

Impact of Decision-Making Empowerment on Attributions of Leadership

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Although empowerment often makes a team more effective, managers do not use this tool extensively. One explanation for this is that managers fear that individuals will draw negative conclusions about their leadership abilities if they use an inappropriate degree of decision-making empowerment (DME). The current research explored this hypothesis, using scenarios to manipulate DME, organizational setting, manager gender, and task outcome. Officer cadets ($N = 173$) judged appropriateness of the manager's use of empowerment; degree of leadership shown; and willingness to work for the manager. Cadets saw high DME as significantly more appropriate than low, resulting in significantly higher leadership attributions and a greater willingness to work for the manager. Findings held regardless of context or gender. Task outcome also affected attributions.

As work environments have become increasingly complex and volatile, organizational scholars have suggested that firms can reap a competitive advantage by harnessing the cognitive skills and intellectual capacities of employees at all levels in the company. Managers and supervisors have also begun to recognize that successful organizational performance requires that contemporary employees function much more like managers and supervisors themselves, demonstrating problem solving and initiative far beyond job requirements of past eras (e.g.,

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Campbell, 2000). Consequently, numerous work initiatives, such as participation, empowerment, autonomous work groups, and teams, have received attention as potential tools for creating organizational cultures facilitative of employee engagement.

Researchers and theorists have generally regarded these initiatives positively. In principle, the increased employee participation implied by the various undertakings potentially benefits the organization through greater commitment and motivation, more effective decision making, enhanced product quality, and higher productivity (Yukl, 1994). Pragmatically, however, these participative/empowerment approaches have been complicated to implement (Daft, 2005) and have been hard to test (Northouse, 2004). This has resulted in supporting evidence that is weak or inconsistent (Yukl) and has led researchers to focus both on the general contingencies that determine whether empowerment is likely to result in organizational improvement and on determining the appropriate degree of empowerment for specific work environments.

The contingencies restraining the effectiveness of empowerment commonly revolve around potential limitations or problems with subordinate employees. For instance, if the knowledge level of employees is low, or if organizational norms do not support subordinate involvement, empowerment makes little sense. Similarly, work group goals and task characteristics are also factors that managers need to consider. It makes little sense to empower employees if their informal goals conflict with the organization's objectives or if the tasks involved inherently have little discretion or decision latitude. These conclusions are directly in line with earlier research on situational approaches to leadership (e.g., Fiedler, 1971; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; House, 1971, 1996; Vroom & Jago, 1978; Vroom & Yetton, 1973).

However, in addition to these subordinate-centered constraints limiting the usefulness of empowerment approaches, another constraint potentially exists that is leader centered. This constraint revolves around the attributional and reputational implications of endorsing subordinate empowerment for the manager. Specifically, if leadership is conceptualized within an attributional framework (Calder, 1977; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Pfeffer, 1977; see also Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas [2007] for a related but complementary stance) or from a political perspective (Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwarter, & Ferris, 2002), empowering subordinates has potentially serious reputational implications for managers that go beyond whatever team or unit performance reservations they may have about empowerment.

Attributional approaches to leadership argue that leadership is an inferred disposition or internal quality based on commonly held prototypes (e.g., Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Because individuals can have no direct knowledge of others' internal qualities, any conclusions they draw about another person's leadership abilities necessarily reflect judgmental

inferences based on observed behavior. Further, behaviors accepted as evidence of leadership ability can vary dramatically across different groups, with individuals inferring its presence or absence from potentially minor actions (Calder, 1977). Similarly, attributions have a central role in some implicit leadership theories where the perceiver's schemas guide the perception of leadership as much as the target's actual behavior (e.g., Meindl et al., 1985). Nonetheless, though it is difficult to specify the precise nature of the behavioral qualities that trigger schemas or result in leadership attributions, all groups develop expectations associating some specific behaviors with perceived leadership, and it is highly likely that an individual's use (or nonuse) of subordinate empowerment is a behavior that others would use to draw inferences about the individual's leadership abilities and probable effectiveness as a leader.

Along related lines, Heilman, Hornstein, Cage, and Herschlag (1984) have argued that managers typically realize that an important aspect of leadership success is how others in the organization view them. Though managers may not be familiar with the tenets of attributional theory, they are concerned with how people view their leadership and are sensitive to the reputational consequences their decisions may have. Empowering subordinates implicitly holds important consequences for how others may perceive the manager's leadership and for how they will interpret the manager's future behavior. As Heilman et al. have suggested, observer inferences have self-fulfilling prophecy consequences for the manager's future effectiveness. That is, if colleagues have already drawn negative conclusions about a manager's leadership ability (e.g., because the individual violated empowerment expectations), then new influence attempts by this person are less likely to be taken seriously and succeed. Similarly, if a manager's empowerment actions conformed to colleagues' expectations and resulted in inferences of high leadership ability, such inferences would enhance the manager's future influence attempts and make successful outcomes more likely.

Viewing leadership from a political perspective (Ammeter et al., 2002; Blass & Ferris, 2007) leads to similar conclusions regarding the potential reputational consequences of empowering subordinates. This framework argues that organizations are political settings centrally concerned with the exchange and regulation of influence and power. Consequently, leadership in this setting revolves around the constructive management of shared meeting, and empowering subordinates (both as an influence attempt and as a method for trying to enact a shared meaning with an important constituency) would certainly impact the manager's accrued reputation as a leader. Because the political model of leadership is complex and involves interactions among context, leader antecedents, target antecedents, political behaviors, and target outcomes (see Ammeter et al.), the model cannot predict in advance whether subordinate empowerment will have a positive or negative impact on a leader's reputation. Nonetheless, the model makes clear that such power sharing will unquestionably have reputational consequences.

