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Empowering leadership in cognitive processes and behavioural dynamics: a thematic analysis

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Abstract: This thematic analysis explores unpacking empowering leadership through behavioural dynamics and cognitive mechanisms. Empowering leadership is a multi-faceted approach that helps followers to feel competent, autonomous, and purposeful. This study reports how empowering leadership may influence behaviours and cognitions among business professionals, taking an idiographic approach of capturing qualitative data on the subject from existing literature and semi-structured interviews. The analysis inspires leaders capable of empowering followers by understanding their psychological needs thoroughly, adopting an inclusive decision-making process, and creating a healthy work environment. This research shed some light on how empowering leadership leads to leaders empowering their followers through affect, creativity infusion, and job satisfaction. The significance of these findings to organisational practice underscores the importance of facilitative leadership behaviours that advance individual and organisational successes. Empowering leadership behaviours must be encouraged to create better outcomes at the personal and organisational levels.

Keywords: empowering leadership; cognitive processes; behavioural dynamics; thematic analysis; participative decision-making.

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1 Introduction

Empowering leadership (EL) and modern organisational practice in contemporary organisational practice, empowerment, has become a prevalent concept, and EL is considered to have paradigmatic significance (Cheong et al., 2019). This leadership style promotes autonomy, mastery, and purpose among employees. The primary objective of this article is to elucidate the behavioural dynamics and cognitive processes that drive EL through enhancing motivation, engagement, and well-being outcomes in followers (Arshad et al., 2022). EL is grounded in social exchange theory, which encompasses EL, wherein the leader becomes empowered and engenders trust, respect, and mutual support between leaders and followers (Blau, 1964). EL is predicated on the fundamental psychological needs addressed by self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), emphasising autonomy, mastery, and social connections. This leadership approach enables employees to become self-motivated and high-performing. When leaders delegate authority, resources, and support, they create an environment conducive to creativity, innovation, and adaptive problem-solving (Spreitzer, 1995; Mutonyi et al., 2020). Recent empirical evidence has demonstrated that EL is positively associated with various organisational outcomes. Studies have suggested that the provision of empowerment by leaders results in higher levels of job satisfaction (Ahearne et al., 2005), enhanced organisational commitment, and increased staff engagement.

Additionally, it has been ascertained that enhanced empowered leadership is imperative to improve organisational effectiveness and competitiveness, as its linkage also exists to advanced team performance (Saleem et al., 2019) and organisational innovation. EL has a potent influence on desirable collective organisational-level results (Kearney et al., 2019). Research still requires a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes and behavioural dynamics underpinning this leadership. This thematic analysis seeks to address this gap in the research, focusing on cognitive and behavioural aspects of EL. The purpose of this research is to investigate relationships between EL and follower-level constructs (attitudes, behaviours, or outcomes) within organisations by gathering a comprehensive review of the independent variables (key concepts) and dependent variables (empirical themes) found in each study. Due to this methodological deficiency, one theme was a focus in a subset of research studies unearthed from our systematic literature search – academic papers that provided theoretical frameworks or practical research that directly mentioned EL. By critically examining and integrating several empirical investigations, this review aims to reinforce insights into the cognitive processes and behavioural dynamics researchers have identified as persisting themes, conceptual frameworks, or theoretical claims of EL. This thematic analysis furthers our understanding of EL by linking it with this behaviour's cognitive foundations and behavioural expressions, thereby elucidating various unexplored areas in this respect. The conceptual understanding of the mechanisms of EL illuminates how empowering behaviours are essential for all those involved – the practitioners, scholars, and organisation leaders seeking to understand this crucial aspect leading toward individual and organisational success. The following research question has been addressed incorporating the intricate relationships between EL and cognitive processes/behavioural dynamics: Research question: How does EL influence cognitive processes and behavioural dynamics in organisational contexts?

2 Literature review

EL has garnered increasing research interest in the organisational literature to enhance employee performance (Alotaibi et al., 2020), motivation (Kim and Beehr, 2020), and engagement. For instance, the EL style favouring the secondary mode by managing power empowerment, control facilitation, and self-efficacy promotion (Burhan and Khan, 2023) has demonstrated greater stability across inferential studies (Pazetto et al., 2023). Nevertheless, Conger and Kanungo (1988) extended the concept of EL to elucidate more comprehensively how leaders enhance follower perception related to their maximum skills, talents, and persuasion power. They posited that EL pertains to manipulating conditions and overcoming followers' wishes, whereas it motivates them to participate in decision-making (Türkmendağ and Tuna, 2022; Al Otaibi et al., 2023). Following a similar theme, Spreitzer (1995) reframed psychological empowerment as referring to an individual's experience of intrinsic motivation with respect to a task combined with the belief that completion will lead to enhanced performance. Empowering leaders, the research suggests, play a significant role in shaping such perceptions within followers through their behaviour and interactions. Extensive empirical research has demonstrated the positive effects of EL on several organisational outcomes (Kearney et al., 2019). A meta-analysis conducted by Seibert and colleagues found positive relationships between EL and employee creativity, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment (Seibert et al., 2011). Consistent with this is empirical evidence, such as the work of Zhang and Bartol (2010), who found that EL behaviours, including autonomy, resources, and support for innovation, are significantly related to employee creativity and innovation.

