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**THE IMPACT OF SUBORDINATES'  
PROACTIVE PERSONALITY ON  
EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP**

**ZHAN XIN**

**SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY**

**2023**

# The Impact of Subordinates' Proactive Personality on Empowering Leadership

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Submitted to Lee Kong Chian School of Business  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

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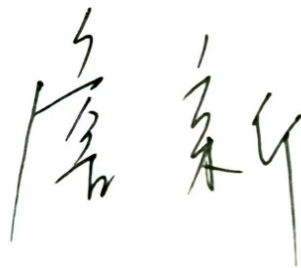
2023

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I hereby declare that this DBA dissertation is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety.

I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in this dissertation.

This DBA dissertation has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of two vertical columns of characters. The left column contains the characters '詹' and '新', and the right column contains '詹' and '新'. The signature is written in a cursive style.

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Zhan Xin

20<sup>th</sup> April, 2023

# The Impact of Subordinates' Proactive Personality on Empowering Leadership

Zhan Xin

## **Abstract**

Research has documented numerous benefits of proactive personality for employees' job outcomes. However, the success of proactive employees largely depends on their leaders' empowerment. Extant research has focused on the bright side of proactive personality for inducing empowerment, without considering its risks. We thus have an incomplete understanding of the effects of employees' proactive personality on empowering leadership. I take a balanced perspective on proactive personality and propose that proactive personality has an inverted U-shaped relationship with empowering leadership, such that empowering leadership is highest when proactive personality is at a moderate level. I argue that leader-member exchange (LMX) mediates this nonlinear relationship and further examine employees' political skill and humble leadership as moderators of the relationship between proactive personality and LMX. I conducted a time-lagged, dual-source survey study to test the hypothesized model. The results supported the inverted U-shaped effect of employees' proactive personality on empowering leadership via the mediation of LMX. Moreover, employees' political skill marginally moderated the inverted U-shaped effect of proactive personality on LMX such that when

political skill was high, the inflection point was closer to the upper right. The proposed moderating effect of humble leadership was not supported. This thesis offers theoretical implications for the consequences of proactive personality and the prediction of empowering leadership.

**Keywords:** proactive personality, empowering leadership, leader-member exchange, political skill, humble leadership

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## **Acknowledgement**

Five-year's DBA journey has passed by in a flash, and I still remember how I felt when I first stepped into the classrooms of Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Singapore Management University in 2018. I started the DBA courses too late! Now, as I'm approaching to the completion of my thesis, I'm filled with gratitude and admiration to the professors/mates/challenging I encountered along the way.

I wish to express my profound gratitude to Prof Tan Wee-liang, my SMU supervisor and Prof Li Xinxin, my SJTU supervisor. Without their guidances and supports, I couldn't complete my thesis so productively and efficiently. My appreciation also goes to Ms. Gao Liyun, Exe Director of SJTU-SMU DBA Programme, whose careful assistance allowing me to concentrate wholly on project research and thesis writing. I'd like to thank all the teachers from SJTU and SMU as well as the administrative staff. Your knowledge and professionalism inspired and assisted me.

Last but not least, graduation from the DBA program is not an end, it's a new start for me to create new knowledge.

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

In the face of increasing complexity and uncertainty of business environments, today's organizations need proactive employees who are willing to go beyond narrow job requirements and take the initiative to improve work efficiency and change the status quo (Griffin et al., 2007). Thus, scholars have devoted plentiful attention to the core antecedent of proactive behavior, namely, proactive personality, which refers to "a relatively stable tendency to effect environmental change" (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Research has documented numerous benefits of proactive personality for employees and organizations, including boosted job performance (Crant, 1995), organizational commitment (Thompson, 2005), career success (Joo & Ready, 2012) and entrepreneurship (Gupta & Bhawe, 2007). As the success of proactive employees largely relies on autonomy and leaders' empowerment, a key assumption underlying the findings that proactive employees have favorable outcomes is that they are empowered to leverage their proactivity (Arnold et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2013; Bolin, 1989). Only when proactive employees are empowered (i.e., a match between employees' pursuit of power and leaders' share of power), could they propose and execute constructive and innovative practices to improve organizational functioning (Qian et al., 2018). Thus, it is important to clarify the relationship between employees' proactive personality and empowering leadership, which refers to a leader's set of actions that involve sharing power, delegating more responsibilities and granting

autonomy to their followers (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999).

However, we have an incomplete understanding of whether, why and when proactive employees get more empowerment than their counterparts. While early research on empowerment has highlighted how it affects employee outcomes such as job performance and innovation, an emerging stream of work has started to examine the antecedents of empowerment from multiple perspectives, including social exchange (Jyoti & Bhau, 2015), social cognition (Scandura & Lankau, 1996), trust (Dansereau et al., 1975), and empowerment risks (Li et al., 2012). While valuable, research on the prediction of empowering leadership has focused on leader-related antecedents, without adequate attention to employee factors. Concerning the relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership, Han et al. (2019) found that proactive personality positively affected empowering leadership via emotional and cognitive trust. Although their study initially revealed that proactive employees are likely to be more empowered, it emphasized the bright side but overlooked the potential downside of proactive personality (Hakimi et al., 2010). As proactive employees tend to identify problems, challenge the status quo, question authority, pioneer innovation and be eager to change, they may make leaders feel inadequate, out of power and out of position (Bergeron et al., 2014). Given these opposing mechanisms, the relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership may be more complex than existing

research reveals (Dansereau et al., 1975). The current study intends to disentangle the effects of proactive personality on empowering leadership and identify the mechanism and boundary conditions, taking a balanced approach that considers both the benefits and risks of proactive personality (Bakker et al., 2012; Harvey et al., 2006; Seibert et al., 1999).

Specifically, I propose that the relationship between employee proactive personality and empowering leadership is not linear, but invertedly U-shaped. That is, a moderate level of proactive personality is the most conducive to obtain empowering leadership. Within a certain range, proactive employees can help leaders improve performance and actively establish a win-win relationship with leaders. However, over-proactive employees may go beyond their authority and threaten leaders' competence, power, and status, thus inhibiting leaders' intentions to share power. Moreover, I suggest that leadership-member exchange (LMX) mediates the nonlinear effect of proactive personality on empowering leadership. To wit, within the turning point, proactive employees have favorable LMX because they are active contributors who can enhance performance and reduce leaders' burdens without bringing about salient discomfort to leaders. But once beyond the critical point, proactive employees may become more threatening to leaders. Employees who are over-proactive are prone to frequently offer suggestions in diverse domains and think and act as if they are in charge of the team, which may invade leaders' sense of control and worsen the hierarchical relationship.

According to the social exchange theory, once a leader establishes a high-quality exchange relationship with employees, the leader will provide employees with more opportunities to participate in decision-making and grant them greater power (Scandura & Lankau, 1996).

While I argue that moderate proactivity is most constructive for improving LMX and incurring empowering leadership, the pattern of the effects of proactive personality and the emergence of the tipping point may depend on both followers' and leaders' characteristics. I specifically consider employees' political skill and leaders' humble leadership as moderators of the aforementioned nonlinear effects of proactive personality on LMX and empowering leadership. These two moderators determine employees' capabilities to wisely speak up and build positive relationships, and leaders' acceptance and openness to diverse ideas, respectively. Employees with high political skill are able to take the perspectives of leaders and are better at challenging the status quo and proposing new methods in pleasant and acceptable ways (Ferris et al., 2005). I further propose that humble leadership plays a similar moderating role as employee political skill do. Humility has three core components: willingness to view oneself accurately, appreciation of others' strengths and contributions, and teachability (Owens et al., 2015). Humble leaders are willing to admit their own weakness and learn from others, and are open to employees' suggestions. Thus, they are more appreciative of

proactive employees' positive qualities and are less likely to feel threatened by followers' doubts, disagreements, and advice.

Taken together, I propose that proactive personality has an inverted U-shaped effect on empowering leadership via the mediation of LMX, with employees' political skill and leader humility moderating the first-stage nonlinear effect. Figure 1-1 illustrates the theoretical model of this study. I did a time-lagged, dual-source survey study of 310 leader-subordinate dyads to test the hypothesized model.

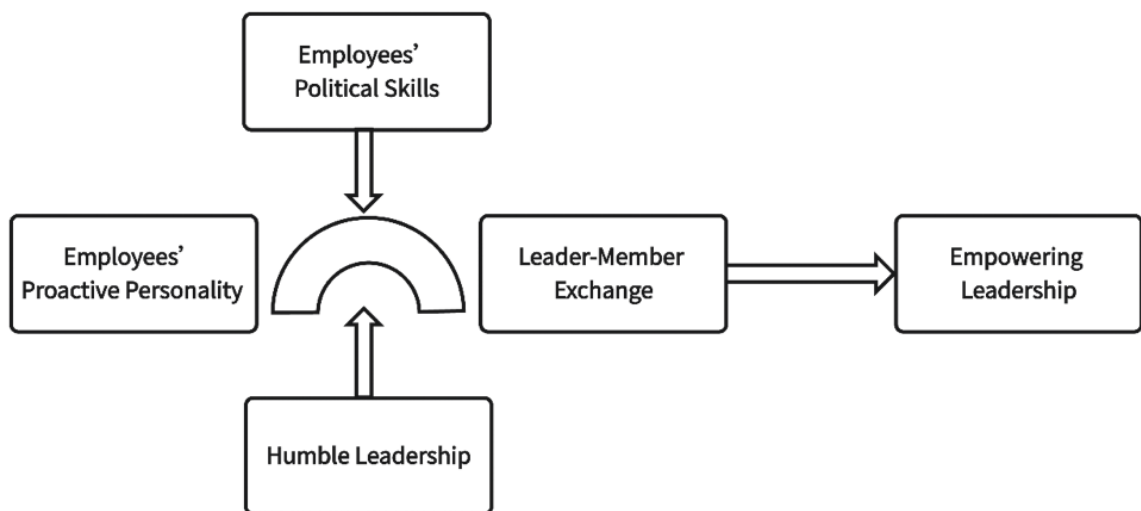


Figure 1-1 Theoretical Model

This study intends to contribute to research on proactive personality and empowering leadership. First, I take a balanced approach to clarify the relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership. Although scholars who highlight the advantages of proactive employees for job and career outcomes have assumed that



proactive employees are favored and empowered at work, this assumption has received inadequate validation. Going beyond Han et al.'s (2019) research, which only focuses on the upsides, I consider both the benefits and threats that proactivity incurs. The latter approach allows us to examine the “too much of a good thing” effect of proactive personality and view the relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership as nonlinear. My theorization indicates that employees with moderate proactivity get most empowerment and thus are most likely to release their potential.