The argument this article proposes is that, if managers believe that important reputational consequences are associated with the shared decision making implied by empowerment, they may take these consequences into account in determining whether empowerment is useful. As the political perspective implies, and as Daft (2005) has observed, empowerment programs upset organizational hierarchies and disturb conventional power relationships. Further, the empowerment initiatives most successfully diffused (i.e., quality circles and job enrichment) are also the ones that redistribute power and authority the least (Daft), suggesting that managers prefer to keep decision authority to themselves. Though some organizational situations justify this reluctance, many others do not. Given that most managers realize that empowering subordinates can often make a team more effective and productive, their reluctance to employ this tool more frequently and more extensively appears self-defeating. However, managerial reservations about empowerment (specifically decision-making empowerment, or DME) become more understandable within the context of potential reputational and attributional concerns. From the manager's perspective, to be attractive DME must involve both the likelihood of positive team or unit outcomes *and* the likelihood that others will not perceive DME as a lack of leadership ability or a reflection of ineffective leadership.

Managerial concerns about reputational consequences are not ill-founded. Ample research has suggested that how managers make decisions (e.g., Puffer, 1990) and the degree to which they allow subordinate involvement (e.g., Campbell, Bommer, & Yeo, 1993; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Heilman et al., 1984) influence attributions made about them, including their leadership ability. Other studies have shown that a manager's favorable reputation results in attributions of higher competence, trustworthiness, and effectiveness (e.g., Bromley, 1993; Hall, Blass, Ferris, & Messengale, 2004; Tsui, 1984), whereas a negative reputation can result in attributions of generalized (and objectively unfounded) poor performance that persist in spite of disconfirming actual performance (e.g., McNatt, 2010). Thus, from a managerial perspective, reputation is practically important. Preserving a positive reputation and avoiding actions that might diminish it certainly make sense. But, currently, it is not clear that empowering subordinates would, in fact, result in reputational damage or, if it did, whether contextual factors exist that exacerbate or minimize such damage. These issues are the focus of the present study. They are important not only from a theoretical perspective but also from a practical one: they may help clarify why managers are reluctant to use such a valuable managerial tool as empowerment. In the following section we examine literature specifically focused on empowering subordinates and leadership attributions, as well as literature focused on several contextual factors that appear likely to impact such attributions and expectations.

DECISION-MAKING EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTIONS

Although *empowerment* can be conceptualized quite broadly as a multilevel construct (e.g., Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, & Rosen, 2007; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Mathieu, Gilson, & Ruddy, 2006), this research uses the term much more narrowly and focuses specifically on the decision-making dimension of empowerment (DME). We adopted this narrower conceptualization for two related reasons. First, this conceptualization, although narrower, still appears to capture the core aspect of empowering subordinates. For example, DME adequately fulfills the criteria laid down by Leach, Wall, and Jackson (2003) for defining empowerment (i.e., a practice involving delegation of responsibility down the hierarchy to give employees increased decision-making authority), and its emphasis on participative decision making (Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, & Drasgow, 2000) and encouraging employees to act on their own (Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2010) directly aligns with current conceptualizations of leadership empowerment behavior (e.g., Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). Second, this conceptualization was consistent with important streams of earlier leadership research that we wanted to draw upon and incorporate into the current study.

Specifically, Vroom and his colleagues (Vroom & Jago, 1978; Vroom & Yetton, 1973) have presented a leadership model that prescribes the degree of subordinate empowerment (defined as decision-making empowerment) that a leader ought to use in various decision-making contexts. This leadership model argues that leaders who adhere to its prescriptions obtain higher quality decisions and greater decision acceptance by subordinates. Further, these investigators provided empirical evidence supporting the model. Although the model is silent regarding the attributional effects of using an appropriate or inappropriate degree of empowerment, it seems reasonable (in light of the model's empirical support) to expect that people make higher attributions of leadership to individuals who abide by the model's prescriptions than to those who do not. After all, abiders are in fact displaying effective leadership. As noted earlier, many factors in addition to actual leadership behavior may influence attributions of leadership, but this leadership model appears to provide a solid baseline for exploring the attributional questions of the current research.

In the Vroom and Yetton (1973) model, subordinate empowerment revolves exclusively around three broad levels of decision-making authority for solving work problems (Vroom & Jago, 1978; Vroom & Yetton). The most empowering approach is participatory decision making. The leader contributes to and facilitates the problem-solving discussions, takes part in problem analysis, and expresses opinions but then accepts and implements whatever decision the group arrives

at. A second, less empowering approach is consultative decision making. Here, the leader discusses the problem with subordinates either singly or as a group, listens to their analysis, and obtains their ideas and suggestions but then reaches a decision that may or may not reflect their input. The third and least empowering approach is autocratic decision making, where the leader unilaterally makes the decision without group input and simply directs subordinates to implement the decision.

Using the Vroom framework, Heilman et al. (1984) conducted two empirical studies that generally supported the propositions of the model. However, they also found that participants in both studies consistently regarded the highly participatory approach more favorably than the other two approaches. This finding held even in those circumstances where Vroom's theory actually endorses the manager's use of a less empowering approach. These results underscore the point made above that objectively effective leadership behaviors do not always result in attributions of effective leadership. That is, we cannot determine others' leadership expectations and attributions simply by knowing the propositions of empirically supported contingency theories.

In another study (Campbell et al., 1993) investigators adopted the Vroom model, but this research focused directly on empowerment and leadership attributions. Using scenarios to vary empowerment levels, the researchers examined leadership attributions made by participants in both the United States and in Singapore. They found that business students in both countries expected managers to employ a highly participatory and empowering leadership style. These expectations even held (in both countries) when the research described the manager as operating in a military organization; that is, a stereotypic structured, directive work environment. The results are also particularly noteworthy because of the highly similar findings that the research obtained across the radically different national cultures. Campbell et al. had anticipated that leadership attributions in Asia would be less favorable to a highly empowering approach. However, even in Singapore, a culture described as much more Eastern than Western in nature, with highly conservative, authority-oriented families and institutions, participants described the approach of a highly empowering, participatory leader as significantly more appropriate than the approach of a less empowering but consultative counterpart.

