

EMPOWERING TROOPS PSYCHOLOGICALLY AND ITS BENEFITS TO MALAYSIAN ARMY

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Do we really need to empower our subordinates? Alexander the Great once said that “An army of sheep led by a lion is better than an army of lions led by a sheep”. Is Alexander the Great wrong? Empowerment and leadership are related strongly. Empowerment is defined as a deliberate continuous process in a given population (sometimes organisation) which is founded by mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) . It is the function of the leaders (or the lion as quoted by Alexander the Great). Empowerment makes people more mindful. It also enables individuals to gain control over their personal (and professional) lives, enhances participation and facilitates better understanding of the environment they operate in. Ultimately, empowerment bridges individual strengths and competencies as well as proactive behaviours for the greater good of their surrounding which in a professional setting referred to as the organisation.

Typically, concerns on empowerment aims at identifying and leveraging on individual capabilities as the deficit of it would result in poor performance, resources wastage and loss of competitive advantage in organisations (Nawrin, 2016) . Therefore, retaining a highly empowered workforce is critical in order to become a highly functional unit, especially for an organisation like military. According to Johnson (2023) , via a poll conducted by Business Daily News New York, military profession is voted as the most stressful and psychologically demanding sector with a mean score of **72.58%**. As such being the case, unless a soldier or an officer is empowered psychologically, he or she can easily succumb to the stress that is experienced by them at work.

According to Job Demand-Resources Theory, psychological empowerment enhances one's positive feeling about their profession and its significance from a wider perspective. Eventually, it serves as an important emotional and motivational resource that negates the negative outcomes of stress such as burnout, melt points and breakdowns (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014). It is crucial for intrinsic motivational facets of an individual to experience awakening for empowerment and individual strengths to be mutually inclusive (Spreitzer, 1995) . This process is identified as psychological empowerment, comprising four main constructs known as **meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact**.

For the longest time, empowerment is deemed as a liability within a military context where command is centralised with vast hierarchical power distance and subordinates are solely expected to obey orders (Laschinger et al., 2004) . However, the South African National Defence Force challenged the traditional norms as early as 1994 by introducing a more integrated command and leadership practice as a result of their dispensation which led to a more psychologically empowered force (Kotze & Menon, 2007) . In addition to that, a review on British troops during Malayan Campaign by Kirkland (1990) and the United States Military leaders by Rasmussen (2012) suggested that psychological empowerment is the key to a high performing and functional military workforce.

As aforementioned, psychological empowerment comprises of four main constructs known as **meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact**. Meaning is the intrinsic values-based attachment that is held by an individual towards his or her work goal and purposes (Spreitzer, 1995) while competence is the faith that one has towards his or her abilities to accomplish certain tasks effectively (Gist & Mitchell, 1992) . Self-determination on the other hand boils down to the autonomy that is possessed by an individual to initiate

and regulate work behaviours that are required for the accomplishment of a specific task (Nix et al., 1999) and impact refers to the perceived influence that is held by an individual to influence the strategic, administrative and operational outcomes at work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

However, a study on psychological empowerment among troops serving Malaysian Army conducted by Chandran et al. (2019) reported that overall psychological empowerment among troops is only at a level of 54.8%. It is moderately low for an organisation like the Malaysian Army in general and Army Field Command West (AFCW) in specific, which, if left untreated will massively hamper the aspirations of AFCW commander **Leftenan Jeneral Dato' Pahlawan Hj Muhammad Huzaimi bin Sabri** to mould AFCW into becoming a **responsive, agile, resilient, dynamic and deployable force at any time, regardless of whatever condition.**

Psychologically empowered troops are critical for the Malaysian Army as it keeps officers and soldiers engaged to their job and superiors, improves their acceptance towards training and ultimately uplifts their performance through interdependency, collaborative measures, and participation (Perkins, 2010). Empowered officers and soldiers will contribute to the proliferation of trained human resource with enhanced communication skills which will facilitate the flow of information and execution of orders across the organisation resulting in enhanced collaboration and participation as aspired by **General Tan Sri Hafizuddeain bin Jantan (2023)** the Chief of Malaysian Army. At the absence of empowerment, troops will perform poorly and turn to be a liability to the organisation as they are intimidated by the unknowns, overwhelmed by mistakes and passiveness towards training initiatives (Perkins et al., 2002).