Second, this study reveals the mechanism through which proactive personality affects empowering leadership. I propose that as proactivity involves both active contribution and violation of status quo and hierarchical order, proactive personality is a double-edged sword for leader-member interaction and moderate proactivity is most conducive to LMX. Moreover, by identifying employee political skill and humble leadership as moderators, this study sheds light on which employees are more likely to benefit from proactivity and which leaders are more appreciative of proactive employees.

Last, this study adds to our understanding of the antecedents of empowering leadership. While prior research has primarily focused on leader traits and organizational characteristics as predictors of empowering leadership, I emphasize that leaders do not treat subordinates equally in the process of empowerment, but make choices according to employees' traits such as proactive personality. The present study also suggests that

empowering leadership is a result of the joint, interactive effect of employees' and leaders' characteristics.

This thesis is divided into a total of seven chapters. The first chapter is an introduction, which introduces the theoretical and practical background of the research question, the purpose of this thesis, and the research methods. Chapter 2 is a literature review that summarizes the major research findings concerning the main variables studied in this thesis (i.e., proactive personality, empowering leadership, leadership member exchange, political skill and humble leadership). Chapter 3 presents the theoretical background and hypothesis development. Chapter 4 presents the methods, including the operational definitions of the study variables and the measurements, the procedure of the survey study and samples. Chapter 5 displays the results, including descriptive statistics, reliability and validity tests, and hypothesis testing. Chapter 6 is a discussion of the empirical results, including a summary of the research findings, theoretical contributions, practical implications, and the limitations and future research directions. Chapter 7 is the conclusion section, which provides a comprehensive summary of the study.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conceptualization and Consequences of Empowering Leadership**

#### *2.1.1 The conceptualization of empowering leadership*

The conceptualization of empowering leadership originated from participative leadership (Locke et al., 1981), supportive leadership (Bowers & Seashore, 1966), super leadership (Manz & Sims, 1981), and situational leadership theory (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) suggested that only incorporating the sharing of power is incomplete for empowering leadership and needs to be supplemented with the motivational effects of empowering leadership on employees. Thus, the literature on empowering leadership unfolded from two different perspectives. One perspective, focusing on the managerial practices based on a socio-structure perspective in which a leader's empowering behaviors play a vital role (Manz & Sims, 1981), states that empowering leadership can be depicted as a series of actions taken to give subordinates the authority and responsibility to make decisions about a task in order to improve employee performance (Dingle et al., 2015). Another perspective focuses on psychological empowerment, a cognitive and motivational state, and points out that empowering leadership include emphasizing the meaning of work, conveying confidence in performance, promoting participatory decision-making, and providing autonomy to reduce hierarchical constraints (Spreitzer, 1995).

### *2.1.2 The consequences of empowering leadership*

The literature on the outcomes of empowering leadership has mainly adopted two different perspectives. Most of the previous literature has documented the positive effects of empowering leadership. Particularly, the relationships between empowering leadership and proximal outcomes of motivational and attitudinal variables such as intrinsic motivation (Cai et al., 2018; Hakimi et al., 2010), self-efficacy (Bolin, 1989; Campbell, 2000), creativity (Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008), leader-member exchange (Hakimi et al., 2010; Hinojosa et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2015), and psychological empowerment (Arnold et al., 2000; Kim, 2019), are stronger than its relationships with distal, behavioral and performance-based outcomes, such as job performance (Johnson et al., 2009; Thompson, 2005), team performance (Liden & Graen, 1980), and organizational performance (Berraies et al., 2014).

While empowering leadership is often considered a desirable leadership approach, mixed results emerge concerning its effectiveness (Hassan et al., 2013). For example, Cheong et al. (2016) found an insignificant relationship between empowering leadership and employees' work-role performance. Similar results were found in a team level study conducted by Srivastava et al. (2006). There is also evidence about a non-linear relationship between empowering leadership and work outcomes (Guastello, 2007; Kolodinsky et al., 2004). When an empowering leader gives employees a high degree of autonomy in decision-making, employees' attention will be distracted, which

increases task uncertainty and causes a decrease in performance. Thus, there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between empowering leadership and employee performance (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Lee & Malerba, 2017).

## **2.2 Antecedents of Empowering Leadership**

### *2.2.1 From the perspectives of environmental factors*

Research on the antecedents of empowering leadership is roughly divided into three perspectives: environment, leaders and subordinates (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015).

Environmental factors refer to specific situational variables that can have a direct impact on organizational behavior or change the relationship between variables (Hornig et al., 2016), and mainly include organizational systems, power sharing, and social factors (Samad, 2007). In organizational systems, the distribution of organizational space and organizational hierarchy could positively affect empowerment, while the scale of human resources, task diversity and work intelligence would negatively affect empowerment (Mayer et al., 2009). In terms of power sharing, the uncertainty of working environment and work pressure will also have a positive impact on empowering leadership (Bolin, 1989; Martin et al., 2013). Under pressure, individuals will use existing resources to obtain new resources to reduce the net loss of resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Compared with ordinary employees, leaders are faced with more complex and extreme work requirements and pressure (Cheng et al., 2021). Therefore, empowering employees becomes an important way for leaders to cope with work

pressure, reduce resource consumption and obtain resources (Tolentino et al., 2014). In terms of social factors, subordinates often use superiors as role models for learning, and the upper-level empowering leadership influences leaders' own empowerment behaviour (Martin et al., 2013). The similarity between role models and observers, and the relationship between leaders across hierarchical levels may also influence the attentional process of social learning (Smallfield et al., 2020). Secondly, organizational climate signals to members which behaviours are supported and expected, facilitating the demonstration of these behaviours (Schneider et al., 2013). Thus, organizational empowerment climate positively influences empowering leadership as a shared perception of organizational information sharing, autonomy across boundaries and team responsibility by organizational members (Ansi & Han, 2019).

### *2.2.2 From the perspectives of leaders*

Concerning the leader-related predictors, research has focused on the impact of empowerment risks (Jung et al., 2020), power distance (Tang et al., 2020), and uncertainty avoidance (Zhang & Zhou, 2014) on empowering leadership.

First, leaders consider the empowerment risks from three aspects: task performance risk (worries about whether the work task would be completed with high quality on schedule), power/status risk (worries about the influence of subordinates on their status and promotion) and organizational interest risk (damage to the interests of the

organization after empowerment due to employees' misconduct and selfishness) (Jyoti & Bhau, 2015). Task performance risk and organizational interest risk have negative impact on empowering leadership, while power/status risk has little impact on empowering leadership (Wong Humborstad et al., 2014). Second, leaders with low power distance are more willing to establish equal and intimate informal relationships with their subordinates, encouraging them to participate in decision-making and share information, while leaders with high power distance are less likely to adopt empowering behaviours in order to maintain their authority (Fock et al., 2013). Third, there is a negative correlation between empowering leadership and uncertainty avoidance (Zhang & Zhou, 2014). Power uncertainty leads leaders to empower less to ensure control over key decisions and behaviours, and power conservation motivates leaders when they perceive that their position of power is threatened (Kim & Fan, 2018).

### *2.2.3 From the perspectives of subordinates*

Currently, a few scholars focus on the influence of subordinate factors on empowering leadership, mainly relying on trust theories (Wang et al., 2022). Subordinate factors are divided into personality traits (Liden & Graen, 1980), employee morality (Joo & Ready, 2012), employee ability (Lee & Malerba, 2017), and learning interest (Bolino et al., 2010). Leaders' trust in subordinates' performance and trust in subordinates' integrity had a significant positive effect on empowering leadership (Gao et al., 2011). The higher the level of trust that leaders have in their subordinates, the more risk they are

willing to take and the more likely they are to empower authority to their subordinates. Moreover, employees with proactive personality will increase their interactions with leaders and increase leaders' emotional trust in them, thus getting more empowerment (Kearney et al., 2019).

### **2.3 The Effects of Proactive Personality**

Mayer (1998) was the first to introduce the concept of proactive personality, which is a relatively stable individual trait that reflects an individual's initiative to perceive opportunities, demonstrate subjective initiative, and persevere to achieve the goal of changing the external environment. Individuals with proactive personality are less constrained by their surroundings, dare to challenge the status quo, act more proactively than others in the same context, and take positive actions to influence and change the environment (Mayer, 1998).

