

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DECISION MAKING DELEGATION AMONG THAI MANAGERS

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Abstract

Decision making delegation is an important aspect of organization design. The Anglo-American literature is resplendent with references that support the benefits of delegating decision making authority and responsibility to lower level managers, and the drawbacks of not delegating. In countries where managers hold different cultural values to Anglo-American managers, it is likely that preferences for the *extent* of decision making delegation will also differ. This study examines the extent of decision making delegation in Thai organizations and its impact of Thai managers' performance and job-related stress. We argue that an organization characterized by high levels of decision making delegation is inconsistent with Thai managers cultural values, and therefore, managers working in such an environment are likely to experience increased job stress and under-perform. Using a sample of 68 Thai middle managers, we found that higher levels of decision making delegation was associated with increased job stress among Thai managers (consistent with the theory), however, high levels of delegation was also associated with increased performance (inconsistent with the theory). Implications of the results with respect to organization design and the effective implementation of decision making delegation in Thai organizations are addressed.

1. Introduction

Decision making is generally considered by managers, and management theorists, to be central to organizational activity [15]. The typical manager must make choices about goals, budget allocations, personnel, product/service decisions, work procedures and ways to improve effectiveness. In very small organizations such decisions can be made by the owner/manager, however, as organizations grow in size and become more complex some degree of delegation becomes inevitable [19]. Delegation involves passing on decision making authority and responsibility to various levels throughout the organization [39].

The Anglo-American literature is resplendent with references that support the benefits of delegating decision making authority and responsibility to lower level managers, and the drawbacks of not delegating [e.g., 1, 4, 5, 8, 13, 13, 18, 35, 36, 38, 41]. Three main benefits of delegation can be identified from the literature: (1) delegation satisfies managers' need for achievement and autonomy, thereby providing a stimulus for motivation and more entrepreneurial behavior [38]; (2) delegation provides a training ground for the more complex strategic decisions that managers are likely to encounter in senior managerial positions [27], and (3) delegation offers information processing benefits contributing to superior organizational performance [38]. Conversely, it has been argued that the lack of delegation of decision making authority and responsibility reduces worker autonomy, stifles creativity, and can lead to higher work alienation, increased job stress and lower organizational commitment [2, 4, 18, 19, 36].

In a climate of increasing globalization and the concomitant heightened awareness of differences in management values across societal groups [22], it is likely that preferences for the *extent* of decision making delegation within organizations differs across societal groups. Thus, the question arises: can the results of research undertaken in Anglo-American contexts be generalized to other countries where managers hold different cultural values? Miller, Hickson and Wilson (1996) [37] note with alarm that there is a paucity of research examining cultural value differences in decision making, particularly in Asian cultures. This study examines the extent of decision making delegation in Thai organizations and its impact on Thai managers' performance and job-related stress. We argue that an organization characterized by high levels of decision making delegation is inconsistent with Thai managers' cultural values, and

thus, managers working in such an environment are likely to experience increased stress from the job and are likely to underperform. The next section presents a conceptualisation of delegation.

2. Conceptualization of delegation

Delegation involves the devolvement of decision making authority and responsibility to lower level managers within the organization [39]. The process of delegation is not an isolated organizational process; rather it forms part of, and is usually consistent with, the overall organization structure. The organization structure defines how tasks are to be allocated, who reports to whom, and the formal coordinating and communication mechanisms [19]. The organization theory literature isolates a number of dimensions of organization structure. Three key dimensions of organization structure that have implications for the *extent* of decision making delegation are formalization, decentralization, and participation in decision making [12, 19].

Formalization refers to the degree to which decisions and working relationships are governed by formal rules, standard procedures and policies [12]. Formalization involves organizational control over the individual by specifying how tasks should be undertaken and by setting constraints on employee behaviour [5]. High formalization effectively reduces the decision making discretion of the individual [17] and therefore is associated with low delegation of decision making authority.

Decentralization (or centralisation) refers to the locus of decision making authority and control within the organization [42]. A decentralized organization usually implies that major sources of decision making authority have been passed to subordinate managers [42]. Clearly, by definition, decentralization involves the delegation of decision making authority while centralization involves very limited delegation of decision-making authority.

