The Effect of Desired-Received Empowering Leadership Fit on Subordinate Work Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

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Abstract

Drawing on Person-Environment Fit Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, this study examines the effects of the congruence between subordinates' need for and received empowering leadership on subordinate attitudes, behaviors, and performance, with emotional exhaustion as a mediator. Two multi-timepoint, multi-source questionnaire surveys were conducted using matched leader-subordinate samples: 150 leaders and 150 subordinates in Study 1, and 50 leaders with 243 subordinates in Study 2. Cross-level polynomial regression and response surface analysis yielded the following conclusions: (1) Mismatch between subordinates' need for and received empowering leadership leads to subordinate emotional exhaustion; (2) Compared to under-empowerment, over-empowerment by leaders is more likely to cause subordinate emotional exhaustion; (3) The congruence between subordinates'need for and received empowering leadership influences subordinate satisfaction with the leader, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance through its effect on emotional exhaustion.

Full Text

The Impact of the Fit Between Needed and Received Empowering Leadership on Followers' Work Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

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Abstract

Drawing on person-environment fit theory and the transactional model of stress, this study examines how the congruence between followers' needed and received empowering leadership influences their attitudes, behaviors, and performance, with emotional exhaustion serving as a mediator. Through two multi-timepoint, multi-source survey studies—Study 1 with 150 leader-follower dyads and Study 2 with 50 leaders and 243 followers—we employed multilevel polynomial regression and response surface analysis. The findings reveal that: (1) misfit between needed and received empowering leadership triggers followers' emotional exhaustion; (2) compared with insufficient empowerment, excessive empowerment more strongly induces emotional exhaustion; and (3) the fit between needed and received empowering leadership influences followers' satisfaction with their leader, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance through the mediating mechanism of emotional exhaustion.

Keywords: needed empowering leadership, received empowering leadership, needs-supplies fit, emotional exhaustion
Classification Number: B849

1. Introduction

In today' s VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) era, organizations increasingly emphasize flat structures and employee self-management. Consequently, empowering leadership—capable of enhancing employees' self-management and self-leadership capabilities—has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Gavin, 2019). Existing research predominantly focuses on the positive effects of empowering leadership, arguing that it fosters positive work outcomes by promoting followers' psychological empowerment, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy (Tang et al., 2020). However, emerging studies have begun to uncover its dark side, such as increased work stress, role ambiguity, and emotional resource depletion (Cheong et al., 2016; Humborstad & Kuvaas, 2013; Krasikova et al., 2019). These inconsistent findings not only perplex theorists but also leave practitioners uncertain about how to proceed.

These contradictory conclusions underscore that the effectiveness of empowering leadership is bounded. As the recipients of leadership behaviors, followers play a critical role in determining whether empowering leadership achieves its intended effects. As Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) emphasize, leadership is a bidirectional process, and leadership effectiveness emerges from the interaction between leaders and followers. Therefore, adopting a leader-follower dyadic perspective to understand the boundary conditions of empowering leadership effectiveness offers substantial benefits for both theory development and managerial practice. Moreover, given that psychological need satisfaction is fundamental to individual effectiveness, the extent to which received leadership empowerment aligns with followers' psychological needs for empowerment likely influences empowerment outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lorinkova et al., 2013). Thus, it is essential

to incorporate a new theoretical lens that simultaneously considers both followers' needed and received empowering leadership to deeply examine the complex effects of leadership empowerment on follower outcomes.

Needs-supplies fit, a key subcategory of person-environment fit theory, focuses on whether individual psychological needs are satisfied by environmental supplies, including compensation, recognition, and social relationships (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). Recently, Tepper et al. (2018) reconceptualized leadership behaviors as a type of environmental supply that can satisfy followers' psychological needs. As an important leadership behavior, empowering leadership serves as an environmental supply that can fulfill followers' needs for autonomy and other psychological requirements. However, due to individual differences in personality, ability, and goal orientation, the need for empowering leadership varies across individuals. Integrating Zhang and Bartol' s (2010) definition, we conceptualize needed empowering leadership as the degree to which followers desire empowering leadership behaviors, specifically including enhancing work meaning, expressing confidence, facilitating decision-making participation, and strengthening autonomy. This definition reveals that needed and received empowering leadership (i.e., perceived leadership empowerment supply) are related yet distinct concepts. Received empowering leadership does not always align with followers' needs; in most cases, discrepancies exist, resulting in either excessive empowerment (received > needed) or insufficient empowerment (received < needed) (Vogel et al., 2020). Therefore, based on the needs-supplies fit framework, this study investigates how different combinations of needed and received empowering leadership differentially influence follower outcomes, aiming to clarify the complex effects of empowering leadership on followers.

How does the fit between needed and received empowering leadership (hereafter referred to as empowering leadership fit) affect follower outcomes? Person-environment fit theory suggests that perceived supply-demand misfit triggers negative consequences but does not elaborate on the specific processes underlying this effect. Clarifying this mediating mechanism is crucial for understanding and deconstructing the impact of empowering leadership fit. We further integrate the transactional model of stress to illuminate this black box of internal mechanisms. The transactional model posits that stress originates from individuals' appraisals of their external environment based on their own circumstances, representing an interaction between person and environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). From this perspective, misfit between needed and received empowering leadership signifies a gap between followers'desired states and actual states, which likely functions as a stressor that depletes followers' resources and triggers emotional exhaustion—a typical stress response—ultimately negatively affecting satisfaction with the leader, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To more finely map this influence process, we further examine the asymmetric effects of excessive versus insufficient empowerment on followers' emotional exhaustion and subsequent work outcomes, as depicted in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