A large number of research shows that employees with high proactive personality can produce high performance and positive work behavior (Bakker et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 1999; Thompson, 2005). Especially in circumstances of uncertainty, proactive control of the circumstances enhances organizational performance more than reactive wait-and-see behaviors (Joo & Lim, 2009). Meanwhile, proactive personality has a positive impact on team creativity and leader-member exchange relationships (Gómez & Rosen, 2001). When leaders are matched with their subordinates' proactive



personalities, leader-member exchange relationships are enhanced, which also has a positive effect on subordinates' performance (Gupta & Bhawe, 2007).

However, there may be some negative consequences of proactive personality in certain situations, particularly in team settings. Some scholars argue that highly proactive employees may be seen as a threat by their colleagues, leading to strained relationships and reduced teamwork (Brown et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2009; Major et al., 2006). Meanwhile, employees with proactive personality may induce other members' envy and social avoidance, which are detrimental to the work of proactive employees (Bing et al., 2011).

To sum up, most of the studies focus on the impact of proactive personality on employees' personal work performance and career success, but there is a lack of research on the impact of employees' proactive personality on leadership behavior. Research shows that subordinates' work performance and relationship with their leaders affect empowering leadership. Therefore, this paper focuses on the effects of subordinates' proactive personality on empowering leadership.

#### **2.4 Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)**

Since its introduction by Graen (1972), LMX has attracted theoretical and empirical research by many scholars. LMX represents the relationship between subordinates and

their supervisors (Scandura & Lankau, 1996). LMX research is based on social exchange theory, which goes against the assumption that leaders will treat all subordinates in the same way.

LMX theory assumes that because time and resources are limited, leaders cannot distribute resources evenly among subordinates (Liden et al., 1997). Leaders establish relationships with subordinates through role negotiations and treat subordinates differently according to the degree of closeness of their working relationship, dividing them into insiders and outsiders (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Insiders have a high-quality relationship with their leaders, and are treated as reliable assistants who are given more tasks than their job description (Dockery & Steiner, 1990). Insiders receive more trust, attention, resources, flexibility, autonomy, promotion opportunities, and remuneration. Outsiders have a low-quality relationship with their leaders, where their relationship is limited to the scope of their work, and they are only required to perform the tasks prescribed by the job. The relationship between the leader and the outsider is based solely on hierarchical relations, and is more of a contractual relationship (Kuvaas et al., 2012).

A great deal of research has been conducted on the antecedents and outcomes of LMX. The main antecedent variables of LMX are subordinate characteristics (Murphy & Ensher, 1999), leader characteristics (Dockery & Steiner, 1990), subordinate and leader

compatibility (Murphy & Ensher, 1999), and situational variables (Dunegan et al., 2002). Subordinate characteristics include subordinates' ability, age, education, performance, personality, affectivity, and upward influence (Schyns et al., 2008). Leadership characteristics include leadership ability and affectivity (Tzinerr & Barsheshet-Picke, 2014). Subordinate and leader compatibility refers to similarities between leaders and subordinates in demographic variables, personality, preferences, expectations, and perceptions (Basu & Green, 1995). Situational variables include leaders' workload and time-based stress, among others (Brouer & Harris, 2007).

Concerning the outcomes, LMX is positively related to job performance (Walumbwa et al., 2008), organizational commitment (Joo & Ready, 2012), organizational citizenship behaviours (Bauer & Green, 1996), job satisfaction (Kim et al., 2015), and degree of empowerment (Johnson et al., 2009), and distributive and procedural fairness (Kacmar et al., 2003).

## **2.5 Definition and Impact of Political Skill**

### *2.5.1 Definition of political skill*

Political skill is the ability to help individuals accurately understand others and influence others through appropriate behaviors, thus helping individuals achieve goals (Ferris et al., 2005). As a kind of individual social skill, it was first proposed by Pfeffer (1981) in the literature related to organizational power competition, defined as the

individual abilities with both interpersonal interaction style and social efficiency and considered to be one of the necessary elements for individuals to succeed in the organization. Pfeffer (1981) proposed that an organization is not only a place where leaders lead employees to work together and create benefits, but also a political arena. Individuals who want to use the scarce resources in the organization need to have not only corresponding working ability, but also certain communication skills.

In recent years, the definition of political skill is often framed in a neutral or positive light, referring to the ability to advance specific personal or organizational goals by understanding and influencing others in the workplace (Ahearne et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007). Research has shown that political skill involves both cognitive and interpersonal abilities. On the cognitive side, political competence refers to the ability to identify and evaluate opportunities for advancing one's goals, and to take action to capitalize on those opportunities (Manz & Sims, 1981). This involves a combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral influences on both oneself and others (Ferris et al., 2007). On the interpersonal side, political skill are characterized by social alertness and apparent sincerity. This means being able to read social cues and adapt one's behavior to different situations and audiences, as well as inspire trust and effectively influence others. People with strong political skill are often seen as strategic thinkers and effective communicators, and are better able to navigate complex social dynamics in the workplace.

### *2.5.2 Outcomes of political skill*

A large number of studies have shown that political skill is positively correlated with job performance. Blickle et al. (2012) revealed that political skill of salespeople had a positive impact on their objective performance. Some scholars have found that political skill has a positive impact on individual subjective performance (Kolodinsky et al., 2004; Wihler et al., 2017). Yu (2006) believes that strong interpersonal influence can be an asset for subordinates in supporting the work of their superiors. There are also studies showing that political skill has a significant positive impact on career success. Research has shown that political skill is particularly helpful for leaders in improving their leadership ability and effectiveness (Ferris et al., 2007). Other studies have confirmed the positive correlation between political skill and perceived organizational support (Brouer et al., 2013), follower effectiveness (Liu et al., 2007), team performance (Ahearne et al., 2005), overall business performance and entrepreneurial performance (Ruberton et al., 2016). Moreover, when faced with job stress, individuals with high political skill will perceive higher levels of control and less stress than those with low political skill (Becker & Murphy, 1992).

In addition, employees who possess political skill are able to develop positive relationships with their superiors. The superior-subordinate relationship has three characteristics. First, it extends beyond the workplace, and employees with strong political skill are able to invest extra time and effort into building these relationships

(Lvina et al., 2012). Second, relationships are built on emotional factors, and politically skilled employees understand their leaders' needs and preferences in order to gain their trust and become their "insiders" (Kuvaas et al., 2012). Third, building these relationships requires the subordinates' loyalty to their leaders, and politically skilled employees are able to use subtle tactics, such as appearing submissive, to build strong relationships (Summers et al., 2020). Politically skilled employees also demonstrate sincerity to create positive expectations for their future behavior, hiding their self-interest motives (Ferris et al., 2007).

Thus, employees are not passive in the relationship building process, but can use their political skill and adopt a proactive approach to change their leaders' perceptions and behaviours to facilitate the formation of high-quality relationships (Meurs et al., 2010).

## **2.6 Definition and Impact of Humble Leadership**

### *2.6.1 Definition of humble leadership*

Humble leadership is a type of leadership that emphasizes openness, equality, and humanity. It involves leaders examining themselves and others in a realistic and down-to-earth manner, regardless of their positions in the hierarchy (Exline & Geyer, 2004).

This leadership style is characterized by leaders putting aside their authority and communicating with their subordinates with respect and equality (Li et al., 2016). In the context of Chinese organizations, humility in leaders is demonstrated through self-

awareness, promoting and transcending oneself, appreciating and promoting others, and not being self-centered (Ding et al., 2020).

Humble leadership can be divided into two perspectives, “personal traits” and “behavioral characteristics.” From the “traits” perspective, humility is seen as an innate characteristic that some people may possess naturally (Lvina et al., 2012). It is considered a desirable personal trait that involves being willing to understand one’s own strengths and weaknesses and adopt a relationship-oriented outlook (Owens & Hekman, 2012). On the other hand, from the perspective of “behavioral characteristics,” humility is seen as a leadership style that can be intentionally developed and learned (Ding et al., 2020). This style of leadership is characterized by plasticity and instability, meaning that it can change and adapt to different situations.

### *2.6.2 Outcomes of humble leadership*

Research on humble leadership has examined its outcomes at multiple levels, including individual, team, and organizational levels. While some studies have suggested potential drawbacks of humble leadership, such as the possibility of subordinates taking advantage of a leader’s humility or a leader being perceived as weak, the majority of research has highlighted the positive outcomes of humble leadership (Owens & Hekman, 2012).

Humble leaders are known for their willingness to listen to their employees and take their feedback and ideas into account when making decisions (McElroy et al., 2014). This behavior can lead to increased follower voice behavior, where employees feel more comfortable speaking up and sharing their thoughts and ideas (Owens et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2018). In addition, humble leaders can also increase employees' feedback-seeking behavior and work initiative, as they model the importance of seeking feedback (Ruberton et al., 2016).

Humble leadership can have a significant impact on employees' attitudes and emotions, leading to increased energy (Ma et al., 2019), engagement (Walters & Diab, 2016), loyalty (Owens & Hekman, 2012), and resilience (Sok et al., 2021). Humble leaders create a positive work environment where employees feel valued and supported, which can enhance their well-being and job satisfaction (Cerit, 2009).

Moreover, humble leadership is positively associated with employee (Zhong et al., 2020), team (Owens et al., 2013), and organizational performance (Chandler et al., 2022). Also, humble leadership enhances the innovation (Yang et al., 2019), learning (Chen et al., 2021), and creativity (Wang et al., 2018b) of employees, teams, and organizations.