This general pattern of evidence suggests that research on the leadership attributions associated with DME and on the judgments individuals draw regarding leadership effectiveness is worth pursuing. Though leadership is multidimensional and DME is only a single dimension, it is an essential one. Knowing more about how a manager's empowering behavior contributes to the development of individuals' naïve and commonsense leadership theories may help managers better gauge the reputational consequences of their leadership approach, and it may help

researchers better integrate attributional aspects of leadership into current theoretical frameworks. As Lord and Brown (2004) have noted in a related context, understanding leadership requires an understanding of how others perceive the leader's behaviors, of how those perceptions make them think and feel, and of how those thoughts and feelings guide action. Investigators examining the influence of social identity and the degree to which the leader is prototypical of the group (e.g., Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) have reached similar conclusions about the importance of leadership attributions.

Thus, we undertook the current research specifically to explore the leadership attributions created by the managerial use of different degrees of subordinate empowerment. We wanted to determine whether individuals saw the use of high DME as generally appropriate and whether the use of high DME affected inferences regarding the manager's leadership ability. We hypothesized that participants would see the managerial use of a greater degree of subordinate DME as more appropriate than a lesser degree (H1) and that they would also infer that the manager possessed greater leadership ability (H2).

Strong empirical support for H1 comes from the findings of the research reported above, where individuals saw high subordinate DME as suitable in virtually all circumstances (Campbell et al., 1993; Heilman et al., 1984). Strong conceptual support for H2 comes from the classic literature on job design (e.g., Breugh, 1985; Campion, 1988; Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980; see also Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), particularly its emphasis on the motivating potential of decision-making autonomy. If, as this research suggests, individuals are motivated when given decision-making autonomy, managers who provide such autonomy are likely to be seen as effective leaders with high leader ability. Attribution theory's assumption that individuals infer personal qualities from behavior leads to similar conclusions and also buttresses H2. Specifically, if a manager displays behaviors that an individual associates with effective leadership, the person will infer leadership ability.

In addition to H1 and H2, we were interested in examining several contextual factors that might influence the attributions of individuals assessing leaders using different degrees of DME. Specifically, we wanted to determine the impact of organization setting, managerial gender, and eventual task outcome on these expectations and assessments. Although individuals certainly can infer the presence or absence of leadership from various and potentially minor cues, for reasons discussed below, the nature of these three contextual factors seemed highly likely to affect such attributions. We hypothesized that individuals would see the use of high subordinate DME as more appropriate in a civilian context than in a military context (H3); more appropriate for women managers than for men (H4); and more appropriate when DME leads to eventual task success rather than to task failure (H5). The bases for each of these hypotheses are discussed below.

ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

As Johns (2006) has noted, researchers generally have not paid sufficient attention to the context in which organizational behavior occurs, even though they recognize that context can have a profound impact on such behavior. As he has argued, context can restrict behavior, influence causal direction, induce curvilinear relationships, and so forth (Johns). Similarly, context can significantly influence perceptions of leadership. For example, one investigator demonstrated how differing group contexts influenced participants to perceive the same job candidate as displaying more leadership qualities and to falsely recall him performing more leadership-consistent behaviors in one context relative to the other (Emrich, 1999).

Though researchers can conceptualize and examine contextual effects along a number of important dimensions (e.g., see Johns, 2006), an organization setting appears to be a particularly useful contextual marker. Different types of organizations (e.g., bureaucratic, organic, mechanistic, etc.) capture distinct organizational contexts and cultures, and it is reasonable to expect these different organizational contexts and cultures to affect individuals' leadership expectations and attributions. Based on this reasoning, we anticipated that the nature of an organization would impact individuals' expectations regarding the appropriateness of empowering subordinates. That is, individuals may expect managers leading teams in a church setting to use a different degree of DME than managers leading teams in a commercial context. Similarly, because of differences in common organizational stereotypes, individuals might see a degree of DME as appropriate in a law firm but inappropriate for an advertising agency—even if managers in the two contexts face substantively identical issues.

The current research contrasts a military setting with a civilian setting. We chose to examine the impact of these two settings on leadership attributions for several reasons. First, important structural differences (i.e., emphasis on hierarchy, centralization, formalization, etc.) appear to distinguish military from civilian settings (e.g., Alpass, Long, Chamberlain, & MacDonald, 1997; Bartling & Eisenman, 1992), and Ammeter et al. (2002) have argued that different organizational structures can indirectly affect leader reputation. More directly, research has shown that individuals perceive military settings as distinctly different from civilian settings (e.g., Boyce & Herd, 2003; Morgan, 2004; Segal & Segal, 1983), and even if these perceptions are not objectively accurate, these beliefs nevertheless govern whatever impact setting has on attributions. Along these lines, some limited empirical research (Holloman, 1967) has indicated that people expect military and civilian supervisors to use different leadership styles, although apparently they do not.

Second, the common perception of military organizations suggested that individuals might see the use of high subordinate DME as less appropriate. For

example, Alpass et al. (1997) have noted that the military environment is unique, with service in this context highly prescribed and much different from civilian organizations. They have pointed out that civilians see the Army as a regimented organization with an explicit, authoritarian hierarchical structure that necessarily allows less personal freedom than civilian organizations. Further, their empirical findings indicated that these perceptions are accurate: their Army participants rated their jobs as having less autonomy than individuals no longer in the military. Similarly, Bartling and Eisenman (1992), in their study of the perceptions of White and minority youth, found that all racial, ethnic, and gender groups saw military jobs as less enjoyable than civilian jobs. Though their data did not specifically examine perceptions of DME in each setting, perceptions of the degree to which employees must consult organizational rules in doing the job and the need to get permission from supervisors in implementing solutions (e.g., Alpass et al.) presumably had some influence on these results.

