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Thank you for this and have a good read!

Authors,
Ausland & Borgen

Content

Abstract

In this master thesis we researched the relationship between the four dimensions of psychological empowerment and followers' openness towards change during the COVID-19 pandemic. By collecting data from a municipality in Norway we received responses from individuals without personnel responsibilities, hence the followers. As well as individuals with personnel responsibilities, hence the leaders, that have been in a situation with radical change and uncertainty. Thus, responses that reflected the reality of everyday work life in an organization that was a key player in dealing with the pandemic in several different sectors (e.g., schools and kindergartens, health- and social services in the municipality).

To understand the relationship between the four dimensions of psychological empowerment and openness toward change, we applied a regression analysis to look at each variable. Our findings indicate that self-determination and meaningfulness both have a positive relation with openness toward change. In addition, did the results indicate that the followers reported the most with openness towards change. However, as our measures for this study were not created with enough precision and only have similarities to the scales created by Spreitzer (1995), there are several limitations and a significant reduction in the reliability related to the results.

Keywords: empowering leadership, the dimensions of psychological empowerment, organizational change management, openness towards change.

Introduction

Organizational change management has as a goal to improve the organization by changing how the individuals work (Voehl & Harrington, 2017). When organizations make big changes, this will of course affect its followers and leaders and there will be individual differences to how the followers perceive the changes the organization implements. Research has proven that well planned changes usually increase followers' well-being at work. Hence, when planning for change, you make the changes more predictable, which makes it easier for followers to adapt to the changes. On the other hand, change can damage the follower's well-being if the change is perceived as unpredictable such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Thus, making it important for the followers in the organization to have positive attitudes towards the change implementation.

Openness towards change is highly reliant on readiness to change, which Armenakis et al. (1993, p. 681) define as *"the cognitive precursor to the behaviors of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort",* which is also proven as crucial to decrease resistance (Schein, 1979). Thus, followers' openness towards change and crisis responses are crucial for organizational change management to succeed with their change implementations. Obtaining followers displaying a positive attitude towards change is more likely if the followers experience good work relationships, organizational commitment, information sharing and a well-planned change (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). The literature on openness towards change states that there are several factors during the change implementation that affects the followers' attitudes, such as culture and climate, and the scope of the changes. However, according to (Devos et al., 2007) a recurring theme is the leadership and its characteristics in the organization, which gives the organization the ability to create positive attitudinal outcomes for the followers.

A theory emphasizing the importance of these kinds of characteristics are empowering leadership. According to Cheong et al. (2019) empowering leadership is a leadership style known to enhance motivation through specific leadership behaviors such as developmental and autonomous support. Hence, achieving a state of psychological empowerment through its four dimensions (Spreitzer, 1995). Reaching a state of psychological empowerment has many positive attitudinal outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, affective commitment, and reduced turnover intentions and strain (Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011).

Empowering leadership has been researched widely, and the research has mainly had focus on the positive outcomes empowering leadership creates whilst there has been little attention paid to its negative outcomes. On an individual level studies have proven many positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, as well as leader-oriented outcomes, follower commitment, and role clarity (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). Moreover, empowering leadership has been researched in relation to change, especially focusing on change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior, but also readiness to change. Proving empowering leadership behaviors as crucial for change-oriented OCB (Li et al., 2016) while the results concerning empowering leadership and readiness are divided (Muafi et al., 2019).

From 2020 to the beginning of 2022 the world was highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH) the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was discovered in January 2020 but is assumed to have been transmitted to humans from bats in December 2019. In March 2020 Norway went into a lock-down, and the organizations had to mobilize for a different way to work. As a result, many employees and leaders have worked from home and telecommuted, while others have had jobs where their presence has been required.

As a response to the pandemic TISK was implemented in the municipalities. TISK involves testing individuals with coronavirus symptoms, isolating individuals with a positive test, infection tracing, and finally quarantining them (NIPH, 2022). In addition to strict infection control rules, Norwegian municipalities have always had to be prepared to readjust and change quickly based on the unpredictable situation it has been in. The municipalities had to reorganize lots of their health personnel to work with testing, isolation, infection detection, quarantine, and vaccination (TISK). Furthermore, it was also necessary to reallocate former health personnel from other positions in the municipality back to the health services.

As there is little research connecting empowering leadership and openness towards change, we conducted a study researching the four dimensions of psychological empowerment by Spreitzer (1995). Hence, self-determination, meaningfulness, impact, and competence at the workplace. We believe that the positive attitudinal outcomes that are achieved with psychological empowerment may help explain the followers' openness towards change during the pandemic. Thus, this study aims to understand which of these dimensions has a significant

relationship with an individual's openness towards change. Hence, looking at the relationship between empowering leadership and openness towards change during a time where changes can have been perceived as radical and frequent, leading to higher levels of uncertainty.

Research gap and question

Sharma and Kirkman (2015) suggested that future studies concerning empowering leadership theory should focus on different types of situations in which empowering leadership can occur. Furthermore, they stated that there were few studies looking at the moderating role of empowering leadership and thus that this perspective should be further developed. While attitudes and perceptions towards organizational change management have been extensively researched, providing components such as organizational commitment, leader effectiveness and good work relationships to be some of the crucial elements for organizational outcomes and the success of the changes (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). We found that there was a small body of literature looking into the relationship between empowering leadership theory and openness towards change in organizations.

However, while follower attitudes and perceptions towards change in relation to a crisis and crisis management are increasingly being researched, there are currently no studies connecting the follower attitudes and perceptions towards organizational change management during a crisis with empowering leadership theory. We would therefore like to contribute to the literature of crisis and organizational change management, by researching the dimensions of psychological empowerment's relationship to openness towards change. Thus, map out which of these dimensions is most important for followers to have an open mind to change implementation during a crisis. This to better prepare organizations for crises in the time to come. Hence, we aimed to investigate the following research question through four hypotheses of each dimension of psychological empowerment:

> *"How was the relationship between empowering leadership and followers' openness towards change during the COVID-19 pandemic?"*

Literature Review

Openness towards change

Organizational change research has been classified and integrated into a theoretical framework by Armenakis and Bedian (1999) indicating three factors that shape the follower's efforts to organizational changes. The first factor, content, refers to the type of change (e.g., organizational structure and orientation), which may have an impact on the followers' attitudes. In the content factors, it is distinguished between convergent change and radical change, whereas follower resistance is a bigger problem for the radical changes as it often involves a change of the entire organization (Devos et al., 2007). Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic can at its beginning in March 2020 have been considered infusing radical change.

