

Using job autonomy as an explanatory mechanism between participative leadership and workplace well-being

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Abstract

Leaders play a vital role in overseeing organizational interventions, which involve changing how work is structured, designed, and supervised to enhance employee health and well-being. This research examines the relationship between the participative leadership style and employee workplace well-being, considering the mediating impact of job autonomy. Data for this study was gathered using questionnaires from 446 employees working in different firms in free trade zones of Pakistan using a convenient sampling technique. For the current research work, SPSS 24 and the Process Macros model were used for hypothesis testing. The results of current studies indicate that participative leadership is positively and significantly related to workplace well-being. Furthermore, the study's findings indicate that job autonomy mediates between participative leadership and workplace well-being. In future endeavors, it is important to categorize free trade zone enterprises by size, control, and ownership to assess the positive association between leadership and well-being.

Keywords: Participative Leadership, Job Autonomy, Workplace Well-being, Free Trade Zones

1 Introduction

Contemporary organizations leverage advanced technology to make informed judgments and achieve a competitive edge in the digital era (Su et al., [2021](#)). Due to the challenges leaders face in making prompt and efficient judgments in the dynamic corporate environment, there is a growing trend of involving employees in making decisions (Peng et al., [2022](#)). The utilization of

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contemporary information technology, encompassing computer networks and integrating systems, has facilitated the dissemination of information from lower levels of organization to higher levels inside enterprises. The transmission of information has occurred due to the integration of the system. This has made the inclusion of cross-level, multifaceted "employee opinions" increasingly important in the process of making leadership decisions. In order for a company to achieve sustainable growth, enhance performance, and acquire a competitive edge, it is crucial to increase employee involvement in decision-making (Jia et al., [2021](#)). Employee involvement is crucial for organizational decision-making to effectively adapt to evolving corporate contexts and improve leaders' decision-making abilities and scientific approach. Leaders in high-power distance cultures must prioritize fostering subordinate participation in decision-making in real-time, according to Huang et al. ([2010](#)). In order to accomplish this, leaders must adopt a democratic and supportive approach known as participative leadership. Experts agree that leaders require actively involved personnel to remain competitive in a cutthroat market. Participative leadership encourages employee involvement in decision-making and is becoming increasingly popular among firms (Usman et al., [2021](#)).

Huang et al. ([2021](#)) define participatory leadership as a leadership style that involves allowing employees to actively participate in the process of making decisions, regardless of the size, kind, or stage of the business. This style is defined by promoting openness and empowering employees. Effective leaders actively participate in collaborative activities with their staff, engaging them in the process of making decisions and soliciting their input on areas of strategic importance (Chan, [2019](#)).

Participative leaders engage all team members in the process of identifying the most crucial objectives and devising effective strategies or methodologies to achieve those objectives. From this perspective, participatory leadership can be defined as a managerial approach that emphasizes the role of the manager as a facilitator rather than just assigning tasks or delivering commands to subordinates (Wang et al., [2022](#)). This leadership style aims to empower individuals in the workplace and improve organizational effectiveness by distributing power and influence between leaders and followers.

The concept of leadership is frequently explored in literature. Employees play a vital role in achieving service excellence. Providing employees with clear expectations will likely enhance their performance (Keskes, [2014](#)). Leaders are responsible for distributing tasks and resources and employ various approaches depending on their leadership style. Research indicates that leaders have the ability to exert influence over others in order to enhance the overall effectiveness of an organization. Leaders exert a significant influence on the followers of their organization. Participative leadership greatly enhances employee well-being (Jian et al., [2021](#)).

Previous literature has conducted little research on the impact of leadership style on employees' well-being, particularly in relation to free trade zones. Free trade zones, often known as special economic zones, are designated areas created by governments with the purpose of enticing foreign direct investment (FDI). Governments provide incentives such as lower tax rates, tax breaks, and financial subsidies to promote the development of enterprises. These incentives are designed to stimulate job creation, enhance export activity, and fortify economic linkages. The arrangement of these zones also enhances employee welfare and well-being, resulting in enhanced business performance. This study will help to understand how participative leadership style will increase the workplace well-being of the employees, especially in the context of free trade zones. In addition, previous management literature has shown a lack of consistent outcomes that have not been properly incorporated into organizational and leadership theories (Vilkinas et al., [2020](#)). Thus, the present study aimed to investigate the impact of participative leadership styles on employee wellbeing, specifically among employees in organizations at free trade zones, to address this knowledge gap. It is crucial to acknowledge that this study has significant limitations since it

focuses solely on Pakistan's organizational environment of free trade zones. We chose this context because there is currently a lack of research specifically examining participative leadership in Pakistan's free trade zones. Our research enhances the existing body of knowledge by addressing this gap and provides an entirely new perspective to the leadership literature.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Support

