

Navigating the hybrid workplace: The role of benevolent leaders and its impact on empowering employees psychologically

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Abstract

The gradually accepted hybrid work mode has redefined the modern workplace, necessitating a transformation in leadership. Traditional management practices, such as controlling and closely monitoring employees' performance, have become impractical and inefficient due to the distance. The challenges of juggling roles between work and family responsibilities faced by employees also demand more individualised support from leaders. To address these realities, focus should be placed on empowering employees and taking their perspective to recognise the dual-role pressure. This study discusses how benevolent leaders fit into the emerging hybrid working trend in empowering employees by practicing perspective taking in considering employees' real needs. The data collection involved 299 respondents from the banking industry in the major cities of Malaysia. Structural equation modeling was adopted for hypothesis testing. The result shows that both benevolent leadership and perspective taking are significantly and positively related to psychological empowerment, and perspective taking moderates the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee engagement.

Keywords: Benevolent leadership, Psychological empowerment, Perspective taking, Hybrid workplace.

Introduction

Hybrid work models have emerged as the dominant mode of the post-pandemic work landscape. The physical distance between colleagues poses challenges for fostering a sense of connection, resulting in necessary modifications in communication and coordination strategies to sustain the performance level. Despite overcoming the cumbersome impediments for the new normal, the rapid adjustment and adaptation to working remotely has unexpectedly brought to light the fact that the workforce highly appreciates the increased flexibility in work (Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2023). Employees have shown keen interest in the continuation of remote work even after the pandemic, which eventually contributes to the future employment relationship and affects the determinants to enter the labour market (Staniulienė and Zaveckis, 2022). The enhanced flexibility has better regulated employees' work-life equation (Chiotti, 2023). Regardless of the preference of the management, up to 90% of the Asia Pacific workforce has displayed their fondness for flexible working mode, either working remotely or hybrid (PWC, 2022). It has topped the list of reasons why hybrid mode is demanded (Chiotti, 2023). In addition to flexibility, recent studies also revealed that the prominent trends of post-pandemic remote or hybrid workplace lies in employee empowerment and work-life balance (Staniulienė and Zaveckis, 2022; Tan, 2023; Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2023, Tan et al., 2024) (Tan et al., 2024). The evolving work nature necessitates empowerment from management to employees, resulting from the increasing demand for a hybrid work mode. To adapt to the remote workspaces, companies are prompted to empower employees due to a lack of transparency and accessibility to all aspects of work (Staniulienė and Zaveckis, 2022). Companies accommodate a higher level of flexibility than the pre-pandemic period, by allowing employees' discretion on job options, in terms of working schedule, location, and routine tasks arrangement (Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2023). Autonomy in the decision-making process becomes a pivotal determinant for a company's performance, as formal approval may be a time-consuming and painful process that a company cannot afford to adopt in such a competitive climate (Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2023). Given that the working processes are invisible among distributed team members, a result-oriented approach may be more appropriate than the highly constrained micromanagement adopted in a conventional workplace. The persistent need for flexibility (Chiotti, 2023) signifies that the dictatorial approach in traditional offices is ill-suited to the modern workplace. Instead, fostering autonomy on the job by empowering the employees can better resonate their needs and is paramount for talent retention, especially those with coveted skills (PWC, 2022).

It is noticeable that companies are now recognising the essentiality of this need by adapting policies to facilitate digital transformation (Cham et al., 2022; Hughes and Davis, 2024) and hybrid working (Chiotti, 2023). However, the transition does not only rely on the institutional change, but human concerns also play a significant role in ensuring an efficient and sustainable hybrid work arrangement (Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2023). This game-changing paradigm shift in the workplace is self-evident, and adaptation in leadership style is required to align with the evolving demands of the current workforce. Despite the increase in productivity under a flexible working arrangement, leaders of a hybrid workforce are endeavoring to manage virtual team interactions, activities, and goals (Schmitt, 2023). The normalised online working environment brought challenges for the leaders to fully perform the leadership functions (Cremers and Curşeu, 2023). The virtual setting has complicated the communication

process and limited the expressive interaction, which can largely affect the social support mechanisms from leaders to employees (Cremers and Curşeu, 2023), especially in building trust and rapport. There is an urgent call for all industries to accentuate humanisation in hybrid settings, support and respect remote workers as multidimensional individuals who carry purposes and responsibilities beyond their work (Schmitt, 2023). Leaders should prioritise employees' changing needs and behaviours rather than just supplying essential equipment for supporting virtual work (Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2023). This emerging phenomenon can be explained by various management theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, and Ulrich's (1997) Human Resource Model (Lukyamu, 2024). Addressing basic physiological, safety, and social needs for such a blended work environment can motivate hybrid workers to become more engaged (Lukyamu, 2024). The human resource model suggested tuning talent management practices to support new organizational strategies (Ulrich, 1997). In this case, the strategies for the remote workplace. Coping with the interruptions from childcare or petcare demands has become part of this virtual norm, which shows how work and life are now inseparable (Tu et al., 2021). The round-the-clock work-life integration may precipitate stress for employees and their family members (Pluut and Wonders, 2020). The awareness towards the personal and familial well-being of employees may become obligatory. Despite all the beneficial outcomes of hybrid working and the advocating policies enforced, the physical spatial gap among isolated teammates can still lead to digital burnout and affect the mental health (Chiotti, 2023). Embracing a holistic leadership approach seems imperative to ease these stresses brought by digital interactions (Tu et al., 2021) by shifting leaders' priorities back to the task executer rather than the task outcomes (Schmitt, 2023). The blended model of remote and in-person work arrangements may require the modern leaders in the post-pandemic era to perform a juggling act in managing employees' physical and mental well-being in both work and family contexts.

