Why do the dogs stop barking? The helplessness of employee empowerment

By

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Date: Friday, 7 March 2008
Time: 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon
Venue: M802

All interested are welcome
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ABSTRACT

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Employee empowerment has become one of the most popular managerial concepts since the 1980s. Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990) proposed a theoretical model of psychological empowerment, which asserts that successful empowerment practices are those that can make employees feel being empowered. Later, Sprietzer (1995) empirically showed that people feel empowered when they experience meaningfulness, self-determination, ability to influence, and competence at work. Central to the theory is the idea that psychological empowerment is a broader form of intrinsic motivation that can be induced by various managerial practices such as participative leadership. And psychological empowerment is seen as an effective way to reduce helplessness experienced by employees and increase their sense of control (Sprietzer, 1995).

Building on attribution theory and the learned helplessness literature, I contend, however, that when employees become helpless, it would be more difficult for managers to induce their psychological empowerment. This is because whereas psychological empowerment is cognitive in nature and subject to short-term stimulations, helplessness manifests in a person’s attribution style that may persist over time and have prolonged influence on how he/she behaves and reacts to management practices.

Regression analyses on data collected from two independent samples consistently showed that helplessness in terms of uncontrollability (the extent to which people attribute the causes of negative events as uncontrollable) moderated the relationship between participative leadership and psychological empowerment. Specifically, participative leadership behavior is less effective in generating psychological empowerment for employees who tend to attribute negative events to factors that are uncontrollable than for employees who tend to attribute negative events to factors that are under their control. In Study 2, I found that the interactive effect of participative leadership and uncontrollability on objective task performance was mediated by psychological empowerment. These findings have pointed to a more fundamental explanation for the reasons why participative leadership often failed to generate feelings of empowerment and desirable work behaviors.