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Empowering Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior: The Mediating Role of Adaptive Career and The Moderating Role of Trust In Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates how empowering leadership influences innovative work behavior (IWB), specifically exploring adaptive career as a mediator and trust in the leader as a moderator. The framework is grounded in Social Exchange Theory.

Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative survey method was applied, with data collected from 319 employees in Pakistan's service sector. Hayes' PROCESS macro (Models 4, 1, and 7) was used to analyze direct, mediating, and moderated mediation effects.

Findings: Results show that empowering leadership significantly predicts IWB. Adaptive career partially mediates this relationship. Trust in the leader moderates the relationship between empowering leadership and adaptive career, such that the mediation is stronger when trust is low.

Research limitations/implications: The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future research should adopt a longitudinal design or a cross-national sample for generalizability.

Practical implications: The study provides actionable guidance for managers on promoting innovation by encouraging empowerment and developing adaptive career paths, especially in trust-sensitive settings.

Originality/value: This research extends existing leadership literature by integrating adaptive career and trust in the leader into a Social Exchange Theory framework to explain how empowering leadership can effectively enhance IWB.

Introduction

In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, organizations must continuously innovate to remain competitive. Global shifts in technology, workforce expectations, and customer demands have made innovation not just a strategic option but a necessity. Employees are increasingly expected to contribute to organizational innovation by engaging in behaviors such as idea generation, experimentation, and implementation, collectively referred to as innovative work behavior (IWB) (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2007).

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the work environment and fostering innovation. Specifically, empowering leadership — defined as behaviors that enhance the meaningfulness of work, encourage participation in decision-making, and promote autonomy — is essential in dynamic and service-oriented settings (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015). These leadership practices not only stimulate intrinsic motivation but also cultivate the psychological safety required for innovation (Lee et al., 2020; Khan et al. 2018).

The service sector, particularly in developing economies like Pakistan, is characterized by high customer interaction and unpredictable work conditions. In such contexts, empowering leadership can help frontline employees respond with agility and creativity. Employees who are entrusted with autonomy and decision-making authority are more likely to feel valued and take ownership of their roles, enhancing their willingness to innovate (Cheong et al., 2019).

Career adaptability — the readiness to cope with changing work and career conditions — becomes a key personal resource in this setting. Employees with high career adaptability are more likely to engage in proactive and innovative behaviors (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Empowering leadership has the potential to cultivate these adaptive capacities by promoting learning, confidence, and a sense of agency (Zacher et al., 2019).

Problem Statement

Although previous research has established a link between empowering leadership and innovation, the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions remain underexplored. Particularly, there is limited empirical evidence on how empowering leadership shapes career adaptability and how this, in turn, promotes innovative work behavior. Moreover, the moderating role of trust in leader — a central tenet of Social Exchange Theory—is often overlooked, despite its relevance in shaping the quality of leader-follower exchanges.

Research Gap and Rationale

Recent literature emphasizes the need to understand mediating and moderating mechanisms within leadership-innovation relationships (Liu et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). However, the combined role of adaptive career as a mediator and trust in the leader as a moderator within the Social Exchange Theory framework has received insufficient attention. Existing studies often focus on isolated variables and fail to examine the interactive dynamics between leadership, trust, and career adaptability (Afsar & Umrani, 2024).

Furthermore, most empirical studies have been conducted in Western contexts, limiting their generalizability to developing economies such as Pakistan. By using a moderated mediation model and analyzing data from a non-Western service sector, this research addresses both theoretical and contextual gaps.

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that interpersonal interactions are driven by reciprocal exchanges. In organizational settings, when employees perceive supportive and empowering behaviors from leaders, they feel obliged to reciprocate through positive work outcomes such as

innovation (Blau, 1964). Empowering leadership initiates this exchange by providing autonomy, meaningful work, and participative opportunities.

Career adaptability acts as a mediator by translating leader support into proactive and innovative behavior. Employees empowered by their leaders develop adaptive capacities, enhancing their readiness to face new challenges and contribute creatively. Trust in the leader serves as a contextual enhancer of this exchange process. High trust strengthens the perceived fairness and value of the exchange, making employees more responsive to empowering behaviors (Ng & Feldman, 2015; Khattak et al. 2022).