The first dimension of psychological empowerment is known as **meaning**. Meaning under the context of psychological empowerment refers to the sense of attachment and identification that is experienced by an individual towards a specific group, community or organisation which, in the military refers to comrades, unit and the force as a whole. It is the perception of attachment that is developed by a soldier towards his organisation in general and his unit in specific (Bharadwaja & Tripathi, 2021). According to Drury & Reicher (2009) and Allen & Shanock (2013), this dimension is governed by two major theories which is the Social Identification Theory (SIT) and Job Embeddedness Theory (JET).

SIT explains that individuals who grow a deep sense of **meaning** towards a group organisation will strongly identify themselves as a part of an organisation instead of their mere individual self. Drury & Reicher (2009) further asserted that this is highly important for enforcement bodies such as the military and police. JET on the other hand supports that the fond meaning that is formed by an individual in his or her workplace promotes social exchange and attachment (London et al., 2023) . The stronger the exchange that is experienced, the more **meaningful** will the attachment felt towards the organisation be, which eventually empowers them psychologically.

As far as the military is concerned, selfless devotion to the nation and the service is the bottom line of **meaning** that every soldier has to establish. They must feel so deeply towards the service that they volunteer to perform above and beyond for their wellbeing of the organisation and the best interest of the nation (Yüce, 2019). That is just how much the military profession should **mean** to every soldier. Higher degree of meaning implies a greater sense of attachment that is held by a soldier towards his organisation which intensifies his or her commitment and affection towards duties that are assigned and values that are upheld by

the unit. It also negates despair and hopelessness which could lead to absenteeism and quitting behaviour.

An individual establishes a strong sense of connection and alignment with their organisation will exhibit a heightened level of harmony and compliance, resulting in a high degree of dedication and loyalty towards the organisation (Islam, 2014). As far as the military is concerned, soldiers of this nature will identify themselves with the unit and demonstrate exceptional performance and exhibit a high level of productivity in carrying out all assigned tasks and responsibilities for the benefit of the organisation. In addition, they will possess a steadfast commitment and will not consider turning over, thereby enhancing the level of knowledge and skills retained within the military. This will ultimately result in a higher rate of retainment of skilled soldiers. They will also display a strong sense of affection towards their unit or organisation and will make every effort to avoid bringing disgrace to it. These are the kind of soldiers who possess charisma and command respect and admiration from their subordinates, who will eventually emulate their actions and behaviour. These are necessary qualities to become effective leaders and mentors, capable of guiding the unit to achieve greater success and honour.

Competence as the second dimension of psychological empowerment is defined as the ability that is perceived to be possessed by an individual in getting a specific task done in their daily work life (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) . According to Self-Efficacy Theory, competence is also the precursor of work behaviour of an individuals in the sense of the extent to which they are willing to complete a task successfully (Bandura & Lyons, 2014). It implies that when individuals have a personalised perception of their own competence, it boosts their self-esteem and confidence in carrying out a task, which in turn improves their

overall productivity. An individual who possesses a high level of confidence is also acutely conscious of their abilities and limitations in relation to the specific challenges they encounter. A study conducted by Gurbuz & Yildirim (2019) in Turkish aviation industry proves that high level of competence yields a greater work performance parallel to what is theorised by Bandura & Lyons (2014). It is because competence allows individuals to assess the current situation objectively and challenge themselves to reach their maximum potential in order to accomplish their ultimate objectives and achieve success.