According to Vakola and Nikolaou (2005), followers' attitudes will affect an individual's openness towards an organizational change, and a change originating from crises may cause followers to experience several different emotional states. Literature has proven positive attitudes towards change to be highly important in the achievement of organizational goals, while negative attitudes towards change have proven to cause negative consequences such as an increased level of work stress. Thus, if changes cause the followers stress-levels to increase, their attitudes towards organizational changes will become negative. In addition, will the frequency of the changes affect the openness towards change. Rafferty and Griffin (2006) claim that the followers will experience higher levels of anxiety if they feel that the changes are unpredictable. However, their research in similarity to Vakola and Nikolaou (2005) showed that if the followers perceive that the leader has planned the change well, they will experience a higher level of job satisfaction and lower levels of turnover intentions as the followers do not have uncertainty associated with their jobs and organization.

Secondly, we have the contextual factors. According to Devos et al. (2007) research by Bommer et al. (2005) and Kavanagh & Ashkanasy (2006) argues that organizations with inconsistent leadership will experience different attitudes from their followers than organizations with strong leadership and clear goals. In addition, several researchers such as Schneider et al. (1996) and Armenakis et al. (1993) have argued that the culture and climate in the organization plays a role in sustaining organizational change and motivating employee effort (Devos et al.,

2007). Thus, literature argues that the leadership is very likely to affect follower attitudes towards change. Vakola and Nikolaou (2005) research has proven that if the followers have high organizational commitment and good work relationships, they might be more willing to accept the organizational changes. In addition, if the followers perceived their own training and the leaders' information as good during the change process, their fear and uncertainty decreased. Thus, effective work relationships, good communication, sharing of information, and a well-planned change is very important for organizational change to succeed.

The final factor in the Armenakis and Bedeian's (1999) framework is process, hence how the change implementation takes place. Change implementation goes through different phases. These different phases as for instance in culture or structure may be perceived as threatening by the followers in the organization, thus making participation an important tool for the followers to decrease uncertainty (Devos et al. 2007). Furthermore, when a change occurs the members of the organization goes through four stages: (1) anticipation, the individual's perception of information and rumors, (2) confirmation, standardization of the change events into logical associations, (3) culmination, comparison of the situation before and after the change, and (4) aftermath, the review and evaluation of the change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999, p. 303).

Business management is considering renewal more than before (Ekvall, 1988). By this meaning, leaders spend more time scanning the world around them, to be constantly updated on the latest changes and to be forward-looking. King (2007) argues that an effective crisis leader maps out the conditions that may lead to a crisis and scans the internal and external environment for information so that the organization will be proactive rather than reactive towards the crisis. Furthermore, during the crisis effective leadership is perceived as important for the organization to return to its natural state. The pressure on companies and leaders to cope with change has increased enormously in the last twenty years. The reason for this is much bigger international competition and that the world is evolving and changing rapidly (Ekvall, 1988, p. 38). Bundy et al. (2017) state that leaders perceive crises as highly salient and threatening towards the organization's goals. In addition, they emphasize the importance of leaders and crisis leaders looking at crises as opportunities rather than threats and refer to research findings indicating that these leaders are more flexible and open-minded.

Readiness

According to Devos et al. (2007) numerous studies have shown that it is difficult for organizations to achieve successful change processes. Beer and Nohria's (2002) research show that even though leaders put a lot of effort into change programs, only 30 percent led to successful organizational change. Openness towards change is based on the Lewin's (1951) concept of the unfreezing state/ readiness for change and can be reflected in the follower's attitudes. As well as Miller et al. (1994) and Wanberg & Banas (2000) conceptualization of openness to change as "willingness to support the change" and "positive affect about the potential consequences of change" (Devos et al. 2007). Armenakis et al. (1993, p. 681) define readiness as *"the cognitive precursor to the behaviors of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort"* which is proven by Shein (1979) crucial to decrease resistance.

To successfully implement complex changes in an organization Morin et al. (2016) argue that leaders must encourage their followers to contribute actively themselves as it is difficult to build approval for complex changes for years to come. Followers' openness towards change will affect their readiness towards organizational changes, which emerges through the followers' sensemaking of the new environment and their decision to potentially be actively involved in seeking information and making assumptions about the change (Choi, 2011).

There are five key beliefs that should be developed in the followers by their leader before implementation of a change to increase the follower's readiness. These can be summarized as a belief that the changes are necessary for organizational success, perceived as legitimate for reaching objectives, that the training necessary to cope with the change will be given, that the change is of personal value to them, and they have capacity to implement the change (Morin et al., 2016).

Finally, research on organizational change management has suggested that if the followers perceive the change implementation as fair, their responses will be more favorable towards both the change and their leader. Hence, the perception of involvement and good information from their leader is once again crucial to positively influence the followers (Caldwell et al., 2004).

Empowering Leadership

A leadership style that holds many of the behaviors essential to achieve openness towards change is empowering leadership. An empowering leadership style is active and directed in followers' development and it is therefore considered to be an effective style of leadership (Wong & Geissner, 2016). Furthermore, empowering leadership is viewed as a process whereas the leader through specific leadership behaviors shares the power with the followers to enhance their internal motivation and achieve organizational success (Cheong et al., 2019).

Empowering leadership can be defined as *"leader behaviors directed at individuals or entire teams and consisting of delegating authority to employees, promoting their self-directed and autonomous decision making, coaching, sharing information and asking for input"* (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Konczak et al., 2000; Chen et al., 2007; Sharma & Kirkman, 2015, p. 40). Amundsen and Martinsen (2014) state that the leadership theory focuses on autonomy at the workplace and has support from Hackman and Oldham (1976) job characteristic model, the self-determination theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985) as well as several other models. For instance, research on self-determination theory has proven autonomy to be an important motivational characteristic yielding positive outcomes for followers.

