

LEADERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT: EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Justyna TRIPPNER-HRABI^{1*}, Aygun KAM², Jacek CHĄDZYŃSKI³, Luong Nguyet TRAN⁴

¹ University of Lodz, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, Department of Local Government Economics;
justyna.hrabi@uni.lodz.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-3241-1122

² University of Lodz, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, Department of Local Government Economics;
aygun.kam@uni.lodz.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-5187-6035

³ University of Lodz, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, Department of Local Government Economics;
jacek.chadzynski@uni.lodz.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-1652-6387

⁴ University of Danang, Vietnam, Faculty of Digital Economy and E-commerce; Korea University of
Information and Communication Technology; tlnguyet@vku.udn.vn, ORCID: 0000-0002-4015-6953

* Correspondence author

Purpose: The research aim was to investigate the relationship between transformational leadership and employee empowerment within the context of project management in Polish public administration. It examines whether transformational leadership is the predominant style in this environment and whether it enhances employee empowerment during project implementation.

Design/methodology/approach: The survey selected 18 offices in Poland's voivodeship capitals and included all 269 departments and faculties. Directors nominated employees for a questionnaire focusing on projects needing diverse skills. Seventy employees (and projects) were selected, with 50 responding to the subsequent survey via computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The study utilized validated leadership and empowerment scales with a -2 to 2 rating system. Data analysis included exploratory factor analysis using principal component analysis, descriptive statistics, and correlation analysis to examine relationships between variables.

Findings: The results reveal that transformational leadership is not the predominant public administration project management style. Moreover, managers do not actively empower their employees during project implementation. Contrary to expectations, no significant correlation was found between transformational leadership and employee empowerment ($r = 0.185$, $p > 0.01$).

Research limitations/implications: Limitations include potential self-selection bias among participants and unaccounted external variables such as political pressures or funding constraints that might influence leadership-empowerment dynamics. Future research should include comparative studies using similar methodology in the private sector in Poland and other countries' public sectors.

Practical implications: The research results indicate the need to strengthen empowerment efforts to foster better teamwork. They also indicate investing in leadership development

programs that promote leadership qualities such as inspiring and motivating employees, supporting empowerment, and aligning goals with the organisation's mission.

Social implications: Encouraging leadership qualities like empowerment and transparency contributes to a more accountable and socially responsible public sector. Enhancing leadership practices in public administration can lead to more responsive and efficient public services, ultimately benefiting citizens through improved project outcomes.

Originality/value: The study provides novel insights into the specific context of Polish public administration, challenging conventional assumptions about transformational leadership's universal effectiveness in enhancing employee empowerment. It offers valuable guidance for leadership development in public institutions.

Keywords: transformational leadership, public administration, project management, employee empowerment.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the evolution of leadership paradigms has significantly influenced organizational dynamics and performance outcomes. Among these paradigms, transformational leadership has emerged as a prominent model that emphasizes inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Bass, 2006). Concurrently, employee empowerment has gained recognition as a critical factor in enhancing organizational effectiveness and innovation (Spreitzer, 2008). The intersection of these two concepts—transformational leadership and employee empowerment—presents a compelling area of research, particularly within the context of project management in public administration.

The originality of this study lies in its focus on the understudied context of Polish public administration project management, where the relationship between transformational leadership and employee empowerment has not been systematically investigated. While extensive research exists on these concepts in private sector organizations and Western public administrations, this study provides the first empirical examination of their interaction within the unique institutional environment of Central European public administration, specifically addressing the gap in understanding how post-communist administrative reforms have influenced contemporary leadership practices and empowerment dynamics in project-based work.

Public administration organizations often operate under unique constraints, including bureaucratic structures, political influences, and strict regulatory frameworks (Denhardt, Denhardt, 2015). These constraints can potentially impact leadership styles and empowerment practices, creating a distinct environment that warrants specialized research. Despite the extensive literature on leadership and empowerment in private sector organizations, there remains a notable gap in understanding how these concepts interact within public administration, especially in project management contexts (Van Wart, 2013).

