

# Act Expediently, with Autonomy: Vicarious Learning, Empowered Behaviors, and Performance

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## Abstract

**Purpose** The purpose of this research is to investigate how organizations can best facilitate an empowered workforce that makes autonomous decisions and acts expediently, which the literature on high performing organizations posits will increase the likelihood of sustained performance and retaining competitive advantages. We introduce a novel mechanism for encouraging such behaviors and pursuant outcomes: vicarious learning from a supervisor who demonstrates autonomy and expediency. **Design/Methodology/Approach** We drew experimental data from a sample of participants who underwent a managerial simulation, and used these data to investigate relationships between the vicarious learning of empowered behaviors and individual task performance ( $n = 100$ ). **Findings** Results indicate that when supervisors behave with autonomy and expediency this both increases the extent to which individuals behave similarly, and is associated with enhanced individual performance. Further, we

find that expedient behavior fully mediates the relationship between empowered supervisor behavior and performance. **Implications** Findings show that supervisors need not necessarily engage directly in empowering others. Rather, by modeling behaviors, supervisors can craft a context where employees may act with autonomy and efficiency. This provides an opportunity for empowerment that is both actionable and cost-effective.

**Originality/Value** This is the first study to consider empowerment as a managerial phenomenon that can be vicariously learned, integrating theories of social learning and empowerment, and extending existing empowerment constructs (including psychological and structural) to develop an indirect, yet potent means of encouraging empowered behavior.

**Keywords** Employee empowerment · High-performance organizations · Performance · Social learning theory

## Introduction

Organizations that make more effective use of human capital are more likely to survive and thrive (Godard 2010; Jin et al. 2010; Lawler 1996). To keep up with the demands of increasingly fast-paced, global, and unpredictable industry and economic environments, organizational scholars have identified the importance of a workforce that acts with autonomy and expediency (e.g., Bartunek and Spreitzer 2006; Gibson et al. 2007; O'Toole and Lawler 2006; Worley and Lawler 2010). Autonomous action, or having the latitude to make decisions without first seeking approval of others, has been associated with enhanced performance (Cohen and Ledford 1994; Cordery et al. 1991), particularly when knowledge is scarce or tasks

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uncertain (Haas 2010). Acting expediently, or refraining from hesitation when making decisions (Diefendorff et al. 2006), has been associated with greater goal attainment, increased productivity, and enhanced performance (Atuahene-Gima 2003) particularly in highly competitive contexts (Perlow et al. 2002). These behaviors ensure opportunities are taken advantage of by those employees who may be the most well-positioned to recognize the opportunity for performance improvements: those who have direct contact with daily operations and processes (Worley and Lawler 2010).

Acting autonomously and expediently so as to increase performance is only possible when an employee has the power and authority to do so. Employees with limited power are unable to make decisions on their own, which can then delay action. For example, an employee who lacks power may be focused and cooperative, but may be unable to make decisions on setting a team's direction without first checking with a supervisor. An employee who has not been empowered by a supervisor may be respectful and courteous to customers, but may not have the ability to solve a customer's problems on the spot without higher level approval. It is only when power has been shared that acting autonomously and expediently are made possible. Hence, autonomous and expedient actions provide clear evidence that power sharing (or empowerment) has occurred.

Research examining what organizations can do to encourage employees to act autonomously and expediently describes a range of approaches under the broad rubric of empowerment. Unfortunately, whether targeting practices such as employee involvement, the climate in a workplace, or psychological feelings of being empowered, the literature we review in this paper indicates limitations and drawbacks associated with each approach, and varying degrees of success in encouraging the empowered behaviors (EBs) of autonomy and expediency. Additionally, such literature typically measures the execution of practices, rather than whether or not such practices are effective as intended—which may be an erroneous assumption of the empowering of high-performance work systems (Liao et al. 2009).

In this study, we address the question of whether there are other unexplored mechanisms for encouraging EB. In doing so, we extend prior research in three ways. First, we focus on the specific EBs of making autonomous decisions and acting expediently, and how they relate to individual performance: a behavioral focus that is missing in the existing literature. Second, we theorize a novel mechanism for how these behaviors take root. Applying social learning theory, we explain that by observing one's supervisor engaging in these behaviors, through vicarious learning and modeling mechanisms, a focal employee may pursuantly model autonomy and expediency. Finally, we show that

engaging in these behaviors after observing one's supervisor results in performance increases above and beyond those realized through empowerment climate and psychological empowerment. As such, we contribute a low-cost means of proliferating EBs that can help to ensure competitive and sustainable organizations to both theory and managerial toolkits.

We begin by reviewing the extant literature on empowerment, and then explain how social learning theory provides novel insight into mechanisms for increasing EBs. We then propose hypotheses that capture these relationships. Next, we test our hypotheses in presenting results of an experimental study. We conclude with a discussion of the contribution of these findings, study limitations, and suggestions for application to practice.

## Literature Review

### Approaches to Empowerment

Four approaches to empowerment can be identified in the literature. First, structural empowerment (Chen et al. 2007a; Mathieu et al. 2006), also referred to as relational empowerment (Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan 1998; Srivastava et al. 2006), considers empowerment to be a structural property of an organization evidenced by management practices (Lawler 1989). This approach traditionally measures empowerment from the perspective of the managerial constituency doing the empowering, typically with a single item asking a participant whether or not they have introduced an empowering management practice (Gibson et al. 2007). Those focused on systems and practices have found that participative management (Godard 2010), empowerment-enhancing human resources (Gardner et al. 2011), and information-sharing campaigns (Gibson et al. 2007) are associated with positive outcomes in firms, including firm-level performance (Becker and Huselid 1998; Huselid 1995; Huselid and Becker 1996; MacDuffie 1995; Staw and Epstein 2000). Second, other research has associated empowerment climate (defined as shared perceptions of empowering organizational structures, policies, and practices) with enhanced performance (Chen et al. 2007a, b; Seibert et al. 2004), satisfaction (Laschinger et al. 2004), and employee engagement (Mone et al. 2011). Third, empowering leadership research focuses on leaders' direct and intentional interactions with their subordinates, and their proactive efforts to formally give power to their subordinates (Chen et al. 2007b; Srivastava et al. 2006). Finally, a fourth stream of research has found psychological empowerment (Maynard et al. 2012; Spreitzer 1995), defined as a psychological state consisting of four experiences: meaning, competence, self-determination, and

impact, to predict individual job performance (Ahearne et al. 2005; Arnold et al. 2000; Liden et al. 2000; Zhang and Bartol 2010), organizational commitment (Kraimer et al. 1999), customer orientation, and job satisfaction (Carless 2004; Hui et al. 2004; Seibert et al. 2011).