Empowering leadership is closely related to several other leadership constructs. For instance, is it referred to as a form of self- or shared leadership (Kim & Beehr, 2018, Pearce et al., 2003; Pearce & Sims, 2002). As empowering leadership takes a behavioral approach to leadership it shows similarities to participative leadership, transformational leadership, and ethical leadership. In addition, it also has similarities to leader-member exchange theory (LMX), and self-leadership. To distinguish empowering leadership from these other related leadership theories several researchers have identified dimensions for empowering leadership. The dimensions have been identified by among others Ahearne et al. (2005), Arnold et al. (2000), and Amundsen and Martinsen (2015). A common denominator in these dimensions is that they are all concerned with supporting the development and autonomy of the followers (Cheong et al., 2019). An example is the dimensions by Arnold et al. (2000) constructing empowering leadership behavior: (1) coaching, (2) informing, (3) leading by example, (4) showing concern, and (5) participative decision-making (Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011).

Wong and Giessner (2016) describe that a follower's perception of the leader's effectiveness often originates from their own schemas of implicit leadership theories. Which means that a follower will consider their leader and their leadership as effective if the leader's behavior aligns with the followers' expectations. If the follower, on the other hand, considers their leader as ineffective the leader's influence over the follower will decrease. Thus, the followers' perceptions of both the leader and their leadership are of importance for positive follower attitudes towards change, as well as the feasibility of the measures. According to Humborstad et al. (2014) is this statement supported by a theory by Labianca et al. (2000) which demonstrated that the followers' perception of empowerment is based on their own expectations.

Empowering leadership increases followers' self-efficacy through leadership behaviors such as developmental and autonomous support. Hence, through the meaningfulness of the work, encouragement for participation in decision making, confidence in the followers' high performance, and in providing autonomy the leader provides a support that enhances self-efficacy (Cheong et al., 2016). Thus, increasing follower performance and satisfaction. Self-efficacy is proven to affect change processes and can negatively influence a follower's organizational commitment if their levels are low and vice versa (Herold et al., 2007).

Finally, as reviewed in the openness towards change literature, readiness is an important part of the support towards, and implementation of changes (Armenakis et al., 1993). In relation to empowerment, Ahearne et al. (2005) also highlights readiness to embrace the freedom afforded with an empowering leadership style, thus arguing that the followers in the organization must have the necessary skills to benefit from the empowerment. While empowering leadership is recommended for its positive benefits (Kim & Beehr, 2018) it is important to emphasize that some studies have proven that empowering leadership may also lead to negative outcomes such as decreased individual and organizational performance. These studies argue that empowering leadership through extra responsibility can cause resistance and task uncertainty to appear in the organization. Thus, indicating that empowering leadership's association with follower outcomes may not be uncomplicated as it can become either too much or too little empowerment (Humborstad et al. 2014).

Empowering Leadership and Change

Sukoco et al. (2021) states that a successful organizational change characterizes ongoing support from the leader's followers. It is therefore important for a leader to find out what it takes for his/her followers to support a potential organizational change. Furthermore, they claim that followers prefer leaders who empower them and inspire them to change. Empowering leaders are characterized by the fact that they provide greater decision-making autonomy and encourage their followers to continuous learning and development through their guidance as a role model for the followers.

Looking at empowering leadership and change, it has been researched in relation to change-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB's). Li et al. (2016) state that change-oriented OCB include the follower's participation in organizational changes to improve performance. The reason empowering leadership is so important for change-oriented OCB is due to the motivational state fostered by the leadership behavior which encourages problem-solving. In addition, is the autonomy and self-efficacy that is promoted by the empowering leadership behaviors boosting positive attitudes in the followers making it more likely for them to adopt change-oriented OCB (Li et al., 2016). Thus, proving that the empowering behaviors of the leaders are crucial in dealing with organizational changes and in creating positive attitudes towards the organizational changes.

In addition, to change-oriented OCB, empowering leadership has been researched in relation to individual readiness to change. According to Muafi et al. (2019) the readiness to change stems from the internal and external resources the individual must support change behavior. In addition, they state that the results from research on readiness to change and empowering leadership are divided. Hence, while Holten and Brenner (2015), Lee et al. (2017) and Li et al. (2016, 2017) argue that empowering leadership is supportive of an individual's readiness to change, other researchers such as Vakola (2014) and Griffin et al. (2018) have concluded that empowering leadership behavior will not increase the individual's readiness to change on its own (Muafi et al., 2019).

Psychological Empowerment

Empowerment was defined by Conger and Kanungo (1998) as *"a motivational concept of self-efficacy"*, and then later as a multi-faceted by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) as they claimed the essence of empowerment could not be determined by one single concept (Spreitzer, 1995). Cheong et al. (2019) emphasizes the distinction between empowering leadership and psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment, a cognitive and motivational state, can be fostered by empowering leadership to enhance desirable organizational outcomes.

Empowerment can be researched from two perspectives: (1) macro perspective, considering the leader role, or (2) micro perspective, focusing on the intrinsic motivation of the follower. The macro perspective focus on the psychological dimensions of empowerment, thus what the follower needs to feel for the measures to be effective (Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011) Furthermore, they refer to the four dimensions of psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995): (1) meaningfulness, (2) competence, (3) self-determination, and (4) impact. These dimensions represent a followers' active cognitive orientation towards their work. Spreitzer (1995) claim that the psychological empowerment dimensions have their antecedents from empowering personality traits and work contexts, such as individual's self-esteem (Brockner, 1988), locus of control in the individuals life (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), sharing of information in the organization (Kanter, 1989), and by individuals attaining rewards (Lawler, 1992).

Seibert et al. (2011) explain that through the dimensions of meaningfulness and self-determination created by autonomy, as well as feeling competent and able to impact the organizational outcomes, followers report higher levels of job satisfaction. Another attitudinal outcome is organizational commitment, whereas researchers have found a strong correlation between intrinsic motivational forms such as provided by an empowering leadership style, and affective commitment. Feelings of autonomy, impact and competence is also on this construct a positive influence as it enhances the follower's ability to express their own values and interests through their work (Seibert et al. 2011).