This research employs Social Exchange Theory as a comprehensive framework to understand the mechanisms and conditions under which empowering leadership translates into innovative work behavior.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes theoretically by developing a Social Exchange Theory–based model that integrates empowering leadership, adaptive career, and trust in the leader. It extends previous literature on leadership and innovation by addressing the mechanisms and contextual conditions that influence employee innovation.

Empirically, it tests a moderated mediation model using data from 319 employees in Pakistan's service sector, thereby enriching the understanding of these dynamics in a non-Western context.

Practically, the study offers actionable insights for organizations seeking to foster innovation through leadership development, trust-building, and career adaptability strategies.

3. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Empowering Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior

Empowering leadership (EL) is characterized by delegating authority, promoting autonomy, encouraging participative decision-making, and fostering employee confidence (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Employees under empowering leaders tend to experience greater self-efficacy, responsibility, and a willingness to contribute beyond formal role requirements. One of the most significant outcomes of such leadership is innovative work behavior (IWB), which includes idea generation, championing, and implementation (Janssen, 2000).

From the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964), empowering leadership behaviors represent socio-emotional resources that elicit reciprocal employee behaviors, such as innovation. Employees respond to autonomy and trust by engaging in creative and constructive performance as a form of reciprocation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Recent empirical studies reinforce this relationship, showing that empowering leadership enhances employee engagement and psychological safety, both of which are critical antecedents of innovation (Yukl & Mahsud, 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

H1: Empowering leadership is positively associated with innovative work behavior.

Empowering Leadership and Adaptive Career

Adaptive career refers to an individual's ability to respond to career-related tasks, transitions, and challenges in a proactive, resilient, and self-regulated manner. In the context of SET, empowering leaders promote this adaptability by offering support, autonomy, and encouragement—thereby nurturing employees' perceptions of control and responsibility over their career growth (Jiang, 2017).

Research indicates that empowerment strengthens employees' confidence and career self-management behaviors, which are key elements of career adaptability (Kim & Beehr, 2021; Boon et al., 2023). Empowering leadership fosters a climate of trust and resource exchange,

encouraging individuals to invest in their personal development to meet organizational expectations.

H2: Empowering leadership is positively associated with an adaptive career.

Mediating Role of Adaptive Career

Adaptive career serves as a mediating mechanism through which empowering leadership drives innovative work behavior. Employees who are empowered are more likely to proactively develop and apply skills aligned with organizational innovation demands. This aligns with SET's notion that employees reciprocate leadership support through proactive and valuable behavior (Shore et al., 2006).

Recent findings have shown that adaptive employees are more inclined to take initiative and contribute creatively when they perceive strong support from their leaders (Zacher et al., 2023). Empowered employees feel a responsibility to contribute meaningfully, and an adaptive career allows them to do so by adjusting, learning, and responding to changing organizational needs. Therefore, adaptive career represents the behavioral pathway through which empowering leadership fosters innovation.

H3: Adaptive career mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and innovative work behavior.

The Moderating Role of Trust in Leader

Trust in a leader refers to the belief that a leader acts in the best interests of the employee, exhibiting reliability, integrity, and concern. When employees have high trust in their leader, the empowering behavior may have a reduced marginal impact since trust already satisfies key socio-emotional needs. Conversely, when trust is low, empowering leadership may play a compensatory role, strengthening adaptive behaviors (Lee et al., 2021).

According to SET, the exchange process between leader and follower is influenced by the perceived fairness, support, and credibility of the leader. Employees are more likely to reciprocate empowering behaviors when trust is lacking, as they actively seek to validate the support being offered. This moderation reflects a leadership substitution mechanism, where trust changes the strength of the relationship between empowerment and adaptive behavior (Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Liu et al., 2024).

H4a: Trust in the leader moderates the relationship between empowering leadership and adaptive career, such that the relationship is stronger when trust is low.

Moderated Mediation via Trust in the Leader

This study further posits that trust in the leader moderates the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and innovative work behavior via adaptive career. Specifically, the indirect effect of EL on IWB through adaptive career is hypothesized to be stronger when trust in the leader is low. This moderated mediation is conceptually grounded in SET and supported by prior findings that contextual variables such as trust affect the strength of social exchange chains (García-Contreras et al., 2022).

