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EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE LEADERSHIP

Abstract

In 21st century organizations, the need for empowering approaches to leadership, such as coach and facilitator of dialogue has been advocated and the traditional command-and-control management challenged. A concept characterized by dialogue and inclusive and responsive forms of communication as well as involvement in decision-making is “communicative leadership”, used since a decade in Swedish private and public organizations. This study analysed how leaders perceive the contribution of communicative leadership to employee empowerment in a multinational business organization. Findings illustrate that leaders’ communication strategies in relation to employee participation, engagement and empowerment diverge in important ways. A communicative leadership strategy including an informal bottom-up approach involving dialogue and responsive communication behaviours invited employees to make their voices heard and participate in decision-making, and thus contributed to a higher level of employee empowerment. The findings of this study contribute to extend and modulate previous research on the outcomes of leaders’ communication, particularly transformational leadership communication behaviours. A communication-based conceptualization of employee empowerment is contributed, including employees’ abilities to voice concerns, influence work in dialogue and take individual action.

Keywords: Communicative leadership; employee empowerment; employee engagement

INTRODUCTION

There is growing awareness that leadership researchers need to focus more on the role of employees' agency, and stop treating leaders as superheroes with passive followers. In 21st century organizations, leaders face the challenges of managing a constantly changing internal and external environment, new communication technology extending the possibilities for employees' networking, and increased specialization of work, which demands highly skilled employees. In this situation, leaders are no longer experts in possession of all answers, but instead need to acknowledge and rely on subordinates' knowledge. Thus, the traditional command - and - control management is considered out-dated and alternative management roles are advocated, such as coach and facilitator of dialogue, which are consistent with more self-directed and empowering approaches to leadership (Raelin, 2013). This type of leadership is seen as a way to encourage employee autonomy, and is in contrast with approaches to leadership focusing on influencing employees in order to create engagement (Berson & Avolio, 2004; Breevaart et al., 2014).

Communicative lenses to the study of leadership have emerged during the past decade in which researchers stress that leadership is socially co-constructed, relational and dependent on the organizational and macro-social context (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Johansson, 2003). Communication in leadership processes is thus seen as enacted by both leaders and employees who actively participate in dynamic interaction (Kramer & Crespy, 2011). A recent conceptualization of "communicative leadership," included empowering communication behaviours of leaders and defined a communicative leader as: "one who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision making, and is perceived as open and involved" (Johansson et al., 2014). The need to encourage focus on employee communication is articulated (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch, 2011), although empirical research on communicative leadership as a type of empowering leadership communication has not yet surfaced. This study seeks to answer how communicative leadership may contribute to employee empowerment in a multinational business organization. To this end, theory on communicative leadership and employee empowerment was employed and interviews with leaders were analysed. The findings of this study contribute to extend and modulate previous research on the outcomes of leaders' communication, for example transformational leadership communication behaviours,

and provide a developed conceptualization of employee empowerment, including a communication aspect of empowerment.

LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

There is no shortage of leadership research and approaches – in fact, leadership is probably one of the most studied research topics in social science. Researchers studying leadership have focused on leaders' traits and styles, and developed situational, transactional, transformational, discursive and authentic leadership approaches, just to name a few (Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson, & Uhl-Bien, 2011). The plethora of theories are not surprising, since leaders beyond dispute are important for individuals, teams, and organizations, and the search for the efficient, highly performing organizations continues. Considering this body of theories and empirical findings, one can ask why do we need to continue to develop new approaches to the study of leadership? Primarily three reasons answer to the need of developing research on communicative leadership. First, there is the general argument that the world around us is constantly changing and so are organizations that consequently need suitable forms of leadership. In 21st century organizations, co-workers' understanding and insight, collaboration, and mutual learning are more important than ever before, and facilitated by empowering forms of leadership communication (Raelin, 2013). A second argument is that although leadership research is abundant, research on leadership communication is not. Few organizational researchers focus on communicative aspects of leadership (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). On the other hand, relatively few communication scholars study leadership (Barge, 2014; Fairhurst, 2007; Johansson, 2003; Madlock, Martin, Bogdan, & Ervin, 2007; Simonsson, 2002; Tourish, 2014). In comparison to other fields within the abundant leadership research, we thus see that leadership communication is understudied (Tourish & Jackson, 2008). A third reason is that leaders' communication can have positive as well as disastrous effects (Hargie & Tourish, 2009; Tourish, 2013). While recent important efforts have been concentrated around leaders' destructive communication (Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Tourish & Vatcha, 2005), there is still a need to focus on positive aspects of leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014), such as outcomes of leaders' communication in terms of employee empowerment.

