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LEADERS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS EMPLOYEES’ PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING
Abstract
This study investigates participative decision-making style within Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It undertakes an analysis of factors that influence leaders’ attitudes towards employees’ involvement in decision-making. An attempt is made to gain a better understanding of such leaders’ behaviour with respect to the engaging low-level employees in the decision-making process. It is argued that such considerations may accrue advantages for more successful collaborative leadership. A theoretical framework is developed which provides insights into such behaviour which is augmented with the empirical design.

The research involved a case study methodology through a detailed investigation of organisations within the two countries noted. It adopts a constructionist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology and a qualitative methodology where 50 interviews from private sector company leaders and employees were the primary source of data.

The findings suggest that culture plays a significant role in the attitude of leaders and their styles, and that Arabian tradition places a high value on the ‘man’ as the leader of the family unit or organisation. Consequently, subordinates tend to be submissive and entrust their leaders to make decisions for them. Leaders in these organisations view their roles primarily in terms of giving directions to subordinates and therefore rely less on participation.

Key words: Leadership, participative decision-making, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, job satisfaction, employees
Introduction

Research in the area of participative management has addressed the relationships between employee participation and numerous variables (Cotton et al., 1990). Unfortunately, the topic of decision making in Gulf Co-operating Countries (GCC) countries such as Kuwait does not appear extensively researched (Almoharby, 2010). In particular, the attitudes that lead leaders not to adopt participative leadership styles and the factors that influence such attitudes have not yet been adequately considered. Identification and control of these factors might be helpful in overcoming the apparent tendency of leaders to shy away from participative management and lead to better ways of management and leadership. Furthermore, a unifying conceptualization and theoretical framework of participative decision-making remains to be developed. In this study, we sought to fill these theoretical and empirical gaps by addressing the issue of participative management from a multidimensional approach and by drawing on data from 50 leaders from the GCC countries of Kuwait United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain.

Participative management style allows for and often promotes the involvement of subordinates in managerial decisions (Parnell, 1992; Somech, 2003). Participative decision making, which Locke and Schweiger (1979) defined as joint decision-making or influence sharing between hierarchical superiors and their subordinates is an outgrowth of participative management. It refers to the involvement and influence of individuals in decisions that are ordinarily the prerogative or responsibility of hierarchical superiors (Parnell et al., 1992; Yukl, 2002).

Participative decision-making offers several potential benefits including inter alia: increases the quality of the decision (Scully et al., 1995), contributes to the quality of employees' work life (Somech, 2002), and increases employees' motivation (Locke and Latham, 1990), commitment (Armenakis et al., 1993), and satisfaction (Smylie et al., 1996). However, despite the afforsaid mentioned benefits, there is little involvement of employees in the decision-making process in organisations in Kuwait and it is the aim of this study to investigate leaders’ attitudes towards employees’ participation in decision-making.
Study rationale

This study is significant because there is a void in the available knowledge base concerning employee participation in organisational decision-making in developing countries as most research is conducted from a western perspective. The study is therefore important from a theoretical and practical point of view in that it will contribute to the understanding of leadership attitudes towards employees’ participation in the decision-making process. Through application of such human resource management practices, organisations in Kuwait can become more effective and more competitive. It is argued that participative decision-making systems allow for greater input from those employees who have specialized knowledge or expertise, while centralized decision-making systems lead organisations to underutilize the special experienced-based knowledge of various parties.

A unifying conceptualization and theoretical framework of participative decision-making remains to be developed (Somech, 2003). Identification and control of these factors might be helpful in overcoming the apparent tendency of leaders to shy away from participative management. This exposes a potential gap in participative decision-making literature: what factors influence leaders’ attitudes towards participative decision-making in such contexts and why is it that despite the advantages of participative decision-making the leaders in the GCC countries have not adopted it?

