The role of the service manager's perceived career success in frontline employees' learning processes and service improvement

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Abstract

Previous literature fails to offer firms consistent guidelines on how successful managers may enhance or reduce the potential to learn from frontline service encounters. In addressing this research gap, this study contributes to the frontline employee (FLE) literature by 1) investigating the contingency role of managers' perceived career success in FLEs' personal learning process, 2) distinguishing between FLEs' service-related and context-related personal learning, and 3) accounting for both exploratory and exploitative learning. This study uses two datasets: an exploratory dataset on 253 FLEs and a multilevel and multisource dataset on 444 FLEs and 55 service managers. Findings reveal that managers who are unsuccessful in their careers still stimulate frontline learning processes, but their subordinates generally use only their service-related personal learning to generate ideas for service improvement. Successful managers are better able to guide their FLEs in how to turn context-related learning into service improvement.

Keywords: manager's perceived career success, frontline employees, personal learning, ideas, service improvement.

1. Introduction

Frontline employees (FLEs) are a key resource in the service development and improvement process (Bowers, 1989; Santos-Vijande et al., 2016). In FLEs' daily work, they interact with customers, peers, and superiors. These interactions help employees acquire new knowledge, skills, and competencies, which add to their cognitive knowledge structures and accelerate personal learning (Noe et al., 2014). These personal learning processes may affect overall unit or company performance, especially when FLEs generate ideas to improve the frontline service (Ye et al., 2012). Despite the obvious importance of FLEs' ideas in improving service performance, this effect has received surprisingly little scholarly attention (see Lages & Piercy, 2012, for a notable exception). To explore the phenomenon further, this study uncovers the personal learning process that precedes FLEs' generating ideas for service improvement.

This study focuses on the role of the manager in FLEs' learning processes and specifically considers whether managers perceive themselves to be generally successful—that is, their perceived career success. Although this concept has received some attention in personnel psychology, it has not been considered in frontline service settings. To illustrate its importance, an exploratory study was conducted in addition to the main study. In the exploratory study, 65.6% of the responding 253 FLEs from the United Kingdom indicated that they care "somewhat" to "a lot" about their manager's career success. Asked for the reason, 33.3% reported that they admire their manager and hence care about their well-being, and 36.5% stated that their successful manager helps or inspires them to learn and grow in their own career.

Apart from the practical relevance of studying the role of perceived career success in frontline services, extant literature provides an unsolved theoretical puzzle by outlining two conflicting views regarding the effect of perceived career success on personal learning

processes. On the one hand, a set of studies emphasizes that managers play a conducive role in FLEs' learning processes (Auh et al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2016; Lam et al., 2010). This is especially true for direct managers (Costanzo & Tzoumpa, 2008), who have close contact with FLEs and therefore can facilitate the reuse of knowledge across service encounters to generate excitement about everyday learning (e.g., Chandler et al., 2020), to encourage actions that make changes persist (e.g., Guchait et al., 2016), and to organize competence development activities at work (e.g., Ellström & Ellström, 2018). Accordingly, the expertise and referent power of successful managers may provide an important motivational force prompting subordinates to learn and work toward service improvement (Elangovan & Xie, 1999; 2000). On the other hand, managers with a more successful track record may prefer creating value from monetary resources (e.g., funds to invest in technology) to capitalizing more fully on human resources (Mannor et al., 2016). In accordance with this view, successful managers may block FLEs' learning processes because of the high expectations and performance pressure these managers put on their subordinates (cf. Ng & Feldman, 2014).

Although it is important for firms to know whether successful managers enhance or reduce the potential to learn from frontline service encounters, these opposing viewpoints in the literature do not point to a definite answer. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role of a manager's perceived career success in FLEs learning and how FLEs translate these learnings into ideas for service improvement. More specifically, this study aims to address the following research questions: 1) What are the antecedents to FLEs' personal learning? 2) How does FLEs' personal learning relate to the generation of ideas for service improvement? 3) How does a manager's perceived career success moderate (i.e., facilitate or hamper) the relationship among FLEs' personal learning, its antecedents, and the generation of ideas for service improvement? As a consequence of these aims, this study explicitly differentiates between the exploratory front end of the learning process (i.e., describing how

FLEs *gather* knowledge) and the exploitative back end of this process (i.e., describing how FLEs *apply* their gathered knowledge, such as through generating ideas).

This study contributes to the literature in various ways. First, while numerous studies have investigated the role of organizational learning, research on FLE learning has remained limited. Table 1 provides an overview and shows that most studies on FLE learning (and learning orientation) have focused on how these employees either gather (i.e., explore) or apply (i.e., exploit) knowledge. A holistic perspective on the personal learning process in the frontline is rare—Turley and Geiger (2006) engage in a qualitative inquiry, while Harris et al. (2005) focus on the correlations between individual traits. Also unique is this study's focus on innovation-related outcomes, as most studies relate learning (orientation) and individual knowledge processing to (sales) performance. Only Ye et al. (2012) consider how generated knowledge may lead to updated service procedures, but they do not actively consider the manager's role in this process. This study thus expands this body of literature by adopting a holistic approach and examining both the front and back ends of the FLE learning process simultaneously.