Empirical studies suggest that the pathway from leadership to innovation is often contingent on interpersonal dynamics such as trust, psychological safety, and leader-member exchange (Newman et al., 2020; Gooty et al., 2023). When trust is low, empowering leadership takes on greater significance as a relational signal that compensates for the lack of emotional assurance. This heightens the reliance on adaptive career strategies as employees strive to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty.

H4b: Trust in the leader moderates the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and innovative work behavior via adaptive career, such that the indirect effect is stronger when trust is low.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a time-lagged, three-wave survey design to minimize common method bias and establish temporal separation between predictor, mediator, moderator, and outcome variables. The research design is consistent with previous studies examining moderated mediation models in leadership research (Cheong et al., 2019).

Sample and Procedure

Data were collected from employees working in service sector organizations in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan, including IT, education, and healthcare sectors. A **convenience sampling** technique was used to target full-time employees who had direct supervisors and had worked at their current organization for at least six months. The survey was administered in three waves, each separated by a two-week interval. A total of 550 questionnaires were distributed, and 319 complete responses were retained for analysis after eliminating incomplete or inconsistent entries, yielding a response rate of 58%. Demographic analysis showed that 54% of participants were male and 46% female. Most respondents held a bachelor's or master's degree (88%) and had at least 2 years of work experience. Following the rule of thumb proposed by Hair et al. (1995) and supported by Kotrlik et al. (2001), a minimum sample size of 200–250 is considered adequate for regression-based models with multiple variables. The final sample size of 319 meets and exceeds this threshold, ensuring reliable results and statistical power (Boomsma, 1983).

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Measures

All variables were measured using established, validated scales. Responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Empowering Leadership (EL):

Measured using the 12-item scale by Ahearne et al. (2005). Sample item: "My leader encourages me to express my ideas and opinions." Cronbach's alpha: .91

Adaptive Career (AC):

Assessed using a 12-item career adaptability scale developed by Savickas and Porfeli (2012).

The measure captures concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Sample item: "I can overcome obstacles that interfere with my career plans." Cronbach's alpha: .88

Innovative Work Behavior (IWB):

Measured with the 10-item scale from Janssen (2000). Sample item: "I search out new working methods, techniques, or instruments." Cronbach's alpha: .90

Trust in Leader (TL):

Assessed using a 7-item scale by Nyhan and Marlowe (1997). Sample item: "I can rely on my supervisor to keep his or her promises." Cronbach's alpha: .89

Analytical Strategy

Data were analyzed using SPSS 26 and Hayes' PROCESS macro (version 4.0). Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed initially.

To test the hypothesized mediation (H2), moderation (H3), and moderated mediation (H4), Hayes' PROCESS Model 4, Model 1, and Model 7 were employed, respectively. All indirect and conditional effects were tested using 5,000 bootstrapped samples with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Variables were mean-centered before the creation of interaction terms.

This methodological approach is consistent with prior research applying conditional process analysis to leadership and innovation studies (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Liu et al., 2024; Boomsma, 1983).

4. Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations for all study variables. Empowering leadership (EL) was significantly and positively correlated with adaptive career (AC) ($r = .567$, $p < .01$) and innovative work behavior (IWB) ($r = .760$, $p < .01$). Moreover, AC showed a strong positive correlation with IWB ($r = .604$, $p < .01$). Trust in leader (TL) was moderately correlated with both EL ($r = .267$, $p < .01$) and IWB ($r = .295$, $p < .01$), and was strongly correlated with AC ($r = .698$, $p < .01$).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables (N = 319)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. EL	4.32	0.35	1			
2. AC	4.28	0.34	.567**	1		
3. IWB	4.36	0.37	.760**	.604**	1	
4. TL	4.29	0.47	.267**	.698**	.295**	1

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Mediation Analysis

A mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4, 5,000 bootstrap samples) to test whether adaptive career (AC) mediates the relationship between empowering leadership (EL) and innovative work behavior (IWB). As shown in Table 2, the total effect of EL on IWB was significant ($B = 0.8008$, $SE = 0.0385$, $t = 20.79$, $p < .001$), and the direct effect of EL on IWB remained significant after including AC as a mediator ($B = 0.6482$, $SE = 0.0443$, $t = 14.64$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. The indirect effect through AC was also significant ($B = 0.1526$, $BootSE = 0.0352$, 95% BootCI [.0812, .2199]). These findings support a partial mediation mechanism, suggesting that empowering leadership not only directly enhances innovative work behavior but also does so indirectly by fostering adaptive career development. This is consistent with Social Exchange Theory, where empowering conditions enable career adaptability, which in turn fuels innovation.