Project management in public administration presents unique challenges that differentiate it from routine administrative functions. Projects typically involve temporary endeavors with specific objectives, timeframes, and resource allocations (Project Management Institute, 2017). The temporary and often cross-functional nature of project teams requires leadership approaches that can effectively mobilize diverse team members toward common goals while navigating the complexities of public sector constraints (Crawford, Helm, 2009).

The relationship between transformational leadership and employee empowerment has been theoretically established in general organizational contexts (Avolio et al., 2004). Transformational leaders are expected to enhance employee empowerment through inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, Avolio, 1994). However, the applicability of this relationship within public administration project management remains underexplored, particularly in the context of Eastern European countries like Poland, which have undergone significant public administration reforms in recent decades (Nemec, 2018).

This study aims to address this research gap by investigating the relationship between transformational leadership and employee empowerment within the specific context of project management in Polish public administration. By examining whether transformational leadership is the predominant style in this environment and whether it enhances employee empowerment during project implementation, the research contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical applications in public sector management. The study formulates one hypothesis and three research questions to guide the investigation. The hypothesis posits that the adoption of a transformational leadership style has a positive impact on employee empowerment. The research questions investigate whether transformational leadership is adopted as the predominant leadership style in project management, whether managers empower their employees in project management within public administration, and whether there is a significant correlation between the transformational leadership style and employee empowerment in project management. Through quantitative research methods, including factor analysis and correlation analysis, this study provides empirical evidence regarding the relationship between transformational leadership and employee empowerment in Polish public administration. The findings offer valuable insights for leadership development in public institutions and contribute to the broader discourse on effective leadership practices in public sector project management.

2. State of the art

The study of leadership and empowerment in organizational contexts has evolved significantly over the past several decades, with numerous theoretical frameworks and empirical studies contributing to our understanding of these concepts. This section provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on transformational leadership, employee empowerment, and their interrelationship, with particular emphasis on project management in public administration.

Transformational leadership emerged as a distinct leadership theory through the seminal work of Burns (1978) and was further developed by Bass (1985). This leadership approach is characterized by four key dimensions: idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, Avolio, 1994). Through these dimensions, transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest for the good of the organization and elevate followers' needs from lower to higher levels of maturity (Avolio et al., 2009). The effectiveness of transformational leadership has been demonstrated across various organizational contexts. Meta-analyses by Judge and Piccolo (2004) and Wang et al. (2011) confirmed significant positive relationships between transformational leadership and various indicators of leadership effectiveness, including follower job satisfaction, follower motivation, and leader effectiveness. These findings have positioned transformational leadership as one of the most influential contemporary leadership theories in organizational research.

In the public sector context, transformational leadership has gained increasing attention. Trottier et al. (2008), found that transformational leadership behaviors were positively associated with perceived leadership effectiveness in U.S. federal agencies. Similarly, Wright and Pandey (2010) observed that public organizations are not as bureaucratic as commonly believed and that transformational leadership can flourish in these settings. However, Van Wart (2013) noted that the application of transformational leadership in public administration might face unique challenges due to institutional constraints, suggesting that contextual factors significantly influence its effectiveness. Within project management specifically, Tyssen et al. (2014) examined transformational leadership in temporary organizations, finding that it positively influences followers' commitment to the project. Müller and Turner (2010) demonstrated that the appropriateness of leadership style in projects depends on project type, with transformational leadership being particularly effective in complex and change-oriented projects. However, as Kissi et al. (2013) noted, the effectiveness of transformational leadership in project contexts may be moderated by organizational factors, a finding that highlights the importance of considering the specific environment in which leadership operates.

Employee empowerment has been conceptualized from both psychological and structural perspectives. Psychological empowerment, as defined by Spreitzer (1995), encompasses four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Structural empowerment, on the other hand, focuses on organizational practices that delegate power and authority to lower levels of the organization (Kanter, 1993). Both perspectives contribute to a comprehensive understanding of empowerment in organizational settings. Research has consistently demonstrated positive outcomes associated with employee empowerment. A meta-analysis by Seibert et al. (2011) found that psychological empowerment was positively related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance while being negatively related to strain and turnover intentions. Similarly, Maynard et al. (2012) observed that empowerment at both individual and team levels contributes to enhanced organizational outcomes, including innovation and effectiveness.

