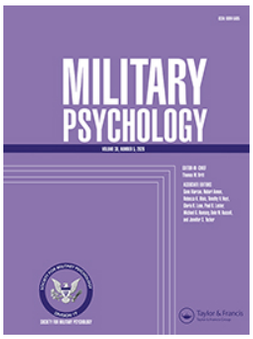

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Mission command: How daily empowering leadership enables proactive behavior

Hans-Christian Knevelsrud[a,b], Jørn Hetland[a], Arnold B. Bakker[c,d,e,f], Tommy Krabberød[g], Henrik O. Sørlie[a,b], Johannes Kibsgaard[a,b], and Olav K. Olsen[a]

[a]Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway; [b]Command and Staff College, Norwegian Defence University College, Oslo, Norway; [c]Center of Excellence for Positive Organizational Psychology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; [d]School of Management, Human Resource Management, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland; [e]School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia; [f]Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa; [g]Leadership Division, Royal Norwegian Naval Academy, Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT

Empowering leadership is central to mission command, the dominant leadership doctrine in modern militaries, which emphasizes decentralized decision-making, initiative, and adaptability in complex, high-pressure operations. Drawing on leadership and proactivity theories, this study examines how daily empowering leadership (i.e. autonomy support and development support) relates to work engagement and performance through personal initiative and strengths use. Using a 15-day diary study design, 261 Norwegian military cadets (3156 observations; 80.6% response rate) reported their daily experiences during a practice-oriented leadership development course. Multilevel analyses showed that leader autonomy support, but not development support, was positively related to daily engagement and task performance (as rated by others), and that these relationships were mediated by personal initiative and strengths use. Moreover, autonomy support had a stronger relationship with initiative on days when development support was high, amplifying its indirect links with engagement and performance. Controlling for directive leadership confirmed the unique value of autonomy support. Overall, the findings suggest that empowering leadership fosters proactive motivation and effectiveness in demanding military contexts, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for cultivating engaged, high-performing teams.

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KEYWORDS
empowering leadership; proactivity theory; task performance; work engagement; strengths use

What is the public significance of this article?— This study highlights the importance of daily leadership practices that combine autonomy with development support in a demanding military training context. On days when leaders balance freedom with guidance, subordinates report being more proactive and engaged, and they receive higher performance ratings. These findings can help inform leadership practices in high-stakes settings where teams must adapt quickly and perform under pressure.

Mission command: How daily empowering leadership enables proactive behavior

Military operations take place in a complex, fast-changing, and unpredictable environment. To meet the challenge, most Western militaries have adopted the leadership philosophy of mission command, enabling decisions to be made by those best placed to make them (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022). By empowering frontline personnel, who often have the most up-to-date information and expertise, military units can not only adapt and respond to change, but also initiate and drive change to gain the initiative and shape the situation in favorable ways (Hughes et al., 2022).

A key unresolved question in military leadership research is how day-to-day leadership behaviors translate the principles of mission command into actual proactive action by subordinates. Doctrine on mission command emphasizes trust, shared understanding, and decentralized decision-making (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022), but offers less clarity regarding the specific daily behaviors through which leaders cultivate such initiative. Empowering leadership theory provides an actionable framework for these behaviors. Empirical work shows that empowering leaders enhance

CONTACT Hans-Christian Knevelsrud knevelsrud@hotmail.com Command and Staff College, Norwegian Defence University College, Bygning 10 FHS, Oslo mil/Akershus, Oslo 0015, Norway.
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autonomy, strengthen competence, and build followers' confidence – conditions that reliably support proactive and self-directed behavior in demanding environments (Kim et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018).

This study examines how daily empowering leader behaviors shape soldiers' proactive behaviors – specifically personal initiative and strengths use – and whether these behaviors translate into greater work engagement and improved task performance. Task performance is reflected in ratings from fellow team members, providing an external perspective on task-related behavior. Linking daily leadership behaviors to both immediate responses and outcomes reveals how leaders cultivate adaptive, self-initiating personnel capable of acting decisively under pressure, such as during demanding military training and field exercises. A daily perspective is particularly important in military contexts, as subordinates' initiative depends on whether leaders create space for independent decision-making and action in the moment. We followed military cadets over 15 days during a six-week leadership development course at the Norwegian Military Academy. Drawing on empowering leadership and proactivity theory, we investigate whether leaders who delegate responsibility, grant decision authority, and support skill development foster proactive motivational states that enhance initiative and strengths use, subsequently boosting daily engagement and observable performance in complex military contexts.

We make three key contributions. First, we provide a nuanced understanding of empowering leadership theory by simultaneously modeling daily leader autonomy support and development support, testing their combined effect on subordinates' proactivity. This clarifies how leaders foster initiative and whether autonomy is most effective when paired with support for skill development. Second, we advance proactivity research by identifying dual mediating pathways – personal initiative and strengths use – linking leader behaviors to outcomes. Most prior work emphasizes broad motivational states, overlooking how empowering leadership simultaneously shapes proactive behavior and enables employees to use their strengths (Cheong et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2018). Examining these pathways provides a richer understanding of the behavioral mechanisms through which leadership drives work engagement and task performance. Third, using a daily diary design while controlling for directive leadership, we capture day-to-day fluctuations in leader behavior and employee responses and isolate the unique contribution of empowering leadership. This approach is especially relevant in military contexts, where personnel must perform effectively across environments ranging from routine peacetime operations to high-stakes, uncertain situations. By showing that empowering leadership behaviors are linked to proactive, strengths-based behavior above and beyond directive leadership, we demonstrate that it is the empowering approach – supporting autonomy and development – that drives adaptive, self-initiating soldiers.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Western militaries emphasize the critical role of leadership in fostering subordinates' initiative to seize opportunities, adapt to change, and gain a position of advantage (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022). Proactivity is associated with better performance in ambiguous and uncertain situations (Bindl & Parker, 2011; Griffin et al., 2007). Conceptually, proactivity is a goal-driven, self-starting, change-oriented, and future-focused process fueled by three proximal motivational states: *can-do* (perceived capability and control), *reason-to* (a compelling internal reason), and *energized-to* (activated positive affect). Together, these states stimulate individuals' proactive goal generation and striving (Parker et al., 2010). Proactive work behaviors are not only influenced by distal antecedents like personality traits and skills, but also vary with more proximal cues in the work context, such as job demands and resources, as well as leadership behaviors (Parker & Wang, 2015). Specifically, job control (Ohly & Fritz, 2010), time pressure (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009), and leadership (Bakker et al., 2023), have been linked to daily proactive behaviors.