Finally, we chose to contrast these two settings because of the military background of the sample population. Because cadets have somewhat greater familiarity with the military, an examination of their expectations regarding empowerment in the two contexts would be especially revealing. As Boyce and Herd (2003) and others (e.g., Morgan, 2004) have pointed out, leadership expectations are impacted when an occupation is held predominantly by one sex. The leadership expectations of new entrants to the predominantly male-dominated military have theoretical and practical significance, but currently these expectations are difficult to predict. On the one hand, the expectations and attributions of these new military entrants may simply reflect past civilian findings, supporting high DME even in a military context. On the other hand, because cadets are more familiar with the importance of hierarchical authority, they may see high DME as less appropriate, resulting in attributions of weak leadership. Given the defensibility of both possibilities, we proposed H3 tentatively. Based on the limited empirical findings (e.g., Holloman, 1967) and on the general view that the military's mission and its hierarchical authority structure make high DME less suitable, we hypothesized that cadets would see DME as less appropriate in a military setting.

MANAGER GENDER

The literature on sex-role stereotyping is complex. Early research suggested that women are often seen as less aggressive, forceful, and analytical than men (Schein, 1975) and are evaluated more favorably when they display "consideration" behaviors, whereas men are evaluated more positively when they display task-oriented behaviors (Bartol & Butterfield, 1976). Other investigators (e.g., Jago & Vroom, 1982) have found that individuals evaluated women who use a directive leadership style as less effective, whereas individuals of both sexes

appear to expect women managers to allow greater participation than male managers (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). More recent and nuanced research has suggested that women may actually have a leadership advantage over men (e.g., Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2003), although not all investigators agree (e.g., Morgan, 2004; Vecchio, 2002). Additional research has suggested that women are more transformational than men (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003); more democratic and participative than men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990); and more effective than men in leadership roles defined in less masculine terms but less effective than men in roles defined in more masculine terms (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995).

The complexity of the research findings makes determining the objective relationship between gender and leader effectiveness difficult. However, regardless of objective effectiveness, this research makes clear that individuals expect men and women to favor different leadership styles and interactions and to be more effective when using the appropriate, expected style (e.g., Bartol & Butterfield, 1976; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly et al., 1995). These gender-based leadership expectations even extend across cultures (e.g., Sczesny, Bosak, Neff, & Schyns, 2004, and more generally, Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999).

Gender research with Air Force Academy cadets found that male cadets saw successful leaders (i.e., officers) within the frame of a masculine stereotype, and this perception was not changed even by the experience of being led by female commanders. Less successful female cadets saw successful leaders as possessing characteristics and attitudes more commonly ascribed to women, whereas more successful female cadets saw successful leaders in terms commonly associated with both men and women (Boyce & Herd, 2003). Interestingly, in spite of the various stereotypes cadets may hold, Morgan (2004) found few differences in the actual leadership style of male and female Army cadets.

Overall, however, the general conclusion from the findings above is that individuals expect different leadership behaviors from men and women and that they evaluate the appropriateness of the leader's behavior in line with these expectations. Consistent with the literature indicating that women are seen as more democratic, person oriented, and participative than men (e.g., Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Sczesny et al., 2004) we expected leader gender to influence leadership expectations; and we hypothesized that individuals would see the use of high DME as more suitable for a female manager than a male manager (H4).

EVENTUAL TASK OUTCOME

Attributional approaches to leadership assume that task outcome and team performance are crucial elements in shaping people's judgments about leadership. If

individuals believe that certain outcomes follow from leadership behavior, and if they observe these outcomes (such as team successes or failure), they infer that leadership occurred (or failed to occur). Research testing these notions by Lord and his colleagues (e.g., Lord, Binning, Rush, & Thomas, 1978; Lord & Maher, 1991; Phillips & Lord, 1981) as well as by others (e.g., Butterfield & Powell, 1981; Meindel et al., 1985; Mitchell, Larson, & Green, 1977; Puffer, 1990) has confirmed that performance information does significantly influence individuals' attributions of leadership.

For example, an investigation of attributions of charismatic leadership by Puffer (1990) demonstrated that both decision outcome (successful versus unsuccessful) as well as the individual's decision-making style (intuitive versus technical) significantly influenced the attribution process. Similarly, recent research by Giessner, van Knippenberg, and Sleebos (2009), examining the effects of leader group prototypicality, also found that task success and failure significantly impacted perceptions of leader effectiveness.

These findings are not at all surprising. As Giessner et al. (2009) have noted, leadership provides an explanatory mechanism for group performance, and team success or failure is typically attributed to the leader. Subsequently, this outcome attribution has an impact on endorsements of the leader and assessments of the leader's ability. Thus, from both a theoretical and empirical perspective, it seemed reasonable to hypothesize (H5): that individuals would see high subordinate DME as appropriate and indicative of leadership ability with team success but see it as significantly less appropriate and indicative of less leadership ability with team failure.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

We recruited cadets from the Introductory Psychology subject pool of the U.S. Military Academy ($N = 173$) to read and complete the research instruments used in the investigation. Participation in the study was voluntary and cadets received extra course credit for their efforts. The typical participant was 18.6 years old, with males comprising 86% of the sample.

Because we used a cadet sample, some limitations may apply when relating findings to actual military officers or managers. Differences can exist between students' reactions to behavioral phenomena and managers' reactions (Gordon, Slade, & Schmitt, 1986). Students appear to emphasize participative approaches (Jago & Vroom, 1982) and typically prefer supervisors who allow freedom and autonomy (Kavanagh, 1975). Thus, the attributions of cadets regarding empowerment may not fully represent the attributions of experienced officers or managers. On the other hand, cadet perceptions are probably representative of the attributions

of relatively junior officers, because cadets and these officers come from the same population. Similarly, cadet attributions likely reflect the attributions of entry-level managers.