In summary, by integrating person-environment fit theory and the transactional model of stress, this study conducts two multi-timepoint, multi-source surveys —Study 1 with 150 leader-follower dyads and Study 2 with 243 dyads—and employs multilevel polynomial regression and response surface analysis to examine how empowering leadership fit influences followers' satisfaction with their leader, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance, with emotional exhaustion as a mediator. Unlike most previous studies that examine empowering leadership from a unilateral leader perspective and focus on its positive effects, we adopt a leader-follower dyadic perspective, arguing that the impact of empowering leadership on followers is not merely a function of received empowerment; rather, the valence of this function depends on followers' need levels for empowering leadership. This approach theoretically contributes to refining research on the boundary conditions of empowering leadership effectiveness and advancing empowerment theory, while practically offering guidance for managers on how to empower effectively.

1.1 Theoretical Foundation

1.1.1 Person-Environment Fit Theory

This study first draws on person-environment fit theory to examine the effects of empowering leadership fit. Person-environment fit can be categorized into supplementary fit and complementary fit. Supplementary fit occurs when individual and environmental characteristics align (e.g., value congruence, personality similarity), including person-supervisor fit and person-team fit. Complementary fit comprises demands-abilities fit and needs-supplies fit. The former refers to individuals' knowledge, skills, and abilities meeting job requirements, while the latter refers to psychological needs being satisfied by environmental supplies (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). As the most important fit type in employment relationships, needs-supplies fit critically influences employee attitudes, behaviors, and performance (Cao & Hamori, 2020). Given that empowering leadership represents a key environmental supply and we focus on how followers' psychological needs for empowering leadership are satisfied by leadership empowerment supplies, this study concentrates on the needs-supplies complementary fit framework.

Within the needs-supplies fit framework, individuals compare their psychological needs for empowering leadership with environmental supplies, forming four distinct combinations: low-level fit, insufficient empowerment, high-level fit, and excessive empowerment (as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]). Insufficient empowerment occurs when received empowerment fails to meet needs, while excessive empowerment occurs when received empowerment exceeds needs. The core principle of the supply-demand fit framework is that individual work outcomes depend on perceived supply-demand congruence; perceived misfit negatively affects work outcomes through complex mechanisms, though person-environment fit theory has not yet clarified the specific internal transmission mechanisms.

1.1.2 Transactional Model of Stress

This study further integrates the transactional model of stress to illuminate this transmission mechanism. The transactional model posits that stress emerges from the interaction between person and environment, with cognitive appraisal of the environment based on one' s circumstances being critical to stress generation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus (1993) further conceptualizes stress as an imbalanced person-environment relationship. Therefore, perceiving a gap between one' s ideal state and the external environment' s actual state represents a typical stressor (Gabriel et al., 2014). This stressor likely triggers emotional exhaustion—a strain response—by depleting individual resources, subsequently negatively affecting work outcomes (Edwards, 1996). By applying the transactional model to the person-environment relationship of supply-demand fit, this study illuminates the mechanism through which empowering leadership fit influences followers. Specifically, within supply-demand fit, imbalanced person-environment relationships take two forms: environmental supplies exceeding individual needs or falling short of them. Supply-demand fit theory suggests individuals form psychological needs for external environmental elements based on their resources and capabilities (Edwards, 1996). The transactional model posits that when individuals perceive external supplies exceeding their needs, they appraise the environment as exceeding their resources and capabilities, generating stress. In coping with this stressful situation, individual resources become depleted, triggering emotional exhaustion (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Conversely, when external supplies fall short of needs, individuals experience negative emotions from unmet psychological needs; coping with these negative emotions also consumes resources, increasing the likelihood of emotional exhaustion (Lazarus, 1993). In summary, by integrating the transactional model, this study conceptualizes misfit between needed (ideal) and received (actual) empowering leadership as a stressor and introduces emotional exhaustion as a mediator to understand how this stressor influences follower outcomes.

1.2 Empowering Leadership Fit and Followers' Emotional Exhaustion

(1) Fit and Misfit Between Needed and Received Empowering Leadership

Based on the transactional model of stress, we predict that misfit between needed and received empowering leadership will trigger followers' emotional exhaustion. We argue this from two perspectives: excessive empowerment and insufficient empowerment. Excessive empowerment represents an imbalanced person-environment relationship where followers perceive received empowering leadership exceeding their needs. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note that individuals appraise external environments based on their resources and capabilities; when the environment exceeds these resources and capabilities, stress emerges. In our context, followers develop psychological need levels for empowerment

based on their resource and capability circumstances. Under excessive empowerment, followers assume leadership empowerment beyond their resource and capability scope. To cope with this stressful situation, both the depth and breadth of their work tasks increase substantially, likely triggering dual-task processing effects and role pressure depletion effects, thereby increasing emotional exhaustion. Specifically, the dual-task processing effect refers to cognitive interference and switching costs that consume resources when individuals simultaneously perform multiple tasks. Under excessive empowerment, followers undertake excessive work tasks, making decisions independently while also implementing them. Parallel processing of multiple tasks triggers dual-task processing effects, causing emotional exhaustion (Rubinstein et al., 2001). Additionally, power and responsibility coexist, as do autonomy and uncertainty. When followers perceive excessive empowerment, they must assume work responsibilities commensurate with their power. These responsibilities beyond their capacity are interpreted as work burdens, creating role overload (Peng & Wang, 2018). Meanwhile, empowering leadership encourages self-leadership and self-management, promoting role transitions but inadvertently increasing role ambiguity. When received empowerment exceeds needs, followers' experienced uncertainty intensifies (Martin et al., 2013). Role overload and role ambiguity not only consume existing resources but also require continuous investment of energy resources like time and effort, accelerating resource depletion and inevitably leading to emotional exhaustion over time.