Empowering leadership, defined as a set of leadership behaviors intended to share power with followers (Vecchio et al., 2010), comprises the two distinct core behavioral dimensions autonomy support and development support (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Military leaders can provide autonomy support by delegating authority, expressing confidence in subordinates' abilities, and encouraging initiative and independent decision-making (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Lee et al., 2018; Vecchio et al., 2010). Effective delegation also requires leaders to share relevant information and align subordinates' goals with organizational objectives and mission (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015; Yukl & Fu, 1999). However, successful power-sharing involves more than delegating tasks and information sharing; it requires ongoing development support, with leaders enhancing subordinates' competence and growth through daily coaching, feedback, and opportunities for learning and skill development, enabling them to take advantage of increased autonomy and new

responsibilities effectively (Forrester, 2000; G. A.; Yukl, 2013). In sum, empowering leadership involves deliberately sharing power to the lowest level where competent decisions can be made (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), combined with motivational and developmental support, to foster employees' autonomous functioning (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). In contrast, directive leadership refers to leader behaviors "that provide followers with specific guidance regarding goals, means of achieving those goals, and performance standards" (Martin et al., 2013, p. 1374), thereby structuring task execution and limiting subordinate discretion.

The role of personal initiative and strengths use

We argue that empowering leadership promotes two key forms of proactive behavior: personal initiative and strengths use. Personal initiative, defined as a self-starting, future-focused approach to work (Fay & Frese, 2001), enables employees to anticipate challenges, seize opportunities, and actively shape their work environment. Increased autonomy creates an environment where employees feel trusted and empowered to make decisions, take risks, and develop their own solutions to problems (Lee et al., 2018), fostering employees' proactive behavior (Hornung & Rousseau, 2007; Parker et al., 2006). Moreover, by delegating responsibility and expanding subordinates' decision latitude, leaders provide employees with accountability, increasing their sense of being personally responsible for the delegated work (Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Schilpzand et al., 2018), increasing the likelihood that employees engage in proactive behavior (Fuller et al., 2006; Morrison & Phelps, 1999).

Empowering leaders also help satisfy basic psychological needs, fostering followers' autonomous motivation (Kim & Beehr, 2020; Knevelsrud et al., 2025; O'Donoghue & van der Werff, 2022), which is related to proactive behavior (Wu & Parker, 2017). By investing in employees' professional growth, empowering leaders foster subordinates' self-efficacy beliefs (Ahearne et al., 2005; Cheong et al., 2016; Kim & Beehr, 2017), making them more capable and self-assured, which in turn increases their willingness to be proactive (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Yin et al., 2017). Taken together, empowering leaders grant subordinates greater autonomy, which reinforces followers' self-efficacy and signals that they possess both the capability and discretion to act proactively, thereby strengthening their can-do motivation (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Additionally, empowering leaders foster accountability and self-determination that enhance followers' reason-to motivation (O'Donoghue & van der Werff, 2022; Wu & Parker, 2017), while also building trusting relationships and a supportive climate that elicit positive emotions and energize followers to act proactively (Cai et al., 2019; Den Hartog & Belschak, 2007; Fredrickson, 2001). In turn, employee proactivity is associated with improved performance as individuals actively select and shape situations that increase the likelihood of high performance (Seibert et al., 1999). Specifically, as situations evolve, taking initiative to adjust plans, redistribute resources, and coordinate with team members, adjacent units, and higher echelons enables effective mission execution. Moreover, by shaping the situation in favorable ways, employees enhance their sense of effectively managing their environment, which in turn increases their work engagement (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2018).

Hypothesis 1. Daily (a) leader autonomy support and (b) development support are positively related to daily employee work engagement through employees' personal initiative.

Hypothesis 2. Daily (a) leader autonomy support and (b) development support are positively related to daily employee task performance through employees' personal initiative.

Simultaneously, empowering leadership fosters an environment where employees feel encouraged to recognize and apply their unique personal strengths. Strengths can be defined as "trait-like individual characteristics that potentially allow a person to perform at his or her personal best" (van Woerkom et al., 2016, p. 385). Although strengths are generally seen as relatively stable personal characteristics, they can be cultivated through practice and further developed through relevant knowledge and skills when identified by oneself or others (van Woerkom et al., 2022). Accordingly, strengths use reflects employees' perceptions of the extent to which they can apply their individual talents in their work, based on their own understanding of what they are good at (Kong & Ho, 2016). Individuals exhibit strengths daily, and research suggests that when people use their strengths, they experience increased energy in an activity, a sense of authenticity, and optimal functioning, which is associated with higher work engagement and improved performance (Dubreuil et al., 2016; Miglianico et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2011). As strengths are expressed in episodes of personal excellence rather than through stable individual differences, their daily

enactment and use can fluctuate significantly in response to contextual factors such as organizational support (Meyers et al., 2020) and leadership (Bakker et al., 2023; Kong & Ho, 2016; Lavy et al., 2017). In a cross-sectional study, Kong and Ho (2016) found a positive relationship between leader autonomy support and employee strengths use, suggesting that empowering behaviors facilitate the effective use of personal strengths. Granting autonomy and decision-making power allows employees to align work with their natural talents, which is linked to better performance (Kong & Ho, 2016). Moreover, when leaders support employees' professional development, they help build the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed for employees to apply their strengths effectively at work (Moore et al., 2022).

