

# Does Authorization Have to Be Omnipotent? The “Double-Edged Sword” Effect of Empowering Leadership on Employee’s Behavior

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**How to cite this paper:** Ni, X. F. (2020). Does Authorization Have to Be Omnipotent? The “Double-Edged Sword” Effect of Empowering Leadership on Employee’s Behavior. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 8, 62-76.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2020.83007>

**Received:** February 14, 2020

**Accepted:** March 6, 2020

**Published:** March 9, 2020

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## Abstract

There are conflicting views about the consequence of empowering leadership. To further explain the inconsistencies in existing studies, our study bases on the cognitive appraisal theory of stress and the transactional model of stress, discussing the indirect effect of employee’s stressor appraisal to empowering leadership (as challenge stressors or hindrance stressors) between empowering leadership and employee’s behaviors (citizenship and incivility), and the regulatory effect of employee’s proactive personality. It reveals the double-edged sword effect of empowering leadership. In our study, a questionnaire survey was conducted with 234 employees as samples and the collected data were statistically analyzed. The results show that empowering leadership positively affects employees’ citizenship through the challenge stressors, and positively affects employees’ incivility through the hindrance stressors. Moreover, the relationship between empowering leadership and challenge stressors will be stronger when employees’ proactive personality was high. And the relationship between empowering leadership and hindrance stressors will be stronger when employees’ proactive personality was low. Finally, implications for theory and research are provided.

## Keywords

Empowering Leadership, Challenge Stressors, Hindrance Stressors, Citizenship, Incivility

## 1. Introduction

In today’s rapidly changing organizational environment, the self-management team and platform organizational structure in enterprises are developing day by

day. Leaders expect to improve employees' self-management and self-leadership abilities through authorization. Therefore, empowering leaders that characterized by power-sharing, have attracted wide attention in theory and practice (Dong, Liao, Chuang, & Zhou, 2015; Hill & Bartol, 2016). A large number of studies have shown that by giving employees the power and opportunity to participate in decision-making, empowered leaders can stimulate the intrinsic motivation of employees and thus improve their positive work attitudes and behaviors. For example, employee satisfaction (Biemann, Kearney, & Marggraf, 2015; Kim & Beehr, 2018), work performance (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Lee, Willis, & Tian, 2018) and innovation behavior (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014) and so on. Although many studies have supported the positive effects of empowering leadership, recent studies have also found that empowering leadership may lead to potential negative effects, with adverse effects on employees and organizations (Humborstad & Kuvaas, 2013; Li, Chiaburu, & Kirkman, 2017). For example, according to Martin, Liao, and Campbell (2013), the self-leadership and self-management advocated by the empowering leaders have virtually increased the environmental uncertainty and role ambiguity of employees, which will lead to the reduction of individual work efficiency. The research of Cheong, Spain, Yammarino, and Yun (2016) also proves that the authorization of leaders objectively increases the workload of subordinates, which causes the work stress of subordinates and leads to the decline of their work performance. Hao et al. (2018) also found that since empowering leaders reinforce employees' perceived leadership expectations, employees need to work hard to prove their value, which leads to controlled work emotions and further reduces employee performance.

Existing studies have shown that while empowering leadership can exert positive effects, they may lead to potential negative effects. However, current studies cannot fully explain why empowering leaders fail or even produce negative effects. The concept of empowering leaders is obviously different from the traditional leadership style and has its own unique characteristics. First of all, empowering leaders advocate power-sharing with employees to stimulate employees' self-management and self-leadership abilities (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Lee, Idris, & Delfabbro, 2017). Empowering leaders advocated that employees should become self-leaders, so leaders will enhance employees' self-management ability by giving them the power of self-control and decision-making. Secondly, empowering leaders expect employees to independently assume the authority and responsibility granted by the leaders. The process of empowerment also implies the expectation of the leaders to assume the responsibility for the subordinates, and they will show confidence and expectation for the subordinates to achieve high performance (Hao et al., 2018; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Finally, empowering leaders encourage employees to participate in the organization's decision-making and establish a flexible and democratic management style with employees. Thus, unlike traditional leadership, empowering leadership may have

