some as authority delegation, a participative management technique, self-efficacy and a motivational construct. Spreitzer *et al* (1997) however caution that, defining empowerment so narrowly will not only limit its explanatory power across a range of outcomes, but could lead to omitted variable biases and misleading conclusions. Empowerment has therefore been regarded as multifaceted and much broader in scope than the narrower concepts of delegation, participation, involvement, and self-efficacy. Ford and Fottler (1995) particularly point out that, power is the differential factor. Thus, although participation, delegation and involvement emphasis employee input, no real change in the assignment of power to make decisions or determine work processes and outcomes actually takes place; as decisional power remains a managerial prerogative. Empowerment therefore, reflects a more exacting involvement of employees and the granting of autonomy to make decisions and not just suggests them or being part of the decision-making process (Forrester, 2000).

Within the extant literature, empowerment has been distinctively conceptualised as a structural concept and as a psychological concept. Definitions and empirical investigations of empowerment have thus tended to assume a structural or a psychological perspective. Menon (2001) has therefore urged researchers to explicitly identify what perspective they are adopting for the sake of clarity. In the following sections, the structural and psychological empowerment perspectives are critically reviewed and an integrative perspective consequently proposed.

2.1 Structural Empowerment

Conceptually, structural empowerment is deeply rooted in job design. According to this perspective, empowerment occurs through objective and often formal organisational changes that grant individuals greater latitude to make decisions and exert influence regarding their work (Eylon and Bamberger, 2000; Ford and Fottler, 1995; Liden and Arad, 1996). Eylon and Bamberger (2000) therefore describe structural empowerment as "*empowering acts/practices*" arising from the purposeful manipulation of structural and contextual factors of the work environment. Consistent with this view, opportunity, power (formal and informal) sources, access to information, support, resources and responsibility have been identified as central explanatory dimensions of an empowering organisational/work-unit environment (Bowen and Lawler, 1995; Eylon and Bamberger, 2000; Kanter, 1977). Together, these variables constitute a set of verifiable conditions within the work environment and their empowering nature arises from their ability to inhibit powerlessness by creating an "*empowerment climate*" within the organisation or work unit. Seibert *et al* (2004) define "empowerment climate" in terms of the shared perceptions of employees of the organisational structures, policies and practices that support employee empowerment. The

conceptualisation of empowerment climate is consistent with Reichers and Schneider's (1990) recommendation of the development of facet specific climates. Structural empowerment reflecting this view is thus synonymous with *"empowerment climate"*.

This perspective of empowerment is however often criticised for its failure to address the cognitive state of those being empowered. Menon (2001) further argues that, from a research point of view, the diverse nature of actions within the work environment that can be construed as empowering under this perspective presents serious conceptual challenges. These concerns cumulated in the development of the psychological perspective of empowerment as discussed below.

2.2 Psychological Empowerment

The psychological perspective proposes that empowerment is a constellation of experienced cognitions. An employee is then psychologically empowered when he or she; i) finds *meaning* in his or her work role, ii) feels *efficacious* or *competent* with respect to his or her ability and capacity to perform, iii) has a sense of *self-determination* with regard to achieving desired outcomes, and iv) believes that he or she has *impact* on the larger work environment (Spreitzer, 1995a; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). These four dimensions combine additively to create an overall construct of psychological empowerment so that, lack of any single dimension will deflate but not completely eliminate the overall degree of empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995a). Menon (2001) argues that defining empowerment as a psychological state of the individual employee has several advantages. First, the expected benefits of empowerment can only be achieved if employees actually perceive that they are empowered. Indeed, this view is central to the psychological empowerment theme, and implies that empowerment cannot just be management rhetoric, but must enable employees to feel in reality that they are empowered. Second, given the range of activities that can constitute structural empowerment, it is more efficient empirically, to study empowerment as a psychological state manifested by the employee. By systematically measuring state of empowerment, the effectiveness of organisational interventions can then be assessed.

Psychological empowerment is however often criticised for focussing too much attention on "overworked symbolic gestures" while ignoring the underlying substantive changes within the work environment (Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). Particularly, the intrinsic nature of psychological empowerment seems to preclude extrinsic, non-task facets of empowerment resulting from, for example, leadership or organisational influence. Consequently, psychological empowerment provides less leverage to organisations in a practical sense to influence employee's inner workings (Forrester, 2000). Also problematic is its implicit assumption that, as long as employees can be made to believe they are empowered, it does not matter whether they actually are or not. Recent studies have however shown that it is not enough for management simply to "preach" employee empowerment with the hope of influencing employee beliefs of empowerment. The findings of Greasley *et al* (2005) is particularly evident of the discordance that can arise between management rhetoric and employee experience of empowerment.