In military contexts, the dynamic demands create numerous opportunities for soldiers to take advantage of their strengths – such as using creativity in mission planning or demonstrating resilience under pressure. Empowering leadership supports this by granting autonomy, providing development opportunities, and building confidence, enabling soldiers to recognize and deploy their capabilities effectively. By unlocking these personal resources, leaders can drive daily engagement and enhance performance. Therefore, we propose that empowering leadership encourages subordinates to utilize their strengths, which, in turn, is associated with increased work engagement (Bakker et al., 2019) and improved performance (Miglianico et al., 2020). Specifically, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. Daily (a) leader autonomy support and (b) development support are positively related to daily employee work engagement through employees' strengths use.

Hypothesis 4. Daily (a) leader autonomy support and (b) development support are positively related to daily employee task performance through employees' strengths use.

Synergistic effects of autonomy and development support

Because proactivity entails personal risk, autonomy alone is often insufficient: individuals should feel capable of succeeding before they take initiative (Bindl & Parker, 2011). Empowerment works by strengthening those beliefs (e.g. self-efficacy), so employees feel able to perform tasks successfully (Bandura, 1986; Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Thus, employees are more likely to engage in proactive behavior when they possess the confidence and competence to exercise the freedom they are given through self-starting, independent action (Bindl & Parker, 2011). From a daily empowerment perspective, leaders' day-to-day development behaviors, such as coaching, feedback, and skill-development, can boost subordinates' self-efficacy (Cheong et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2018), which in turn fuels personal initiative and makes them more willing to go beyond prescribed duties, implement improvements, and address problems proactively.

At the same time, ongoing development support enables employees to take advantage of greater autonomy to apply their character strengths more effectively in their work. When leaders encourage subordinates to reflect on and develop their competencies, they help provide clarity about their own capabilities and reinforce their confidence (self-efficacy). This, in turn, strengthens their ability to handle autonomy in their daily work, increasing the likelihood that they will actively use their strengths in the workplace. In the context of military operations, when a team leader gives a subordinate feedback during an exercise, highlights what the subordinate did well, and explains how to improve further by building on their natural talents, the leader strengthens the subordinate's confidence and competence to take the initiative, and apply their strengths in critical situations. A recent study (Knevelsrud et al., 2025) found that daily autonomy support was most strongly related to psychological empowerment and, indirectly, to work engagement on days when leaders also provided development support. Accordingly, we propose:

Hypothesis 5. Daily leader development support moderates the positive relationships between leader autonomy support and (a) personal initiative and (b) strengths use. These relationships are stronger when development support is high rather than low.

Hypothesis 6. Daily leader development support moderates the indirect relationship of daily leader autonomy support with daily work engagement through (a) personal initiative and (b) strengths use. These indirect effects are stronger when development support is high (vs. low).

Hypothesis 7. Daily leader development support moderates the indirect relationship of daily leader autonomy support with daily task performance through (a) personal initiative and (b) strengths use. These indirect

effects are stronger when development support is high (vs. low).

Method

Participants and procedure

A total of 263 cadets from the Norwegian Defense University College were invited to participate in the study. As part of their mandatory military leadership and basic soldier training, cadets from all three main branches of the armed forces participated in a six-week leader development course in August and September 2023. The course covered basic soldier skills, team-operating procedures, mission planning, and leadership. With leadership being the central theme, the course combined theory lessons with practical applications across multiple settings. The course concluded with a four-day field exercise in which the cadets practiced their leadership skills in a fast-paced environment through a series of team-level missions. The cadets were assigned to teams of 9 to 10 cadets based on branch, prior military experience, and age to ensure a balanced mix of backgrounds and experience within each team. Team composition remained constant throughout the entire 6-week period. During the first four weeks of the course, roles, including that of team leader, were rotated on a weekly basis. In the final two weeks of the course, when teams were mainly deployed in the field for exercises, the team leader role was typically rotated daily. This study was conducted during the last three weeks of the course. Cadets were asked to complete a daily survey every evening, typically between 8 and 11 pm, depending on the scope of the assigned duty that day. Data collection was mainly conducted via an online survey using cell phones on nights spent in garrison, supplemented by pen-and-paper during field exercises. In addition to self-assessments, cadets were asked each day to evaluate their team leader's leadership behaviors and the task performance of the same two fellow cadets. A numbered response system was implemented to facilitate unbiased ratings and prevent individuals from knowing who rated them. The linkage key was managed by faculty staff not directly involved in the research. Four cadets were selected to assist with facilitating the data collection. Their primary responsibilities were to encourage teams to complete the survey, serve as a point of contact for technical issues, and convey any concerns participants might otherwise be reluctant to voice during the data collection period. In total, 261 cadets participated in the study, resulting in an overall participation rate of 99.2%. The average daily response rate across 15 days was also high (80.6%). Due to the relatively low number of female cadets, gender was not included as a demographic variable to maintain anonymity. However, the gender distribution of the sample was provided by the course staff, and among the invited cadets, the sample comprised 63 females (24%) and 200 males (76%). Thirteen participants did not answer questions about their demographic characteristics. The average age of the 248 participants who answered the demographics-related questions was 21.6 years (SD = 2.25). Of these participants, 217 (87.5%) had at least one year of military service, whereas 31 (12.5%) had no prior military experience.

Measures

All study variables were measured using adapted short versions of validated scales. The items were modified to reflect daily behavior and experience. To prevent survey fatigue, we reduced the number of items in the scales (Ohly et al., 2010). All measures used the same 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Daily empowering leadership was measured using a 10-item short form of the empowering leadership scale (ELS) developed by Amundsen and Martinsen (2014), comprising the two dimensions of autonomy support (six items) and development support (four items). Example items are "Today, my leader gave me authority over issues within my area of responsibility." (autonomy support), and "Today, my leader guided me on how I can improve my way of working." (development support). The within-person reliabilities were $\omega = 0.76$ for autonomy support and $\omega = 0.77$ for development support, while the between-person reliabilities were $\omega = 0.93$ and $\omega = 0.96$, respectively.

Daily directive leadership was assessed with six items from Pearce and Sims (2002), covering the two dimensions of assign goals, and instruction & command. An example item for assign goals is "Today, my leader established my performance goals," and for instruction and command: "Today, my leader gave me instructions about how to do my work." The composite scale demonstrated adequate reliability, with $\omega = 0.76$ at the within-person level and $\omega = 0.89$ at the between-person level.

