

# THE IMPACT OF EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP ON WORK PERFORMANCE AND WORK FAMILY CONFLICT: THE ROLE OF GENDER

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## Abstract

Several previous studies have investigated the influence of empowering leadership on employee outcomes. However, research on investigating the potential negative consequences of empowering leadership has been neglected. In order to achieve a better understanding of these complicated relationships, this study predicts relationship between empowering leadership and work-family conflict in combination with other important factors that affect this relationship. Work engagement is examined as a mediator of the empowering leadership and work-family conflict. Gender is examined as moderator of work engagement and work family conflict.

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**Keywords:** Empowering leadership, work Engagement, Gender, Work-life conflict

## Introduction

Few studies have examined the link between particular theory of leadership and non-work criteria. Due to inevitable link between an employee's work and family life (Frone, 2003), it is indispensable for leadership research to move beyond traditional organizational outcome-based studies into research that examines leadership's effect on non-work variables. Distinctively omitted from research attention has been empowering leadership, few studies have linked empowering leadership to non-work outcomes. This article argues that empowering leadership, which is proven to have many positive *job* outcomes (Bass, 1998; Den Hartog & Koopman, 2002), may have a contrary effect on work family conflict. Empowered employees take surplus and increased level of work responsibilities and feel more committed to their tasks and organization. Because time and energy are limited resources, this additional obligation comes at a cost of non-work related responsibilities.

Social developments have deepened the demand for organizations to concentrate on an employee's personal life. Leaders are the key representatives of organizations that allow for adaptable adjustments, assisting in employees' abilities to handle with work and family demands, nevertheless this link has not comprehensively been investigated in the Organizational Behavior literature (Harrison, Jones, & Cleveland, 2007; Youngcourt, Huffman, & Alden-Anderson, 2008).

Thus, this paper investigates the work and non-work subtleties of empowering leadership. It is proposed that behaviors explained by empowering leadership theory create confronting expectations for work and family. This study contributes both the empowering leadership and work-family conflict literatures by investigating mediating role of work engagement and moderating role of gender on work and non-work outcomes.

## **Literature review and propositions**

### **Empowerment leadership**

For decades researchers and practitioners have been interested in the role of management on employee performance, satisfaction, and commitment. Research suggesting and empirically supporting the fact that the relationship between supervisors and subordinates is one of the most important determinants of subordinate's behaviors and attitudes and subsequent individual, group, and organizational outcomes is plentiful. Therefore, it is important to understand the variables that impact effective leadership. The leadership literature has gone through several paradigm shifts. Early research sought to isolate universal traits that distinguished successful leaders from their unsuccessful counterparts (Stogdill, 1948). Studies conducted during this period indicate that the personal traits of leaders only explain a small amount of the variance in desired outcomes (Bass, 1990). During the 1950s, the trait paradigm fell out of favor and was replaced by a focus on leader behaviors (Kahn & Katz, 1966; Stogdill & Coons, 1951). Research from this area provided some significant findings and indicated that situational variables should be considered in conjunction with the leader's traits and behaviors. The consideration of situations, followers, and/or combinations of these, resulted in several contingency theories of leadership (Bass, 1990; Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1974; House, 1971). The 1970s saw a decline in leadership research as several studies found that leadership only explained a slight amount of variance in performance. Some authors even proposed abandoning the field (Brown, 1982; Pfeffer, 1977). Additional research indicated that methodological flaws had suppressed leadership's influence on performance. When these methodological issues were addressed, leadership research was found to explain up to 50% of the variance in organizational performance (Thomas,

1988). The renewed interest in leadership research was accompanied by a shift from broad encompassing models to focusing on the effects of leaders on their followers and their relationships. For instance, charismatic leadership emphasizes the ability of a leader to achieve high levels of follower commitment and performance by utilizing symbolic and emotional appeal (House & Aditya, 1997). Empowering leadership theory was introduced as an alternative approach to examining a leader's influence on individual subordinate effectiveness. Empowering leadership is important because its main focus is highlighting the significance of the work, providing participation in decision making, conveying confidence that performance will be high, and removing bureaucratic constraints. Empowerment was first defined as an aspect of the relational or power sharing view (Burke, 1986; Burpitt & Bigoness, 1997; Spreitzer & Doneson, in press). The several academic origins of this view of empowering leadership include the Ohio State leadership studies (Fleishman, 1953) on "consideration" (for example, expressing concern for subordinates' needs); work on supportive leadership (Bowers & Seashore, 1966); participative leadership studies (Locke & Schweiger, 1979; Vroom & Yetton, 1973); and the coaching, participating, and delegating behaviors contained in situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). Conger and Kanungo (1988) state that empowerment regarded as "sharing power" is not complete and that a thorough conceptualization must also entail the motivational effect of empowerment on subordinates. Empowered employees have capacities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments' (Bandura 1997, p. 3). Research shows that highly empowered employees are highly committed to the activities they carry out and invest more time and effort in their daily activities (Bandura, 2001). I propose that empowering leadership will influence employee work performance by enhancing work engagement. Thus, the higher empowering leadership leads the higher work engagement and, consequently, the higher performance.