In the public sector, empowerment practices face unique challenges. Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2013) found that empowerment practices in U.S. federal agencies had mixed effects on employee performance, with empowerment focused on providing job-relevant knowledge having positive effects, while empowerment focused on granting discretion showing more complex relationships. Smith and Fernandez (2010) argued that the hierarchical and rule-bound nature of public organizations might constrain empowerment efforts, a perspective that aligns with traditional views of public administration as bureaucratic and centralized. Within project management, empowerment has been recognized as a critical factor for success. Tuuli and Rowlinson (2009) found that empowerment in project teams positively influenced both in-role and extra-role performance. Henderson et al. (2013) demonstrated that empowered project teams showed greater resilience in responding to challenges and changes during project implementation. However, as Leung et al. (2014) noted, the temporary nature of project teams and the often rigid structures of project governance might create tensions in implementing empowerment practices effectively.

The theoretical relationship between transformational leadership and employee empowerment has been well-established in the literature. Kark et al. (2003) proposed that transformational leaders enhance follower empowerment through role modeling, articulating a vision, and providing individualized support. This theoretical linkage was empirically supported by Avolio et al. (2004), who found that transformational leadership positively influenced follower psychological empowerment, which in turn enhanced organizational commitment. Several studies have explored the mechanisms through which transformational leadership influences empowerment. Dust et al. (2014) found that transformational leadership enhances psychological empowerment by influencing how followers perceive their work environment. Men and Stacks (2013) observed that transformational leadership creates a supportive organizational climate that facilitates empowerment. These findings suggest that the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment is mediated by organizational and psychological factors.

In the public sector, the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment has received limited attention. Park and Rainey (2008) found that transformational leadership in public organizations was positively associated with empowerment and that this relationship contributed to higher job satisfaction and perceived performance. Tummers and Knies (2013) observed that public sector leaders who exhibited transformational behaviors were more likely to empower their followers to implement policies effectively. However, as Jacobsen and Andersen (2015) noted, the effectiveness of transformational leadership in public organizations might be contingent on the specific institutional context, including political influences and bureaucratic structures. Within project management in public administration, the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment remains underexplored. Clarke (2010) found that transformational leadership in project teams enhanced team learning and performance but did not specifically examine empowerment as a mediating mechanism. Yang et al. (2011) observed that empowering leadership in public sector projects enhanced team efficacy and performance, but their study focused on empowering leadership as a distinct construct rather than examining how transformational leadership influences empowerment. This limited research highlights a significant gap in understanding how transformational leadership and empowerment interact within the specific context of public sector project management.

Recent studies have begun to address this gap but with mixed results. Aga et al. (2016) found that transformational leadership positively influenced project success in non-governmental organizations, with team building as a mediating mechanism, suggesting that transformational leadership might enhance project outcomes through team-oriented processes similar to empowerment. However, Chipunza et al. (2017) found that the relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement in South African public sector organizations was moderated by institutional factors, indicating that context plays a crucial role in determining leadership effectiveness.

The present study contributes to this evolving body of literature by specifically examining the relationship between transformational leadership and employee empowerment in Polish public administration project management. By focusing on this specific context, the research provides valuable insights into how leadership and empowerment dynamics operate within the unique constraints and opportunities of public sector project management in a Central European setting.