led to a shift in the roles of leaders and employees. Leaders and subordinates need to reach a consensus on the responsibilities and obligations of decision-making, so that they can clearly understand how to use authorization to achieve the goals of leadership, otherwise leadership effectiveness and employee performance may be greatly reduced (Humborstad & Kuvaas, 2013). Empowering leaders grant employees too much autonomy and expectation, which may be will be special stressors for employees. Based on the cognitive appraisal theory of stress, our study systematically explains the double-edged sword effect of empowering leadership by exploring different evaluations of individuals in the face of the pressure source of empowering leadership, which is of great significance for the theoretical research and practical application of empowering leadership. At the same time, the transactional model of stress indicates that stress is the result of the interaction between individuals and the environment. In the face of stressors, personality differences will affect individuals' choice of coping strategies, which in turn will affect the negative effects of stressors. Therefore, based on the cognitive appraisal theory of stress and the transactional model of stress, our study explores and verifies the influence of proactive personality on the different effects of empowering leadership and citizenship and incivility.

## **2. Theory and Hypothesis Development**

### **2.1. Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress and the Transactional Model of Stress**

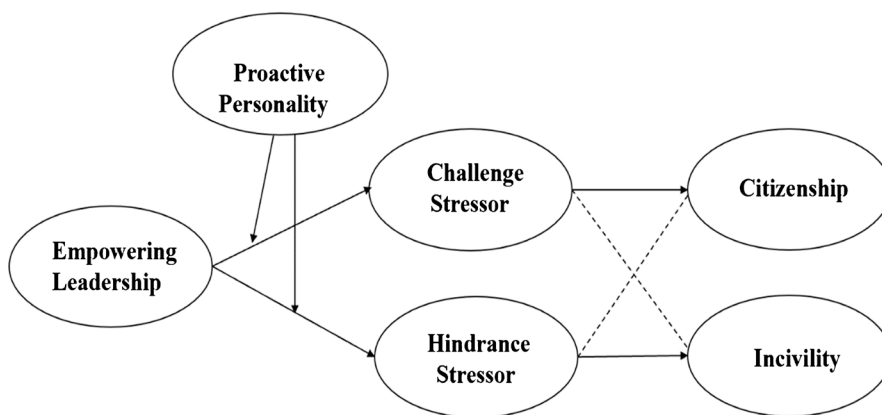
Cognitive appraisal theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986) suggests that how individuals appraise a stressor can elicit marketers coping the processes. The evaluation of the stressors as a threat creates an internal focus on the potential harm or difficulty associated with addressing the situation. The evaluation of the stressors as a challenge creates an internal focus on the potential opportunities and growth from the situation. Relevant studies have shown that different evaluations of stress can motivate employees to behave in very different ways: if stress is regarded as a threat/obstacle, it will stimulate the dysfunctional behaviors of employees. (Such as organizational deviant behavior, destructive behavior, etc.), if stress is regarded as challenges that will motivate functional behaviors of employees (e.g., innovation behaviors, organizational citizenship behaviors, etc.) (See Bliese, Edwards, & Sonnentag, 2017, and Ganster & Rosen, 2013). Therefore, when employees make different assessments on the stress caused by the empowering leadership, it will lead to different subsequent behavioral responses. At the same time, the transactional model of stress points out that stress is the result of the interaction between individuals and the environment. In the face of stressors, personality differences will affect individuals' choice of coping strategies, which will further affect the negative effects of stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986; Nandkeolyar, Shaffer, Li, Ekkirala, & Bagger, 2014). Research literature on proactive personality and stress shows that individuals with high proactive personality will actively try to influence and change

the stressful environment, and proactive personality will have a buffering effect on the negative effects of stressors (Cunningham & De La Rosa, 2008; Parker & Sprigg, 1999). The proactive personality of employees may affect their behavioral responses to the pressure brought by the empowering leaders, thus moderating the indirect relationship between empowering leaders and citizenship and incivility. Therefore, analyzing the influence boundary of empowering leaders from the perspective of proactive personality may be an important breach to further clarify the relationship between empowering leaders and citizenship and incivility, which is also one of the focuses of this paper.