Procedure

After selecting one of several time slots available for a study on “several aspects of organizational work,” participants for a given time slot reported to a designated classroom location. There they received a brief overview of the task (“to complete a set of questionnaires asking your opinions and reactions to common situations and events”) and were assured that all responses would remain anonymous. After answering participants’ initial questions, the researcher distributed the study’s questionnaire packet. After all participants completed the packet, the researcher collected the material and then debriefed and dismissed participants.

Case Scenario

The questionnaire packet contained a one-page case scenario followed by a set of questionnaire items. The case itself described a research and development team that had been pursuing three promising but relatively incompatible approaches to a high-technology integration problem. Now, budget and time requirements have forced the team to select one of the three approaches to pursue in depth. Choosing the correct approach is critical, because rival firms would undoubtedly find a solution before the R&D team could correct a poor choice.

The manager, who is a technical expert in the problem area, has called together his (or her) team members, who are also technical experts. During this meeting, one of the three approaches is unanimously eliminated, and disagreement arises over the remaining two. The three subordinates strongly favor the second approach, whereas the manager prefers the third. The team spends a considerable amount of time attempting to resolve this difference, but these efforts prove futile. Neither party is able to convince the other. This information formed the heart of the case situation.

Manipulation: Decision-Making Empowerment

High DME. In the highly empowering approach, after the open discussion with the three subordinates, the manager willingly accepts and implements the team’s approach to the problem, even though the manager still disagrees with that approach. Thus, in the high-DME scenario, the disagreement ends with the manager allowing the team to pursue the team’s preferred approach.

Low DME. In the low-DME scenario, the manager involves subordinates identically. But after the open discussion, because the manager disagrees with the team's approach to the problem, the manager directs the team to pursue the approach preferred by the manager. Thus, in the low-DME scenario, the disagreement ends with the manager directing the team to pursue the manager's preferred approach rather than the team's approach.

Although these two representations of DME do not capture all of empowerment's various forms, they effectively highlight the distinction implied by Daft (2005) regarding managers willing and unwilling to redistribute decision authority to their teams, and they adequately capture the earlier participative versus consultative leadership distinctions made by the Vroom and Yetton (1978) model. Further, these two extremes appear to cover a significant portion of the range of decision empowerment discussed in the literature (e.g., Cotton, Vollrath, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings, 1988; Locke, Schweiger, & Latham, 1986; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) even if a specific form of empowerment is absent. For example, in the recent work of Morgeson and Humphrey, *decision-making autonomy* (a concept highly similar to this study's notion of DME) centers on three characteristics: opportunity to use personal initiative and judgment; opportunity to make one's own decisions; and opportunity for significant autonomy in making decisions. A relatively high degree of these characteristics is present in this study's high-DME manipulation and a relatively lower degree in the low-DME manipulation.

Manipulation: Organizational Setting

Half the cases described the R&D unit as part of a civilian organization referred to as Byte-Matrix Communications and the team manager's title as "Dr." The other half of the cases described the R&D unit as part of a military organization, referred to as the Army Communication Research and Development Center (ACRDC). In these variations, the case referred to the team manager as "Colonel." For additional emphasis, each version of the case was prominently entitled "Decision Making at Byte-Matrix Communication" or "Decision Making at the Army Communication Research and Development Center (ACRDC)."

Manipulation: Gender

In the male version of the case, the manager's identity was "Dr. (or Col.) John Wolfe." In the female version, the case referred to "Dr. (or Col.) Joan Wolfe." The case description also used appropriate gender-specific pronouns throughout the scenario.

Manipulation: Eventual Task Outcome

The basic scenario had three different task outcomes:

- Version 1 provided no indication of whether the team eventually achieved success or not. The case simply ends after indicating the approach taken.
- Version 2 provided additional information that indicated a successful task outcome: “As things eventually turned out, about seven months later, this approach led to the hoped-for breakthrough.”
- Version 3 indicated an unsuccessful task outcome: “As things eventually turned out, this approach stalled after encountering one technical difficulty after another, and about seven months later a rival center announced a breakthrough using an approach similar to the one the manager rejected (defended).”

In sum, the research employed 24 different versions of the basic scenario, conforming to a 2 (Empowerment) $\times$ 2 (Organizational Setting) $\times$ 2 (Gender) $\times$ 3 (Task Outcome) factorial design. Each participant received only one randomly distributed version of the case, and individuals were not aware that other versions existed.

Questionnaire Items

In addition to the one-page case scenario, each packet contained a set of questionnaire items that provided the various manipulation checks and formed the basis for the dependent variables. The questionnaire’s introduction instructed individuals to read each question carefully and then to indicate their response to each item on the associated 5-point Likert-type scale.

Empowerment check. We used three items to gauge whether cadets saw a difference in the two levels of subordinate DME reflected in the various versions of the case. Individuals rated the degree of involvement allowed subordinates (1 = *no involvement* to 5 = *very large degree*); the degree of participation (1 = *not participative at all* to 5 = *very highly participative*); and the amount of influence permitted subordinates (1 = *no influence* to 5 = *very large amount*). Coefficient alpha for the three items equaled .75. These three items were not directly focused on decision making per se but were geared to capture the more general aspects of empowerment implied by DME.

Organizational setting check. Individuals judged the organization mentioned in the case in three areas: its probable reliance on written rules, regulations, and standard operating procedures (1 = *minimal reliance* to 5 = *very heavy reliance*); its probable emphasis on authority and obedience to a supervisor’s

directions (1 = *much less emphasis than the average organization* to 5 = *much more emphasis*); and the probable importance put on an individual's standing in the organizational hierarchy (1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *extremely important*). Although these items were meant to capture the differences in organizational structure associated with military settings relative to civilian settings, the items did not form a coherent scale: coefficient alpha for the three items equaled .34, unacceptably low by conventional standards.