In line with the underlying assumption of human resource theory, this thesis adopts the view that employees who are allowed to participate in decision-making will fulfil higher order psychological needs and, therefore, exhibit higher levels of satisfaction, morale, and outcomes closely linked to improved performance (Meyers, 1994; Somech, 2002; 2003). Criticism of participative decision-making is that since communication with multiple voices does not necessarily merge into a single voice, it takes time to determine the overall company direction. However, the consensus building resulting from give and take enables rapid implementation of strategic decisions in a company (Daft, 2004).
Aims and objectives

The main aim of this study is to enhance our understanding and contribute to the study of factors that influence leaders' attitudes towards participative decision-making in developing countries, where despite the benefits that can be gained by allowing employees to participate in the decision-making process, leaders in organisations in such countries are reluctant to shift some authority for decision-making to their subordinates. More specifically, the objectives of the study are:

1) To contribute knowledge on general leaders’ attitudes towards employees’ participation in decision-making
2) To identify factors that influence leaders’ attitudes on participative management.
3) To establish the extent and degree to which attitudes of leaders in a given setting has an important bearing on the nature of their personal relationship and their relationship with others in the work situation and the subsequent organisational outcomes.
4) To investigate and understand employees’ capabilities towards participation and initiation.
5) To generally understand how leaders behave and to put in place a theoretical framework that explains the propensity for decision-making in organisations in Kuwait.

It is important to note that the leaders themselves must be willing to let go of traditional authority roles, not only allowing employees to have a greater voice but helping to prepare them, providing support and establishing an environment of trust.

Research questions

The research seeks to address the following major research question: Why is that despite the benefits that can be gained by allowing employees to participate in the decision-making process, leaders in organisations in developing countries such as Kuwait, are reluctant to shift some authority for decision-making to their subordinates? More specifically, the questions will include *inter alia* the following:
1) What are leaders’ attitudes and beliefs about their subordinates’ level of participation and their capacity for leadership and initiation?

2) What are the main factors that influence leaders’ attitudes towards their employees and what is the style of leadership generally adopted by most Kuwait leaders?

3) To what extent do the companies’ human resource practices, especially those related to employee participation, reflect the values and attitudes of top management?

4) To what extent does a participatory decision-making process by employees influence strategic decision effectiveness, firm performance and employees’ morale?

**Context and background**

Knowledge is unavoidably situational, and this study cannot be understood whilst isolated from the broader social forces and regimes of power in which it is embedded. It is contended that participative management varies across different contents and contexts. An emphasis on situational details unfolding over time allows qualitative research to describe processes (Gephart, 2004). This study is centred upon a strategy that focuses understanding on the dynamics present within a particular setting (Eisenhardt, 2002; Yin, 2004): in this case developing countries and more particularly several private companies in Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, which are part of the Gulf Cooperating Countries-GCC. This will enable comparison to be made between private companies in Kuwait and those in UAE.

Leaders and employees’ values, attitudes and behaviours vary across different cultures (Adler, 1991) hence the more reason to study leaders’ attitudes towards employees’ participation in decision-making within this context, as it exposes some of the cultural differences towards employees’ participation. Previous studies have tended to be Western based and their findings might not be applicable to non-Western countries, because of cultural differences.
Kuwait is a high-power distance culture where employees are supposed to be submissive and do what they are told (Hofstede, 2003). The Globe study (House et al., 2004) confirmed the earlier findings by Hofstede and noted that Kuwait is a high-power distance culture and leaders in such societies find it difficult to involve subordinates in the decision-making process. The situation is further compounded by the company ownership structures of most companies in Kuwait that are family owned where decision-making is not subject to public scrutiny and is the perogative of family members. This is in sharp contrast to industrialised countries where the level of worker participation has increased over the years as the work becomes more complex for one person to manage alone. It is important to note that a strong, explicit statement of corporate philosophy and values to develop trust with employees is the key to the lock of a participative management approach (Daft, 2004).

Kuwait is an Islamic country where religion dictates the way of living and working and guides the way leaders behave at the work place. Islamic religion compels people to be submissive and Beekun and Badawi (1999) note that Muslims base their behaviours as leader and or as follower upon the word of God, as exposed in their holy book, the Qura'an. The implication of this is that religion compels people to be submissive and leaders tend to be autocratic in the styles (Khan, 2007). Autocratic leaders retain a high degree of authority and delegate little authority to their employees. As a result, communication from autocratic managers is typically one-way and downward and often takes the form of policies and procedures (Nowicki and Summers, 2008).

These contextual factors and their implications on organisations clearly differentiate Kuwait from Western leadership practices. In particular, it seems that the beliefs and values of key leaders play an important role in the way companies are led/managed.

**Literature review and emerging framework**

The literature review identified specific dimensions of participative leadership encompassing the decision domain, degree of participation, structure, target of participation, and the rationale (Somech, 2002). These dimensions were examined
together in the present study with the aim of representing the leaders’ managerial perceptions.