Daily personal initiative was measured using four items from Frese et al. (1997). Example items are "Today, I have actively attacked problems" and "Today, I have taken initiative immediately, even when others did not." The scale's reliability was $\omega = 0.77$ at the within-person level and $\omega = 0.95$ at the between-person level.

Daily strengths use was assessed using 4 items from the Strengths Use Behavior Scale developed by van Woerkom et al. (2016). Example items include "Today, I have applied my personal qualities in my job" and "Today, I have used my strengths at work." The reliability was ω = 0.91 at the within-person level and ω = 0.99 at the between-person level.

Daily work engagement was assessed using the 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Breevaart et al., 2012). Example items for each subdimension: "Today, I felt strong and vigorous" (vigor), "Today, my job inspired me" (dedication), and "Today, I got carried away when I was working" (absorption). Reliability was ω = 0.89 at the within-person level and ω = 0.95 at the between-person level.

Daily task performance was assessed using four items from Williams and Anderson (1991) that measure in-role performance. Each day, every cadet was independently rated by two fellow team members, and the ratings were averaged to form the daily task performance score. Example items are "Today, the cadet has adequately completed assigned duties" and "Today, the cadet has performed the tasks that were expected of him/her." Inter-rater agreement, assessed from two separate peer ratings of each cadet's daily task performance, was acceptable (AD = .28) based on the average deviation index (Burke & Dunlap, 2002). Reliability was based on the four daily task performance items averaged across the two peer raters and showed good internal consistency at both the within-person (ω = 0.91) and between-person (ω = 0.99) levels.

Strategy of analyses

Given the multilevel structure of the data with daily measurements (Level 1; $N = 3156$) nested within individuals (Level 2; $N = 261$), we conducted multilevel analyses using MPlus version 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998). A multilevel parallel mediation model at the within-person level was estimated using the observed scores for all variables. Predictor variables at level 1 were person-mean centered, removing all between variance prior to modeling, while level 2 predictors were grand-mean centered (Preacher et al., 2010). Additionally, we included the interaction term between autonomy- and development support as a level 1 predictor. Predictors were allowed to correlate at their respective levels.

To investigate how changes in personal initiative and strengths use influence work engagement and task performance, we controlled for the previous day's levels of both the mediators and outcome variables (Gabriel et al., 2019). We allowed correlations between the mediators and pre-score variables at level 1, as well as between the mediators, personal initiative, and strengths use at level 2. The significance of the indirect relationships between empowering leadership dimensions and outcomes was tested by obtaining 95% confidence intervals for the indirect paths. To test the interaction effects, simple slope analyses were conducted at ± 1 standard deviation (SD) from the mean to examine the influence of development support on autonomy support (Preacher et al., 2006). Descriptive statistics were retrieved using Mplus version 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998).

Results

Descriptive statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between all study variables are presented in Table 1. To assess the appropriateness of multilevel analysis, we computed the between-person intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for all study variables (Preacher et al., 2010). As displayed in Table 1, ICC values ranging from .30 to .39 indicate substantial within-person variability, highlighting the dynamic and fluctuating nature of leadership, employee behaviors, and attitudes.

Table 1. Means, standard deviation, and correlations for all study variables.

	ICC	M	SD_{within}	$SD_{between}$	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Directive Leadership	.39	3.28	0.54	0.43		.52***	.73***	.25***	.28***	.34***	−.01
2. Autonomy Support	.34	3.74	0.47	0.33	.31***		.58***	.51*	.53***	.55***	.10
3. Development Support	.35	3.07	0.64	0.46	.45***	.43***		.41***	.30***	.37***	−.02
4. Personal Initiative	.39	3.34	0.53	0.42	.12***	.26***	.14***		.54***	.55***	.12
5. Strengths Use	.39	3.26	0.66	0.52	.15***	.36***	.18***	.46***		.65***	.22**
6. Work Engagement	.38	3.38	0.56	0.44	.15***	.30***	.16***	.38***	.45***		.07
7. Task Performance (other-rated)	.30	4.14	0.42	0.27	−.02	.02	−.02	.10***	.10***	.10***	

Note. $N = 261$ participants, 15 days, and $N = 3155$ observations. Correlations below the diagonal are level 1 within (day) correlations, and correlations above the diagonal are level 2 between (person) correlations. ICC = intraclass correlation coefficient.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

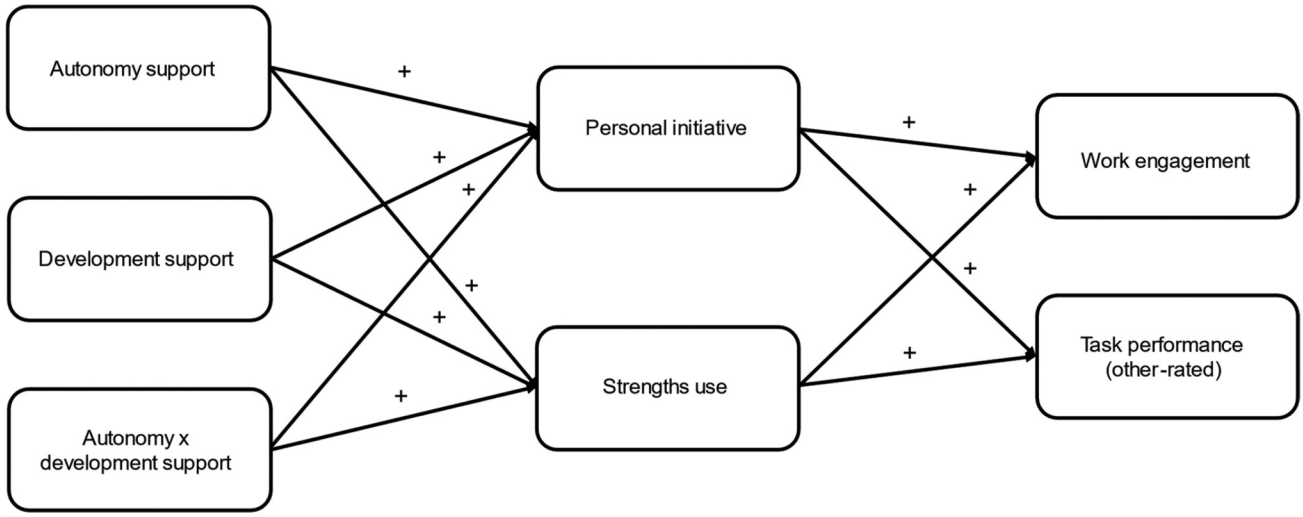

Figure 1. Hypothesized daily relationships.