LEADERSHIP DEFINED

Definitions of leadership mirror ontological and epistemological standpoints and are as abundant as the number of research approaches. Accordingly, definitions focus on individual leader characteristics, the leader-follower dyad, group and organization leadership etc. Here, leadership is seen as a dynamic process constituted in communication between people contributing to common activity. Just as communication has a constitutive role for organizing (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), communication has a constitutive role for leadership, which means that communication forms and produces features, relationships and outcomes. This is in line with research claiming that leadership is socially co-constructed, relational and dependent on the organizational and macro-social context (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Johansson, 2003; Simonsson, 2002). Communication in leadership processes is thus seen as enacted by both leaders and employees who actively participate in dynamic interaction (Kramer & Crespy, 2011).

COMMUNICATIVE LEADERSHIP

Communicative leadership is a concept used in Swedish organizations for over a decade with reference to leaders who “engage others in communication”. In Swedish language the concept is not equivalent to “communicating” leadership, meaning that all that leaders do is communicative (cf. Barge, 2014), since that is a long recognized assumption in most Swedish organizations. Rather, the concept connotes that communicative leaders are “better” communicators than leaders that are not being communicative; that is a quality component is characterizing communicative leaders. The concept is also above the individual level, carrying the assumption that it is not just an individual trait or behaviour, but communicative leadership can be systematically developed in an organization.

A recent theoretical conceptualization defined a communicative leader as: “one who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision making, and is perceived as open and involved” (Johansson et al., 2014, p. 155). Four central categories: *structuring*, *facilitating*, *relating*, and *representing* were found to cover important aspects of leaders’ communication behaviour within, between and outside organizational units. These include several “empowering” leadership behaviours, such as for example coaching, encouraging self-management, and upward influence. Eight principles of communicative

leadership were proposed, integrating research findings from quantitative and qualitative research traditions of leaders' communication behaviour and discourse. Several of these principles have empowering characteristics. The first principle highlights the coaching and enabling of employees to be self-managing. The third principle focuses on setting clear expectations through giving and seeking positive and negative feedback. The sixth principle concerns conveying direction and assisting others in achieving their goals through engaging in daily conversations and listening to employees' perceptions of their work situations and problems (Johansson et al., 2014).

The authors focus on leaders' communication behaviours served to develop a theoretical framework assisting in developing leaders' communication competence, however they stress that communication between leaders and employees is co-constructed and context-dependent, and that future research ought to focus more on employees' roles in the (social) co-construction of leadership.

COMMUNICATIVE LEADERSHIP VERSUS OTHER APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

There are certain leadership theories that seem similar to or overlapping with communicative leadership. However, some significant differences exist, therefore it is of interest here to compare similarities and differences with LMX-theory, LMCQ-theory, discursive leadership and transformational leadership.

LMX-THEORY

Leader-member relationship theory (LMX) concerns factors influencing the dyadic relationship between leaders and members and its outcomes (Graen, Rowold, & Heinitz, 2010; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Communication behaviour, in this tradition is seen to influence for example work group commitment (Abu Bakar, Dilbeck, & McCroskey, 2010). In this approach, leadership communication is based on the transmission view of communication, a linear process, in which a leader influences a person or group. This is different from the constructive stance of the communicative leadership approach, which also recognizes the influence on the leadership communication process of the organizational and social micro and macro contexts. Moreover, in the LMX tradition, members are traditionally seen as rather passive followers influenced by their leader.

LMCQ-THEORY

The LMCQ-theory extends and develops the LMX-theory by focusing on the communicative aspects of leader-member relationships. The purpose is to measure the quality of conversations between leaders and members in the workplace (Jian, Shi, & Dalisay, 2014). This approach also employs a psychometric perspective, however it is open for the dynamic and multidirectional character of the communication between leaders and members. Just as the LMX-theory, the LMCQ-theory focuses on dyadic relationships and does not account for communication between leaders and teams or larger units.