### **Employee work engagement**

The concept of engagement was first introduced by Kahn (1990). He defined engagement as the "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). Therefore, engaged employees, as they identify themselves with their jobs, put a great deal of effort into it. As argued by Kahn (1990, 1992), a dynamic, dialectical relationship exists between the work role that lets the person express him or herself on one hand, and the person who drives personal energies (cognitive, physical, emotional, and mental) into his or her work role, on the other. Fascinatingly, it is investigation about burnout that has

inspired most current investigation on work engagement (Bakker et al. 2008a). Engaged employees unlike those who suffer from burnout, have a sense of effective and energetic link with their work, and they view their work as challenging, as against stressful and demanding. Two dissimilar but linked schools of thought exist that regard work engagement as a positive, state of fulfillment or well-being related to work. As argued by Maslach & Leiter (1997), energy, involvement, and efficacy, the direct opposites of the three burnout dimensions are among the main features of engagement. According to the scholars, with regard to burnout, energy becomes exhaustion, efficacy as ineffectiveness, and involvement as cynicism. The other perspective regards work engagement as a distinct independent concept which bears a negative relationship with burnout. Therefore, work engagement is conceptualized and operationalized in its own right as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli et al. 2002, p. 74). This implies that, in the case of engagement, fulfillment exists contrary to the voids of life that leave people feeling hollow as in burnout. The characteristics of vigor involves mental resilience and high levels of energy while working involves persistence even in the face of difficulties and the will to put effort in one’s work. On the other hand, by dedication we mean being powerfully involved in one’s work and experiencing a sense of challenge, enthusiasm, and significance.

Previous researches of engagement have mainly considered on categorizing its determinants. These researches indicate that engagement is often a result of positive characters, interesting work, or inspiring leadership. Additionally, the few studies in which researchers have studied the consequences of engagement have discovered that it is linked with higher performance (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) and lower intention to quit (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The engagement literature appears to recommend that engagement is a good element from the perspective of both employees and employers altogether, and therefore; the existing research seems to support this opinion. Similarly, Macey and Schneider (2008) recently noticed that “there are limits on the group of energy and resources available to employees” and that “sustained levels of engagement will be hard to achieve” (p. 25). Employees who consume their full potential at work, possibly they go back home with less energy and resources. In other words, engagement might contribute to work family conflict. The purpose of this study is to examine the possibility that engagement could have negative implications for employees with respect to work family conflict.

### Work family conflict

According to Kahn et al. (1964), work family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict wherein work and family, which are somewhat incompatible, put stress on the role. This means that taking part in the work (family) role seems to become more difficult due to taking part in the family (work) role. Studying the terminology offers three main forms of work-family conflict: (a) time-based conflict (i.e., “a consequence of competition for an individual’s time from multiple role demands”), (b) strain-based conflict (i.e., “when role stressors in one domain persuade physical or psychological strain in the individual, hindering fulfillment of role expectations in the other domain”), and (c) behavior-based conflict(i.e., “when patterns of behavior appropriate to each domain are incompatible, and necessary adjustments are not made by the person,” Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 76; see also Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000; Stephens & Sommer, 1996).