Preliminary analyses

Prior to testing the hypothesized relationships in Figure 1, several Multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analyses (MCFA) were performed to assess the discriminant validity of the study variables in our model. Work engagement and directive leadership were modeled as second-order factors, each with its respective subdimensions and observed indicators. The remaining five latent factors were modeled with their respective observed indicators. The model yielded an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi2 = 4868.878$, DF = 1206, CFI = 0.928, TLI = 0.921, RMSEA = 0.031), with good fit at the within-person level ($SRMR^{within} = 0.040$), and a marginal fit at the between-person level ($SRMR^{between} = 0.081$). With one exception, all standardized factor loadings were within an acceptable range (Hair et al., 2019). One indicator for leader autonomy support at the within-person level showed a marginal factor loading of 0.43, whereas all remaining indicators demonstrated acceptable loadings, ranging from 0.54 to 0.91 at the within-person level and from 0.72 to 1.00 at the between-person level. At the within-person level, the latent factors for autonomy support, development support, and directive leadership were not significantly correlated with task performance. All other latent factors showed significant positive intercorrelation, ranging from 0.11 to 0.62. The results indicate that the study variables in our model are empirically distinct constructs. In line with recommendations from Gabriel et al. (2019), we estimated plausible alternative models to assess comparative model fit. First, we estimated a five-factor model combining all three leadership constructs (autonomy support, development support, and directive leadership) into a single leadership factor. The model demonstrated a poorer fit to the data than the hypothesized model ($\chi2 = 5194.961$, DF = 1224, CFI = 0.922, TLI = 0.915 RMSEA = 0.032, $SRMR^{within} = 0.051$, $SRMR^{between} = 0.104$). Next, we tested a six-factor model merging personal initiative and strengths use into a single proactive behavior factor. This model also showed a poorer fit to the data ($\chi2 = 7130.312$, DF = 1218, CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.039, $SRMR^{within} = 0.050$, $SRMR^{between} = 0.113$). The MCFA results suggest that the hypothesized model fits the data better than the alternative models, supporting the distinctiveness of the constructs in our model.

Hypothesis testing

The hypothesized structural model, controlling for directive leadership, linear day trend, and prior-day levels of the mediators and outcomes, showed an acceptable overall fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 271.579$, DF = 51, CFI = 0.965, TLI = 0.927, RMSEA = 0.033), with a good fit both at the within-person level ($SRMR^{within} = 0.033$) and the between-person level ($SRMR^{between} = 0.044$). The relationships among the study variables, with standardized estimates for the complete model, are shown in Figure 2, and the indirect effect estimates with their confidence intervals are reported in Table 2.

In Hypothesis 1, we proposed that daily leader autonomy support and development support would positively relate to daily work engagement through personal initiative. Results partially confirmed the hypothesis, specifically, leader autonomy support ($\beta = .052$, $p < .001$) was positively related to work engagement via personal initiative, whereas leader development support ($\beta = .002$, $p = .575$) was not. This means that Hypothesis 1 was partly supported.