Second, to investigate management's involvement in FLE learning, this study borrows the personnel psychology concept of a manager's perceived career success and applies it to the service management domain. This study's holistic approach to FLE learning enables reconciliation of the conflicting views in the literature outlined above. Perceived manager's career success is shown to act as an inhibitor in the front-end process (where FLEs explore new knowledge) and as a facilitator in the back-end process (where FLEs exploit gathered knowledge). In other words, the effect of perceived manager's career success depends on the type of individual learning process.

Third, this study builds on extant studies on frontline learning because it differentiates between employees acquiring and applying knowledge that is service related (i.e., about the

operational and interpersonal elements of service provision) and context related (i.e., about the interdependence or connectedness of one's job to peers and other departments). The results illustrate that the two types of personal learning have differential antecedent and outcome structures.

Finally, in addition to an exploratory dataset of 253 FLEs, authors gathered a unique multilevel and multisource dataset on FLEs and their managers. This method differentiates it from studies on frontline learning that take a qualitative (e.g., Wägar, 2008), a scenario-based lab survey (e.g., Wirtz, Tambyah, & Mattila, 2010), and/or a single-level field survey (e.g., Lages & Piercy, 2012) approach.

=== Insert Table 1 about here ===

2. Theoretical background

This study builds on social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) to reveal which factors may drive FLEs' personal learning and what role a manager's perceived career success may play in the frontline learning process. Furthermore, the focus of the study is on the different types of personal learning.

2.1 Service-related and context-related personal learning

The literature identifies two important types of personal learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). The first, service-related personal learning, involves an increased understanding of the operational and interpersonal elements of service provision. Through this type of learning, FLEs acquire new knowledge, skills, and abilities, which enable better service delivery. FLEs may thus develop a better ability to listen, conduct root-cause analyses, plan service encounters, and solve problems more robustly. This may lead to the insight, for example, that customers more fully engage with a firm's service when employees educate the customer on the service's key elements (Bell et al., 2017; van der Heijden et al., 2013). Second, context-related personal

learning involves an increased understanding of the interdependence or connectedness of one's job to peers and other departments. Insights about the relationships between actors in the work environment help FLEs contextualize the self in relation to others (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). For instance, knowing more about the processes of the R&D department helps FLEs better understand which of their insights could contribute to the firm's innovations (Melton & Hartline, 2013).

When employees learn more about their service task and the context of their service job, they have more opportunities to exchange experiences and ideas. This exchange represents the generation of ideas for service improvement, and is the "employee's contribution and encouragement of co-workers to contribute ideas and suggestions for service improvement as well as the employee's sharing of creative solutions for customer problems with co-workers" (Lages & Piercy, 2012, p. 216).

2.2 Formalized organizational structure, empowering leadership, and perceived career success

Social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) suggests that individuals develop attitudes and behaviors through a variety of learning experiences and interactions in several contexts. Understanding the transition from the covert cognitive process of personal learning to the overt behavioral process of idea generation requires taking into account 1) the context in which learning takes place and 2) the interactions between individuals (Elkjaer, 2003).

First, this study acknowledges the importance of context by considering the role of a formalized organizational structure in FLEs' learning processes. Formalized organizational structure is important in social learning theory as well as frontline practice. Frontline service environments are often dynamic and uncertain, and clear service rules and guidelines provide structure to this context (Schepers et al., 2012). Formalized organizational structure is defined

as the degree to which an organization's management presents rules, standard policies, and procedures to FLEs as prescribed ways to perform their jobs (Hage & Aiken, 1967; Hartline et al., 2000). Without service rules and guidelines, FLEs may feel lost. This can reduce their ability and motivation to look beyond their current state of knowledge and skills (Netemeyer et al., 2005).

Second, in the frontline environment, employees continually interface between customers and managers. Although FLE–customer interaction is a well-researched topic in frontline learning (Schepers et al., 2016; Marinova et al., 2017; Yee et al., 2018), how FLEs' interactions with managers shape FLEs' learning processes has received less attention from the academic community (Lam et al., 2010). This gap is remarkable, as many frontline settings have intense manager involvement (e.g., store managers may overlook retail employees), and interactions with other knowledgeable and successful people are among the most important ways individuals learn (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). To clarify the nature of these interactions, this study focuses on the concepts of empowering leadership and managers' perceived career success.

Empowering leadership is exercised when a manager provides subordinates with full information and high levels of initiative and trusts employees' judgments in decision-making (Ahearne et al., 2005). Such practices enhance the meaning and significance of FLEs' work by fostering participation in decision-making. This is valuable in a frontline setting where responses to idiosyncratic customer needs are hard to capture in scripts.

In addition, a manager's career success reflects "the positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one (manager) has accumulated as a result of their work experiences" (Judge et al., p. 486). Manager career success may be regarded from an objective perspective or a subjective viewpoint (Abele & Spurk, 2009b). Scholars have often regarded objective career success as an individual's progress in an organization or occupation reflected

in extrinsic measures, such as responsibility (Poole et al., 1993), salary, hierarchical status (Abele & Spurk, 2009a; b), and promotions (Judge & Bretz, 1994; Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Subjective, or perceived, career success has been assessed with intrinsic measures, such as individuals' perceptions of their career success (Arthur et al., 2005; Turban & Dougherty, 1994), their affective responses to their careers (Greenhaus et al., 1990), and their career satisfaction (Abele & Spurk, 2009a). While objective and subjective career success measures are correlated, the concepts are distinct (Ng et al., 2005).