This study aims to scrutinise the impact of benevolent leadership on psychological empowerment of employees in the current hybrid work system, and the moderating effect of perspective taking on this relationship. Benevolent leaders who extend their concern beyond the working context and place partial focus on employees' familial and personal well-being (Farh and Cheng, 2000) may fit perfectly into the current hybrid environment. In comparison to other leadership styles, such as transformational, servant, or democratic leadership, benevolent leaders stretch the reach of attention to familial context, which is now interlaced into one's working life. The nurturing actions of benevolent leaders build a comforting and supportive setting to allow employees to confide their work-related or personal concerns (Chhabra and Pandey, 2023) that facilitates the efficiency of a hybrid workplace. A healthy virtual partnership between employer and employees is only viable when leaders trust their employees to give their best for the company by empowering them in making decisions (PWC, 2022). The caring nature of a benevolent leader may accurately recognise the need for empowerment of the hybrid workforce. However, empowering employees unilaterally without being recognised by the employees is apparently futile and unproductive. Even if leaders see themselves delegating more power, employees may not discern a considerable change in the delegation, although they do perceive a decrease in leaders' control (Cremers and Curşeu, 2023; Stoker et al., 2022). Therefore, psychological empowerment, which indicates how the individual perceives and internalises power received from the superior to allow them to influence work outcomes, becomes the

determinant of work efficiency. To ensure a smooth transition for the hybrid workforce and build rapport with them, benevolent leaders should take a holistic mentoring approach by understanding each other's values and perspectives or extending the conversation beyond the working context (Tu et al., 2021).

Reframed from an alternative perspective, fulfilling the evolving demand of the modern workforce may constitute an effective approach to talent retention strategy in the current competitive landscape of the job market, especially eliminating the geographical barriers in recruiting global talent (Chiotti, 2023). Discerning the propensity of diverse employees and allowing them to have a voice over the nature of their jobs has encouraged a better engaged, more productive, and satisfied workforce (Chiotti, 2023; PWC, 2022). To truly empower the employees, the importance of contemporary leaders taking the perspectives and recognising the genuine needs of the hybrid workforce may be imperative to truly empower them.

Literature Review

Benevolent Leadership

Benevolent leadership refers to a leadership style that manifests individualised and holistic care for employees' work-related and personal well-being (Farh and Cheng, 2000). Benevolent leadership is distinguishable from other leadership styles in terms of extensive care given to employees by placing additional emphasis on personal well-being beyond the working context (Ye et al., 2024). At work, benevolent leaders demonstrate their goodwill to employees by being respectful of employees' viewpoints, supportive to employees' career enhancement (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016), perceptive to the reasons of them performing poorly on tasks, offering coaching and mentorship, and permitting rectification for mistakes (Cheng et al., 2000; Chhabra and Pandey, 2023; Farh et al., 2008). Meanwhile, benevolent leaders are going above and beyond, treating employees as family members by indicating genuine apprehension, and devoting much of their energy to aid with overcoming employees' personal dilemmas through their difficult moments (Chen et al., 2015; Cheng et al., 2000; Chhabra and Pandey, 2023; Farh et al., 2008; Ye et al., 2024).

Despite the introduction of alternative leadership styles that focus more on knowledge-sharing and inclusion in the remote or hybrid workplace, benevolent leadership remains versatile and incorporates the benefits of other leadership styles. Knowledge-oriented leadership was proposed as the leadership style that is needed during and post-pandemic due to its characteristics of being supportive and visionary, delegating, mentoring, and providing personalised encouragement (Khan et al., 2024; Shamim et al., 2017). It is also perceived as a leadership style that synthesises the attributes of transformational and transactional leadership, which inspire team members with future vision in the context of creating and sharing new knowledge (Khan et al., 2024). Inclusive leadership focuses on leader-follower interaction where leaders are always readily accessible as the situation demands, and such a conducive and reliable setting encourages employees to express their needs comfortably and confidently (Vallabh et al., 2024). This leadership style was proposed in a remote or hybrid context where physical engagement is lacking primarily due to its effectiveness in forming social ties through a two-way influence process between leaders and followers (Roberson and Perry, 2022; Vallabh