## **Chapter 3 Hypothesis Development**

### **3.1 Proactive Personality and Empowering Leadership**

Most of the extant leadership studies argue that the leadership process is a top-down process whereby subordinates only passively accept the arrangement of leaders. In fact, the ability, attitude, behavior and other factors of subordinates will affect the decision-making power of leaders. Bandura (1986) social cognitive theory emphasizes the interaction between individuals, their environment, and their behavior. According to this theory, individuals' behavior is not solely determined by the environment or their traits, but rather is influenced by the dynamic interplay between these factors. Based on this theory, Bateman and Crant (1993) were the first to introduce the idea of proactive personality and argue that individuals are not solely influenced by their environment, but rather they have the ability to influence and change their surroundings. Proactive individuals actively seek out opportunities, take initiative, and persist until change is made. Research on proactive personality has largely supported its positive effects. For example, Han et al. (2019) find that proactive personality increases empowering leadership by increasing leaders' trust. Employees who exhibit proactive personality tend to seek out opportunities to showcase their abilities, gather information about the company, and use their creativity to enhance their job performance. They aim to earn recognition and build trust with their leaders. Proactive individuals also increase their communication with their leaders, not only to complete their assigned tasks but also to go beyond and exceed others' expectations. During interactions with their leaders,

proactive employees demonstrate initiative, integrity, and kindness to establish a positive emotional connection, which can lead to increased trust and more opportunities for growth and development.

Individuals demonstrate proactive behavior by taking actions to support the organization's mission, persisting in overcoming obstacles to change, and implementing proactive problem-solving strategies, idea implementation, responsibility, and testing (Schilpzand et al., 2018). Employees with proactive personality traits tend to exhibit positive work attitudes, possess job-related competencies, maintain good interpersonal relationships, and demonstrate creativity (Shi et al., 2011, 2011). When employees demonstrate proactive behavior, they are likely to interact positively with their leaders, enhancing the leaders' perceptions of their subordinates' performance, thus increasing the likelihood of leaders exhibiting empowering leadership. Conversely, subordinates who demonstrate less proactive behavior may not receive as much empowerment from their leaders (Newman et al., 2017).

It is worth noting that empowerment involves leaders' placing trust in their subordinates, but this trust-building process also carries inherent risks. In certain situations, managers may determine that the benefits of empowerment outweigh the potential risks and are willing to assume those risks (Fuller & Marler, 2009). While proactive personality can

have positive effects, proactive employees often challenge the existing norms and can threaten the leader's status and trigger restrictive behavior towards them (Yin et al., 2017). The perception of status threat is activated when leaders face highly motivated subordinates, causing them to perceive empowerment as risky and, consequently, empowering them less. Status is a highly competitive resource, and individual influence and task performance determine an individual's status in the organization. When subordinates are too proactive, their individual influence and performance levels challenge the authority and status of the leader. Leaders tend to avoid loss of resources and, therefore, become avoidant. Avoidant leaders are leaders who are risk-averse and prefer to follow established rules and guidelines to avoid making mistakes. They tend to be conservative in their approach and focus on achieving what is expected of them rather than taking risks or exploring new opportunities. They tend to provide detailed instructions, set timelines for task completion, actively review the process, and correct it to complete required tasks. Thus, as subordinates become more proactive, leaders may feel increasingly threatened, becoming more risk-averse and less likely to engage in empowering behavior.

In summary, employees' proactive personality can contribute to empowering leadership within a certain limit. However, if an employee's proactive personality exceeds that limit, leaders may perceive it as a threat and hold back from empowering them. Therefore, I suggest that there exists an inverted U-shaped relationship between

employees' proactive personality and empowering leadership. Based on this, I propose the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 1:** There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership.*

### **3.2 Proactive Personality and LMX**

The formation of LMX relationships requires a process that involves the creation of informal, unique connections between individuals who adhere to social norms of the relationship through implicit psychological agreements. These norms may include maintaining long-term relationships, emphasizing loyalty, responsibility, and obligation. In organizations, leaders usually prefer to engage with proactive, well-connected subordinates (Wei et al., 2021). Employees who possess proactive personalities tend to develop high-quality relationships with their superiors by engaging in frequent reciprocal exchanges, maintaining long-term commitments, and showing trustworthiness (Joo et al., 2014). By doing so, they can effectively lower their superiors' wariness and establish a positive impression, leading to the establishment of a trusting relationship (Zuberi & Khattak, 2021).

Moreover, those with proactive personalities are likely to convert their proactive traits into better work performance (Li et al., 2022). By consistently demonstrating qualities such as initiative, innovation, and the drive to improve their skills and work results,

proactive subordinates can establish a positive relationship with their leaders. Before reaching a certain threshold of proactivity, the more proactive subordinates are, the better their work performance (Park & Jo, 2017). This in turn increases leaders' trust and appreciation of their subordinates, leading to the formation of high-quality exchange relationships.

While proactive personality can be conducive for building high-quality LMX, it can also induce risks for leader-member interactions, especially when it exceeds a certain tipping point. When subordinates display an excessively high proactive personality, leaders may also view them negatively (Zhang et al., 2012). The reason is that overly proactive and self-expressive subordinates may threaten the leader's status and authority (Xu et al., 2019). Status seeking and maintenance are basic human motivations, and even leaders with a low social dominance orientation may feel threatened by the status of their highly expressive and high-performing subordinates. To wit, proactive subordinates often suggest improvements and even unconsciously give orders to their leaders to make decisions and actions more efficient (Mostafa & El-Motalib, 2019). While such behaviors may be constructive for work outcomes, they may also challenge the leader's prestige and status. When subordinates' proactivity is displayed too much, leaders' risk awareness begins to be activated, and the LMX relationship will be deteriorated, demonstrating a "too much of a good thing" effect.

Taken together, I propose that a curvilinear relationship exists between proactive personality and LMX such that moderate proactive personality is most conducive for building high-quality LMX.

***Hypothesis 2:** There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX.*

### **3.3 LMX and Empowering Leadership**

According to the leader-member exchange theory, subordinates who develop strong LMX relationships become part of the "in-group" and exhibit greater responsibility and effort in their work, which translates into improved individual, team, and organizational performance (Liden & Graen, 1980). Social exchange theory posits that employment relationships are built on the exchange of employees' hard work and loyalty for benefits and rewards from the organization (Locke, 1987). As employees give more, their performance and rewards increase, including benefits such as power appointments, participation in decision-making, and job coaching. The quality of the relationship between leaders and organizational members is determined by mutual trust and respect developed through interaction and cooperation. Green (1996) showed that leaders give more trust and support to in-group members than outgroup members. Lee (2001) stated that empowerment is a managerial action that is founded on trust, and thus high levels of trust between leaders and their "inner circle members" facilitate empowerment behavior. Additionally, Long (2011) discovered that both cognitive and affective trust

from leaders towards their subordinates have a significant positive effect on leadership empowerment behavior. When a high-quality exchange relationship is established, leaders grant employees more opportunities to participate in decision-making, greater authority, and further development of high-quality LMX (Kim & George, 2005). Consequently, LMX has a favorable impact on employee empowerment and participation in decision-making (Yoon et al., 2017). I thus propose the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 3:** LMX is positively related to empowering leadership.*

### **3.4 The Mediating Role of LMX**

Taken the curvilinear relationship between proactive personality and LMX together with the positive effect of LMX on empowering leadership, I propose that LMX mediates the inverted U-shaped effect of proactive personality on empowering leadership. That is, within a certain range, proactive personality is conducive for building high-quality LMX because employees with high proactive personality are more likely to initiate interactions with leaders take on additional responsibilities and engage in extra-role behaviors constructive for team performance, which can promote the leader-member dyads' mutual understanding and increase trust and respect from leaders. Further, leaders are willing to share power with the trusted, proactive employees.

However, the effect of proactive personality on LMX is not simply linear. Too much proactivity could create challenges in the leader-member interactions. If subordinates are too proactive, they may start to take on excessive decision-making power and challenge the power hierarchy. This can lead to a breakdown in trust and communication between the leader and the subordinate, and ultimately damage the LMX relationship. Hence, leaders may contain their empowerment and manage their followers in a more controlling way to regain control and power balance when the followers are too proactive. Accordingly, I propose the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 4:** LMX mediates the inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership.*

### **3.5 The Moderating Role of Employees' Political Skill**

Political skill refers to “the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives” (Munyon et al., 2015). Individuals with political skill are able to effectively blend social awareness with the ability to adapt their behavior to various situational demands in a manner that comes across as genuine, engenders trust and support, and effectively influences and manages others’ reactions (Andrews et al., 2009).



I propose that politically skilled employees are more likely to leverage the advantages of proactivity and avoid its risks in leader-member interactions. Politically skilled employees have high sensitivity and accurate judgment on the behavior of their superiors, and then actively understand the intention of the organization and superiors and make correct responses (Wei et al., 2012). First, employees with high political skill better understand the importance of high-quality LMX for effective work and career success, and are motivated to adjust their behaviors to satisfy leaders' expectations. Second, politically skilled employees are more sensitive to their leaders' feelings, needs and preferences (Brouer et al., 2013). They are able to take the perspective of their leaders and recognize that excessive proactivity may threaten leaders' sense of power and control. Third, with a mastery of influence tactics, individuals with strong political skill are able to adopt self-presentation strategies in a manner that demonstrate competence and warmth simultaneously (Kolodinsky et al., 2007). Specifically, they can effectively propose new ideas or suggestions in a pleasant way that demonstrate their respect and gratitude toward their leaders, and highlight the leaders' authority and contributions in the idea-generation and decision-making process. Thus, with high political skill, proactive employees can exhibit their proactivity in a manner that make leaders believe in their genuine intentions to improve organizational outcomes without feeling a threat to their power and status (Sun & van Emmerik, 2015). In contrast, with inadequate political skill, proactive employees may become self-focused and overlook leaders' strengths and even reveal leaders' limitations when proposing the existing

problems at work, which drives the leaders to feel incompetent and controlled by followers (Munyon et al., 2015).

