

The Paradox of Employee Empowerment: Decision-Making Autonomy, Role Ambiguity, and Job Performance

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Abstract

Employee empowerment is widely promoted as a route to higher motivation, innovation, and performance. Yet a growing body of evidence suggests that granting decision-making autonomy can also create strain, particularly when employees do not know what is expected of them. This paper develops a conceptual model explaining the paradox of empowerment: autonomy simultaneously enhances performance through psychological empowerment and impairs it through role ambiguity. Drawing on job characteristics theory, role theory, the job demands-resources model, and the challenge-hindrance stressor framework, we propose that (a) decision-making autonomy has a positive indirect effect on job performance via psychological empowerment, (b) autonomy has a negative indirect effect via role ambiguity when role clarity is not deliberately supplied, and (c) the net effect is curvilinear and moderated by employee experience, task complexity, and leadership clarity. We present a summary table of constructs and propositions, a flowchart of the dual-pathway process, and practical and research implications.

Keywords: empowerment, autonomy, role ambiguity, job performance, job demands-resources, role theory.

INTRODUCTION:

Over the past four decades, organizations have flattened hierarchies, pushed decisions to the front line, and encouraged employees to "take ownership." The

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logic is intuitive: people closest to the work often hold the best information, and autonomy signals trust, which should raise motivation and speed. Classic research supports this view. Autonomy is a core job characteristic that fosters felt responsibility and meaningfulness (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), and psychological empowerment is associated with higher effectiveness and satisfaction (Spreitzer, 1995).

However, practitioners frequently report a different experience. Newly empowered employees may feel unsure which decisions are theirs to make, how success will be judged, or when to escalate. Role theory has long shown that such uncertainty, known as role ambiguity, is a persistent stressor linked to lower satisfaction and performance (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Empowerment therefore contains a paradox: the same freedom that energizes can also disorient.

This paper addresses three questions:

1. Through what mechanisms does decision-making autonomy influence job performance?
2. Why does autonomy sometimes increase role ambiguity, and what does this do to performance?
3. Under what conditions does the empowering pathway outweigh the ambiguity pathway?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Decision-making autonomy and psychological empowerment

Decision-making autonomy is the degree to which employees have discretion over how, when, and sometimes what work is done. Structural empowerment (delegated authority, access to information and resources) is distinct from psychological empowerment, the motivational state comprising meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995). Autonomy is a structural condition; psychological empowerment is how employees experience it. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that psychological empowerment relates positively to task performance, and team-level empowerment relates to team performance (Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011; Maynard, Gilson, & Mathieu, 2012).

2.2 Role ambiguity as a performance-relevant stressor

Role ambiguity is the lack of clear information about role expectations, methods for fulfilling them, and the consequences of performance (Rizzo et al., 1970). Meta-analyses show it correlates negatively with job satisfaction, commitment, and performance, and positively with tension and turnover intentions (Tubre & Collins, 2000; Gilboa et al., 2008). Within the challenge-hindrance framework, role ambiguity is typically classified as a hindrance stressor, one that blocks goal attainment without offering compensating growth opportunities (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007).

2.3 Why autonomy can generate ambiguity

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Traditional supervision and standard procedures supply implicit role information: rules, checklists, and managerial direction define what to do. When these are removed in the name of empowerment, three things can happen:

- Loss of structure: fewer rules mean fewer cues about acceptable behavior.
- Unclear boundaries: employees may not know the limits of their decision rights or when approval is needed.
- Ambiguous evaluation: outcome standards may remain vague while process control is withdrawn.

The job demands-resources model helps explain the resulting tension. Autonomy is a job resource that stimulates motivation and engagement, whereas ambiguity adds to job demands that deplete energy (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Autonomy can also be too much of a good thing: Pierce and Aguinis (2013) show that many beneficial job features show diminishing or reversing returns at high levels.

Research stream	Core finding	Link to this model	Key source
Job characteristics	Autonomy increases felt responsibility and intrinsic motivation	Motivational pathway (P1)	Hackman & Oldham (1976)
Psychological empowerment	Empowerment is positively related to individual and team performance	Motivational pathway (P1)	Seibert et al. (2011); Maynard et al. (2012)
Role stress	Role ambiguity is negatively related to satisfaction and performance	Strain pathway (P2)	Tubre & Collins (2000); Gilboa et al. (2008)
Challenge-hindrance stressors	Ambiguity acts as a hindrance rather than a challenge	Weakened empowerment effect (P6)	Podsakoff et al. (2007)
Too much of a good thing	Beneficial job features show diminishing or reversing returns	Curvilinear net effect (P3)	Pierce & Aguinis (2013)
Job demands-resources	Resources motivate while demands deplete energy	Dual-pathway logic	Bakker & Demerouti (2007)

Table 2. Summary of prior research informing the model.

