Managerial Delegation: Socio-cultural influences on Process and Practice

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This study explores the influence of societal norms and values on the nature of managerial delegation in a transitional Asian economy. More precisely, we examine how Thai cultural vertical-collectivism, high context and the indigenous construct of *kreng jai* shape how and why tasks, roles and responsibilities are delegated from superior to subordinate at the local subsidiaries of western MNCs.

Unlike the widely-studied concept of employee empowerment (e.g. Argyris, 1998; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Martin et al., 2016), management delegation has been relatively neglected in the literature to date (though see Meagher and Wait, 2020; Zhang et al., 2017 and Sengul et al, 2012) for notable exceptions. Suffused with egalitarian norms and values most keenly associated with Anglo-European socio-cultural environments, empowerment has focused on the downward transfer of authority and role from the perspective of subordinates – typically in the reduction of 'power gaps' towards the provision of a more efficient, customer-oriented service delivery process (Chow et al, 2006; D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Feldman, 2003). However, whilst almost universally lauded in the western context from where the concept originated, the modest and scattered body of work conducted in non-western work settings shows a multitude of culturally-influenced challenges (Eylon & Au, 1999; Huang et al., 2006; Robert et al., 2000). Much of this has centred on the hierarchical, high power distance nature of such contexts where being empowered and taking on additional discretionary authority is typically unwelcome among subordinate employees (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Hui et al., 2004; Humborstad et al., 2008; Triandis & Gelfand, 2012). In such environments, traditional motivations and practices involved in the delegation of duties and tasks by managers to their subordinates is not done for the purposes of empowering them. However, managerial delegation both as a whole and, in particular, in East Asian contexts where empowerment is culturally incongruous remains understudied, especially in the latter (Barkema et al, 2015; Fock et al., 2013; Zhang et al, 2017).

In this article we seek to address this lacuna – recognizing not only the distinction between 'delegating' and 'empowering' but also generating novel insights into the empowering process in a hierarchical, collectivist cultural environment. To investigate this phenomenon we situated our study in the southeast Asian economy of Thailand. This choice was based on both theoretical and practical considerations. Theoretically, Thailand constitutes a culture with a high degree of collectivism and power distance and thus provided a fitting context (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 2003; Yukongdi, 2010). Additionally, within our research team we held a good level of research access to a number of Western (UK/US) headquartered Thai subsidiaries, as well as maintaining a sensitivity to the local language and culture.

We progressed a purposive sampling approach, selecting four Thai subsidiary corporations from a cross-section of industries and sectors: energy (UK), facilities management

(UK), hospitality (US) and logistics (US). Within each organization we selected a combination of expatriated Western and local Thai managers. In both cases, we looked for a willingness to share information and, in the case of expatriates, those with at least one year's working experience in the Thai corporate arena. Our total of managers sampled was 15 – 11 men and 4 women aged between 32 and 51. Data collection was progressed using qualitative procedures based on information sourced from semi-structured interviews (as our primary source), direct observation and company documentation. Repeat interviews were conducted at company office premises with an average duration of just over an hour. In each case we took interview notes which we then discussed and organized immediately afterwards (or as soon as possible) (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We avoided the use of recording equipment based on the voiced discomfort among a number of our participants (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). We then analyzed our data post-hoc using templates and a multi-stage coding method. Broadly speaking this followed the process of open coding and then axial coding followed by a deepening of our identified categories as we merged, deleted and adjusted the terms employed (e.g. Miles & Huberman, 2005). We continued the coding process until we'd reached a point of saturation, i.e. where no new data was proffered.

Findings showed that the willingness and propensity to delegate – along with the objectives and the process of managerial delegation itself - varied quite significantly between Thai managers on the one hand and UK/US managers on the other. Furthermore, cultural norms and values acted as a significant differential moderators – specifically the relatively hierarchical, collectivist, high context nature of Thai managerial behviour along with the key indigenous Thai cultural construct of *kreng jai* (e.g. Andrews & Chompusri, 2013; Tsui, 2004; Zhang & Begley, 2011).

In practice, the key differences were that among Thai managers (relative to their Western counterparts) delegation was rarer, more implicit, disseminated on the basis of the superior-subordinate relationship as a whole (over e.g. skills/competence considerations), actioned verbally, and given temporarily. By contrast, our US/UK respondents were more willing to delegate and delegated more frequently and readily as a consequence. In addition, they preferred to make the delegation process a more permanent affair one that was confirmed in written format. Their selected delegates were singled out for their perceived capability, qualifications and track record relative to their Thai managerial counterparts. Finally, our Western managers demonstrated a higher propensity to delegate in order to empower their subordinates – giving them a greater degree of discretionary authority in decision-making and general interactions with external stakeholders. Moreover the reasons given were mostly concerned with customer experience and satisfaction, enabling frontline staff in particular to accelerate the way they handled customer complaints, suggestions and requests.

Together our findings embody a number of insights and implications of relevance and import both to theory and practice in the cross-cultural management of corporate subsidiary employees (Ferner et al., 2011). Theoretically we provide insight into how and why elements of societal culture – singly and combined – shape the practice and motivations inherent in the superior-subordinate delegation process. For management practitioners, and particularly those from Anglo-European headquartered MNCs with subsidiaries in emerging and transitional southeast Asian economies, our findings reveal important predictive pointers for how delegation works in hierarchical, high-context, collectivist cultures with additional implications for

understanding the implementation and evaluation of corporate employee empowerment programs (Biron & Bamberger, 2011; Chiang et al., 2017; Randolph, 2000).

Naturally, and as with all studies using small sample-size qualitative procedures, caution should be taken when making generalizations based on the initial results of this study (e.g. Denzin, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 2005). Future research should extend the pool of participating managers to cover a much wider range of functions, companies, industries and countries in order to ratify and deepen our understanding of how key societal culture norms shape the delegation of tasks and responsibilities within the superior-subordinate relationship.

Keywords: Managerial delegation; national culture; indigenous culture norms; empowerment; Thailand.

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