Participation in this study is limited to one of the key areas of participatory decision making, budgetary participation. Budgetary participation refers to the practice of allowing superior and subordinate managers to jointly decide on budget-related matters, such as setting budget targets, revising budget targets and deciding on the extent to which budget targets will form the basis for performance evaluation [32]. Budgetary participation, then, affords managers a degree of decision making discretion and responsibility beyond that offered by formalization but less than that offered by genuine organizational decentralization.

Given the foregoing, the extent of decision making delegation within an organization can be viewed on a continuum where at one extreme, low levels of decision making delegation is characterized by an organization structure that relies heavily on formalization, is centralized, and offers limited scope for budgetary participation by subordinate managers. In other words the organization structure may be described as 'mechanistic' [6]. At the other extreme of the delegation continuum, high levels of decision making delegation is characterised by an organization that does not rely heavily on formalization, is decentralized, and encourages participation in budgetary decisions. Such an organization structure may be described as 'organic' [6].

3. Thai societal values and preferences for the extent of delegation

Some researchers have argued in favour of culture-free factors influencing organizational design [21], and other researchers have argued in favour of the increasing universality of management practices [29]. We, however, support the cultural contingencies view of organization design [24], such that the effectiveness of organization structures (including decision making delegation) is influenced by the national cultural context.

The study of work-related values and associated management practices undertaken by Hofstede (1980) [22] remains the most complete empirical research of its type [7] and is therefore used in this study. According to Hofstede's (1980) [22] cultural model, Thailand is classified as large power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance, collectivistic and feminine. The first three dimensions, only, will be used to develop the relationship among Thai managers national cultural values, their preference for decision making delegation and the associated job-related outcomes, managerial performance and job-related stress.

Power distance refers to the extent to which members of a society accept and expect that power will be distributed unequally [22]. Organizations in large power distance cultures are characterized by the acceptance of human inequality and individuals show deep respect for authority that results in a paternalistic work relationship between superior and

subordinate. Involvement in the decision making process is not sought by subordinates nor encouraged by superiors [3, 9].

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which members of a society feel threatened by uncertainty or unknown situations [22]. Organizations in strong uncertainty avoidance cultures are characterized by: a strong need for rules and regulations; greater structuring of organizational activities; employee preference for clear unambiguous instruction from management, less risk-taking; intolerance toward deviant ideas and behaviours and; less individual initiative and responsibility in the workplace [22].

The Individualism-Collectivism dimension refers to the extent to which identity is based on the self versus the collectivity. Individualism refers to a loosely knit social framework in which people are supposed to look after their own interests and those of the immediate family. Independence from the collective is encouraged and status is derived from individual accomplishments. Collectivism refers to a tightly knit social framework where individuals are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, such as, organisations, religions, and the extended family or communities. Individuals are protected by the group and are expected to act in the group's best interest [22].

Organization structures that limit the extent of decision making delegation of subordinates seems congruent with the large power distance societal values of Thai managers. The Thai social system is strongly hierarchical [28] and Thai managers refer often to others higher in the hierarchy because they feel this establishes legitimacy [40]. Indeed, it is likely that encouraging Thai managers to increase their individual involvement in decision-making may generate anxiety, leading to lower levels of performance and higher job stress levels. Such managers tend to prefer and respect a more non-consultative, decisive approach from their superior. At the same time, upper management inculcated with the values of a large power distance culture, are likely to be reluctant to give up decision-making authority (perceived to be rightly bestowed upon them) to promote a relationship of greater equality in decision-making.

Similarly, limited decision making delegation seems consistent with Thai managers' strong uncertainty avoidance values. Fear of making decisions is a characteristic of strong uncertainty avoidance cultures [23]. Subordinate managers of such cultures would most likely prefer to defer to the certainty of rules, procedures and leader directives, rather than make key decisions themselves and accept responsibility for the decision consequences. Organization decision making structures that emphasize the hierarchy and focus on prescribed (already decided) procedures are likely to be preferred, contributing to lower stress levels and higher performance for Thai managers.

Based on the foregoing, implementing organization structures that limit decision making delegation to Thai subordinate managers (i.e., high formalization and low decentralization) are likely to be associated with lower job stress and higher managerial performance. Alternatively decision making structures that promote the delegation of decision making authority to Thai subordinate managers (i.e., low formalization and high decentralization) are likely to be associated with higher job stress and lower managerial performance. These arguments form the basis of the following hypotheses:

H1: Low levels of decision making delegation characterized by high formalization and low decentralization will be positively associated with Thai managers' performance

H2: Low levels of decision making delegation characterized by high formalization and low decentralization will be negatively associated with Thai managers job-related stress.