Insufficient empowerment represents an imbalanced person-environment relationship where followers perceive received empowering leadership as failing to meet their needs. Existing research finds that the negative experience of unmet psychological needs depletes individuals' physical and psychological resources, increasing emotional exhaustion likelihood (Lazarus, 1993). When external resource supplies cannot satisfy individual needs, experienced negative emotions consume physical resources. For instance, Oishi et al. (2017) demonstrated that when the human brain lacks meaningful stimulation (a key dimension of empowering leadership is enhancing work meaning), the brain' s pleasure centers generate negative emotions, depleting physical resources. Furthermore, Burke and Greenglass (1993) found that when individuals perceive organizations failing to meet their needs for autonomy and self-actualization, they experience negative emotions like frustration, which depletes psychological resources. Finally, Vogel et al. (2020) directly supported our argument, finding that when individuals' needs for meaningful work go unmet, they experience emotional exhaustion and fatigue. In summary, we propose:

H1: The greater the misfit between followers' needed and received empowering leadership, the higher their emotional exhaustion.

(2) Asymmetric Effects of Insufficient Versus Excessive Empowerment on Emotional Exhaustion

We argue that under misfit conditions, insufficient and excessive empowerment have asymmetric effects on followers' emotional exhaustion. Specifically, excessive empowerment more strongly affects emotional exhaustion than insufficient empowerment. From the transactional model perspective, individuals appraise environmental stress levels based on resources required to cope. When coping demands more time, energy, and other resources, individuals appraise the environment as more stressful and consequently experience higher emotional exhaustion (Lazarus, 1991). Therefore, we argue this hypothesis by comparing resource depletion differences between excessive and insufficient empowerment scenarios. Under excessive empowerment, followers perceive leadership empowerment exceeding their capability scope, substantially increasing both the depth and breadth of work tasks. This requires followers to invest more time and energy resources in parallel task processing, generating cognitive interference and task-switching costs that deplete resources (Langfred & Moye, 2004). Additionally, empowering leadership increases perceived uncertainty, requiring followers to spend extra time and energy adapting to role transitions and clarifying task structures, further depleting cognitive and emotional resources. Moreover, empowering leadership research indicates that empowerment only achieves intended effects when matching followers' expectations and preferences; otherwise, it may be interpreted as laissez-faire leadership, rendering the empowerment process ineffective (Wong & Giessner, 2018).

Conversely, under insufficient empowerment, followers perceive leaders primarily using command-and-control approaches, such as setting goals and clarifying task structures. In this scenario, followers simply follow directives, reducing both the number and complexity of work tasks, thereby decreasing resource depletion from parallel task processing. Although insufficient empowerment fails to stimulate autonomous motivation, leaders provide specific instructions and commands, resulting in lower work uncertainty and consequently lower resource depletion compared to excessive empowerment. By comparing resource consumption differences, followers appraise excessive empowerment as more stressful, making its positive effect on emotional exhaustion more pronounced. In summary, we propose:

H2: Under misfit conditions, excessive empowerment more strongly induces followers' emotional exhaustion than insufficient empowerment.

1.3 The Mediating Role of Followers' Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion refers to a state of depleted cognitive, emotional, and physical resources (Grant et al., 2014). Existing research demonstrates that emotional exhaustion significantly impacts individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and performance (Matta et al., 2017). This study focuses on how empowering leadership fit influences three outcome variables—satisfaction with the leader, organiza-

tional citizenship behavior, and job performance—through emotional exhaustion. We selected these outcomes because they are central to both person-environment fit and stress theories and significantly impact individual and organizational effectiveness (Bliese et al., 2017; Tepper et al., 2018).

According to the transactional model of stress, experienced stress negatively influences work outcomes by inducing emotional exhaustion (Lazarus, 1993). Specifically, given followers' limited resources, emotional exhaustion resulting from empowering leadership misfit reduces the time and energy available for work investment—resources essential for high job performance. Consequently, emotionally exhausted followers exhibit lower job performance. Additionally, when followers experience emotional exhaustion from imbalanced empowerment, they attribute this negative experience to inappropriate or incompetent leadership, reducing satisfaction with their leader. Finally, abundant resources are prerequisites for organizational citizenship behavior—extra-role proactive behaviors. Emotionally exhausted followers are less likely to engage in such behaviors. Integrating H1 and H2, we propose:

H3: The fit between followers' needed and received empowering leadership influences (a) satisfaction with the leader, (b) organizational citizenship behavior, and (c) job performance through emotional exhaustion.

1.4 Overview of Studies

This study validated our hypotheses through two multi-timepoint, multi-source surveys: Study 1 with 150 leader-follower dyads and Study 2 with 50 leaders and 243 followers. This research design enhances external validity and demonstrates replicability. Additionally, because Study 1 used abbreviated measures for the core construct of empowering leadership, Study 2 employed full scales to increase rigor. Finally, since all follower self-reported variables in Study 1 were collected at the same timepoint, potentially creating reverse causality issues, we added Study 2 with time-lagged collection of independent and mediating variables to better infer causality for our core hypotheses (H1 and H2).