The outcomes of psychological empowerment are self-determination and impact predicting the follower's organizational commitment, while competence and meaningfulness predict career progression intentions. Thus, it is necessary with several dimensions of psychological empowerment to achieve a different range of

attitudinal outcomes (Spreitzer, 2007; Kraimer et al., 1999). In addition, related to changes, Spreitzer (2007) refers to research that has proven that empowerment can facilitate a sense of hope for the future (Spreitzer & Mishra, 2000), it is however argued that this link lacks research.

Self-determination

The psychological empowerment dimension of self-determination can be defined as reflecting *"autonomy in the initiation and continuation of work behaviors and processes; examples are making decisions about work methods, pace and effort"* (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1443; Bell & Staw, 1989; Spector, 1986). Thus, the dimension refers to the individual's perception of self-determination. Humborstad et al. (2014) state that leaders encouraging higher levels of job autonomy are considered to have followers with higher levels of satisfaction, job performance, and adaptability. Hence, an empowering leader providing the followers with motivational support encourages self-initiation will create autonomous motivation and contributes to the followers' development of self-efficacy beliefs. In addition, will the sharing of power which allows the followers to voice their opinion and participate in the decision-making process, provide them with a greater feeling of self-determination at the workplace (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014).

Including followers in decision-making processes and creating high organization-based self-esteem will create synergy effects in that followers feel important in the organization. They will feel that they count, have an important role and that they have achieved acceptance and respect which results in them being able to influence the surroundings in the organization (Raub & Robert, 2010). Central to self-determination theory is autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Intrinsic motivation created by autonomy is an example of autonomous motivation and is when individuals become actively involved due to interest (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

H1: Therefore, we hypothesize that there is a positive relationship between self-determination and openness towards change.

Meaningfulness

The psychological empowerment dimension of meaningfulness can be defined as involving *"the fit between requirements of a work role and beliefs, values, and*

behaviors" (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1443; Brief & Nord, 1990; Hackman & Oldman, 1980). The leader's sharing of power is central in this dimension as well. Vecchio et al. (2010) argue that the sharing of power in an empowering leadership style increases self-directedness which generates not only higher levels of performance but also an attitudinal response in the form of satisfaction.

In addition, does Amundsen and Martinsen (2014) state that leaders sharing their power give their followers the opportunity to make autonomous decisions through sharing of information, and coordination. The access to information has been noted as empowering in itself, and the information shared about goals will help the followers to create a sense of meaningfulness. This emphasizes the importance of information sharing from the leader during change implementation, which is also considered along with delegation and coordination as the central behaviors of an empowering leader (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014).

In addition, Tims et al. (2015) emphasizes the importance of adapting work tasks to each individual follower to create meaning in their followers. Job-person fit will thus contribute to followers feeling meaningfulness above their work tasks. Self-determination also plays an important role in influencing followers' perception of meaningfulness. By empowering leadership, leaders should show that their followers are important in the organization, and that they have faith in them. This will help increase the followers' self-confidence and the belief that they can make a difference in the organization, which in turn will help to increase the feeling of meaningfulness (Grant, 2007).

H2: Therefore, we hypothesize a positive relationship between meaningfulness and openness towards change.

Competence

The psychological empowerment dimension of competence can be defined as *"an individual's belief in his or her capability to perform activity with skill"* (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1443; Gist, 1987). It is argued that leaders familiar with their followers' competencies and who encourage their followers to use these, contribute to the development of self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, competence is about self-efficacy or the belief in one's own ability to complete tasks in a successful way (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). A leader displaying effective self-leadership skills will also contribute to the followers' learning and development process. In addition, by showing interest,

confidence and trust in the followers, leaders will contribute further to their follower's development of positive self-efficacy beliefs (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Furthermore, Raub and Robert (2010) states that empowering leadership can increase followers' perception of their competence and self-efficacy in performing their work, by becoming role models of desired behaviors and by providing followers with valuable feedback. Competence is also a factor that affects intrinsic motivation of individuals (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

H3: We therefore hypothesize a positive relationship between competence and openness towards change.

Impact

The final dimension of psychological empowerment, impact, can be defined as *"the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work"* (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1443; Ashforth, 1989). Amundsen and Martinsen (2015) state that through a leader's promotion of the follower's participation and contribution in the decision making the followers will experience a sense of making an impact. The leaders will listen to their followers' ideas giving them the chance to make a difference at the workplace and have an impact on the organization's results. To enhance followers' sense of confidence and personal control even further, leaders can encourage their followers to set their own goals for their work (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015).

Sharma and Kirkman (2015) refers to participative leadership which is about including your followers by asking for suggestions and considering followers' ideas before making their own decision. Followers who receive such leadership have reported that they can discuss problems and participate in influencing decision-making processes in the organization by collaboration with their leaders. Such experiences reflect how leaders can include their followers and create an interaction so that followers can have an impact in the organization, thus reaching psychological empowerment.

H4: We hypothesize a positive relationship between impact and openness towards change.