The theoretical denotation of EL amalgamates within wide-ranging academic frameworks, including self-determination theory, transformational model of leadership, and social cognitive theory (Türkmendağ and Tuna, 2022). Social cognitive theory posits that self-efficacy, belief in oneself, and one's skills influence performance. Consequently, followers whose leaders empower them tend to exhibit enhanced performance (Bandura, 1977). One element of transformational leadership is empowerment, which emphasises the importance of motivating and inspiring followers to perform at a higher level (Bass, 1985). Consistent with EL, self-determination theory posits that providing competence and autonomy is crucial for fostering intrinsic motivation and greater well-being (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Research on EL has been conducted for a variety of organisational outcomes. Zhang and Bartol (2010) found that employees' psychological empowerment and intrinsic motivation are two processes accompanying employee creativity, through which enabling EL positively affects creative behaviour. Similarly, Wang et al. (2017) asserted that EL increases subordinate performance and job satisfaction, an effect that others have demonstrated is contingent on the sense of competence and autonomy facilitated.

The literature on EL is elucidated with a focus on this construct's behavioural dynamics and cognitive processes. The individual components of EL are predicated on self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), which posits that individuals possess an innate propensity to engage in tasks that fulfil their fundamental psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Long-term needs are addressed through leaders' proficiency in empowering subordinates by conferring decision-making authority, opportunities for development, and supportive work environments (Arnold et al., 2000). By exhibiting these behaviours, empowering leaders foster a sense of ownership among

their subordinates, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and engagement within the workforce (Ahearne et al., 2005). A critical aspect of EL is grounded in cognitive empowerment, which comprises ‘the requisite cognitions that allow people to feel they have the power to change their surroundings’ (Spreitzer, 1995). A salient feature of cognitive empowerment is its capacity to engender efficacy, efficiency, mastery, and control over professional activities and outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2022). Empirical research corroborates the concept of cognitive empowerment, wherein establishing challenging goals, providing constructive feedback, and cultivating an environment conducive to experimentation and learning are among the methods employed by empowered leaders to empower their followers (Kark et al., 2003). Employees demonstrate enhanced performance and job satisfaction as they develop an increased sense of competence and self-efficacy (Carmeli et al., 2006). The cognitive dimension of empowerment leadership pertains to the beliefs, attitudes, and cognitive processes utilised by leaders that influence their interactions with followers. The concept of psychological empowerment was initially introduced by Spreitzer (1995), who emphasised the significance of leaders’ assessments of their followers’ capacities and their willingness to delegate responsibility and authority. Similarly, Conger and Kanungo (1988) presented the notion of ‘empowerment leadership’, underscoring leaders’ convictions regarding their subordinates’ inherent motivation and capabilities.

From a behavioural perspective, EL is defined by inclusive decision-making procedures in which managers involve staff members in goal-setting and problem-solving exercises (Zhu et al., 2009). An empowering leader solicits feedback from team members, communicates areas of interest, and demonstrates value for their opinions and experiences, all of which influence dedication and belonging (Blau, 1964). Furthermore, supporting leaders through coaching, mentoring, and task delegation facilitates skill development and enhancement (Spreitzer, 1995). Empowering leaders who model these behaviours enable staff to assume accountability for their work and become more productive members of an organisation, making substantial contributions to organisational goals (Muchiri et al., 2019; Rao Jada et al., 2019; Naqshbandi et al., 2019). The empowerment behavioural facet of leadership focuses on the adoption of certain behaviours that enable subordinates to take charge of their tasks and significantly contribute to organisational goals (Alblooshi et al., 2021). Fostering a supportive work environment, providing autonomy, and creating growth opportunities are recommended actions. According to Zhang and Bartol (2010), enabling leadership behaviours such as providing resources, coaching, and setting high expectations are necessary to support staff members in becoming fully functioning and active agents. Ahearne et al., 2005, also found that supportive leadership was essential for facilitating staff initiative and innovation. While the significance of EL has been acknowledged, thematic analysis of the literature has identified a list of important open questions and additional areas for further examination (Hoang et al., 2021). To understand the interplay of leaders’ beliefs with their actions in impacting organisational outcomes, it is imperative to first synthesise the cognitive and behaviouristic dimensions of empowered leadership (Jung et al., 2020). Second, the expectation that EL would manifest and function differently in various cultural settings (Wen et al., 2023) necessitates further cross-cultural research into the confluences of empowerment with cultural normativity and values.