Taken together, with high political skill, highly proactive employees are still able to maintain high-quality LMX. In contrast, with low political skill, even employees with a mild level of proactivity can easily offend leaders and hamper LMX. Thus, I propose that:

***Hypothesis 5:** Subordinators' political skill moderates the inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX. When subordinates' political skill is high, the inflection point of the above inverted U-shaped relationship is closer to the upper right.*

### **3.6 The Moderating Role of Humble Leadership**

Humble leadership is a leadership approach that is open, equal, and empathetic, and the leaders with this trait are able to critically examine themselves and others in a practical and realistic manner (Owens & Hekman, 2016). This leadership style is characterized by a deep understanding and appreciation of oneself and others, and is demonstrated through leaders prioritizing equality and respect in their interactions with subordinates, while also being willing to put aside their authority and ego (Owens et al., 2015). In the context of Chinese organizations, humble leadership is mainly characterized by leaders' self-awareness, their efforts to promote and transcend themselves, their appreciation

and support for others, and their ability to avoid being self-centered (Woolley et al., 2011).

I propose that when humble leadership is higher, the negative effect of excessive proactive personality on LMX will be less salient. Humble leaders are willing to acknowledge their own limitations and appreciate others' strengths (Zhou & Wu, 2018). Thus, they will be more open to proactive employees' suggestions and ideas and more willing to learn from employees. This means that when leaders display high levels of humble leadership, highly proactive subordinates are less likely to be viewed negatively, and the relationship between the leader and subordinate is less likely to decline. In contrast, when leaders have low levels of humble leadership, they are more likely to view employees' proactivity as a sign of disrespect and demonstration of their own inadequacy, thus feeling threatened by employees' taking charge (Chiu et al., 2016). Hence, when humble leadership is high, the negative effects of a proactive personality on LMX are weakened. This means that the point at which the effect of proactive personality on LMX begins to decline is higher when humble leadership is present. Taken together, I propose that:

***Hypothesis 6:*** *Humble leadership moderates the inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX. When humble leadership is high, the inflection point of the above inverted U-shaped relationship is closer to the upper right.*

## **Chapter 4 Methods**

### **4.1 Sample and Procedures**

Participants were recruited from a panel of subjects registered in Credamo, a survey platform in China. First, I recruited supervisors from this platform to participate in this study. Each supervisor should randomly choose a direct follower to co-participate with them. Each supervisor-subordinate dyad was given a unique tracking number to match their data. At Time 1, the subordinate participants completed a survey containing measures of demographics, proactive personality, political skill, and humble leadership. Three weeks later (Time 2), subordinates completed the second survey that measured empowering leadership. Also at Time 2, the supervisors completed a survey that measured LMX and subordinates' job performance.

At Time 1, a total of 378 subordinates participated in the survey. At Time 2, complete data was available from 366 supervisors and 317 subordinates. Ultimately, data from 310 supervisor-subordinate dyads were matched for analysis. Of the 310 valid employee subjects, 140 were male (45.2%), with an average age of 30.8 years. On average, these employees had worked with their current leader for 41.7 months. 3.5% of the participants had senior high school education, 12.3% had junior college education, 72.3% had a bachelor's degree, and 11.9% had a master's degree or above.

## 4.2 Measures

I followed Brislin's (1980) translation-back-translation procedure to accurately translate the scales from English to Chinese. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree) unless otherwise noted.

**Proactive personality.** Employees rated their proactive personality with the 10-item scale developed by Seibert et al. (1999). A sample item was "I am always looking for better ways to do things". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.846.

**Leader-member exchange.** Employee participants' direct leaders reported their exchange quality with the LMX-7 scale (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). A sample item was "This subordinate has enough trust in me. Even if I am not present, he/she will uphold my decision". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.736.

**Empowering leadership.** Employees evaluated their direct supervisors' empowering leadership with the 14-item scale developed by Kirkman and Rosen (1999), which was frequently used by scholars (e.g., Harries et al., 2014). An example item was "My leader encourages me to figure out the causes/solutions to my problems". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.797.

**Political skill.** Employees assessed their political skill with the 18-item scale developed by Ferris et al. (2005). A sample item was “I am skilled at cultivating relationships with influential individuals”. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.847.

**Humble leadership.** Employees assessed their direct leaders’ humble leadership with the 9-item scale developed by Owens et al. (2013). An example item was “My direct leader is open to the advice of others”. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.863.

**Control variables.** Existing research suggests that LMX and leadership behavior are influenced by employees’ demographic variables (Yam et al., 2016). For example, male employees, employees with higher education, and those with longer years of working with current leaders, are more likely to be favored by leaders and receive more empowerment. Therefore, I control for employee gender, education, performance and number of years with current leader. Gender was coded as 1=male, 2=female. Education was coded as 0=Junior high school and below, 1= Senior high school and technical secondary school, 2=Junior college, 3=bachelor’s degree, and 4=master’s degree or above. The length of time spent with the current leader was calculated on a monthly basis. Based on the findings of previous studies, this study also further controlled for employee performance (Kacmar et al., 2003). The direct leaders reported the focal employees’ job performance with the scale developed by Williams and

Anderson (1991). An example item was “Adequately completes assigned duties”.

Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.812.

## Chapter 5 Results

### 5.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In the present study, AMOS was used to test the discriminant validity of the focal variables (proactive personality, political skill, humble leadership, LMX and empowering leadership). Normally,  $\chi^2/df < 3$  (Bolino et al., 2010), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)  $< 0.10$ , standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)  $< 0.10$ , and the closer the comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) are to 1.00, the better the model is considered to have significant discriminant validity. As shown in Table 5-1, the five-factor model fit the data better ( $\chi^2/df = 1.408$ , RMSEA=0.036, SRMR=0.032, CFI=0.858, TLI=0.852), while the four-factor model ( $\chi^2=3033.304$ ,  $\chi^2/df=1.909$ , RMSEA=0.054, SRMR=0.046, CFI=0.683, TLI=0.670) had a poorer fit than the five-factor model. Similarly, the five-factor model was significantly better than the other models, indicating that the five main variables in this study had significant differential validity.



Table 5-1 Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Model	Combination	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
Five-factor model	PP; LMX; EL; PS; HL	2233.01	1585	1.41	0.036	0.032	0.858	0.852
Four-factor model	PP; LMX; EL; PS+HL	3033.30	1589	1.91	0.054	0.046	0.683	0.670
Three-factor model	PP; EL; LMX+PS+HL	3362.32	1592	2.11	0.060	0.050	0.611	0.596
Two-factor model	EL; PP+LMX+PS+HL	4524.67	1594	2.84	0.077	0.071	0.356	0.332
Single-factor model	PP+LMX+EL+PS+HL	5063.53	1595	3.17	0.084	0.076	0.238	0.210

*Note: PP: Proactive personality; LMX: Leader-member exchange; EL: Empowering leadership; PS: Political skill; HL: Humble leadership.*

## 5.2 Correlation Analysis

As shown in Table 5-2, proactive personality was significantly and positively correlated with leader-member exchange ( $r = 0.14, p < 0.05$ ), as well as with empowering leadership ( $r = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ). In addition, political skill was not significantly related to leader-member exchange ( $r = 0.06, ns$ ), nor was it related to empowering leadership ( $r = 0.01, ns$ ). Humble leadership was not correlated with leader-member exchange ( $r = -0.08, ns$ ), nor with empowering leadership ( $r = 0.01, ns$ ).

Table 5-2 Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of the Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Gender	1.54	0.49								
2.Education	2.92	0.61	-0.06							
3.Working time with current leader	41.72	25.26	-0.05	-0.05						
4.Job performance	4.41	1.23	-0.10	-0.03	0.09					
5.Proactive personality	2.98	1.01	-0.10*	0.03	0.14***	0.01				
6.Leader-member exchange	3.15	0.84	-0.01	-0.02	0.11*	0.52***	0.14**			
7.Empowering leadership	3.13	0.93	-0.01	-0.01	0.03	0.03	0.27***	0.17***		
8.Political skill	3.14	0.49	0.08	-0.09	-0.03	0.13**	0.01	0.07	0.06	
9.Humble leadership	3.68	0.54	0.01	-0.04	0.02	-0.05	0.18***	-0.08	0.01	-0.05

Note: \*\*\* represents  $p < 0.01$ , \*\* represents  $p < 0.05$ , \* represents  $p < 0.1$

### 5.3 The Relationship between Proactive Personality and Empowering Leadership

#### Leadership

The findings from Model 2 in Table 5-3 revealed that the squared term of proactive personality had a significantly negative impact on empowering leadership ( $B = -1.260$ ,  $SE = 0.064$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This implies that there was an inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership. I depict this curvilinear relationship in Figure 5-1. More specifically, proactive personality demonstrates an initial positive association with empowering leadership, indicating that employees with higher proactive personality tend to get more empowering leadership. However, as

employee proactive personality further increases, this positive relationship weakens, suggesting that the benefits of proactive personality begin to decline. That is, there is an optimal level of proactive personality in terms of getting empowering leadership. Empowering leadership will reach its peak when employee proactive personality is moderate. Beyond this point, as employee proactive personality continues to increase, empowering leadership begins to diminish, revealing the increasing negative effects of proactive personality. This pattern of results supports Hypothesis 1, which posits that an inverted U-shaped relationship exists between proactive personality and empowering leadership.