Gender of manager check. A single item asked respondents to indicate whether the manager described in the scenario was male (1), female (2), or not indicated (3).

Eventual outcome check. A single item asked respondents to indicate whether the ultimate outcome of the project was successful (1), unsuccessful (2), or not indicated (3).

Appropriateness of DME level. Respondents rated the suitability of the manager's empowerment approach using four items: appropriateness (1 = *completely inappropriate for this situation* to 5 = *highly appropriate*); suitability (1 = *not at all suitable* to 5 = *very highly suitable*); properness (1 = *highly improper for the situation* to 5 = *highly proper*); and acceptability (1 = *not at all acceptable* to 5 = *very highly acceptable*). We summed and averaged the four items into a single composite item. Coefficient alpha for the four-item composite equaled .91.

Leadership ability. Respondents also rated two items focusing on the leadership ability of the manager. Individuals evaluated the degree of leadership shown by the manager (1 = *absolutely no degree of leadership shown* to 5 = *very large degree*); and the degree of leadership ability possessed by the manager (1 = *much below average in leadership ability* to 5 = *much above average*). We summed and averaged these two items into a single composite. Coefficient alpha for the two-item composite equaled .79.

Willingness to work for the manager. Respondents rated two items tapping general willingness to work for the described manager. One item gauged their own willingness and ranged from 1 = *not willing at all* to 5 = *very highly willing*. A second item evaluated their willingness to urge a job-seeking, qualified friend to apply for an open position on the described manager's team. Again, we summed and averaged the two items into a single composite. Coefficient alpha for these two items equaled .93.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Decision-making empowerment. We averaged the items dealing with subordinate involvement, participation, and influence to form a composite variable. We then used a *t*-test to determine whether subjects saw a difference in the two levels of DME used in the cases. Results confirmed that respondents saw the empowerment levels as significantly different. Mean scores for the high and low levels were 4.07 ($SD = .69$) and 3.02 ($SD = .69$) respectively, with $t = 10.07$, $p < .001$. These results provide strong evidence that the DME manipulation was effective.

Organizational setting. Although the internal consistency reliability of the three items used to gauge the effectiveness of the setting manipulation was extremely low, we decided to conduct an exploratory analysis and tentatively combined the three responses into a composite variable. We then conducted a *t*-test to determine whether respondents saw the civilian and military situations as significantly different. As expected, participants rated the civilian setting as less likely to rely on rules and regulations, to emphasize obedience to authority, or to emphasize hierarchical standing ($M = 2.98$, $SD = .60$ versus $M = 3.17$, $SD = .54$; $t = -2.18$, $p < .05$). Thus, in spite of the low coefficient alpha, these results suggest that the setting manipulation was successful.

Gender of manager. An examination of the single item asking respondents to identify the gender of their scenario's manager showed that 85% (147/173) could do so correctly. The majority of incorrect identifications (21/26) fell into the "not indicated" category but showed no other discernible pattern. A likely explanation for this finding is that these respondents probably interpreted the question narrowly, as asking whether the gender of the manager was explicitly noted in the case. Rather, we expected respondents to infer manager gender from case cues (i.e., manager name and pronoun usage), as most respondents did.

Eventual outcome. An examination of the single item asking respondents to indicate whether the ultimate outcome of the project was successful, unsuccessful, or not indicated showed that 80% (138/172 with one missing) could correctly identify the project's eventual outcome. In the majority of incorrect identifications (26/34) respondents misidentified "no outcome information" scenarios as successful. No other pattern was discernable. It is possible that these respondents assumed that something as important as team failure certainly would have been explicitly noted, and because failure was not mentioned in these scenarios, they simply concluded the outcome was eventually successful.

Primary Analysis: Attributions of DME Appropriateness

In accordance with the logic of the research design, we employed a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3$ factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the perceived appropriateness of the manager's DME use. We conducted this analysis on the composite variable gauging appropriateness. Because we had no theoretical or conceptual basis for expecting higher order interactions, we suppressed the ANOVA's three- and four-way interactions,¹ shifting their potential explanatory sums of squares into an increased error term and producing a more stringent overall analysis. Table 1 summarizes the results of the ANOVA. An examination of this table shows that, of the four variables hypothesized to influence individuals' judgments, only two actually did so: the degree of subordinate DME ($F = 11.53, p < .001$) and eventual team outcome ($F = 9.21, p < .001$). Organizational setting ($F < 1.00, p = \text{ns}$) and gender of the manager ($F < 1.00, p = \text{ns}$) had no effect on these judgments. None of the various two-way interactions achieved significance.

Inspection of the relevant means indicated that cadets saw managerial use of a greater degree of DME as significantly more appropriate ($M = 3.59, SD = 0.68$) than a lesser degree ($M = 3.08, SD = 0.76$), strongly supporting H1. Similarly,

TABLE 1
ANOVA Summary Table of the Effects of Level of Subordinate
Empowerment, Organizational Context, Manager Gender, and Task
Outcome on Attributions of Appropriateness

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Main effects				
Empowerment	1	11.53	27.07	<.001
Context	1	0.01	<1.00	ns
Manager gender	1	0.25	<1.00	ns
Task outcome	2	9.21	21.62	<.001
Two-way interactions				
Empowerment $\times$ Context	1	0.19	<1.00	ns
Empowerment $\times$ Gender	1	0.19	<1.00	ns
Empowerment $\times$ Outcome	2	0.18	<1.00	ns
Context $\times$ Gender	1	0.17	<1.00	ns
Context $\times$ Outcome	2	0.28	<1.00	ns
Gender $\times$ Outcome	2	0.79	1.85	ns
Explained	14	2.38	5.58	<.001
Residual	158	0.43		

Note. $N = 173$.

