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The Unexpected Role of Employees' Leadership for the Self-Management of Their Competence

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Abstract:

Managers' transformational leadership was repeatedly shown to support trust, intrinsic motivation and competence of employees working with them. In contrast, there is a gap in the literature regarding employees' leadership. In line with a self-determined view of competence management, we investigate the role of employees' transformational leadership, work motivation and trust on the satisfaction of their own need for competence. We surveyed a sample of 71 field workers, holding non-managerial, non-executive positions in the industry. Descriptive data show their relatively high level of transformational leadership, and predictive analysis shows its positive impact on their competence dynamics. Furthermore, identified motivation (and not intrinsic motivation) and trust towards managers also arise as significant drivers of satisfaction of the need for competence. Surprisingly, trust towards teammates acts as a barrier to individual competence, as if a trustworthy team would alleviate individuals' responsibility or need to grow in competence. From these results, we discuss the potential of training transformational leadership in non-managerial populations: in addition to supporting employees' efficiency at work, this could help them gain perspective and maturity on their professional role, increase their purpose- or value-driven identified motivation and support their competence development. Ultimately, all these factors are likely to enhance individual and organizational wellbeing, and thereby contribute to human and societal development.

Keywords:

Need for Competence, Transformational Leadership, Identified Motivation, Trust

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Introduction

The management of 'core competence of the corporation' is recognized as highly strategical for companies (Prahalad & Hamel, 2009) and central to making human assets flourish in the workplace. At the individual level, competence development is also key to talent retention, in particular within young generations (Younas & Waseem Bari, 2020). However, companies can no longer apply the same formulas that used to work in the past, as young generations constantly challenge preexisting Human Resource Management strategies (Rachmad, 2025). In a changing world, there is need to develop new approaches for competence management adapted to the evolution of the workforce, its needs and expectations. In particular, competence management policies allowing individual consideration and self-determination are worth considering, given the attitudinal profile of young generations, their independence and self-reliance (Kutlák, 2021). In line with these evolutions, the aim of the present study is to contribute to identifying new drivers of individual competence for the workplace, to nurture competence management strategies of the future.

Literature Review

Although the notion of competence is pervasive in today's workplace, there is still no consensus on the definition of what competence is (Hoffmann, 1999; Reineholm et al., 2024). The vast majority of scholars consider that, in addition to knowledge and skills, competence depends on hidden individual characteristics, including personality traits and motivation (Kumar et al., 2024), in interaction with multiple external factors. Besides, theories of human motivation such as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) model competence as one of the three universal psychological needs at the root of human motivation, thereby strengthening the conceptual link between competence and motivation. In particular, intrinsic motivation is likely to provide the highest stimulation and satisfaction of the need for competence (with comparison to identified, introjected or extrinsic motivation; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). In line with this body of research, we hypothesize (H1) that the satisfaction of one's need for competence will be predicted by their level of intrinsic motivation for their job.

Interestingly, the field of competence management hardly addresses motivation management, which is therefore mostly absent from corporate processes such as competency mapping (Anisha, 2012; Bhagat & El Achmar, 2023). In practice, motivation management is either left to the individual, or implicitly and informally delegated to managers. In this respect, managers' leadership, in particular transformational leadership, was shown to be a major driver of work motivation (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) and employees' competence (Bin Atan & Mahmood, 2019). Transformational leadership is usually defined in contrast to transactional leadership (Bass, 1999). Transactional leadership is rooted in an exchange relationship (transaction) between the leader and the follower: the follower is responsible for achieving results and

the leader is responsible for giving rewards (e.g. incentives, recognition) or sanctions in response to the follower's performance. Transactional leaders derive their power from the fact that they control rewards and sanctions: by essence, this process generates only short-term effects and results in a climate of apprehension. Conversely, transformational leaders derive their influential power from the inspiration they convey: they give value, purpose and meaning to work, they hold a long-term and optimistic vision of the future, and bring intellectual stimulation to people working with them (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

So far, transformational leadership was almost exclusively studied at the manager's level to assess its impact on followers, in line with a hierarchical view of organizational processes and of competence management. Yet, recent approaches to leadership invite us to consider non-managerial variants thereof, such as shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2002) or co-leadership (Raelin, 2011). Furthermore, contrary to transactional leadership which has to control rewards to be exerted, transformational leadership does not require a managerial position, as virtually anyone can bring inspiration around themselves. Therefore, the main purpose and originality of the present research will be to test the hypothesis (H2) that the satisfaction of one's need for competence will be predicted by their level of transformational leadership, in line with a self-determined approach to competence.