et al., 2024). However, benevolent leadership largely captures the positive characteristics of the proposed leadership styles for the hybrid workplace. The abovementioned studies pointed out that leadership demand in a hybrid workplace accentuates empathy, resilience, kindness, and social ties, which contribute to building mutual trust (Khan et al., 2024; Vallabh et al., 2024). A recent study has also validated the effectiveness of benevolent leadership during the pandemic in strengthening the leader-follower relationship (Chhabra and Pandey, 2023). Benevolent leaders practice kindness by demonstrating genuine concerns for employees' work-related and personal well-being, being understanding and respectful to employees' feelings and thoughts, and providing selfless guidance to support employees' achievement (Cheng et al., 2000; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016; Farh et al., 2008; Farh and Cheng, 2000). The benevolent behaviours further foster a secure organisational climate where employees can freely express their opinions, anxieties, and concerns (Wu et al., 2012), and therefore enhance the effectiveness of knowledge sharing (Johnson et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2018). Correspondingly, the aspect of extended solicitude beyond the working context seems to be tailored for better applicability. The intensified concern is also more contextually aligned with a hybrid workplace where employees must balance between family and career.

Psychological Empowerment

Empowerment is commonly defined as the top-down delegation of power and resource accessibility (Spreitzer, 1995). Later, scholars argued that job incumbents' cognition towards the empowerment should be considered (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990), and the term "psychological empowerment" was coined. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) proposed that the holistic meaning of empowerment involves multiple aspects and cannot be grasped by a single concept, and therefore introduced the four cognitions which manifested intrinsic task motivation: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meaning refers to the work goal or purpose that fits one's ideals or standards; competence is one's confidence on his or her own ability in accomplishing activities; self-determination is the sense of autonomy one has to initiate and regulate the continuation of work behaviours; and impact is the influence of one's decision towards important outcomes (Spreitzer, 1995). In essence, individuals feel enhanced work meaningfulness, confidence, sense of autonomy, and personal significance when authority is delegated to them.

Delegating power downwards sets aside more time for leaders to accomplish paramount strategic planning for long-term goals (Zheng and Tian, 2019). Past studies also revealed that the power and control distribution from superiors to subordinates determine organisational productivity and effectiveness (Kanter, 1979; Tannenbaum, 1968). Meanwhile, multiple aspects of employees' personal life and profession, such as self-worth and self-reliance, will be motivated through empowerment obtained (Allam, 2017; Neilsen, 1986). This constructive effect is extended to frontline employees who can efficiently identify problems out of their role accountabilities and proactively assist colleagues and suggest solutions when they are empowered (Raub and Robert, 2013). Empowering leaders decentralise problem-solving and decision-making and encourage self-managed work teams as they place confidence in their subordinates (Konczak et al., 2000; Özaralli, 2015). With their voice being heard, employees can optimise the operational effectiveness in planning and execution (Cook, 1994).

In a hybrid working environment, there is limited transparency and accessibility in business processes when employees are away from the office. It drives the organisations to empower employees (Staniulienė and Zaveckis, 2022) which permits them to stay agile and adaptive in coping with the competitive business landscape (Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2023). Traditional management practices are out of sync with the needs of enhancing employees' skills in all domains through psychological empowerment (Allam, 2017). Even though psychological empowerment is called for in a hybrid workplace (Staniulienė and Zaveckis, 2022), the empowerment provided may not be explicitly registered as a favour by employees (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). To improve psychological empowerment, leaders may have to take both working conditions and the psychological status of employees into consideration (Xiao et al., 2017). Benevolent leadership, which advocates holistic support for subordinates, including enabling employees' self-determination for personal growth (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016) may resonate with the current needs of the hybrid workforce. The social backing of benevolent leaders also leads to a greater sense of meaning at work (Duan et al., 2024). This study proposed that benevolent leadership can psychologically empower employees in a hybrid working context.

H1 Benevolent leadership is positively associated with psychological empowerment.

Perspective Taking

Perspective taking is a cognitive ability to take the initiative in interpreting a certain situation by embracing others' viewpoints (Goldstein et al., 2014; Parker and Axtell, 2001). It acts as a relational competence that gained others' appreciation and recognition due to the consideration made in understanding others' thoughts (Ng et al., 2021). This action of stepping into another person's shoes is viewed as a powerful cognitive merging process between the perspective taker and the target (Goldstein et al., 2014). The merging process brings a greater sense of self-other overlap due to the perception of similarities in both the perspective taker and target's identities, and a closer relationship bonding between the two parties (Goldstein et al., 2014). Individuals with more perspective taking develop a more interdependent self-construal by understanding others' convictions, rather than distinct individuals with an independent self-construal (Voyer and McIntosh, 2013).

