Thought Self-leadership & Performance: Examining the Role of Work Engagement

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This research aims to examine the effect of thought self-leadership (TSL) on performance through self-efficacy and work engagement. The study collected data through a questionnaire survey administered to the employees of various Indian organizations representing different roles. The findings suggest relationships between TSL and performance and mediation mechanism through which self-efficacy impacts performance. The findings imply that TSL has a positive effect on performance through self-efficacy and work engagement.Thus, organizations should invest in developing TSL skills across all levels of employees and also create an enabling environment to boost work engagement. The contribution of the study lies in integrating the research in self-leadership and performance area and testing the relationship in different cultural context.

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Introduction

In the present turbulent and uncertain environments, organizations increasingly rely on the strengths and talents of their employees and aspire for tools and techniques to develop them. For a long time, the primary focus of research was on exploring how the vertical influence process (i.e., top-down) facilitates the creation and development of an engaging and high performing workforce. Although in certain situations this leadership style is appropriate, the present business scenario requires a shift in leadership skills.With the changing work context such as the introduction of the virtual environment, flexi-time, telecommuting, and so on, employees may not always work under direct supervision. In this context, it has become critical for the employee to learn to self-lead which is an acceptable leadership theme (Bennis, 1994;Drucker, 1999; Goleman et al., 2002; Senge, 1990; Yukl, 2002).

Manz and Sims (1980) were the pioneers to introduce the concept of self-leadership which proposes that

even though external forces influence behavior, internal forces more than external forces ultimately control the actions (Manz, 1986). Self-leadership is" a process through which individuals control their behavior, influencing and leading themselves through the use of specific sets of behavioral and cognitive strategies" (Manz, 1986; Manz & Neck, 2004).It is based on the self-regulation framework (Carver & Scheier, 1981; 1998) which explains the reasons underlying the behavior. Self-leadership theory suggests the strategies that may be used to augment self-regulatory effectiveness. Employees with self-leadership skills can adjust well and have more confidence, which increases the likelihood of their success (e.g., Murphy & Ensher, 2001; Raabe, Frese, & Beehr, 2007; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Self-leadership leads to higher job satisfaction (Neck & Manz, 1996; Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998),low absenteeism (Frayne & Latham, 1987; Latham & Frayne, 1989), and numerous positive health- and work-related outcomes in organizations (e.g., Stewart et al., 2010).

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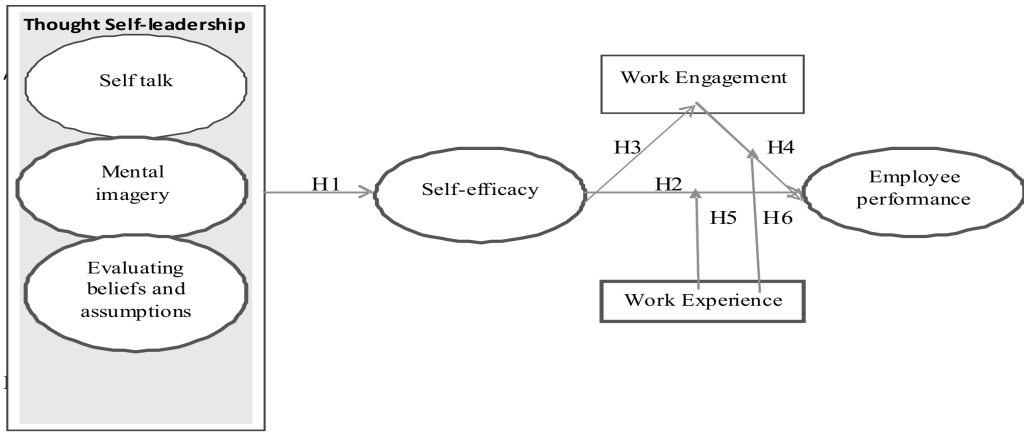
Research in the self-leadership domain suggests that increasing individual effectiveness has a positive influence on organizational outcomes (e.g.,Manz & Sims, 1980, 2001; Manz & Neck, 2004; Houghton & Neck, 2002). There have been continuous efforts to understand the effect of self-leadership on employee performance. A series of studies opined that self-leadership has a direct effect on performance (e.g., Konradt et al., 2009; Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006). Other research suggests mediating variables linking self-leadership and performance (e.g., Breevaart et al., 2016; Prussia et al., 1998). Prussia et al. (1998) testified the mediating effect of self-efficacy and reported the positive effect of self-leadership strategies on self-efficacy and the direct effect of self-efficacy on performance. Breevaart et al.(2016) examined the relationship between self-leadership and performance through work engagement using a unidimensional measure of self-leadership. A recent study on sales employees demonstrates that TSL strategies can influence performance through selling skills and adaptive behavior as a mediator between self-efficacy and performance (Singh et al., 2017).We have tried to integrate the research linking self-leadership and performance, and by following the multi-dimensional model of leadership, have explored the cognitive and motivational explanation of employee performance. We include the cognitive variables: thought self-leadership (TSL), and self-efficacy and motivational variable, work engagement. This study proposes self-efficacy as a distal predictor of performance unlike as suggested by the previous study (Prussia et al. 1998). We argue that TSL leads to high self-efficacy and high self-efficacy leads to enhanced performance through work engagement.This research contributes to the domain of self-leadership and performance by integrating the