3. Methods

The article results from a research project financed by the National Science Center (Miniatura 5 number: 2021/05/X/HS4/00171). The research project was designed to gain knowledge on the maturity of local government public administration to implement solutions related to team self-management processes in Poland. The selection of units to be surveyed from the general population was complete; consequently, surveys were planned in 18 offices in the capital cities of voivodeships in Poland. The study covered all 269 departments and faculties. In the beginning, the first questionnaire survey was sent to directors or deputy directors of all departments. Their task was to identify a project that required the involvement of a team with various skills, experience, and knowledge, and to select a person from this team to conduct further research. Managers selected a total of 70 employees (and 70 projects) who met the adopted assumptions. Then a second questionnaire survey was sent to them. A total of 50 responses were received. The choice of where to conduct the research is dictated by city offices that are the capitals of voivodeships should implement advanced organizational and functional solutions in their activities. The designed research was quantitative and was carried out using the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).

In addition to the author's methodologies, leadership and empowerment scales were used when constructing the survey (Tuckman, Jensen 1997; Super 2020; Turaga 2022). A -2 to 2 scale was used for leadership and empowerment related expressions: -2 = Very Poor, -1 = Poor, 1 = Good, 2 = Very Good. In this regard, the main research questions were evaluated using mean, median, and correlation analysis.

The primary research goal for this paper is to investigate the relationships between transformational leadership and empowerment within the context of project management in public administration. In contemporary project management, successful empowerment between employees and managers is significant in speeding up project activities and improving effectiveness in executing project tasks. Therefore, the study investigates whether transformational leadership enhance empowerment within the context of project management in public administration. One hypothesis and three research questions were formulated (Table 1).

Table 1.
Research questions and hypotheses

Research Questions (RQ)	Hypotheses (H)
RQ1: Is transformational leadership adopted as the predominant leadership style during project management?	H1: The adoption of a transformational leadership style positively enhances employee empowerment.
RQ2: Do managers empower their employees in project management within public administration?	
RQ3: Is there a significant correlation between transformational leadership style and employee empowerment in project management?	

Source: own compilation.

3.1. Research Model

The following diagram (Figure 1) visually delineates the investigator's findings on the relationship between transformational leadership and empowerment.

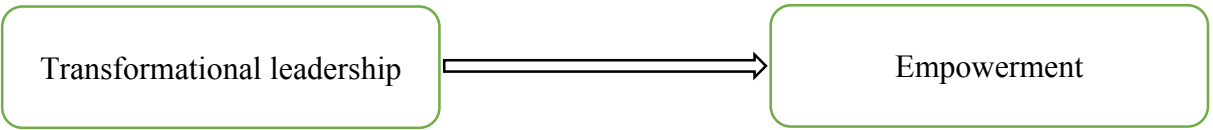


Figure 1. Research Model.

Source: own prepared.

In our research, we used factor analysis because encompasses diverse multivariate statistical methods with the primary objective of elucidating the underlying structure inherent in a given data matrix (Alpar, 2011). To assess the suitability of the dataset, two distinct methods are employed: the Bartlett test (Bartlett, 1937) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test (Kaiser, 1970). The Bartlett sphericity test provides insights into the presence of a satisfactory level of correlation among variables. If the p-value derived from the Bartlett test is below the 0.05 significance threshold, it signifies a notable relationship among variables, indicating suitability for conducting factor analysis. The KMO value, ranging from 0 to 1, evaluates the sampling adequacy and the appropriateness of inter-variable correlations for factor analysis. A KMO value equal to or exceeding 0.50 is considered acceptable, indicating sufficient sampling adequacy (Durmuş, Yurtkoru, Çinko, 2013; Kalaycı, 2014).

The gathered data were analyzed in two ways: exploratory factor analysis using the principal component analysis method and descriptive statistics using the frequency and correlation analyses (Figure 2).

