A Review of Leadership Empowerment and Employee Creativity: Based on the Chinese Enterprises Context

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Abstract: Based on the literature on the relationship between leadership empowerment (LE) and employee creativity (EC) in Chinese enterprises context, this article uses literature review method to explore the current situation of this issue in China. On the basis of comparative analysis of relevant literature, this article sorts out the definition of LE and EC by different scholars and the use of relevant scales. It also discusses the current situation of LE and EC in China, the problems encountered and the future prospects.

Keywords: Leadership Empowerment; Employee Creativity; Chinese Enterprises; Measurement Scales

1. Introduction

With the impetus of the revolution of science and technology, China has gradually entered the society of information and standardization. Facing the rapid technological change and the social background of “Internet plus”, more and more organizations in China need further transformation, and proposed that employee creativity is one of the important factors in the development of organizational innovation. Leadership style is a very important factor regarding how to achieve organizational innovation.

With the development of empowerment leadership theory in China, more and more enterprises have noticed the benefits of empowerment to organizational development. A large number of studies have proved that different leadership styles or behaviors have some influence on the development of employee creativity, among which transformational leadership and empowering leadership are the most studied.

On the basis of the mature research on LE behavior or authorized leadership, in recent years, China has gradually launched a discussion on the relationship between LE behavior and EC. Li and Cao (Li Zhengwei, Cao Yating, 2019)[1] analyzed the influence of LE behavior on EC through pairing samples of leaders and employees from individual and situational factors. Feng & Guo (2011) discussed the mechanism of the role of LE on EC. Li and Mei (Li Wei, Mei Jixia 2018)[2] took the innovation behavior of employees as the starting point, and use the multivariate regression statistical analysis method to explore the influence path and conditions of LE behavior on EC. Although the research on LE behavior and EC in Chinese enterprise environment has been achieved in a few decades, we can still see the shortcomings and gaps in the current research.
2. Literature review

2.1 Leadership Empowerment (LE)

This study found clues about the definition of LE behavior in the existing literature. Empowerment behavior has always been a hot topic in leadership theory research. It mainly refers to a series of behaviors that leaders delegate to employees, and supports and encourages subordinates to carry out self-management, so as to improve employees’ sense of empowerment. This definition was put forward by Li Wei and others on the basis of the research of Lee & Wei (2011). It is also directly quoted from western studies that LE refers to empowering employees, clarifying work meaning, participating in decision-making and giving trust (Li, Cao and Wang, 2019). This concept directly refers to the definition of LE by Ahearne (2005).

Some scholars have also made a special interpretation of “empowerment”, and believe that empowerment should be divided into situational empowerment and psychological empowerment. The former is discussed from the perspective of leadership, while the latter is the psychological perception of empowerment of employees (Li Xiaoyan, 2019)[3]. Li (2019) also directly refers to the concept of Srivastava et al. (2006) in which leaders delegate power to improve employees’ sense of self-control. Ji (Ji Wei 2016)[4] also explored the impact of empowering leadership on employee creativity on the basis of situational empowerment and psychological empowerment.

Some scholars have studied from the structural and Psychological Perspectives (Spreitzer & Doneson, 2005). The former focuses on leadership behavior, while the latter focuses on employees’ psychological perception of empowerment. The two are based on different theoretical basis. LE from the perspective of structure is based on the theory of social rights, focusing on the transfer of power and responsibility from management to subordinates. From the perspective of psychological empowerment, its representatives are mainly western researchers (Chen Fei, 2015)[5]. It usually includes four dimensions: work meaning, ability, self-determination and influence. Based on the western theoretical research, domestic researchers based on this, also have related discussion, but the number is not much.

In addition, some scholars have also defined it from the perspective of leadership style. The essence of empowering leadership is to empower employees, ensure that employees have no direct supervision and interference in making decisions and implementing plans, and encourage autonomous behavior, opportunity thinking, teamwork, self-development, participation in goal setting and self-reward (Feng & Guo, 2011). This idea is also proposed on the basis of the research results of Bass, B.M. (1985) abroad and Wang et al. (2009) in China.

Geng (2011) spent a lot of space on the literature review of LE behavior. When talking about its concept, he almost quoted the concepts of western scholars. The perspective of empowerment behavior is also the psychological perspective and situational empowerment of previous research.

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that in the research of the concept of LE behavior, further efforts are needed to realize the localization of LE theory in China. Therefore, the study is still in the stage of theoretical reference, which means that LE behavior has been developing for many years in mainland China, but slowly.

2.2 Employees’ Creativity (EC)

The research on the definition of EC at home and abroad is fruitful. Domestic research is mainly based on foreign research theory. EC is the result of interdisciplinary research. Before studying EC, most scholars defined it based on the classic theory of creativity.