Table 2

Mediation Analysis: Indirect Effect of Empowering Leadership on Innovative Work Behavior via Adaptive Career (Model 4)

Path	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Total Effect (EL → IWB)	0.8008	0.0385	20.79	<.001	[0.7251, 0.8766]
Direct Effect	0.6482	0.0443	14.64	<.001	[0.5611,

(EL → IWB)					0.7353]
Indirect Effect (via AC)	0.1526	0.0352	—	—	[0.0812, 0.2199] (Boot)

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; Boot = Bootstrapped 95% CI based on 5,000 samples.

Moderation and Conditional Indirect Effects

Trust in leader (TL) was examined as a moderator of the relationship between EL and AC using Hayes' PROCESS Model 1. The interaction term (EL × TL) was significant ($B = -0.1786$, $SE = 0.0565$, $t = -3.16$, $p = .0017$), suggesting a moderation effect. PROCESS Model 7 was also used to assess whether the indirect effect of EL on IWB via AC varies across levels of TL. As shown in Table 3, the strength of the indirect effect decreased with higher levels of trust, supporting the moderated mediation hypothesis. This interaction pattern reveals a substitution effect, where the influence of empowering leadership on adaptive career and innovative behavior diminishes as trust in the leader increases, likely because high trust alone provides sufficient psychological safety and guidance.

Table 3

Moderation and Conditional Indirect Effects of Trust in Leader (TL)

PROCESS Models 1 and 7 (N = 319)

Trust Level	EL → AC (B)	SE	t	p	95% CI	Indirect Effect (EL → AC → IWB)	BootSE	95% BootCI
Low (−1 SD)	0.7399	0.1124	6.58	<.001	[0.5187, 0.9610]	0.1284	0.0372	[0.0642, 0.2107]
Average (Mean)	0.4667	0.0396	11.78	<.001	[0.3887, 0.5446]	0.1051	0.0294	[0.0535, 0.1564]
High (+1 SD)	0.2975	0.0469	6.34	<.001	[0.2052, 0.3899]	0.0819	0.0217	[0.0388, 0.1228]

Interaction Term (EL × TL): $B = -0.1786$, $SE = 0.0565$, $t = -3.16$, $p = .0017$, 95% CI [−0.2898, −0.0674]

Note. All indirect effects are based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples. CI = Confidence Interval; BootSE = Bootstrapped Standard Error.

7. Discussion

This study examines the impact of empowering leadership on innovative work behavior (IWB), with adaptive career as a mediating mechanism and trust in the leader as a boundary condition. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), the results offer meaningful insights into how and when empowering leadership influences employees' innovation within the service sector in Pakistan. Therefore, according to the direct effect of empowering leadership on innovative work behavior results strongly support that empowering leadership significantly predicts innovative work behavior. This finding aligns with existing literature that emphasizes how leadership behavior can influence employee outcomes through psychological empowerment and autonomy (Kim & Beehr, 2021; Cheong et al., 2019). Employees under empowering

leadership feel motivated and confident to experiment, suggest novel solutions, and go beyond routine tasks, a key feature of innovative behavior. Social Exchange Theory provides a fitting explanation: empowered employees, perceiving the support and autonomy provided by their leaders, reciprocate through constructive, innovative contributions.

Also, the mediating role of adaptive Careerthe study confirms the mediating role of adaptive career between empowering leadership and IWB. This means empowering leadership enhances employees' perceptions of control, confidence, and openness to future-oriented challenges—qualities that lead to greater innovation. Adaptive career is framed entirely within the lens of Social Exchange Theory, conceptualized as a behavioral and psychological response resulting from high-quality leader-employee exchanges. Employees who feel empowered by their leaders are more likely to reciprocate by demonstrating proactive, flexible behaviors that support their own development and organizational innovation goals. Thus, this mediation reflects a chain of social exchange processes initiated by empowering leadership and culminating in innovative outcomes.