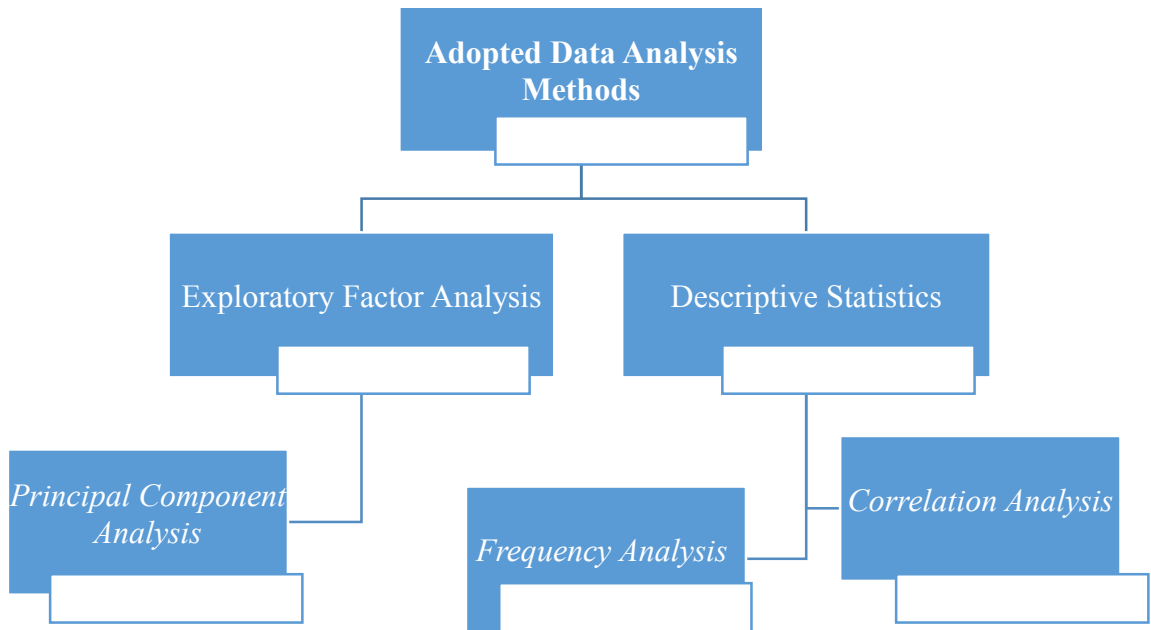


Figure 2. Adopted methods for analysing data obtained from surveys.

Source: own prepared.

4. Results – Exploratory Factor Analyses

In this part, factor analysis will be employed to delineate the underlying structure of the study's data matrix.

4.1. Transformational Leadership

The eligibility of the data for factor analysis was assessed through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) coefficient and the Bartlett Sphericity test, revealing a KMO value of 0.744 and significant results for the Bartlett Sphericity test ($\chi^2 = 127.480$, $p < 0.001$). Given these outcomes, it was deemed appropriate to proceed with factor analysis for the data about Transformational Leadership construction. To this end, Principal Component Analysis (Pearson, 1901) served as the estimation method, complemented by the Varimax Rotation Method (Kaiser, 1958).

Table 2.

Results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis Related to Transformational Leadership

Corresponding Items	Transformational Leadership
Encouraged employees to come up with their ideas	0.851
Encouraged you to look for better ways of doing things and to come up with your ideas	0.783
He/She was a source of new ideas, thought-provoking; you could learn a lot from him/her	0.747
Encouraged group discussions and implemented solutions adopted by the group	0.741
He/She was a good representative of the interests of the team he was leading towards higher superiors	0.768
Able to defuse tensions and misunderstandings within the team	0.585
Ensured that employees were informed about the goals of the team and their role in the organization	0.504
Total Variance Explained	49.99%

Source: own prepared.

A total of 7 expressions related to the one-dimensional construction in the study were subjected to factor analysis. The analysis revealed the existence of one dimension with an eigenvalue exceeding 1. This dimension accounts for a total variance of 49.99% (Table 2).

4.2. Empowerment

The eligibility of the data for factor analysis was assessed through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) coefficient and the Bartlett Sphericity test, revealing a KMO value of 0.654 and significant results for the Bartlett Sphericity test ($\chi^2 = 52.095$, $p < 0.001$). Given these outcomes, it was deemed appropriate to proceed with factor analysis for the data about empowerment construction. To this end, Principal Component Analysis (Pearson, 1901) served as the estimation method, complemented by the Varimax Rotation Method (Kaiser, 1958).