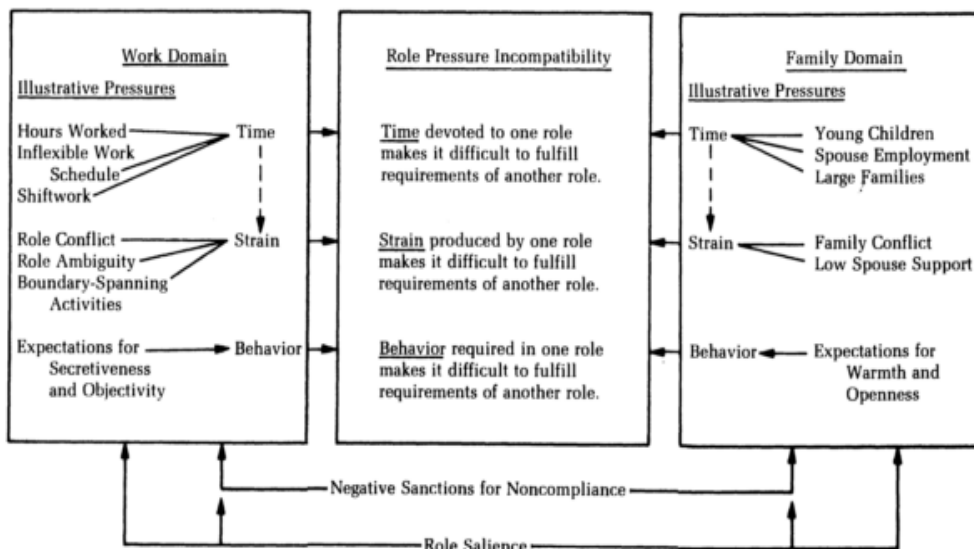


Figure 1 - Work-Family Role Pressure Incompatibility (Adopted from Jeffrey greenhouse)

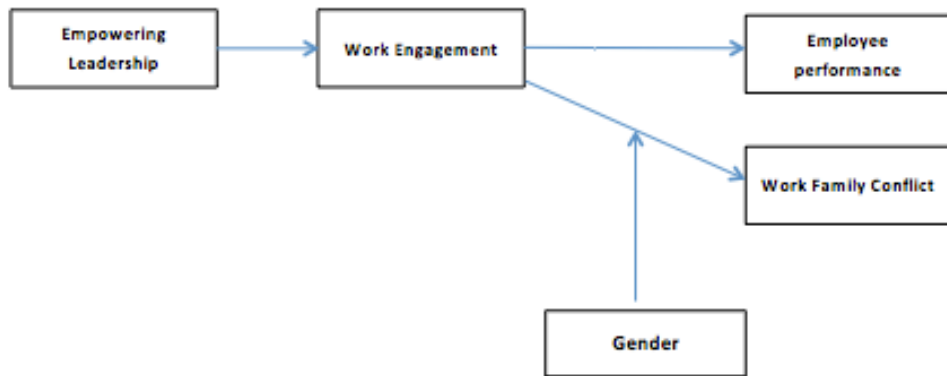
The notions of work and family are of enduring attention in social science literature. In the 1970s, organizational scholars, sociologists, and other researchers began to discover the relationship between workers’ personal life and work. The growth in the attention of work and family as a modern social problem developed because of the huge influx of female workers into the labor force (Edwards, 2001). Seminal works by Kanter (1977) and Katz and Kahn (1978) proven that events in the work environment can affect the events in the off-work environment. The implied idea is that work and family are detached yet attached area of research, as the

effect of one field has an influence on the other field. These two studies established the basis for over three decades of research that has studied and continues to study the interactions between an employee's work, personal, and family life.

Even before the huge influx of female workers entrance in to labor force, Kahn et al. (1964) set the primary foundation for the research of work-family conflict. Khan et al. (1964) argued that work-family conflict is considered as a result of strain linked with managing various work and family obligations. Their study was one of the original research to investigate the notion of role theory as it relates to role strain. Role theory states that an individual may have manifold roles according to the customs, principles, preferences, and prospects of the society to which the individual belongs (Biddle, 1986). Role strain results when an individual posses multiple roles that later conflict with one another (Frone, Russell, et al., 1997; Hammer, Allen, & Grigsby, 1997). These initial theoretical viewpoints established the seminal for defining work-family conflict.

Some social scientists claim that people have limited time, energy, and resources (Coser, 1974; Goode, 1960; Slater, 1963). Involvement in multiple roles needs significant time and energy. Therefore, individuals engaged in various roles may diminish their resources causing in role conflict (Byron, 2005; Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) which may result to the involvement of stress or strain (Casper, Martin, Buffardi, & Erdwins, 2002). Moreover, multiple role duties may result in faced conflict between job role responsibilities and family role responsibilities. The challenge to fulfill these contending role demands may lead to the experiences of work-family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Kahn et al.'s (1964) did additional research on work-family conflict distinguishing between three types of work-family role conflict. Their research suggests that work-family role conflict may result when multiple duties compete due to: 1) time-related matters, 2) strain between expectations at work and at home, and 3) struggles between different role behaviors. Time-based work-family conflict is experienced when time required to fulfill one role makes it difficult to carry out other role responsibilities (Burke et al., 1980; Judge, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1994; Greenhaus & Beutell; Keith & Schafer, 1984; Voydanoff, 2004). It is expected that work engagement to be associated with these three types of work family conflict.



**Figure 2 - Conceptual model**

Many studies have pointed out the value of leader behaviors for employee performance (e.g., Druskat & Wheeler, 2003; Durham, Knight, & Locke, 1997; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). Among the various leader behaviors that have been examined, empowering leader behaviors have observed substantial consideration, as in line with the tendency towards providing higher autonomy to employees (Bennis & Townsend, 1997).