Drawing from these all, we propose that empowering leadership represents a unique and dynamic stressor. Employees may focus on attributes of empowering leaders that are more self-directed and more opportunities for performance (i.e., challenge stressors), and they may also focus on attributes of empowering leaders that are more demanding and more accountable (i.e., hindrance stressors). These fluctuations in attention influence how empowering leaders are appraised across time, which, then, influences the subsequent behaviors (i.e. for, citizenship and incivility). Proactive personality plays different buffering roles in this process. **Figure 1** represents our hypothesized model.

## 2.2. Implications for Empowering Leadership and Citizenship

According to the classic definition of Beehr and Newman (1978), stress is a condition in which various work-related factors (stressors) interact with employees and cause them to undergo psychological or physiological changes, making them deviate psychologically or physically from their normal functional state. The transactional model of stress states that when a stressor is produced, the individual will carry out a primary appraisal, i.e. an assessment of the negative effects of the stressor, which will trigger a series of psychological and behavioral responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Empowering leadership is an important stressor and there are two different types of pressure sources of challenge and hindrance, and employees' cognition and emotion are different under different pressure sources, which may have different effects on employees' behavioral



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model.

responses. When employees pay more attention to that the empowering leadership is to give employees autonomy to participate in decision-making power and opportunity, in order to arouse the creativity of employees, subjective initiative, and intrinsic motivation, will regard it as a challenge stress. And individual thinks it is easy to overcome by hard, this pressure will be seen as motivation, and has positive meaning for their job performance and growth. The stressors that are evaluated as challenges have positive effects on employees while bringing about stress. Existing studies have shown that challenge stressors give employees expectations of future benefits: as long as employees can cope with challenges, they can achieve higher work performance, richer work experience or more skilled work skills. Such expectations can motivate employees, offset the negative effects of stress, and achieve higher levels of workplace outcomes (Zhang, LePine, Buckman, & Wei, 2014). Using abundant resources can improve the likelihood of successfully coping with challenging stressors (Methot et al., 2016). Citizenship promotes cooperation and social interaction among members of the working group (e.g., being courteous and helping to deal with work-related issues; Organ, 1988). Sufficient interpersonal resources enable employees to better cope with challenges. These actions improve organizational performance and productivity by freeing resources, helping to coordinate, and adapting to changing goals and needs (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). A meta-analysis has shown that citizenship effectively promotes and improves performance at the unit and organizational levels (Podsakoff et al., 2009). In addition, employees' citizenship affects their performance ratings (Lam, Hui, & Law, 1999), because they believe that these behaviors create a positive impression in the manager's mind and influence the reward proposal (Allen & Rush, 1998; Kiker & Motowidlo, 1999). We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Empowering leadership is positively associated with employee's appraisal to empowering leadership as challenge stressor.

Hypothesis 2: Challenge stressor mediates the relationship between Empowering leadership and employee's citizenship.

### **2.3. Implications for Empowering Leadership and Incivility**

When employees pay more attention to empowering leadership, which will bring more work content, higher work demands and more work responsibilities, they cannot predict the future, which cannot be controlled by their own abilities and resources. When it is difficult for individuals to assume the role expectations and requirements of others, they cannot effectively play their own social roles, so authorization may also lead to increased role pressure of employees. When required by the employees face work such as role ambiguity, employees can't clear expectations referred to, and the task, empowering leadership may be regarded as a kind of hindrance stressor, namely the individual unable to work through their own efforts to improve the sense of control, easy to fall into long-term anxiety or stress state of mind, and a negative impact, such as the result of the

work. Hindrance stressor may deplete self-resources, employees in this diminished capacity will be too drained to monitor their behavior. Incivility is a form of interpersonal deviant behavior, manifested as a subtle violation of social etiquette and appropriate communication norms (Robinson, 2008), such as rudeness, discourtesy, or showing indifference to others (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). The low-intensity nature of uncivilized behavior makes it difficult for observers to understand the intent of such behavior. In this respect, incivility is a relatively safe deviant behavior because actors are unlikely to be named or punished for such behavior (O'Reilly, Robinson, Berdahl, & Banki, 2015). When focusing on negative work stress, employees "have less energy, motivation, and time to pay attention to politeness", resulting in bad manners (Widrick et al., 2005). We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Empowering leadership is positively associated with employee's appraisal to empowering leadership as hindrance stressor.

