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Article

Leaders' effects on Empowerment and Innovation - National Differences Between China, UK, and GAS in Authentic Leadership

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Marketing Review St. Gallen



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Leaders' effects on Empowerment and Innovation

National Differences Between China, UK, and GAS in Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is a beneficial approach to transformation processes. This study examines its effects on empowerment, work engagement, and innovative performance in a multinational context (Germany/Austria/Switzerland, UK, China). There are subtle differences in its effects, but our results show the value of this leadership behavior for multinational enterprises.

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The current environment that is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) constantly forces industries and businesses to transform themselves. This can affect business models, products and services, marketing strategy, and corporate culture. Within such transformations, organizations often strive for higher levels of employee empowerment to fully leverage the potential of their human resources. This aims, for instance, at fostering innovation within the company. In this vein, authentic leadership has gained attention in both academia and management (e.g., Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2018). Authentic leadership is “a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003, p. 243). Its core dimensions are self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective (Lemoine, Hartnell, & Leroy, 2019). The response to authentic leadership behavior, however, differs depending on the underlying national culture of the subordinates (Singh, Sengupta, & Sharma, 2018). This is particularly relevant for multinational enterprises (MNE), especially in the context of organizational transformation processes. When intending to implement a common, global corporate culture, MNEs cannot ignore national differences. Therefore, it is crucial to define and implement a unitary leadership style that aims at positive effects in all subsidiaries.

This study is meant to offer guidance on solving this issue by examining national differences concerning the positive effects of authentic leadership on employee empowerment, work engagement, and innovative performance in a transforming MNE. Thus, the study’s aim is to find out whether authentic leadership is a globally

valuable approach to make transformation processes successful. The analyzed data originates from a global study conducted among employees (N = 4,527) of an international lighting manufacturer, headquartered in Europe. The company is in the midst of a transformation process from a manufacturing company to a customer-centric service provider. This study offers insights on how employees in different cultures (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (GAS region), UK, and China) respond to authentic leadership and, hence, allows us to derive implications for management and leadership development in times of transformation.

Effects of Authentic Leadership on Employees’ Work Engagement and Innovative Performance

Authentic leadership is a popular leadership style in both practice and academia. It is concerned with the self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-concordance of leaders and how they model those characteristics to subordinates (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Authentic leaders are “persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act on those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others” (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004, p. 802). While a variety of different understandings and definitions of this leadership style have emerged, they commonly focus on the leader’s self-confidence, self-concept, self-awareness, authenticity, and general character (Lemoine et al., 2019). Authentic leaders seem to have the potential of positively affecting their organization and team members. Indeed, studies show beneficial outcomes, such as increased task performance, higher willingness to address problems, and stronger engagement of employees, and indicate the concept’s relatedness to transformational

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leadership (Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016). This makes it a promising leadership style when tackling the question of how to implement transformational change and innovation in an organization.

To transform an organization and drive things forward, its employees need to be engaged at work and able to bring up new ideas to develop intrapreneurial behaviors. While authentic leadership is linked to both outcomes, the underlying mechanism seems to be mediated by employees' empowerment (Edu Valsania, Moriano, & Molero, 2016), making empowerment a core concept in understanding the effects of authentic leadership on employees' work engagement and innovative performance.

Effects of Authentic Leadership on Subordinates' Empowerment

Psychological empowerment is a concept that describes an intrinsic task mo-

tivation coming with a sense of control over one's job environment and an active orientation to one's work role (Spreitzer, 1995). It is manifest in four cognitions (see Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011, p. 981): meaning (alignment between the demands of one's work role and one's own beliefs, values, and standards), self-determination (sense of choice concerning the initiation or regulation of one's actions), competence

(belief in one's capability to successfully perform work activities), and impact (belief that one can influence strategic, administrative, or operational activities and outcomes in one's work unit). In their meta-analysis of psychological empowerment, Seibert et al. (2011) could show that leadership styles – with authentic leadership being one of them – affect the level of subordinates' empowerment and that empowerment re-

Management Summary

Authentic leadership has been strongly advocated in theory and practice and its positive effects on employees have been advertised. Since it promises to increase employee empowerment and innovative behavior, it is of great interest to multinational enterprises in transformation processes, but there is a lack of empirical support in this context. The present study finds varying, but moderate effects of authentic leadership on empowerment, work engagement and innovative performance in the UK, China and the GAS region (Germany/Austria/Switzerland).

lates to higher levels of commitment and innovation at work.