Among the significant amount of research on leadership, it was notably shown that the benefits of transformational leaders on their followers were mediated by trust (Braun et al., 2013). We may then derive a cascade of positive effects between manager's transformational leadership, employee's trust, work motivation, and competence, providing multiple opportunities of competence stimulation along the way. If these effects are transferred to employees' leadership style, it may be interesting to investigate the effects of trust on the satisfaction of their need for competence. As we intend to overcome a managerial view of competence, we aim to explore several instances of trust: organizational trust, trust towards managers, and trust towards teammates. Still in line with a horizontal (i.e., non-hierarchical) view of competence management, we hypothesize (H3) that the satisfaction of one's need for competence will be predicted by their level of trust towards their teammates.

To test these hypotheses, we measure the satisfaction of the need for competence in a sample of industrial workers, along with their work motivation (H1), transformational leadership (H2), and trust level (H3). We believe it is important to offer alternative understanding of competence dynamics in more participative and less hierarchical configurations, consistent with future generations' aspirations.

Methods & Data

We built a 37-item survey combining validated scales to measure the satisfaction of the need for competence (Gillet et al., 2008), work motivation including intrinsic, identified, introjected and extrinsic motivation (Gagné et al., 2014), transformational leadership (Berger et al., 2011), organizational trust

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(Shockley-Zalabak et al., 1999), trust towards management (Tzafrir et al., 2004) and trust towards teammates (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2018). Items were to be answered on 5-point Likert-type scales.

N = 71 French industrial workers (including 15 women), all holding a non-managerial position, volunteered to participate and took a paper version of the survey during dedicated team meetings in their working hours. Their mean age was 37.6 (SD = 9.6) with 11.3 years of seniority on average, and mainly with 2-year post-secondary degrees in highly-specialized fields. Participants provided their informed consent before and after survey taking, for research purposes and non-commercial use of their answers. Data were anonymized and their storage and processing comply with General Data Protection Regulation.

Results

Descriptive data can be found in Table 1. All dimensions showed sufficient reliability for further analyses (all Cronbach's alphas > 0.6).

Variable	Mean	Standard error	Alpha
Satisfaction of the need for competence	4.03	0.08	0.637
Intrinsic motivation	3.77	0.10	0.812
Identified motivation	3.83	0.12	Single item
Introjected motivation	4	0.11	Single item
Extrinsic motivation	2.41	0.11	0.732
Transformational leadership	3.67	0.08	0.873
Organizational trust	2.94	0.09	0.765
Trust towards managers	3.33	0.08	0.887
Trust towards teammates	3.81	0.08	0.838

Table 1: Mean, standard error and Cronbach's alpha for all variables

To test our hypotheses, we performed a multiple regression analysis (Table 2) with the satisfaction of the need for competence as dependent variable and all other variables as predictors.

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	B	Standard error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.74	0.72	0	1.03	0.305
Intrinsic motivation	-0.1	0.16	-0.08	-0.64	0.524
Identified motivation	0.24	0.11	0.25	2.18	0.033*
Introjected motivation	0.02	0.13	0.02	0.16	0.874
Extrinsic motivation	-0.18	0.11	-0.17	-1.65	0.104
Transformational leadership	0.42	0.17	0.29	2.55	0.013*
Organizational trust	0.22	0.16	0.18	1.38	0.174
Trust towards managers	0.62	0.21	0.43	2.97	0.004**
Trust towards teammates	-0.41	0.19	-0.29	-2.15	0.035*
DV: Satisfaction of the need for competence					

Table 2: Results of the multiple regression analysis. Colored lines emphasize significant positive (green) and negative (red) predictors of the satisfaction of the need for competence.

The multiple regression highlights 4 significant predictors of the satisfaction of the need for competence: 3 positive ones (Identified motivation, $\beta = 0.25$, $t = 2.18$, $p = 0.033$; Transformational leadership, $\beta = 0.29$, $t = 2.55$, $p = 0.013$; and Trust towards managers, $\beta = 0.43$, $t = 2.97$, $p = 0.035$) and a negative one, namely Trust towards teammates ($\beta = -0.29$, $t = -2.15$, $p = 0.035$).