Despite these promising findings, research has also identified undesirable associations and implementation challenges with these aforementioned approaches. Empowering practices can be labor intensive, are risky to implement due to the unknown factor of how employees will react to such practices, and are often expensive. For example, Cappelli and Neumark (2001) found that employee involvement in decision making (often serving as a proxy for empowerment) actually raised labor costs per employee. Psychological perceptions of empowerment may exist, but may not improve performance. For example, Staw and Epstein (2000) found that empowerment-related human resources practices did not affect firm performance (although firms that implemented them were rated higher in management quality). Finally, empowerment can fail if managers empower only in principal, but not in action. For example, it is necessary for managers to relinquish control over employees' daily activities, and provide adequate resources to employees so that empowering does not just mean shifting a burden of responsibility (O'Toole and Lawler 2006; Spreitzer and Doneson 2005). This mirrors theorizing by Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan (1998), who concluded that there can be risks involved in the overuse of symbolic gestures, as they are symbolic and not substantive empowerment. Such emblematic delegation of authority, without access to requisite information and resources, can result in worker exploitation.

Focusing on the specific EBs that employees demonstrate, and the outcomes they achieve through these behaviors, is a novel approach in the empowerment literature. We argue that understandings of empowerment may differ if, instead of asking whether a practice exists or how respondents feel, we instead measure what they do. Is the employee acting in such a way that indicates power has been shared? The link between employee behavior and outcomes has been implicitly assumed, but infrequently tested in the empowerment literature, despite Conger and Kanungo's call to "investigate and test the effect empowerment has on specific behaviors," (1988, p. 480). Instead, the literature is characterized by a tendency to measure the existence of work practices (e.g., a single leader or human resources director reports if practices are implemented) or how an employee feels (e.g., to what extent does one experience meaning or competence), without measuring the specific employee behaviors that are assumed to have resulted from such practices or psychological states. Indeed, Gibson et al. (2007) argued this is the most critical next step in understanding what organizations can do to

encourage EBs. We believe that employee empowered *behavior* is paramount in the transfer of power, as it is key to the germination of empowerment.

### Social Learning Theory

To address these inconclusive findings and identified challenges, we apply social learning theory (Bandura 2001) to develop a novel means of encouraging EB. Vicarious learning, also referred to as vicarious experience (Bandura 2001; Bresman 2010) and modeling (Manz and Sims 1981), occurs as a focal individual comes to understand how specific actions and their consequences are construed. Information gained about the experience of others is applied to one's own future behavioral decisions (Manz and Sims 1981) as generalized perceptions of coping capabilities in similar situations are formed (Bandura 2001), sometimes even overriding the impact of direct experience (Bandura 1997). Applying social learning theory to empowerment, it may be that employees will demonstrate EB following the observation of someone else behaving in a way that indicates power has been shared with them. That is, an employee who observes a supervisor demonstrating autonomous and expedient behavior may then learn from such behavior, and pursuantly engage in such behaviors him or herself.

Importantly, this approach to encouraging EB may be less risky, costly, and time-consuming to implement than more traditional empowerment practices (such as fostering feelings of psychological empowerment) or empowering leadership behavior (which is directed specifically at coaching or mentoring subordinates, and entails substantive resource use). That is, even if employees are not the direct recipient of an empowerment program or intense coaching, they can vicariously learn by observing their supervisor engaging in autonomous and expedient behavior. This type of learning may occur in a situation as quotidian as informally observing one's supervisor in his or her daily work routine or communications with others.

Engaging in EBs through vicarious learning is distinct from extant forms of empowerment. While psychological empowerment affects one's feelings and perceptions (Spreitzer 1995), empowerment climate operates at a collective level (e.g., considering an entire group, unit, or organization of employees), and empowering leadership focuses on how leaders directly empower their subordinates, vicarious learning of EB occurs indirectly, more subtly, and is indicated by individual behaviors. Vicarious learning of EB thus represents a novel approach to the phenomenon of empowerment, helping to paint a more complete picture of the mosaic of different ways that such behavior can be encouraged.

## Vicarious Learning and Empowered Behaviors

Vicarious learning involves indirect, implicit, and implied normative influences. Norms reinforce the shared values and expected behaviors of group members (Homans 1950), and are among the “least visible and most powerful forms of social control over human action” (Bettenhausen and Murnighan 1985, p. 350). In fact, in discussing how norms are established, some scholars have argued that behavioral modeling tends to be the most effective route, since it provides evidence of an enacted pattern of behavior that differs from prior shared understandings (Cialdini 2003). Feldman and Khademian (2003, p. 348), in their development of a model of how empowerment can foster the cascading of employee vitality through organizations, referred to employee empowerment in saying that “it makes sense that some employees would replicate the example among people with whom they interact and have the ability to empower.” Employees look to see what others are doing, rather than what official policy might dictate, in order to determine normative behaviors. Considerable research has demonstrated how people easily mirror the actions, attitudes, and emotional states exhibited by observed models, such that this observation can provide an even more potent influence on behavior than explicit instructions (Davis and Luthans 1980).