From the analysis of the psychological and structural perspectives of empowerment above, it is apparent that they are complementary, rather than parallel constructs; suggesting that it may be worthwhile to integrate them. This integrative view is presented in the section that follows.

2.3 The Integrative Perspective

Empowerment climate and psychological empowerment are conceptually different in referent, focus and content. While empowerment climate refers to the work environment, psychological empowerment refers to an individual's cognitive state (Seibert *et al.*, 2004). Further, empowerment climate assumes a relatively descriptive focus, while psychological empowerment is more subjective and evaluative. In terms of content, empowerment climate assesses shared perceptions of organisational structures and practices while psychological empowerment assesses the cognitive states of organisational members

(Seibert *et al.*, 2004). Despite these conceptual differences, ample theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that rather than being pursued separately, structural and psychological empowerment are actually complementary and that integrating them provides a more unifying explanation of the dynamics of the empowerment process (c.f. Mathieu *et al.*, 2006; Menon, 2001). Eylon and Bamberger (2000, p. 356) for instance point out that "it is just as difficult to view the construct as a cognition to be experienced independent of managerial action, as it is to view it as some objective shift in the structural characteristics of the organisation that almost by definition 'enables' job incumbents". An integrative view is therefore advocated in which structural changes within the work environment (empowerment climate) are perceived as enabling and providing control over work related decisions and processes, thereby producing feelings of empowerment (psychological empowerment). Indeed, Conger and Kanungo (1988) and subsequently Spreitzer (1995a) both contend that management practices or structural changes are only one set of conditions that may, but not necessarily empower employees and thus suggested that employees' perceptions of empowerment may even be more important than management practices aimed at empowerment. This is supported by the assertion of Holt *et al* (2000) that, employees' cognitive growth controls their fundamental behaviour within the work environment and that positive employee perception is an integral part of successful empowerment. Spreitzer (1995a) also makes the link for us when she suggests that, psychological empowerment comprise a set of cognitions shaped by the work environment. Liden and Arad (1996, p. 208) are unequivocal about the link when they state that "psychological empowerment may be interpreted as the psychological outcome of structural changes designed to provide power". Viewed in this context, empowerment reflects an interactive process between person and organisational environment in which the individual's sense of empowerment is either facilitated or inhibited by critical, salient, environmental events (Spreitzer, 1997).

This integrative perspective is even more apparent from a social cognitive theory point of view. Social cognitive theory discounts the notion of human behaviour as unidirectional, shaped or controlled by either environmental influences or by some internal personal dispositions (Bandura, 1999); positions implicit respectively, when empowerment is considered solely as a structural or a psychological concept. Viewed from the focal point of social cognitive theory then, both structural and psychological perspectives of empowerment provide only a partial and incomplete picture of the empowerment journey. The empowerment process should then be conceived as an interactional process in which the perception of empowerment (psychological empowerment) is shaped through interaction with environmental factors (empowerment climate), producing behavioural outcomes. Thus, changes within the work environment perceived as empowering should influence and reinforce the cognitive state of employees and eventually affect work outcomes. A dynamic system is then established over time in which resulting work outcomes provide justification for continual reinforcement of organisational practices, which in turn trigger further motivating experiences.

2.4 Dynamics of Empowerment in Project Teams: The Multilevel Perspective

Thus far, psychological empowerment has been portrayed as an individual experience. The growth and pervasive use of teams or work-groups has however led to the study of psychological empowerment also as a collective experience (c.f. Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). Empowerment climate can then be conceived as engendering individual perceptions or shared perceptions of empowerment. Liden and Tewksbury (1995) however suggests that some researchers often discuss individual and team empowerment as though they were interchangeable; often suggesting that what is true of individual level is also true of team level empowerment. We discuss team level psychological empowerment below, so as to delineate their differences and interrelationships.