Perspective taking is a core function that individuals employ to interact positively with others (Long and Andrews, 1990) so that they can adapt to the social environment (Davis et al., 1996). Perspective taking is deemed a relational competence that lowers interpersonal risk (Ng et al., 2021). By understanding things through others' lenses, perspective takers can adeptly calibrate and attune their reactions to accommodate antagonistic and defensive responses of the targets, and effectively reduce the misunderstanding (Ng et al., 2021). The studies from the psychology field have provided evidence on this. The greater occurrence of perspective taking is found to have a significant influence on fewer relationship problems (Hudson et al., 2024). In addition, perspective taking has a bidirectional predicting effect on relationship problems, which indicates that one with better perspective taking can develop a healthier relationship, whereas the healthier relationship allows one to enhance their perspective taking too (Hudson et al., 2024). In the context of family-of-origin risk for electronic aggression perpetration due to romantic conflicts, perspective taking is found to mitigate the

aggression reactions stemming from family-of-origin aggression (Ramos et al., 2021). A better perspective taker may interpret messages in electronic communications alternatively towards a more benign intention (Ramos et al., 2021). With the ability to react appropriately to various hostile situations, perspective takers can mitigate or even eliminate interpersonal risks and be encouraged to voice up, with conviction about how to express their thoughts in a constructive manner (Ng et al., 2021).

Perspective taking has been regarded as “a valuable social skill” (Galinsky et al., 2011) that cannot be acquired by everyone effectively (Ng et al., 2021). The skillful perspective takers are capable of processing the information received to anticipate the behaviours of others, and subsequently adjust their own reaction to it (Ng et al., 2021). Although perspective taking is not an effortless skill and requires a combination of various high-level cognitive skills (Ryskin et al., 2015), it is viewed as a developable skill that can vary across different individuals, with a high possibility that it will stay consistently over time once it is acquired (Parker and Axtell, 2001). There is quite an array of noticeable cues in the social process that allow observers to recognise this cognitive process (Ng et al., 2021). For instance, a person who appears to be listening patiently in a conversation, reiterating another person’s words for clarification, being agreeable or amenable, providing relevant and helpful advice, embracing a range of diverse viewpoints, and pursuing a win-win outcome in negotiations (Ng et al., 2021).

On occasion, it is noticed that the word “empathy” is used interchangeably with perspective taking (Parker and Axtell, 2001). Scholars explained the connection between them. Empathy is an affective response that emerged as a result of the cognitive process of viewing from others’ perspectives (Parker and Axtell, 2001). An individual must first understand what is happening to others from their vantage point before they can perceive others’ emotions triggered by this incident (Hoffman, 1975). Batson (2014) suggested that the reasons for taking another person’s perspective are to prompt the feeling of empathy, to minimise stereotyping and prejudice, to perceive one’s thoughts, desires, and intentions, and to understand the environment and oneself. To fulfill the active orientation defined in psychological empowerment, where an individual wishes and feels to have control over his or her work (Spreitzer, 1995), a leader may have to empathise and “accurately” empower the employees based on their true desires for autonomy. This circumstance is similar to autonomy-supportive parenthood (Mageau et al., 2017). Autonomy-supportive parents are empathic instead of dominating, and perspective taking is the preliminary factor of embracing autonomy-supportive behaviour (Grolnick and Pomerantz, 2009). Reeve and Cheon’s (2024) study in the educational field put forth a comparable stance. This study proposed that autonomy-supporting teaching is preceded by empathic perspective taking. The methods of autonomy-supporting teaching include asking students what they want; considering students’ opinions, preferences, and interests; and communicating perspective-taking. Therefore, this study proposed that leaders who take perspective of employees are likely to value employees’ autonomy needs in the hybrid workplace, and further enhance employees’ psychological empowerment.

H2 Leader’s perspective taking is positively associated with employees’ psychological empowerment.

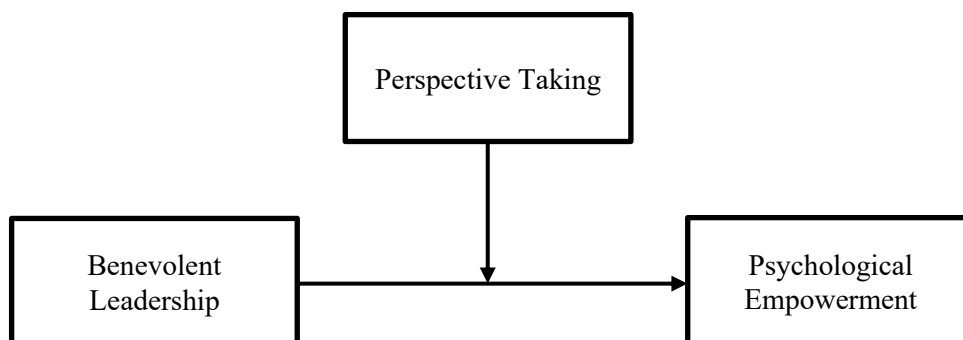
The Moderating Role of Perspective Taking

Apart from that, the best managers are also expected to adopt more complex cognitive thinking (Fisher and Torbet, 1991) and be able to see from different angles rather than a single perspective (Weick, 2006). Benevolent leaders demonstrate their concerns by actively listening and showing respect to their employees (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016), which encourages their employees to unreservedly convey their views and considerations (Wu et al., 2012). Perspective taking may be one of the key elements to fulfill a benevolent leader's role as a helping spirit. In the leader development process, perspective taking allows leaders to realise the urge of change in their behaviours (Mason et al., 2014). Leaders learn to make "ongoing corrective adjustments" along the way in the development process by perceiving whether followers' emotional and behavioural factors are contributing to the desired outcomes (Mason et al., 2014). Therefore, benevolent leaders with the skill of taking others' perspectives may be more precise in empowering their employees. Employees' sensitivity in perceiving the reception of empowerment may also be higher due to the hit-on-target fulfilment of their desires. This study hypothesised that perspective taking can strengthen the relationship between benevolent leadership and psychological empowerment.