If we accept that the three variables, formalization, budget participation and decentralization form a continuum of decision making delegation from low to high, then it could be argued that budget participation represents the midpoint. Given this midpoint position, it is more difficult to predict its effect on Thai managers job-related outcomes. The budget participation/job outcomes relationship is even more difficult to predict because the Thai cultural values of collectivism and uncertainty avoidance are consistent with effective budget participation, whereas the power distance cultural value is inconsistent with effective budget participation. To expand on this point, in collectivist cultures there is a fundamental belief in, and preference for, group decision making [22] and thus budget participation is likely to be preferred by collectivist Thai managers. Additionally, research has shown that the budget participation process can provide a forum whereby managers can obtain additional task information, reducing task uncertainties and ambiguities [33]. Again, high uncertainty avoidance Thai managers are likely to favourably respond to budget participation. On the

other hand, accepted and expected power differentials between Thai superior and subordinate seems inconsistent with budget participation.

From another angle, budget participation could be viewed as a precursor to more intense decision making delegation expected to be accepted by subordinate Thai managers. Thai subordinate managers may therefore feel more confident and less stressed when the delegation of decision making authority is within a participatory framework. All decision making responsibility does not rest on the subordinate managers' shoulders but is shared with the superior manager. Given that two of the three cultural value dimensions support the effectiveness of budget participation, and given the likely preference for shared responsibility for decision making responsibility, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Delegation of decision making in the form of budget participation will be positively associated with Thai managers performance and negatively associated with job-related stress.

4. Research Method

Data were gathered by questionnaires completed by middle managers working in manufacturing organizations in Bangkok, Thailand. The questionnaire was firstly written in English and subsequently translated into Thai following the procedure advocated by Hulin and Mayer (1986) [25]. The questionnaire was piloted on English speaking Thai managers and Thai academics working in Australia.

4.1 Sample size and data collection

Contact was made with a Thai academic working in an Australian university who coordinated the data collection in Bangkok. Twenty-five companies were initially contacted and invited to participate in the research. All companies contacted employed between 90 and 200 employees in an attempt to control for size. All organizations were headed by a Thai CEO in an attempt to reduce the potential dilution of Thai cultural values within the organization. Six companies declined to participate due to disinterest or time constraints. The remaining 19 companies in the sample reflect a predominance of companies from the consumer products and textile industries. Of 100 questionnaires distributed, 71 were returned of which three were not complete, representing a response rate of 68 percent. All respondents were male, the average age of respondents was 41 years and the average length of stay with the organization was 7.2 years.

4.2 Measurement of variables

The Mahoney *et al* 's (1963) [30] nine-item instrument was used to measure managerial performance. The instrument requires managers to self-rate their performance on eight main functional categories of managerial work, such as planning, coordinating and evaluating. The fifteen-item index developed by Kahn *et al* (1964) [26] was used to assess manager's job-related stress. The index requires self-report perceptions of how frequently respondents feel "bothered" by certain aspects of the work environment. Decentralization was measured using an instrument developed by Burns and Stalker (1961) [6]. The instrument requires respondents to rate their actual authority in making the following kinds of decisions: developing new products or services; hiring and firing managerial personnel; selection of large investments; budget allocations and; pricing decisions. A seven-point Likert-type scale was employed to elicit responses that range from (1) no delegation to (7) complete delegation. The formalization variable was measured using a five-item instrument aimed at capturing the extent to which rules, policies and procedures are formalized and followed within the work group based on the instrument developed by Van de Ven and Ferry (1980) [42]. Budgetary participation was measured using a six-item instrument developed by Milani (1975) [34].

The cultural variables, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and collectivism were re-measured using Hofstede's (1980) [22] value-survey module. The re-measurement of the cultural dimensions was considered important because Hofstede obtained the index scores 30 years ago. The power distance score obtained was 65, the index score for uncertainty avoidance was 98, and the individualism score was 25, confirming that Thailand is a high power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance and collectivistic culture.