¹Including the higher-order interactions in the ANOVA revealed only a statistically significant ($p < .05$) four-way interaction. Trying to make sense of such a complex interaction without a compelling a priori theoretical rationale must be entirely speculative, so we offer no interpretation of it.

examination of the relevant means for the task outcome main effect confirmed that eventual task success was also a potent influence on individuals' attributions. Eventual task success significantly increased ratings of appropriateness ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.58$) relative to no outcome information ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.73$; $t_{115} = 2.69$, $p < .01$). Task failure ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.76$) significantly decreased the evaluation ($t_{115} = -3.47$, $p < .001$). These results strongly support the predictions of H2 and they are consistent with prior attribution findings that demonstrated the importance of after-the-fact considerations in leadership assessments.

Primary Analysis: Attributions of Leadership Ability

We carried out two similar analyses to demonstrate the practical implications and importance of the perceived appropriateness attributions. The first examined cadets' attributions of managerial leadership ability and their willingness to work for the described leader. Table 2 summarizes the results of this ANOVA. We assessed leadership ability attributions using the composite variable described earlier and, as before, we suppressed the ANOVA's three- and four-way interactions.²

TABLE 2
ANOVA Summary Table of the Effects of Level of Subordinate
Empowerment, Organizational Context, Manager Gender, and Task
Outcome on Attributions of Leadership Ability

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Main effects				
Empowerment	1	12.42	25.79	<.001
Context	1	0.20	<1.00	ns
Manager gender	1	1.65	3.43	ns
Task outcome	2	7.20	14.95	<.001
Two-way interactions				
Empowerment $\times$ Context	1	1.29	2.67	ns
Empowerment $\times$ Gender	1	2.71	5.63	<.02
Empowerment $\times$ Outcome	2	0.14	<1.00	ns
Context $\times$ Gender	1	2.16	4.49	<.05
Context $\times$ Outcome	2	0.21	<1.00	ns
Gender $\times$ Outcome	2	0.66	1.36	ns
Explained	14	2.62	5.44	<.001
Residual	158	0.49		

Note. $N = 173$.

²The unsuppressed ANOVA showed these interactions to be nonsignificant.

As the table reveals, attributions regarding the manager's leadership ability differed significantly, depending on the level of subordinate DME the manager used ($F = 25.79$, $p < .001$) and on eventual task outcome ($F = 14.95$, $p < .001$). As anticipated, participants rated the highly empowering manager as significantly higher ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.82$) in leadership ability than the less empowering manager ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.71$). Similarly, eventual task success produced significantly higher attributions of leadership ability ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.76$) than did no outcome information ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.76$; $t_{115} = 3.23$, $p = .002$), whereas eventual task failure produced somewhat lower attributions of leadership ability ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.77$) than no outcome information ($t_{115} = 1.78$, $p < .08$).

Though no significant main effects were uncovered for the organizational setting ($F < 1.00$, $p = \text{ns}$) or for the gender of the manager ($F = 3.43$, $p = \text{ns}$), the analysis uncovered two significant two-way interactions relative to ability attributions. As the table shows, one interaction centered on levels of DME by leader gender ($F = 5.63$, $p < .02$) and the other centered on context by leader gender ($F = 4.49$, $p < .05$). No other interactions achieved significance.

Although we did not predict these interactions, we conducted follow-up probes on the two interactions to see what they might reveal. For the Empowerment $\times$ Gender interaction, the probes revealed that attributions of leadership ability were the same for both the male ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.72$) and female manager ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.71$) at low levels of DME but were significantly higher for male managers ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.81$) than female managers ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.76$) at high levels of empowerment. Thus, though high subordinate empowerment resulted in higher attributions of ability for both genders, the impact for the male manager was much greater.

Probes of the second interaction revealed a similar finding. Attributions of leadership ability were identical for both the male ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.82$) and female manager ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.86$) in a civilian context, but participants attributed greater leadership ability to the male manager ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.88$) and less to the female manager ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.61$) in the military context. This finding is consistent with the results obtained Boyce and Herd (2003) in their investigation of gender stereotypes held by military students for military leadership positions. They found that many cadets possess a strong masculine gender role stereotype of the successful military leader. These researchers have suggested that when an occupation is predominated by one sex, this dominance fosters expectations that create conflict if a person of the opposite sex occupies a leadership role. The findings of Eagly et al. (1995) also suggested that this role incongruity interpretation of the interaction is reasonable. Of course, given Morgan's (2004) findings that show few gender differences between male and female cadets in leadership performance, the cadets' lower-ability attributions are probably objectively unfounded.

Primary Analysis: Willingness to Work for the Leader

As a final analysis, we examined whether a manager's level of DME influenced the respondents' assessments of the desirability of working for the manager. For this test, we conducted an ANOVA on the willingness composite variable. As with the earlier ANOVAs, we suppressed three- and four-way interactions, which were again shown to be insignificant. Table 3 summarizes this analysis.

As with the prior ANOVAs, an individual's willingness to work for the manager depended on both the empowerment level allowed by the manager ($F = 84.78$, $p < .001$) and on the eventual outcome that occurred ($F = 11.70$, $p < .001$). Neither the gender of the manager ($F < 1.00$, $p = ns$) nor the organizational setting ($F < 3.48$, $p = ns$) had additional effects. Further, none of the various two-way interactions achieved significance.

These results parallel the prior findings. Respondents preferred working for a manager using a high-DME approach ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.02$ versus $M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.99$). Similarly, participants were more willing to work for a manager whose decisions led to eventual success ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.11$) than to eventual failure ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.16$). Thus, these findings overall strongly indicate that a manager's choice of an empowerment level has important implications. Potential colleagues and subordinates draw far more generalized conclusions about the individual's leadership ability from this choice and even allow it to influence their willingness to work for that person.

