

SHARED LEADERSHIP AND PROJECT SUCCESS: A MODERATED MEDIATION MODEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AND JOB AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Purpose: As project-based work becomes increasingly complex, traditional centralized leadership often falls short. Based on the Theory of Social Exchange, By examining the moderation of work autonomy and the mediation of psychological empowerment, this study investigates how shared leadership influences project success.

Design/methodology: A quantitative, cross-sectional approach was utilized. The data were collected from 278 project professionals across various sectors in Pakistan and analyzed using regression and moderated mediation techniques.

Findings: Shared leadership influences project success significantly. Psychological empowerment partially mediates this relationship. Furthermore, moderation role of job autonomy between psychological empowerment and project success, indicates that the benefits of empowerment are maximized in highly autonomous environments.

Originality/value: The study broadens the cross-cultural generalizability of shared leadership theory by validating a moderated mediation model in a high power-distance, emerging economy context. It highlights the critical boundary condition of job autonomy, proving that empowerment without structural freedom yields suboptimal outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations increasingly rely on project-based work to navigate complex, knowledge-driven environments. In these dynamic settings, traditional, centralized leadership models often act as bottlenecks, failing to leverage the distributed expertise of team members. Consequently, project management literature has shifted towards a collaborative approach of shared leadership where the impact is disseminated between members of the team

rather than being condensed in a single delegated leader (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Carson et al., 2007). While empirical research findings indicates that shared leadership, team commitment, creativity, and overall project success (Hoch, 2007; Nicolaides et al., 2014), recent studies further highlight its importance in enabling collaboration and adaptability within increasingly complex project environments (Chamberlin et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). Despite these advancements, the underlying

psychological mechanisms and contextual boundary conditions that drive these outcomes remain underexplored.

To evaluate this gap, this study investigates how and when shared leadership translates into project success. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), we propose that distributing leadership signals trust and confidence in team members, prompting them to reciprocate with higher commitment and performance. Specifically, we identify psychological empowerment as the critical mediating mechanism. When team members experience shared leadership, they are likely to comprehend their work as more purposeful, feel more reliable, and experience greater autonomy and influence (Spreitzer, 1995). This psychological empowerment, in turn, drives the proactive behaviors and creative problem-solving essential for project success. Recent evidence also supports the role of psychological empowerment in translating collaborative leadership into improved team behaviors and performance outcomes (Wang et al., 2024). However, empirical data validating this mediating pathway, particularly in non-Western contexts, remains scarce.

Furthermore, leadership efficacy does not occur in a vacuum; it is highly contingent on the organizational context. We introduce job autonomy—the degree of discretion teams have over task execution, scheduling, and resource allocation—as a crucial moderating variable (Langfred & Moye, 2004). High job autonomy provides the structural freedom necessary for empowered teams to act on their shared leadership, whereas low autonomy may constrain these benefits. This dynamic is especially critical in emerging economies like Pakistan, where organizational cultures are typically characterized by high power distance, centralized decision-making, and hierarchical management (Han et al., 2024; Ud Din et al., 2022). The generalizability of shared leadership models, predominantly developed in Western, individualistic cultures, to such hierarchical and collectivistic contexts therefore remains

uncertain. Moreover, recent project management research suggests that contextual factors, particularly trust and organizational support, play a critical role in enabling shared leadership within project-based organizations.

Hence, in this study, the effect of shared leadership on project success in organizations that works on projects in Pakistan is tested through moderated mediation model in which psychological empowerment will be the mediation variable and job autonomy will be the moderation variable. This research has three major contributions to make. First, it unpacks the "black box" of shared leadership by empirically validating psychological empowerment as the motivational mechanism linking distributed leadership to project outcomes. Second, it establishes job autonomy as a vital boundary condition, clarifying when shared leadership is most effective. Finally, it extends the cross-cultural generalizability of shared leadership theory by providing empirical evidence from a developing, high power-distance economy, offering actionable insights for project managers operating in similar hierarchical environments. The theoretical background and hypotheses of the paper are explained in the next part of the paper followed by the methodology, the results, and the discussion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Theoretical Background: Social Exchange Theory

The explanation that underlies the explanation of how shared leadership affects employee attitudes and project outcomes is called Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET postulates that workplace relationships develop as a result of exchange processes where people react positively to positive treatment from others (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Within project teams, the delegation of leadership responsibilities signals trust, respect, and confidence in team members' capabilities. Such positive exchanges encourage employees to reciprocate through greater

commitment, active participation, and behaviors that support project objectives. Recent project management research also emphasizes that collaborative leadership strengthens trust and collective responsibility, enabling project teams to perform more effectively in complex environments (Müller et al., 2024). Therefore, SET offers a strong theoretical explanation for understanding how shared leadership creates psychological and behavioral conditions that ultimately contribute to the success of project.