Subjective career success has become increasingly important because focusing on only objective achievements is unlikely to make employees happy (Allen, 2020). Furthermore, scholars are increasingly focusing on subjective career success because of its power to explain the motivation and behavior of the self and others. Although personal in nature, one's subjective career success is likely to be noticed by others because it correlates with personality traits (e.g., extroversion), organizational commitment, and social integration at work (Bozionelos et al., 2011; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001; Seibert et al., 2001). Subjective career success may thus affect the work attitudes and behaviors of peers and subordinates. Therefore, this study adopts a subjective perspective when conceptualizing and operationalizing a manager's perceived career success.

3. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

The conceptual model in Figure 1 summarizes the previous discussion and shows how formalized organizational structure and empowered leadership are antecedents to personal learning, which in turn may lead to the generation of ideas for service improvement. The model also illuminates the moderating role of a manager's perceived career success.

== Insert Figure 1 about here ==

3.1 Main effects in the frontline learning process

Social learning theory posits that individuals learn by observing and understanding their role models, thus adopting these models' values and behavioral patterns. When FLEs' direct managers actively seek to obtain and share new knowledge through "leading by example" (Arnold et al., 2000), their subordinates are likely to develop a similar attitude toward learning (Jada et al., 2019). Empowering leadership thus encourages knowledge exchanges (e.g., Lee et al., 2014) and peer coaching (e.g., Ely et al., 2010), which provide FLEs with opportunities to acquire job-related skills (Ahearne et al., 2005).

In addition, empowering leadership provides FLEs with ownership of and responsibility for the service job (Auh et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017) as well as the flexibility to bend and break rules to offer superior customer service (Slåtten & Mehmetoglu, 2011). This ownership, responsibility and flexibility motivate FLEs to actively search outside their extant repertoire of service actions for better solutions. Through trial and error, employees discover which "unusual" service actions work and which do not. Workers keep the successful elements of this on-the-job experimentation and integrate this new knowledge with their existing knowledge base (Schepers et al., 2016), leading to enhanced personal learning. Such exploratory actions outside the extant repertoire may apply to both service-related elements (e.g., changing the order of questions asked of customers to obtain better or more information on their needs) and context-related elements (e.g., contacting colleagues to ask for their experiences with a particular customer) of the frontline job. In sum, empowering leadership enhances both types of personal learning. In formal terms, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: Empowering leadership is positively related to an FLE's (a) service-related personal learning and (b) context-related personal learning.

Given the importance of context to social learning theory, this study focuses on

formalized organizational structure because it provides a clear and stable basis for employees' learning processes. This basis also enables individuals to determine how their work results and methods align with the articulated policies. Formalized organizational structure may thus help FLEs perceive a need to learn more about their work environment to bring their performance in line with formalized work goals. Indeed, Krasman (2011) finds that employees proactively seek information to improve their work performance when formalization, standardization, and centralization increase. Formalization's directive function also allows employees to focus their attention and effort on optimizing (i.e., learning about) goal-relevant activities (Locke & Latham, 2002).

Despite these anticipated positive effects of formalized organizational structure on personal learning, the marketing control literature stresses the risk of work rigidity under ever-increasing formalization (Hartline et al., 2000). When levels of formalization become too high, FLEs may become so consumed with following rules and guidelines that they do not look beyond these standardized procedures. The limited motivation to question current ways of working constrains the potential for personal learning.

Thus, the positive (linear) effect of formalization on personal learning is likely to decline when formalization further increases, and this relationship may even become negative when formalization becomes too rigid. Such a relationship aligns with previous studies reporting that the clarity of the task and resultant (under)activation relate to a person's performance in an inverted U-shape pattern (Scott, 1966; Singh, 1998). Therefore, it is hypothesized that

H2: The relationship between formalized organizational structure and an FLE's (a) service-related personal learning and (b) context-related personal learning takes the form of an inverted U-shape.

New insights by FLEs can lead to enhanced company performance when individuals take the initiative to generate ideas for service improvement and articulate their insights to peers and managers (Ye et al., 2012). Processing individual FLE knowledge with others can help identify the weak points in current service solutions and address typical trade-offs, such as productivity versus quality (Singh, 2000). FLEs generally have a strong sense of urgency regarding sharing and validating lessons with their coworkers (Auh et al., 2014; Ye et al., 2012). As these employees develop new routines and solutions, they use their social ties within the organization to share, test, and further refine their thoughts (Enkel et al., 2017; de Jong & den Hartog, 2010).

Highlighting the motivation to generate and validate ideas, Pan et al. (2011) show that employees who experience personal learning "have more positive reactions to their work" (p. 266). Through those positive reactions, FLEs gain confidence in their abilities and skills and feel more comfortable confronting others with their knowledge (Matzler & Mueller, 2011), even though they are aware that the process is sometimes difficult, risky, and time-consuming (e.g. Szulanski, 2000). Personal learning may also lead FLEs to generate ideas for service improvement because this makes them more visible to their managers and increases their chance of receiving positive evaluations or a bonus (Luria et al., 2009; Yoo, 2013). Furthermore, FLEs who have gathered new insights might make their work-related goals more challenging by setting higher targets for themselves (Button et al., 1996). Generating ideas for service improvement may help them achieve those targets. Therefore, it is hypothesized that

H3: An FLE's (a) service-related personal learning and (b) context-related personal learning are positively related to their generation of ideas for service improvement.