Individuals in supervisory positions are likely to play an important role in this indirect and implicit process, yet their role may not be the intentional and direct granting of power that has been described in the past. Homans (1950) claimed that norms for social behavior, or the general expectations of what is acceptable for participants in a social system, are established through the behavior of those higher in the hierarchy. Bandura (2001) argued that behavior that is modeled by someone with admired characteristics (such as a supervisor), is seen as not only possible, but also desirable. The behaviors of a senior supervisor have been found to have a stronger influence on subordinate ethical behavior than the influence of peer behavior (Arlow and Ulrich 1988; Vitell and Festervand 1987). Likewise, Chen et al. (2007b) have found evidence that supervisors have the greatest impact on empowerment climate. Clearly, supervisors have an important influence on how employees choose to behave. However, we distinguish our approach from prior empowerment literature in that we do not presume qualities of a leader in all supervisor-subordinate relationships, but rather, focus on the role that supervisors play in modeling specific behaviors that shape social norms.

Based on this evidence, we argue that vicarious learning is likely to transpire when a focal employee observes a supervisor making decisions autonomously and acting expediently. As a result of this vicarious learning, the focal

employee is likely to behave in ways similar to their observations, making autonomous decisions and acting expediently themselves—even though the focal employee was not personally the direct target of a structural or practice-based empowerment intervention, and even if the supervisor does not directly coach or encourage the employee so as to invoke feelings of psychological empowerment. This is a different mechanism for the transfer of power among employees than has been theorized in the prior literature. Specifically, the process of vicarious learning is distinct from empowering leader behavior, empowerment practices, or empowerment climate. This is because each of these other concepts captures an explicit and direct approach, where a supervisor engages in specific and targeted initiatives toward a focal employee or employees, with the intent of directly changing employee behavior.

Our focus is different. We suspect that employees may also be influenced in much more implicit and indirect ways, simply by observing the autonomous and expedient behavior of others. When a supervisor acts autonomously and expediently, this facilitates the transmission of social norms as the standards of conduct for particular environments (Bandura 2001). When supervisors act autonomously and expediently themselves, this provides environmental cues to an observer about what is considered to be acceptable behavior, shaping future behavioral decisions (Labianca et al. 2000; McClelland 1975). Importantly, this may occur even when the transmission of observation to actual behavior is automatic or non-conscious (Carver et al. 1983). That is, observation of a supervisor’s behavior will prime a focal individual to engage in similar behaviors.

First, autonomy is a sense of having choice in actions and decisions (Bell and Staw 1989) about one’s own work activities independent from managerial control, such as work methods or pace (Lawler 1989). An employee who observes a supervisor demonstrating the power to act with autonomy—making one’s own decisions, not seeking approval from upper management, and working without the limits of overly cumbersome bureaucratic controls—is more likely to make autonomous decisions and take independent action themselves, as this behavior is considered normative. Autonomous action may result from practices such as participative decision making and employee involvement (Black and Gregersen 1997; Latham et al. 1994) but is not synonymous with these practices, because autonomous behavior encompasses more than just decision making or the provision of suggestions and advice to management. Rather, autonomy can occur in nearly any action that an employee might engage in without managerial control, including those involved in core work and task accomplishment. Examples could include creatively

responding to a customer request to enhance the quality of service, making a critical change to a technical protocol based on situational circumstances, or developing a cost saving solution an administrative problem.

The second EB—acting with expediency—may also be emulated through vicarious learning. Observing quick, decisive action on the part of a supervisor communicates a sense of urgency and priority, and can be energizing (Kessler and Chakrabarti 1996), which is then likely to result in focal employees acting expediently. Competing on the basis of timeliness is becoming more and more critical as employees, customers, and consumers’ lives become more complex and time is an even more precious resource. Expediency may be all the more critical for frontline employees to take such approaches in how they perform their jobs, since they may need to address the diverse and dynamic needs of customers in tight timelines. This may be particularly crucial in service environments, where the quality of a customer experience can depend ultimately upon managerial systems that allow for timely response (Bowen and Ford 2002).

Focusing on the vicarious learning of the individual EBs of acting autonomously and expediently, which have been cited (but not empirically tested) (Gibson et al. 2007; O’Toole and Lawler 2006; Spreitzer and Doneson 2005), we hypothesize (Fig. 1):

**Hypothesis 1** A supervisor’s autonomous and expedient behavior is positively and significantly related to the extent to which the focal employee (a) makes autonomous decisions and (b) acts expediently.

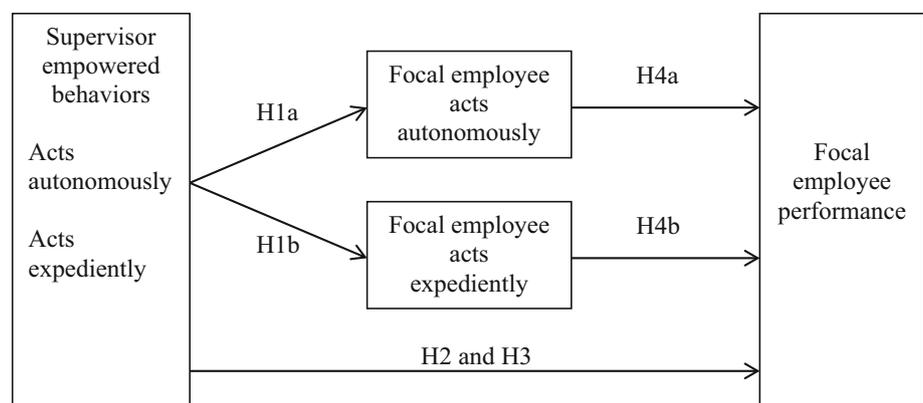
Autonomous and expedient behaviors, in turn, are likely to subsequently increase individual work performance. With autonomy, employees avoid having to sift through organizational levels and maneuver within a hierarchy (Lawler 1989). Autonomy enhances an employee’s performance because of the ability to act and react with

flexibility, to act with initiative, to be proactive, and reduces costs of supervision (Birdi et al. 2008). Additionally, acting with autonomy allows employees to grow and develop through the trials and errors of decisions (Leach et al. 2003), providing them with developmental opportunities as they engage in experiences over time. Autonomy facilitates employees’ ability to be proactive, to identify and act on opportunities, to display initiative, and to persevere through challenges (Crant 2000). For example, an employee who makes autonomous decisions may better respond to the specific needs of a customer, based on personal knowledge of that customer, rather than what policy dictates. Acting with autonomy, employees can make choices best suited to accomplish their objectives (Chung and Schneider 2002).