Research model

Based on the proposed hypotheses in the literature review to the four different dimensions of psychological empowerment, we were supposed to propose a research model including all the dimensions to determine which of them have a relationship with the openness towards change construct. However, as our study has some limitations the hypotheses concerning the psychological empowerment dimensions impact and competence have been removed from the research model. Thus, we propose the following research model (figure 1) with two of the hypotheses from the literature review concerning the psychological empowerment dimensions of meaningfulness and self-determination.
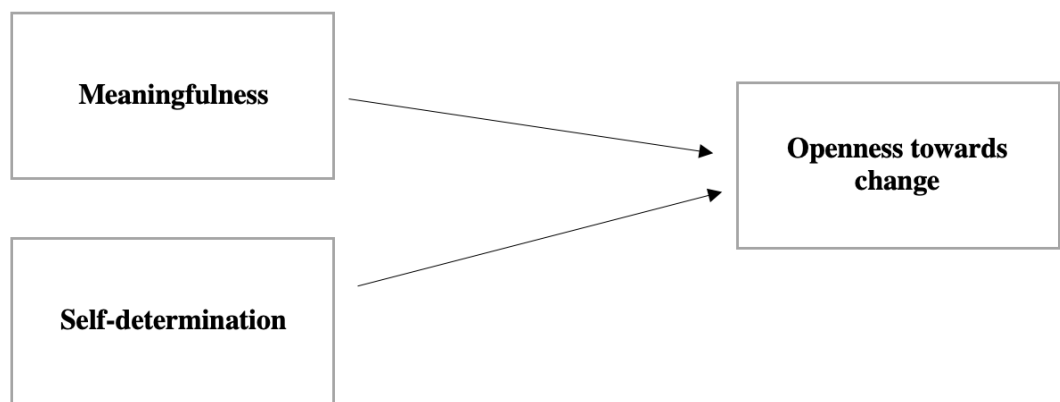
Figure 1: Research model

Hypotheses

H1:   A positive relationship between self-determination and openness towards change.

H2:   A positive relationship between meaningfulness and openness towards change.

Method

Procedure

The respondents for this master thesis are followers and leaders in a Norwegian municipality. As employees in a municipality, these individuals have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic up close. The selection criteria for the first sample are that the individuals are followers without a hierarchical role consisting of personnel responsibilities. While the employees (leaders) with a hierarchical role as a leader or head of a department with personnel responsibilities belong to the second sample. The municipality has many different workplaces, but common to the vast majority regardless of whether you work at schools, nursing homes, kindergartens, health centers, or in the administration, is that you have in one way, or another been affected by the pandemic.

To collect data from the two samples we used a questionnaire in Qualtrics XM. For us to achieve the highest number of possible responses a self-completion questionnaire was applied. Here the respondents completed the questionnaire which was sent out by the municipality by email themselves, thus making it quicker and easier for us to administer a large sample size. While this method helped us achieve a better understanding of the prevalence of follower attitudes and perceptions during the crisis, we experienced limitations in describing the deep perceptions of the respondents as we could not ask follow-up questions providing additional data, or prompt or probe the respondent (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The municipality has approximately 1200 employees in different sectors, and all these employees were invited to answer the questionnaire. The data was collected in accordance with ethical concerns and GDPR, and prior to sending it out the questionnaire along with the study was approved by NSD - the Norwegian Center of Research Data. Prior to responding to the questionnaire, the participants had to read through an informational letter, with information regarding the purpose of the study, data collection, and contact information to the researchers, supervisor, and safety representative. We did not collect any personal information in this study, we did however ask permission to obtain information regarding age, gender and work unit and the respondents therefore had to give their consent to the questionnaire. As we had one respondent not consenting, this response is not a part of the final thesis results.

Participants

In total we received 446 responses to our study, thus approximately one third of all employees in the municipality responded to our questionnaires. From the leaders, a group of individuals belonging to the control variable with personnel responsibilities, we received 69 responses, whereas approximately 62 percent of the respondents were women (N=43) while approximately 38 percent of the respondents were men (N=26). The results have a mean age group between 35-50 years old (N=42). In addition, the results showed that the biggest number of respondents at 35 percent came from health and social services (N=25). Most of the respondents had worked in their positions between 1-5 years (N=27) approximately 40 percent, or over 10 years (N=21) approximately 31 percent. All respondents except 2 had worked during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the followers, a group of individuals belonging to the control variable without personnel responsibilities, we received 377 responses, whereas approximately 80 percent were women (N=312), and 20 percent were men (N=65). The results have a mean age group between 35-50 years old (N=155). The unit with the highest response rate was the school sector with 27 percent (N=113) of the respondents followed by health and social services with 23 percent (N=91) of the respondents. Most of our respondents from this sample had worked in the municipality between 1-5 years approximately 38 percent (N=147), or over 10 years (N=139) approximately 35 percent. Out of 377 respondents only two have not worked during the pandemic. Thus, out of our 466 respondents only four of them did not work in the municipality during the pandemic.

Measures

For our study we applied a Likert-scale ranging from one to five in the Qualtrics questionnaires. The questionnaires were separated into six sections to cover all the topics. The first section obtained general information, the second section obtained information about change and openness, while the four last sections of the questionnaires measured the four dimensions of psychological empowerment. Thus, questioning the leaders and followers' perceptions of the empowering leadership behaviors necessary to reach psychological empowerment. However, it should be noted that we did not pre-test our measures like we should have nor use already determined scales which has led to some limitations to our study.

The measurement scale of psychological empowerment was created by Spreitzer (1995) and is all measured on three items per dimension on the Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha on these measures is ranging from .83 -.91 (Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011). According to Spreitzer (1995) the scales only focus on one single dimension for discriminant validity, they are adaptable for Likert-scales, and finally they focus on the individual's experience of each dimension, not the environment at the workplace. As mentioned, we created our questions without looking into how the scales and items have been previously determined. Thus, after the data collection the items most fitting with the scales from Spreitzer (1995) were selected to measure the dimensions of psychological empowerment.

In addition, research has proven that many of the scales that are meant to comprehend openness toward change are related to the dimensions of psychological empowerment by looking at some of the key behaviors in empowering leadership such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and sharing of information (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). However, by looking at for instance the leadership questionnaire by Ekvall and Arvonen (1991) there were several change-centered leadership items we could have used that do not overlap with the psychological empowerment dimensions. Thus, a more thorough review of all the different measurement scales would have increased the reliability and results of this study.

Analyses

For the analyses we applied IBM SPSS version 26 with PROCESS. Initially, a factor analysis was applied to the merged datasets. According to Bryman and Bell (2011) factor analysis is used with multiple-indicator measures, such as the dimensions in our study, to see if they will form factors. By applying an exploratory factor analysis, we increased the interpretability of our measures. To reduce the indicators in our data set we used the principal components analysis (PCA) with Promax rotation in SPSS. The Promax rotation is one of the most widely used and estimated factors by allowing them to be correlated (Kline, 2016). As factor loadings are not stable below 0.40, only items with a factor loading above this threshold were applied in further analyses (Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988). Thus, we had to remove some of our variables due to items loading on the same factors.