3.2 Moderating effect of managers' perceived career success

The extant literature has paid little attention to the role of manager career success in the process of frontline service employee individual learning. Therefore, an exploratory survey study was conducted to better understand the facilitating or inhibiting role of manager career success in that process and empirically validate the extant theoretical arguments. More specifically, the 253 UK FLEs recruited were asked how successful they felt that their direct manager had been in their career and whether (and *why*) they cared about this. The appendix provides an illustrative selection of FLE quotes answering the "why" question. The quotes jointly illustrate that the sampled FLEs felt that the career success of their manager was relevant to their personal on-the-job learning.

The front end of the learning process focuses on knowledge acquisition, which requires an exploration process. Previous research has demonstrated that stress and pressure may thwart exploratory actions (Sijbom et al., 2018). The perception of a manager's career success may be a source of such pressure, as it communicates high performance expectations to the manager's subordinates. The exploratory study's findings illustrate that FLEs with successful managers (i.e., rating their success 4 or 5 on a five-point scale) scored significantly higher (t = -4.223, p < .01) on the statement "Your manager sets high expectations for your performance" (N = *124*, M = 3.91, SE = .078) than respondents with less successful managers (N = 129, M = 3.43, SE = .087). Likewise, respondents who regarded their managers as being successful scored on average significantly higher (t = -4.431, p <.01) on the statement "Your manager sets high formal standards for your performance" (N = *124*, M = 3.79, SE = .081) than respondents with less successful managers (N = 129, M = 3.24, SE = .094).

Scholars have shown that successful managers typically work more hours than unsuccessful managers, make work more central in their lives, have greater work engagement, and are more conscientious (Ng & Feldman, 2014; Ng et al., 2005). Because successful

managers are also proactive, have high social status, and are "visible" in the workplace, others notice these managers' ethos. According to social learning theory, FLEs generally see their managers as role models and consequently infer that their managers expect them to have similar work values (e.g., put in as many hours or act proactively). This phenomenon may increase employees' perceptions of performance pressure. Such perceptions deplete the motivational resources that empowering leaders provide because individuals perceive fewer opportunities to experiment with new routines and reflect on their current knowledge (Hirst et al., 2008). Indeed, Zhang et al. (2017) find that with higher levels of performance pressure, the motivational effects of autonomy on employees' work engagement fade. Following this line of reasoning, perceived manager career success weakens the relationship between empowering leadership and personal learning:

H4: Managers' perceived career success moderates the relationships between empowering leadership and FLEs' (a) service-related personal learning and (b) context-related personal learning, such that these relationships become weaker as a manager's perceived career success increases.

Additionally, this study posits that employees working under successful managers are more likely to regard the formalized organizational structure as limiting their learning opportunities because of the increased performance pressure from their managers. Higher performance pressure leads employees to become more performance oriented (Harris, 2005; Mowen, 2000), such that they are primarily motivated by receiving recognition from their manager. Hence, they perceive the formalized organizational structure as a set of rules that they need to follow carefully to receive rewards. In contrast, managers who have lower levels of career success put less performance pressure on their employees. Subordinates working under such managers are more likely to see formalized organizational structures as a basis for

effective service delivery but not as rules set in stone. Therefore, it is expected that managers' career success weakens the positive relationship between formalized organizational structure and personal learning:

H5: Managers' perceived career success moderates the relationships between formalized organizational structure and FLEs' (a) service-related personal learning and (b) context-related personal learning, such that these relationships become weaker as a manager's perceived career success increases.

The back end of the FLE learning process reveals how new insights help generate ideas for service improvement. In this exploitative process, a manager's power can play an important role in FLEs' decisions regarding whether to share new ideas with others (Luria et al., 2009). For instance, the service manager must take an FLE's ideas through the "organizational trenches" to transform frontline learning into firm- or unit-level service improvements. This is in line with the exploratory study's finding that, on average, respondents with successful managers scored significantly higher (t = -8.184, p <.01) on the statement "More successful managers use their power in the organization to make the voices and ideas of employees be heard" (N = *124*, M = 3.33, SE = .102) than respondents with less successful managers (N = 129, M = 2.16, SE = .100).

In frontline settings, market-related employee insights may have to be communicated to the marketing department, while the R&D department should know about product- and service-related insights from the front line. Managers need advanced communication skills to effectively transfer FLE insights to these departments, because other departments may dismiss frontline knowledge as irrelevant (Melton & Hartline, 2010). Managers with a successful career possess these skills (Ng et al., 2005), and therefore, their subordinates can be more confident that frontline insights will actually impact the organization. The notion that FLEs' ideas can

make a difference in unit or even firm performance could motivate FLEs to transform what they have learned about their job and its context into ideas for service improvement (Luria et al., 2009). Therefore, it is hypothesized that once FLEs have engaged in personal learning, successful managers are more capable of stimulating these employees to generate ideas for service improvement than before training:

H6: The positive relationships between FLEs' (a) service-related personal learning and (b) context-related personal learning and their generation of ideas for service improvement becomes stronger as a manager's perceived career success increases.

