Perceived Delegation and Work Outcomes:  
The Moderating Role of Cultural Orientations in the Malaysian Business Context

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Abstract

We examined the moderating impact of cultural orientations on the perceived delegation-work outcomes relationships. Data were gathered from 434 Malaysian managers and their immediate supervisors from various manufacturing and service organizations. Supervisors rated subordinates’ job performance items, whereas subordinates rated perceived delegation, cultural orientations, and affective commitment scale items. The regression analysis showed a significant positive impact of delegation on work-related outcomes: affective commitment and job performance. But the impact varied with the type of subordinates’ cultural orientation—that is, the positive impact was found to be significantly stronger for employees with low power distance and moderate collectivism cultural orientations. Practical implications of the study findings and directions for future research are discussed.

Key Words: Delegation; Culture; Work Outcomes; Global Leadership
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Delegation is a process that involves assigning important tasks to subordinates, giving them authority and responsibility to make decisions with or without getting prior approval (Yukl, 2006). It is a “wonderful tool of efficiency” (Yukl, 2006) and imperative to empower subordinates by giving them a task that will stretch creativity, foster growth, and add a new dimension to their abilities. Delegation usually involves decision-making by an individual (Sim, Ansari, & Jantan, 2004), where the authority of making decisions is on the subordinate and it is not retained by the supervisor (Yukl & Fu, 1999). Unfortunately, findings concerning the relationship between delegation practices and organizational outcomes are mixed. While some studies (e.g., Henkin & Marchiori, 2003; Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998) indicate that delegation is often positively related to subordinate performance and job satisfaction, other studies (e.g., Webber, Morgan, & Browne, 1985) have noted the negative impact of too much delegation. Thus, the inconsistency in previous findings prompted us to search for moderators in the delegation-work outcomes relationships. We believe the cultural context is likely to be a potential candidate for affecting (modifying) the relationship between delegation and various work outcomes.

Thus the present study addresses the call for empirical examinations of the relationship between perceived delegation and work-related outcomes. Specifically, it contributes to the existing leadership literature in three important ways. First, while the relationship between delegation and employee outcomes has been advocated and observed, most of these studies have exclusively relied on a single, subordinate perspective. In the present research, we employ both perspectives—supervisor and subordinates. Having different sources of data has been strongly
recommended (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), as it is likely to minimize common method variance. Second, most previous studies have independently focused on the relationship between delegation and work outcomes and the relationship between cultural context and work outcomes. This study attempts to integrate these two relationships and help managers to recognize the importance of delegation in different cultural contexts. Third, the few studies that are available on the relationship between delegation and work outcomes have been conducted in the United States (Schriesheim et al., 1998) or more recently in Turkey (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2006). Thus, our study contributes to the leadership literature by testing the combined role of delegation and cultural orientations in work outcomes in a slightly different culture—the Malaysian context.

THEORETICAL BASES AND DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

Delegation and Work Outcomes

A review of the literature (e.g., Leana, 1986, 1987; Schriesheim & Neider, 1988; Schriesheim et al., 1998; Sim et al., 2004) on delegation indicates that researchers have followed two major lines of research—antecedents of delegation and consequences of delegation—in their deliberations. First, within the existing literature, however, only a few empirical investigations are available on the antecedents of delegation at the lower level of management. Generally, most antecedents have focused on the trait characteristics of the managers and those of the subordinates. It has been shown that delegation varies with the managers’ perceptions about their subordinates, the managers’ perceptions of their workload, and the importance of the decision (Leana, 1986). When supervisors have favorable perceptions of their subordinates, have more workload, and the decision is important, they are more likely to delegate. It has also been shown that delegation varies with the characteristics of the subordinates. For example, managers are
more likely to delegate to those subordinates who are competent (Leana, 1986), who share the same goals with management (Leana, 1987), who express interest in receiving increased responsibility (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), who have worked longer for their managers (Yukl & Fu, 1999), and who are managers themselves (Yukl & Fu, 1999). The nature of the decision such as the complexity of decision and types of decision (Ashmos & McDaniel, 1996) has been found to have influence over the decision to delegate. According to Ashmos and McDaniel, managers are less likely to delegate as the decisions increase in visibility, lateral implications, and multilevel influence. Research on the top-management level indicates that contextual factors such as organizational performance influence the CEOs’ decision on delegating the task to the subordinates (Richardson, Amason, Buchholtz, & Gerard, 2002).