2.2 Shared Leadership and Project Success

Shared leadership is the distributed leadership influence among all the team members, in which people commit to their leadership roles depending on their leadership specialized skills and the needs to execute the project, instead of a formal leader (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Carson et al., 2007). As projects become increasingly knowledge-intensive and uncertain, organizations require leadership approaches that promote collaboration, flexibility, and collective problem-solving. In this regard, shared leadership enables project teams to capitalize on diverse expertise, improve coordination, and make more informed decisions (Nicolaidis et al., 2014; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017).

Recent studies further suggest that shared leadership enhances the team adaptability, creativity, and knowledge integration, thereby improving project performance in dynamic environments (Chamberlin et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). By encouraging team members to actively contribute to leadership and deliberation processes, shared leadership strengthens ownership, accountability, and commitment toward project goals. These collaborative behaviors facilitate timely responses to project challenges and contribute to broader dimensions of project success, including stakeholder satisfaction and strategic value creation (Joslin & Müller, 2016). Grounded on this evidence, the given hypothesis is suggested:

H1: Shared leadership is positively related to project success.

2.3 The Mediating Role of Psychological Empowerment

The psychological empowerment reflects organizational members' intrinsic motivation and their perception that their work is meaningful, they possess the necessary competence, have autonomy in decision-making, and can influence organizational outcomes (Spreitzer, 1995). Shared leadership is expected to foster these perceptions by encouraging participation, recognizing employees' expertise, and providing greater responsibility in project activities (Zhu et al., 2018; Fareed et al., 2023). When individuals are trusted to contribute beyond their formal roles, they become more confident, engaged, and motivated to perform effectively.

In the view of Social Exchange Theory, employees who experience trust and support through shared leadership are likely to reciprocate by investing greater effort in achieving project objectives (Blau, 1964). Recent empirical evidence also indicates that psychologically empowered employees demonstrate stronger initiative, collaboration, and creative problem-solving, all of which contribute to superior project performance (Wang et al., 2024). Consequently, psychological empowerment is expected to function as underlying mechanism through which project success get enhanced by shared leadership.

H2: Shared leadership is positively related to psychological empowerment.

H3: Psychological empowerment is positively related to project success.

H4: Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between shared leadership and project success.

2.4 The Moderating Role of Job Autonomy

Although psychological empowerment motivates employees to contribute toward project goals, the extent to which this motivation translates into successful project outcomes relies on the extent of job autonomy available within the work environment. Job autonomy refers to employees' freedom to determine how and when work activities are performed (Langfred & Moye,

2004). Greater autonomy enables project members to utilize their knowledge, exercise initiative, and implement innovative solutions without unnecessary procedural constraints.

Recent management research suggests that autonomy strengthens employees' ability to convert motivation into effective performance by providing greater discretion in task execution and decision-making (Han et al., 2024). Conversely, highly centralized work environments may restrict employees' ability to apply their skills despite feeling psychologically empowered. This issue is particularly relevant in developing economies, where hierarchical organizational structures often

limit employee discretion (Ud Din et al., 2022). Accordingly, job autonomy is expected to strengthen the beneficial effect of psychological empowerment on project success by providing an environment in which empowered employees can effectively apply their capabilities.

H5: Job autonomy moderates the relationship among psychological empowerment and project success, in such a way that the positive relationship is stronger when job autonomy is high.