The descriptive statistics and Cronbach (1951) [11] alpha reliability measures for the relevant variables are contained in Table 1 and a correlation matrix for all relevant variables is presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Theoretical range	Actual range	Cronbach Alpha
Managerial performance	52.31	8.46	8-72	27-72	0.85
Job-related tension	40.14	10.89	15-75	15-62	0.90
Formalization	17.56	4.55	5-25	5-23	0.82
Budget participation	26.94	6.19	6-42	12-37	0.89
Decentralization	19.89	6.83	5-35	5-33	0.87

Table 2: Correlation matrix for independent and dependent variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Managerial performance	1.00				
2. Job-related tension	-0.32*	1.00			
3. Formalization	0.41**	-0.21*	1.00		
4. Budget participation	0.46**	-0.26*	0.31*	1.00	
5. Decentralization	0.46**	0.18	0.48**	0.22	1.00

* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

5. Results

Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. Tests for normality indicate that the residuals for each model are fairly normally distributed. Table 3 shows the results for testing the decision making delegation variables on managerial performance. As reported in Table 3, coefficient b_1 is positive and significant ($p < 0.00$) and b_3 is also positive and significant ($p < 0.1$). These results provide partial support for H1 such that an increase in formalisation increases managerial performance (consistent with H1), however, an increase in decentralization also increases managerial performance (inconsistent with H1). Table 4 shows the results for testing the decision making delegation variables on job-related stress. As reported in that table, coefficient b_1 is negative and significant ($p < 0.05$) and b_3 is positive and significant ($p < 0.00$). These results provide support for H2 such that, for Thai managers, an increase in formalization is associated with reduced job stress while an increase in decentralization is associated with increased job stress. Referring to Tables 3 and 4, H3 is also supported (coefficient b_2 in Table 3 is positive and significant [$p < 0.00$] and coefficient b_2 in Table 4 negative and significant [$p < 0.05$]). Thus, for Thai managers, budgetary participation has a favourable impact on performance and job-related stress.

Table 3 : Results for testing the effect of formalization, budget participation and decentralization on managerial performance

Variable	Coefficient	Value	Std error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	a_0	16.05	6.12	2.62	0.00
Formalization	b_1	0.48	0.36	1.35	0.00
Budget participation	b_2	0.51	0.21	3.30	0.00
Decentralization	b_3	0.34	0.18	2.75	0.09

$R^2 = 0.37$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.34$; $F = 12.43$; $p < 0.00$

Table 4: Results for testing the effect of formalization, budget participation and decentralization on job-related stress

Variable	Coefficient	Value	Std error	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	a_0	53.18	6.24	8.52	0.00
Formalization	b_1	-0.87	0.37	-2.39	0.01
Budget participation	b_2	-0.44	0.21	-2.08	0.02
Decentralization	b_3	0.55	0.19	3.00	0.00

$R^2 = 0.20$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.16$; $F = 5.17$; $p < 0.00$

Given the exploratory nature of the study, further analysis was undertaken to examine the association between the particular dimensions of job-related stress and the decision making discretion variables, formalization, budget participation and decentralization. We were particularly interested in the decentralization variable because an increase in decentralization increases performance, but at the same time, Thai managers experience greater job-related stress.

A principal components factor analysis of Kahn *et al*'s (1964) [26] job-related stress instrument was performed. Factors with eigenvalues > 1 were retained and the factor solution was rotated using the varimax orthogonal method. Four factors emerged, labelled role conflict/ambiguity, resource inadequacy, work overload, and human relations conflict. This factor structure is similar to Kahn *et al* (1964) job stress dimensions, with some variations. The most notable variation was the blending of role conflict and role ambiguity as one factor. New variables were created from these factors and correlated with the decision making discretion variables. The resultant correlations in Table 5 shows that, for this sample of Thai managers, an increase in formalization is associated with reduced stress with respect to role conflict/ambiguity, resource inadequacy and HR conflict. Increased budget participation is associated with reduced job stress with respect to role conflict/ambiguity and HR conflict, and finally, decentralization is associated with increased stress with respect to resource inadequacy and work overload. The implications of these finding are taken up in the next section.

Table 5: Correlation matrix for formalization, budget participation, decentralization and components of job-related stress

Variable	Formalization	Budget Participation	Decentralization
Role conflict/ambiguity	-0.26***	-0.33***	-0.01
Resource inadequacy	-0.20**	-0.08	0.16*
Workload	0.00	-0.12	0.42***
HR conflict	-0.13	-0.16*	0.14

* correlation is significant at the 0.10 level

** correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

*** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

6. Discussion

The results of this research show that Thai managers' performance was positively associated with all three decision making variables, formalization and budget participation, *as well as* decentralization. Given the high power distance/strong uncertainty avoidance cultural values of Thai managers, it was argued that increased decision making delegation (i.e. decentralization) would be negatively associated with performance. Thus, the decentralization/performance result was unexpected. It appears that there are performance benefits of devolving decision making discretion to subordinate Thai managers, despite seemingly inconsistent societal values.