Expediency allows for an employee to take advantage of spontaneous and potentially time-limited options for acting upon or improving service or processes. An employee who does not have to wait for permission can satisfy customer objectives faster, likely providing better customer service (Lawler 1989). Customers or colleagues internal to the organization, who themselves have windows of opportunity they hope to take advantage of, appreciate quick replies and responsiveness, and time-based competition is an identified way of increasing profits and market share (Lawler 1996), while simultaneously containing costs and market risk (Page 1993). Our findings suggest that an employee is likely to act expediently and realize performance gains when he or she vicariously learns that it is normative to do so and by mirroring a supervisor who displays such behavior.

Importantly, we argue that these effects are likely to occur even when accounting for employee’s perceptions of empowerment climate and psychological empowerment. This is because vicarious learning effects operate under different mechanisms than the climate or psychological state of empowerment. Empowerment climate has been

**Fig. 1** Model of empowered behavior and relationships tested



theorized to operate through its effects on psychological empowerment; that is, when employees collectively develop a shared sense of feeling psychologically empowered (such as feeling increased meaning or competence), this constitutes empowerment climate (Seibert et al. 2004), and results in increased effort and performance. In contrast, vicarious learning of EBs results from observation of others, which then leads to mirroring normative behaviors. Hence, we would suggest that the latter provides performance benefits, over and above an individual employee reporting feelings of empowerment, or that a shared climate of empowerment exists. Thus, we hypothesize

**Hypothesis 2** A supervisor's autonomous and expedient behavior is positively related to a focal employee's individual performance.

**Hypothesis 3** A supervisor's autonomous and expedient behavior is positively related to a focal employee's individual performance, even after accounting for variance due to psychological empowerment or perceptions of empowerment climate.

Finally, we argue that it is when observation of a supervisor results in a target employee exhibiting autonomous and expedient behavior that individual work performance is elevated. Mere observation, without acting upon the learned behaviors, is not sufficient to realize performance benefits. This is an important way in which our research extends beyond traditional research models, where behaviors are implied mechanisms that are not empirically tested. We propose that it is the employee's making of autonomous decisions and acting expediently that account for the relationship between exposure to the supervisor, and performance. It is the behavioral translation of the exposure, by the focal employee, that results in performance gains, rather than just simply the exposure itself.

**Hypothesis 4** The relationship between a supervisor's autonomous and expedient behavior, and performance, is mediated by the extent to which the target employee (a) makes autonomous decisions and (b) acts expediently.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

To test these hypotheses, we designed an experiment that simulated the managerial compensation administration process of bonus allocation. In the experiment, participants underwent a robust in-basket scenario, which is a common assessment and research tool (Schippmann et al. 1990) with high face validity (Hakstian et al. 1986). The design was chosen to elicit behaviors that are likely to reflect how

employees would behave in real organizational settings (Crooks 1968). Participants were given detailed instructions of their role ("a regional manager in this mid-sized paper company"), the reporting structure ("you report to Jan, the AVP"), descriptions of multiple aspects of the organizational context (e.g., "there is a consistent threat of losing top talent to major suppliers") and company culture (e.g., "relationships with customers are often the most important link keeping customers loyal, as they cannot compete with the major distributors based on cost"), relevant information on the company's HR processes (e.g., "the bonus employees receive is a critical component of their overall compensation"), a description of their instructions (e.g., "decide how to allocate bonuses for your staff"), and suggestions to incorporate into their decision making (e.g., "in allocating the bonus pool, there are several things you may want to consider in terms of how risky you are willing to be"). Finally, the instructions specify that the participant can submit the bonus recommendations with or without consultation of the immediate manager (a decision which leads to the measure of autonomy), and that their submission will be time stamped (which leads to expediency).

The bonus allocation task is ideal for understanding empowerment because it is one that is often delegated, but which employees often find challenging if they receive very little guidance, given that there may be serious repercussions of compensation decisions, such as employee relations issues or turnover. This provides a situation where direct empowerment may be more likely to be precarious or ineffective, allowing for the role of vicarious learning to be assessed. The experimental design also allowed us to control for extenuating circumstances that might exist in firms, such as variance in prior history or task characteristics which could represent alternative explanations for results, and allowed us to better infer causality and thus test our causal hypotheses with standardized procedures (Colquitt 2008). In particular, the experimental design is ideal in this study, as it allowed us to pinpoint and study the vicarious learning mechanism which we hypothesize provides performance benefits.

The 100 participants were upper division management students located in southwestern U.S., with an age range from 18 to 30 years, a mean age of 21, and with an average of 3.2 years of work experience. Of the sample, 44 % were male. This sample was selected based on two factors: convenience, and that the participant experience (i.e., entry level) is commiserate with the likely population who face the simulated issues regarding completing the compensation task with very little experience. Thus, the work experience levels and management knowledge of the students provided a representative sample, and hence have external validity with regard to the research questions in

focus here. Due to excessive missing data, two participants were dropped from the sample prior to analysis. Two additional participants were dropped from the sample prior to the analysis because they required excessive time to complete the simulation, and indicated that they did not understand the task.

Participants were asked to voluntarily participate in a simulation aimed at investigating work behaviors, and received extra credit in their course. Participants responded to a set of inputs (Tett and Jackson 1990), which we presented in the form of emails. For the purposes of this exercise, we followed guidelines set by Eylon and Herman (1999) in developing these in-basket inputs in order to represent high or low exposure to supervisor autonomous and expedient behavior. We followed MacKinnon et al. (2012) suggestions for our study design regarding randomization (in realistically randomizing assignments to groups), and mediator choice (regarding selection and execution of statistical tests). We followed conventional minimums with regards to sample size for a mediation effect, ensuring 25 participants per condition, and our use of the mediation tests was appropriate (Preacher and Hayes 2008). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a two (high vs. low supervisor autonomy and expediency)  $\times$  two (high vs. low exposure to supervisor) between-subjects design. The primary contrast is whether the supervisor demonstrated the autonomous and expedient behavior. We anticipated that a high degree of exposure would amplify this effect. Each participant received a packet containing instructions, a set of emails, and an answer key. A full set of materials and the data are available by request from the first author. Sample materials are presented in “Appendix” section. Participant instructions provided detailed information about the exercise, in which they were asked to play the role of Michael, who is assigned the task of rewarding year-end bonuses from a set pool of money. He receives parameters for the task in emails from his supervisor, Jan.