4. Method

4.1 Sample and data collection

In line with the research goal to examine theoretically grounded research hypotheses and consistent with previous empirical studies on FLE learning and innovation (e.g., Schepers et al., 2016), this study adopted a positivistic research paradigm that defined the research process and design, data collection, and data analysis. A deductive and quantitative methodology was used to ensure maximum objectivity and generalization of the findings. Because recent research shows that employee learning and service improvements are important in providing high-quality service in omnipresent business-to-consumer settings (e.g., healthcare employees, Garmann-Johnsen et al., 2020; flight attendants, Tuzovic et al., 2018; hotel employees, Baradarani & Kilic, 2018), this study set out to test the hypotheses using data gathered from a chain of food outlets and restaurants in the UK. Restaurants are a high-contact service setting with a substantial level of interaction between FLEs and their customers (Hartline et al., 2000). Such settings are typically conducive to personal learning (Schepers et al., 2016). Furthermore, this research design involved the collection of a multilevel and multisource dataset on FLEs and their direct managers.

An envelope that contained a cover letter, questionnaire, and prepaid return envelope was sent to all FLEs in the company who agreed to participate in the study. Employees were assured that their responses would remain confidential to encourage honest answers to the items in the questionnaire. The employees were allowed to complete the questionnaire during working hours. Of the 2,324 questionnaires distributed to employees, 740 were validly returned, yielding a response rate of 31.8%.

Data were collected from the FLEs' managers using a similar procedure as that described above. Of the 177 questionnaires distributed to managers, 85 were validly returned, resulting in a final response rate of 48%. Matching employee and manager data reduced the effective sample to 55 managers and 444 FLEs. Each manager was responsible for one unit. The majority of managerial respondents were female (58.2%) and 25 years old or older (63.6%), and all managers worked on a full-time basis (100%). The majority of FLEs were female (58.1%), 24 years old or younger (54.1%), and worked on a full-time basis (61.0%).

In addition, the exploratory study mentioned earlier recruited 253 UK FLEs, who were asked how successful they felt that their direct manager had been in their career and how this related to their own on-the-job learning, among other questions. The respondents came from the following industries: retail (24.9%); healthcare and social assistance (17.0%); hotel and food services (12.3%); finance and insurance (9.9%); transporting and warehousing (4.3%); arts, entertainment, and recreation (3.2%); and other service industries (28.4%).

4.2. Measures

In the main data collection, two types of questionnaires were developed, one for FLEs and another for their direct line managers. Both questionnaires included multi-item reflective measures drawn from the extant literature. The authors of this study went to great lengths to ensure each concept's coverage of the theoretical domain and representativeness of the

business processes, while minimizing the potential for ambiguity in the items. Pretesting of the questionnaire was executed in five sequential stages. First, one academic and the HR director of the company provided comments on the initial version of the questionnaire. Second, six focus groups with three to six FLEs were organized. The researchers encouraged participants to indicate any problematic items. Third, two academic experts assessed the content validity of the (revised) items. Fourth, three focus groups with four FLEs were conducted to check the draft version of the questionnaire. Finally, four academics were asked to reassess the content validity of the final items. Employees involved in the focus groups were not included in the final sample of this study.

The questionnaire asked FLEs about their service-related and context-related personal learning by using six items borrowed from Lankau and Scandura (2002). Respondents answered these items using a seven-point Likert-type scale. The generation of ideas for service improvement of FLEs was based on Lages and Piercy (2012) and Bettencourt and Brown (2003). Answers were provided on a seven-point semantic differential scale ("not at all characteristic of me" [1] to "extremely characteristic of me" [7]).

The manager questionnaire measured empowering leadership with three items from Cook et al.'s (1984) scale. Furthermore, formalized organizational structure was assessed with three items of Hartline et al.'s (2000) measure based on Hage and Aiken's (1967) work. Answers to both sets of items were provided on seven-point Likert-type scales. To operationalize a manager's perceived career success, Turban and Dougherty's (1994) four-item scale was employed, which includes both self-referent comparisons (i.e., personal aspirations, standards, and previous achievements) and other-referent comparisons (i.e., reflecting on coworkers' success). A seven-point semantic differential scale ("very unsuccessful" [1] to "very successful" [7]) was used to record the respondents' answers.

The control variables included were FLEs' level of education, industry experience (in

years), full-time/part-time status (as a dummy variable), the dyadic tenure with their manager (in months), and the FLE's mastery orientation. The latter used Janssen and Van Yperen's (2004) scale and reflects employees' tendency to focus on developing competence and skills. This trait may imply a significant predisposition to learn on the job. The model also controls for a manager's level of education and industry experience (in years).

4.3. Measurement validation

Two confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted to assess the measurement properties of this study's measures; one CFA used manager data, and the other used employee data. Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of the constructs. Table 3 reports the results of the CFAs, including construct reliabilities and item-level factor loadings. This study involved a nested data structure with 444 FLEs (Level 1) nested within 55 managers (Level 2). Due to the limited sample size (n = 55) for Level 2, a Bayesian CFA for the set of manager-based constructs (cf. Hoofs et al., 2018) was conducted. Within Bayesian CFA, the posterior predictive p-value (ppp) checks the proportion of iterations for which the replicated χ^2 exceeds the observed χ^2 (for other implementations of the ppp, see, e.g., Gelman et al., 2013; Lee, 2007). The results revealed an acceptable model fit: observed $\chi^2(30) = 13.638$; replicated $\chi^2(30) = 41.881$; and ppp = .154 (cf. Hoofs et al., 2018). In addition, the "regular" CFA for the employee-based measures (n = 444) also yielded a satisfactory model fit, $\chi^2(87) = 177.516$, p = .00; comparative fit index = .96; Tucker-Lewis index = .95; standardized root mean square residual = .042; and root mean square error of approximation = .048.