DISCURSIVE LEADERSHIP

Discursive leadership is grounded in social constructionism, and engages in conversation with leadership psychology through arguing the important influence of the social context where leadership is enacted and the leadership processes involving more actors than the leader alone (Fairhurst, 2007). Leadership is more than leaders' traits, and cognitions, dependent and independent variables. Both language and interaction on micro-level (little-d discourse) and talk patterns, ideas, logics and assumptions on macro-level (big-D Discourse) are constitutive of leadership processes according to this approach. The main assumptions of Communicative leadership are influenced by and dependent on discursive leadership theory, although Communicative leadership theory is more focused on leaders' responsibility and contribution to the co-constructed communication than on co-workers¹ and contexts.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Transformational leadership is the most studied and debated theory within the leadership field during recent years (Díaz-Sáenz, 2011). This theory states that leaders ensure organizational performance by transforming their followers through projecting charisma and creating compelling visions of the future. It is a theory that focuses on how leaders' behaviours influence their followers' commitment (Tyssen, Wald, & Heidenreich, 2014). Recent results highlight communication behaviours of leaders such as listening, and two-way communication in order to achieve their objectives. This may seem similar to and overlapping with the communicative leadership theory. However, the fundamental difference is that according to transformational leadership, the leaders lead and followers are to follow. That is, leaders have

¹ Co-worker is interchangeable with employee throughout the text.

the privilege of formulating the objectives that followers must comply with, and employee commitment is a means to achieve employees' supporting actions: "committed subordinates, unlike uncommitted employees, would try to do the right thing. However, committed individuals might at some point fail to recognize what needs to be done because they lack information" (Tyssen et al., 2014, p. 386).

In the communicative leadership approach, responsive behaviours such as listening and upward influence through involving co-workers in decision-making contribute to distribute power not concentrate it. The transformational leadership approach has also received severe criticism for its over-emphasis on leaders, and its resemblance with the creation of destructive cults where powerful leaders are followed by (blindly) devoted subordinates (Tourish, 2013).

ENGAGED AND EMPOWERED EMPLOYEES

A number of concepts highlighting the important role of employees in organizations have surfaced in the academic literature recently. *Employee engagement* (sometimes job/work engagement are used) and *employee empowerment* are both seen as influenced by *empowering leadership*. There are some fundamental differences between engagement and empowerment important to note.

Employee engagement has been much focused during the past ten years, due to the belief that it is associated with important employee and organization outcomes. Previous studies show that outcomes related to employee engagement are found on the individual level, for example job attitudes, job performance, health and wellness and decreased employee turnover intentions; and organizational level outcomes such as customer satisfaction, productivity, profitability, and safety (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Kahn defined personal engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). In other words, Rich, Lepine and Crawford (2010) conceptualized engaged individuals as investing their hands, head, and heart in their performance (cf. Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). These conceptualizations are more encompassing than for example job satisfaction or involvement.

Engagement is seen as a mediating variable, influenced by a host of antecedent variables, which mediates the relationship between antecedent

variables and work outcomes (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Leadership is identified as one of the important antecedent variables of employee engagement in addition to job resources and demands. For example, transformational leadership, empowering leadership, and leader-member exchange (LMX) have been positively related to engagement (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011; Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Saks and Gruman note that the influence of leadership has received less research attention than job resources and propose that certain forms of leadership (transformational, empowering, and LMX) is directly related to job resources and job demands, and indirectly related to the psychological conditions and different types of employee engagement (2014).

EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT

Employee empowerment is a concept related to participative management and employee involvement (Park, Kim, & Krishna, 2014), and the interest from researchers in valuing employees is increasing. Quinn and Spreitzer (1997) characterized employee empowerment as self-determination (freedom to choose how to do the work), meaningfulness (feeling the value of the job), competence (confidence in the ability to do work well), and impact (influence on their work) (cf. Spreitzer, 1995). Bowen and Lawler (1992) noted that when employees have knowledge about organizational performance and are allowed to make important decisions, it makes them take responsibility for and ownership of their jobs.

Empowering leadership has been defined as “the process of implementing conditions that enable sharing power with an employee by delineating the significance of the employee’s job, providing greater decision-making autonomy, expressing confidence in the employee’s capabilities, and removing hindrances to performance” (Tuckey, Bakker, & Dollard, 2012). This definition means that leaders share their power and allow greater decision-making autonomy for employees and express confidence in their work and capabilities. Tuckey, Bakker and Dollard saw that leaders who delegated responsibility and encouraged independent action as well as teamwork empowered their followers and created better working conditions for them – also, this resulted in increased engagement. Leaders thus, played an important role by creating the right work environment in which followers could thrive. Empowering leadership positively predicts newcomer creativity, and that this relationship is contingent on the organizational context (Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Park et al. (2014) highlight the important communication roles of empowered employees who contribute to innovative organizing. They note that an effective organization must have a system for employees to participate in managerial processes in order to help identifying emerging threats, opportunities, novel and creative ideas and practices.