earlier research and explores the effect of specific self-leadership strategies on larger job-roles. This study has used the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1991) and job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Crawford et al., 2010) to explain the effect of TSL on self-efficacy and of self-efficacy on performance and mediating role of work engagement on the proposed relationship (Fig. 1)

Figure 1 Hypothesized Model



The other contribution of the study lies in identifying the mediating relationships among the study variables in Indian contexts compared to western culture. Most of the research on the application of self-leadership is in the western context which is characterized by low power distance and high on individualism. There is a debate that the research findings that appear in the western context may not apply to another cultural context like India, which is high on power distance and low on individualism (Hofstede, 2001). Adler (1997) opined that there are no universal theories of leadership. Neck and Houghton (2006: 286) suggested that "the usefulness and applicability of self-leadership should be examined across a variety of international settings". Endeavors in this direction suggest that use of self-leadership strategies varies in different cultural contexts (e.g., Jose et al. 2006; Georgianna, 2007) and employees from western culture are high on self-leadership compared to eastern group (Georgianna, 2007).

Theoretical Background& Conceptual Model

TSL, an important component of self-leadership, suggests the cognitive strategies that employees can use for self-influence (Manz& Neck, 1991; Neck & Manz, 1992; 1996b; Neck & Milliman, 1994; Neck et al., 1995). These strategies comprise identifying and replacing dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions, practicing mental imagery, and using positive self-talk (Neck & Manz, 2012).

These strategies influence one another and produce constructive thought patterns or habitual ways of thinking (Manz, 1983; 1992; Neck &Manz, 1992).

Dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions cause dysfunctional thinking (Burns, 1999). Therefore, it is desirable that for an individual to inspect his/her thought patterns and substitute dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions with constructive ones (e.g., Burns, 1980; Manz & Neck, 2004; Neck & Manz, 1992). Employees have a positive perception of their job when they can replace and avoid irrational thoughts (Judge & Locke, 1993; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000).

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Self-talk can be defined as speaking to oneself. Individuals who use self-talk as a strategy covertly tell themselves (Neck &Manz, 1992; 1996a), mentally self-evaluate, and react (Ellis, 1977; Neck & Manz, 1992). A person can replace negative or pessimistic self-talk with more optimistic self-dialogues by carefully analyzing his/her self-talk patterns (Seligman, 1991).Employees build up the confidence for learning complex skills (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1996) and complete the task better by using positive self-talk (Neck & Manz, 2012).