The second line of research concerned itself with the consequences of delegation. Several researchers (e.g., Howard, 1997; Yukl & Fu, 1999) have pointed out the potential benefits of delegation to the individual as well as to the organization as a whole. Positive outcomes such as improved decision speed and quality, higher stress tolerance, greater subordinate commitment, greater motivation, and greater organizational innovation (Howard, 1997) have been found to strongly relate to delegation. This is the reason why Yukl (2006) has strongly advocated for the use of more delegation in the workplace. Subordinates desire delegation because they feel that they have control over their work and have increased feelings of self-efficacy of their abilities and skills (Henkin & Marchiori, 2003). However, not all subordinates would be comfortable with too much autonomy (Sim et al., 2004). A recent cross-national experimental study by Sim et al. (2004) indicated that informational delegation style received the highest rating on leadership perceptions in both countries—the US and Malaysia. This study compared the US and Malaysian managers on leadership perceptions of three different delegation styles: advisory (supervisor
provide recommendation to subordinates before subordinates make decision), informational (supervisor provide needed information to subordinates before subordinates make decision), and extreme (subordinates are fully in control of decision-making without any help from supervisors) (Schriesheim & Neider, 1988). Sim et al. found that subordinates prefer supervisor to play some part in the decision-making process, rather than letting the subordinates make decision fully on their own. They further reported that country culture plays a significant role in affecting the relationship between delegation and leadership perceptions. Their analysis indicated that Malaysian managers outperformed the US managers on leadership perceptions under the advisory delegation style condition. On the other hand, the US managers outperformed the Malaysian managers on leadership perceptions under the extreme delegation style condition. This finding clearly points out the need for adding some cultural dimensions to research on delegation practices.

The most comprehensive studies on the consequences of delegation were conducted by Leana (1986, 1987). In those studies, delegation was found to be significantly related to subordinates’ performance. According to Yukl (2006), delegation improves the decision quality, as the employees close to the “front line” will have a clearer view of the facts. As a result, delegation leads to better problem solving and decisions and hence increases the subordinates’ job performance. Yukl also reports that subordinates show greater commitment to the organization as a result of delegation.

Employee behaviors that can contribute to the effective functioning of an organization have long been of interest to researchers and practitioners (Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Various work outcomes such as in-role performance, extra-role performance, job satisfaction, and
organizational commitment have been studied (Hackett & Lapierre, 2004; Meyer et al., 2002) in order to indicate organizational success. Among the many outcomes at the individual level, organizational commitment and job performance are two of the widely studied and salient work outcomes in the field of leadership and organizational behavior. Therefore, we chose these two work outcomes in the present study.

We chose organizational commitment because it has been extensively studied in the past two decades, as it contributes substantial importance to managers in understanding employees’ work and non-work related behaviors (e.g., Hackett, Bycio, & Hausdorf, 1994; Randall, Fedor, & Longenecker, 1990). It has been found to be associated with absenteeism, turnover, job performance, stress, work-family conflict, and organizational citizenship behavior (see such reviews as those of Meyer et al., 2002). Although there are a few other conceptualizations of commitment, Mayer and Allen’s (1991) three-component model seems to be the most widely used in the current organizational literature. Even though there are three components—affective, normative, and continuance—of organizational commitment, only a few studies have investigated all of them within the same study (e.g., Cheng & Stockdale, 2003; Hackett et al., 1994; Kee, Ansari, & Aafqai, 2004; Randall, Fedor, & Longenecher, 1990). Most researches (e.g., Ansari, Lee, & Aafqai, 2007; Banai, Reisel, & Probst, 2004; Shaw, Delery, & Abdulla, 2003; Stinglhamber, Bentein, & Vandenbergh, 2004) have examined just one component--affective commitment. In the current research, we also focus only on affective dimension of organizational commitment, because this dimension has shown the most promise as a predictor of various work outcomes (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer et al., 2002).