H3 Leader's perspective taking moderates the positive relationship between benevolent leadership and employees' psychological empowerment.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study. Benevolent leadership is proposed as the means of enhancing psychological empowerment by recognising and respecting employees' needs in a flexible work model. The ability of perspective taking allows leaders to understand the autonomy needs of the hybrid workforce, and therefore contribute to higher employees' psychological empowerment. The more the benevolent leaders take the employees' perspective, the more likely to affect the relationship between benevolent leadership and psychological empowerment positively.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Methodology

Sample and Procedures

The data was collected via a survey method from banking employees in Malaysia who are working in a hybrid manner in different departments and holding positions from different management levels. The survey questionnaires only required employees to rate their leaders' behaviours and their own empowerment. Therefore, a judgemental sampling method was applied to include only the employees who have been working under the same leader for over a year were selected as participants of this research. This is to ensure that the employees have sufficient understanding of their leaders' leadership styles. The construct items were pre-tested by 6 professionals with 4.5 to 30 years of banking experience in Malaysia and 5 academicians with finance, management, organisational behaviours, research methodology, and quantitative analysis backgrounds from both public and private Malaysian universities. The purpose of re-testing is to ensure the relevance of this questionnaire in the banking industry and that the items are all comprehensible. An additional note was added for the unfamiliar word "arduous" in item 8 under the construct of benevolent leadership based on the feedback. There were 299 usable responses collected out of the 349 questionnaires distributed to reachable and available banking employees, after excluding those who had worked less than a year with the same supervisor and the outliers. There are up to 69.9% of the respondents ($n=209$) fall within the age range of 31-40 years old. The distribution of gender is somewhat balanced, with 48.5% ($n=145$) being males and 51.5% ($n=154$) being females. The education level of respondents ranges from Diploma/Certificate to Doctoral degree, with most of them (75.6%, $n=226$) holding a Bachelor's degree. There are 75.3% of them ($n=225$) have a job tenure of more than 10 years. The respondents mainly hold the positions of specialist/executive/associate (21.7%, $n=65$), assistant manager/deputy manager (50.2%, $n=150$), and manager (24.4%, $n=73$).

Measures

This study adopted measurement instruments with seven-point Likert scales, starting from "Strongly disagree" with a score of 1 to "Strongly agree" with a score of 7. The benevolent leadership's 11-item scale ($\alpha=0.895$) from (Cheng et al., 2000) was utilised to measure benevolent leadership behaviours of the respondents' leaders. The sample items are "Beyond work relations, my leader expresses concern about my daily life" and "My leader takes good care of my family members as well". The leaders' perspective taking was assessed by the banking employees with Parker and Axtell's (2001) 6-item scale with two dimensions of empathy ($\alpha=0.78$) and positive attribution ($\alpha=0.71$). The sample items are "My leader understands the problem his/her employees experience" for empathy and "My leader understands that the employees are doing the best they can, given the circumstances" for positive attribution. Psychological empowerment of employees was determined by using Spreitzer's (1995) 12-item scale ($\alpha=0.894$) with four dimensions, namely, meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. The sample items are "The work I do is meaningful to me" for meaning; "I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities" for competence; "I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job" for self-determination; and "I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department" for impact.

Statistical Methods

The hypothesis testing was conducted using the method of structural equation modelling (SEM) with a partial least squares technique software - SmartPLS 4.0. The partial least squares method was widely adopted in quantitative research with latent variables (Low et al., 2022; Kurniawanti *et al.*, 2023) related to social sciences such as business management and human resource management (Hair et al., 2012; Ringle et al., 2020). This method is relevant for studies with weak theoretical foundations (Masrizal et al., 2023) as it allows analysing models involving generalising relationships between multiple independent variables and a dependent variable across a population without normal distribution of data (Lacap et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2022; Ringle et al., 2020). A disjoint two-stage approach was used to analyse the model, which includes the measurement model and structural model analysis. The values of loading, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) were generated in the measurement model to ensure the internal consistency and convergent validity of the data. To evaluate the discriminant validity of the constructs, (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) criterion and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio analysis were conducted in the measurement model too. The relationships between benevolent leadership and psychological empowerment, and the moderating effect of perspective taking, are assessed through a structural model, with 10,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Results