Team empowerment can be traced to the sociotechnical movement at the Tavistock Institute and their work on autonomous work-groups. Essentially, team empowerment reflects "team members' collective belief that they have the authority to control their proximal work environment and are responsible for the team's functioning" (Mathieu *et al.*, 2006, p.98). Thus, in contrast to individual empowerment, team level

empowerment focuses on collective perception and organisational practices targeted at providing control to the team as a whole, rather than to individual members. It is therefore critical to note that team empowerment is not simply the aggregation of individual empowerment to the team level, but represents a distinct team-level construct with no meaningful existence at the individual level. Kirkman and Rosen (1997) view team psychological empowerment as multifaceted, comprising the team members' shared perception of *potency, meaningfulness, autonomy and consequences.* These dimensions parallel the individual psychological empowerment dimensions developed by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and Spreitzer (1995a). Potency is analogous with competence or self-efficacy at the individual level and reflects the collective belief of a group that it can be effective (Shea and Guzzo, 1987). It also reflects Bandura's notion of collective-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Meaningfulness describes the shared belief of team members that their group task is valuable and worthwhile, and thus reflects a strong collective commitment to a mission or goal, as well as a sense of purpose (Kirkman and Rosen, 1997). The autonomy dimension also corresponds to self-determination and is defined as the degree of freedom, independence and discretion that the team has regarding work schedule and work procedures (Hackman, 1987). Consequences is synonymous with impact at the individual level and reflects the collective belief that group tasks have significant consequences (Hackman, 1987). From the foregoing therefore, team empowerment and individual empowerment are conceptually distinct, but inter-related and particularly present practical implications for empowerment in project team settings.

Due to their cross-functional nature, project teams comprise individuals with specific technical knowledge, making them the authority in certain task-specific matters. The lack of common grounding in such teams suggests that team members can often not cover for one another. Thus, team members are often personally responsible for adequately representing and integrating their technical contributions into the final product (Uhl-Bien and Graen, 1998), the construction of a building, road or bridge. The high task interdependence particularly implies that teamwork and collaboration are imperative to the success of cross-functional teams. Langfred (2005) found that when task interdependence is high, correspondingly high group autonomy and control is critical for group effectiveness. In practice however, while project teams may be truly empowered, individuals due to their specific technical knowledge may also still be empowered to some extend, to take certain key decisions. The apparent paradox of how individual and team empowerment can coexist at the project team level arises, since team empowerment may not preclude individual empowerment. Empowerment is also considered a non zero-sum concept (Liden and Tewksbury, 1995; Spreitzer, 1995a) and thus can be described as existing along a continuum where teams or individuals are more or less empowered rather than empowered or not empowered. This notion of an empowerment continua can be depicted as in Figure 1 below, an adaptation from Langfred (2000), to illustrate how the design of project teams can result in varying combinations of individual and team empowerment. For simplicity we use "low" and "high" to depict the continuum of empowerment.

The "traditional" work group scenario (type 0), arises where both teams and individuals have little to no autonomy regarding their tasks. Structured work settings, characterised by low uncertainty and high routine are symptomatic of this type of design. Types 1-3 work settings constitute scenarios where individuals and teams manifest substantial degree of empowerment. A contingency view can thus be adopted in deciding which type is most suitable for a given project situation. These contingencies could range from task related issues such as task interdependence to contextual issues such as organisational culture or structure. Type 1 is the typical "empowered team" structure where the team as a unit enjoys high autonomy and control over it's affairs with very little control vested in individuals. Organisations dependent on group outputs, produced through highly interdependent sub-tasks, may find high team empowerment and low individual empowerment (type 1) appropriate for their operations. The "empowered individuals" category (type 2), may be suitable where little or no interdependence exist among tasks, permitting independent task performance without spill over effects on other tasks within the work-group. Type 3 work settings with both high individual and high team empowerment may be a rare scenario, but may exist in loosely coupled work settings with strong employee empowerment culture, and where there are no interdependent requirements as well (Langfred, 2000).
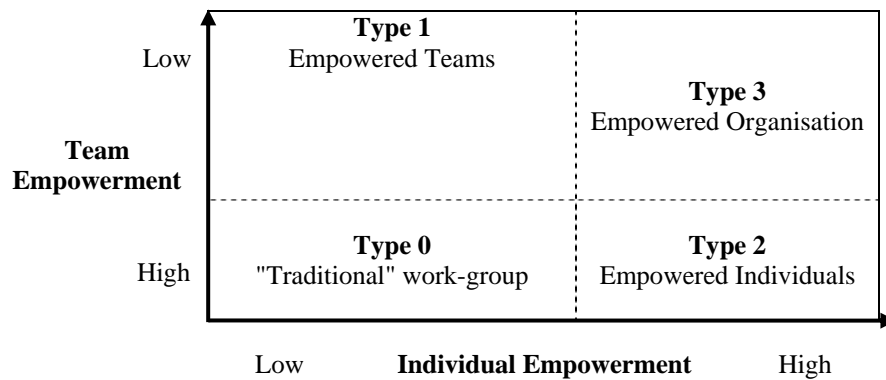
Figure 1: Empowerment Continua