This research outcome provides some evidence for a convergence of management practices with respect to attributes of organizational decision making structures/processes designed to enhance managerial performance. The increased opportunities for managers to work and study abroad in this era of globalization, and the subsequent cross-fertilization of knowledge and ideas, may explain the effectiveness of decentralization across seemingly diverse national cultural contexts.

The other interesting feature of the performance/delegation result is that favourable performance is associated with delegation via decentralization but at the same time performance is also associated with formalisation, which effectively constrains managerial decision making discretion. This seems a contradiction. It is possible that the devolvement of decision making authority and responsibility to Thai managers is more effective in an environment that provides guidelines and boundaries of acceptable and appropriate managerial behaviour. In a climate of increased decision making autonomy, the organizational rules and procedures may increase Thai managers confidence when making important decisions. Certainly qualitative research is required here to untangle these complex relationships.

Turning to job-related stress, the decision making delegation variables, formalization and budget participation were associated with lowered job stress, however, decentralized decision making was associated with increased feelings of job stress. Further analysis of the job stress variable revealed that an increase in decentralization was more specifically associated with stress from too much work. It is likely that the increased burden of making key decisions is perceived as creating more work for Thai middle manager, and at the same time reducing time for family life (the question with the highest factor loading). The job stress analysis also revealed that Thai managers experienced feelings of being under qualified when working in an environment of greater decision making delegation. Thai managers may require additional education and/or training to enhance their confidence and competence in making decisions in key areas of the organization, such as hiring and firing personnel, product pricing decisions and the development of new products.

The additional analysis of job stress also reveals that an increase in formalization negatively correlated with stress from role conflict/ambiguity. One could speculate that the impartiality of organizational rules, policies and procedures – that the middle manager can point to the rule to direct/correct worker behaviour without becoming personally involved – might contribute to less stressful work relationships in Thai organizations. Formalization was negatively correlated with stress from feeling inadequately qualified. This result is not surprising since there is less need for education and training to complete programmed tasks. Budget participation was also negatively correlated with stress from role conflict/ambiguity and HR conflict. Allowing Thai managers to participate in budget allocation decisions may also provide a forum whereby managers can discuss work/role related issues, thus reducing conflict and ambiguity in the workplace [33].

In summary, with respect to job-related stress, decision making delegation for this sample of Thai middle managers is contra-indicated. Decision making structures that limited delegated authority and responsibility (formalization and budget participation) were associated with lowered job stress while increased delegated authority and responsibility (decentralization) was associated with increased job stress. However, the research outcomes present a dilemma for organization design theorists when considering the appropriate level of delegation. For Thai managers, decentralized decision-making was positively associated with managerial performance, but at the same time, it was positively associated with job-related stress. Given the statistically significant negative correlation between job stress and performance (see Table 2), a decentralization program cannot be implemented too rigorously before the negative impact of job stress unfavourably affects managerial performance.

Clearly any implementation of a decentralization program in these organizations would benefit from a culture sensitive training program for both superior and subordinate managers. On the basis of the research results, such a training program should specifically address the stress brought about by decentralization – feelings of being overworked and having less time from family life, and feelings of being under qualified when levels of decision making responsibility are increased.

A number of limitations may have influenced the results of the study. Data were drawn from only large manufacturing organizations located in Bangkok. The results may only be generalizable to that population. Further studies could, for example, examine regional areas outside of Bangkok, smaller organizations or service organizations. The results of this study can only be generalized to male middle managers. Females and front-line managers/employees may have different preferences for the extent of decision making delegation that may impact on their experienced stress and/or performance. Self-report performance measures used in this study have been criticized [43]. The usual caveats applicable to cross-sectional survey methods must be taken into account. A number of limitations have been raised with respect to Hofstede's cultural model [see, 31, 20]. In particular, Hofstede's broad quantitative national cultural dimensions cannot adequately capture the depth and diversity of societal culture. Qualitative research in the field is sorely needed.

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