The literature noted that leadership attitudes towards subordinate participation, which can be positive or negative, are influenced by the following main factors: (a) the ‘father-figure’ relationship between management and subordinates (high-power distance culture), (b) propensity for participative decision-making i.e. perceptions about power control and their organisational effectiveness, (c) subordinates’ country of origin, (d) subordinates’ capacity for leadership and initiation, and (e) internal locus of control, and (f) the country’s level of industrialisation. We also theorized that higher levels of participation in decision-making can lead to increased employee-outcomes (commitment, morale) and organisational performance. The approach adopted here was to rely on the existing literature to develop working propositions about levels of analysis and participation but also to allow alternative views to be tested concurrently.

The research being an exploratory work leads us to investigate the phenomenon qualitatively as further explained below.

Methodology
The methodology chosen is justified from a philosophical perspective. Philosophical differences matter when conducting qualitative research because they affect judgments about how data is collected, analysed and interpreted and the researcher is not a detached observer, but is part of the social world being studied (Piekkari et al., 2009). The use of paradigms is recommended because it assists the researcher to be reflexive and critical of his/her own intellectual assumptions and allows the extant literature to be critically reviewed both from a theoretical and methodological standpoint. Paradigms provide a convenient way of locating one’s personal frame of reference with regard to social theory, and thus a means of understanding why certain theories and perspectives may have more personal appeal than others (Burrell and Morgan, 2000). It is for the above reasons that the study adopts a constructionist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology and a qualitative methodology where interviews will be the primary source of data.
Interviews are situated; face-to-face interactions in which researchers typically pose questions, which respondents answer (Gephart, 2004).

The researcher is compelled to select additional cases according to whether similar (literal replication) or different (theoretical replication) results are predicted by the emerging theory (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). In our study, theoretical replication was a key factor in the selection of cases and participants.

In total, 50 participants were purposively selected from different companies operating in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain based on: their ability to speak in English, their extensive leadership knowledge, the size of the company so that the organisational culture was clearly identified, and more importantly, the cases’ ability to inductively build theory. In addition to data obtained from interviews, documentary material (e.g., internal documents, memos, letters, annual reports, etc.) were collected and their contents reviewed and analysed in order to add value to the interview data (Blazejewski and Dorow, 2003). The main rationale for multiple data sources is that it allows for triangulation and enhances the construct validity of a study (Yin, 2004). Therefore, the quality of the study will be judged according to whether it has been able to represent a multiplicity of perspectives.

Data was analysed using ‘whole-text’ qualitative content analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2000), which involves analysis of texts using ideas from theories in hermeneutics and literary criticism intended to provide systematic understanding of texts. The data generated from the interviews was examined for what it conveyed rather than how the process of the interview influenced what was said individually, and we were seeking to identify and describe particular experiences (Holstein and Gubrium, 1998). Data was interpreted based on what may be meaningful with respect to the research aims. Discussion then ensued regarding prominent emerging themes until there were no further themes emerging and the substantive themes had been identified and defined. These were later compared and discussed to see if there was conformity with the extant literature or not.
Discussion and emerging framework

It was shown that the leaders’ tendency to engage in participative decision making was influenced by one's assessment of the prevailing culture within the organization, perceptions concerning the stability of managerial power, and beliefs concerning the relationship between participation and performance, as illustrated in the following emerging framework:

![Diagram of integrated participative decision-making framework](image)

Overall, our results revealed that leaders in these countries have negative attitudes and perspectives towards employee participation and several explanations were given. Our assessment however was that high distance and high uncertainty culture has an important role to play along with other dimensions as discussed above. Our findings and discussion suggest that there was greater resentment, particularly by leaders in the middle management levels who believe that they alone have the capacity for leadership and initiative, while they expressed a lack of confidence for others. These divergent findings challenge the conventional assumptions of advocates of participative decision-making which may lead to employee satisfaction and other organisational outcomes such as better labour productivity and commitment.
**Conclusion**

To sum up, the aim of the present study was to enhance our understanding of the factors that influence leaders' attitudes towards participative decision-making in developing countries by focusing on the leaders’ perspective. This approach was believed capable of contributing to a larger understanding of employees’ participative decision-making. This is in view of the importance of employees’ participative decision-making in improving strategic decisions, enhancing employees’ morale and ultimate company performance.

The findings reinforce the importance of finding ways of increasing various forms of employee participation for greater positive organisational outcomes. It was shown that the leaders’ tendency to engage in participative decision making was influenced by one's assessment of the prevailing culture within the organization, perceptions concerning the stability of managerial power, and beliefs concerning the relationship between participation and performance.
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