Study 1

2.1.1 Sample and Data Collection

We conducted a two-wave survey with a half-month interval across 12 large and medium-sized companies in finance, insurance, telecommunications, and consulting industries. Specifically, we asked each company' s HR manager to distribute invitation letters and instructions (including data collection procedures, sample requirements, complete anonymity, academic purpose, and voluntary participation) through internal communication channels. Ultimately, 150 leader-follower dyads agreed to participate without overlapping personnel. In Wave 1, we invited 150 followers to assess their needed and received empowering leadership, emotional exhaustion, satisfaction with their leader, and demographic variables.

Half a month later, in Wave 2, we invited the 150 leaders to assess their followers' job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and their own demographic information. All leaders and followers provided valid questionnaires.

Leader sample characteristics: 52.0% male; mean age = 34.17 (SD = 6.06); 26.0% held associate degrees and 74.0% bachelor' s degrees; average organizational tenure = 6.84 years (SD = 3.75). Follower sample characteristics: 54.0% male; mean age = 29.86 (SD = 5.24); 50.7% held associate degrees and 45.3% bachelor' s degrees; average organizational tenure = 3.72 years (SD = 2.74) and average tenure with current leader = 2.85 years (SD = 1.62).

2.1.2 Variable Measurement

We used established Western scales for all variables, employing translation-back-translation procedures for the Chinese versions. Unless otherwise specified, all variables were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Empowering Leadership. We measured this construct using the highest-loading item from each of the four dimensions in Zhang and Bartol' s (2010) scale: "My leader helps me understand how my objectives relate to my team' s goals" (enhancing work meaning), "My leader allows me to participate in decision-making" (facilitating decision-making participation), "My leader expresses confidence that I can perform difficult tasks" (expressing confidence), and "My leader allows me to work in my own way" (strengthening autonomy). Since we focused on the effects of perceived empowering leadership fit, we asked followers to rate both their need for these behaviors ("To what extent do you think it is appropriate for your leader to exhibit the following behaviors?") and their receipt of them ("Please evaluate to what extent your leader actually exhibits the following behaviors") on a 7-point frequency scale (1 = never, 7 = always) (needed empowering leadership: Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.90$; received empowering leadership: Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.81$).

Emotional Exhaustion. We used Watkins et al.' s (2014) three-item scale. A sample item is: "After a full day of work, I often feel exhausted" (Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.93$).

Satisfaction with the Leader. We used Janssen' s (2001) three-item scale. Followers rated their satisfaction with aspects such as "collaboration with their leader" (Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.90$).

Organizational Citizenship Behavior. We used Podsakoff et al.' s (1990) five-item scale targeting organization-directed citizenship behaviors, rated by leaders. A sample item is: "This employee works overtime voluntarily to better complete tasks" (Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.91$).

Job Performance. We used Bala and Venkatesh' s (2016) four-item scale, rated by leaders. A sample item is: "This employee successfully fulfills all job responsibilities" (Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.89$).

2.1.3 Analytical Strategy

(1) Multilevel Response Surface Analysis Given that leaders and followers were nested within different companies, we used the ICC1 method to decompose variance in endogenous variables to verify the necessity of multilevel analysis (Bliese & Hanges, 2004). Results showed significant between-group variance for emotional exhaustion (ICC1 = 0.11, p = 0.007), satisfaction with the leader (ICC1 = 0.10, p = 0.012), and organizational citizenship behavior (ICC1 = 0.09, p = 0.016), but not for job performance (ICC1 = 0.02, p = 0.270). Since the effect of empowering leadership fit on emotional exhaustion is our core focus, following Wu and Kwok' s (2012) recommendation, multilevel analysis is warranted when key endogenous variables exhibit significant between-group variance. Therefore, we conducted regression analyses in Mplus 8.2 using the "Type = Twolevel" and "Estimator = MLR" commands (Muthén & Muthén, 2019). We controlled for organizational-level variance by not including predictors at the organizational level and instead estimating random effects for the intercept variances of all endogenous variables at this level (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992).

Specifically, we constructed the following polynomial regression model:

$$\text{Follower Emotional Exhaustion} = b_0 + b_{1N} + b_{2R} + b_{3N}^2 + b_{4N} \times R + b_{5R}^2$$

where N represents needed empowering leadership, R represents received empowering leadership, and N^2, $N \times R$, and R^2 are three quadratic terms. To reduce multicollinearity in constructing product terms and facilitate result interpretation, we used grand-mean-centered N and R to build the product terms (Carter & Mossholder, 2015). We used regression coefficients b_0 through b_5 to plot a three-dimensional response surface, with needed and received empowering leadership on the X and Y axes of the base plane, and follower emotional exhaustion on the Z axis.

Following Edwards and Cable (2009), to test H1, we calculated the curvature of the line of incongruence ($N = -R$) as ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$). A significant positive curvature indicates that greater misfit between needed and received empowering leadership corresponds to higher follower emotional exhaustion. To test H2, we used Cole et al.' s (2013) method to calculate the lateral shift quantity: $[b_2 - b_1]/[2 \times (b_3 - b_4 + b_5)]$. This quantity indicates the magnitude and direction of response surface displacement along the line of incongruence. A significant positive lateral shift indicates that emotional exhaustion values are higher in the excessive empowerment region ($N < R$) than in the insufficient empowerment region ($N > R$), supporting H2. We tested significance using bootstrapping in RStudio.