The nature of the emails provides the manipulation of supervisor autonomy and expediency, in the form of “email trails” that are left on a forwarded email. Each participant becomes privy to the interactions Jan has had with her own supervisor (the “VP”), which reveal the extent to which Jan demonstrates acting autonomously and expediently. To be clear, all direct actions of Jan toward the participant are consistent across all participants; the manipulation is the content of the VP’s communications with Jan, which demonstrates the extent to which Jan was empowered. Then, upon reading the emails, each participant (in the role as Michael) has the opportunity to demonstrate autonomy and expediency through decisions made in the bonus allocation exercise. In other words, each

participant is a focal employee, who is provided the opportunity to learn from his or her supervisor’s behaviors.

Participants were instructed to carefully read the emails, and then (acting as Michael) to complete the bonus pool answer key of how to allocate bonuses to each sales employee. Participants were given information regarding each employee, including the employee’s bonus from the prior year, performance ratings, a performance description, and a description of the extent to which the company valued retaining the employee (for example, if employees had valuable client relationships). Prior course material had emphasized that bonuses are a key means of retaining valued employees. The simulation took approximately one hour to complete. Upon completion, participants handed in their bonus pool answer key (with the submission time recorded on the key), and then completed a questionnaire about their experience during the simulation, which took approximately 20 min.

### Manipulations

We manipulated supervisor behavior by varying the extent to which Jan (i.e., the participant’s supervisor) demonstrated acting with autonomy and expediency. “Appendix” section provides an example of one email from each condition. It is important to note that the participants within each condition received the exact same instructions for how to allocate the bonus from Jan. Hence, Jan (as the focal participant’s supervisor) did not directly treat, coach, or interact with the employees any differently across the two conditions. To be clear, there was no opportunity for her to exhibit empowering leadership toward them directly in a different way across the two conditions, and the participants were not therefore directly empowered by her. Rather, it was only the degree to which Jan *herself* was able to demonstrate autonomy and expediency in her role that differed. In the high condition, the supervisor Jan acted with autonomy and expediency. For example, she indicated that she could make her own decisions, and was able to act quickly. In the low condition, Jan demonstrated a lack of autonomy and expediency. For example, she checked in with the VP before acting, and was reluctant or slower in responding.

We manipulated the degree of exposure by varying the frequency with which participants interacted with their supervisor Jan. In the high exposure condition, participants were instructed that they communicate with Jan “on a regular basis—several times per day” and they received eight email communications in their packet. In the low exposure condition, participants were told that they communicate with Jan “on an infrequent basis—about once per week” and they received half the number of emails. This

provides two clearly different scenarios where participants either had a more or less extensive experience of observing autonomous and expedient supervisor behavior. There was no direct practice or intervention focused directly on empowering each participant in their role as Michael. Rather, participants were simply exposed to behaviors of their supervisor Jan to a greater or lesser degree.

## Measures

The simulation activity included three measured variables. To capture the extent to which participants made autonomous decisions, each participant was asked at several points during the exercise whether or not they would ask the supervisor Jan for help in making a particular decision. We coded this response such that the greater number of times they asked for help, the lower their autonomy score. That is, the total number of times they asked for help was their score on this variable. To measure acting with expediency, we recorded how many minutes each participant took to complete the task. Finally, the dependent variable, performance, was operationalized as the optimality of the bonus decisions made. That is, the simulation was designed to contain an optimal solution based on what would have been the most advantageous bonus allocation, given the information provided in the simulation regarding which employees are a priority to retain. The authors discussed and jointly agreed upon the optimal solution which was used to evaluate participant responses, based on the literature and practical experience.

In the post-exercise questionnaire, we examined whether our results held after controlling for alternate empowerment constructs by measuring psychological empowerment and psychological empowerment climate (that is, individual perceptions of empowerment climate). We measured psychological empowerment using the same 12-item scale validated by Spreitzer (1995) ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Psychological empowerment climate was measured using an adapted 12-item version of the scale validated by Seibert et al. (2004) ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

Finally, as a manipulation check, we assessed the extent to which participants perceived their supervisor Jan made autonomous decisions (e.g., “The person at the level above me is able to make their own decisions”) and acted expediently (e.g., “The person at the level above me does not take too long to make decisions”). To assess whether a different level of exposure was perceived in each experimental condition, participants rated their agreement with three items, “I am highly exposed to my supervisor’s day-to-day activities and communications,” “I am highly aware of how my supervisor goes about doing her job,” and “My supervisor communicates with me frequently” with 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”

( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). To verify that our experimental manipulations of supervisor behaviors created the intended conditions for the study, we conducted a multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) with the supervisor behaviors condition and the exposure condition as the independent variables. The results indicated that when the supervisor exhibited a high level of autonomy and expediency, participants were significantly more likely to perceive these EBs in their supervisor ( $M_{\text{lowEB}} = 3.03$ ;  $M_{\text{highEB}} = 3.72$ ;  $F[1, 100] = 14.53$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and that those in the high exposure condition (“EX”) were significantly more likely to perceive high exposure ( $M_{\text{lowEX}} = 2.89$ ;  $M_{\text{highEX}} = 3.70$ ;  $F[1, 100] = 34.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, the manipulation checks worked as expected.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables are provided in Table 1. With a MANCOVA and linear regression, we tested the influence of experimentally manipulated supervisor behavior and exposure to the supervisor on the degree to which participants acted autonomously and expediently (controlling for psychological empowerment and empowerment climate), as well as their performance in making bonus allocations. The MANCOVA results show that when the supervisor acted with greater autonomy and expediency, participants themselves were more likely to act autonomously and expediently. In the high EB condition (supervisor acts autonomously and expediently), even after controlling for psychological empowerment and empowerment climate, participants acted more autonomously, given that they asked for help less (Wilks’  $\lambda = 0.82$ ;  $M_{\text{lowEB}} = 1.59$ ;  $M_{\text{highEB}} = 0.81$ ;  $F[1, 100] = 14.01$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.13$ ) (supporting H1a). Likewise, in the high EB condition (supervisor acts autonomously and expediently), participants acted more expediently, given that they took less time to complete the exercise (Wilks’  $\lambda = 0.82$ ;  $M_{\text{lowEB}} = 49.36$ ;  $M_{\text{highEB}} = 45.91$ ;  $F[1, 100] = 5.60$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.055$ ) (supporting H1b) than those in the low condition.