This research work is supported by social exchange theory (Blau, [1964](#)), which explains that exchanges are maintained by the consistent interchange of rewards inside organizations (Settoon et al., [1996](#)). According to this hypothesis, individuals tend to react to receiving valuable resources to maintain positive ties with other members of society and to continue these mutual interactions (Blau, [1964](#)). The concept of social exchange has been extensively explored in various leadership literature (Eisenberger et al., [2014](#)). Due to the presence of unknown obligations and expectations for future benefits, employees respond positively to favorable treatment from leaders based on the principle of reciprocity (Gouldner, [1960](#)). According to the hypothesis, when leaders provide support and autonomy to employees, the employees are likely to reciprocate by displaying positive behaviors and attitudes (Blau, [1964](#)). Employees with close ties with their leaders tend to report high social support, job performance, and well-being (Gooty & Yammarino, [2016](#)).

According to the perspective of social exchange theory, we posit that employees whom their supervisors empower through their behaviors may perceive their leaders as a substantial source of resources and authority. Employees are regarded as dependable sources of resources that contribute to enhanced psychological satisfaction. This, in turn, leads to increased well-being and prompts them to demonstrate high performance. Consequently, they establish excellent interpersonal connections with leaders and organizations.

2.2 Participative Leadership and Employee Well-being

Participative leadership is characterized as a non-definitive behavior by a leader that allows employees to get involved in the basic leadership process (Harris & Ogbonna, [2000](#)). Participative leadership is providing employees with opportunities to articulate their ideas and suggestions. A participative leader assumes the mentor role, fostering an environment where all employees are encouraged to express their thoughts and opinions openly. This valuable information is then utilized in the decision-making process. A participatory leader empowers people throughout the process and eliminates any obstacles to achieving desired results (Somech, [2010](#)). According to the objective theory proposed by Sagnak ([2016](#)), effective leaders motivate their subordinates to participate in decision-making processes to achieve goals successfully and actively. The objective is to enhance employee enthusiasm and bolster productivity inside the firm. Administrators should adopt a participative leadership approach as it involves seeking input and advice from others. The technique of critical thinking can be used to develop leadership style, adaptability, and advancement (Sarti, [2014](#)).

A participatory leader fosters collaboration, enhances individuals' skills and knowledge, and demonstrates an understanding of others' needs by involving them in decision-making processes. Providing support in fundamental leadership fosters self-sufficiency and mental empowerment and enables followers to understand that they are valuable assets to a business (Armstrong, [2010](#)). A participatory leader fosters an environment of transparent communication, where employees feel included, and any resistance to organizational changes can be effectively addressed. This leadership style is characterized by less formalization, an ability to show respect, sharing of control, mutual understanding, and mitigation of proportional threats and risks (Newman et al., [2016](#)). This leadership style is most effective in an organic organizational structure, where people are largely involved in creativity and have a strong understanding of their job responsibilities.

Participative leadership yields favorable results, fostering employee engagement and a desire to learn from their supervisor (Bhatti et al., [2019](#)).

The participative approach to leadership has gained prominence in recent times in the competitive environment due to its significant contribution to the success of organizations in terms of enhancing organizational and human values. In this manner, organizational administrators should be able to employ this approach to enhance their management styles. More precisely, it is crucial for enhancing the efficiency of personnel inside an organization (Shaed, [2018](#)). A participatory leader is characterized by engaging subordinates in activities that provide opportunities for autonomous decision-making. When employees see that their boss empowers them, they will respond favorably by exerting more effort to fulfill the goals the leader sets. This empowerment fosters a favorable perception of a leader's integrity among personnel. Leadership that fosters confidence in subordinates encourages them to think that their leader trusts their skills and abilities. A participative leader fosters employee self-reliance and values their self-worth. Employees who acquire knowledge and skills receive recognition, and the leader acknowledges their innovative ideas and abilities. This self-recognition by the leader motivates them to take on additional roles and tasks that contribute to the growth and competitiveness of the organization (Lu et al., [2015](#)).