Empowering leaders transfer authority to employees, engage employees in decision making, share authority with employees, encourage self-management of work, and deliver confidence in employees' ability to confront challenging work (Ahearne et al., 2005). Therefore, it is argued that these leadership behaviors can assist employees get a sense of capability and self-sufficiency, therefore, increasing intrinsic motivation and consequently work performance. Additionally, current theoretical development of performance (Parker et al., 2006) proposes role breadth self-efficacy (i.e., self-perceived capability to perform a range of proactive, interpersonal, and integrative activities that extend beyond prescribed tasks) as a key driver of proactive work performance and as stimulated by work environment factors such as autonomy and supportive supervision. Consequently, empowering leadership, which offers employees autonomy and support for pursuing unstructured tasks, should enhance employees' role extensiveness, additional proactiveness and performance.

Contrastingly, leaders as essential elements of the work setting can affect how individuals make sense of their work. Kahn (1990), Macey and Schneider (2008) argued that when empowering leaders transfer authority to employees, engage employees in decision making, distribute power with employees, motivate self-management of work, and entrust in employees' ability to face challenging job (Ahearne et al., 2005). Leaders will have positive effects on employee engagement by offering a sense of attachment to work. Empowering leadership actions positively impact employees'

affective commitment and employee engagement because the behaviors result employees to sense more personally accountable and affectively engaged with work.

On the other hand, Work engagement is focuses on work performed at a job and represents the inclination to devote physical, cognitive, and emotional resources to this work. As Kahn (1990) advocated, an engaged individual is one who approaches the job with a sense of self-investment, vigor, and passion, which should convert into higher levels performance. As a motivational perception, engagement should relate to the intensity with which individuals pursue their performance (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Burke, 2008; Kanfer, 1990; Rich et al., 2010). Engaged employees will be more attentive and more absorbed on their work.

Based on the above theoretical analysis and empirical evidence, it is expected that empowering leadership will be positively related to work engagement, which, in turn, will be related to work performance.

*Proposition1: Empowering leadership will be positively related to employee performance*

*Proposition2: Empowering leadership will be positively related to work engagement.*

*Proposition3: Work engagement will be positively related to employee work performance.*

Some studies have examined the outcomes of engagement is associated with higher performance (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). However increased work engagement may also lead to dark side of performance and may also lead to work family conflict. According to Macey and Schneider (2008), high levels of work engagement are characterized by absorption in work such that individuals are excited about their job, committed to the work role, and very concerned with their work. As a result, employees who are highly engaged will have fewer resources available to use in other realms.

According to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) work family conflict is a “form of inter role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (p. 77). They further delineated three types of work family conflict: time based, strain based, and behavior based conflict which mentioned above. I expect work engagement to be associated with these three types of work interference with family.

In other words, as employees devote more of their psychological attention and energy to investments in the workplace, this is likely to reduce the psychological resources available to address the obligations associated with their family role (Eckenrode & Gore, 1990; Small & Riley, 1990).



Based on the above theoretical analysis and empirical evidence, it is expected that Work engagement is positively related to work family conflict.

*Proposition 4: Work engagement is positively related to work family conflict.*

Past studies showed that gender often impacts the amount to which individuals participate in their work and family roles (Pleck, 1977). Gutek et al (1991) found that women tend to focus on their family roles to a higher level than do men. Additionally, comparative to men, women are still more likely to have the main duty to balance family commitments with their duties to their employer (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 1993). Furthermore, Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh, and Reilly (1995) suggest that men are able to manage work and family more simply than women. Role theory indicates that when individuals allocate more importance to a certain role, they are likely to feel inter role conflict when other obligations interfere with their ability to accomplish the requirements of their most important role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kahn et al., 1964). Because women are inclined to highlight their family roles to a higher level than men do and have more inconvenience balancing work and family obligations, it is proposed that gender will moderate the relationship between work engagement and work–family conflict. Particularly, it is expected that the relationship between work engagement and work–family conflict will be stronger among women than men. So we can formulate the following proposition:

*Proposition 5: Gender moderates the relationship between work engagement and work family conflict, in a way that, the positive relationship between engagement and work–family conflict will be stronger for women than for men.*

## **Conclusion**

Empowering leadership offers both positive and negative outcomes towards work performance and work family conflict. This study takes the stride to contribute to both theory and practice by bringing conceptual model including empowering leadership as a cause, work engagement as a content and work performance as a positive outcome while work family conflict as a negative outcome. Additionally, moderating role of gender between work engagement and work family conflict is also applied.

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