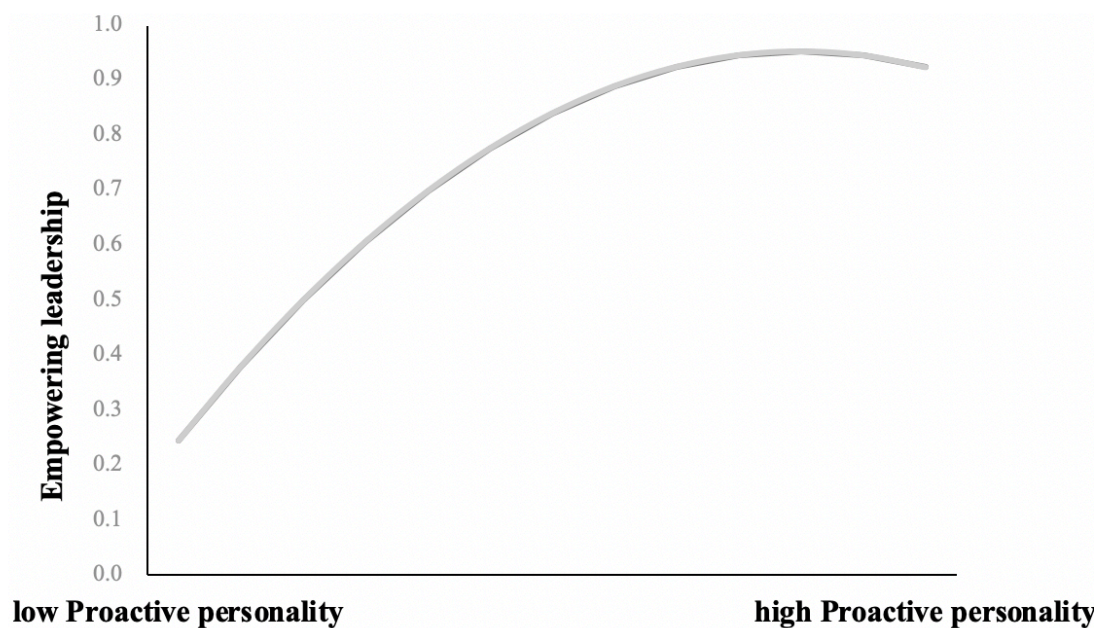


Figure 5-1 The Inverted U-shaped Relationship between Proactive Personality and Empowering Leadership

#### 5.4 The Mediating Role of LMX

Next, I examined the curvilinear effect of proactive personality on LMX. As shown in Model 5 in Table 5-3, the squared term of proactive personality was significantly and negatively associated with leader-member exchange ( $B = -2.009, SE = 0.059, p < 0.01$ ), revealing an inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX. I depict the curvilinear effect of proactive personality on LMX in Figure 5-2. As expected, as proactive personality increases, its positive effect on LMX starts to decline; after an optimal point, the effect of proactive personality on LMX becomes negative. Hence, Hypothesis 2, stating that proactive personality has an inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and leader-member exchange, was supported.

I further examined whether LMX mediated the effect of proactive personality on empowering leadership. Model 3 in Table 5-3 shows that LMX was positively related to empowering leadership ( $B = 0.133, SE = 0.062, p < 0.05$ ), supporting Hypothesis 3.

To further verify the mediating impact of LMX, I employed the Bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples, using the Process 3.3 macro in SPSS. The indirect effect of the squared term of proactive personality on empowering leadership via LMX was statistically significant, with an indirect effect value of -0.035 and a 95% confidence interval of [-0.076, -0.003], which excludes 0, suggesting a significant mediating effect.

Thus, Hypothesis 4, which posits that LMX mediates the inverted U-shaped effect of proactive personality on empowering leadership was supported.

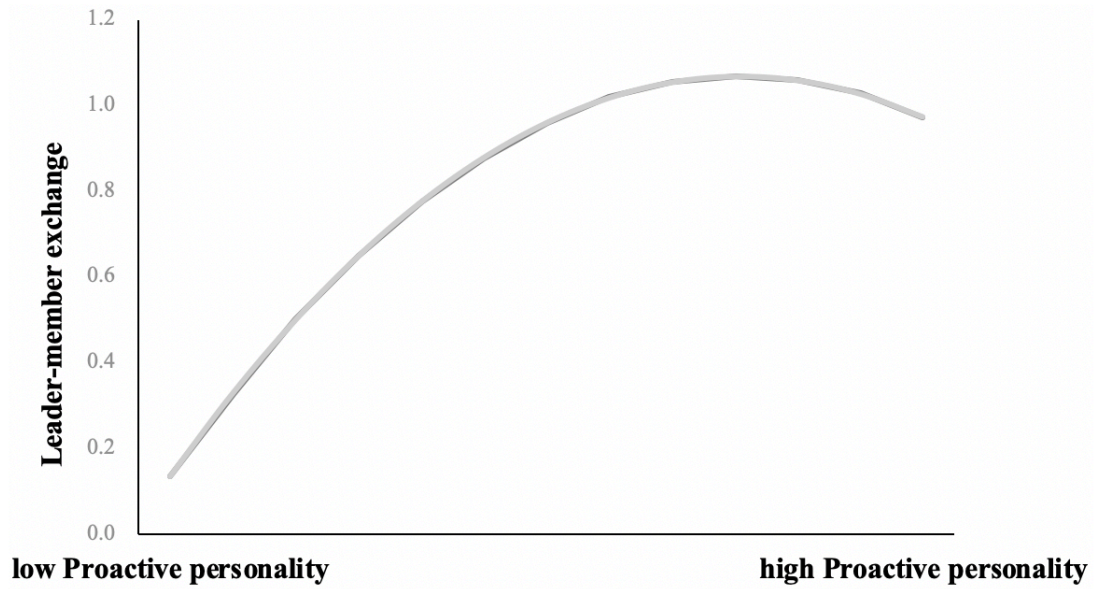


Figure 5-2 The Inverted U-shaped Relationship between Proactive Personality and LMX

Table 5-3 Regression Results of the Mediation Model

Variable	Empowering leadership			Leader-member exchange	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Gender	-0.113* (0.047)	-0.078 (0.045)	-0.065 (0.045)	-0.128*** (0.043)	-0.104 (0.042)
Education	0.005 (0.038)	0.003 (0.036)	0.002 (0.036)	0.005 (0.035)	0.004 (0.034)
Working time with current leader	0.033 (0.001)	-0.003 (0.001)	-0.009 (0.001)	0.063 (0.001)	0.046 (0.001)
Job performance	0.013 (0.073)	0.006 (0.071)	-0.059 (0.082)	0.503*** (0.068)	0.490*** (0.066)
Political skill	0.071 (0.060)	0.066 (0.058)	0.065 (0.057)	0.006 (0.056)	0.005 (0.054)
Humble leadership	0.059 (0.042)	0.028 (0.042)	0.035 (0.041)	-0.059 (0.039)	-0.055 (0.039)
Proactive personality		1.509** (0.487)	1.225** (0.499)		2.132*** (0.453)
Proactive personality <sup>2</sup>		-1.260** (0.064)	-0.993* (0.065)		-2.009*** (0.059)
Leader-member exchange			0.133** (0.062)		
$R^2$	0.021	0.096	0.108	0.296	0.347
$F$	1.075	4.009***	4.028***	21.204***	20.038***

Note: \*\*\* represents  $p < 0.01$ , \*\* represents  $p < 0.05$ , \* represents  $p < 0.1$ . Standard error in parentheses.

### 5.5 The Moderating Effect of Political Skill

To reduce the effect of multicollinearity, the variables involved were centered before constructing the squared and interaction terms. Results for Hypothesis 5 (i.e., the moderating effect of political skill) indicate that the interaction term of the squared term

of proactive personality and political skill was marginally significantly related to LMX ( $B = -0.262, p < 0.1$ , Model 3 in Table 5-4).

In Figure 5-3, we plot the relationship between proactive personality and LMX at different levels of employee political skill. The results showed that employees with higher political skill had better LMX, keeping proactive personality constant. Moreover, consistent with Hypothesis 5, when subordinates' political skill is high, the inflection point of the above inverted U-shaped relationship is closer to the upper right. Taken together, I found marginal support for the moderating role of political skill in the inverted U-shaped effect of proactive personality on LMX.