Hence, while the positive effect of authentic leadership on engagement seems to be well grounded, academic literature is still lacking in insights on cultural differences in this respect. It is important to take a closer look at this topic, as many MNEs are trying to implement global guidelines on leadership in their organizations to foster a specific and uniform corporate culture amongst all subsidiaries. This appears to be challenging, as Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions influence individual factors such as organizational commitment and perception of leadership styles (Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010). Studies have already shown the influence of culture in the context of authentic leadership (Qian, Lin, & Chen, 2012) and on outcomes such as empowerment (Hui, Au, & Fock, 2004). To obtain a more accurate picture of the impact of authentic leadership in MNEs, this study examines an organization that employs the majority of its staff in the GAS region, UK and China. Given that culture is likely to affect leadership outcomes, it is expected that:

Hypothesis 1: Authentic leadership in general relates to higher levels of employees' psychological empowerment, but the strength of this relation will vary amongst the GAS region, UK, and China.

Effects of Empowerment on Employees' Work Engagement and Innovative Performance

Usually, it is not empowerment that companies in transformation strive for, but empowerment leads to desired employee behaviors that are helpful for succeeding in the process. For instance, companies can be interested in employees' work engagement and their inno-

vative performance. Work engagement describes a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor (high levels of energy and resilience), dedication (sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge), and absorption (being fully engrossed in one's work) (Gupta, Singh, & Bhattacharya, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). On the other hand, employees show high levels of innovative performance when they create, disseminate, and implement novel and possibly valuable ideas (Ng & Feldman, 2013) and, thereby, add to the organization's competitiveness and existence (Anderson, Potočník, & Zhou, 2014). Hence, both constructs are of high strategic value for companies that want to evolve and, to this end, need to rely on the engagement and ideas of their personnel.

Both authentic leadership and empowerment have been found to affect employees' levels of work engagement (e.g., Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2016) and inno-

vative performance (e.g., Pieterse, van Knippenberg, Schippers, & Stam, 2009). Again, the cultural context may come into play when examining the strength of these effects. For instance, power distance is a two-sided sword in the context of innovation. Low power distance contexts are characterized by less rigid hierarchies and people face lower barriers to expressing their thoughts; hence, more ideas are brought forward. However, having a lot of people stating their ideas and opinions may delay the speed of innovation processes (Tian, Deng, Zhang, & Salmador, 2018). This might be a reason why more innovativeness is found in high power distance countries.

We did not find any literature with convincing evidence that there is any kind of cultural impact on the relation between empowerment and work engagement. Hence, the effect of empowerment on employee engagement will probably not differ significantly between the three regions. On the other hand, it is to be expected that the effect of empowerment on innovative performance will be stronger for employees in the GAS region and the UK than in China, which has a higher power distance. These considerations lead to:

Hypothesis 2: Empowerment positively relates to work engagement.

Hypothesis 3: Empowerment in general relates to higher levels of innovative performance, but the strength of the relation will be higher in the GAS region and UK than in China.

Methods and Results

The data was gathered in a cross-sectional employee survey in a MNE in the lighting industry (N = 4,527). Employees were invited to participate in the

Main Propositions

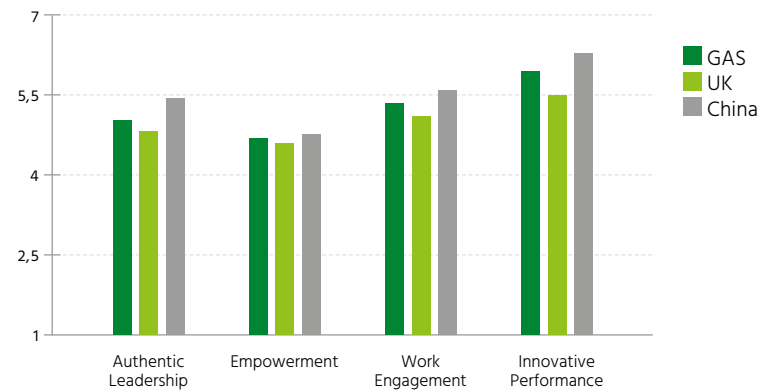
1. Authentic leadership increases work engagement and innovative performance by empowering employees.
2. Authentic leadership has a stronger impact on empowerment in the UK and the GAS region than in China.
3. Innovative performance is strongly driven by empowerment in the UK and the GAS region, while less so in China.
4. Authentic leadership is a valid leadership approach in the transformation of multinational enterprises.

digital survey during working hours. Corporate HR advertised the survey and ensured global reach. While white collars could fill in the survey via laptop, smartphone or tablet, computer terminals were set up in the factory halls for blue collars. We measured the underlying constructs in a 7-point Likert scale format from 1 = “I don’t agree at all” to 7 = “I fully agree” using validated scales, i.e. 8 items for authentic leadership (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008), 12 items for empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995), 9 items for work engagement (Sautier et al., 2015), and 6 items for innovative performance (Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Pundt & Schyns, 2005).