The composite reliabilities varied between .84 and .91 for both employee- and manager-rated measures, and the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct approached or exceeded .50, supporting the measures' reliability and convergent validity. The measures also exhibited adequate discriminant validity: The AVE exceeded the average variance shared with

any other study construct.

=== Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here ===

4.4 Results

To estimate the hypothesized relationships, multivariate multilevel regression using MLwiN 2.27 (Rashbash et al., 2012) was employed because the data were hierarchical (each manager was responsible for a unit of FLEs) and contained a multilevel structure; multiple FLEs (Level 1 = FLE) were nested under a manager (Level 2 = manager). The sample contained 55 groups, where one group corresponded to one direct manager and multiple FLEs. Multilevel regression scholars (e.g., Snijders & Bosker, 2011; Hofmann, 1997) argue that a minimum sample size of 30 at the highest level (i.e., Level 2) yields reliable regression estimates. Therefore, the Level 2 sample of 55 groups in this study is arguably an appropriate size. In addition, estimating a single multivariate multilevel regression model instead of a set of unrelated multilevel regression models offers various advantages: 1) This approach yields an overall model fit statistic (chi-square test), 2) it takes into account the relationships among the dependent variables, 3) it generally better controls for Type I errors, and 4) it has a higher level of power (Hox, 2002).

A model with control variables only (not reported here) was used to determine if extending the model with additional variables would significantly improve the model fit (i.e., decrease the -2 log likelihood of the model). The extensions then involved adding the main effects variables (Model 1) and the moderating effects of the manager's perceived career success (Model 2). The variables used in the interactions were mean-centered. The final multivariate multilevel regression comprised a system of three interrelated sub-models of FLEs' service-related personal learning, FLEs' context-related personal learning, and FLEs' generation of ideas for service improvement, expressed as follows:

(1) $Y_{SRPLij} = \beta_{SRPL0} + \beta_{SRPL1}EDUCF_{RPLij} + \beta S_{RPL2}INDUSTRYF_{RPLij} + \beta_{SRPL3}PTE_{SRPLij} + \beta_{RPL4}MASTEROR_{SRPLij} + \beta_{SRPL5}DYADTEN_{SRPLij} + \beta_{SRPL6}EDUCM_{SRPLj} + \beta_{SRPL7}INDUSTRYM_{RPLj} + \beta_{SRPL8}EMPOW_{SRPLj} + \beta_{SRPL9}FOS_{SRPLj} + \beta_{SRPL10}FOS^2{}_{SRPLj} + \beta_{SRPL11}CAREER_{SRPLj} + \beta_{SRPL12}\left(EMPOW_{SRPLj} \times CAREER_{SRPLj}\right)_{SRPLj} + \beta_{RPL13}\left(FOS_{SRPLj} \times CAREER_{SRPLj}\right)_{SRPLj} + u_{SRPL0j} + \varepsilon_{SRPL0ij}$

(2) $Y_{CRPLij} = \beta_{CRPL0} + +\beta_{CRPL1}EDUCF_{CRPLij} + \beta_{CRPL2}INDUSTRYF_{TPLij} + \beta_{CRPL3}PTE_{CRPLij} + \beta_{CRPL4}MASTEROR_{CRPLij} + \beta_{CRPL5}DYADTEN_{CRPLij} + \beta_{CRPL6}EDUCM_{CRPLj} + \beta_{CRPL7}INDUSTRYM_{CRPLj} + \beta_{CRPL8}EMPOW_{CRPLj} + \beta_{TPL9}FOS_{CRPLj} + \beta_{CRPL10}FOS^2{}_{CRPLj} + \beta_{CRPL11}CAREER_{CRPLj} + \beta_{CRPL12}\left(EMPOW_{CRPLj} \times CAREER_{CRPLj}\right)_{TPLj} + \beta_{CRPL13}\left(FOS_{CRPLj} \times CAREER_{CRPLj}\right)_{CRPLj} + u_{CRPL0j} + \varepsilon_{CRPL0ij}$

(3) $Y_{GSIij} = \beta_0 + +\beta_{GSI1}EDUCF_{IIij} + \beta_{GSI2}INDUSTRYF_{GSIij} + \beta_{GSI3}PTE_{GSIij} + \beta_{GSI4}MASTEROR_{GSIij} + \beta_{GSI5}DYADTEN_{GSIij} + \beta_{GSI6}EDUCM_{GSIj} + \beta_{GSI7}INDUSTRYM_{GSIj} + \beta_{GSI8}RPL_{CSIj} + \beta_{II9}TPL_{GSIj} + \beta_{GSI10}CAREER_{GSIj} + \beta_{GSI11}\left(EMPOW_{GSIj} \times CAREER_{GSIj}\right)_{GSIj} + \beta_{GSI12}\left(FOS_{GSIj} \times CAREER_{GSIj}\right)_{GSIj} + u_{GSI0j} + \varepsilon_{GSI0ij}$