To sum up, both employee engagement and empowerment are psychological constructs and both are related to individual's actions that contribute to enhancing organizational performance. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two concepts. Engagement reinforces the dominance of leaders over employees, while empowerment assumes that employees that are allowed freedom to act and influence their work contribute to a creative and innovative environment, and ultimately to organizational performance. In order to focus on employees' freedom to act and how leadership communication contributes to reducing leader domination, I will use the concept of employee empowerment in the following study.

Leadership communication aspects related to employee empowerment have not been sufficiently analysed previously. Consequently, the following two research questions are important to answer.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ 1) How do leaders perceive the relationship between their communication and outcomes on individual, team, and organizational level?

RQ 2) How can communicative leadership contribute to employee empowerment in organizations according to leaders?

ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

The study was undertaken in a large Swedish multinational manufacturing organization with headquarters in Sweden and operations and sales offices all over the world. The organization is well known for pioneering work in communicative leadership, and the strategic corporate communication department has been working with a Communicative Leadership Index, aimed at evaluating and developing leaders' communication competence since the end of the 1990s (Nordblom & Hamrefors, 2007). The organization was purposefully selected for this study, based on its history of working with the concept of communicative leadership, and also based on the participation in a research project with the purpose of defining and exploring the concept of communicative leadership.

METHOD

Interviews were chosen as research method due to the purpose of the study to focus on leaders' experiences and understandings of communicative leadership and employee empowerment, and how they perceive the outcomes of leaders' communication with employees (Tracy, 2013). Interviews are suited to this type of research questions of descriptive or exploratory type, that focus on "what" and "how" social processes are enacted in everyday life, and how individuals make their experiences meaningful (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012).

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger project² and consists of semi-structured interviews with 32 leaders in ten units of the business organization. The selection of leaders was designed in order to comprise a variety of roles and experiences (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, both male and female leaders representing top, middle and first line positions, as well as leaders of white- and blue-collar personnel from both sales and production units were approached and asked to participate voluntarily. Age was not a criterion used for selection. All interviewees are termed leaders following the convention of the organization; eight are senior managers, eighteen are middle managers, and six are first-line managers or team leaders. Leaders were interviewed in Sweden (17 men, 4 women), France (3 men), and the USA (7 men, 1 woman). Interviews with Swedish leaders were conducted in Swedish and translated into English. American and French leaders were interviewed in English or English/French and then translated. The proportion of women in the sample is 15,6%, which is close to the proportion of women in the organization 17%, and the proportion of female leaders, which is also 17% according to the Annual report. The interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed.

Individual interviews were conducted and adapted to leaders' ability to find suitable time for the interview. Before the interviews, they were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the material. They were asked a number of questions concerning their experiences of and opinions on leadership, communication, outcomes of leaders' communication, and what it means to be a "communicative leader". The one-on-one atmosphere invited leaders to reflect in-depth on their own experiences and philosophies of leadership (Harris, Li, Boswell, Zhang, & Xie, 2014).

² Communicative Leadership: Conceptualization, Analysis and Development of Core Competence. Funded by the Swedish Knowledge Foundation, grant nr 2010-0226. Directed by the author. [<http://www.miun.se/forskning/forskningscentra/demicom/core/kommunikativ-ledarskap>]

Interview dynamics can be constrained by the demands of time and place; particularly interviewing elites can be challenging and calls into question issues of accessibility, power, and control (Odendahl & Shaw, 2001). In this case some of the interviewed leaders may be termed business elites, however, leaders appeared to openly discuss their experiences without time pressure. There were no apparent differences in how leaders from top echelons or lower levels in the organization respectively disclosed their experiences and opinions. They seemed not to protect themselves, nor were they difficult to access. Most leaders rather provided wordy descriptions of both positive and negative experiences related to leaders' communicative actions, as well as attitudes, behaviours and characteristics of "communicative" leaders, which were compared to the theoretical concepts of employee engagement and empowerment.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interview data was analysed employing a qualitative iterative approach that involved comparing interviewees' practice based experiences of leaders' communication, and conceptualizations of communicative leadership with the theoretical concepts of employee engagement and empowerment (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). The analysis was carried out in three steps. In the first step, the transcripts were carefully read, and descriptions of leader communication outcomes were collected. In the next step the transcripts were scrutinized for concepts that characterized respondents' descriptions of communicative leaders, including meaningful words or descriptive sentences (Tracy, 2013). In the third step, these concepts and statements were compared to the theoretical concepts of employee engagement and empowerment, and illustrative quotes were collected.