Mental imagery involves imagination or visualization of the successful performance of a task before it is completed (Manz & Neck, 1991; Neck & Manz, 1992).Driskell et al. (1994) reported a significant positive effect for mental imagery on performance after a meta-analysis of 35 empirical studies. Hotel room cleaners who saw their performance as a result of effort stayed longer compared to others who linked performance to luck (Parsons, Herold & Leatherwood, 1985). Individuals also perform better when they visualize the successful completion of an activity in advance of its actual accomplishment (Manz & Neck, 2004).

Hypotheses

Thought Self-Leadership Strategies and Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's self-assessment of his/her capability to perform a required task (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy has been identified as the single most frequently cited outcome of self-leadership (e.g.,Manz, 1986; Manz & Neck, 2004; Neck & Manz, 1992,Prussia et al., 1998). Self-leadership strategies, mainly thought pattern strategies along with natural reward strategies, enhance the perception of self-efficacy (e.g.,Manz, 1986; Manz & Neck, 2004; Neck & Manz, 1992; Prussia et al., 1998). Neck & Manz, (1996a) reported that the participants who attended the training program on TSL strategies experienced improved self-efficacy over those who did not attend the training (Neck & Manz, 1996a). Mental imagery of successful perfor-

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mance of the task, constructive self-talk, and replacement of dysfunctional beliefs with alternative beliefs can nurture self-efficacy, the setting of challenging goals, and work persistence,leading to better effectiveness (Stajkovic& Luthans, 1998).Following the above literature, we hypothesize the following:

H1. TSL strategies positively relate to self-efficacy perceptions.

Self-efficacy & Performance: Self-efficacy is among the few cognitive factors that have received ample empirical support for its contribution to individual action. The social cognitive theory suggests that it reinforces an individual's self-beliefs about the abilities required for completion of the task (Bandura, 1991) which contributes to high-performance standards (Houghton et al., 2003). A person with high self-efficacy initiates the task, sustains the efforts towards task accomplishment, and persists even in difficult situations (Bandura, 1997; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Various research studies suggested the link between self-efficacy and high enhanced performance (Mathieu et al., 1993; Lee & Gillen, 1989; Barling & Beattie, 1983).In agreement with the previous findings, we hypothesize the following:

H2. Employees' self-efficacy positively relates to performance.

Mediating Role of Work Engagement

Work engagement refers to "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that includes concepts such as vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al. 2002:74). An individual with high vigor is more energetic and higher on mental resilience which translates into higher inclination to put effort and continue in obstacles. Dedication leads to a high connection to work through a sense of significance, passion, inspiration, and self-confidence. An individual with high absorption is fully concentrated in one's work.

Work engagement is suggested as an important construct in the positive organizational scholarship (POS) literature as it creates work as an integrally more positive employee experience (Rothbard & Patil, 2012). It is associated with various positive outcomes in the workplace such as high productivity (Rich et al., 2010), organizational citizenship behaviors (Rich et al., 2010), satisfaction (Harter et al., 2002), and less attrition (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011).Employees with high work engagement are more customer-focused and demonstrate customer loyalty (Barnes & Collier, 2013; Salanova et al., 2005)

Job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) is a dominant framework to evaluate work engagement which suggests that the main causes of work engagement are job and personal resources. Job resources comprise physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that support work goals achievement (de Lange et al., 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Personal resources are cognitive-affective aspects of personality such as self-efficacy and optimism that helps an individual in goal achievement by adjusting with the difficulties and obstacles and managing oneself and environments

(Hobfoll et al., 2003). A strong belief about own competence leads to high work engagement (e.g.,Mauno et al., 2007; Salanova et al. 2006; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Tuckey et al., (2012) opined that self-control and self-efficacy are an effective emotional driver for work engagement. Following the literature on drivers and the outcome of work engagement, we hypothesize the following:

H3. Employees' self-efficacy positively relates to work engagement.

H4. Employees' work engagement positively relates to performance.