Several empirical studies have attested to the positive influence of EL on various organisational outcomes. EL, for example, is associated with higher satisfaction for both work (Ahearne et al., 2005) and the organisation (Arnold et al., 2000). Zhu et al. (2009)

empirical studies have demonstrated the role of EL in enhancing organisational effectiveness and competitiveness, leading to enhanced team performance (Kark et al., 2003) and organisational innovation. Consequently, EL can enhance cognitive empowerment and foster advantageous employee behavioural outcomes. Ultimately, fostering autonomy and facilitating a connection to purpose within individuals empowers every level of leadership and creates an environment that supports higher intrinsic motivation, engagement, and performance at work. This is particularly relevant given the various contexts in which EL functions and its implications for organisational performance. Recent studies have expanded our understanding of cognitive factors, such as mindfulness and psychological safety, and have significantly influenced the mechanisms of EL, as evidenced in this recent study (Leroy et al., 2021). In this empirical study, we aimed to examine the mediating mechanism of mindfulness at the individual level to elucidate its impact on task-related job performance by investigating how EL can result in enhanced levels of employee mindfulness, which subsequently leads to improved decision-making and attention-to-detail, as argued by Pircher Verdorfer (2019). The research demonstrates that empowering employees enables leaders to cultivate mindfulness in the workplace, thus guiding them towards more mindful and attentive behaviours at work (Kim and Beehr, 2023; Gracia et al., 2020). This indicates that EL increases employee autonomy and cognitive processes required for work performance (O'Donoghue and Van Der Werff, 2022; Arshad et al., 2022).

EL can enhance employees' confidence to express their opinions and engage in innovative practices without fear of repercussions (Semedo et al., 2022; Xu and Zhang, 2022). Organisations seeking to foster innovation may derive substantial benefits from this approach (Farida and Setiawan, 2022). Consequently, when employees perceive a safe environment for risk-taking among their colleagues, they are more likely to strive for enhanced performance and contribute to organisational learning (Ivaldi et al., 2022). Recent research has extended the examination of EL by focusing on associated employee behaviours (Faulks et al., 2021). Cheong et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between EL and proactive behaviours, such as voice behaviour and task crafting. Their studies indicated that employees who perceive high levels of EL demonstrate a greater propensity to initiate and craft roles (Kim and Beehr, 2021). These employees actively seek novel ways to contribute to the team's shared objectives (Ali et al., 2020). This phenomenon exemplifies a broader trend observed in numerous organisations, wherein employee behaviours play a crucial role in determining an organisation's capacity and willingness to pursue success within its dynamic environment (Zainol et al., 2021). Furthermore, Li et al. (2022) investigated the influence of EL on employee resilience during organisational change. Their findings suggest that EL fosters adaptive behaviours among employees, enhancing their ability to manage uncertainty. In an unpredictable business environment, resilience represents a critical capacity that leadership rooted in empowerment can cultivate, enabling employees to maintain motivation and achieve superior outcomes, even under challenging circumstances.

Previous research on EL has been predominantly culture-bound, and significant advancements in this field necessitate increased cultural inclusivity in EL studies to enhance the understanding of the generalisability of inspiring servant-leadership practices globally (Zhao et al., 2020). EL is associated with job satisfaction. The relationship between EL and satisfaction was found to be indirect and mediated by increased job autonomy. The addition of communal purpose and team solidarity further enhanced

satisfaction levels. This finding supports the notion that EL is culture-bound, suggesting that EL behaviours are conditioned even in cultures with a more extensive history of hierarchical relationships.

Empowerment-based leadership influences cognitive-behavioural dynamics in remote or flexible working environments during Digital Transformation. This research examines the impact of EL on behaviour and sustainability practices. Given the increasing societal and environmental challenges, an EL style may encourage employees to assume responsibility for their contribution towards the organisation's sustainability initiatives. It is important to investigate the impact of EL on workers with diverse intersectional identities (e.g., gender, race, and age). Recent trends indicate that leadership styles should be inclusive and sensitive towards employees from various backgrounds. EL may foster inclusivity by creating an environment in which every employee is valued for their critical thinking abilities. Leadership is a product of the culture in which it is implemented. Concurrently, EL is associated with the exercise of power towards subordinates. It involves sharing power with them or granting employees autonomy and participative decision-making latitude, depending on the cultural context. A framework suggested to be useful in understanding such variances is Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension theory, particularly power distance and individualism versus collectivism. In high-power distance cultures, such as those found in many Asian and Latin American countries, hierarchical structures are favoured, implying that subordinates expect a more directive leadership style (Hofstede, 1980). In contrast, in low power distance cultures, leaders do not automatically command respect but must cultivate it by demonstrating competence in EL values. In this context, employees tend to feel comfortable with the degree of decentralisation in decision-making and the participatory nature of the environment (House et al., 2004). This approach might be facilitated in these cultures because individuals are expected to have broad rights to egalitarianism and autonomy (Eylon and Au, 1999), which has implications for leaders who aim to guide subordinates towards greater initiative-taking through self-direction.