In support of H2, linear regression showed that supervisor EBs are a significant positive predictor of participant performance ( $\beta = 1.08$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In support of H3, this relationship held even after controlling for the effects of psychological empowerment and empowerment climate ( $\beta = 1.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Contrasts enabled by the MANCOVA indicated that participants whose supervisor acted autonomously and expediently performed more effectively (Wilks’  $\lambda = 0.92$ ;  $M_{\text{lowEB}} = 7.15$ ;  $M_{\text{highEB}} = 8.15$ ;  $F[1, 100] = 3.78$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.077$ ). Although we did not hypothesize a difference between high and low exposure,

**Table 1** Variable means, standard deviations, and correlation matrix

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Supervisor empowered behavior (manipulation)	–	–	–						
2. Exposure (manipulation)	–	–	–0.03						
3. Performance	7.61	2.65	0.20*	–0.16					
4. Acts expediently <sup>a</sup>	47.65	7.41	–0.24*	–0.01	–0.32*				
5. Acts autonomously <sup>a</sup>	1.20	1.10	–0.35*	–0.01	0.08	–0.03			
6. Psychological empowerment	3.98	0.55	0.21*	–0.09	–0.10	0.16	–0.32*	(0.88)	
7. Empowerment climate	3.48	0.64	0.19*	–0.04	–0.04	0.03	–0.23*	0.57*	(0.88)

The score on *Acts expediently* is the number of minutes it took for participants to complete the simulation, hence lower scores indicate more expediency

\*  $p < 0.05$

<sup>a</sup> The score on *Acts autonomously* is the number of times participants asked for help, hence lower scores indicate more autonomy

we note a non-significant difference between performance means in the low exposure condition ( $M_{lowEB} = 8.08$ ;  $M_{highEB} = 8.06$ ; ns), as compared to the significant difference between performance means in the high exposure condition ( $M_{lowEB} = 6.22$ ;  $M_{highEB} = 8.24$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ).

To test the mediation relationships, we applied the Preacher and Hayes (2008) test of mediation. We estimated the direct and indirect effects from the supervisor’s EB through to the targets’ behaviors, to performance (Fig. 2). We calculated the bootstrap confidence intervals (with 1000 bootstrap samples) controlling for psychological empowerment and empowering climate. The mediated model was significant. Examining the degree to which participants acted expediently, we found that the lower bound of the 95 % bias-corrected confidence interval was 0.06, and the upper bound was 1.01. As this confidence interval excludes zero, the analysis indicates a significant mediation. Consistent with H4b, participants’ expedient action fully mediated the relationship between supervisory behavior and participant’s performance. Note that this supervisory behavior is the only variable that significantly mediates expedient action and performance. This occurs with or without the controls. Neither psychological

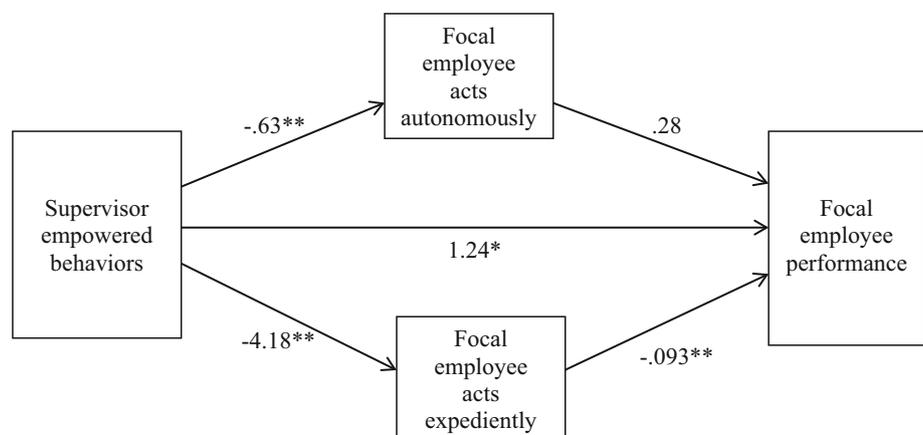
empowerment nor empowerment climate are significant mediators. However, H4a was not supported, as participants’ autonomous action did not fully mediate the relationship between supervisory behavior and participant performance since that lower bound of the 95 % bias-corrected confidence interval was  $-0.77$ , and the upper bound was 0.10.

Our results support the positive and significant relationships between supervisor behaviors, and the subordinate focal employee’s own behavior, as well as a positive relationship between supervisor behavior and subordinate performance. Specifically, those within the autonomous/expedient supervisor behavior condition were over 8 % more efficient, asked for help 50 % fewer times, and performed over 12 % better than those whose supervisor did not act with autonomy and expediency.

### Discussion

In this research, we find that autonomous and expedient behavior of a supervisor both increases the extent to which employees behave similarly, and is associated with

**Fig. 2** Results of mediation model. Notes \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ . Negative associations are desired, as they denote fewer times asking for help (indicating autonomous decision making) and taking less time on the task (indicating expediency)



enhanced employee performance. Further, we find that the employee's behavior (i.e., acting expediently) fully mediates the relationship between the supervisor behavior and performance even after controlling for psychological empowerment and empowering climate. These findings are important for two reasons. First, they allow for the opportunity for indirect, inexpensive, yet effective forms of encouraging employee EB, as supervisors need not necessarily engage directly in empowering others or create employment practices intended to facilitate this type of management style; rather, by modeling behaviors motivate employees to act with autonomy and efficiency. Second, a workforce that is able to make autonomous decisions and act expediently is more likely to experience sustained performance.