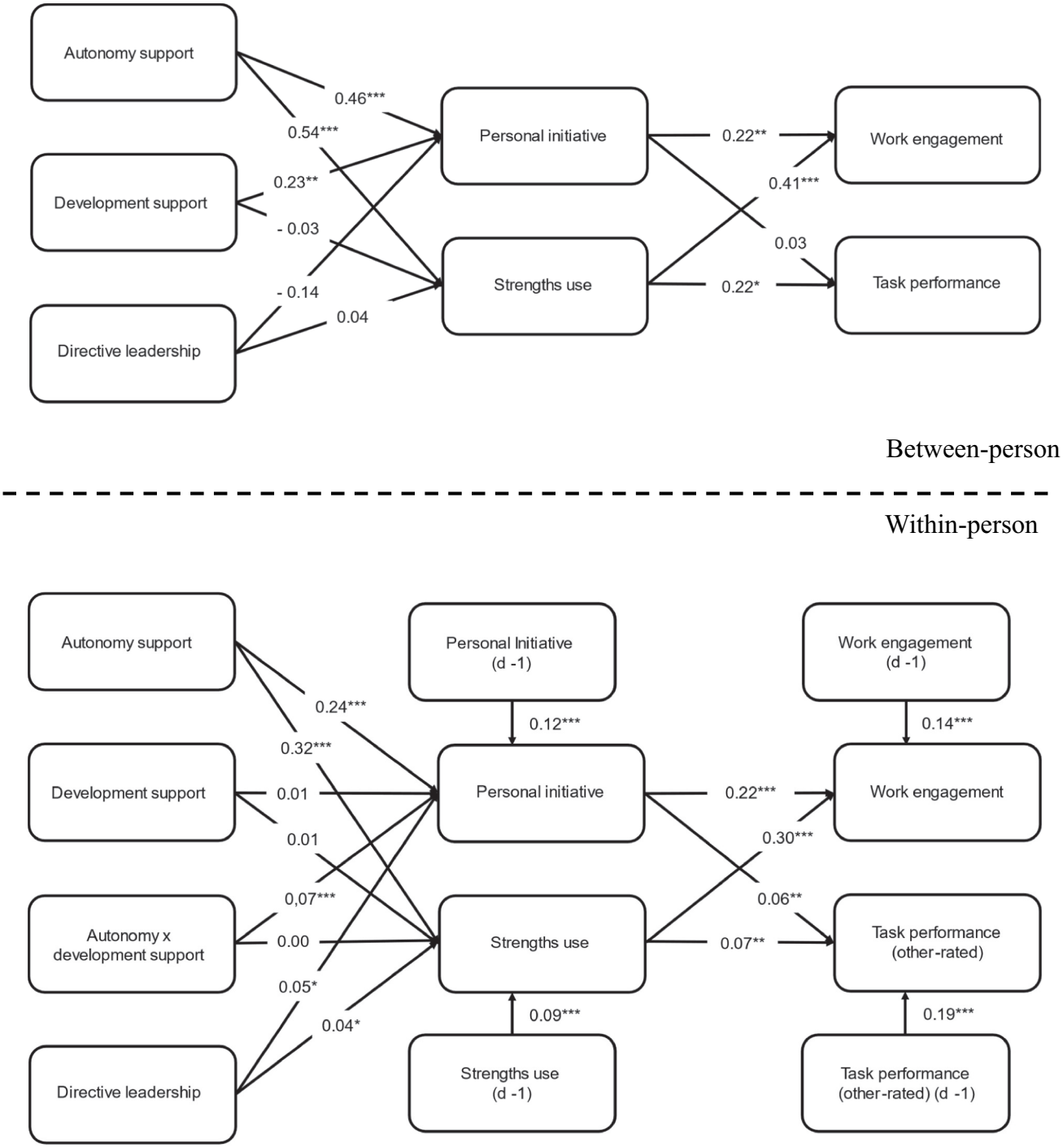

Figure 2. Parameter estimates in the hypothesized multilevel model. *Note.* *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

In Hypothesis 2, we predicted that daily leader autonomy support and development support would positively relate to task performance, mediated by personal initiative. Results showed that personal initiative mediated the effect of autonomy support ($\beta = .014$, $p = .009$), but not development support ($\beta = .001$, $p = .582$), on task performance. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was also partly supported.

In Hypothesis 3, we predicted that daily leader autonomy support and development support would be positively related to work engagement through employee strengths use. Results indicated that strengths use mediated the relationship of autonomy support ($\beta = .096$, $p < .001$) with work engagement, but not development support ($\beta = .003$, $p = .604$). Hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

Table 2. Model 1. Maximum likelihood parameter estimates, standard errors, and confidence intervals for indirect effects.

	Work Engagement					Task Performance				
	Standardized			95% CI		Standardized			95% CI	
Indirect effect x→ m → y	Est.	SE	*p*	Lower	Upper	Est.	SE	*p*	Lower	Upper
Autonomy Support → y										
Total	.249	.019	<.001	.212	.286	.039	.021	.060	−.002	.080
Total indirect	.148	.010	<.001	.129	.167	.037	.007	<.001	.023	.051
Autonomy Support → Initiative → y	.052	.006	<.001	.040	.064	.014	.005	.009	.003	.024
Autonomy Support → Strengths Use → y	.096	.008	<.001	.080	.112	.023	.007	.002	.009	.038
Autonomy Support → y	.101	.018	<.001	.065	.137	.002	.022	.922	−.041	.045
Development Support → y										
Total	.022	.020	.275	−.017	.061	−.026	.022	.239	−.069	.017
Total indirect	.006	.009	.522	−.011	.023	.001	.002	.522	−.003	.006
Development Support → Initiative → y	.002	.004	.575	−.006	.011	.001	.001	.582	−.002	.003
Development Support → Strengths Use → y	.003	.006	.604	−.009	.015	.001	.001	.608	−.002	.004
Development Support → y	.016	.018	.366	−.019	.052	−.027	.022	.212	−.070	.016
Autonomy Support*Development Support → y										
Total	−.035	.018	.050	−.070	.000	.024	.020	.214	−.014	.063
Total indirect	.016	.008	.037	.001	.032	.004	.002	.076	.000	.009
Autonomy Support*Development Support → Initiative → y	.015	.004	<.001	.007	.023	.004	.002	.029	.000	.008
Autonomy Support*Development Support → Strengths Use → y	.001	.005	.811	−.009	.012	.000	.001	.812	−.002	.003
Autonomy Support*Development Support → y	−.051	.016	.001	−.083	−.020	.020	.020	.306	−.018	.058
Directive Leadership → y										
Total	.051	.019	.007	.014	.089	−.021	.021	.326	−.062	.020
Total indirect	.023	.008	.006	.006	.039	.006	.002	.014	.001	.010
Directive Leadership → Initiative → y	.010	.004	.020	.002	.018	.003	.002	.076	.000	.006
Directive Leadership → Strengths Use → y	.013	.006	.025	.002	.024	.003	.002	.065	.000	.006
Directive Leadership → y	.028	.017	.099	−.005	.062	−.026	.021	.207	−.067	.015

Hypothesis 4 stated that daily leader autonomy support and development support would be positively related to task performance, mediated by strengths use. The analysis revealed that autonomy support ($\beta = .023$, $p = .002$) was positively related to task performance through strengths use, while development support ($\beta = .001$, $p = .608$) was not. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was partially supported.

In Hypothesis 5, we proposed that daily leader development support would moderate the positive relationship between daily leader autonomy support and (a) personal initiative, and (b) strengths use. We predicted these relationships to be more pronounced when development support was high rather than low. The analysis showed that the interaction between daily development support and