In circumstances where individual creativity and autonomy are highly valued personal attributes that influence employee performance (Kirkman and Shapiro, 2001), those seeking leadership roles may be inclined to avoid subordinate positions. A comparative analysis of EL could elucidate the practices and challenges associated with this leadership style across diverse cultural contexts. Furthermore, this cross-cultural examination may contribute to the development of a culturally sensitive approach to global leadership and enhance the applicability of EL in international settings. Chen and Aryee (2007) posit that EL demonstrated a more pronounced positive effect on work attitudes in the USA, attributable to higher tolerance for autonomy relative scores.

3 Methodology

This study employs a thematic analysis technique to investigate EL in behavioural dynamics and cognitive processes. The process of identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or themes in textual material is known as thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The study utilised a qualitative research methodology. Twenty-seven Indian professionals working in operations, finance, human resources, marketing, and information technology provided consent to participate in the study. The diverse backgrounds of the experts facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the implications

and range of aspects of EL. The initial step involved a systematic search strategy using electronic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar to identify relevant literature. Keywords pertaining to behavioural dynamics, cognitive processes, empowered leadership, and related concepts were employed to locate pertinent research. The second step involved conducting semi-structured interviews with respondents. Semi-structured interviews are utilised to collect data without being constrained by questions with predefined responses (Arksey and Knight, 1999). The initial identification of 15 respondents was facilitated through purposive sampling. Subsequently, the participants were requested to suggest other individuals they deemed suitable for the study (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). During the interviews, questions such as ‘What challenges or risks does EL pose for business organisations going forward?’ were posed to the experts. What implications might be EL have for business organisations, if any? What actions might a leader take to prepare for these situations? Both in-person and telephone interviews were conducted and documented concurrently. Most research on EL utilises self-report measures, wherein participants rate their perceptions of leadership behaviour, personal attitudes, or behavioural responses (Kim and Beehr, 2020). Self-report instruments are valuable for capturing individual perspectives; however, they may be susceptible to social desirability bias, which influences participants to provide favourable or socially acceptable responses (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Future research to mitigate self-report biases should include multi-source data collection, supervisor and peer ratings, and performance measures (Ellingson and Tirol-Carmody, 2022). Triangulating data from multiple sources enhances the validity of the findings by reducing the possibility that they are solely based on individual perceptions (Johnson et al., 2007). Most studies on EL have been conducted in limited or homogeneous cultural contexts (Mutonyi et al., 2020). They are predominantly concentrated in Western or high-income settings, where leader behaviour consistent with empowerment aligns with a normatively practiced culture supported by individualism and low power distance (Kirkman et al., 2009). This restricted cultural perspective may impede the generalisability of findings across diverse global contexts. In empowering employee leadership research, increased generalisability and reliability necessitate, at minimum, addressing self-report biases and expanding beyond limited cultural contexts. Future studies should employ multi-source data collection, longitudinal research design, and aggregation of diverse cultural samples to enable a reliable estimation of how EL may trigger cognitive processing mechanisms in varied settings. These strategies are likely to advance more robust, broadly applicable theories and practices of leadership.