A participatory leader fosters motivation by involving subordinates in the fundamental leadership process, so conveying that the leader values the ideas and suggestions of subordinates. According to Sagnak ([2016](#)), the freedom to express opinions and the limited authority of a participative leader positively impact well-being.

Therefore, the proposed hypothesis is:

H1: *Participative leadership is positively related to workplace wellbeing.*

2.3 Job Autonomy acts as a mediator between Participative Leadership and Workplace Well-being

Participative leadership involves superiors and subordinates, enabling them to influence the decision-making process (Sagnak, 2016) collectively. It can be examined using a comparative method, which defines it as the inclusion of employees in decision-making processes or, at the minimum, their collective impact on important leadership actions by a superior worker (Wang et al., [2022](#)). Participative leadership is the tendency of a leader to engage subordinates in the process of making decisions (Coffeng et al., [2023](#)). Participative management might be theoretically associated with job enlargement through various means. Frese and Fay ([2001](#)) propose that individuals are driven to improve their job performance when they perceive that they have control over the circumstance, as the social cognitive theory explains. Participative leadership improves control examination by engaging instructors in the decision-making process, thus enhancing their sense of control over work procedures and outcomes (Parker et al., [2006](#)). Moreover, as Locke and Latham (1990) stated, helping in primary leadership may boost organizational commitment and dedication, resulting in a feeling of personal responsibility towards objectives and missions. The feeling of possessing something drives individuals to expand their duties to improve their job performance. Moreover, working together can cultivate a culture characterized by honesty, trust, and support within the organization. This is because it enables teachers to safeguard their interests and gain access to decision-making processes that they would not otherwise be aware of (Sagie et al., [2002](#)).

Participation and autonomy both convey a sense of confidence in educators' abilities to meet corporate goals. Leaders who promote employee engagement in decision-making processes and grant employees autonomy in shaping their job responsibilities observe a rise in employee job satisfaction (Hoy et al., [2002](#)). Studies indicate that leaders could shape employees' views of job demands and workplace resources, which in turn can impact their overall well-being. Fernet et al.

(2015) discovered that transformative leadership had a negative correlation with psychological, cognitive, and physical job demands and a positive correlation with job resources. Additional research indicates that having a leader who can captivate and include their team members is associated with increased job resources, decreased job demands, a higher level of work engagement, and a reduced likelihood of experiencing stress (Rahmadani et al., 2020). Participative leadership helps to enhance employees' motivation and engagement by encouraging, strengthening, and connecting them (Schaufeli, 2015). It is associated with satisfying core psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (van Tuin et al., 2020). Therefore, we formulated a hypothesis:

H2: *Job autonomy mediates the relationship between participative leadership and workplace well-being.*

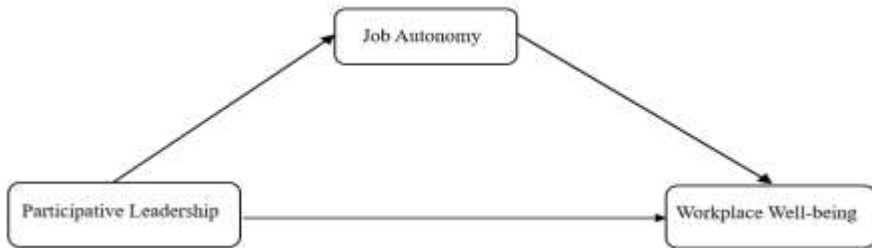


Figure 1: Proposed Research Framework

3 Material and Methods

A survey methodology is utilized for the current research work since it is one of the effective and best ways to collect data from many participants. Saunders et al. (2019) state that there is an association between the survey and the deductive approach analysis. Since they enable the fair and dependable gathering of data from a large population, questionnaires serve as the main tool for collecting data for surveys. Our study's goal is to gather data just once, and we accomplish this by using cross-sectional research. Individuals who are currently employed by the different enterprises located in Pakistan's free trade zones provide information. The required respondents were selected from employees working in free trade zone firms. Employees' willingness to take part in convenient sampling through the questionnaire made it possible for the study to achieve its objective of gathering employee feedback. The researcher contacted the specific organizations in free trade zones and requested permission from their management to gather data from the employees. The researcher gained permission from the managers to visit willing participants and give the questionnaire. The participants were provided with the questionnaire and given a briefing on the significance and objective of the study. They were also allowed to leave if they desired to do so. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality, and they also signed a consent form prior to starting the procedure. The respondents were granted ample of time to complete the questionnaires. Upon the survey's conclusion, the participants were graciously acknowledged and commended.