In summary, substantial amount of empirical studies have indicated that delegation has positive effect on work outcomes such as job satisfaction, subordinate commitment, motivation,
and organizational innovation (e.g., Ansari et al., 2007; Howard, 1997; Schriesheim et al., 1998). Empowered subordinates feel that they have more control over their work and experience increased feelings of self-efficacy of their abilities and skills (Henkin & Marchiori, 2003). They perceive themselves as engaging in a meaningful work and, therefore, create and sustain a sense of purpose and provide an energizing connection to work. They tend to be more satisfied, involved, and productive (Henkin & Marchiori, 2003). Consistent with this argument, we predict that empowered subordinates will benefit their organization by being more committed and engaging in superior job performance. Thus, we offer the following hypotheses:

H1a: Perceived delegation is positively correlated with subordinates’ affective commitment reported by subordinates.

H1b: Perceived delegation is positively correlated with subordinates’ job performance reported by immediate supervisors.

Moderating Impact of Cultural Orientations

Overall, previous research (e.g., Henkin & Marchiori, 2003; Schriesheim et al., 1998) seems to be in favor of the use of delegation, as it positively relates to several work outcomes such as subordinate performance and job satisfaction. Yet there are some studies (e.g., Webber et al., 1985) that have noted the negative impact of extreme delegation. Thus, there may be likely moderators that would condition the relationship between delegation and work outcomes. According to some cross-cultural researchers (e.g., Erez, 1994), cultural value dimensions are presumed to moderate the impact of managerial practices on several employee behaviors. Following this theoretical perspective, Pellegrini and Scandura (2006) proposed that the relationship between delegation and job satisfaction should be different in Turkey from the United States. In addition, it has been found that the cultural context can modify the relationship
between the use of delegation styles and leadership perceptions (Sim et al., 2004). In other words, the work of Sim and colleagues clearly hints at the cultural context as a potential moderator. Hui, Au, and Fock (2004) indeed found power distance to moderate the effect of empowerment on job satisfaction such that empowerment had a stronger effect on job satisfaction in low power distance cultures (Canada) than in high power distance cultures (China). Some evidence (see, e.g., Bass, 1990) also exists that countries with low power distance favor and accept participative management whereas those with high power distance favor and accept autocratic styles. Based on these findings and theoretical arguments, we hypothesize the following:

H2a: Power distance cultural orientation moderates the relationship between perceived delegation and work outcomes (subordinates’ affective commitment reported by subordinates and job performance rated by supervisors) such that the delegation-work outcomes relationship will be more positive for subordinates with low power distance cultural orientation than for subordinates with high power distance cultural orientation.

H2b: Collectivist cultural orientation moderates the relationship between perceived delegation and work outcomes (subordinates’ affective commitment reported by subordinates and job performance rated by supervisors) such that the delegation-work outcomes relationship will be more positive for subordinates with low collectivism cultural orientation than for subordinates with high collectivism cultural orientation.

METHOD

Research Site, Participants, and Procedure

We included in our sample both manufacturing and service organizations located in Malaysia. The two sectors were almost evenly distributed (46.8% and 53%, respectively). The
manufacturing organizations were mainly composed of electronics and computer organizations. On the other hand, service sectors included organizations such as healthcare, financial sector, transportation, insurance, internet services, and telecommunications. The selection of diverse organizations was a deliberate attempt to make the survey findings generalizable in significantly different settings.