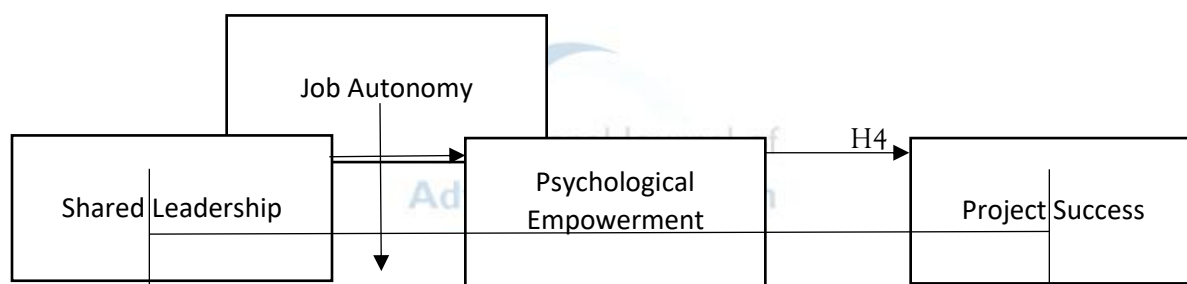


Figure 01 Conceptual Framework of Study Variables

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sample

The study at hand employed data driven research design with single time point survey design to identify the proposed relationship among the study variables. The study employed a deductive method, which is in line with the positivist research paradigm, hypotheses generated from Social Exchange Theory (SET) were tested with the data obtained from employees who work in project-based organizations (Saunders et al., 2019). The research focused on project professionals employed in various organizations across Pakistan, where project work is increasingly common and organizational structures remain predominantly hierarchical, providing an appropriate context for examining the effectiveness of shared leadership.

The data were gathered using a well designed questionnaire through a purposive sampling technique and a convenience sampling technique. Purposive sampling verified that only individuals with experience of working in project teams participated in the study, while convenience sampling facilitated access to respondents due to the non-availability of a extensive sampling frame for project professionals in Pakistan (Etikan et al., 2016). In total 500 questionnaires were distributed, among which 287 fit for analysis responses were collected as received, generating a 57.4% response rate. Participation was completely voluntary, and respondents were guaranteed that their professional/personal identities and responses would remain confidential. These procedural measures were adopted to encourage honest

responses and minimize the possible impact of common method bias.

3.2 Measures

Previously validated measurement scales have been used to ensure the psychometric properties of all constructs. The items were all adapted from existing studies and scaled on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

Shared Leadership was evaluated using the 18-item scale constructed by Pearce et al. (2013). The instrument measures the degree to which leadership responsibilities are shared among members of the team through shared decision autonomy, mutual influence, and collective responsibility. A representative item is: "Team members share responsibility for leadership roles."

The 9-item scale developed by Spreitzer (1995) was used to assess Psychological Empowerment. The scale measures the sense of significance, proficiency, self-determination, and impact, hence the worker's intrinsic motivation and perceived control over their work. An example item for the scale is: "I have a lot of freedom in performing my duties." Job Autonomy (Langfred and Moye, 2004, 9 item scale). The instrument measures the discretion employees have in organizing their work, choosing their work method and making decisions about how to carry out the task. One of the representative items is: I have freedom to perform my work tasks. The success of the project was analyzed based on a multidimensional scale developed based on the existing project management literature, which consisted of nine items (Shenhar et al., 2001; Serrador & Turner, 2015; Martens & Carvalho, 2017). The instrument goes beyond the traditional tripartite view of project success: cost, time, and quality, and includes organizational performance, business value, strategic benefits, learning, and long-term organizational outcomes. By integrating the multiple dimensions, this approach fits with the modern understanding of the fact that successful projects create value that

extends beyond delivery of the project itself (Silvius & Schipper, 2014). Representative item: The project was a positive influence on the organization's performance."

3.3 Data Analysis Strategy

Psychological Empowerment was assessed by Spreitzer's nine item scale (1995). The scale measures significance, proficiency, self-determination, and impact, which are aspects of autonomous motivation that help to understand how much employees feel they have control over their work and therefore how much they are motivated. An example item is: "I have a lot of freedom about how I perform my job." Job Autonomy using the nine item scale from Langfred and Moye (2004). All data were analysed in SPSS version 30. The first evaluation was the framework for the purpose of determining the psychometric properties of the framework including Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Second, the framework was tested to investigate the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships. Specific technique, that is, Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) / Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) bootstrapping with 5000 resamples, was implemented to calculate the mediating role and the moderating effect of psychological empowerment and job autonomy. This method is strong for testing complex moderated mediation models, and gives confidence interval estimates of indirect effects.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Study was conducted in the context of ethical standards of scientific research. Before the data collection, ethical approval was obtained from Riphah International Islamic University. All participants were given informed consent. The cover letter to the questionnaire made it clear that the study was to find out the aim of the research, voluntary participation and the legal entitlement to terminate participation at any time without penalty. No personal data was acquired

and all responses were de-identified and housed on an access controlled server, only accessible by the research team.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Preliminary Analyses and Reliability