where *i* denotes the FLE, and *j* indicates the manager. In addition, *SRPL*, *CRPL*, and *GSI* refer to the FLE's service-related personal learning, context-related personal learning, and generation of ideas for service improvement, respectively; *EDUCF*, *INDUSTRYF*, *PTE*, and *MASTEROR* denote the FLE's level of education, industry experience, work status (0 = full-time employee; 1 = part-time employee), and mastery orientation, respectively; *DYADTEN* reflects the FLE's dyadic tenure with their manager; *EDUCM* and *INDUSTRYM* refer to the manager's level of education and industry experience, respectively; *EMPOW*, *FOS*, and *CAREER* reflect the manager's level of empowering leadership, formalized organizational structure, and perceived career success, respectively.

The FLE-level error terms $\varepsilon_{SRPL0ij}$, $\varepsilon_{CRPL0ij}$, and ε_{CSI0ij} are normally distributed, with an average of 0 and variance σ^2. In addition, the random parameters u_{SRPL0j}, u_{CRPL0j}, and u_{CSI0j} are multivariate normal distributed over the managers, with an expected value of 0 and variance τ.

The u_{SRPL0j}, u_{CRPL0j}, and u_{CSI0j} parameters reflect unique deviations by manager *j* from the overall effects on the subsequent intercepts (β_{SRPL0}, β_{CRPL0}, and β_{CSI0}), accounting for the manager-level predictor variables. The specifications of the coefficients β_{SRPL0}, β_{CRPL0}, and β_{CSI0} concern random parameters (i.e., allowed to vary across managers), but the other βs are constrained to be invariable across managers (i.e., no random term specified on Level 2) to ensure the stability of the parameter estimates (de Jong et al., 2004).

Finally, the dependent variables of the three equations (Y_{SRPLij}, Y_{CRPLij}, and Y_{CSIij}) were allowed to covary with the dependent variables of the directly preceding equations. In particular, covariance terms for the random parameters u_{SRPL0j}, u_{CRPL0j}, and u_{CSI0j} at the manager level were specified. At the FLE level, specified covariance terms applied only to $\varepsilon_{SRPL0ij}$ and $\varepsilon_{CRPL0ij}$, which reflect the covariance between the two dependent variables (Y_{SRPLij} and Y_{CRPLij}) that are closely related conceptually. In theory, covariance terms could be specified among all ε_{0ij}s. However, from a statistical point of view, this practice is not recommended because it negatively affects model convergence and results in instability in the parameter estimates (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

Table 4 reveals the results. Adding the main effects variables (Table 4, Model 1) increases model fit significantly, $\chi^2(8) = 391.577$, $p < .01$, over the model with control variables only. Including the interactions that feature a manager's perceived career success (Table 4, Model 2) also leads to a significant increase in model fit, $\chi^2(9) = 19.455$, $p < .05$, compared to Model 1. Thus, Model 2 is used to formally test the hypotheses.

=== Insert Table 4 about here ===

Empowering leadership exerts a significant effect on FLEs' service-related personal learning ($\beta = .022$, $p < .01$) and context-related personal learning ($\beta = .015$, $p < .05$), in support of H_{1a} and H_{1b}, respectively. In addition, formalized organizational structure has a significant negative quadratic effect on FLEs' service-related personal learning ($\beta = -.068$, $p < .01$) and context-

related personal learning (β = -.066, $p < .05$), which is in line with H_{2a} and H_{2b}, respectively. Finally, FLEs' service-related personal learning has a significant positive relationship with contribution to service improvement (β = .605, $p < .01$), but the relationship between context-related personal learning and generation of ideas for service improvement appears to be non-significant (β = .119, *n.s.*). Thus, support was found for H_{3a}, but not H_{3b}.

In addition, and consistent with H_{4a}, a manager's perceived career success negatively moderates the relationship between empowering leadership and service-related personal learning (β = -.004, $p < .05$), such that FLEs' empowering leadership is less influential on service-related personal learning when career success is high. Figure 2, panel A plots this relationship for easy interpretation. The moderating effect of a manager's perceived career success on the relationship between empowering leadership and context-related personal learning is not significant (β = -.004, *n.s.*), failing to support H_{4b}.

=== Insert Figure 2 about here ===

Contrary to expectations, the manager's perceived career success does not moderate the relationship between formalized organizational structure and service-related personal learning (β = .007, *n.s.*), failing to support H_{5a}. In support of H_{5b}, the manager's perceived career success negatively moderates the relationship between formalized organizational structure and context-related personal learning (β = -.028, $p < .05$). Figure 2, panel B, plots this relationship. Because the hypothesized and supported main effect of formalized organizational structure on context-related personal learning takes the shape of an inverted U, the study also tested whether the manager's perceived career success moderated this non-linear effect. This interaction was ultimately not significant (β = .008, *n.s.*), and therefore, only the two-way interaction effect is plotted and interpreted.

Finally, the results reveal that the manager's perceived career success does not moderate the relationship between service-related personal learning and generation of ideas for service

improvement (β = -.039, *n.s.*), failing to support H_{6a}. In support of H_{6b} (β = .60, $p < .05$), the manager's perceived career success positively moderates the relationship between context-related personal learning and generation of ideas for service improvement, such that the relationship is stronger when perceived career success is high. Figure 2, panel C visually supports this conclusion. Figure 3 summarizes the results for the hypothesized relationships.