Secondly, a reliability analysis was applied to the variables remaining from the factor analysis. As we in our study aimed to measure the concept of openness towards change and empowering leadership, by researching the dimensions of psychological empowerment the remaining dimensions had to be checked for internal reliability. So, to comprehend the internal reliability of the measures we used Cronbach's alpha, with a rule of thumb for 0.70 as an acceptable level of reliability (Taber, 2017). Due to the several limitations in our study related to measurement scales we got some mixed results from the reliability analysis as well.

Thirdly, prior to the multiple regression analysis the variables were checked for multicollinearity. Multicollinearity can occur when the independent coefficients are significantly correlated with each other in addition to the dependent variable (Shrestha, 2020). According to Hair et al. (2010) the threshold value most commonly is 30, none of our variables had a value above 30. The meaningfulness variable was close at 28 which indicated that there may have been a collinearity problem. However, when we looked at the variance proportions for the meaningfulness variable it did not account for a substantial proportion (.90 or above) of the variance for any of the other coefficients. Thus, our study did not have problems related to multicollinearity.

Finally, to analyze the relationship between the remaining psychological empowerment variables, meaningfulness and self-determination, and openness towards change, we applied a multiple regression analysis with the two control variables. The two control variables were created as follows, one for individuals with personnel responsibilities and one for individuals without personnel responsibilities. The multiple regression analysis was meant to help us determine which of our independent variables, meaningfulness, and self-determination, actually had a statistically significant relationship with the dependent variable, openness towards change (Gallo, 2015). Hence, the multiple regression analysis described and tested the hypotheses concerning the relationships between the indicators in the psychological empowerment dimensions and openness toward change (Peng et al., 2002).

Results

The pattern matrix which can be found in appendix C shows that the factor analysis extracted four factors, whereas several of our items measuring self-determination, competence and impact loaded on the same factor. While openness to change, changes, and meaningfulness loaded on their own factors. In addition, did several of our items load on several different factors implying that they measured the same. However, as factor loadings are not stable below 0.4, these have been removed from the pattern matrix (Guadagnoli & Velicer, 1988). Thus, the factor analysis left us to test the hypotheses that looked at the relationship between self-determination and openness, as well as meaningfulness and openness as items loading on the same factor were removed from the data.

In addition, the factor analysis showed that while our items had similarity to the items by Spreitzer (1995), they loaded on several factors. This is a limitation in our study as we did not do a thorough enough review of the literature concerning measurement of both openness to change, and the dimensions of psychological empowerment. Furthermore, our questions regarding changes during the COVID-19 pandemic do not relate itself to openness such as we had planned for, and thus also loaded on two different factors. Hence, to measure openness towards change we moved forward using the items focusing on the follower and leaders' perception of their openness toward change both in general and during the pandemic in our model. Rather than items focusing on the comprehensiveness of the changes that were implemented in the organization during the pandemic.

Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis showed that the internal reliability of the variables self-determination (.72) and meaningfulness (.74) were acceptable (Taber, 2017). The dependent variable of openness had a reliability score at .48 which was below the acceptable levels of Cronbach's alpha. However, as the variables were adjusted after the scale if the item was removed, there were no other additional items that could have been used to increase our reliability scores. Thus, we had to keep the openness variable to measure our research model with regression analysis, this did however cause some limitations to the results. The means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability scores are presented in Table 1.

Finally, we ran a regression analysis with the control variables of "personnel responsibilities" (leaders) and "no personnel responsibilities" (followers). The

results are presented in Table 2. Firstly, the results showed that the followers reported more openness towards change with a positive coefficient. The analysis showed a significant relationship between psychological empowerment dimension "self-determination" and openness towards change ($p < .001$, $t = 5.368$). Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported. Secondly, the analysis showed a significant relationship between the psychological empowerment dimension "meaningfulness" and openness towards change ($< .05$, $t = 2.472$). Hence, hypothesis 2 was supported as well. The results did emerge with low unstandardized betas (.113 for self-determination, .112 for meaningfulness) which means that the effect is low in a regression coefficient when an observation is removed from the regression analysis (Hair et al., 2010).

Summarized, while the multiple regression results lack two of the variables representing the psychological empowerment dimensions of competence and impact. The results from the two remaining variables, meaningfulness, and self-determination, do imply that both the psychological empowerment variables have a positive relation to openness towards change independently of the control variables. In addition, the followers were proven to report more openness towards change.

Discussion

As a part of the discussion, it is important to note that while it is not our focus in the discussion to investigate differences in gender nor occupation, there have been some substantial differences within the responses from the municipality. Firstly, 80% of the respondents to the survey are women and the remaining 20% are men. Secondly, it emerged that 29% of those who responded work in school, 23% in health and social care, 16% in nursing and care, 11% in support units, 10% in kindergarten, 9% in technical and 2% from culture. Finally, the mean age group ranging from 35 to 50 years of age stood for approximately 50 percent of the responses. The spread in responses from gender and different units may have affected the results of the survey to the extent that the different units have been affected by the pandemic to different degrees and in different ways. The fact that we also have such a large majority of women who have responded, makes it important to emphasize that it can affect the answers to the extent that there may be a difference in how women and men respond to such a crisis.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, correlation, and reliability scales

Descriptive statistics, correlation, and reliability scale									
Variables	*Mean*	*S.D.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Openness	10.95	1.82	(.48)						
Gender	1.78	.418	.033	-					
Age	3.18	,809	.034	-.025	-				
Employed time	1.26	.729	-.461**	-.103	.118	-			
Personnel responsibilties	.8539	.35357	.554**	.128*	-.064	-.796**	-		
Self-determination	16.6360	4.84606	.565**	.113	-.045	-.584**	.685**	(.72)	
Meaningfulness	12.3146	2.23806	.509**	.172**	-.009	-.568**	.679**	.668*	(.74)

Variables: 1 – Openness, 2- Gender, 3 –Age, 4 -Employed time, 5 – Personnel responsibilities, 6 – Self-determination, 7 – Meaningfulness. *N= 445.*
*p< .05, **p <.01and L **. Coefficients alpha from Cronbach's ().