According to General Tan Sri Hafizuddeain bin Jantan (2023) through the first core of his vision for the Malaysian Army, a competent soldier is the greatest resource of a force. Competence is the return of investment that a great force reaps for the amount of training that is given to its troops. This is because, competent troops are highly efficient and reliable in getting tasks done with minimal waste of resources. This is also highlighted in Kod T 3031 (1991) of the Malaysian Army as early as the year 1991. According to Malaysian Army Training system, training institutes only provide knowledge and basic skills that is required to execute a task which is at level 3 of competence. It is at their respective units soldiers enhance their knowledge and skills into competence which level 4 and 5 (Kod T 3031, 1991). As this takes place, they ultimately contribute to the greater readiness of units and formations.

According to Bliese & Stetz (2007), competent soldiers are empowered in a way that they possess high convictions on their capabilities of successful accomplishing their tasks. Competency in the military is gauged via leadership and task accomplishments (Meerits & Kivipõld, 2020). A competent soldier will not only be a good subordinate but will also take up commanding and leadership roles because competence empowers him or her and subsequently motivates him or her to strive harder to achieve collective goals. In addition to

that, competent soldiers are also more acceptive towards change that is brought upon them. Change in this context refers to the changes in training, operational environment and roles that are assumed in their units. Competency empowers soldiers to be more acceptive, receptive and versatile.

Typically, **self-determination** is the resilience that is possessed by an individual to strive beyond hurdles and challenges to achieve success. Under the light of psychological empowerment, self-determination is defined as the cognitive will that is owned by an individual to initiate, develop and accomplish a given task regardless of the challenges (Deci et al., 1989) . According to Self-Determination Theory, competence, relatedness and autonomy are three main precursors that cultivate this cognitive will of individuals (Ryan & Deci, 2000) . That being said, there clearly is an evident inter-relatability between the dimensions of the facets of psychological empowerment. Competence is formerly mentioned while relatedness is simply the meaning and identification that is experienced by an individual with respect to his or her surrounding, also formerly explained in this essay.

According to Legault (2017) , the level of self-determination that is ingrained in an individual determines their response towards the external environmental triggers (or challenges). Those with high levels of self-determination will be stimulated and engaged at the face of challenges while the rest get demotivated. There are several ways to cultivate self-determination within an individual and inclusion is one of them. Inclusivity enhances the person-environment fit towards their organisation hence psychologically transforms all external challenges and obstacles into constructive triggers which motivates individuals to not give up so easily (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004) . The **military** is a classic example of inclusivity where soldiers are given similar uniforms, badges and formation signages to

portray their inclusivity in the organisation to enhance their goal congruence with the organisation.

Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) on the other hand suggests, that every individual requires a certain degree of extrinsic regulation to induce their self-determination (Pelletier et al., 2001). This is highly evident in the military where the regimental practice and regulations of law in one way or other acts as the motivating factor to get soldiers accomplish a given task. The need to not get punished or penalised serve as the motivation for soldiers to push themselves and increase their determination in getting a job done. Therefore, it can be concluded here that high degree of self-determination will produce a more rules abiding troop and subsequently reduce disciplinary offences in the service as it will motivate them to adhere to the rules and regulations of the service.

As aforementioned, the final component of psychological empowerment is **impact**. According to Thomas & Velthouse (1990) , impact in the context of psychological empowerment boils down to the perception that is held by individuals towards the degree of difference or significance in the outcome of their job. Spreitzer (1995) further elaborated that the degree of impact is also influenced by the hierarchical standing that an individual holds in the organisation. Relating that to the military, officers might perceive their degree of impact differently than that of senior ranks and soldiers. That is due to the difference in the degree of autonomy, responsibility and accountability that is integral to each category of appointments. Scrutinising the findings of Chandran et al. (2019) proves that the level of **impact** that is perceived by officers in **Malaysian Army** is 67% while senior ranks only experience 47% proving the influence of rank, autonomy, responsibility and accountability.