Data collection involved sending out 560 questionnaires in total; of those, 487 were eventually returned, yielding an 87 percent response rate. Once the data cleaning process was finished, the missing data, non-engaged responders, and outliers were identified and fixed. After the data was cleaned, a total of 446 questionnaires were available to be used. Collected data were entered in SPSS for statistical analysis along with the Process Macro Model by Hayes (2018) to examine the hypotheses of the current study.

3.1 Measures

The questionnaire gathered data on four demographic variables, such as Gender, Age, Tenure, and Qualifications of the respondents. In addition to population demographics, the research study has additionally included constructs for evaluation. The constructs consist of survey questions relating to Participative leadership, job autonomy, and employees' well-being. Each factor was assessed using a Likert scale with seven points. We employed a 6-item scale developed by Ismail et al. (2010) to measure participative leadership. The four components that comprised the job autonomy scale were adapted from Breugh (1985) and Hackman and Oldham (1980). Workplace well-being (WWB) was assessed using an 8-item scale by Bartels et al. (2019) that included two categories: Interpersonal and intrapersonal factors. Within the framework of WWB, organizational respect for workers and employer care were also considered.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlation Analysis

The standard deviations, means, correlations, and reliability of all the variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive, Correlation, and Reliability Analysis

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Participative Leadership	5.62	0.61	(0.85)		
Job Autonomy	4.93	0.52	0.22*	(0.78)	
Workplace Well-being	5.73	0.68	0.49**	0.43**	(0.81)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings shown in Table 1 indicate that the workplace well-being among workers in Pakistani Free trade zones is expected to be higher, as seen by the highest average value of 5.73 coupled with a standard deviation of 0.68. Cronbach's alpha assesses the reliability of the measures by computing the Pearson correlation between variables under the assumption that all variables possess equal reliability. The Cronbach alpha ratings ranged from 0.78 to 0.85 at the conclusion of the study. This suggests high reliability because the values exceed the acceptable threshold established by Fornell and Larcker (1981), being larger than 0.70.

After completing the reliability evaluations, correlation research was undertaken to investigate the connections among all the analyzed elements. This statistical analysis aimed to establish a direct correlation between participative leadership and workplace well-being. Furthermore, the variables exhibit correlation when they demonstrate a propensity to fluctuate in either similar or opposite ways. Table 1 exhibits a notable link among all factors. There is a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.49$; $p < 0.05$) between participative leadership and workplace well-being. The values shown in the correlation table suggest that it is appropriate to conduct further statistical investigations, as they correspond to the anticipated relationships.

Regression Analysis

The present study utilized multiple regression analysis to examine the direct impact and mediating function of the variables under investigation, which include participatory leadership, job autonomy, and workplace well-being. The following table displays the outcomes derived from the regression tests.

Table 2: Regression Analysis

	Coefficient	T	P-value	Result
PL → WWB	0.37	9.56	0.000	Supported

PL= Participative Leadership, WWB= Workplace Well-being

The present study's results suggest that participative leadership has a significant and positive effect on workplace wellbeing ($\beta = 0.37$, $p = 0.000$), which supports hypothesis 1.

4.2 Mediation Analysis

We used regression analysis to evaluate the mediating effect of job autonomy in the relationship between participative leadership and workplace wellbeing. The Preacher and Hayes Process Macro Model was used to examine the indirect effect of job autonomy. Table 3 shows the mediation analysis results. In this study, we utilized 5000 bootstrap resamples to calculate the 95% confidence interval (CI) of the indirect effects. We followed the methods suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008).