This study aimed to examine empowering leadership relationships with followers' openness towards change. This by looking at a situation whereas changes happened rapidly, and new ways of working needed to be implemented, hence the COVID-19 pandemic. By applying the four dimensions of psychological empowerment we could research perception of the leadership behaviors hypothesized to increase followers' openness towards change. As it emerged from the analyses and results the psychological empowerment dimensions of competence and impact's items loaded on several factors in the factor analysis and were thus removed from the research model before the regression analysis. Hence, the research model lacked two variables representing the psychological empowerment dimensions during the analysis.

The results from the multiple regression analysis showed that the psychological empowerment dimension of self-determination was perceived as important for the followers' openness towards change. Our expectation that the empowering leadership behavior of creating a sense of self-determination for the followers has a relation to openness towards change was supported. As stated by Humborstad et al. (2014) self-determination creates higher levels of job satisfaction, performance and adaptability by leaders encouraging job autonomy. Hence, the followers and leaders in the municipality found job autonomy as of importance for dealing with the organizational changes that came along with the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, our study may imply that self-determination created a feeling of ownership to the organizational changes that were made during the pandemic. Which is in accordance with Hackman & Oldham's (1976) job characteristics model concerning job autonomy.

The psychological empowerment dimensions of meaningfulness were also proven statistically significant in our multiple regression analysis, and thus our second hypothesis was supported as well. In similarity to self-determination, empowering leadership theories state that to create a sense of meaningfulness for the followers in an organization information sharing (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014) or sharing of power (Vecchio et al. 2010) is essential as it gives the followers a sense of ownership to the changes. However, has it been difficult for leaders to share information and plan for rapid changes in the municipality during the pandemic, but they can by showing the followers that they are important to the organization increase their sense of meaningfulness (Grant, 2007). Thus, it could

be argued that our study implies that the followers in the municipality had a sense of meaningfulness due to their leaders exhibiting these leadership behaviors.

Moreover, it could be argued from the results of our study and multiple regression analysis that self-determination and meaningfulness are the psychological empowerment dimensions with a relationship with followers' openness towards change. However, as our study had limitations related to some of the variables from the psychological empowerment dimensions these cannot be excluded. Hence, their relationship with openness towards change has not been fully examined. The remaining variables' items loaded on several factors excluding them from further analysis, the lack of support may stem from us not applying the correct scale for measurement of the psychological empowerment dimensions.

Table 2: Regression analyses

Results of regression analyses	
	Openness towards change
Meaningfulness	.137*
Self-determination	.299***
R2	.388
Adjusted R2	.379
F	46.206***

Standardized regression coefficients are shown. N= 445. *p <.05, **<.01, ***<.001.

Practical implications

While our research may not be fully supported which will be highlighted in the next section, we would like to highlight some practical implications. Our study contributes to the body of literature on empowering leadership by researching the psychological empowerment dimensions with a relationship with openness towards change. Thus, suggesting a positive relationship between the dimensions of psychological empowerment and openness towards change. Hence, we researched the dimensions of self-determination and meaningfulness, and our research implied that the psychological empowerment dimension of self-determination had a significant relationship to openness towards change.

Thus, our research implied that the psychological empowerment dimension of self-determination in empowering leadership has had a great effect on openness towards change during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, our research suggested that both variables are positively related to openness towards change independently of the control variables, and that the "no personnel responsibilities' (followers) reported most to the openness variable. In addition, we mean that our study has highlighted how leaders can gain insight into how they can make their followers more open to changes by applying empowering leadership.

Limitations and future research

Firstly, are the limitations in this project characterized by the fact that we had not collected data prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in March 2020. This is due to the project start, which was not until our second semester of the master's program in leadership and organizational psychology. This limited the study to the fact that we did not have data prior to the pandemic to compare to the data we had collected after the pandemic. Thus, by only collecting data at one point in time it could be biased. Secondly, Podsakoff et al. (2003) state that when respondents are looking in retrospect at their own behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions they often try to stay consistent in their responses. In our study, the respondents are looking in retrospect at their everyday work life during the pandemic, thus making it possible that the consistency bias has a presence in the results of this study.

Thirdly, as briefly mentioned when describing the procedure of this study. We applied a quantitative research method to help us achieve a better understanding of the prevalence of follower attitudes and perceptions during the COVID-19

pandemic. This may however have created limitations in describing the deep perceptions of the respondents as we could not ask follow-up questions after the survey (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Furthermore, our study has limitations due to items loading on several factors in the factor analysis, as well as a low reliability level (Taber, 2017) on the openness towards change variable (.48) in Cronbach's alpha testing. However, the openness towards change variables did load on its own factor. Moreover, we should have looked closer into how to measure and scale each dimension of psychological empowerment before creating the questionnaire. By applying the measures of previous studies, we would have achieved higher reliability on our measures, and could have researched our initial research model without adjustments.

Hence, most of the limitations in this study are characterized by the fact that the literature review of measurement scales concerning organizational change, openness towards change, and the psychological empowerment dimensions were not done thoroughly enough before sending out the questionnaire. In addition, we did not pre-test our items. While we tried to rectify this mistake later by trying to make the measurement items fit the already determined measurements scale, our questions were not formulated in a way that made it possible to get a similarity to the scales or a higher reliability to our measures. This kind of mistake made our analyses more difficult to perform and the results were affected, it was however an experience that resulted in a good learning outcome.

Finally, our suggestions for future research. Firstly, we suggest for future research to continue the study of openness towards organizational change and the dimensions of psychological empowerment. We do however suggest that the scale by Spreitzer (1995) is applied to improve the assessment of the relationships between them and the reliability of the study. Secondly, we suggest data collection to be executed at several points in time to reduce the biases that can emerge from individuals looking at their experiences and perceptions of a situation in retrospect. Third and finally, we suggest that future research look at other types of organizational changes and how these affect the relationship between the psychological empowerment dimensions and openness towards change.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a great deal of uncertainty and frequent changes, which forced organizations to implement changes at a rapid pace, without sufficient preparation. In this master's thesis we wanted to expand the literature by examining the relationship between empowering leadership and openness towards change. We investigated relationships by linking the dimensions of empowering leadership (self-determination and meaningfulness) to openness towards change.