TABLE 3
ANOVA Summary Table of the Effects of Level of Subordinate
Empowerment, Organizational Context, Manager Gender, and Task
Outcome on Willingness to Work for the Leader

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Main effects				
Empowerment	1	76.16	84.78	<.001
Context	1	3.13	3.48	ns
Manager gender	1	0.61	<1.00	ns
Task outcome	2	10.51	11.70	<.001
Two-way interactions				
Empowerment $\times$ Context	1	0.28	<1.00	ns
Empowerment $\times$ Gender	1	2.63	2.93	ns
Empowerment $\times$ Outcome	2	0.14	<1.00	ns
Context $\times$ Gender	1	1.88	2.09	ns
Context $\times$ Outcome	2	0.44	<1.00	ns
Gender $\times$ Outcome	2	0.00	<1.00	ns
Explained	14	7.65	8.51	<.001
Residual	158	0.90		

Note. $N = 173$.

DISCUSSION

The study's findings suggest several conclusions. First, individuals see managers who empower their subordinates as acting appropriately; that is, high DME does not subtract from their stature as leaders. In fact, the results suggest quite the opposite: individuals saw a highly empowering manager as having higher leadership ability than a less empowering manager. Also, individuals indicated a greater willingness to work for such a manager. These findings are particularly impressive, in that they were obtained from a sample of military cadets, a population typically more conservative than the average individual and in training for a profession traditionally characterized by a rigid hierarchy of authority and a chain-of-command decision culture. The findings are also noteworthy in that they held across different situations and across different genders. Participants generally viewed managerial empowerment of subordinates as equally appropriate in a military context as a civilian context and generally as appropriate for men as for women. From a leadership perspective, the findings are encouraging, in that they suggest that high subordinate empowerment does not produce negative attributions regarding ability or competence. Regardless of whether high DME is actually effective in any particular situation (an important consideration not addressed by the current research), the current findings imply that individuals will likely see high empowerment as appropriate and worthwhile across a wide range of situations.

The effects of eventual task outcome on judgments of appropriateness warrant comment. Our results are in line with past findings (e.g., Butterfield & Powell, 1981; Giessner et al., 2009; Phillips & Lord, 1981; Puffer, 1990; Staw & Ross, 1980), and they underscore the nature of observers' judgments regarding leadership. Respondents relied on whether a leadership approach worked in determining the appropriateness of a given level of subordinate DME. Though this has intuitive appeal, it reflects a naïve view of leadership. The manager's decision was only one of several factors that could have accounted for the eventual outcome. Nonetheless, these judgments appear to reflect the belief that, if the outcome was successful, the process must have been correct. Alternatively, the results may simply add confirmation to the view that a primary function of leadership is to provide a simple (and potentially controllable) focus of causality for other organizational participants.

Another area warranting comment is the failure of the organizational setting to affect judgments of appropriateness. Individuals saw high DME as equally appropriate in the military as in the civilian context. Such results are surprising, in that they seem to contradict conventional expectations that military organizations necessarily should be more autocratic. A potential explanation for this finding is that the R&D unit, although identified as a military operation, was not considered a typical military work group. If so, conventional expectations concerning appropriate military leadership would be less applicable. In fact, the low coefficient alpha

for the organizational setting manipulation check raises the possibility that this manipulation may not have been entirely effective. Another possibility is that conventional expectations for military organizations have changed and have become more sophisticated and fine-grained. Additional research is needed here.

Gender effects must also be considered. Although the investigation uncovered no main effects for gender in any of the three primary analyses, gender was involved in two interactions regarding attributions of leadership ability. In one case, high empowerment did not enhance the female manager's attributed ability as much as it did her male counterpart; and in the other case, the female manager was seen as having less ability than her male counterpart in a military environment. Other researchers have obtained similar results regarding attributions concerning women's leadership abilities (e.g., Ridgeway, 2001; Yoder, Schleicher, & McDonald, 1998). Though not wishing to read too much into these data, the findings suggest that gender remains an important variable in leadership investigations. Recent research (e.g., Eagly, 2007; Eagly et al., 1995) has suggested that leader sex effects are complex and may at least partly reflect situational cues and expectations (Boyce & Herd, 2003; Morgan, 2004). The results of the current study certainly are consistent with these ideas. Additional empirical evidence appears to be warranted here, too.

Limitations

Because of the methodology employed, the findings must be interpreted cautiously. The dependent variables suffer to some degree from common method variance, and the study itself uses a descriptive narrative (instead of actual people) approach that has specific bounds. In its defense, the approach allows great flexibility in portraying various leadership situations that are identical except for the variables of interest. Finding equivalent situations in actual settings is impossible and, even if found, live situations allow for little control over other potentially confounding details. Thus, the method's shortcomings appear offset by the control the procedure provides. Finally, because this study merely required individuals to report their reactions to a situation (rather than speculate on actions they might take), usual concerns about scenario research are also less pertinent.

So, though not underestimating the study's methodological limitations, the study's findings merit serious consideration, in that attributions-of-leadership investigations have real value as complements to more traditional approaches. For example, this research clearly demonstrated that reactions to an empowerment level are impacted by eventual outcome information. Regardless of how a person may initially regard empowerment, the person's assessment is likely to be revised in the light of subsequent task success or failure. More importantly, the overall set of results forms a coherent, telling pattern: Individuals who judge an empowerment level as appropriate also judge the leader as having higher ability and are

more willing to work for that leader. If so, then managers who hesitate to empower subordinates because of some concern that high empowerment may have dysfunctional reputational consequences are unnecessarily handicapping their own organizational effectiveness.

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