Table 3: Mediating Effect of Job Autonomy

	Direct Effect	Total Effect	Indirect Effect	Findings
PL-JA-WWB	0.37***	0.54***	0.17*	Supported
PL-JA-WWB	0.37***	0.54***	0.17*	Supported

PL= Participative Leadership, JA= Job Autonomy, WWB= Workplace Well-being

Furthermore, the investigation examined the impact of a participative leadership style on workplace well-being, with the mediating effect of job autonomy. The results given in Table 3 demonstrate that job autonomy has a significant role in mediating the relationship between participative leadership and employees' workplace well-being. The mediation effect is statistically significant, with a beta coefficient of 0.017 and a p-value of 0.05. Thus, the findings supported Hypothesis 2.

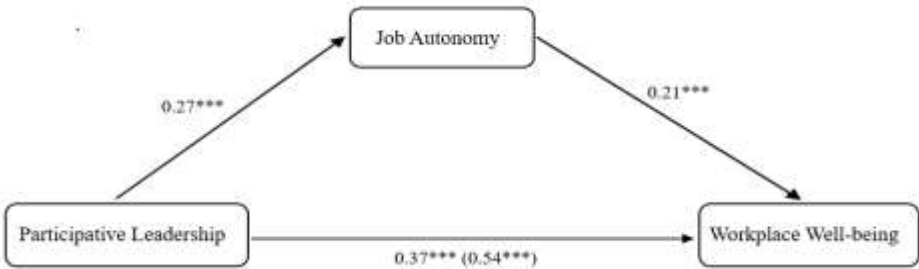


Figure 2: Mediation Analysis

5 Discussion

This study aims to investigate the relationship between participative leadership styles and the well-being of employees in the workplace. During our research, we have specifically investigated participative leadership styles within the framework of participatory settings, which, when combined, constitute a unique managerial arrangement. This system encourages employees to behave in an exemplary manner, to have positive attitudes, and to maintain collective accountability.

Angermeier et al. (2009) found that previous literature has undertaken a limited amount of study on the impact of leadership on the well-being of individuals in the workplace. It has been discovered that no empirical examination was carried out in free trade zones. As a result, to solve this shortcoming, an ongoing study is being conducted to evaluate the influence participative leadership has on the workplace well-being experienced by workers in Pakistani free trade zones. Because no previous research particularly investigates participative leadership and workplace well-being in Pakistani free trade zones, the Pakistani environment was selected as the location for this scholarly investigation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationship between a

participative leadership style and the workplace well-being of employees. As an additional point of interest, this research investigates the role that job autonomy plays as a mediator between participative leadership styles and the workplace well-being of employees. According to the findings of this study, the participative leadership style that is displayed by leaders in free trade zone firms appears to have a good impact on the well-being of employees in the workplace.

5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

There are a great number of intellectually stimulating fields that are eagerly awaiting contributions, and there are other exciting prospects for future research. The data and proposed theoretical framework are specifically intended for enterprises operating in Free Trade Zones. The sample does not include enterprises located in Non-Free Trade Zones. In future research, it may be beneficial to incorporate organizations that are not in the free trade zones category and perform a comparative examination to ascertain the variations in interactions between the two groups. Including a sample representative of a diverse community, such as this one, will make it easier to generalize the study's findings to a larger group. Additionally, to evaluate the validity of the favorable relationship that exists between leadership and well-being, it is important to classify businesses that operate within free trade zones based on their size, control, and ownership in future initiatives that will be undertaken. This study focused on quantitative data analysis. However, it is recommended that future researchers should integrate quantitative methodologies with qualitative research techniques such as focus groups, interviews, or case studies because qualitative data offers a more comprehensive understanding of experiences, views, and contextual interpretations that empirical research may not fully capture. One of the limitations of this study is that it consists of cross-sectional data. For future researchers, we recommend a longitudinal study to investigate the influence of various leadership styles on the well-being of employees by employing a dynamic approach.

5.2 Conclusion

Leadership is viewed as a precursor or influencer of well-being. This study has demonstrated that adopting a participative leadership style in free trade zone enterprises positively affects employees' well-being. Free trade zone enterprises should implement training programs to cultivate positive leadership styles among their managers. We found that granting job autonomy to individuals in firms leads to a more pronounced influence of the participative style on the employees' workplace well-being. Our research has found that participative leadership styles directly impact overall well-being, aligning with earlier studies. The outcomes of the current research work significantly contribute to the existing body of literature.

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