(2) Block Variable Approach We used Edwards and Cable' s (2009) block variable approach to test mediation effects. Specifically, we first created a block variable representing empowering leadership fit by multiplying the raw values

of the five polynomial terms (N, R, N^2, $N \times R$, R^2) by their respective regression coefficients from the polynomial regression. We then re-estimated the model to obtain: (a) path coefficient a from fit to emotional exhaustion; (b) path coefficient b from emotional exhaustion to the three outcome variables after controlling for fit; and (c) path coefficient c' from fit to outcomes after controlling for emotional exhaustion. Finally, we calculated the indirect effect ($a \times b$) and tested its statistical significance using bootstrapping.

Study 1 Results

2.2.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

We conducted CFA using Mplus 8.2 to examine discriminant validity. Since needed and received empowering leadership shared identical items, we allowed residual correlations between corresponding items (Tepper et al., 2018). Results showed that the hypothesized six-factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2(211) = 378.95, p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.05) and fit significantly better than alternative models (all $p[\Delta\chi^2] < 0.001$), supporting good discriminant validity.

2.2.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations. Given the high correlation between needed and received empowering leadership, following expert Edwards' recommendation, if the 95% CI of the correlation between corresponding factors (r_j) does not include 1, the constructs are statistically distinct. Additionally, if scatterplot scores are not concentrated on one side of the $Y = X$ line, this further indicates theoretical value in examining fit. In this study: $r_{\text{enhancing work meaning}} = 0.61$, 95% CI [0.45, 0.74]; $r_{\text{expressing confidence}} = 0.60$, 95% CI [0.48, 0.70]; $r_{\text{facilitating participation}} = 0.56$, 95% CI [0.42, 0.67]; $r_{\text{granting autonomy}} = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.52, 0.74], none including 1. Furthermore, scatterplots showed follower scores distributed relatively evenly on both sides of the $Y = X$ line.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (Study 1)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Needed Empowering Leadership	(0.90)					
2. Received Empowering Leadership	0.76**	(0.81)				
3. Emotional Exhaustion	-0.25**	-0.19*	(0.93)			

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Satisfaction with Leader	0.68**	0.53**	0.62**	-0.35**	(0.90)	
5. Organizational Citizenship Behavior	0.63**	-0.28**	0.68**	-0.23**	(0.89)	
6. Job Performance						

Note: Individual-level N = 150; reliability coefficients on diagonal; p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01.*

2.2.3 Hypothesis Testing

We first conducted two prerequisite tests to verify the necessity and appropriateness of polynomial regression and response surface analysis. First, we examined whether adding the three quadratic terms improved explanatory power for emotional exhaustion. As shown in Table 2 , the three quadratic terms were significant, $F(3, 144) = 5.46$ ($p = 0.001$), supporting the need for polynomial regression. Second, according to Edwards and Parry (1993), if the outcome variable's maximum is hypothesized to occur on the line of incongruence ($N = -R$), the response surface' s principal axis should not rotate or shift along this line. Specifically, we calculated the stationary point (N_0, R_0) and the principal axis intercept (p_{10}) and slope (p_{11}). Whether p_{11} differs significantly from -1 indicates rotation, while whether $-p_{10}/(p_{11} + 1)$ differs from 0 indicates shift. Bootstrapping results showed $p_{11} = -1.16$, 95% CI [-2.20, -0.74], including -1, and $-p_{10}/(p_{11} + 1) = -1.61$, 95% CI [-88.92, 95.29], including 0, indicating no rotation or shift.

(1) Fit Effect Test H1 predicted that misfit between needed and received empowering leadership would cause emotional exhaustion. Table 2 shows the curvature of the line of incongruence ($N = -R$) was significantly positive (curvature = 1.15, $p = 0.007$), supporting H1. As Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper] illustrates, the response surface curves downward along the line of incongruence ($N = -R$), indicating that greater misfit corresponds to higher emotional exhaustion.

H2 predicted that excessive empowerment would cause more emotional exhaustion than insufficient empowerment. Table 2 shows the lateral shift quantity = 0.31, 95% CI [0.05, 0.82], not including 0, supporting H2. Figure 3 visually presents this effect: emotional exhaustion values are higher in the left region of the line of incongruence (excessive empowerment: $N < R$) than in the right region (insufficient empowerment: $N > R$).

Table 2. Multilevel Polynomial Regression Results (Study 1)

Parameter	Coefficient (SE)
b_0 (Constant)	3.95** (0.08)
b_1 (Needed Empowering Leadership, N)	-0.33 (0.18)
b_2 (Received Empowering Leadership, R)	-0.03 (0.15)
b_3 (N^2)	4.05*** (0.07)
b_4 ($N \times R$)	-0.58*** (0.14)
b_5 (R^2)	0.14 (0.21)
F-test for quadratic terms	5.46**
Pseudo-R^2	0.16**
ΔPseudo-R^2	0.10**
Response Surface Analysis	
Stationary point (N_0, R_0)	(-0.58, -1.05)
Principal axis: $R = p_{10} + p_{11}N$	$R = -1.16 - 1.72N$
$-p_{10}/(p_{11} + 1)$	0.31*
Line of Incongruence ($N = -R$)	
Slope ($b_1 - b_2$)	-0.72* (0.32)
Curvature ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$)	1.15** (0.42)
Line of Congruence ($N = R$)	
Slope ($b_1 + b_2$)	-0.45** (0.16)
Curvature ($b_3 + b_4 + b_5$)	-0.31*** (0.08)

Note: Individual-level N = 150, organizational-level N = 12; unstandardized coefficients (SE in parentheses); $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.*

Figure 3. The Effect of Empowering Leadership Fit on Followers' Emotional Exhaustion (Study 1)