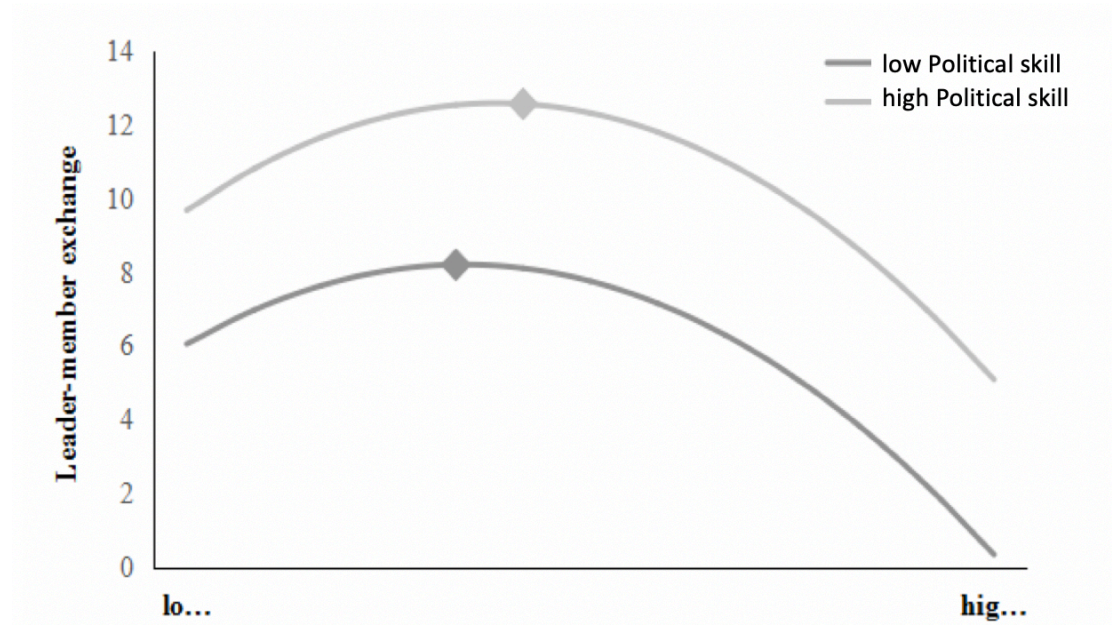


Figure 5-3 The Moderating Role of Political Skill in the Relationship between Proactive Personality and LMX

## 5.6 The Moderating Effect of Humble Leadership

As shown in Table 5-4, the results of model 4 show that the interaction term of the square term of active personality and humble leadership had no significant effect on LMX ( $B = 0.046$ , *ns*). Thus, Hypothesis 6, which posits that humble leadership moderates the inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX, was not supported.

Table 5-4 The Effects of Proactive Personality on LMX and the Moderating Role of Political Skill and Humble Leadership

Variable	LMX			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Gender	-0.128*** (0.043)	-0.104 (0.042)	-0.091** (0.042)	-0.093** (0.042)
Education	0.005 (0.035)	0.004 (0.034)	-0.001 (0.034)	-0.003 (0.034)
Working time with current leader	0.063 (0.001)	0.046 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Job performance	0.503*** (0.068)	0.490*** (0.066)	0.691*** (0.066)	0.691*** (0.067)
Political skill	0.006 (0.056)	0.005 (0.054)	8.155* (4.766)	3.611* (2.153)
Humble leadership	-0.059 (0.039)	-0.055 (0.039)	-0.048 (0.039)	1.240 (3.799)
Proactive personality		2.132*** (0.453)	-6.271 (4.815)	-4.790 (6.229)
Proactive personality <sup>2</sup>		-2.009*** (0.059)	-0.244*** (0.060)	0.817 (0.649)
Proactive personality×Political skill			1.990* (1.162)	1.941* (1.167)



Proactive personality <sup>2</sup> ×Political skill			-0.262*	-0.255
			(0.156)	(0.156)
Proactive personality×Humble leadership				-0.314
				(0.927)
Proactive personality <sup>2</sup> ×Humble leadership				0.046
				(0.120)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.296	0.347	0.354	0.355
F	21.204***	20.038***	16.379***	13.624***

Note: \*\*\* represents  $p < 0.01$ , \*\* represents  $p < 0.05$ , \* represents  $p < 0.1$ . Standard error in parentheses.

## **Chapter 6 Discussion**

### **6.1 Summary of Research Findings**

As anticipated, proactive personality and empowering leadership have an inverted U-shaped relationship, with moderate levels of proactive personality leading to maximum empowering leadership. Our reasoning is that proactive employees work harder and have better performance, which further induce empowering leadership. However, overly motivated subordinates can pose a threat to the leader's authority and position, resulting in less empowerment.

The curvilinear relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership was mediated by LMX. Specifically, the relationship between proactive personality and LMX follows an inverted U-shaped pattern, with subordinates exhibiting moderate proactivity having the highest level of LMX due to their ability to establish trust through frequent interpersonal communication. However, subordinates who have excessive proactivity may pose a threat to the leader's position and status, leading to increased vigilance and distance from the leader, while subordinates with low proactivity may not establish enough rapport. Moreover, LMX was positively related to empowering leadership. Leaders have higher trust in their in-group members and are more willing to empower these members (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999).

Political skill marginally moderated the curvilinear relationship between proactive personality and LMX, such that when political skill was high, the positive effect of proactive personality on LMX attenuated slowly as politically skilled employees are better at taking charge in a pleasant manner that shows respect and recognition of leaders' authority.

The results did not support the hypothesis that humble leadership moderated the inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX. A possible reason for this insignificant finding is that employees may have inflated evaluations of leaders' humility, especially in cultures that value the demonstration of modesty, such as China. Leaders may express humility to conform to cultural values and hide their ego-centered thoughts. Thus, even when employees perceive that their leaders are humble, the leaders may still feel threatened by employees' high proactivity.

Table 6-1 below summarized the results of hypothesis testing.

Table 6-1 Results of Hypothesis Testing

	Hypotheses	Result
1	There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership.	Supported
2	There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX.	Supported
3	LMX is positively related to empowering leadership.	Supported
4	LMX mediates the inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership.	Supported
5	Subordinates' political skill moderates the inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX. When subordinates' political skill is high, the inflection point of the above inverted U-shaped relationship is closer to the upper right.	Marginally Supported
6	Leader humility moderates the inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and LMX. When leader humility is high, the inflection point of the above inverted U-shaped relationship is closer to the upper right.	Not supported

## 6.2 Theoretical Contributions

Generally speaking, empowering leadership is a positive way of leadership, which has a positive effect on organizations, groups and enterprises. However, we know very little about its antecedents. From the only few literatures available, researchers emphasize the trait factors of leaders and ignore the important role of subordinates as co-constructors of the leadership process. Therefore, this paper explores the antecedents of empowering leadership. This study intends to contribute to research on proactive personality and empowering leadership. The contributions of this paper are as follows:

In this study, I take a balanced approach to clarify the relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership. While scholars who highlight the advantages

of proactive employees have assumed that they are favored and empowered at work, this assumption has received inadequate validation. To address this gap, I consider both the benefits and threats of proactivity, going beyond Han et al.'s (2019) research which only focuses on the upsides. This approach allows us to examine the "too much of a good thing" effect of proactive personality and view the relationship as nonlinear. My theorization indicates that moderate proactivity is most favorable for employees to receive empowerment and release their potential.

Furthermore, most existing studies on the antecedents of empowering leadership focus on the factors of leaders, paying less attention to the impact of subordinates' personalities on empowering leadership behavior. This paper highlights the importance of subordinates and reveals how, why and when proactive personality affects empowering leadership. Specifically, I propose an inverted U-shaped relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership, where moderate proactive personality is the most favorable for obtaining empowerment. The empirical evidence provided in this study enriches our understanding of the antecedents of empowering leadership and effectively responds to the call for research exploring the antecedents of empowering leadership from the perspective of subordinates.

Additionally, this study proposes and tests the mediating role of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) underlying the inverted U-shaped relationship between subordinates'

proactive personality and empowering leadership. Proactivity involves active contribution and violation of hierarchical order, making it a double-edged sword for leader-member interaction, with moderate proactivity being most conducive to LMX. On one hand, proactive subordinates obtain trust and positive emotional attitudes from leaders, build good superior-subordinate relationships, and obtain more power and status. On the other hand, proactive subordinates may make leaders perceive a threat to their identity and status, leading them to become conservative and restrict employees from gaining more power.

Additionally, this study sheds light on which employees are more likely to benefit from proactivity and which leaders appreciate proactive employees, by identifying employee political skill and humble leadership as moderators. The findings reveal that employee political skill can enhance the positive effect of proactive personality on leadership-member exchange and weaken the threat incurred by proactive personality, shifting the inverted U-shaped relationship to the upper right. This suggests that the degree to which leaders confer empowerment is determined not only by followers' proactivity, but also the way they express their proactivity.

### **6.3 Managerial Implications**

This study proposes a novel perspective on the relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership, which contributes to a deeper understanding

of how leaders treat proactive employees. These research findings carry significant implications for management practices.

First, the findings of my thesis indicate that a moderate level of proactive personality is most conducive for developing high quality LMX and obtaining empowerment from leaders. Hence, it's important for subordinates to be aware that although being proactive can build trust with leaders and improve LMX, excessive self-expression of proactivity may lead to higher caution from superiors and make them more conscious of the risks of empowering leadership. Employees should take the perspectives of their leaders and understand how leaders will perceive their proactive behaviors.

Second, my research shows that political skill is a key factor for leveraging the benefits of proactivity and containing its risks in leader-member interactions. As political skill is malleable (Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007), proactive employees should develop their political skill so that they can obtain adequate empowerment from leaders, take charge more effectively, and have a positive impact at work. For example, employees can work on improving their verbal and non-verbal communication skills, active listening, and adapting their communication style to satisfy their leaders. I also encourage organizations to involve political skill training in their training and professional development programs. Organizations can also initiate mentoring programs to help employees become politically apt through interpersonal influence.

Moreover, organizations can identify highly politically skilled employees and place them in roles that require a high degree of proactivity to make full use of their human capital.