The SPSS program (30) was used for data analysis. Meaning that the data set was first checked for missing data and data outliers, which yielded an N = 278 of valid data to be used for hypothesis testing. The sample was of high diversity with 52.9% identified as female and 47.1% identified as male. Most of the surveyed individuals were in the age stratum 20-35 years (82.0%) and had 1-10 years of professional experience (62.5%). In further analyses, the age variable was used as a control variable, but proved to be unimportant and ruled out the results were due to this variable alone. Cronbach's alpha was implemented to test the reliability of the measurement scales. The internal consistency of

all constructs was excellent, exceeding the recommended .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994): Shared Leadership ($\alpha=.987$), Psychological Empowerment ($\alpha=.961$), Job Autonomy ($\alpha=.972$) and Project Success ($\alpha=.968$).

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Means and Pearson correlation coefficients are given in table 1 for all study variables. The correlation among all the variables was significant and positive at the $p<.01$ level. Shared leadership was positively correlated with psychological empowerment ($r=.815, p<.01$), job autonomy ($r=.627, p<.01$), and project success ($r=.748, p<.01$). Moreover, psychological empowerment was positively and highly correlated with project success ($r=.773, p<.01$). These initial correlations are useful to support the proposed theoretical correlations.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (N = 278)

Variable	Mean	1	2	3	4
1. Shared Leadership	3.83	1			
2. Psychological Empowerment	3.91	.815**	1		
3. Job Autonomy	3.72	.627**	.774**	1	
4. Project Success	3.94	.748**	.773**	.625**	1

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

We used model 4 from the PROCESS macro for mediation testing and model 14 of the PROCESS macro for moderated mediation testing to test for the hypothesized direct, mediating, and moderating relationships.

Direct Effects (H1, H2, H4)

Hypothesis 1 was stated and assumed as there is a positive relationship among shared leadership and the project success. The regression analysis results implied that there was a significantly positive effect ($\beta=.75, p<.001$) and explained the variance of the project success ($R^2=.641$) by 64.1%. Therefore, the hypothesis H1 is accepted. Based on hypothesis 2, it was expected that

shared leadership would be a positive factor that would facilitate the psychological empowerment. The results indicated a strong positive correlation with high significance ($\beta=.79; p<.001$) that proved the support for H2. Hypothesis 4 assumed that there is a positive relationship between psychological empowerment and project success. This direct effect ($\beta=.50, p<.001$) was further confirmed by the analysis which validated H4.

Mediating Effect (H5)

Based on the above, Hypothesis number five was set as follows: "Psychological empowerment plays a mediating role between shared leadership and project success. A bootstrapping procedure (with 5,000 resamples) was used to test the indirect

effect. The analysis showed that there was a significant indirect effect of shared leadership on project success through psychological empowerment (Effect = .39, SE=.08, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.22, .55]). This reveals that there is a “partial mediation” in that the affect of shared leadership on project success was still present when the mediator was added in. So, H5 is accepted.

Moderating Effect (H3)

Based on the theory, Hypothesis 3 was that the effect of psychological empowerment on project success (or indirect effect) will be moderated by job autonomy. The psychological empowerment and job autonomy cross term was added to the regression model. Job autonomy had a significant interaction effect with psychological empowerment ($\beta = .49$; $p < .01$), with psychological empowerment being more of a positive influence on project success in situations that were high in job autonomy. The relationship was stronger under the conditions of high autonomy as confirmed by simple slope analysis. Therefore, H3 is supported.

4.4 Summary of Hypotheses

All five proposed hypotheses were supported by the data. The results validate that shared leadership positively and directly affects project success through creating psychological empowerment and further, that these effects are greatly enhanced in environments with high levels of working autonomy.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has focused the influence of shared leadership on project success in project-based organizations with a distinct consideration on studying the mediating role of psychological empowerment along with the moderating role of job autonomy. This study offers robust empirical evidence on the impact of distributed leadership grounded on the Social Exchange Theory (SET) on project outcomes. Importantly, the study contributes to understanding the “black box” of this relationship by demonstrating that shared