Hypothesis 4: Hindrance stressor mediates the relationship between Empowering leadership and employee's incivility.

#### 2.4. The Moderating Role of Proactive Personality

According to the transactional model of stress, the psychological assessment of the stimulus determines the severity of the stressor, and this cognitive assessment will lead to short-term and long-term physical, psychological and behavioral outcomes. Cognitive evaluation and its consequences are influenced by individual characteristics, which are often referred to as stress-correcting factors or stress-buffering variables (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Based on this, we believe that employees' proactive personality will play a buffering role in the process of empowering leadership's influence on citizenship and incivility. Bateman and Crant (1993) define proactive personality as the tendency of individuals to take actions to change the environment. Individuals with high proactive personalities are good at spotting and seizing opportunities, and holding out for action until meaningful change results. In contrast, individuals with low proactive personality can hardly find opportunities, let alone seize opportunities to change the status quo, so they tend to adapt to the environment rather than change the environment (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999; Zhang, Wang, & Shi, 2012). Specifically, employees with high proactive personalities have higher expectations of their ability to change the environment, are more likely to respond to pressure in a constructive way, and choose and create a more favorable environment for them. When faced with empowering leadership, they tend to attribute this pressure to a challenge and opportunity, and are more inclined to regard it as a challenging pressure source. And more likely to produce more citizenship. On the contrary, for employees with low proactive personality, they are difficult to change the adverse environment or cope with work pressure, and tend to passively adapt to and endure the current environment (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Therefore, employees with low proactive personality have relatively negative

cognitive evaluation of the empowering leadership (such as thinking more work content, work responsibilities and requirements), resulting in a more obvious stress response, and tend to regard it as a kind of hindrance pressure, which may lead to incivility.

We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 5: The indirect effect of empowering leadership on citizenship, via employee's appraisal to empowering leadership as challenge stressor, is moderated by employee's proactive personality such that the indirect effect is stronger when employee's proactive personality is high, but lower when employee's proactive personality is low.

Hypothesis 6: The indirect effect of empowering leadership on incivility, via employee's appraisal to empowering leadership as hindrance stressor, is moderated by employee's proactive personality such that the indirect effect is lower when employee's proactive personality is high, but higher when employee's proactive personality is low.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants and Procedure**

The formal survey of this study mainly collects research data through questionnaires, and the respondents are relatively mature enterprises in major cities in south China. In order to conduct this survey, participants of the above enterprises were contacted in advance. After briefly informing them of the purpose and process of the study, about 270 participants were willing to participate in this survey. This survey is mainly conducted in the form of questionnaires issued by email or WeChat. Therefore, prior to the implementation of the formal survey, we have obtained the contact information and email address of all the participants. In order to minimize the adverse impact of Common Method Bias (CMB) on the research results, this study selected a Method combining multi-point data collection. Data were collected at two-time points, three months apart. Firstly, the data of Empowering leadership and Challenge stressor and Hindrance stressor appraisal were collected at time 1. The citizenship and Incivility were evaluated by employees themselves at time 2.

After the questionnaires were collected, the invalid questionnaires were eliminated. The screening criteria of the questionnaire are as follows: 1) eliminate the questionnaires with more than 1/3 unanswered questions; 2) eliminate all questionnaires that choose the same option, such as "very consistent" for all questions; 3) questionnaires for leaders or subordinates who are unable to participate in the whole survey due to emergencies or personal reasons. After screening, a total of 234 participants were collected, with an effective recovery rate of 87%. Among all the participants, 136 were female (58.1%). Participants aged from 21 to 40 mostly accounted for 66.2% of the total sample. Education level is mainly undergraduate, accounting for 47.0%; Primary management staff accounted for 50.4%; working years 2 - 4 years accounted for 61.6%; Functional posts ac-

counted for the most of the departmental functions, accounting for 31.5%.