RESULTS

Findings illustrate a number of communication outcomes that often were seen as interrelated, such as employee participation, engagement and empowerment through communicative leadership. The first research question asked how leaders perceived the relationship between their communication and outcomes on individual, team, and organizational level.

Table 1 details the perceived outcomes of leaders' communication. As illustrated in the table, many of these outcomes are positive and believed to contribute to good relationships between leaders and their co-workers, and can also be said to characterize a good work environment.

The outcomes were attributed to three levels: the individual level, the team or unit level, and the organizational level. In the table, individual and team level communication outcomes are related to employee engagement and employee empowerment, respectively, and separated, although in the discussions with interviewees these concepts were sometimes held together.

LEVEL	OUTCOMES OF COMMUNICATION CONTRIBUTING TO ENGAGEMENT	OUTCOMES OF COMMUNICATION CONTRIBUTING TO EMPOWERMENT
INDIVIDUAL	Trust Understanding Acceptance Motivation Morale Meaningfulness Job satisfaction Pride Knowledge (goals, markets' development, other teams' work, individual's/ teams' problems)	Participation Involvement Engagement Respect Voice (incl. critique) Courage Energy - Stress Influence Independent action Independent thinking Creativity Individual performance
TEAM	Understanding Problem solving Consensus Commitment Group cohesion Atmosphere Support Less conflicts Common objectives	Cross-pollination of ideas and knowledge Performance

Table 1: Individual and team outcomes of communication

COMMUNICATION OUTCOMES RELATED TO ENGAGEMENT

Leaders who thought communication was important in order to increase employee engagement talked about communication outcomes such as trust, acceptance, motivation, morale, meaningfulness, and job satisfaction. According to these leaders, engagement was an outcome of leaders' communication.

UNDERSTANDING AND BUY-IN

Leaders that related communication outcomes to engagement highlighted the importance to create understanding in order for co-workers to act in line with the strategy and objectives:

If you think about a long rowing boat where a leader sits in the front and a leader in the end with 40 people in the middle. If no one understands why, only the leaders will

row, and if they do not understand what and how they may row out of time. So it is about getting a good movement and then you must understand why. (F4Swe)

Understanding is also related to pride, according to a Swedish leader: “They understand our objectives and what they need to do /.../ they become proud to work for the company” (F15Swe)

One of the leaders with a French background, working in the USA, said that being a communicative leader means that you create understanding through being precise:

A good communicative leader, it means that you are very precise, in what the goals are for the year. The more people that understand, the more they can do their part and the more they feel that their actions are meaningful and that’s something that the company is going to benefit from. (F23USA)

Another leader in France had a similar experience and meant that clarity sets aside concerns: “there is clarity in our teams because a communicative leader ... there’s no real doubts. /.../ there are less things to be concerned about” (F30France)

Communicative leadership is not a Swedish concept, according to a French leader:

Communication is really the tool of leadership. I don’t think it’s based in Sweden, or with [Company name]. A leading company needs to have managers that are succeeding in driving the people in a good way. Communication is really the key to getting people involved and to follow you. (F31France)

This leader thinks that communication is the key to get co-workers to follow your ideas; another Swedish leader has a similar idea:

If you are a communicative leader you of course can get the team to follow you, to get the team to pull in the same direction” /.../ you buy the ideas easier, and the work gets done in a better way, I am totally convinced about that. (F13Swe)

These quotes all illustrate that these managers relate communication to something that a leader does in order to create understanding, compliance towards objectives, and a feeling of meaningfulness. In these quotes, the leader is active, and the employee role is the one of a more passive “follower”.

COMMUNICATION OUTCOMES RELATED TO EMPOWERMENT

The second research question asked how leaders perceive that communicative leadership contribute to employee empowerment in organizations. Leaders that emphasized communicative empowering strategies highlighted a substantial number of communication outcomes, for example co-workers' independent action, voice, and creativity. These outcomes were also related to involvement, participation and engagement.

INDEPENDENT ACTION

One of the female managers pointed to the freedom of action of co-workers when they are not kept within bounds by leaders' explanations: "If leaders are good at communicating with the employees they understand what they need to do and you save a lot of time because you do not need to explain" (F2Swe).