Our experimental design lends greater confidence in the results (Colquitt 2008). With no differences in the degree of direct coaching or encouragement, the only difference was the extent to which the supervisor (Jan) herself was empowered to act with autonomy and expediency. Moreover, all of these results hold even after controlling for psychological empowerment and empowerment climate. In our tests of mediation, we find that participants' expedient action fully mediated supervisor behaviors and performance, but participants' autonomous action did not fully mediate the relationship. It may be that observing autonomous supervisory action affects additional helpful outcomes other than performance, or that it affects performance through other mediating mechanisms. It is also interesting to postulate that the act of making expedient, quick decisions may suggest that an employee has internalized the information learned from observation, and is actually applying this vicarious learning to behavior, whereas this may be less likely to occur for autonomous behavior which may have other precursors.

### **Contributions to Theory and Direction for Future Research**

Our results both connect and contribute to the literature of employee empowerment and high-performance work organizations, introducing vicarious learning as a mechanism for the EBs of employee autonomy and expediency, which subsequently increases performance. The opportunity for employees to be empowered indirectly, through vicarious learning from a supervisor who demonstrates autonomy and expediency, is a novel yet potentially potent path to empowerment. We contribute to theory and directions for future research in three areas: vicarious learning, contingencies and contextual moderators, and individual differences in EB.

### *Vicarious Learning*

First, we extend prior work investigating relationships between empowerment and performance by offering a fresh perspective: the possibility that EB will occur as a result of vicarious learning, rather than directly through specific practices such as workshops or training programs, or through intentional coaching or mentoring on the part of a supervisor or leader. Our behavioral view explains how empowering effects may vicariously operate above and beyond psychological empowerment, empowerment climate, or empowering human resource management practices. These constructs may be related to the vicarious learning of EB (e.g., psychological empowerment may also result from such experiences). An interesting avenue for future research would be to conduct longitudinal studies with repeated measures of each to better understand how these relationships unfold over time. Our behavioral approach provides an alternate perspective to the traditional approach of measuring intended practices, as there can be differences between the intent of management practices, and how effectively they are actually enacted (Birdi et al. 2008). We find that a focus on actual behaviors is missing in prior views, and hope that future research will continue to develop such an approach.

This research also addresses an identified call in the empowerment literature (Maynard et al. 2012) for studies with strong causal inferences regarding relationships between EB and outcomes. We hope this study encourages other researchers to investigate empowerment with behavioral measures, using a variety of methodologies. Future research might investigate additional outcomes. A reasonable starting point may be those which have been included in the existing work on psychological and team empowerment such as creativity (Zhang and Bartol 2010), job satisfaction (Robert et al. 2000), and feedback seeking behavior (Chen et al. 2007b).

We hope that our theoretical development and promising empirical results for vicarious learning of EB will also encourage exploration of the effects of observing other work phenomena. For example, we wonder whether behaviors associated with conflict management, overcoming communication challenges, and networking could be gained by observing managers successfully engaging in these behaviors, rather than employees directly experiencing a training or practice intervention themselves.

### *Contingencies and Contextual Conditions*

Future research might also explore moderators of these relationships. For example, indicators of the quality of

relationship with a supervisor (such as leader-member exchange or trust in a supervisor) may moderate the effects of supervisor behavior on a focal employee's behavior and performance. Vicariously learned EBs may be less prominent when a relationship is strained or suboptimal. As suggested by Feldman and Khademian (2003), positive empowering processes which occur within employee relationships may be the foundation for how important employee resources (such as vitality) can be fostered at an organizational level—a suggestion we see as promising for future empirical research. We also wonder whether the duration of the relationship between the supervisor and employee matters. There may be a curvilinear relationship, such that employees demonstrate more EB over time, but with diminishing returns. Alternatively, perhaps a manager has a ripe window of time to model behavior early on in the relationship, placing a premium on exposing employees to behavior of the supervisor early in the relationship? Furthermore, there may be tipping points when vicarious learning of EB is more potent.

Equally as promising is the prospect of investigating vicarious learning of EB in different cultural contexts. Prior research has found that traditional approaches to empowerment (e.g., direct practices) are not well received in certain cultural contexts, such as those characterized by high power distance (Eylon and Au 1999; Robert et al. 2000). It may be that an indirect approach to the transfer of power, as implied in our theoretical development where an employee simply observes his or her supervisor acting autonomously and expediently, is a more successful means of empowering in cultures where status differences are salient, respect for hierarchy is essential, and power distance between a subordinate and his or her direct reports is expected.

#### *Individual Differences*

While our study relied on random assignment to account for the effects of individual differences on the vicarious learning of EBs, there may be constructs that future research may find and play a role in the relationship between these behaviors and performance. Personality characteristics and personal traits such as action state orientation, risk-seeking or avoidance behavior, or extraversion may be particularly promising to pursue. Are employees who are more action-oriented, more comfortable with risk, or more extraverted, more likely to engage in and thus benefit from newly learned behaviors? Vicarious learning in certain states, such as a state of extreme negative or positive affect, high stress, or in the early stages of a new supervisor-supervisee relationship may be interesting to explore as well. Finally, self-efficacy, defined as the belief in one's capability to perform a specific task,

may interact with exposure to one's supervisor to even more prominently increase autonomy and expediency. Bandura (1997) proposed that vicarious learning is a means for increasing self-efficacy. Self-efficacy could result from the sharing of power, but in and of itself, it does not constitute EB. As an employee's individual belief, self-efficacy might interact with exposure to one's supervisor, to result in increased autonomous and expedient behavior on the part of that employee. We encourage future research regarding such interactions, as self-efficacy has been shown to be a potent influence on individual performance (Bandura 2001).