To be able to make statistically sound conclusions, only regions with $n > 200$ participants were included in the analysis. Hence, data of three regions were used to test the underlying hypotheses, namely GAS ($n = 1,955$), UK ($n = 797$), and China ($n = 813$). The survey comprised 813 managers (18.0%), 2,188 participants (48.3%) with a tenure of six or more years, 1,219 participants (26.9%) with a tenure between two and six years, and 1,120 participants (24.7%) with a tenure of less than two years.

The results show moderate to high values of all relevant constructs in all three regions (see figure 1). Additionally, one-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess the effects of region (GAS, UK, China) on authentic leadership, empowerment, work engagement, and innovative performance. As there was no homogeneity of variance (Levene’s test, $p < .05$) in all dependent variables, Welch tests were applied and showed that the means differed significantly for the different regions: authentic leadership shows a Welch’s $F(2, 1645.71) = 66.13$, $p < .001$; empowerment a Welch’s $F(2, 1554.47) = 6.94$, $p = .001$; work engagement a Welch’s $F(2, 1562.42) =$

Fig. 1: Means of the Relevant Constructs in the Studied Regions



Source: Own illustration.

Lessons Learned

1. To achieve successful transformation processes in multinational enterprises, top managers should strengthen authentic leadership.
2. As the effect of authentic leadership on empowerment, work engagement and innovative performance varies between regions, it is important to consider cultural differences in transformation processes.
3. Companies need to be aware of their underlying values before pushing authentic leadership.
4. Employee empowerment will increase the level of work engagement and innovative behavior, even without authentic leadership.

30.23, $p < .001$; innovative performance a Welch’s $F(2, 1422.02) = 38.36$, $p < .001$. Tukey-Kramer post-hoc analysis revealed significant differences ($p < .001$) between the levels of authentic leadership, work engagement and innovative performance in all regions, levels of empowerment between UK and GAS on the one hand and China on the other hand, but no significant difference in empowerment between GAS and China. In more detail, the mean levels of authentic leadership are lower in UK compared to GAS ($-.21$, 95%–CI[$-.33, -.09$]) and China ($-.63$, 95%–CI[$-.77, -.49$]), and in GAS lower than in China ($-.42$, 95%–CI[$-.54, -.30$]). Mean levels of work engagement are lower in UK compared to GAS ($-.21$, 95%–CI[$-.32, -.10$]) and China ($-.45$, 95%–CI[$-.59, -.32$]), and in GAS lower than in China ($-.24$, 95%–CI[$-.35, -.13$]). Mean levels of innovative performance are lower in UK compared to GAS ($-.47$, 95%–CI[$-.64, -.31$]) and China ($-.82$, 95%–CI[$-.1.02, -.62$]), and in GAS lower than in China ($-.34$, 95%–CI[$-.51, -.18$]). Lastly, mean levels of empowerment are lower in UK compared to GAS ($-.09$,

95%–CI[–.17, –.02]) and China (–.15, 95%–CI[–.25, –.06]), but not significantly different between GAS and China (–.06, 95%–CI[–.14, .02]).

For a more detailed analysis of the data and for testing our hypotheses statistically, we conducted structural equation modeling and group comparisons (see figure 2). The tested model revealed an acceptable to good model fit with $\chi^2 = 5241.299$, $df = 1527$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.432$, $CFI = .973$, $GFI = .935$, $TLI = .968$, $RMSEA = .024$, $SRMR = .043$ (Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004). Further, a χ^2 difference test for group comparison based on the underlying regions shows significant differences between the models ($df = 70$, $\chi^2 = 998.412$, $p < .001$). We found that the effect of authentic leadership on empow-

erment is significantly weaker in the Chinese staff ($\beta = .43$) compared to staff from the GAS region ($\beta = .54$) or the UK ($\beta = .57$). Empowerment shows equally strong relations to work engagement in all regions but has a weaker effect on innovative performance in the Chinese group of employees ($\beta = .44$, compared to .66 for GAS and .63 for the UK). Lastly, our results show that empowerment fully mediates the relation between authentic leadership and innovative performance and partially mediates the relation between authentic leadership and work engagement.