4 Data analysis

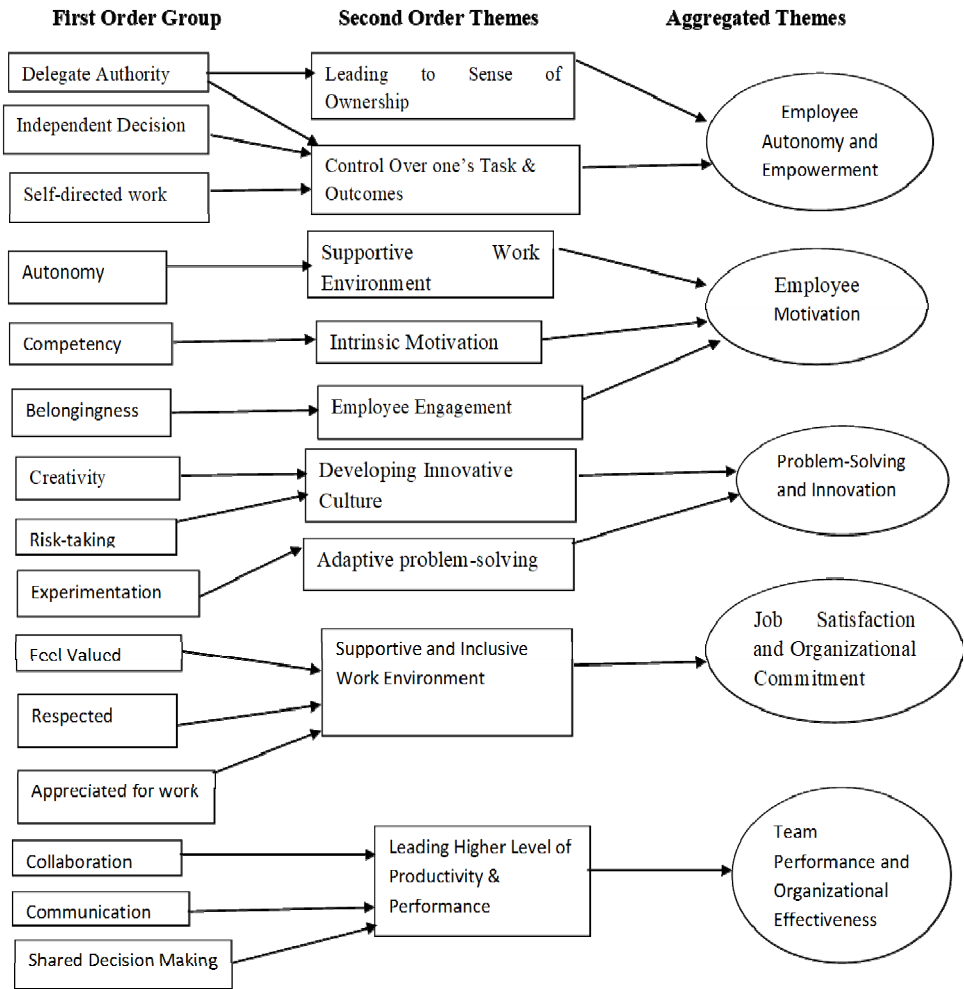
The study employed thematic analysis to evaluate the interview transcripts and identify the emerging themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that this method is “a versatile and practical research instrument that may offer a comprehensive, intricate, yet nuanced explanation of data.” Thematic analysis is a widely utilised qualitative research technique that involves classifying data into units of analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Terry et al. (2017) state that thematic analysis “produces accounts of patterns across the dataset.” The responses from the participants were examined. Subsequently, through comparison of the responses with those of other respondents, similar themes were

identified (Ozcan and Eisenhardt, 2009). Common themes in the data were discerned by codes, which were further categorised.

5 Findings

Based on the existing literature, interviews, and literary remarks, five major themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis. The conceptual model developed using the study as a basis is depicted in Figure 1. Samples from each theme’s respondent interviews, which serve as examples, are shown in Table 1. The findings demonstrated that business organisations are impacted by EL in various ways. These were the five primary themes.

Figure 1 Conceptual model



Source: Author’s own compilation

Table 1 Excerpts from respondent interviews about pertinently analysed aggregated themes

<i>Theme 1: Employee autonomy and empowerment</i>
“It feels good to be able to take responsibility for my work and make my own decisions. Knowing that my contributions and thoughts are appreciated and that I can be relied upon to provide the desired outcomes is powerful. “The way I approach my work has changed significantly since our team adopted a more empowering leadership style. Because I have the freedom to decide how to approach work and solve difficulties, I feel more engaged and driven. In my role, it has increased my sense of empowerment and capability.” “It has changed everything for me to be a member of a team that is run by someone who values employee empowerment. I believe that I have the motivation and support I need to venture outside of my comfort zone, take on new challenges, and advance both personally and professionally.” “A pleasant work atmosphere where everyone feels appreciated and respected has been established by our manager’s empowering leadership style. I can now speak up, contribute to the team’s success, and offer my thoughts without worrying about criticism or retaliation because of this confidence.” “The ability to trust us to take the lead and make decisions is one of the qualities about our leader that I like the most. It has encouraged me to aim for perfection in whatever I do and helped me feel like I have more control over my job.”
<i>Theme 2: Employee motivation</i>
“My view of my work has completely changed as a result of working under a leader who practices empowering leadership. Because I am aware that my efforts are valued and acknowledged, I feel more driven and involved. Being a member of a team where each person is empowered to achieve is motivating.” “My motivation levels have significantly increased as a result of our manager’s encouraging leadership style. Knowing that my voice counts and that my contributions have an impact makes me feel more enthused and dedicated to my profession. When I’m given the freedom to take responsibility for my work, I feel so much more energetic. “My motivation has significantly increased since our team started using a more empowering leadership style. Knowing that my manager has faith in my ability to make judgments and offer suggestions makes me feel more committed to the accomplishment of our projects. Being a member of a team where everyone is encouraged to put in their best effort and feels respected is really inspiring.” “I have renewed enthusiasm for my work thanks to empowering leadership. I’ve been motivated to work harder and pursue excellence by my manager’s belief in my skills and support for my professional development. It’s incredible how much more driven I am to take charge of my work and achieve my objectives when I feel empowered.” I feel more driven and involved at work than I have ever felt. Everyone at work feels inspired to succeed thanks to their inspiring leadership style, which has fostered a good and encouraging workplace. Being on a team where my manager actually cares about my growth and well-being is a breath of fresh air.”
<i>Theme 3: Problem-solving and innovation</i>
“I’ve observed a noticeable shift in our team’s approach to problem-solving toward greater creativity under our manager’s empowering leadership. It is encouraged for us to think creatively, try out novel concepts, and accept that failure is a necessary part of learning. Working in a setting that not only promotes creativity but actively celebrates it is invigorating.”