Another top-level leader details his way of creating teams that make decisions on their own:

I have created an informal management team consisting of team-leaders and architects and try to communicate through them /.../ I want these teams to be as selfmanaging as possible and agile in their work. And they have to make their own decisions to make progress. /.../ The only thing I communicated is the overall objectives and I participate in their project meetings to see what is happening. (F8Swe)

The expression to give the co-workers "free hands" that was used by two leaders illustrates that they have autonomy to come up with solutions and solve problems on their own: "If someone asks for help I always ask what they think, give them free hands. It is okay to come up with your own solutions. They know that it is not a good idea to come in and ask a lot of stupid questions if they can solve them on their own. I call that free hands" (F14Swe).

When leaders communicate to co-workers that they have "free hands" they are able to influence and make decisions on their own, and work autonomously even in stressful situations according to another leader (F16Swe). This kind of independent action, creates another type of employee engagement, than when the leader communicates what co-workers need to accomplish: "Leaders that are good at getting the team to think independently /.../ create a totally different employee engagement, when you have been thinking yourself and made a decision and carried it through" (F17Swe).

This kind of engagement is characterized by co-worker participation, according to another top level leader, who gives his subordinate leaders means to be communicative and involving:

You feel the participation, you are in the game /.../ through being good at communicating, I give my [subordinate] leaders means to communicate and motivate their co-workers and also feel that they are in the loop and have information and can contribute to the work. (F5Swe)

This type of involvement, where positive feedback is one communicative leadership strategy also create energy, said one of the female Swedish leaders: “You get energy if you understand that you contributed and feel that what you do is meaningful” (F10Swe).

Creative problem solving is another communication outcome related to empowerment: “When a leader is good at communicating, you get the right information for your job in the right time and the atmosphere gets problem solving, proactive, engaging and motivating, a positive spiral” (F11Swe).

Influence and participation depend on the way the leader communicates, according to a Swedish leader: “You have a real dialogue, you do not just stand and talk, people feel that they can influence” (F18Swe). It is not enough just to talk, but here he emphasizes a “real” dialogue, including listening and feedback, in order for co-workers to understand that they truly have influence.

VOICE

A number of leaders commented that communicative leadership was related to giving voice to co-workers, not just giving them information:

You can question if it is information that you want or if it is something else. I think you can inform until you die. I think there is a need to speak out on different important issues. You need to find forums where [co-workers] are allowed to talk about important issues, and that is something completely different than me standing there informing and telling stories. (F9Swe)

This leader detailed his experience and learning from collecting different input from co-workers:

I had an exercise today where we talked about a change process we are subject to. We sat down and discussed what

[people] see are the threats, possibilities and challenges in this change process. And all are in different places, [people] see different problems, and if you listen there is an enormous amount to learn. It is so easy for me as a leader to direct what can be said and not with my questions. What is possible to talk about and what is not. In that case there is no good communication. The more openly you can listen, and the more input you can permit, the easier it gets to say what needs to be said. (F9Swe)

This leader also thinks that if you do not involve co-workers, give them voice and listen to their knowledge and experience they will become frustrated and not feel well.

Leaders mentioned different communicative leadership strategies to give co-workers voice, for example to let co-workers take turns during weekly meetings, listen to perceptions and proposals, and have a “real” dialogue. Voice also contribute to individuals becoming engaged according to one of the American leaders:

“If you’re listening to them I think they feel like they have a voice in what goes on and they have a say in the direction of the company and the work that they’re doing. So I think that if you can communicate well on an individual perspective, you can get them engaged ... it’s a big advantage. (F25USA)

One of the first-line leaders told a story from the production unit, where they worked with Lean management, and standardization processes. Instead of coming with suggestions, he tried to get the co-workers to voice their ideas and come up with solutions themselves:

I left most of it up to the team /.../ I wanted them mainly to come up with the idea. And it took like three or four sessions, hour session each day, to come up with a plan. And now the guys are acting to the plan and actually it’s been a pretty good process with the team understanding what they need to do. And they came up with the idea so I know that the idea was brought in through them and wasn’t pushed down through me. Just with my help to communicate it to them. (F26USA)

This example illustrates the bottom-up approach to give the co-workers voice and influence their work situation. According to this leader, his communication strategy of facilitating their ideas created a more effective and sustainable behaviour change in the team. At the same time

it creates empowerment, since the co-workers themselves can decide how they want to shape the standardization process in their work environment. Giving voice to co-workers not only contributed to their empowerment, but also to improved decision-making:

“I think that you must be responsive. You must really listen to what they say. You should not oppose, just because you may know an answer but allowing them to say what they think. Perhaps come up with a proposal. In the end it can really be a better solution /.../ even negative criticisms can lead to something positive” (F32Swe)

This leader is open for criticism from his co-workers, and realizes that they may come up with a better idea than the leaders were anticipating.