Table 3.*Results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis Related to Empowerment*

Corresponding Items	Transformational Leadership
The control of the implementation of the tasks was carried out by the employees	0.515
Staff commitment to tasks was high	0.836
Team membership had a motivating effect on employees	0.836
Competence of team members was high	0.772
Total Variance Explained	56.70%

Source: own prepared.

A total of 4 expressions related to the one-dimensional construction in the study were subjected to factor analysis. The analysis revealed the existence of one dimension with an eigenvalue exceeding 1. This dimension accounts for a total variance of 56.70% (Table 3).

4.3. Reliability of Research Instruments

In this part, reliability of the research instruments are evaluated by Cronbach's alpha results.

Table 4.*Cronbach's Alpha results*

Instruments	Cronbach's Alpha Value
Transformational Leadership	0.821
Empowerment	0.709

Source: own prepared.

Upon scrutiny of the Cronbach alpha values provided above for the instruments utilized in this study, it becomes apparent that each dimension demonstrates reliability in terms of internal consistency.

In this part, the main research questions and hypotheses are evaluated in the order presented in Table 1. In the following, transformational leadership is evaluated, and results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5.*Evaluation of the leadership style*

Corresponding Item	Mean	Median	Skewness	Kurtiosis	Std Dev.
Transformational Leadership	-1.28	-1.42	1.12	0.61	0.57

Note. Std Dev. - Standard deviation.

Source: own prepared.

The result exhibits that transformational leadership is not the predominant leadership style in public organizations (Table 5). In this regard, research question 1 (RQ1. Is transformational leadership adopted as the predominant leadership style during project management?) was negatively evaluated.

Table 6.*Evaluation of the empowerment*

Corresponding Item	Mean	Median	Skewness	Kurtiosis	Std Dev.
Empowerment	-1.18	-1.25	1.78	4.45	0.60

Note. Std Dev. - Standard deviation.

Source: own prepared.

The findings indicate that empowerment is uncommon during project implementation (Table 6). In other words, managers in public administration do not actively empower their employees in project management. As a result, research question 2 (RQ2: Do managers empower their employees in project management within public administration?) was negatively evaluated.

In the following, correlation analysis is presented to evaluate the relationship between research variables in Table 7. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) and George (2011) indicate that If Skewness and Kurtosis's results are between +1.5 and -1.5, it can be concluded that data has normally been distributed. In the study, only the Empowerment variable is unsuitable for this criterion. In addition, when a small sample size is considered, it is seen that non-parametric tests can be appropriate for the study. Therefore, Spearman correlations have been applied.

Table 7.*Evaluation of the empowerment*

Variables	Mean	Median	Std Dev.	1.
1. Transformational Leadership	-1.28	-1.42	0.57	0.185
2. Empowerment	-1.18	-1.25	0.60	-

Note. Spearman's correlation applied, n = 50. Std Dev. - Standard deviation.

Source: own prepared.

The findings show that no significant relationship exists between empowerment and transformational leadership ($r = 0.185$, $p > 0.01$). According to correlation analysis results, research question 3 (RQ3: Is there a significant correlation between transformational leadership style and employee empowerment in project management?) has negatively evaluated that there is no significant relationship between transformational leadership style and employee empowerment.

As a result, hypothesis 1 (H1: The adoption of a transformational leadership style positively enhances employee empowerment) has been rejected because there is no significant relationship between related variables.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The research findings above indicate that transformational leadership is not the dominant leadership style in public organisations. Importantly, this applies to project implementation contexts, where institutional constraints typical of the public sector should be less significant, and the project-based approach should encourage using such a leadership style.

Unfortunately, as a consequence of or regardless of the presence of transformational leadership in the studied cases, managers in public administration do not actively empower their employees during project management. It may result in lower-than-possible motivation and engagement among project team members. Employees do not feel authorised to make decisions or responsible for task execution. There may be a gap between current leadership practices in the public sector and the optimal leadership style required for effective project management.