The study confirms the mediating role of adaptive career between empowering leadership and IWB. This means empowering leadership enhances employees' perceptions of control, confidence, and openness to future-oriented challenges—qualities that lead to greater innovation. Adaptive career is conceptualized here as a behavioral and psychological response to leader-employee social exchange, whereby employees develop a proactive and flexible approach to their roles. The findings suggest that employees empowered by their leaders become more self-directed and capable of aligning their career development with organizational innovation needs. Thus, this mediation reflects a positive chain of exchanges that begins with empowering leadership and culminates in innovation.

Moreover, the moderating role of trust in leaders is an important contribution of this study is the identification of trust in leaders as a significant moderator in the relationship between empowering leadership and adaptive career. The negative interaction term indicates that the empowering leadership–adaptive career link is stronger when trust in the leader is low. This reflects a leadership substitution effect (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), where empowering behavior becomes more crucial in environments lacking relational trust. In high-trust settings, employees may already feel secure and supported, thus reducing the incremental impact of empowering behaviors on their career adaptability. In contrast, in low-trust situations, empowering leadership acts as a compensatory mechanism, reinforcing employees' adaptive behaviors through enhanced reciprocal social exchanges. By reinforcing or substituting trust, empowering leadership shapes the strength and quality of leader–employee social exchange processes, emphasizing the relational foundation upon which adaptability and innovation are built. This underscores the context-sensitive nature of social exchanges and the dynamic interplay between trust and empowerment.

An important contribution of this study is the identification of trust in the leader as a significant moderator in the relationship between empowering leadership and adaptive career. The negative interaction term indicates that the empowering leadership–adaptive career link is stronger when trust in the leader is low. This reflects a leadership substitution effect (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), where empowering behavior becomes more crucial in environments lacking relational trust. In high-trust settings, employees may already feel secure and supported, thus reducing the incremental impact of empowering behaviors on their career adaptability. In low-trust situations, however, empowering leadership acts as a compensatory mechanism, strengthening employees'

adaptive behaviors. This underscores the context-sensitive nature of social exchanges and the dynamic interplay between trust and empowerment.

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to leadership literature by integrating trust and adaptability into the empowering leadership-IWB relationship. It demonstrates that empowerment is not universally effective but operates under specific relational conditions. By employing a moderated mediation framework, this study answers recent calls for more complex and context-sensitive models of leadership behavior (Banks et al., 2020). The study also confirms the relevance of Social Exchange Theory in understanding innovation-related behaviors. Empowering leadership initiates a reciprocal process whereby employees invest in their careers and generate novel ideas as a return on the autonomy and support received from leaders. This exchange becomes particularly potent when trust is not inherently present, indicating that empowerment fills the relational gap.

Practical Implications

For practitioners, the findings offer actionable recommendations. First, leadership development programs should emphasize empowering behaviors, particularly in contexts where relational trust is low. Empowering leadership, characterized by delegation, autonomy support, and participatory decision-making, can effectively drive innovation even in environments with low interpersonal trust. Second, human resource departments should incorporate adaptive career development into their training frameworks. Encouraging skills such as curiosity, control, and confidence will equip employees to better respond to dynamic workplace challenges and opportunities. Lastly, leaders should regularly assess and understand the level of trust in their teams. In low-trust teams, leadership strategies should combine empowerment with transparency and active listening to compensate for the lack of inherent trust. These strategies can be especially beneficial in volatile or transitional environments, such as the Pakistani service sector.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The sample was restricted to service-sector employees in Pakistan, limiting generalizability. Cross-cultural or industry-wide replications would enhance the robustness of these findings. Moreover, the use of self-reported and peer-rated data may still be susceptible to social desirability or response bias. Future research could benefit from longitudinal or experimental designs to validate causal pathways. Additionally, further studies could explore whether the nature of tasks, industry turbulence, or individual traits like psychological capital influence the effectiveness of empowering leadership. Exploring alternative moderators, such as perceived organizational support or leader-member exchange, may also deepen understanding of the boundary conditions affecting empowerment dynamics.

Conclusion

In sum, this study underscores the significance of empowering leadership in fostering innovative work behavior through the mechanism of adaptive career. The conditional role of trust in leadership further highlights that the effectiveness of empowerment depends on the relational context. These findings enrich our understanding of how leadership behavior can be strategically leveraged to cultivate innovation in dynamic organizational settings, particularly within developing economies where leadership style and interpersonal dynamics play a pivotal role.

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