We distributed our survey questionnaires to 960 full-time employees (managers) and their immediate supervisors. In the process of distributing the questionnaires, managers (supervisors) were asked to prepare a code list with the corresponding name(s) of employee(s), and the subordinates’ questionnaires were numbered based on the code list before the questionnaires were distributed to the subordinates. The survey was coded so that the supervisor and subordinate responses were matched for statistical analysis. In order to protect the confidentiality of the respondents, completed questionnaires were returned directly to the researchers in sealed envelopes. We received usable questionnaires from 434 subordinates and their 380 immediate supervisors (a response rate of 45.21%).

Subordinates ranged in age from 25 to 44 years ($M = 34.42; SD = 8.07$). Over half of them were male (54.4%). The racial composition was rather reflective of Malaysia’s population with 50.7% Malays, 37.1% Chinese, and 6.7% Indians. Most managers were degree holders (49.1%) and high school (46.1%) graduates. About 38% had been with their present organization for less than 5 years, 27.9% had served their organization for 5 to 9 years, and 29.2% had served their organization for 10 years or more. Their average tenure with the current immediate supervisor was 4.36 years ($SD = 3.60$). With 6.7% representing the top level of management, majority were in the middle (45.6%) or lower (42.2%) echelon of management.
On the other hand, majority of the supervisors were in the age range of 25 to 55 years ($M = 38.29; SD = 7.52$). Over half of them were male (61.1%). Their racial composition was as follows: Malay = 42.2%; Chinese = 40.1%; Indian = 4.6%. Over 80% of the supervisors were degree holders (bachelor’s and above). Their average tenure with the present organization was 9.55 years ($SD = 7.53$). About 70% represented middle and top echelons of management.

In conclusion, supervisors were significantly older ($p < .01$) and better educated ($p < .01$) than their subordinates. As expected, their organizational tenure was significantly greater ($p < .01$) than their subordinates. However, the supervisors and subordinates were not significantly ($p > .05$) different in terms of gender and ethnicity.

**Measures**

Data were obtained from two sources. The subordinate survey included, in addition to demographic items, perceived delegation, affective commitment, and cultural orientation scales. The immediate supervisor survey included demographic items as well as job performance scale. Two sources of data were a deliberate attempt to avoid common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Except for personal-demographics, all other measures required the participants to indicate on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) the degree of their agreement or disagreement with each statement. The items in each scale were summed and then averaged to arrive at an overall score for the scale. Higher scores represent higher levels of each of the constructs.

**Delegation.** Perceived delegation was assessed with a 7-item scale (Yukl, Wall, & Lepsinger, 1990). Subordinates rated their level of agreement with each item. An example of delegation item is, “My boss delegates to me the authority to make important decisions and implement them without his/her prior approval.”
**Affective commitment.** Affective commitment was assessed with a 6-item, organizational commitment subscale developed by Stinglhamber et al. (2004). This measure was a modified version of the scale developed by Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993). Subordinates rated their degree of agreement with each of the six items. An example of affective commitment item is, “I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own.”

**Job performance.** The performance scale consisted of 7 items (Williams & Anderson, 1991). The current supervisors indicated their degree of agreement with each item. An example of performance item is, “… adequately completes assigned duties” and “… fulfills responsibilities specified in job description.”

**Cultural orientations.** Twelve items were used (Dorfman & Howell, 1988) to assess the cultural orientations of the subordinates: power distance (6 items) and collectivism (6 items). Dorfman and Howell developed this scale as an ongoing effort to extend Hofstede’s (1980, 1993) work to the individual level of analysis, so that it can be used at both the micro (individual) and macro (national) levels. Evidence regarding reliability, validity, and usefulness of the scale was found for research studies conducted in Taiwan and Mexico (Dorfman & Howell, 1988). Subordinates rated their degree of agreement with each of the 12 items. Sample items include, “Managers should seldom ask for the opinions of employees” (Power Distance) and “Being accepted by the members of your workgroup is very important” (Collectivism).