### 3.2. Measures

*Empowering leadership.* In this study, the 10-item scale compiled by Vecchio et al. (2010) was used to measure the empowering leadership behaviors, and Hong et al. (2016) confirmed the reliability and validity of the scale with multi-country samples. Typical measurement items such as “Encourages me to find solutions to my problems without his/her direct input”, “Urges me to think of problems as opportunities rather than obstacles”. Likert scale 5 was used, ranging from “never = 1” to “always = 5”. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the scale was 0.89.

*Challenge stressor and Hindrance stressor.* We measured employee’s appraisal to empowering leadership as challenge stressor or hindrance stressor with a six-item scale adapted from Methot et al. (2016). The items of challenge stressor are “Working to fulfill the demands of my job helps to improve my personal growth and well-being”, “I feel the demands of my job challenge me to achieve personal goals and accomplishment”, “In general, I feel that my job promotes my personal accomplishment” ( $\alpha = 0.830$ ). The items of challenge stressor are “Working to fulfill the demands of my job thwarts my personal growth and well-being”, “I feel the demands of my job constrain my achievement of personal goals and development”, “In general, I feel that my job hinders my personal accomplishment” ( $\alpha = 0.760$ ). Followers indicated their level of agreement with each item using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Citizenship.* Citizenship was assessed with four items from Lee and Allen’s (2002) measure. Respondents indicated their agreement with whether they had engaged in the listed behavior recently. Participants read: “Please indicate your agreement about whether you engaged in the listed behavior today”. Sample items include: “Helped others at work” and “Willingly gave my time to help others who had work-related problems”, with each item using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree),  $\alpha = 0.734$ .

*Incivility.* Incivility was assessed with three items from Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout’s (2001) measure. Respondents indicated the extent to which they engaged in the listed behavior that day. Participants read: “Please indicate your agreement about whether you engaged in the listed behavior today.” Sample items include: “Criticized another coworker” and “Ignored a coworker”, with each item using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree),  $\alpha = 0.845$ .

*Proactive personality.* Employees’ proactive personality was evaluated by themselves using Li et al. (2014)’s six-item scale which covers: action orientation, change orientation, opportunity recognition and utilization, realizing changes. A sample item is “Whenever there is a chance to get actively involved, I take it (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = 0.775$ ).”



**Control variables.** We controlled for leader and follower gender, leader education, leader and follower work experience, leader and follower position rank.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

**Table 1** provides the mean, standard deviation and correlation coefficient of each variable. In addition, the correlation analysis results of this study on Empowering leadership, Challenge stressor and Hindrance stressor, Citizenship, Incivility, Proactive personality are shown in **Table 1**.

### 4.2. Hypothesis Testing

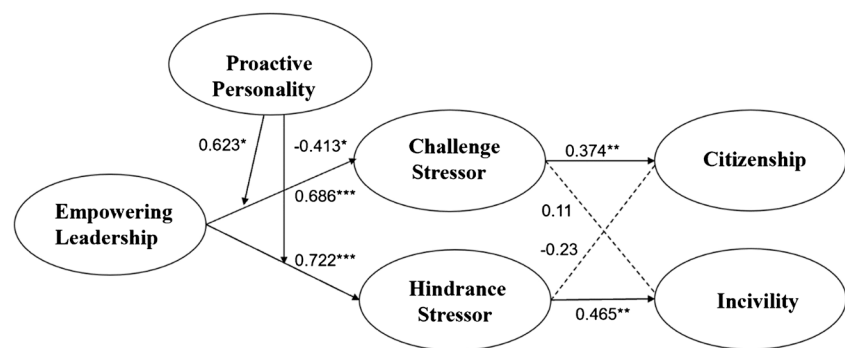
In our study, structural equation model is used to test the relevant hypotheses within Mplus7.4, as shown in **Figure 2**. To assess the significance of the indirect effects, we also employed bootstrapping produces, resampling 2000 times and creating 95% confidence intervals.