3. Conceptual Model and Propositions

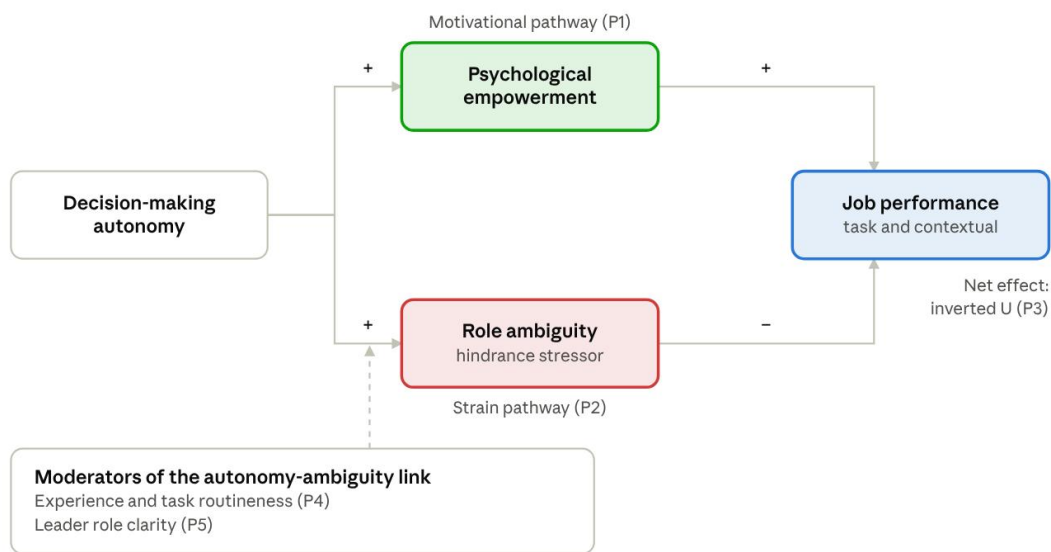
We propose a dual-pathway model. Decision-making autonomy (the independent variable) activates two simultaneous mediating processes with opposite signs. The *motivational pathway* runs through psychological empowerment and raises performance. The *strain pathway* runs through role ambiguity and lowers performance. Contextual moderators determine which pathway dominates. Figure 1 depicts the process.

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Autonomy helps via empowerment and hurts via ambiguity



dual-pathway model · 4 constructs, 2 pathways, 2 moderators

Figure 1. Autonomy raises performance through psychological empowerment (green) and lowers it through role ambiguity (red); moderators shift the balance between the two.

P1 (Motivational pathway). Decision-making autonomy is positively related to psychological empowerment, which in turn is positively related to job performance.

P2 (Strain pathway). When role clarity is not deliberately supplied, decision-making autonomy is positively related to role ambiguity, which in turn is negatively related to job performance.

P3 (Curvilinear net effect). The total relationship between autonomy and job performance is an inverted U: performance rises as autonomy increases from low to moderate levels, then plateaus and declines as ambiguity accumulates at high levels.

P4 (Experience and task complexity). Employee experience and task routineness weaken the autonomy-ambiguity link, because experienced employees hold richer mental models of the role and routine tasks have clearer success criteria. For novices or highly non-routine tasks, the link strengthens.

P5 (Leader clarity). Leader role-clarifying behavior (setting goals, defining decision rights, giving feedback) buffers the autonomy-ambiguity link and strengthens the autonomy-empowerment link. When clarity is high, autonomy produces net positive effects across a wider range.

P6 (Role ambiguity as hindrance). Role ambiguity also weakens the effect of psychological empowerment on performance, since feeling capable and self-determined is less useful when the target of effort is unclear.

4. Constructs and Propositions at a Glance

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Element	Role in the model	Definition	Expected effect on performance	Key source
Decision-making autonomy	Independent variable	Discretion over methods, timing, and decisions	Indirect, positive and negative	Hackman & Oldham (1976)
Psychological empowerment	Mediator 1 (motivational)	Experienced meaning, competence, self-determination, impact	Positive (P1)	Spreitzer (1995)
Role ambiguity	Mediator 2 (strain)	Uncertainty about expectations, methods, and consequences	Negative (P2)	Rizzo et al. (1970)
Job performance	Dependent variable	Task proficiency and contextual contribution	Outcome	Borman & Motowidlo (1993)
Employee experience / task routineness	Moderator	Familiarity with role and predictability of tasks	Weakens autonomy-ambiguity link (P4)	Pierce & Aguinis (2013)
Leader role clarity	Moderator	Goal setting, defined decision rights, feedback	Buffers ambiguity, amplifies empowerment (P5)	Bakker & Demerouti (2007)

Table 1. Constructs, roles, and propositions in the dual-pathway model.