A full collinearity test was adopted by validating the values of the variance inflation factor (VIF) of the inner model to scrutinise common method bias (Kock, 2015; Memon et al., 2023). The VIF values of predictor constructs were found to be lower than the acceptable threshold value of 5 (Hair et al., 2022), ranging from 1.103 to 1.250. Therefore, the common method bias is not a significant concern in this study. To assess the internal consistency and convergent validity of the model, the first-order measurement model, which includes the lower-order constructs (e.g., benevolent leadership, empathy, positive attribution, meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact), was administered to generate the results for confirmatory factor analysis. Item 6 (PT6) under the construct of perspective taking and item 12 (PE12) of psychological empowerment were removed to achieve an AVE value of above 0.50. PT 6 is “My leader understands that the employees work just as hard as he/she does,” under the dimension of positive attribution. There is uncertainty for employees to find out whether their leaders perceive their work as on par with his or her own, as this question may be rarely discussed openly. PE12 is “I have significant influence over what happens in my department,” under the dimension of impact. The degree of “significance” might lack clarity in indicating the extent of influence the employees are having on their department. Table 1 illustrates that both the values of CR and AVE are above the recommended values of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively, after the deletion of items. This outcome indicates that the internal consistency and convergent validity are satisfied.

Table 1: First-order reflective measurement model

Constructs	Dimensions	Indicators	Loadings λ	CR	AVE
Benevolent Leadership		BL1	0.721	0.950	0.636
		BL2	0.845		
		BL3	0.819		
		BL4	0.689		
		BL5	0.841		
		BL6	0.822		
		BL7	0.785		
		BL8	0.841		
		BL9	0.832		
		BL10	0.713		
		BL11	0.844		
Perspective Taking	Empathy	PT1	0.729	0.753	0.504
		PT2	0.751		
		PT3	0.646		
Psychological Empowerment	Positive Attribution	PT4	0.836	0.766	0.622
		PT5	0.737		
	Meaning	PE1	0.857	0.900	0.751
		PE2	0.871		
		PE3	0.871		
	Competence	PE4	0.887	0.898	0.746
		PE5	0.873		
		PE6	0.829		
	Self-Determination	PE7	0.857	0.897	0.744
		PE8	0.840		
		PE9	0.890		
	Impact	PE10	0.774	0.810	0.682
		PE11	0.875		

Table 2 shows the values of the HTMT ratio analysis. To achieve the discriminant validity, the ratio of correlation must be below 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 2 shows that all the HTMT values ranged from 0.142 to 0.719, which are below the acceptable threshold of 0.90. Therefore, the first-order measurement model has achieved the discriminant validity.

Table 2: Discriminant validity (HTMT criterion)

Constructs	Benevolent Leadership	Empathy	Positive Attribution	Meaning	Competence	Self-Determination	Impact
Benevolent Leadership							
Empathy	0.292						
Positive Attribution	0.198	0.390					

Constructs	Benevolent Leadership	Empathy	Positive Attribution	Meaning	Competence	Self-Determination	Impact
Meaning	0.210	0.393	0.281				
Competence	0.142	0.346	0.278	0.535			
Self-Determination	0.209	0.404	0.276	0.719	0.514		
Impact	0.402	0.316	0.399	0.335	0.354	0.423	

The result of the second-order measurement model is illustrated in Table 3. The VIF values for the latent variables are below the satisfactory level of 5.0 (Hair et al., 2022), which signifies that there is no potential collinearity issue. The convergent validity is measured by assessing the path coefficient between the formative construct and the global item, which is also known as redundancy analysis. The result shows the coefficient values for perspective taking and psychological empowerment are near and above the acceptance threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022), which indicates the formative construct explains at least half of the criterion construct's variance. The values of outer weight are all significant (p -values < 0.05), which denotes that all the indicators significantly contribute to the formative constructs.

Table 3: Second-order formative measurement model

Constructs	Indicators	Redundancy Analysis	VIF	Outer Weight	p-value
Perspective Taking	Empathy	0.694	1.217	0.618	0.000
	Positive Attribution		1.217	0.567	0.000
Psychological Empowerment	Meaning	0.822	2.243	0.324	0.000
	Competence		1.517	0.287	0.000
	Self-Determination		2.311	0.320	0.000
	Impact		1.259	0.351	0.000

Note: VIF – variance inflation factor

Table 4 demonstrates the results of the model explanatory power, which includes the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size of the coefficient of determination (f), and predictive relevance (Q^2). The endogenous variable, psychological empowerment, has an R^2 value of 0.326. It means the exogenous variables (benevolent leadership and

perspective taking) predict 32.6% of the variance of psychological empowerment, and the explanatory power is moderately weak (Hair *et al.*, 2011). However, due to the uncertain nature of human behaviours in social sciences, R^2 values between 0.10 to 0.30 are deemed acceptable as long as they are statistically significant, since the purpose of social science studies is to discover the significant effect of independent variables on the dependent variables but not to fully predict human behaviours (Gupta *et al.*, 2024; Ozili, 2023). The weaker R^2 may also indicate there is other possible explanatory power that is not included in this study, which can be examined in the future (Ozili, 2023). The value of Q^2 for the endogenous construct is 0.306. A Q^2 value of greater than 0 suggests that the exogenous construct of this study has predictive power over the endogenous constructs, and it can be interpreted that there is predictive relevance and validity of this model. The effect sizes for benevolent leadership and perspective taking are 0.032 and 0.314, respectively, which indicate a small and medium effect (Cohen, 1988). Thus, perspective taking has a stronger effect in explaining psychological empowerment than benevolent leadership.