**Demographic control variables.** Subordinates provided information about their age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, level of education, organizational level, organizational tenure, tenure with the current supervisor, and the type of industry described in the questionnaire. Supervisors also provided biographical data similar to those collected from the subordinates.
Past research (e.g., Curry, Wakefield, Price, & Mueller, 1986; Hackett et al., 1994; Meyer et al., 2002; Organ & Lingl, 1995; Shore, Thornton, & McFarlane Shore, 1990; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998) suggests that age, gender, organizational tenure, and subordinate-supervisor dyadic tenure can all potentially influence affective commitment and job performance. Hence, these four variables were controlled in all hierarchical regression analyses to rule out any alternative explanations for the findings.

RESULTS

We are aware of no research that has previously used our study variables in the Malaysian context. Thus, to verify the distinctiveness of the measures, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (principal components analysis with varimax rotation)—including all items (perceived delegation, affective commitment, and cultural orientation scales) rated by subordinate employees. The analysis is reported in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1, the analysis constrained to four neat factors—Delegation, Collectivism, Power Distance, and Commitment, as intended—explaining a total of 66.2% of the variance, all eigenvalues exceeding 1.0, and factor loadings ranging between .44 and .88. The findings concerning neat dimensionality of the scales may be treated as evidence of discriminant validity of the measures as well as partial evidence against common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and intercorrelations of all variables. The information contained in Table 2 suggests that all measures have substantial
reliability coefficients. It can also be seen that measures are correlated as one would expect on theoretical grounds. In conclusion, results of the EFA, reliability estimates (coefficients alpha ranging from .77 to .91), and intercorrelations indicate that the measures have sound psychometric properties.

Table 2 about here

The hypotheses concerning main and moderating effects were tested by conducting two hierarchical multiple regression analyses—one for affective commitment and one for job performance. It was a 4-step hierarchical regression analysis—see Table 3. At step 1, we included all control variables. At steps 2 and 3, we entered predictor (delegation) and moderator (power distance and collectivism) variables, respectively. Finally, at step 4, we entered interaction terms (predictor X moderator). In a hierarchical regression analysis, a moderator was identified through interaction. For each interaction pair, scores on predictor and moderator were first converted to z scores and then a product term was formed. If the moderator hypothesis was to be confirmed, the beta weight of the product term (i.e., interaction) would be significant. Significant interactions were then analyzed graphically (Hunt, Osborn, & Larson, 1975)—see Figure 1.

Table 3 and Figure 1 about here

As can be seen in Table 3, H1a and H1b were fully supported from the data in that perceived delegation had strong positive impact on both indicators of work outcomes—
affective commitment (26% of the variance) and job performance (14% of the variance). Figure 1 clearly suggests that H2a also received full support from the data—that is, the impact of delegation on work outcomes was significantly moderated by power distance (Figures 1a and 1b). However, H2b (delegation X collectivism interaction) received limited support only for job performance (Figure 1c). The analysis (H2a) implies that power distance reduces the impact of delegation on both work outcomes. In other words, high delegation works best for subordinates with low power distance cultural orientation. It is less effective with employees who report high power distance. However, results for collectivism orientation as a moderator are not that clean, although interaction term is statistically significant. What seems to be evident is that the moderate amount of delegation works best for job performance regardless of the degree of collectivism cultural orientation.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the moderating role of cultural orientations (i.e., power distance and collectivism) in the relationship between perceived delegation and employees' work-related outcomes. Given this purpose, the study tested two major hypothesized relationships: (a) the relationship between delegation and work-related outcomes (affective commitment and job performance) and (b) the moderating impact of cultural dimensions on the delegation-work outcomes relationships.