(2) Mediation Effect Test H3 predicted that empowering leadership fit influences followers' (a) satisfaction with the leader, (b) organizational citizenship behavior, and (c) job performance through emotional exhaustion. As Table 3 shows, the empowering leadership fit block variable was significantly positively related to emotional exhaustion ($b = 0.92, p < 0.001$). Emotional exhaustion negatively affected satisfaction with the leader ($b = -0.11, p = 0.004$), organizational citizenship behavior ($b = -0.14, p = 0.002$), and job performance ($b = -0.10, p = 0.011$). Furthermore, the indirect effects through emotional exhaustion were: (1) satisfaction with the leader = -0.10, 95% CI [-0.20, -0.03]; (2) organizational citizenship behavior = -0.13, 95% CI [-0.25, -0.04]; (3) job performance = -0.10, 95% CI [-0.20, -0.02]. All confidence intervals excluded 0, supporting H3a, H3b, and H3c.

Table 3. Mediation Effect Tests (Study 1)

Path	Coefficient (SE)	Indirect Effect	95% CI
Fit → Emotional Exhaustion	0.92*** (0.18)		
Emotional Exhaustion → Satisfaction	-0.11** (0.04)	-0.10*	[-0.20, -0.03]
Emotional Exhaustion → OCB	-0.14** (0.05)	-0.13*	[-0.25, -0.04]
Emotional Exhaustion → Performance	-0.10* (0.04)	-0.10*	[-0.20, -0.02]

Note: Individual-level N = 150, organizational-level N = 12; unstandardized coefficients (SE in parentheses); $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.*

Study 2

3.1.1 Sample and Data Collection

We partnered with a national professional data collection firm (listed on the New Third Board in early 2016) to recruit participants. The firm sent invitation letters and instructions to nearly 200 teams in its database located in a western Chinese province. Ultimately, 50 team leaders and 253 followers from 38 manufacturing and service companies agreed to participate (each team comprised 4-10 members). Our research team contacted each participant individually to ensure they understood the academic purpose and voluntary nature. All participants indicated informed consent and willingness to cooperate. To test causal relationships, we conducted a two-wave survey with a half-month interval. In Wave 1, followers assessed needed and received empowering leadership, psychological stress, psychological empowerment, and demographics. In Wave 2, followers evaluated emotional exhaustion and satisfaction with their leader; the 50 team leaders assessed followers' job performance and organizational citizenship behavior and provided their own demographics and team information.

We used attention-check items to assess questionnaire validity (e.g., "Please select 'somewhat agree'for this item") and excluded questionnaires with incorrect

responses or entire pages left blank (Lee et al., 2019). We excluded 10 invalid questionnaires, yielding 243 valid follower questionnaires (96.0% response rate) and 50 valid leader questionnaires (100% response rate).

Leader sample characteristics: 45.7% male; predominantly middle-aged, with 61.3% aged 31-40; 32.9% held associate degrees and 63.0% bachelor' s degrees; average organizational tenure = 6.63 years (SD = 2.23). Follower sample characteristics: 51.4% male; primarily aged 21-40 (46.5% aged 21-30, 42.0% aged 31-40); 54.3% held associate degrees and 40.3% bachelor' s degrees; average organizational tenure = 3.72 years (SD = 2.63) and average tenure with current leader = 2.77 years (SD = 2.19). Tests revealed no significant differences in demographic variables between the final 243 followers and the initial 253 followers ($p = 0.762$ to 0.963), indicating no sample attrition bias.

3.1.2 Variable Measurement

All scales and development procedures remained consistent with Study 1. We only present information differing between studies. Unless otherwise specified, key variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Empowering Leadership. We used Zhang and Bartol' s (2010) complete empowering leadership scale (1 = never, 5 = always). The second-order factor structure showed good fit (needed empowering leadership: $\chi^2(50) = 104.25, p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.07; SRMR = 0.05; received empowering leadership: $\chi^2(50) = 73.70, p = 0.016$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.04), supporting a second-order factor structure (needed empowering leadership: Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.90$; received empowering leadership: Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.88$).

Emotional Exhaustion, Satisfaction with Leader, OCB, and Job Performance. Cronbach' s α values were 0.94, 0.82, 0.80, and 0.80, respectively.

Control Variables. Edwards (1996) noted that perceived needs-supplies misfit as a stressor may co-occur with psychological stress, affecting emotional exhaustion. Therefore, we controlled for psychological stress to better isolate the effect of empowering leadership fit. We used Motowidlo et al.' s (1986) four-item scale (sample item: "I experience considerable stress at work" ; Cronbach' s $\alpha = 0.87$). Additionally, research shows that employees' subjective empowerment experience (i.e., psychological empowerment) influences empowerment effectiveness (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Thus, we controlled for psychological empowerment using Spreitzer' s (1995) scale. Due to questionnaire length concerns, we used only the highest-loading item from each dimension (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$). While we included psychological stress and psychological empowerment as controls for theoretical reasons, their inclusion did not substantially alter results.

3.1.3 Analytical Strategy

Given that 243 followers were nested within 50 teams, which were further nested within 38 organizations, we used ICC1 to test the necessity of multilevel analysis. Results showed significant between-group variance at both team and organizational levels for emotional exhaustion (team: ICC1 = 0.54, $p < 0.001$; organization: ICC1 = 0.51, $p < 0.001$), satisfaction with leader (team: ICC1 = 0.31, $p < 0.001$; organization: ICC1 = 0.23, $p < 0.001$), organizational citizenship behavior (team: ICC1 = 0.47, $p < 0.001$; organization: ICC1 = 0.35, $p < 0.001$), and job performance (team: ICC1 = 0.52, $p < 0.001$; organization: ICC1 = 0.47, $p < 0.001$). We conducted three-level polynomial regression and response surface analyses in Mplus 8.2 using "Type = Threelevel" and "Estimator = MLR" commands. Because needed and received empowering leadership showed significant variance at the team level (needed: ICC1 = 0.61, $p < 0.001$; received: ICC1 = 0.55, $p < 0.001$), we group-mean-centered the independent variables and included group means in the team-level intercept equation to control for team-level effects (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). Other analytical procedures remained consistent with Study 1.