Along with work engagement, the study hypothesizes work experience as a moderator between self-efficacy and performance and work engagement and performance.

Participants

The Google doc link of the questionnaire was shared with around 600 participants with the request to participate in the survey. Participants were identified through personal contacts of the researchers. We received 180 responses, out of which 156 were used for model validation after cleaning the data. The participants were from different organizations, belonging to both the manufacturing and service sectors. The average age of the participants was 33.99 (SD 7.36), and total experience was 11.52 (SD 9.09) years. 13.5 percent were graduates from various streams (i.e., commerce, science, management, etc.); and 86.5 percent were post-graduates from management, science,etc. Male respondents accounted for 85.3 percent of the sample,and14.7 percent were females.

Instruments

A questionnaire was developed using self-report measures for TSL, self-efficacy, work engagement and performance. 11 items from Houghton and Neck's (2002) study were used to measure TSL. This scale has demonstrated consistent validity and psychometric properties (Stewart et al., 2011). Participants responded to each item on the five-point Likert scale (1 – Not at all accurate; 5 completely accurate).

Self-efficacy was measured using six items drawn from Luthans et al. (2007). Work engagement was measured with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9, developed and validated by Schaufeli et al. (2006). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each item for self-efficacy and work engagement on a five-point scale (1 – strongly disagree; 5 – strongly agree).

The study used a short-term measure of performance as recommended by researchers (Chonko et al., 2000). Participants rated their performance on the 5-point Likert scale (1-not at all competent to 5- very competent) on items such as "All in all, how competently do you perform your job?" and "In your estimation, how effectively do you get your work done?"

Results & Findings

We assessed the measurement model for uni-dimensionality, reliability, and va-

lidity using confirmatory factor analysis in AMOS 21.0. Following the recommendations in the literature, we operationalized TSL as a second-order reflective construct with three as first-order reflective dimensions. After removing items with low factor loadings and high modification indices, fit statistics indicate that the measurement model provides reasonable fit (χ^2 = 573.83, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.06,CFI = 0.90).Composite reliabilities of all constructs exceeded the 0.70 cutoffs, providing evidence of reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Convergent validity was assessed by analyzing the factor loadings. All of the standardized loadings were large and significant at $\alpha = 0.01$ providing evidence of convergent validity. The AVE of each multi-item construct exceeded the squared correlation between all pairs involving the construct, providing evidence of discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Common Method Bias

Common method variance (CMV) was checked by using a solitary latent factor. In case the data was affected by CMV, all of the manifest factors likely to load on that latent factor. Our analysis revealed that the loadings were on multiple manifest factors, suggesting that our data does not have significant threats related to CMV (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). We further checked common method bias by using a partial correlation procedure including a marker variable (Lindell & Whitney, 2001) – a variable not theoretically related to at least one other variable in the study. We used age as a marker variable, and we found that it had no significant relationship with other variables in the model. This further supports our claim that our study is not subject to an inherent common method bias. Furthermore, since 100% of our respondents received an undergraduate or higher degree, our approach is aligned with literature promoting the utilization of highly educated respondents to mitigate common method bias risks (Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan & Moorman, 2008).

Table 1 Construct Correlations & Reliabilities

	1	2	3	4	AVE	CA	CR
1.TSL	1				0.55	0.76	0.80
2.Self-Efficacy	0.18*	1			0.77	0.78	0.86
3.Work Engagement	0.27*	0.55**	1		0.67	0.91	0.93
4.Employee Performance	0.19*	0.37**	0.43**	1	0.75	0.82	0.87

Note -AVE - Average variance extracted; CA -Cronbach's alpha; CR - Composite reliability;
*p<.05; **p<.01

Structural Model

Next, we fit several structural models to test the hypotheses as depicted in Fig. 1. As outlined by Singh and Venugopal (2015) and Mathieu and Taylor (2006), we fit three models to test for hypothesized relationships; a *direct-ef-*

fect model, a hypothesized *no direct effect* model and a full model. The summary of the model-fit indices and parameter estimates is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Parameters Estimates, Model Fit Statistics & Variance Explained