The results of the present study contribute to the leadership literature in three ways. First, our results revealed that subordinates exhibit organizational commitment and superior job performance when they experience delegation in the workplace. This finding is quite consistent with those in the previous research (Leana, 1986, 1987). However, our findings are inconsistent
with Pellegrini and Scandura’s (2006) study where delegation was found to have non-significant impact on job satisfaction in Turkish subjects. Malaysian cultural context may be different from the Turkish culture. Evidence (e.g., Saufi, Wafa, & Hamzah, 2002; Sim et al., 2004) exists that Malaysian managers prefer their leaders to use participative and delegating styles. In addition, they rate autonomy as important contribution to effective leadership (Mansor & Kennedy, 2000). Thus, so far as delegation is concerned, Malaysia is very much similar to the US context (Ansari et al., 2007; Howard, 1997; Schriesheim et al., 1998; Yukl, 2006).

Second, our findings clearly suggest that subordinates’ cultural orientations significantly moderate the relationship between delegation and work outcomes--affective commitment and job performance. The analysis implies that for subordinates with low power distance cultural orientation, the impact of delegation on job performance and commitment would be significantly greater. Thus power distance orientation appears to complement the relationship between immediate supervisors and their subordinates in the determination of commitment and in-role behavior. Earlier studies were equivocal on the relationship between delegation and work outcomes. Some (e.g., Henkin & Marchiori, 2003; Schriesheim et al., 1998) reported that delegation was often positively associated with subordinate performance and satisfaction, while others (e.g., Webber et al., 1985) noted the negative impact of too much (extreme) delegation. Clearly, the inconsistent findings may necessitate the search for moderators. Given such previous findings, the present research adds to our understanding into the search for moderators in the delegation-work outcomes relationships.

Finally, the present research has discovered different roles of power distance and collectivism in the delegation-work outcomes relationship. The two dimensions do not interact similarly with delegation in predicting work outcomes. Thus, this finding supports the earlier
contention of Hofstede (1980; 1993) that though power distance and collectivism may be correlated value constructs, they might play different roles.

Despite substantive theoretical contributions, our study has some potential limitations. First, we collected data at a single point in time from supervisors and subordinates. The cross-sectional design certainly limits our ability to make causal inferences. Second, we employed just two criterion measures—commitment and job performance. We recommend that future research should examine a broader range of outcome variables, such as organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, and counterproductive behavior. Third, future research should also incorporate other cultural dimensions such as paternalism and masculinity as potential moderators of the delegation-work outcomes relationship. Finally, we recommend that researchers compare data from many different cultures on delegation and work outcomes.

All data limitations aside, our study has some obvious theoretical and practical implications. From the theoretical perspective, delegation leads to organizational commitment and job performance. It is interesting to note that delegation works in motivating subordinates toward positive behavioral responses. Our analysis suggests that supervisors should use delegation in order to be effective. It should, however, be noted that the effectiveness of delegation depends on the characteristics of the subordinates and the context in which it is used. This is consistent with Sim et al.’s (2004) cross-cultural study where Malaysian managers’ most preferred style was the informational style of delegation. That means too much delegation in Malaysia may be detrimental to work outcomes. The implication is that today’s expatriate managers must understand the culture of a country where they are going to lead a work team. For example, in a country with a large power distance and a high collectivism cultures (like Malaysia, India, and China), extreme delegation may not be functional, whereas extreme
delegation may be quite functional for a culture with low power distance and high individualism cultures (USA, Germany, and Canada).
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TABLE 1

Exploratory Factor Analysis Results—Subordinates Data
(Delegation, Affective Commitment, Power Distance, and Collectivism)

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<th>Collectivism</th>
<th>Power Distance</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
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<td>Delegation-6</td>
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Note. N = 411.
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Note. \(N = 411\); ** \(p < 0.01\); * \(p < 0.05\); \(^a\) dummy-coded variable (0 = female; 1 = male); Diagonal entries in bold are coefficients alpha; SIM = Single-item demographic measure.
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**Note.** *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01; * dummy-coded variable (0 = female; 1 = male).
FIGURE 1
Moderating impact of cultural orientations on perceived delegation-work outcomes relationships