Discussion

Descriptive data (Table 1) show a remarkably high level of satisfaction of the need for competence (above 4 on a 5-point scale), reinforcing the value of investigating competence processes in this experienced and proficient population.

Regarding the role of motivation, H1 has to be rejected. Contrary to expectations, intrinsic motivation showed no effect on the satisfaction of the need for competence, which also contradicts the literature (Deci & Moller, 2005). The power of intrinsic motivation (appeal of the activity for its own sake) seems to have been replaced here by that of identified motivation (significance of the activity). Both types of motivations score high in this population (see Table 1) but the causal link to competence is clearly on the side of identified motivation (see Table 2). Simply put, our study participants seem to be driven to be competent not because they like their job (although they actually like it), but because their job is useful. From this result, we may infer that identified motivation is likely to engage individuals in a spiral of

competence development just like intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, identified motivation, which involves values and purpose, is also strongly conveyed by transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2010), and purpose-driven management of competence can also be seen as a more mature process, i.e. less self-centered than one driven by intrinsic motivation. Anyhow, we should remain cautious with regard to the generalizability of this result, as our population is highly specific: it then calls for further research on the relationship of young generations to intrinsic and identified motivation (see e.g., Chaudhuri, 2020) and their impact on competence.

Regarding H2 dedicated to transformational leadership, our results bring out a highly original finding: first, measuring employees' leadership, when they are neither managers nor executives, is infrequent and interesting in itself, especially since their leadership level proves to be quite high (Table 1). Secondly, this original approach highlights that employees' transformational leadership does predict their satisfaction of the need for competence, as if, in this case, leadership was self-applied and contributed to their personal growth. H2 is therefore validated and opens up avenues for future research. For example, to strengthen the dynamics of competence (among other expected benefits), we could imagine promoting transformational leadership for individuals and teams. Contrary to transactional leadership, the transformational style does not require a managerial position, and protocols actually exist in the literature to train transformational leadership (Barling et al., 1996; Abrell et al., 2011). These protocols were successfully validated among managers, and testing them with non-managers, non-executives, is both an intriguing and promising avenue.

H3 considering the effects of trust is also rejected and emphasizes other surprising results. Firstly, organizational trust appears as quite low (see Table 1), but this does not impact competence (see Table 2). Secondly, the traditional approach of competence partly relying on managers (see e.g., Parfyonova et al., 2019) still applies in our population, as trust towards management proves to be the strongest driver of the satisfaction of the need for competence. Finally, contrary to our assumptions, trust towards teammates is not a driver, but a barrier to the satisfaction of the need for competence. This suggests that someone experiencing high trust for their teammates will be less incline to develop their own competence. This makes sense and could be assimilated to some sort of diffusion of responsibility (Liu et al., 2022), or to a principle of communicating vessels between individual and collective competence (see e.g., Boreham, 2004): when the team is strong and trustworthy, individuals may receive less urge to develop their potential, and reciprocally. Team trust is precious and should not be reduced whatever. This result simply provides a valuable insight into the driving forces of competence.

Conclusion

This study brought about a number of insightful results. This may primarily be due to the high-quality, outstanding nature of our study population: we had the opportunity to glance into psychological

processes of real-life field workers in industry, with non-managerial positions – a population that few researchers have access to, although highly relevant to challenge and update our theoretical models of what happens in the workplace. Our methods based on standardized psychometric scales and inferential analyses also proved relevant here to uncover implicit processes that employees and managers are probably not aware of.

The main insight of the present study pertains to the leadership of field workers: firstly, they show quite high levels of transformational leadership, which surely helps them in their everyday tasks, as well as in their private life, and demonstrates that leadership should not be restricted to managers in the collective mind. Secondly, our results suggest that this leadership could help them gain perspective on their professional role and strengthen their identified motivation: what purpose do they work for, what meaningfulness do they find therein, and why should they develop competence. Ultimately, leadership and identified motivation may engage them in an upward spiral of competence development, which is likely to generate both performance and wellbeing. Transformational leadership training applied to large-scale populations could therefore be a fruitful avenue, benefitting organizations, their members personally, and the society in general.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report they have no conflict of interest to declare.

Ethics

The protocol was approved by the authors' institution's Data Protection Officer. Data collection and storage comply with General Data Protection Regulation. Informed consent was granted by all individual participants included in the study.

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