Third, leaders should realize that empowerment is necessary to realize proactive employees' potential and improve work efficiency. Moreover, leaders should also recognize that they may feel threatened by highly proactive employees and withhold empowerment to maintain their power and status, which can diminish proactive employees' motivation and harm group functioning. It is important for leaders to value proactive employees by providing respect, support, and recognition to promote innovation and growth, acknowledging that they bring new ideas, solutions, and perspectives to the organization. Providing autonomy, resources, and clear expectations can help proactive employees pursue initiatives independently. Leaders should also foster a culture that views mistakes as learning opportunities, rewards proactive behavior, and actively listens to feedback and suggestions from proactive subordinates.

Last, empowering leadership can create a more positive work environment, enhance employee motivation, and improve overall performance outcomes. Thus, organizations should provide training to leaders on how to be empowering. Such training can cover areas such as communication skills, emotional intelligence, empathy, and coaching skills. Moreover, it is essential to create a culture that supports empowering leadership



by aligning policies, practices, and values that encourage employee engagement and participation. Organizational structures, systems, and processes must align with empowering leadership principles and support employee autonomy and involvement.

#### **6.4 Limitations and Future Research**

This study investigates how, why and for whom proactive personality influences empowering leadership. As with any research, this thesis has some limitations to note. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data hinders us from drawing causal conclusions about the hypothesized relationships. While the adoption of the dual-source, time-lagged research design helps reduce common method bias, this study is correlational in nature. I encourage scholars to adopt longitudinal designs and experiments to replicate the findings and enhance the establishment of causality. For example, researchers can manipulate the levels of employees' proactivity and offer supervisor participants the opportunities to engage in empowering leadership.

Second, this study did not find support for the moderating role of humble leadership in the relationship between proactive personality and LMX. One possible reason is that the variable of humble leadership was only measured through employees' evaluations. Although employees can infer their leaders' humility from interactions and observations, their evaluations may be biased and different from leaders' self-perceptions. Particularly, some leaders may express humility to make positive

impressions, hiding their arrogance or self-focused thoughts. Future research could further examine the role of humble leadership with leader-report measures.

Third, this study was done in China, which has a culture characterized by a high power-distance. In such a culture, many leaders tend to favor an authoritative leadership style and may be less receptive to their followers' suggestions and ideas. As a result, the beneficial impact of proactive personality on LMX may weaken more quickly, and the risks associated with proactive personality may become more pronounced. To assess the generalizability of the findings in this study, future research could conduct cross-cultural comparisons.

Last, this paper is among the first to examine the effects of employees' characteristics on empowering leadership. Future research can explore other employee factors, such as creativity and organizational citizenship behavior, as predictors of empowering leadership.

## **Chapter 7 Conclusion**

This research presents a fresh outlook that challenges the notion of a straightforward positive linear relationship between proactive personality and empowering leadership. Instead, this thesis proposes an inverted U-shaped relationship, arguing that employees with moderate levels of proactive personality are most likely to be empowered. This research also reveals that LMX mediates the curvilinear effect of proactive personality on empowering leadership. Furthermore, when proactive employees have strong political skill, the risks of proactivity become weaker. We thus encourage proactive employees to improve their political skill to take charge effectively. I hope this thesis spurs researchers' interest in taking a balanced view on proactive personality and examining employee factors as predictors of empowering leadership.

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## **Subordinate Questionnaire (I)**

Dear participant,

Thank you very much for participating in this research conducted by scholars from Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

The answers to the questions in the questionnaire are not good or bad, right or wrong. Please feel free to answer according to your actual feelings in work. The survey results are only used for academic research and presented in the form of statistical data. The research team will not disclose your personal information. In order to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, please read the questions carefully and fill them in carefully.

This research includes two questionnaires. After completing this questionnaire, you will be invited to complete the second questionnaire three weeks later. Thank you for your cooperation and help!

**To match the first and second questionnaires, please fill in the last four digits of your mobile phone number: \_\_\_\_\_**

### **Part I: Personal Information**

**Your gender:**

**Your age:**

**Your education level: Junior high school and below | Senior high school and technical secondary school | Junior college | Bachelor's degree | Master's degree | PhD**

**Your tenure in the current organization: \_\_ years**

**How long have you been a subordinate of the current direct leader:**

**Your industry:**

**Your current position:**

## Part II

<b>1. Please rate the degree to which you agree/disagree with the following statements. □</b>					
<b>Item</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1. I am constantly on the lookout for new ways to improve my life.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Wherever I have been, I have been a powerful force for constructive change.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Nothing is more exciting than seeing my ideas turn into reality	1	2	3	4	5
4. If I see something I don't like, I fix it.	1	2	3	4	5
5. No matter what the odds, if I believe in something I will make it happen.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others' opposition.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I excel at identifying opportunities.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am always looking for better ways to do things.	1	2	3	4	5
9. If I believe in an idea, no obstacle will prevent me from making it happen.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I can spot a good opportunity long before others can.	1	2	3	4	5

<b>2. Please rate the degree to which you agree/disagree with the following statements. □</b>					
<b>Item</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1. I spend a lot of time and effort at work networking with others.	1	2	3	4	5
2. At work, I know a lot of important people and am well connected.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am good at using my connections and networks to make things happen at work.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I have developed a large network of colleagues and associates at work who I can call on for support when I really need to get things done.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I spend a lot of time at work developing connections with others.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am good at building relationships with influential people at work.	1	2	3	4	5
7. It is important that people believe I am sincere in what I say and do.	1	2	3	4	5
8. When communicating with others, I try to be genuine in what I say and do.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I try to show a genuine interest in other people.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I always seem to instinctively know the right thing to say or do to influence others.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I have good intuition or savvy about how to present myself to others.	1	2	3	4	5

12. I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I pay close attention to people's facial expressions.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I understand people very well.	1	2	3	4	5
15. It is easy for me to develop good rapport with most people.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I am good at getting people to like me.	1	2	3	4	5

## Subordinate Questionnaire (II)

Dear participant,

Thank you very much for participating in this research conducted by scholars from Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

The answers to the questions in the questionnaire are not good or bad, right or wrong. Please feel free to answer according to your actual feelings in work. The survey results are only used for academic research and presented in the form of statistical data. The research team will not disclose your personal information. In order to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, please read the questions carefully and fill them in carefully.

This research includes two questionnaires. You have completed the first questionnaire and this is the second questionnaire. I hope you can take the time again to complete the questionnaire independently and seriously!

**To match the first and second questionnaires, please fill in the last four digits of your mobile phone number: \_\_\_\_\_**



<b>1. The following is a description of your direct leader. Please select the most appropriate option according to your perception of your direct leader.</b>					
<b>Item</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1. My direct leader controls much of my activities.	5	4	3	2	1
2. My direct leader gives me many responsibilities.	1	2	3	4	5
3. My direct leader makes me responsible for what I do.	1	2	3	4	5
4. My direct leader asks me for advice when making decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My direct leader uses my suggestions and ideas when making decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
6. My direct leader encourages me to take control of my work.	1	2	3	4	5
7. My direct leader allows me to set my own goals.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My direct leader encourages me to come up with my own goals.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My direct leader stays out of the way when I work on my performance problems.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My direct leader encourages me to figure out the causes/solutions to my problems.	1	2	3	4	5
11. My direct leader tells me to expect a lot from myself.	1	2	3	4	5
12. My direct leader encourages me to go for high performance.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My direct leader trusts me.	1	2	3	4	5

14. My direct leader is confident in what I can do.	1	2	3	4	5
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## Leader Questionnaire

Dear participant,

Thank you very much for participating in this research conducted by scholars from Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

This research needs to be completed by you and a subordinate. You need to fill in this questionnaire, and a subordinate you invited will complete the other two questionnaires. In addition to the basic information, the questions involved in this study are all about your evaluation of the subordinate.

The answers to the questions in the questionnaire are not good or bad, right or wrong. Please feel free to answer according to your actual feelings in work. The survey results are only used for academic research and presented in the form of statistical data. The research team will not disclose your personal information. In order to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, please read the questions carefully and fill them in carefully.

**Your gender:**

**Your age:**

**Your education level: Junior high school and below | Senior high school and technical secondary school | Junior college | Bachelor's degree | Master's degree | PhD**

**Your working tenure in the current organization: \_\_\_years**

**Your working tenure in the current position: \_\_\_\_\_years**

**How many years have you held a leadership/management position since you worked: \_\_\_\_\_years**

**Please make an evaluation based on the actual situation of the subordinates that you invited to participate in this study.**

<b>1. Please rate the degree to which you agree/disagree with the following statements.</b>					
<b>Item</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1. This subordinate adequately completes assigned duties.	1	2	3	4	5
2. This subordinate fulfills responsibilities specified in job description.	1	2	3	4	5
3. This subordinate performs tasks that are expected of him/her.	1	2	3	4	5
4. This subordinate meets formal performance requirements of the job.	1	2	3	4	5
5. This subordinate engages in activities that will directly affect his/her performance evaluation.	1	2	3	4	5
6. This subordinate has completed all aspects of the work he/she is obligated to perform.	1	2	3	4	5
7. This subordinate is able to perform basic duties.	1	2	3	4	5

**2. Please rate the degree to which you agree/disagree with the following statements.**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1. I'm usually satisfied with the results of this subordinate's work.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I know well the problems and needs of this subordinate at work.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I can recognize the potential of this subordinate.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I will use my power to help this subordinate solve work problems.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I am willing to lose amounts of my formal authority to "bail him/her out" in the work.	1	2	3	4	5
6. This subordinate has enough trust in me. Even if I am not present, he/she will uphold my decision.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I have a good working relationship with this subordinate.	1	2	3	4	5