#### **Limitations**

There are limitations to this study that need to be considered when interpreting its results. The experimental data were collected over a short-term time interval. It may be that these effects change over time or have long-term performance effects that could not be accounted for in this study. While we believe this to be a starting point for the conceptualization of vicarious learning of EB, and perhaps also employing a vicarious lens to other personnel practices, future research should employ a longitudinal design to determine any long-term effects. Employing such a design in a naturalistic organizational setting would help to substantiate the findings we obtained here. We also note that while we did find support for H4b (mediation argument for acting expediently), we did not find such support for H4a (mediation argument for autonomous action). Given that the confidence intervals are relatively wide, future research may test these mediation models with larger sample sizes to gain further understanding of how observation of these behaviors may result in enhanced individual performance.

We also note that we proposed that supervisor behavior is the key to vicarious learning, yet we operationalized this observational process in our experiment as the interpretation of behaviors through emails. While confident that this operationalization provides a reasonable proxy for behavioral observation (particularly since many supervisor-employee relationships are increasingly virtual), future research could benefit this theoretical development by including different types of operationalizations, such as live behavioral observation, or viewing of video recorded interactions. Finally, though our sample had an average of over 3 years of work experience and are all adults over 18 years of age, there may be benefits to testing these findings on a sample of even more experienced workers. Perhaps there may also be industry effects (for example, a stronger effect seen in service-based occupations) or tenure effects (for example, variation in the effectiveness of vicarious learning given employee tenure) that we were not able to discover with this current sample.

## Implications for Practice

This study has important implications for organizations and managers. First, results suggest that observing supervisor behavior is important. It may not be sufficient for supervisors to expect employees to do as they say. For employees to act autonomously and expediently, supervisors must “walk the talk.” This signals the legitimacy of acting autonomously and expediently within their organization, which can stimulate the normative effects. Second, it is critical that results of EB be documented and shared. Situations where empowerment results in successful performance can be communicated such that both the “what” and the “how” are relayed (i.e., what results were achieved, as well as how they were attained). Stories are a powerful way to convey examples that stick and promote empowerment. For example, the Ritz-Carlton organization has its employees spend 15 min sharing “wow” stories about how they took initiative to provide exceptional customer service (Grant 2014). These stories plant ideas for other employees, and more generally, empower and motivate employees to take initiative in meeting the organization’s mission.

Third, it may also matter how often supervisors ensure such learning experiences. As there may be jobs which offer little or no access to supervisor behavior (such as jobs which are highly independent), vicarious learning of EB may not be as viable of an option for empowering all employees. Alternatively, the onus may be on the supervisor to create opportunities for employees to observe, learn from, or engage with their EBs. For example, supervisors are encouraged to share both small wins and major accomplishments that occur in the workplace as a result of supervisory action with employees who normally operate very independently. Employees may reap the benefit of such supervisory action, without even knowing they are doing so! Examples include when a supervisor acts autonomously or expediently to secure additional resources, to access information, to provide flexibility on a policy, or to enable opportunities for an employee. The employee may not be aware of these many supportive actions, or may not be aware that the supervisor secured such support by engaging in EBs. By communicating the how and the why, even if by email, the supervisor provides the opportunity for the employee to witness the gains brought about through autonomy and expediency.

Additionally, organizations can promote vicarious learning by ensuring vicarious experiences. This might include setting modeling expectations and institutionalizing 360°, upward feedback, or managerial behavior review processes whereby employees can voice opinions and concerns related to the ways in which they are, or are not, empowered. Vicarious learning of EB has tremendous

potential because it may be more cost-effective than large-scale adoption of structured empowerment practices.

When organizations engage in high involvement work systems, resources are typically invested in human resource practices (such as training) to ensure that the benefits of such systems can be harnessed (Bamberger and Meshulam 2000). As it may be challenging for some managers to give up control of decision making, so too should employees be prepared to effectively leverage decision making control that they are given. This is particularly important for management practices related to empowerment, as employees must have the capacity to handle the multitude of associated situational contingencies, such as uncertainty, taking risks, working autonomously, deciding when to expedite action versus when to take caution, or responding to novel situations. To appropriately adopt this vicarious path to EBs and yield its performance outcomes, we recommend that organizations take heed of this level of rigor with which they are advised to maintain their people-related practices.

## Conclusion

This research extends from extant empowerment and work practice theories to creatively expand our considerations of how empowerment may transpire. We hope these findings encourage theoretical insights for future research, and inspire further investigation of how vicarious learning of EB may drive desired work outcomes.

## Appendix: Sample Simulation Materials

(Excerpt from the instructions)

In this exercise, you will read through a series of emails from your supervisor, Jan, in your email inbox. You will then have to decide how to allocate bonuses for your staff at your branch. You have already completed a first round of bonus decisions, but you need to go back and revise your choices. Your instructions are to incorporate the email inbox contents into making that revision. In the simulation, today is Monday. You are spending your afternoon working on this allocation, so that you can have a decision completed by Tuesday. Each email says the day in the previous week on which it was sent.

In allocating the bonus pool, there are several things you may want to consider. First, larger discrepancies across employees—such as when one or more employees get a very large bonus, while others get very small bonus—are riskier than awarding everyone an equal amount. However, employees often want to be rewarded for greater effort than their colleagues. Likewise, awarding bonuses this year that

differ dramatically from prior years is also riskier than awarding everyone the same bonus this year as in prior years. However, again, employees often want to be recognized for any additional effort they have expended beyond prior years. Please consider these risks when making your decisions.

(Sample email inbox items, focusing on autonomy)

High supervisor empowered behavior condition	Low supervisor empowered behavior condition
Wednesday	Wednesday
To: Michael From: Jan	To: Michael From: Jan
Michael, please forward me a contact list of our accounting department	Michael, please forward me a contact list of our accounting department
*****	*****
To: Jan From: VP	To: Jan From: VP
Jan, I'd urge you to try to be a little creative with this one. Think about how you can manage the bonus pool that you have, and keep all the employees that you need to keep. I'll forward you a list of guidelines that I've used in the past, regarding how to evaluate people's role versus how they are performing as compared to their role expectations. Kind of like a yardstick	Jan, I hear that you're having problems managing your bonus pool, and that you're worried about losing your top folks. I'll do it for you. Just send me your employee list. Have accounting send me their sales figures from the past 2 years

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