Table 4: Assessment of structural model (R^2 , Q^2 , f^2)

Predictor(s)	Outcome	R^2	Q^2	f^2
BL	PE	0.326	0.306	0.032
PT				0.314

Note: *BL = benevolent leadership; PT = perspective taking; PE = psychological empowerment

Table 5: Hypotheses test

Hypothesis	Standard Beta	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	Result
(H1) BL → PE	0.155	0.051	3.056	0.001	Supported
(H2) PT → PE	0.483	0.048	9.978	0.000	Supported
(H3) (PT*BL) → PE	0.104	0.043	2.424	0.008	Supported

Note: *BL = benevolent leadership; PT = perspective taking; PE = psychological empowerment

The results of hypothesis testing using PLS bootstrap algorithms are shown in Table 5. The results revealed that both benevolent leadership and perspective taking have a significant and positive relationship with psychological empowerment. Benevolent leadership affects psychological empowerment with $\beta = 0.155$, $t = 3.056$, $p = 0.001$; and perspective taking influences psychological empowerment with $\beta = 0.483$, $t = 9.978$, $p = 0.000$. Therefore, both H1 and H2 are supported. H3 assessed the moderating effect of perspective taking on the relationship between benevolent leadership and psychological empowerment. The result shows a significant moderating effect of perspective taking with a positive beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.104$, $t = 2.424$, $p = 0.008$), which indicates that an increase in perspective taking will strengthen the relationship between benevolent leadership and psychological empowerment. A slope analysis is conducted to visualise the changes in the strength of this relationship. Figure 2 illustrates that the steepness of the gradient explains that the relationship between benevolent leadership and psychological empowerment is strengthened with an increase in perspective taking.

Figure 2: Slope analysis

Discussion

This study intends to evaluate the effectiveness of benevolent leadership, which emphasises holistic and personalised care extended beyond the working context in enhancing the psychological empowerment of the hybrid workforce in the banking industry in Malaysia. To achieve the research objectives of this study, structural equation modelling is utilised by adopting the partial least squares method to validate the proposed hypotheses. The findings provide supportive evidence that both benevolent behaviours and perspective taking of leaders are indeed encouraging employees' empowerment psychologically. By allowing more flexibility and control over their job when working remotely, productivity is elevated. A proliferation in perspective taking is also found to significantly amplify the effect of benevolent behaviours in enhancing psychological empowerment. While there is a concern of privacy intrusion when leaders' attention crosses the boundary to personal life (Lin et al., 2018), a benevolent leader with perspective taking skill may also accurately capture employees' fundamental needs, including the privacy expected.

These findings are consistent with self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000). SDT asserted that when competence, autonomy, and relatedness are satisfied, self-motivation and mental health of employees will be improved (Ryan and Deci, 2000). On the contrary, the motivation and well-being of employees diminished if these are not satisfied (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Scholars suggested that benevolent leaders support the self-determination of followers by facilitating the autonomy of employees (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016). Benevolent leaders regard employees' well-being by providing holistic care (Farh and Cheng, 2000). The effect on employees' psychological well-being has also been proven empirically (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016). These arguments aligned with the significant and positive relationship between benevolent

leadership and psychological empowerment found in this study, as self-determination and autonomy are the perceived components of psychological empowerment. Hence, this study provides empirical evidence to expand the body of knowledge of SDT by exploring the actionable provision of benevolent leaders in contributing to the well-being of employees through acknowledging employees' need for autonomy. The results further consolidated Ryan and Deci's (2000) approaches in evaluating SDT: 1) how people assimilate social values and extrinsic factors and transform them into personal values and self-motivators; and 2) the impact of psychological need fulfilment on health and well-being. The "social values" offered by benevolent leaders based on employees' needs for autonomy are transformed into perceived empowerment, and this fulfilment of psychological needs enhances the well-being of employees.

The banking industry, which has a longstanding practice of imposing stringent rules regulating daily operations, has probably aroused the yearning for more control on the job. The emergence of a hybrid workplace further deepens the desire for autonomy and substantially impedes a close monitoring management style in the traditional workplace. Empowerment may already become inevitable in facilitating banking processes more efficiently in a remote workplace. To enable empowerment, a fine-tuned leadership style is imperative to cope with the modern workplace demands. Evidently, the results of this study support this viewpoint with empirical evidence showing that benevolent leadership does enhance psychological empowerment of employees, with perspective taking as a moderating role. Banking employees are expected to appreciate a considerate, compassionate, and supportive leader who deliberates their needs not only in the pre-pandemic conventional work setting, but even more in the new normal. Just like any other industry, past studies consistently put forward that the right leadership and management style will enhance company performance over time (Cham and Easvaralingam, 2012; Tan et al., 2019; Rafiq et al., 2024). As today's workplace operates in spaces with fluid integration of professional and personal lives, benevolent leaders' emphasis on both working and personal well-being is pertinent in this instance. However, the effectiveness of benevolent leadership can be boosted with the assistance of perspective taking skills to precisely and concretely address the contemporary needs of the hybrid workforce.