The polynomial regression model was:

$$\text{Follower Emotional Exhaustion} = b_0 + b_{01}\text{Stress} + b_{02}\text{Empowerment} + b_{1N} + b_{2R} + b_{3N}^2 + b_{4N} \times R + b_{5R}^2$$

Study 2 Results

3.2.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To optimize the sample size-to-parameter ratio, we used Landis et al.' s (2000) balanced item parceling technique. For unidimensional constructs, we iteratively paired items based on factor loadings to create two latent factors. For multidimensional constructs, each dimension was parceled into one latent factor. The six-factor model showed excellent fit ($\chi^2(85) = 176.25, p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06) and fit significantly better than alternative models ($p[\Delta\chi^2] = 0.019$ to 0.001).

3.2.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations. In this study: $r_{\text{enhancing work meaning}} = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.54, 0.73]; $r_{\text{expressing confidence}} = 0.69$, 95% CI [0.60, 0.77]; $r_{\text{facilitating participation}} = 0.76$, 95% CI [0.69, 0.82]; $r_{\text{granting autonomy}} = 0.72$, 95% CI [0.64, 0.78], none including 1. Scatterplots showed follower scores distributed relatively evenly on both sides of the $Y = X$ line.

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (Study 2)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Psychological Stress	(0.87)							
2. Psychological Empowerment	0.57**	(0.76)						
3. Needed Empowering Leadership	0.54**	0.57**	(0.90)					
4. Received Empowering Leadership	0.13*	0.13*	0.85**	(0.88)				
5. Emotional Exhaustion	-0.35**	-0.21**	-0.24**	-0.24**	(0.94)			
6. Satisfaction with Leader	0.28**	0.22**	0.22**	0.43**	0.37**	(0.82)		
7. Organizational Citizenship Behavior	0.13*	0.13*	-0.24**	-0.20**	0.17**	0.68**	(0.80)	
8. Job Performance	-0.28**	0.17**	0.17**	0.17**	-0.20**	0.17**	0.68**	(0.80)

Note: Individual-level N = 243; reliability coefficients on diagonal; p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01.*

3.2.3 Hypothesis Testing

Table 5 shows the three quadratic terms were significant, $F(3, 235) = 9.18$ ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, $p_{11} = -0.67$, 95% CI [-1.27, -0.30], including -1, and $-p_{10}/(p_{11} + 1) = 9.62$, 95% CI [-69.26, 78.37], including 0.

(1) Fit Effect Test The line of incongruence ($N = -R$) curvature was significantly positive (curvature = 5.73, $p = 0.003$), supporting H1. As Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper] shows, the surface curves downward along the line of incongruence, indicating that greater misfit corresponds to higher emotional exhaustion. The lateral shift quantity = 0.07, 95% CI [0.01, 0.15], not including 0, supporting H2. As Figure 4 illustrates, emotional exhaustion values are higher in the left region (excessive empowerment: $N < R$) than in the right region (insufficient empowerment: $N > R$).

Table 5. Multilevel Polynomial Regression Results (Study 2)

Parameter	Coefficient (SE)
b_0 (Constant)	4.43*** (0.75)

Parameter	Coefficient (SE)
b_{01} (Psychological Stress)	0.08 (0.07)
b_{02} (Psychological Empowerment)	0.09 (0.07)
b_1 (Needed Empowering Leadership, N)	-0.22 (0.18)
b_2 (Received Empowering Leadership, R)	0.28 (0.17)
b_3 (N^2)	-0.05 (0.18)
b_4 ($N \times R$)	-0.36* (0.17)
b_5 (R^2)	0.42* (0.21)
F-test for quadratic terms	9.18***
Pseudo-R^2	0.10***
Response Surface Analysis	
Stationary point (N_0, R_0)	(-1.38, -2.21)
Principal axis: $R = p_{10} + p_{11}N$	$R = -3.14 - 0.67N$
Lateral shift quantity	0.07*
Line of Incongruence ($N = -R$)	
Slope ($b_1 - b_2$)	-0.78* (0.35)
Curvature ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$)	5.73** (1.91)
Line of Congruence ($N = R$)	
Slope ($b_1 + b_2$)	0.06 (0.15)
Curvature ($b_3 + b_4 + b_5$)	0.27 (0.18)

Note: Individual-level N = 243, team-level N = 50, organizational-level N = 38; unstandardized coefficients (SE in parentheses); p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.*

Figure 4. The Effect of Empowering Leadership Fit on Emotional Exhaustion (Study 2)

(2) Mediation Effect Test Table 6 shows that empowering leadership fit was significantly positively related to emotional exhaustion ($b = 1.00, p = 0.002$). Emotional exhaustion negatively affected satisfaction with the leader ($b = -0.14, p = 0.022$), organizational citizenship behavior ($b = -0.11, p = 0.007$), and job performance ($b = -0.12, p = 0.014$). The indirect effects through emotional exhaustion were: (1) satisfaction with the leader = -0.14, 95% CI [-0.32, -0.01]; (2) organizational citizenship behavior = -0.11, 95% CI [-0.23, -0.02]; (3) job performance = -0.12, 95% CI [-0.26, -0.02]. All confidence intervals excluded 0, supporting H3a, H3b, and H3c.