As shown in **Figure 2** and **Table 2**, empowering leadership has a significant

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations ( $N = 234$ ).

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Empowering leadership	3.591	0.830	—					
2. Challenge stressors	3.693	0.844	0.639**	—				
3. Hindrance stressors	3.538	0.987	0.602*	0.034	—			
4. Citizenship	3.746	0.926	0.507**	0.614**	-0.593	—		
5. Incivility	3.587	0.931	0.483**	-0.135	0.594**	-0.602	—	
6. Proactive personality	3.451	0.879	0.34	0.763**	-0.326*	0.563**	-0.42	—

Data sources:  $N = 234$ .



**Figure 2.** Structural equation modeling results.

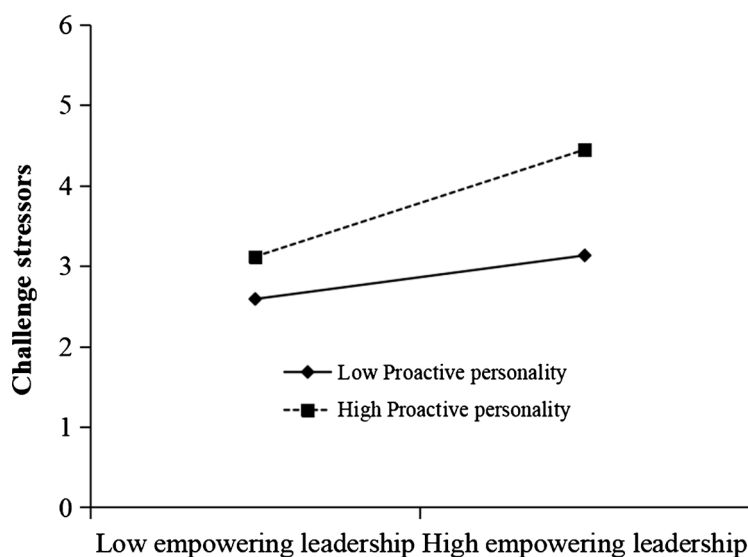
**Table 2.** Indirect effect test results of different paths.

Indirect	coeff	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Challenge stressors (Empowering leadership → Citizenship)	0.257	0.528	0.292	0.501
Hindrance stressors (Empowering leadership → Incivility)	0.336	0.446	0.238	0.411

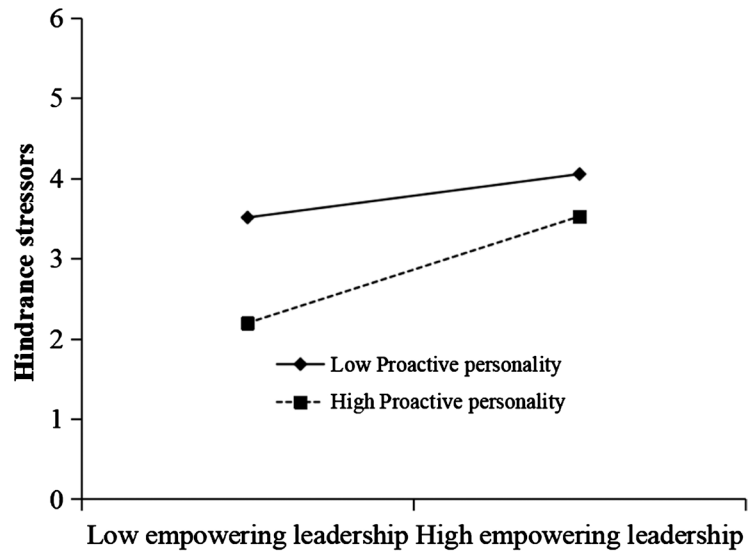
positive impact on challenge stressors of subordinates after controlling for relevant control variables ( $b = 0.686, p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 1 is supported by observational data. The challenge stressors had a significant positive impact on citizenship ( $b = 0.374, p < 0.01$ ). The indirect effect of challenge stressors between empowering leadership and citizenship was 0.275, and the 95% unbiased confidence interval was (0.292, 0.501), excluding zero. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is supported by observational data. Similarly, empowering leadership has a significant positive impact on hindrance stressors of subordinates after controlling for relevant control variables ( $b = 0.722, p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 3 is supported by observational data. The hindrance stressors had a significant positive impact on incivility ( $b = 0.465, p < 0.01$ ). The indirect effect value of hindrance stressors between empowering leadership and incivility was 0.336, and the 95% unbiased confidence interval was (0.238, 0.411), excluding zero. Therefore, hypothesis 4 is supported by observational data. Furthermore, we verified that the positive moderating effect of proactive personality to the indirect effect of challenge stressors between empowering leadership and citizenship, reaching a significant level ( $b = 0.623, p < 0.05$ ), thus Hypothesis 5 is verified. At the same time, we verified that the negative moderating effect of proactive personality to the indirect effect of hindrance stressors between empowering leadership and incivility, also reaching a significant level ( $b = -0.413, p < 0.05$ ), thus Hypothesis 6 is verified. In order to more intuitively illustrate the regulatory role of proactive personality, the regulation effect diagram is described in **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, these results support our assumption that empowering leadership positively affect employees' citizenship through the challenge stressors, and positively