Siegall & Gardner (2000) argue that perceived level of impact fosters the relationship between staffs. Higher levels of perceived impacts earn the trust of co-workers and subordinates which brings about individuals in the beginning and the whole unit together subsequently. According to Hancer & Thomas (2003) , impactful individuals are more approachable as they seek for more opportunity to spread their influence and make a difference. This enhances the opportunities of interaction between them and other staffs and intensifies the reliance of others on them. Mediated by the reliance, they become trustworthy and stay impactful. Hence why commanders in the military are always trustworthy. They constantly seek for opportunities to bring about improvement and betterment in their respective units.

In a study conducted by Newby et al. (2005) on the United States Army who just returned from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 77% reported to be impactful on the proceeding of the deployment while only 23% perceived the otherwise. Its shows that soldiers typically perceive themselves to have an impact on their job. They believe that what they do has led to a greater good in not only their units, but also to the people and other stakeholders. From the standpoint of Human Resource Management (HRM), Markey et al. (2013) argued that perceived level of impact invigorates participation and eventually performance which deemed true in the case of military. Armed forces globally are generally considered as the toughest and most reliable organisation. This is mainly due to the impact that they perceive they bring about for the peace, defence and sovereignty of their respective countries. Peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an absolute proof.

Having discussed the dimensional concepts of psychological empowerment, let's now look at how Malaysian Army in General and the Army Field Command West (AFCW) in

specific could benefit from it. In order to do so, let's once again delve into each dimension exclusively.

Soldiers with strong meaningful connections to their organisation will be aligned and compliant, resulting in high commitment and loyalty. They will join the unit and perform exceptionally well for the company, completing all tasks efficiently. Furthermore, given the worrying prevailing situation of The Global Great Resignation with an increase of more than 3% per annum (Fuller & Kerr, 2022) , their commitment to staying in the military will enhance the retention of their acquired skills and knowledge, resulting in a higher return on investment for the military. They will display a strong sense of affection and loyalty towards their unit or organisation, and will make every effort to avoid bringing disgrace or shame to it. These soldiers will be charismatic and inspire their subordinates to emulate them. They are capable leaders and mentors who can lead the unit to success and honour.

As far as **competence** in the military is concerned, it can be dissected with respect to levels of appointment given the hierarchical nature of the organisation. According to Thomas & Velthouse (1990), competence allows individuals in lower ranks to have a greater locus of control over their surroundings and understand the necessary actions and tasks required to carry out operations successfully. Given the vast composition of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) in battle groups, their competence contributes greatly to the success of a battle formation. Competent NCOs will comprehensively understand the instructions given to them by their commanders and act accordingly. Additionally, they will possess the ability to anticipate imminent events and make necessary preparations. Individuals with specialised roles, such as mortar crews, would acquire the knowledge and expertise to effectively utilise

their weapons in support of their commanders' strategic objectives in order to successfully complete a mission.

From officers' standpoint, competence is an essential psychological aspect as they are the decision makers in the military. From the day one of their enrolment into the service, they are referred to as commanders as the most basic operational appointment of an officer is platoon commander under whose command relies the fate of 28 soldiers. It is highly critical for an officer to be competent in order to make wise tactical decision and lead his troops towards success. A competent officer will command, lead and administrate effectively resulting in the success of the unit. Having this in mind, the Malaysian Rocket Artillery Brigade (**Briged Artileri Roket**) has initiated Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) and Artillery Hunting Radar (ARTHUR) conversion courses as to enhance the competence of its crews.

Commanders' **self-determination** establishes the standards that must be met by a troop and the values that must be maintained consistently. Put simply, it is a factor that determines the level to which soldiers are anticipated to engage in combat and demonstrate resilience in the face of adversities during warfare. Officers with a strong sense of determination are typically confident in their abilities and believe that the organisation has given them enough independence to effectively exercise their command. Therefore, they are also more receptive to challenges and learning because they view every obstacle as an opportunity to demonstrate their independence, authority, and self-control. These officers possess the qualities necessary to serve as effective mentors and leaders, enabling them to bring out the optimal performance of their subordinates at all levels. Officers who possess a

high level of determination also demonstrate increased creativity in problem solving and are more prompt in making decisions.