	Direct effect model	No direct effect model	Full model
H1 Thought self-leadership————self-efficacy	0.35*	0.40*	0.40*
H2 Self-efficacy————————Performance	0.26**	—	0.24
H3 Self-efficacy————————work engagement	-	0.68**	0.67**
H4 Work engagement ————————Performance	-	0.47**	0.29**
Chi Squares	636.73	574.5	571.37
Degrees of Freedom	340	339	338
CFI	0.88	0.90	0.90
RMESA	0.08	0.06	0.06

*p<.05; **p<.01

We first fit a *direct-effect* model estimating the direct path from TSL to self-efficacy, and self-efficacy to employee performance; however, the mediator variable, work engagement remains as a latent variable; no path stems from or leads to mediator variable. The *direct-effect* model exhibited deficient fit indices (χ^2 = 636.73 (340), p<. 01; CFI = .88; RMSEA = .08), indicating that self-efficacy has a significant relationship with at the mediating variable.

Next, we fit a no direct effect model that includes paths from self-efficacy to mediating variable work engagement; and mediating variable to employee performance. The model does not include the direct effect of self-efficacy on employee performance. This model demonstrated acceptable fit indices (χ^2 = 574.50 (339), p<. 01; CFI = .90; RMSEA = .06). As shown in Table 2, all hypothesized relationships are significant. Self-efficacy was significantly related to work engagement (β = .68, p<. 01), and work engagement was significantly related to employee performance (β = .47, p<. 01). Finally, we fit a *full-structural* model that adds a direct path from self-efficacy to employee performance. This model demonstrates acceptable-fit indices (χ^2 = 571.37(338), p<. 01; CFI = .90; RMSEA = .06).

Self-efficacy was significantly related to work engagement (β = .68, p<. 01), and work engagement was significantly related to employee performance (β = .47, p<. 01).

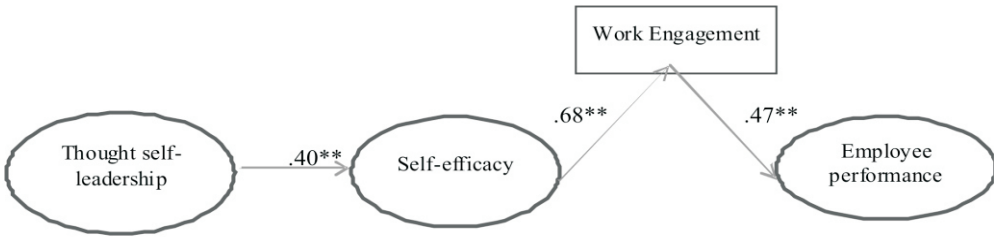
These models provide us with valuable information on the significance of hypothesized relationships in this study. The *direct-effect* model (Fig. 2a) indicated the importance of mediating variables in our model. The *no-direct-effect* model (Fig. 2b) clearly established the significant role of mediating variable in explaining the hypothesized relationships (*H3* and *H4*). The relationship between self-efficacy and employee performance was transmitted through work engage-

ment (Sobel = 4.52, $p < .01$). Finally, the *full structural* model (Fig. 2c) provided support for all the hypothesized relationships except the direct relationship between self-efficacy and employee performance ($\beta = .24$, ns), thus demonstrating the full mediation role for work engagement (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Fig. 2a Direct Effect Model