This study faces limitations due to its static and cross-sectional nature, which inhibits causal interpretation. The understanding of the sustainability effect of benevolent leadership towards psychological empowerment and how the moderating role of perspective taking evolves remains unexplored. The need for autonomy is neither universal nor persistent across the life span, and demonstrates uniform demeanour in different cultures. A longitudinal study can be conducted to provide more time series data. Quantitative analysis has narrow interpretative power in capturing nuanced perspectives and stretches out underlying motivations or resistance. For instance, the possibility of unintended consequences of excessive concern provided by benevolent leaders; the industry-specific suitability and ethical considerations of empowerment provided to employees; and the cultural conditions in practicing perspective taking. A qualitative approach can be adopted in future studies to provide comprehensive insights into understanding these unique and complex phenomena. This study examined particularly for the effects of benevolent leadership and perspective taking on psychological empowerment of the Malaysian banking industry. Future research may include other leadership styles that also focus on employee needs (e.g., servant leadership or adaptive leadership), other moderators performed by employees (e.g.,

individual traits, trust, team cohesion, etc.), or demographic factors (e.g., gender or cultural background), or other needs of the hybrid workforce as the dependent variables (e.g., social connection, performance recognition, self-management, etc.).

Practical Implications for Asian Business

Individuals are likely to express their competence, autonomy, and relatedness distinctively in a culture that encompasses a diversity of values (Ryan and Deci, 2000). It tends to be influenced by the ambient demands, obstacles, and affordances in the respective sociocultural background (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Asian leadership culture values collectivism, respect for hierarchy, power structures, and relationships (Arun and Kahraman Gedik, 2022; Chuah, 2024). These cultural components hinder empowerment by implicitly shaping employees into compliant individuals who perceive adhering to instructions and order as natural. This is prominent in the banking industry due to its highly regulated nature, which inadvertently results in detrimental effects such as stress and high turnover in the industry. The new leadership demand triggered by global changes in the working mode of the current workplace may resolve these unfavourable organisational outcomes in a single effort. By addressing the actual demands of a hybrid workforce, benevolent leaders with perspective taking skills initiate flattening of these hierarchies and transform Asian leadership into an empathetic and empowering actions. Accentuation on responding to newly arisen needs allows improvement in Asian employees' retention, which is essential to survive in the competitive labour market and secure long-term success, specifically in fast-growing Asian economies.

Benevolent leadership originates from one of the components of paternalistic leadership. It is a parent-child approach leadership style which is commonly practiced by Chinese family businesses (Cheng et al., 2004). It was developed based on the Confucius philosophy that expounds a synergistic fusion of disciplined mandate, fatherly benevolence, and moral integrity (Niu et al., 2009). Recent studies have gradually narrowed down the focus to only benevolent leadership as an independent leadership style (Chhabra and Pandey, 2023; Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016; Wang and Cheng, 2010; Ye et al., 2024) due to its pragmatic and favourable outcomes. To date, most of the studies regarding benevolent leadership remain from the Chinese context due to its deep alignment with Confucian teachings that are interwoven with Chinese societal values (Niu et al., 2009; Wang and Cheng, 2010). However, evidence shows that the Eastern societies outside of Mainland China are also impacted by Confucianism. Scholars found that Asian countries such as Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea have inherited Confucian orthodoxy to a certain extent (Wang and Hong, 2009). This study was conducted in Malaysia, a multicultural country with several major ethnicities, including Malaysian Chinese. The influence of benevolent leadership that carries the legacy of Confucianism in such a diverse background was explored. Showcasing the capacity in navigating leadership for the Asian workforce may facilitate the sustainability of businesses and outshine in the global market. Thereupon, this study provides insights for organisations that capitalise hybrid model, especially multinationals running operations across territories, to incorporate Asian societal values when tailoring the regional management policies. Confucius' teachings advocated that dyadic interactions build the underpinnings for blossoming a harmonious and benevolent world (Yang et al., 2008). Benevolent

leadership includes the emphasis on mutual social relations as part of leaders' duty (Wang and Cheng, 2010). There is consistency between Confucian philosophy and the theory of benevolent leadership. Benevolent leaders who understand the importance of interpersonal dynamics tend to create harmony for the overall well-being of employees, which eventually brings about a nurturing environment that stimulates employees' growth and loyalty. As Malaysian workers also found to be attaching importance to workplace interpersonal relations (Ayupp and Kong, 2010), this study has proven the effectiveness of benevolent leadership in a multicultural hybrid workplace to elevate employees' psychological empowerment.

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