**Figure 3.** Interaction between empowering leadership and proactive personality on challenge stressors.



**Figure 4.** Interaction between empowering leadership and proactive personality on hindrance stressors.

affect employees' incivility through the hindrance stressors. Moreover, the relationship between empowering leadership and challenge stressors will be stronger when employees' proactive personality was high. And the relationship between empowering leadership and hindrance stressors will be stronger when employees' proactive personality was low.

### 5.1. Theoretical Implications

Our research offers several primary contributions. First of all, there are inconsistent conclusions in the existing researches on empowering leadership. By exploring the double-edged sword effect of empowering leadership, this study explains the reasons for the inconsistent conclusions in the existing researches. Secondly, from the perspective of the transactional model of stress, an in-depth study on the impact of proactive personality on employees' behavioral responses under different stress evaluations of empowering leaders is conducive to further revealing the mechanism of regulating the role of proactive personality and further clarifying the boundary of the role of empowering leadership on citizenship and incivility.

### 5.2. Practical Implications

Through the above research, we further demonstrate that the empowering leadership is a double-edged sword. Managers must understand that empowering leadership has its own limitations, and they need to take a realistic view of the best effect that the empowering leadership can achieve, and strive to maintain balance, timeliness, moderation, and moderation in authorization. Thus, we recommend that the level of authorization be commensurate with the employee's capabilities, with appropriate delegation. Leaders should: 1) accurately judge and evaluate the quality and ability of employees; 2) appropriate authori-

zation based on work characteristics and leadership ability; 3) adjust the degree of authorization according to the status of employees after authorization.

### 5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Through theoretical discussion and empirical research, this study has drawn a relatively clear conclusion on the influence of empowering leadership on citizenship and incivility and its intermediary mechanism, demonstrating the double-edged sword effect of empowering leadership. However, due to the limitations of various aspects, this study still has some limitations.

1) Our study adopts the method of employee self-evaluation to measure all variables, and the results may be biased by the influence of social approval. Therefore, future studies can adopt a variety of evaluation methods (such as direct supervisor, colleague and employee self-rating, etc.) to avoid the possible bias caused by a single source.

2) The effectiveness of empowering leadership may also relate to such factors as the active situation, therefore, the future research organization situation can be considered as a moderator variable into consideration, in order to explore the influence of the empowering leadership organization situation.

3) The sample sampling of this study is not comprehensive enough. Due to the limitation of human resources, financial resources and other research conditions, stratified sampling cannot be conducted nationwide in strict accordance with sampling requirements, such as stratified sampling according to regional and industrial standards, which may affect the accuracy of research results to some extent.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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