5. Proposed Research Design

The model can be tested with a multi-wave, multi-source field study.

Sample and design. Employees and their supervisors across several organizations, surveyed at three time points separated by roughly three months to reduce common-method bias and support temporal ordering.

Measures. Autonomy: work design questionnaire decision-making autonomy subscale. Psychological empowerment: Spreitzer's 12-item scale. Role ambiguity: Rizzo et al.'s scale. Job performance: supervisor-rated task and contextual performance. Moderators: tenure and a task-routineness index; leader clarity rated by employees.

Analysis. Multilevel structural equation modeling to estimate parallel indirect effects (P1, P2); polynomial regression with squared autonomy terms for curvilinearity (P3); moderated mediation with bootstrapped confidence intervals

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(P4-P6). Researchers should control for job level, industry, and general cognitive ability proxies.

Proposition	Relationship tested	Analytic method	Expected result
P1	Autonomy to empowerment to performance	Parallel mediation (multilevel SEM)	Positive indirect effect
P2	Autonomy to role ambiguity to performance	Parallel mediation (multilevel SEM)	Negative indirect effect when clarity is low
P3	Autonomy squared on performance	Polynomial regression	Significant negative quadratic term (inverted U)
P4	Experience and task routineness on autonomy-ambiguity link	Moderated mediation, bootstrapped CIs	Weaker link for experienced staff and routine tasks
P5	Leader role clarity on both autonomy links	Moderated mediation, bootstrapped CIs	Buffers ambiguity, strengthens empowerment
P6	Role ambiguity by empowerment interaction	Moderated regression	Empowerment is less effective at high ambiguity

Table 3. Testing plan for the propositions.

Complementary design. A vignette-based experiment can manipulate autonomy (low, moderate, high) and role clarity (low, high) to establish causal ordering. The key prediction is an autonomy by clarity interaction on performance.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical contributions

First, the model reframes empowerment as a double-edged condition rather than a uniformly beneficial practice, reconciling positive findings from the empowerment literature with negative findings from role stress research. Second, it positions role clarity as a complementary rather than competing design feature: autonomy and structure are not opposites, and the best-performing arrangement typically combines freedom over *how* with clarity about *what* and *why*. Third, it identifies boundary conditions that explain inconsistent results across studies.

6.2 Practical implications

- Pair autonomy with clarity. Delegate decisions together with explicit decision rights, escalation thresholds, and success metrics.
- Stage the rollout. Expand discretion gradually for newer employees and for non-routine work, where ambiguity risk is highest.
- Replace control with feedback. When procedural direction is withdrawn, increase the frequency of outcome feedback so employees can calibrate.
- Train managers. Supervisors need skills in goal setting and boundary-setting, not just in letting go.

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- Monitor ambiguity directly. Pulse surveys on role clarity can serve as an early warning that empowerment is tipping into strain.

Warning sign	Recommended action	Proposition addressed
Newer employees given broad discretion at once	Expand decision rights in stages	P4
Staff unsure when to escalate or seek approval	Publish a decision-rights matrix with escalation thresholds	P2, P5
Goals and success measures are vague	Set outcome goals and review them regularly	P2, P5
Managers withdraw direction without replacing it	Train supervisors in goal setting and feedback	P5
Rising stress or rework after empowerment initiatives	Run short role-clarity pulse surveys	P2, P6

Table 4. From warning signs to managerial actions.

6.3 Limitations and future research

This paper is conceptual; the propositions require empirical testing, and the effect sizes of the two pathways are unknown. Future studies should examine cultural moderators (for example, power distance, which may shape how autonomy is interpreted), team-level and shared leadership contexts, remote and hybrid work where informal clarity cues are scarce, and the role of AI-assisted decision tools in either reducing or intensifying ambiguity. Longitudinal work should also test whether employees adapt to ambiguity over time, converting an initial hindrance into a learning challenge.

7. Conclusion

Empowerment is not simply a matter of giving people more freedom. Autonomy energizes employees through psychological empowerment, yet without clear expectations it can also generate role ambiguity that undermines the very performance it was meant to improve. Organizations that treat autonomy and clarity as partners, rather than trade-offs, are most likely to realize the benefits of empowerment while avoiding its paradoxical costs.

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