CREATIVITY

Communicative leadership was also related to creativity by some of the leaders:

The good results of a very communicative leader are that your people will have the purpose of why they are doing certain things. You help them to release their initiative and creativity; they get more initiative to do what they are doing because they understand where they are going. The big picture /.../ Normally once you do have a job with no good communication, is kind of an order. People stop being creative, they just follow orders.” /.../ communication today is much more supportive. It’s more open dialogue, in order to achieve the results /.../ so if you understand how to have a good dialogue and good communication with your people, and allow them to work and give them some freedom for their initiative and creativity you reach that next stage. (F21USA)

Once again, having a good dialogue is mentioned as a communicative leadership strategy that has empowering outcomes, this time leading to creativity and initiative.

COMMUNICATION OUTCOMES RELATED TO THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

Organization level outcomes of communication were seen as stemming from leaders’ communication but also from employees’ engagement and empowerment, which in turn was perceived as depending on the forms and qualities of communication between leaders and employees. Leaders mentioned a number of organizational outcomes such as alignment to

strategy, fulfilment of objectives, effectiveness, organizational culture, decreased sickness rates and turnover, and increased profitability and competitiveness. Some leaders also discussed negative outcomes of deficient communication such as stress, morale issues and questioning of leadership.

The communication outcomes on organizational level were seen as linked to each other as a chain: “in the end it [leaders’ communication] improves the profitability and you get a good work climate, more positive and you have fewer sick leaves, not as high personnel turnover” (F15SWE). One senior leader expressed his experience of communicative leadership as directly impacting competition and business results:

You become more competitive, that is when you have a leader who is very communicative then you create, the company and co-workers are in consensus. You get the overall picture, with the [Company] hat on. /.../ And the bottom line is directly influenced. I have seen it in the actual figures. Those leaders who are very good communicatively get much more output. (F17SWE)

One of the American leaders commented on the relationship between communication and meeting goals and KPI’s, key performance indicators: “Well, I think you hit your goal at the end. /.../ So we hit all the KPI’s that we need to meet.” (F26USA). The KPI’s mentioned by this leader were safety, quality, delivery and earned time, hours per unit. None of the leaders advocated that communication does not make a difference for the organization as a whole, and several examples like the ones quoted above illustrated the perceived aggregated benefits of communicative leadership.

DISCUSSION

These findings add to existing knowledge on leadership and communication by investigating and demonstrating how leaders perceive the outcomes of their communication. Specifically, the relationship between communicative leadership and employee empowerment is focused. Employee empowerment (Park et al., 2014) has been advocated in response to the challenges of managing 21st century organizations where the traditional command- and control management is no longer appropriate considering the specialization of work and the skills of employees (Raelin, 2013). In this context, leaders who recognize that mutual learning and collaboration are more important than ever before, and venture to facilitate dialogue and encourage employee initiatives and autonomy are needed.

This type of “bottom-up”-leadership is in contrast with approaches to leadership focusing on strong charismatic leaders with compelling visions that are influencing employees in order to create employee engagement and organizational results (Berson & Avolio, 2004; Breevaart et al., 2014).

Findings illustrated leaders’ perceptions of the relationship between their communication and outcomes on individual, team, and organizational level to diverge in important ways. Some of the leaders illustrated more of a transformational approach to leadership in highlighting the importance of explaining the objectives to co-workers and reinforcing the need for them to understand in order to follow and become engaged (Díaz-Sáenz, 2011; Tyssen, Wald, & Heidenreich, 2014). This approach is in line with the findings of Berson and Avolio (2004) who emphasized transformational leaders’ ability to create agreement over organizational goals. Their listening, and open communication styles were used for the purpose of “conveying messages to followers” (p.642). Also LMX-theory espouses a transmission view of communication as a linear process to study the dyadic relationship between leaders and members, in which supervisory communication serves as a mediating “tool” to influence work group commitment (Abu Bakar et al., 2010). Leaders’ communication in this way reinforces the model of the “strong” and active leader and the passive follower. However, just as Sharma and Kirkman (2015) point out, transformational leaders may inspire, listen, and coach without exhibiting any empowering leadership including transferring control or power to subordinates. Even though transformational leadership behaviours were shown to influence work engagement (Breevaart et al., 2014), other factors may have greater impact on employee autonomy and employee engagement (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