Moreover, the results do not indicate a significant relationship between transformational leadership style and employee empowerment ($r = 0.185$, $p > 0.01$). In other words, the findings revealed that even where a transformational leadership style was applied, it did not positively impact the empowerment of the surveyed employees.

These findings can be understood through the lens of institutional theory and bureaucratic inertia, which provide compelling explanations for the weak empowerment practices observed in Polish public administration. Institutional theory suggests that organizations are embedded in institutional environments that shape their structures and behaviors through normative, coercive, and mimetic pressures (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983). In the context of Polish public administration, decades of centralized, hierarchical governance have created deeply embedded institutional norms that resist change, even when new leadership philosophies are introduced. The concept of bureaucratic inertia further explains why traditional command-and-control structures persist despite efforts to implement more participatory approaches. Weber's (1947) classical bureaucratic model, which emphasizes hierarchy, rules, and formal procedures, remains deeply ingrained in public sector organizational culture. Selznick's (1957) institutionalization theory suggests that organizations develop their own values and character over time, making them resistant to change and creating organizational inertia that maintains established patterns of behavior even when environmental conditions change. This institutional embeddedness may explain why transformational leadership behaviors, when present, fail to translate into meaningful empowerment practices. The formal rules, hierarchical approval processes, and risk-averse culture characteristic of public bureaucracies create structural barriers that prevent leaders from delegating meaningful authority to subordinates, regardless of their leadership intentions.

The research results indicate the need to strengthen empowerment efforts to foster better teamwork. They also indicate investing in leadership development programs that promote leadership qualities such as inspiring and motivating employees, supporting empowerment, and aligning goals with the organisation's mission.

1. Multi-level Leadership Development Program: - Executive level: 360-degree feedback assessments using validated transformational leadership instruments (MLQ-5X), followed by individualized coaching focused on empowerment behaviors - Middle management: Skills-based workshops on delegation techniques, decision-making autonomy, and psychological safety creation - Frontline supervisors: Mentoring programs pairing experienced empowering leaders with developing managers.
2. Institutional Reform Initiatives: - Establish "empowerment zones" within project teams where traditional approval hierarchies are temporarily suspended - Create performance metrics that explicitly reward empowering behaviors and employee autonomy - Implement reverse mentoring programs where junior employees advise senior leaders on empowerment practices.
3. Assessment and Monitoring Framework: - Quarterly empowerment climate surveys measuring Spreitzer's (1995) four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact - Leadership competency assessments using behaviorally-anchored rating scales (BARS) specific to empowering behaviors - Project outcome analyses correlating empowerment practices with project success metrics (time, budget, stakeholder satisfaction).
4. Structural Interventions: - Pilot "flat project structures" that eliminate middle management layers during project implementation - Establish cross-functional empowerment committees with authority to modify bureaucratic procedures - Create "empowerment champions" roles within each department to monitor and support empowerment initiatives.

These interventions should be implemented gradually, with continuous monitoring and adjustment based on empirical feedback, recognizing that institutional change requires sustained effort and commitment from multiple organizational levels.

Public organisations should prioritise leadership approaches that value integrity, transparency, and accountability. Of course, one must not forget the specific nature of public sector operations, including institutional conditions and the goals driven by the need to consider the public interest and meet social needs. Therefore, leaders should also pay attention to the public interest and foster a sense of social responsibility (Trippner-Hrabi et al., 2024).

Participants who volunteered for the study may systematically differ from those who did not, potentially introducing self-selection bias. Additionally, the study may not have accounted for all relevant external variables or contextual factors that could influence the relationship between transformational leadership style and empowerment. Influences such as political

pressure, financial constraints, or changes in public policy may have distorted the results and should be carefully considered in future research.

Finally, on the one hand, it would be worthwhile to conduct studies using a similar methodology in other countries' public sectors to confirm whether the public sector's specific nature limits the impact of transformational leadership on employee empowerment. On the other hand, similar studies in the private sector are also recommended to compare results and generate suggestions for increasing empowerment in public institutions.

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