Source: Author’s own compilation from participant interview

Table 1 Excerpts from respondent interviews about pertinently analysed aggregated themes (continued)

<i>Theme 3: Problem-solving and innovation</i>
“Under our leader’s inspiring guidance, our team’s capacity for innovation has grown. We are allowed to investigate novel ideas, question the status quo, and take measured risks. Seeing how strong leadership may unleash our group’s creativity and propel innovation ahead is encouraging.” “Our manager’s readiness to foster creativity and openness to new ideas is one of my favorite qualities about them. They encourage a culture of experimentation and continual progress by giving us the tools and direction we need to investigate novel solutions to challenging issues. Knowing that our opinions are respected and heard is empowering. Our team’s approach to problem-solving has changed as a result of empowered leadership. We are empowered to proactively recognize problems and work together to find solutions, rather than waiting for orders. We are incredibly inventive and productive when allowed the latitude to express our creativity and accept responsibility for our job.” “Our team has discovered a greater feeling of creativity and ingenuity because of our manager’s empowering leadership style. They inspire us to question preconceptions, exercise critical thought, and consider novel options. Working under an executive who is certain of our ability to spur innovation and leave a lasting impression is motivating.”
<i>Theme 4: Job satisfaction and organisational commitment</i>
“My level of job satisfaction has significantly increased since our boss embraced an empowering leadership approach. Because I have the freedom to decide for myself and to share my views, I feel more involved and fulfilled at work. Having my work acknowledged and valued as a member of a team is powerful.” “Under our leader’s inspiring leadership style, our team’s job satisfaction has skyrocketed. Because we are confident that our manager will allow us to take responsibility for our work and contribute significantly, we are more driven and dedicated to our work. Working in a place where everyone feels appreciated and supported is motivating.” “My level of job satisfaction and organizational dedication have significantly increased as a result of empowered leadership. Because of our manager’s encouragement of candid communication, teamwork, and respect, I feel more a part of my team and our common objectives. Working in a setting where everyone feels appreciated and inspired to achieve is inspiring.” I’ve never been more content with my work. Everyone feels appreciated and respected in this wonderful and encouraging work atmosphere that they have established with their empowering attitude. My level of motivation and commitment increase significantly when I feel empowered to take responsibility for my work. “The morale and commitment levels of our team have improved due to our manager’s inspiring leadership style. Because our manager values our opinions, believes in our skills, and encourages us to advance professionally, we feel more invested in and interested in our work. Being led by someone who actually cares about our achievement and well-being is inspiring.”
<i>Theme 5: Team performance and organisational effectiveness</i>
With our manager’s inspiring guidance, our team’s output has increased dramatically. Our manager has effectively established a unified and productive team by promoting transparent communication, teamwork, and mutual decision-making. Witnessing how empowering leadership can unleash our group’s potential and propel us toward our objectives is encouraging.

Source: Author’s own compilation from participant interview

Table 1 Excerpts from respondent interviews about pertinently analysed aggregated themes (continued)

<i>Theme 5: Team performance and organisational effectiveness</i>
“Our team’s efficacy and production have doubled as a result of empowered leadership. We’ve been able to operate more productively and creatively since our management has given us the freedom to own our responsibilities and make decisions on our own. When granted the liberty to create and work together, it’s astounding how much more we can achieve. “Our team’s performance has skyrocketed since our manager took an empowering leadership approach. Knowing that our management appreciates our opinions and encourages our professional development makes us more driven and dedicated to our work. It is empowering to work in a setting where everyone is driven to achieve and support the success of the team.” “The productivity and effectiveness of our team have been directly impacted by our manager’s empowering leadership style. Our manager has built a high-performing team that generates outcomes regularly by encouraging a culture of trust, accountability, and cooperation. Working under a boss who encourages us to reach our goals and flourish is motivating.” Our team has grown more flexible, inventive, and resilient under the empowering direction of our leader. We have been able to overcome challenges and accomplish our goals because our management pushes us to question the status quo, take strategic risks, and learn from mistakes. Being employed in a place where people are inspired to achieve and feel supported is empowering.