Implications

Organizations face several challenges in times that are characterized by

VUCA environments. Many of those challenges require companies to transform their business models, services, or products, often requiring a cultural change as well. The leadership literature has identified authentic leadership as a promising tool that seems to be beneficial for organizational outcomes and – given its conceptual closeness to transformational leadership – transformation processes in general (Banks et al., 2016). This study addresses a question the answer to which can be helpful for multinational enterprises striving to implement a globally valid leadership culture: Is authentic leadership a leadership style that shows equally positive effects in different national contexts? Our results give a positive answer to this question. Authentic leadership has

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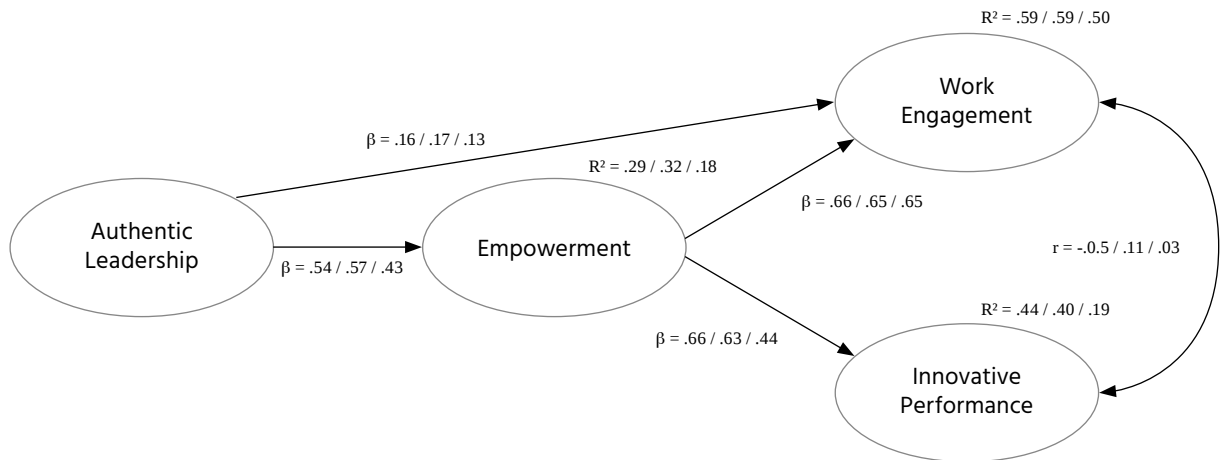
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Fig. 2: Structural Equation Model with Standardized Coefficients of Regression (β) and Coefficients of Determination (R^2) for GAS, UK and China



Source: Own illustration.

positive effects on employee empowerment in GAS, UK, and China. Empowerment, in turn, is a significant and strong predictor of work engagement and innovative performance. It is, indeed, the connective link between authentic leadership and these two outcomes.

Furthermore, this study shows that there are slight national differences in how strongly authentic leadership increases empowerment, thus leading to higher work engagement and innovative performance. But, while its effects are stronger in the GAS region and UK, authentic leadership proves to be a valuable tool even amongst Chinese employees. This insight is relevant for MNEs trying to transform their business successfully. Marketing managers and HR practitioners alike should foster authentic leadership in their organizations to empower employees. This will ultimately lead to higher degrees of innovativeness. Implementing authentic leadership as a major part of the corporate culture can contribute to the

success of corporations in a rapidly changing environment. The low cultural barriers to this specific leadership behavior make it especially attractive for MNEs. Personal exchange between leaders and managers, e.g. via short or long-term assignments abroad or international mentoring programs, may foster authentic leadership throughout the organization.

Authentic leaders are aware of their values and attitudes and show this in their daily actions (Avolio et al., 2004). While this is the main lever that authentic leaders use to exert a positive effect on their followers, it may also pose a risk for organizations. Teams might focus too much on their leader's values and start to deviate from the organization's values and goals. This is why top managers should carefully assess their organization's values before evaluating the current state of authentic leadership in their organization. A clear understanding of the organization's values and the leaders' commitment to

them is crucial. The implementation of leadership trainings to promote the authentic leadership style among management teams is the logical next step. This must be accompanied by effective measures that anchor an authentic leadership style on all management levels of the organization in the long term, e.g. systematic and regular 360° feedbacks.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. For example, only limited data was available from countries other than those listed above, especially from developing countries. The sample sizes for these countries allowed only for an ANOVA analysis instead of testing our hypotheses. ANOVAs found significantly higher values for some constructs in countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Serbia. It seems promising to take a closer look at the underlying causes so as to get a more complete picture of authentic leadership in an international context. Additionally, our model was not controlled for other possible influences on the dependent

variables. We therefore call for additional research in other countries with less developed economies and more comprehensive research models. Moreover, we strongly recommend that top managers consider cultural specifics and their effects when introducing authentic leadership in countries other than the UK, China or the GAS region.

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Conclusion

Authentic leadership is an effective leadership style in organizations that have to transform their business models and/or corporate cultures. It has a positive effect on employee empowerment and, thus, on work engagement and innovative performance. Although

authentic leadership shows slightly weaker relations to empowerment in China compared to UK and GAS, it does have an impact on those desired outcomes in each region. Hence, it is a valuable approach for setting up a common, global corporate and leadership culture. 

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