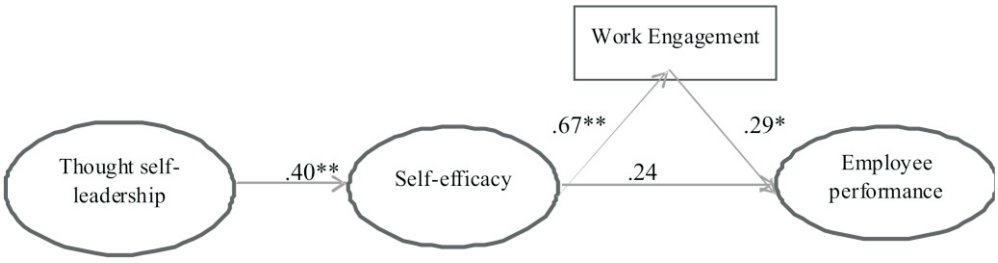
p <.01

Fig. 2b IndirectEffect Model



*p<.05 **p<.01

Fig. 2c Full Model



*p<.05**p<.01

Moderating Effect of Work Experience

We further tested for moderation effect of work experience on the relationship between employee self-efficacy and performance and work engagement – employee performance linkage. Using Smart PLS 3, two interaction terms were estimated; the first interaction term with work experience and self-efficacy and the second interaction term with work

experience and work engagement. Moderating effects of both the interaction terms were estimated, and these were found to be non-significant (β = .04, ns, β = .02, ns).

Discussion, Implications, Limitations & Future Research

The present study proposed and tested a model that links TSL, self-efficacy, work-engagement,and performance. The findings of this study support the model suggesting the path linking TSL and performance. It suggests that TSL has an indirect effect on performance through self-efficacy and work engagement. It also suggests work engagement as a significant mediator between self-efficacy and performance. Self-efficacy leads to high performance only when an employee is highly engaged in work, implying that self-efficacy does not have a direct effect on performance in contradiction to previous studies which suggest a direct effect of self-efficacy on performance (Prussia et al., 1998). This study also renders support to the findings linking self-leadership and self-efficacy (Mathieu et al., 1993; Lee & Gillen, 1989; Barling & Beattie, 1983) in the Indian context. This commonality in findings suggests that the relationship between self-leadership and self-efficacy is not influenced by cultural characteristics like individualism and collectivism.

TSL has an indirect effect on performance through self-efficacy and work engagement. It also suggests work engagement as a significant mediator between self-efficacy and performance.

The findings of the study affirm that work engagement is a strong predictor of desirable outcomes in organizations. If employees are high in work engagement, they are likely to learn and use the skills required to contribute to performance.

Along with training in TSL skills, organizations also need to create supporting conditions to boost employee engagement.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in providing an integrated model linking self-leadership to performance by including self-efficacy and work engagement. Further, it also contributes to the cross-cultural literature in self-leadership as there are few studies on self-leadership in the eastern culture context. The findings of the study offer insights into training interventions for self-leadership. Research suggests that employees can be trained to develop and enhance self-leadership skills (Neck & Manz, 1996). In response to this evidence, organizations have designed and delivered training programs to develop self-leadership skills and behaviors in the workplace (e.g., Neck & Manz, 1996a; Stewart et al., 1996). This study suggests that work experience does not have any impact on TSL – performance linkage and therefore, in managerial terms, all employees are likely to benefit from TSL training and interventions. This is counter-intuitive to the prevalent thinking that younger employees need more training in relative

terms. Also, this study recommends that along with training in TSL skills, organizations also need to create supporting conditions to boost employee engagement to facilitate an effective transfer of TSL skills in the workplace.

The present study also has some limitations that need to be addressed in future research. Although we developed a model using the sound theoretical framework and tested it in our research, the data used was cross-sectional, which might not be strong support for the causal relationship suggested in our study. We could have stronger evidence of causality with a longitudinal or experimental study. The second limitation is that we used the sample from only one culture (eastern) to test the relationship proposed in the study. There could have been strong evidence of applicability and commonality of research findings of self-leadership linking performance in other cultural contexts by using the sample from a western context. Further, we examined only one component of self-leadership. Future study should use another component of self-leadership by including behavior focused strategy and natural reward strategies. Also, this study examined the effect of self-leadership on the one dimension of psychological capital. Other studies may consider including other dimensions of psychological capital namely hope, resilience, and optimism.

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