Source: Author’s own compilation from participant interview

5.1 *Theme 1: Increased employee autonomy and empowerment*

According to Arnold et al. (2000), employees who have experienced empowered leadership have higher levels of autonomy and empowerment. A sense of ownership and control over one’s duties and outcomes are fostered by leaders who empower their followers by delegating authority, promoting autonomous decision-making, and offering opportunities for self-directed work (Spreitzer, 1995).

5.2 *Theme 2: Valuable effect on employee motivation*

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), EL has a beneficial impact on employee motivation by meeting the basic psychological requirements for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Employee engagement and intrinsic motivation are enhanced when leaders create a positive work atmosphere and offer opportunities for skill development (Ahearne et al., 2005).

5.3 *Theme 3: Promotion of adaptive problem-solving and innovation*

EL fosters the development of innovative and adaptive problem-solving techniques within organisations (Carmeli et al., 2006). Empowering followers promotes innovation and continuous improvement by rewarding risk-taking, experimentation, and creativity (Kark et al., 2003).

5.4 Theme 4: Enhanced job satisfaction and organisational commitment

According to Zhu et al. (2009), employees who experience empowerment in their leadership are more likely to exhibit high levels of commitment to their organisations and their jobs. A supportive and inclusive workplace is produced by leaders who empower their subordinates, engendering feelings of respect, value, and appreciation for their contributions (Blau, 1964).

5.5 Theme 5: Enhanced organisational effectiveness and team performance

According to Arnold et al. (2000), EL plays a significant role in enhancing both organisational effectiveness and team performance. Carmeli et al. (2006) posit that leaders who empower their followers promote cooperation, communication, and shared decision-making, which subsequently elevates output, efficiency, and performance standards. The final analysis indicates that EL fosters worker autonomy, motivation, and overall job satisfaction, all of which contribute to a company's enhanced effectiveness and competitiveness. Ultimately, EL results in employee autonomy, motivation, job satisfaction, and competitive customer experience.

6 Discussion

Thematic analysis surrounding this theme in cognitive processes and behavioural dynamics reveals several significant findings that contribute to expanding our understanding of how EL impacts organisational environments. First, the results underscore the critical importance of empowered leadership in fostering enhanced employee initiative and empowerment (Arnold et al., 2000; Spreitzer, 1995). Empowered leaders establish a supportive work culture where individuals are comfortable attempting novel approaches, and all members contribute to achieving the organisation's objectives. Deci and Ryan (2000) found that employees granted autonomy demonstrated increased motivation and engagement (feelings of controllability and ownership). Ahearne et al. (2005) and Zhu et al. (2009), in their study, noted that the effect of empowered leadership on job satisfaction and employee motivation was also highly positive. Sustained automatic thoughts assist employees in meeting their basic psychological needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence, thereby preventing emotional disengagement. According to Carmeli et al. (2006), this leads to higher organisational commitment and job satisfaction. Organisations with more innovative problem-solving adaptations also require support to encourage management leaders. This culture can promote unconventional thinking among employees and incentivise creativity, experimentation, and risk-taking by fostering a spirit of exploration with the support of empowering leaders. According to Kark et al. (2003), this improves organisational performance and simultaneously builds sustainability and long-term competitiveness. The findings also suggest that EL is associated with more effective teams and organisations. Developing leaders facilitate the creation of strong, efficient teams that collaborate, make decisions to achieve organisational aims, and embrace change by encouraging collaboration, communication, and cooperation. The outcome is determined, and this substantiates, in general, the necessity for strong leadership and governance to foster positive organisational outcomes. It facilitates the creation of an environment that enables

employee autonomy and motivation, encourages employee innovation, and supports individual and corporate successes.

7 Practical implication

There are several practical implications for organisational leaders and practitioners derived from the thematic analysis of empowered leadership in cognitive processes and behavioural dynamics. One practical implication is the significance of training leadership behaviours in empowering organisations. Empowering leaders can facilitate supporting intrinsic motivation, engagement, and innovation from employees in the workplace, which leads to higher autonomy (self-governed), relatedness (sense of belonging), and competence (having the capacity to perform the job) (Ahearne et al., 2005). Consequently, this can increase job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and overall well-being of the staff (Zhu et al., 2009). Another implication points to the necessity for programs that promote leadership in development, emphasising EL abilities. Arnold et al. (2000), also stated that organisations can provide opportunities for the training and development of leaders in order for them to enhance their coaching, delegation, and feedback skills. Organisations create an environment that enables leaders to develop inclusive and supportive work cultures conducive to employee learning by building a pool of essential skills and competencies. Additionally, businesses that establish processes and policies enabling more autonomy and empowerment among their workers will benefit. Some examples include flexible work hours, participative decision-making processes, and opportunities for advancement in jobs and skill levels (Carmeli et al., 2006). Providing employees with more autonomy over their jobs and growth opportunities gives organisations higher employee performance results, satisfaction, and motivation.