Our research implies that the empowering leadership dimensions of self-determination and meaningfulness can help to influence followers' openness towards change, in situations demanding rapid change. We also want to emphasize that based on previous research, several of the dimensions of empowering leadership will be important in relation to openness towards change, but due to the limitations of our research, this does not emerge.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Questionnaire for followers:

Q1: I do consent to participate in the survey, that personal information is stored until the end of the project on 1st July 2022 and that personal information (workplace, position, gender, and age) is collected

      yes/no

Q2: Gender

      male/ female/ other/ do not wish to respond

Q3. Age

      below 25/ 25-35/ 36-50/ 51-65 /over 65

Q4: Which unit do you belong to?

      school/ kindergarten/ health and social services/ nursing and care/ culture and leisure/ technical/ support

Q5: How long have you worked in your current position?

      less than a year/ 1-5 years/ 5-10 years/ more than 10 years

Q6: Have you been working during the COVID-19 pandemic?

      yes/ no/ part-time

Change

Q7: There are often changes in my unit, which influence/change my work tasks

      Likert scale (1-5)

Q8: To what extent has the pandemic changed your work tasks?

      Likert scale (1-5)

Q9: To what extent has the pandemic changed your working methods?

Likert scale (1-5)

Openness

Q10: I deal with changes…

Likert scale (1-5)

Q11: I think it has been difficult / easy to deal with the uncertainty and unpredictability of the pandemic

Likert scale (1-5)

Q12: I have been open to changes in my work tasks as a cause of the Covid-19 pandemic

Likert scale (1-5)

Meaningfulness

Q13: I see my work tasks as meaningful

Likert scale (1-5)

Q14: I experience the municipality's mission as meaningful

Likert scale (1-5)

Q15: My values are in line with the municipality's values

Likert scale (1-5)

Self-Determination

Q16: I have the opportunity to influence my own work tasks

Likert scale (1-5)

Q17: My leader has informed me of changes during the pandemic before they have been implemented

Likert scale (1-5)

Q18: My leader has given me the support I needed during the pandemic

Likert scale (1-5)

Q19: Predictability in my work tasks is important for my well-being
Likert scale (1-5)

Competence

Q20: I perceive that my leader trusts me
Likert scale (1-5)

Q21: I feel I have the competence required for me to be able to solve my work tasks successfully
Likert scale (1-5)

Q22: My leader knows what skills I have
Likert scale (1-5)

Q23: My leader has provided me with necessary training / courses during the pandemic so that I can master new work tasks / working methods in the best possible way
Likert scale (1-5)

Q24: My leader is a good role model
Likert scale (1-5)

Impact

Q25: I have been involved in influencing the way we worked during the pandemic
Likert scale (1-5)

Q26: My leader has allowed me to participate in decision-making processes during the pandemic
Likert scale (1-5)

Questionnaire for leaders:

Q1: I do consent to participate in the survey, that personal information is stored until the end of the project on 1st July 2022 and that personal information (workplace, position, gender, and age) is collected

yes/no

Q2: Gender

male/ female/ other/ do not wish to respond

Q3. Age

below 25/ 25-35/ 36-50/ 51-65/ over 65

Q4: Which unit do you belong to?

school/ kindergarten/ health and social services/ nursing and care/ culture and leisure/ technical/ support

Q5: How long have you worked in your current position?

less than a year/ 1-5 years/ 5-10 years/ more than 10 years

Q6: Have you been working during the COVID-19 pandemic?

yes/ no/ part-time

Change

Q7: There are often changes in the unit which changes my employees' work tasks

Likert scale (1-5)

Q8: There are often changes in the unit which changes my employees' working methods

Likert scale (1-5)

Q9: To which degree has the pandemic changed your employees' work assignments/methods?

Likert scale (1-5)

Openness

Q9: My employees handle crises

Likert scale (1-5)

Q10: The pandemic has led to changes that affect my employees' work tasks / methods

Likert scale (1-5)

Q11: My employees have found it difficult to deal with the uncertainty and unpredictability associated with the Covid-19 pandemic

Likert scale (1-5)

Q12: My employees have been open to the changes the Covid-19 pandemic has led to

Likert scale (1-5)

Meaningfulness

Q13: My employees have meaningful work tasks

Likert scale (1-5)

Q14: My employees believe that the municipality's mission is meaningful

Likert scale (1-5)

Q15: My employees' values are in line with the municipality's values

Likert scale (1-5)

Self-Determination

Q16: I encourage my employees to think and act independently in their work performance

Likert scale (1-5)

Q17: I encourage my employees to think and act independently in their work performance
       Likert scale (1-5)

Q18: During the pandemic, I let my employees participate in decision-making processes
       Likert scale (1-5)

Competence

Q19: I trust my employees
       Likert scale (1-5)

Q20: I know what skills my employees have
       Likert scale (1-5)

Q21: My employees have received the necessary skills development to be able to perform their work tasks in the best possible way during the pandemic
       Likert scale (1-5)

Q22: Through the pandemic, I have planned and informed my employees about changes in good time before they have been implemented
       Likert scale (1-5)

Q23: I have given my employees the support they needed during the pandemic
       Likert scale (1-5)

Impact

Q24: My employees have had the opportunity to influence the way we have worked during the pandemic
       Likert scale (1-5)

Q25: As a leader I give my employees the opportunity to influence their own work tasks
       Likert scale (1-5)

Principal Components Analysis

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Change1				.764
Change2				.826
Change3				.781
Openness1			.738	
Openness2			.776	
Openness3			.615	
Meaningfulness1		.778		
Meaningfulness2		.854		
Meaningfulness3		.766		
SD1	.942			
SD2	.605			
SD3	.891			
Competence1	.604			
Competence2	.634			
Competence3	.558			

Competence4	.719		
Impact1	.817		
Impact2	.774		

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.
All low factors loadings have been removed (0.4).