The self-determination of soldiers is critical to ensure the continuity of a work process by adhering to the regulations set by higher authorities (Deci et al., 1989). As their resolve grows, so will their understanding of their commanders' orders and their responsibilities. They will set priorities and put-up great effort to accomplish troop objectives. Developing outstanding soldiers is made easier by determination. Even under appalling conditions, they will be more willing to learn and put in more effort for their unit. Success results from synchronisation and compliance, which are ensured by strong resolve at the lowest level of the troops. Ultimately, fulfilling soldiers' psychological needs such as delegation of power and shared responsibilities enhances their self-determination which subsequently attaches a deeper meaning towards their service (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Clear evidence of self-determination by Malaysian Army is showcased by the Malaysian Troops during the incident of Bakara Market (Battle of Mogadishu 1993) widely known as the Black Hawk Down incident and much recently the bravery of Sergeant Mazlan Abdul Rahman who dived into the sea to save a drowning victim under the Penang Bridge in January 2024.

Commanders who perceive to be highly impactful towards his or her organisation will be highly confident in performing his or her role. They will be more creative and optimistic towards their job and organisation. By feeling so, they will also try to be a better leader by acquiring more knowledge, practice military virtues and act with integrity. Once an officer perceives that he or she has an impact towards the dynamics and wellbeing of the unit, he or she will strive as hard as possible to maintain their best behaviours and watch their actions to retain the degree of impact they perceive to possess. Officers of this kind will facilitate

greater performance and credibility of the organisation as a whole. Impactful officers are also known to be risk takers and highly accountable for their actions which will further motivate the organisation at all levels. Amongst the most impactful hero of Malaysian Army is **Leftenan Adnan Saidi** whose bravery and impact on Japanese dictators is still spoken about.

NCOs who perceive to be impactful will be psychologically conditioned to strive to earn humility and respect from their commanders and subordinates. They will always maintain a high quality of job and set good examples to their subordinates (Castro et al., 2008). They will exercise better command in their daily job and look forward to excel in every task that are assigned to them as well as wanting to achieve greater heights in the organisation such as becoming a **Regiment Sergeant Major**. Thus, they will be more open to participate in challenging duties, voluntary in fulfilling organisation goals and welcoming towards training. **Impact** from a NCO's psychological perspective has the needs to satisfy both their superiors and subordinates. As that being the case, NCOs who strive to have an impact will perform in ways that will earn them the trust of their officers and commanders in order to earn high regards and inclusivity in the decisions that are made by their officers. Therefore, impactful NCOs will not reject courses nor promotions which will facilitate the proliferation of skills and knowledge as well as turnover in the service. An example of a highly regarded NCO in the Malaysian Army is **Kanang anak Langkau** who was so impactful in his company while battling against communist bandits. He retired as a Regiment Sergeant Major, which is the highest of rank and the most prestigious appointment.

Psychological empowerment is a crucial determinant of an organization's overall efficacy. It influences the employee's perception of themselves as an individual, which transcends their performance. As the nature of global trade and the marketplace becomes

more fluid as a result of technological advancement, every organisation including the military must maintain a highly responsive workforce to preserve its competitive advantage. Therefore, employees must be psychologically empowered to resonate with the requirements of global trades and operations. As far as a combat force such as the Malaysian Army is concerned, it is essential to keep the force psychologically empowered to ensure a supreme level of combat readiness, as globalisation and technological development have contributed to the expansion of the battlefield, resulting in significant changes to the pattern of war precedence. Psychological Empowerment is the key to becoming a responsive, agile, resilient, dynamic and deployable force at any time, regardless of whatever condition as aspired **by Leftenan Jeneral Dato' Pahlawan Hj Muhammad Huzaimi bin Sabri**, the Commander of Malaysian AFCW.

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