leadership results in success because it fosters a psychologically empowered workforce, and that these benefits are boosted when there is a relatively high degree of structural autonomy.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The analysis has range of unique and significant involvement to the existing literature on leadership and project management. Firstly, it builds on the existing knowledge in shared leadership by exploring the psychological mechanism that can influence project outcomes. There is a consistent correlation between shared leadership and team performance in previous studies (e.g., Nicolaides et al., 2014), but the processes by which shared leadership affects team performance are relatively under-investigated. This study provides the empirical evidence by supporting the proposition that shared leadership has a positive effect on the success of projects by improving employees' intrinsic motivation and sense of ownership (Spreitzer, 1995), and by identifying psychological empowerment as a mediating mechanism. Second, the study adds to the growing literature on contextual leadership by showing the importance of job autonomy as a scope condition. The results indicate that the positive outcomes of psychological empowerment are more likely to be obtained when workers have sufficient autonomy to apply their knowledge and make decisions about their work. It highlights the importance of congruence between leadership and organization structures for optimal project results, and helps understand the context of effective shared leadership.

Finally, this study contributes to the empirical evidence on shared leadership by examining the proposed relationships in Pakistani project-based organizations that are characterized by hierarchical management structures and relatively high power-distance norms, unlike the Western contexts where shared leadership has mostly been explored (Carson et al., 2007; Pearce & Conger, 2003). The present study extends the incipient debate on the generalizability of collaborative leadership approaches across different

organizational and cultural contexts by providing evidence from an emerging economy.

5.2 Practical Implications

The finding of this analysis have several practical applications for project managers and organizational leaders who aim to improve project performance through collaborative leadership practices. First, organizations should build leadership styles that should foster higher levels of participation, information sharing and collective decision making, not just formal authority in the hierarchy. Allowing team members to participate according to their expertise can lead to better collaboration and project performance.

Second, organizations should invest in practices that enhance psychological empowerment of employees. Involving employees in decision-making, assigning meaningful responsibilities, rewarding individual contributions and providing constructive criticism can improve employees confidence and commitment toward project objectives. Such practices are likely to foster greater initiative, proactivity in problem-solving and involvement within project teams.

Finally, the results are evidence that leadership practices need to be accompanied by the relevant organizational structure to benefit from psychological empowerment. Thus, to gain the substantial benefits from psychological empowerment, it is important to allow workers to make decisions at work and take responsibility for project outcomes. It implies that for the project team, the degree of freedom and independence should be increased. In addition, to achieve more significant results, collaborative leadership should be associated with supportive work structures which would ensure the required level of coordination and responsibility.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Despite the fact that ongoing research provides essential guidelines on the interrelationship among shared leadership and project success, a number of limitations of the study should be

mentioned. The study has some limitations, the first being the research design employed in the study. Using single time point design prevents establishing the causal relationships between the variables of interest. The changes in shared leadership practices and employees' psychological empowerment may occur in the process of project implementation. In view of this, future research on the subject could consider time lagged design to analyse the association of shared leadership and psychological empowerment on the project success over time.

Secondly, the researchers utilized self-reported data in their study which might result in a common method bias. Although the authors attempted to address this issue by using a reliable data collection procedure, future studies should attempt to use alternative methods to self-reports to measure the variables of interest. For instance, the following research could include supervisor's reports or focus on other aspects of the project realization, such as its objective accomplishment.

Finally, while this study demonstrates the mediating capacity of psychological empowerment, future studies should explore other potential variables that could be impacted by shared leadership practices. Moreover, the next empirical studies could attempt to integrate such variables as project complexity, organizational culture, and psychological safety in teams, and work environment. It is vital to identify the impact of shared leadership on these variables in various professional settings and countries.

5.4 Conclusion

The objective of this case study is to analyse the indirect relationship between shared leadership and project success through psychological empowerment and to examine the moderating effect of job autonomy on the relatedness among shared leadership and project success. Data were gathered from 429 Pakistani employees working in project-based organizations and analysed; the results showed that there is a significant association between shared leadership and project

performance. This might be done directly via increased psychological empowerment of employees, and indirectly via the mediating effect of the latter. Moreover, the findings indicated that psychological empowerment positively influences project success with job autonomy having an important role. The general analysis revealed that a shared leadership and facilitating contextual factors are necessary for effective project management. Through the use of theoretical concepts of the social exchange perspective and by incorporating current trends reported in the project management literature, the study introduced novel ideas regarding the link between the theories of leadership, variables related to employees, and the factors for project success in project-based organizations.

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