While empowerment and its consequences have consistently been studied separately at either the individual or team levels, the discussion above suggests that in reality individual and team empowerment may actually often exists together in varying degrees. Researchers have however yet to explicitly study empowerment as a multi-level concept at both the individual and team levels, *simultaneously*. This omission especially in team-based industries such as construction is particularly curious. Research on the interplay between individual and team empowerment and how work outcomes may be impacted at each level is thus warranted. Particularly, given their distinct nature and suitability in different situations as discussed above, they may require different leadership behaviours to manage (Liden and Tewksbury, 1995), and their coexistence may be counter-productive as evident from emerging team empowerment research in other team-based industries (c.f. Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). This paradox further raises other practical questions but whose answers remain elusive. For example, what trade-offs are required to achieve an "optimal fit" between individual and team empowerment at the project level? This paper is part of a research agenda that seeks to answer these and other related questions.

2.5 The Integrative-Multilevel Framework

Taken together, the exposition of the integrative and multilevel perspectives of the empowerment concept can be depicted as in Figure 2 below. It shows empowerment climate as having a causal role in determining individual and team psychological empowerment, which in turn influences work outcomes such as performance, commitment and satisfaction. The dynamic interplay of individual and team psychological empowerment, as well as the feedback influence of work outcomes as reinforcing empowerment climate overtime is also depicted.
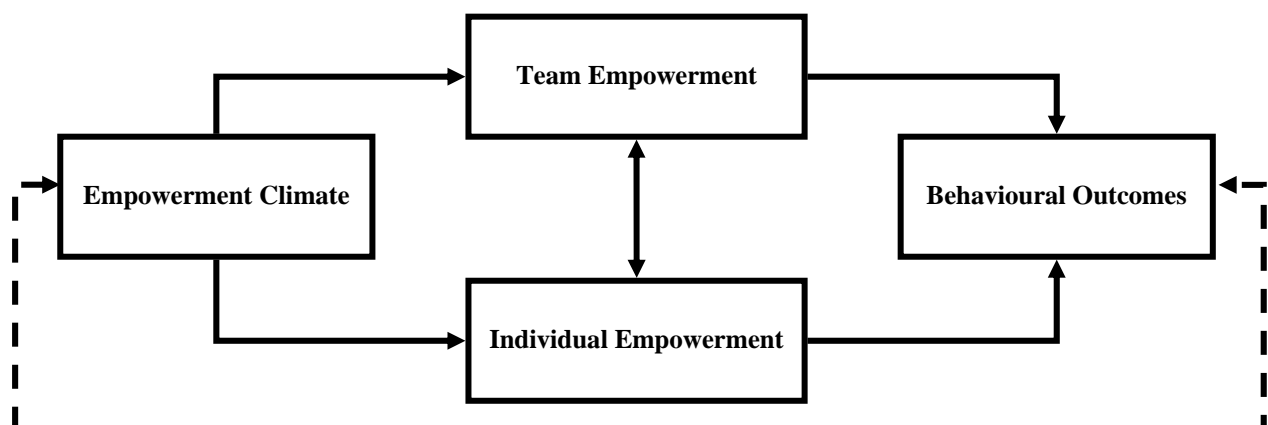

Figure 2: Integrative-Multilevel Framework of the Empowerment Process

3 Conclusions

An integrative-multi-level conceptualisation of empowerment has been presented. Practically, it suggests that the creation of an empowerment climate may hold the greatest potential for managers to influence employee perceptions of empowerment and can serve as a diagnostic tool for "trouble-shooting" in the empowerment process. For research, this paper has provided the much needed clarity to the empowerment concept, and sets the stage for investigating various outcomes and antecedent factors associated with empowerment climate, individual and team empowerment. An important contribution is that, the analysis of empowerment has been taken beyond the primary focus of individual empowerment, characteristic of much of the empowerment studies in the construction context, and thus provides the first step for empirical investigation of the relationship and trade-offs between individual and team empowerment. An industry wide study of the relationships among the key variables depicted in Figure 2 above will form the second stage of this research agenda, to specify and quantify the determinants and outcomes of team and individual empowerment in the project context.

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