Zhao and Li (2004) believe that creativity is a kind of creative skill that uses accumulated knowledge and experience to solve problems, produce new ideas and make new achievements in creative activities. He (2008) states creativity refers to the ability of individuals with different personality traits to solve problems by putting forward novel, unique and valuable things based on existing knowledge and information and cooperating with the surrounding environment. Zhuo & Sun (2012) defined creativity as a new research field in organizational behavior. Creativity can be both a result and a process. Creativity as a process means that in order to get creative results, individuals need to participate in a specific process to make them more creative. As a process, creativity includes continuous problem dis-
covery, problem-solving and implementation of new solutions. Qin and Chen (Qin Liping, Chen Dongmei 2017)\cite{6} believe that creativity refers to the ability of an individual or a group of people working together to produce novel and useful ideas. In essence, creativity is the ability to generate new things and new ideas. Ma (Ma Huasu 2016)\cite{7} discusses the basis of creativity is ideas or ideas, that is, thinking about problems; the core of creativity is novelty or usefulness, that is, better understanding or solving problems can be achieved through comparison or verification. Creativity is a dynamic process, including not only the cognitive characteristics of input processing output, but also the interaction between individuals and environment.

Sternberg and Lubart (1991) defined EC as the ability to create both novel and applicable products. Oldham and Cummings (1996) believe that employee creativity is the process in which employees produce novel, original or important and useful products, ideas or processes. Leonard and Swap (1999) believe that employee creativity is the process in which employees develop and express new ideas that may be useful. According to the current domestic research situation, the main influencing factors of employee creativity are personality characteristics, cognitive style, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, creative role identification, and work characteristics (Jiang & Zhao 2010); self-efficacy, challenging stressors, and team innovation atmosphere (Guo, 2010), intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, cognitive style, personality characteristics, work complexity, work pressure, atmosphere, organizational culture. (Tang Chaoying, Kao Jiaxin, 2018)\cite{8}.

3. Scales

3.1 LE scales

At present, when studying the relationship between LE and EC in mainland China, the commonly used scales are as following: (1) twelve items developed by Ahearne were divided into four scales: meaning, participation, confidence and autonomy; (2) amundsen developed the empowerment leadership scale, which includes three dimensions: empowering, empowering employees, and encouraging employees to improve their abilities; (3) the leadership empowerment questionnaire (LEBQ) developed by Konczak et al. (2000) was used to measure subordinates’ perception of LE behavior. The scale consists of 17 items with six components: empowerment, accountability, autonomous decision-making, information sharing, skill development and innovation performance coaching; (4) pearce scale verified the encouragement and reward, the independent executive ability of employees, the encouragement of mutual cooperation, the participation in decision-making, the affirmation of opportunities and the encouragement of self-development; (5) stelly proposed six dimensions of LE Scale: empowerment, responsibility, independent decision-making, information sharing, innovation ability improvement and skills development; (6) twelve measurement items developed by Spreitzer, which included four dimensions of work meaning, competence, self-determination and influence.

3.2 Creativity scale

The research results of creativity are relatively rich. At present, the academic circles mainly use the following scales about creativity, with a total of 13 items developed by Zhou and George (2001). The scale developed by Scott & Bruce (1994) is suitable for employees’ self-evaluation. The three items in the scale are selected from the research of Scott & Bruce (1994). The scale is more applied to the supervisor’s evaluation of employee’s innovative behavior. Janssen (2002) scale of 9 items: referring to the viewpoints of Ranter (1988) and Kanter (1988), it is believed that the innovation behavior consists of three stages: the generation of ideas, the promotion of ideas, and the realization of ideas. the research scholars represented by Wang (2006) introduced the concept of LE behavior into China, and began to discuss its scale and relationship research.

4. Conclusion

At present, the research on LE and EC in China’s enterprise environment is based on foreign classic theories, both in definition and scale. In the study of the relationship between LE and EC, the commonly used theories are: social
identity theory, motivation theory, cognitive evaluation theory, social network theory, self-efficacy theory, social exchange theory, leadership two factor theories, social cognition theory, self-management theory, incentive theory. Although this field has developed in China for more than ten years, the process of its Sinicization is still slow. It is rare to study the achievements of the two fields in combination with China’s specific situation, which is also worthy of our future efforts. To sum up, the current and future research direction of LE and EC in China should be carried out in combination with China’s specific situation, so as to produce more theories that can adapt to the organizational culture of Chinese enterprises, so as to promote the breakthrough in the research of leadership empowerment and employee creativity in China’s enterprise environment.

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