Other leaders in this study advocated communicative leadership principles such as enabling employees to be self-managing, giving and seeking positive and negative feedback, listening to co-workers perceptions of their work situation and problems, and creating a good dialogue (cf. Johansson et al., 2014). It was clear that a communicative leadership strategy including an informal bottom-up approach involving dialogue and responsive communication behaviours invited employees to make their voices heard and participate in decision-making, and thus contributed to a higher level of employee empowerment (Park et al., 2014; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997). In this study, communicative leadership principles were empirically illustrated to be similar to what previous research termed “empowering” leadership behaviours, which emphasize sharing of power, providing greater decision-making autonomy and facilitating performance

(Sharma & Kirkman, 2015; Tuckey et al., 2012). Communicative leadership behaviours thus contribute to enhance our understanding on what leads to empowering leadership and highlight communicative aspects that are often neglected in organizational research.

Leaders in this study clearly expressed that empowering leadership behaviours which encourage employee autonomy are communicative, that is specific communicative actions like dialogue and listening involved co-workers in decision-making, gave them voice, means for taking action independently and being creative. Thus the findings reinforced the communicatively constituted, socially co-constructed, relational and context-dependent nature of leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Johansson, 2003; Kramer & Crespy, 2011).

The findings demonstrated that communication is an important factor both when it comes to both engagement and empowerment. Communication between leaders and co-workers was related to engagement and perceived to contribute to trust, motivation, job satisfaction, commitment and work atmosphere, just to name some of the outcomes mentioned by the leaders. Findings thus contribute to extend and modulate previous research where leadership is seen as influencing engagement, which in turn leads to work outcomes (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Clearly, it is not just leader behaviours, but leader communicative behaviours that create good relationships and engagement. Therefore, developed conceptualizations of engagement and empowerment that previously have been treated as psychological constructs need to include communication aspects that are largely missing in the literature today (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Tuckey et al., 2012; Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). To this end, the following definition of employee empowerment is proposed: employees' ability to voice their concerns, to influence their work in dialogue, and take independent action.

LIMITATIONS

This study has two important limitations. First, it only analysed leaders' perceptions of communication outcomes and the ways communicative leadership contribute to employee empowerment. Researchers were depending on getting access to organizational members and in this case, business organization representatives favoured interviews with leaders although, for research purposes, it would have been preferable to interview both employees and leaders. Obviously, employees could give better answers than leaders to questions concerning what empowerment means to them.

Second, results obtained from these interviews illustrate how leaders experience and perceive the outcomes of communication and communicative leadership. Just like in survey research, this kind of “reported” behaviour may be idealized to some or larger extent and not reflect actual practices. Thus, a mixed method approach, combining observations, discourse analysis and interviews (Johansson, 2003) would be able to confirm if espoused values are really reflected in daily communication.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While these findings explore how communicative leadership is perceived by leaders to contribute to employee empowerment in the forms of independent action, voice, and creativity, future research need to examine employees’ perspectives and perceptions on engagement and empowerment (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). Research studying leadership as a process and focusing on how individuals or groups communicate in practice, would enhance our understanding on how communicative leadership, and outcomes such as employee engagement and empowerment is co-constructed. Also, contextual and cultural factors are important to take into consideration, since we need to study when, how, and why organizations benefit from communicative leadership and employee empowerment and creativity (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Moreover, as suggested by Park et al. (2014), both organizational systems for encouraging employee creativity and participation in managerial processes; and the communication roles of empowered employees who contribute to innovative organizing are important future fields of research.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. It examined leaders’ perceptions of the relationship between leadership communication strategies, particularly communicative leadership, and outcomes on individual, group, and organizational level. Contributing to communicative leadership research, empirical findings demonstrate that dialogue and responsive communication behaviours was important prerequisites for employee empowerment, such as voice, which is important in order to create better decision-making and organizational learning (Adelman, 2012). According to leaders, a communicative leadership strategy invited

employees to make their voices heard and participate in decision-making, and thus contributed to a higher level of employee empowerment, as well as aggregated outcomes on the organizational level, such as profitability and performance. Moreover, the study also contributes new findings on leadership communication aspects related to employee empowerment, which have not been sufficiently analysed previously. Consequently, a new conceptualization of empowerment, including communication aspects was provided. Findings further illustrate that employee empowerment is socially constructed in communication between leaders and employees, dependent on leaders' communicative behaviours, and the socio-cultural context in their teams and organizations.

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