Table 6. Mediation Effect Tests (Study 2)

Path	Coefficient (SE)	Indirect Effect	95% CI
Fit → Emotional Exhaustion	1.00** (0.32)		
Emotional Exhaustion → Satisfaction	-0.14* (0.06)	-0.14*	[-0.32, -0.01]
Emotional Exhaustion → OCB	-0.11** (0.04)	-0.11*	[-0.23, -0.02]
Emotional Exhaustion → Performance	-0.12* (0.05)	-0.12*	[-0.26, -0.02]

Note: Individual-level N = 243, team-level N = 50, organizational-level N = 38; unstandardized coefficients (SE in parentheses); $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.*

4.1 Main Conclusions

Integrating person-environment fit theory and the transactional model of stress, this study examined how the fit between needed and received empowering leadership influences followers' satisfaction with their leader, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance. Through multilevel polynomial regression and response surface analysis of 150 dyads (Study 1) and 243 dyads (Study 2), results indicate: (1) misfit between needed and received empowering leadership triggers followers' emotional exhaustion; (2) compared with insufficient empowerment, excessive empowerment more strongly induces emotional exhaustion; and (3) empowering leadership fit influences followers' satisfaction with their leader, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance through emotional exhaustion.

4.2 Theoretical Implications

This study offers several theoretical contributions. First, regarding empowering leadership effects, existing research presents contradictory positive and negative perspectives, necessitating refined understanding of boundary conditions.

Based on person-environment fit theory and adopting a leader-follower dyadic perspective, we simultaneously examined needed and received empowering leadership, revealing that followers' needs for empowerment constitute a boundary condition for its positive effects. This responds to scholars' calls for dyadic perspectives to fully capture leadership processes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) and validates Follett' s (1920) classic leadership philosophy that leadership involves mutual influence rather than unidirectional top-down impact. If followers are empowerment targets, their needs must be considered; otherwise, empowerment cannot be effective. This also inspires future leadership research to adopt dyadic perspectives for more comprehensive understanding.

Second, we demonstrated that excessive empowerment more strongly induces emotional exhaustion than insufficient empowerment, challenging the prevailing view of empowering leadership as a universal remedy where more is always better. This aligns with research indicating "too much of a good thing" effects (Lee et al., 2017). It also suggests that empowering leadership itself is neither inherently good nor bad; its effectiveness largely depends on appropriate, measured empowerment that considers follower needs. Indiscriminate empowerment can backfire.

Finally, by integrating the transactional model of stress into person-environment fit theory, we clarified emotional exhaustion' s mediating role in transmitting empowering leadership fit effects on work outcomes. This mechanism elucidates how and why perceived empowering leadership misfit as a stressor influences outcomes. Additionally, this expands emotional exhaustion research, which has predominantly examined antecedents from single perspectives. Our dyadic perspective demonstrates that empowering leadership misfit induces emotional exhaustion, enriching the nomological network of emotional exhaustion.

4.3 Practical Implications

This study offers managerial insights. First, we found that misfit between needed and received empowering leadership causes emotional exhaustion. This suggests leaders should assess followers'individual characteristics, abilities, goals, and contexts to evaluate their empowerment needs, then provide customized, tailored empowerment—ensuring appropriate levels, as both insufficient and excessive empowerment are suboptimal. Particularly in increasingly diverse workplaces, this targeted approach is essential rather than one-size-fits-all.

Second, excessive empowerment more strongly triggers emotional exhaustion than insufficient empowerment. This cautions managers that empowerment is not universally beneficial; when followers are unprepared for granted empowerment, leaders should avoid unilateral excessive empowerment to prevent counterproductive effects and heightened emotional exhaustion. Managers should empower gradually and according to needs.

Finally, managers need dynamic awareness, as follower needs evolve with contexts, tasks, and abilities. Regularly reviewing empowerment appropriateness

is crucial because both chronic excessive and insufficient empowerment harm employee and organizational development.

4.4 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations requiring future research. First, by integrating the transactional model into person-environment fit theory, we examined emotional exhaustion as a mediator. Future research could integrate other theoretical perspectives to explore additional mechanisms. For example, integrating need theory to examine how empowering leadership fit influences outcomes through autonomy, relatedness, and competence needs would enrich the literature (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Second, all studied variables are influenced by individual differences that could serve as third variables explaining our results. We did not include these in our model to test whether hypotheses remain robust after their inclusion (Li et al., 2020). Future research using similar paradigms should control for relevant individual differences to rule out alternative explanations.

Finally, although two multi-source, multi-wave samples partially address common method bias and support causal inference, limitations remain—both studies only collected two timepoints. To rule out reverse causality, we compared AIC and BIC values between hypothesized and reverse-causality models. According to Kline (2011), smaller AIC and BIC values indicate better fit and replicability. Our hypothesized models had lower AIC and BIC values [AIC = 1524.19, BIC = 1656.66 (Study 1); AIC = 1661.90, BIC = 1885.46 (Study 2)] than reverse-causality models [AIC = 3334.20, BIC = 3532.90 (Study 1); AIC = 3142.46, BIC = 3407.94 (Study 2)], supporting our hypothesized direction. Nevertheless, reverse causality cannot be completely ruled out; future research should use three-wave designs or rigorous experimental designs.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.