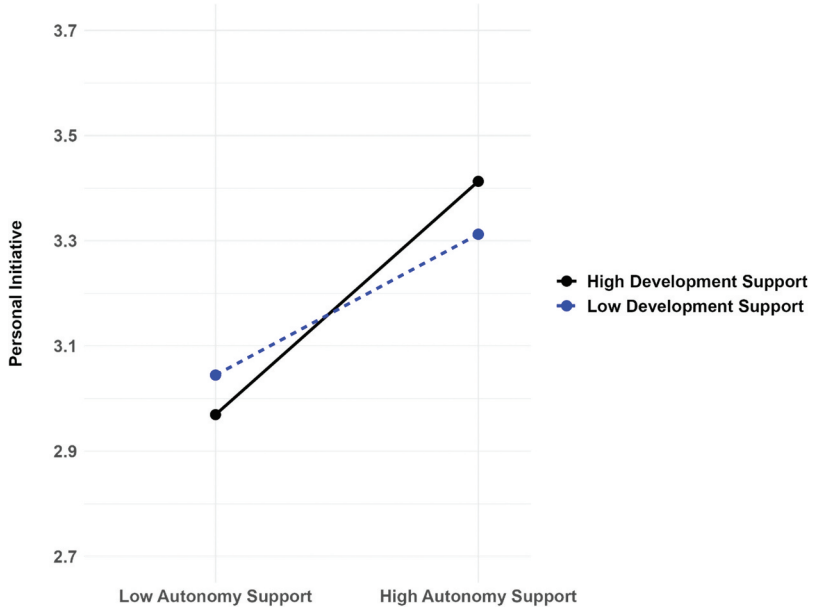

Figure 3. Interaction effect between daily leader autonomy support and development support on followers' daily personal Initiative.

autonomy support predicted personal initiative (β = .069, $p < .001$), but not strengths use (β = .004, p = .811). Simple slope analyses at ± 1 standard deviation indicated a stronger positive relationship between daily leader autonomy support and personal initiative when leaders provided high (vs. low) development support. Specifically, as predicted, Figure 3 shows a steeper slope for participants reporting high levels of daily leader development support (B = .349, z = 10.979, $p < .001$) compared with those reporting low levels (B = .211, z = 8.110, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 5 was partially supported.

In Hypothesis 6, we posited that daily leader development support would moderate the indirect relationship between daily leader autonomy support and daily work engagement, mediated by (a) personal initiative, and (b) strengths use. We expected these indirect effects to be stronger when development support was high. Multilevel analyses revealed a significant moderated mediation effect through (a) personal initiative (β = .015, $p < .001$), but not (b) strengths use (β = .001, p = .811) on work engagement. Testing conditional indirect effects at ± 1 standard deviation showed that the indirect effect of daily leader autonomy support on work engagement through personal initiative was stronger when development support was high (B = .081, $p < .001$) than when it was low (B = .049, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 6a was supported, whereas 6b was not.

Finally, Hypothesis 7 proposed that daily leader development support would moderate the indirect relationship between daily leader autonomy support and daily task performance, mediated by (a) personal initiative and (b) strengths use. We anticipated that the effects would be stronger when development support was high. The results indicated that development support amplified the positive effect of autonomy support on task performance through (a) personal initiative (β = .004, p = .029), but not through (b) strengths use (β = .000, p = .812). Testing conditional indirect effects at ± 1 standard deviation further revealed that the indirect effect of daily leader autonomy support on task performance was somewhat stronger when development support levels were high (B = .016, p = .010) rather than low (B = .010, p = .011). Although the moderated indirect effects were small, Hypothesis 7a was supported, while 7b was not supported. A table (Table S3) summarizing the hypothesis testing is provided as an electronic supplement.

Discussion

NATO doctrine identifies empowered leadership as the basis of mission command, enabling decentralized decision-making and maximizing subordinate initiative to seize emerging opportunities (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022). Building on existing research regarding empowering leadership and proactivity theory, we extend this work by examining how these processes unfold daily, capturing short-term fluctuations in leader behavior and subordinates' proactive responses. Our findings highlight daily autonomy support as key to subordinates' personal initiative and strengths use, both of which were uniquely related to work engagement and task performance. Although daily development support was not directly related to personal initiative or strengths use, it *strengthened* the effect of daily autonomy support on personal initiative, suggesting that skill-building input helps subordinates make fuller use of their decision-making discretion. This moderating effect did not apply to strengths use, indicating that drawing on one's strengths may be less dependent on daily developmental input. Finally, controlling for daily directive leadership did not alter these patterns, underscoring the unique contribution of daily autonomy support to proactive functioning. Next, we discuss key findings in more detail.

Theoretical contributions

With this study, we make three contributions to the literature. First, our study offers a more granular understanding of empowering leadership by modeling daily autonomy support and daily development support simultaneously. Despite the multidimensional nature of empowering leadership, previous studies have, with two exceptions (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015; Knevelsrud et al., 2025), treated empowering leadership as unidimensional, thereby overlooking potential differences in mediators, moderators, and outcomes at the component level (Cheong et al., 2019). By investigating how autonomy support and development support independently and jointly relate to subordinates' personal initiative and strengths use, we clarify how empowering leaders stimulate proactive behaviors in operational settings. The results indicate that while autonomy support is vital, it is more effective when paired with competence and skill-building support, increasing subordinate personal initiative. This aligns with proactivity theory and motivational theories, suggesting that autonomy creates the opportunity for proactive behavior, whereas development support strengthens the capacity and self-efficacy required to both act in the first place and to act effectively (Knevelsrud et al., 2025; Parker et al., 2006). Importantly, while job autonomy is generally associated with well-being, recent research indicates that sudden within-person increases in autonomy can

lead to greater emotional exhaustion (Clinton & Conway, 2025). Similarly, empowering leadership has been associated with increased employee stress, as delegation can increase demands and create role ambiguity (Cheong et al., 2016). Our findings suggest that providing daily competence-building support helps employees make effective use of increased daily job autonomy, mitigating potential negative effects by ensuring they have the skills and confidence needed to handle new and dynamically changing challenges (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Clinton & Conway, 2025). These nuanced findings advance prior work by demonstrating that empowering leadership is a multifaceted set of complementary behaviors that, when aligned, increases the likelihood that employees engage in proactive behaviors contributing to mission success in military contexts.