Conversely, organisations can foster a culture of empowerment by acknowledging and rewarding positive and EL behaviours. Organisations should acknowledge and incentivise core leaders, who consistently prioritise employee empowerment, as these managers are crucial in driving their overall success. In addition to encouraging more engagement and empowerment from both executives and employees, this will help to establish the desired behaviours and initiate a virtuous cycle of energy. EL can have practical effects that depend on the extent to which individuals feel valued, respected, and free to contribute their best at work. EL behaviours can enhance employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organisational effectiveness.

8 Future directions

Potential future studies may encompass cultural variations in specific EL behaviours. According to Hofstede (1980), the efficacy and acknowledgement of EL practices are influenced by cultural values and norms, suggesting a need for culturally appropriate leadership development. Longitudinal research can be conducted to assess the long-term effects of empowered leadership on outcomes such as performance, innovation, and staff retention. Spreitzer et al. (2012) measuring change over time enables researchers to better understand the potential long-term effects of EL practices. Future research should

investigate how EL approaches translate into virtual settings as technology-mediated communication and remote work increase. Effective collaboration and productivity in the digital age can only be achieved through leaders who can source and engage remote workers (Martins and Terblanche, 2003). Future work should also examine the boundaries of and the factors that determine success or failure in EL. According to Walumbwa et al. (2010), empowering actions have varying effects on employee outcomes as a function of the extent to which they intersect with other contingencies, such as organisational culture, leadership styles, and follower characteristics, creating interventions and training programs that facilitate EL behaviours among leaders in organisations into practice. According to Avolio et al. (2009), organisations may foster a culture of engagement, innovation, and performance by providing leaders with the skills and tools to empower individuals. EL research should continue to explore when and how the concept applies across different contexts, build upon our understanding of its inherent motivational potentials, and develop actionable strategies for fostering EL in organisations.

9 Limitations

Building upon this work, future research may utilise longitudinal designs to better understand how the long-term effects and temporal dynamics of EL behaviours unfold (Avolio et al., 2009). Reliance on self-reported measures of EL and employee outcomes may introduce common method bias and social desirability effects. This could result in biased findings and highly subjective ratings, which could be mitigated if future authors incorporated multi-source data collection methods, including objective behaviour and supervisor ratings (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Findings on EL are less generalisable to other cultural and organisational contexts because most studies have been conducted in Western contexts, primarily North American ones. According to Hofstede (1980), future studies should consider cultural differences in leadership styles and workers' reactions to empowering actions. Research has focused less on the boundary conditions and moderators that may affect these interactions, even though EL has been demonstrated to negatively impact employee outcomes. According to Walumbwa et al. (2010), further research might examine factors including follower characteristics, organisational culture, and leadership philosophies that mitigate the consequences of EL. EL constructs are conceptualised and operationalised differently in various studies, which results in inconsistent findings and impedes cross-study comparisons. Future studies might consider developing more explicit theoretical frameworks and standardised measures of EL to consolidate efforts in defining and measuring the construct (Arnold et al., 2000). These constraints will subsequently influence the behavioural dynamics and cognitive processes that organisations can address using EL.

10 Conclusions

EL influences employees' cognitive processes and behaviour and is an effective approach in contemporary business environments. Thematic analysis enabled a focus on the unique characteristics of the impact of EL on employee autonomy, motivation, job satisfaction, and, subsequently, organisational effectiveness. Leadership, akin to all relationships

between human beings, should be empowered to gain the benefits of competence, autonomy, and purpose (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Blau, 1964). EL is grounded in identity and social exchange theories. By conferring employees with the authority to make decisions and contribute their skills, employees assume responsibility for their work and engage in activities that benefit the organisation (Arnold et al., 2000; Spreitzer, 1995). Empowering leaders accomplish this, according to Ahearne et al. (2005). According to the analysis results, EL affects workers' satisfaction and motivation, according to Zhu et al. (2009). Empowered leaders can ensure that the workplace atmosphere is highly supportive of the efforts of their staff members, stating that they are valued and receive all due respect (Rai et al., 2024). Empowerment and leadership strengthen teamwork, organisational effectiveness, and stronger leaders. It is not surprising that cooperation, communication, and shared decision-making predict team reliance on charismatic leaders to achieve organisational goals. Finally, organisations think and act according to the type of leadership provided. Leaders who empower develop a culture that supports the success of the individual and the organisation by providing autonomy, inspiration, and meaning to their personnel.

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