Second, we contribute to proactivity theory by identifying specific behavioral pathways linking empowering leadership to both the experience of work (engagement) and a more distal outcome, namely other-rated task performance. Earlier meta-analyses (Cheong et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2018) have found that empowering leadership is more strongly related to proximal, attitude- and motivational-based outcomes, with psychological empowerment and self-efficacy being the most frequently examined mechanisms. However, its effectiveness has been questioned, as prior studies have reported a weak, non-significant relationship with performance outcomes (Cheong et al., 2016; Srivastava et al., 2006). Our study helps clarify this inconsistency by shifting attention from broad motivational states to specific proactive behaviors, showing that daily empowering leadership is associated with followers' work engagement and other-rated task performance *through* personal initiative and strengths use. Our findings are largely consistent with Bakker et al. (2023), who demonstrated that daily personal initiative and strengths use are critical behavioral pathways linking daily transformational leadership to work engagement and task performance.

Third, by capturing day-to-day fluctuations in leader behavior and employee responses, we show that empowering leadership is dynamically associated with followers' proactive behavior. Research using within-person designs in the empowering leadership literature is limited (Kelemen et al., 2020). Only a few studies have examined followers' daily perceptions of empowering leadership and its relationship with proactive behavior (Schilpzand et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2020). By capturing the dynamic, moment-to-moment processes that empowering leadership is theorized to activate, we show that empowering leadership fluctuates significantly and that these fluctuations are dynamically related to proactive behavior. Moreover, accounting for daily directive leadership in our analyses allowed us to establish the conceptual and empirical distinctiveness of empowering leadership, ensuring that its effects are not simply attributable to the absence of directive behavior. Similar to our findings, a field experiment by Martin et al. (2013) found that both empowering and directive leadership increased work-unit core task performance, but only empowering leadership increased proactive behaviors.

Limitations

Like all research, our study has several limitations. Thus, caution is necessary when interpreting the results. First, although diary data were collected over fifteen days, there was no time lag between measuring the independent and dependent variables, limiting the ability to establish causality. We cannot rule out reciprocal effects – e.g., that proactive subordinates influence leaders' daily empowering behaviors. Future studies should try to obtain predictor and criterion variables at distinct time points or use methodological separation (Ohly & Gochmann, 2017). Future studies may also benefit from incorporating more objective or context-specific indicators of task performance, such as formal course evaluations or performance benchmarks. Second, our study mainly depends on self-reported daily experiences, which may raise concerns about common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, daily leadership (which involved different cadets on different days) was rated as perceived by followers, and each team member's task performance was rated by two fellow team members, providing a more objective measure of individual task performance. Additionally, predictor variables were person-mean centered to reduce the likelihood of biased estimates of level-1 regression coefficients (Gabriel et al., 2019). Moreover, a comprehensive Monte Carlo simulation showed that interactions are unlikely to be caused by common method variance (Evans, 1985). Third, as our sample comes from a specific military setting, generalizability to other branches of the military, civilian organizations, and settings may be limited. Cadets in basic training and leader development face tasks and challenges that are not fully representative of high-stakes or combat environments characterized by acute threat, severe time pressure, or complex mission demands. Real-life combat environments may influence the benefit of empowering versus directive leadership. Finally, because the present study was conducted in a setting

characterized by frequent daily interaction between leaders and subordinates, our findings may not generalize beyond the lower tactical level or to units where such interactions are less frequent. Effects may depend on regular and close contact between leaders and subordinates. Future research could address this limitation by examining empowering leadership behaviors in such contexts using weekly or longitudinal designs. Nevertheless, the rotating team leadership structure in our study may help isolate the effects of leadership behavior from leader personality (Oh & Berry, 2009) and leader-subordinate relationship quality (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017), allowing us to capture the psychological process more accurately.

Practical implications

Our study offers valuable insights for practitioners exercising leadership within the mission command framework. First, daily autonomy support is positively related to proactive behavior and performance. Military leaders should regularly allow subordinates discretion in how they approach tasks or solve problems and encourage decentralized decision-making. However, since increased autonomy may also have potential downsides, including role ambiguity and stress (Cheong et al., 2016), leaders should align delegated responsibility and decision-making authority with subordinates' tolerance for autonomy and level of competence. Our study shows that autonomy should be paired with deliberate skill-building efforts, as daily development support amplifies the benefits of autonomy support for personal initiative. Together, these daily relationships indicate that leadership development programs should teach leaders how to allow daily decision-making discretion, give immediate feedback, reinforce, and build competence daily.

Second, as the relationship between daily autonomy support and both task performance and work engagement was somewhat stronger via strengths use than through personal initiative, military leaders should adopt strengths-based approaches to their leadership practice. Leaders who identify and place their subordinates in positions where their strengths can be used and developed not only promote their well-being but also enhance task performance. To further enhance the benefits of strengths use, character strengths can also be considered in personnel selection by aligning individuals' strengths with the specific requirements of the position.

Finally, integrating daily autonomy support and development support, together with insights from proactivity theory, into the course curriculum could provide cadets with a practical framework for daily leadership practice. As the course offers repeated opportunities to translate theory into action, this could help them develop the habit of creating conditions that foster subordinates' initiative and strengths use in the dynamic situations they are likely to face as military leaders.

Conclusion

To cope with the uncertain and dynamic nature of modern military operations, many Western militaries have adopted the mission command philosophy. Drawing on empowering leadership and proactivity theory, we examined how daily leader behaviors within the mission command framework translate into subordinates' proactivity. Our study shows that daily leader autonomy support is positively associated with subordinates' daily personal initiative and strengths use, which, in turn, are related to increased work engagement and better performance. Moreover, to maximize the positive effects of daily autonomy support, leaders need to couple it with skill development and guidance, further amplifying subordinates' personal initiative and, subsequently, increasing work engagement and task performance. Thus, when putting mission command into practice in daily leadership, military leaders should combine autonomy-granting practices with targeted development and coaching.

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ORCID

Hans-Christian Knevelsrud http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3440-4092

Data availability statement

Due to Norwegian Armed Forces data policies the data cannot be made available in a public repository but will be made available to all colleagues upon reasonable request to corresponding author.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools (specifically, OpenAI's ChatGPT) were used to support the writing process by assisting in text refinement, grammar, and clarity. All content,

including the theoretical arguments, study design, analytical decisions, and interpretations, was developed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript. The AI tool did not perform any intellectual or scholarly work that would warrant authorship.

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