=== Insert Figure 3 about here ===

5. Discussion

This study indicates that a manager's perceived career success is an important contingency factor influencing how empowering leadership and formalized organizational structure lead to FLEs' personal learning and how learning, in turn, stimulates the generation of ideas for service improvement. While the study employed previously validated concepts and scales, it addressed an important gap in the literature because it adopted a holistic perspective (i.e., including both explorative and exploitative stages of frontline learning), differentiated between service- and context-related learning, and focused on innovation-related outcomes in a service setting.

Specifically, the results reveal that empowering leadership is a less important antecedent of service-related personal learning for FLEs working under successful managers than for FLEs working under unsuccessful managers. Successful managers may implicitly put performance pressure on FLEs, depleting the cognitive and time resources that empowering leadership provides (Zhang et al., 2017). This finding contributes to recent advances in empowering leadership research. For instance, Cheong et al. (2016) show that empowering leadership may have a positive effect on employees' job performance through self-efficacy and motivation, and a negative effect through job-induced tension and pressure. However, they do not identify the factors that determine which route prevails. This study found that the manager's perceived career success may be such a factor.

Surprisingly, empowering leadership's positive effect on context-related personal learning is not affected by the perceived career success of the manager. The dynamic frontline environment might drive employees to first develop a better understanding of their peers and other departments before thinking about the service elements of their job. Indeed, with demanding—or even aggressive—customers, organizational support is an important basis for survival in the job (Kashif et al., 2017). Therefore, learning about the context of a frontline job would be an essential prerequisite for FLEs, and they would likely use the resources from empowering leadership to acquire this knowledge, regardless of any managerial pressure.

The manager's perceived career success also alters the relationship between formalized organizational structure and personal learning. This finding adds more detail to literature that investigates the effects of formal structures on employees' idea generation (e.g., Globocnik & Salomo, 2014) and creative and proactive behaviors (e.g., Dutton et al., 2001; Ohly et al., 2006). These studies acknowledge that formalized organizational structures may have positive as well as negative effects on such employee behaviors, which corresponds well with this study's inverted U-shaped relationship. Figure 2, panel B visualizes this relationship for different levels of the manager's career success—an element that the aforementioned studies do not consider. Especially when there is little formalization in the front line, successful managers stimulate more context-related personal learning in their FLEs. A lack of formalization means that FLEs have few guidelines to structure their work processes and become more dependent on their manager for clues on task prioritization (Globocnik & Salomo, 2014). Successful managers may stress social networks and political skills to followers (Seibert et al., 2001b), which may motivate FLEs to invest in context-related personal learning in these situations. When formalization increases, differences between successful and unsuccessful managers fade. In line with the hypothesis and activation theory (Scott, 1966), (excessively) high levels of formalization limit exploration opportunities and fail to motivate

employees to look beyond the current state of affairs.

Finally, this study adds detail to findings from previous research in marketing and innovation, which conclude that FLEs generally have a strong sense of urgency to share, validate, and refine their learning with their coworkers (Auh et al., 2014; de Jong & den Hartog, 2010; Enkel et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2012). While this study finds that service-related personal learning unconditionally stimulates FLEs' generation of ideas for service improvement, context-related personal learning does not increase FLEs' idea generation. Previous literature may explain this pattern of effects by revealing that FLEs have a natural tendency to put the customer first when faced with typical frontline trade-offs, such as quality, productivity, and innovation considerations (Marinova et al., 2008; Schepers et al., 2016). FLEs may be especially motivated to make constructive suggestions to peers or managers based on their service-related personal learning because it directly relates to problem-solving and customer interaction and thus puts the customer first.

This study further adds to the above-mentioned studies by illustrating that context-related personal learning influences FLEs' idea generation only when they work for successful managers. Such managers typically underline the importance of visibility in a social network, and their subordinates are likely to better understand the value of such strong relationships. Hence, these FLEs may be more motivated to think about how their new context-related learning could help colleagues and the service organization as a whole and, at the same time, establish their own importance in the network. They may therefore be more willing to engage in the generation of ideas for service improvement.

The results did not confirm that a manager's perceived career success affects the relationship between service-related personal learning and the generation of ideas for service improvement. This outcome could be due to two counteracting forces. On the one hand, successful managers may have the power to influence key actors in the organization to act on

feedback from the front line. This is an important consideration for FLEs to share ideas with others (Luria et al., 2009). On the other hand, as successful managers raise expectations, FLEs may feel that an idea or suggestion pertaining to their service job is too mundane and refrain from contributing that idea to service improvement processes. This point will be discussed in the future research section.

6. Conclusion and further research

6.1 Theoretical implications

This research offers important contributions to the literature. In general, this study bridges the literature on personal learning and FLE boundary-spanning behaviors. Work on personal learning has focused on the role of leaders and mentors in stimulating an individual's personal learning process (Hirschfeld et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2016; Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Liu & Fu, 2011; Pan et al., 2011), but, to the best of the authors' knowledge, previous studies have not investigated the role of leadership or formalization or how personal learning influences individual contributions to service improvement. Studies on boundary-spanning behaviors of frontliners have focused on uncovering the antecedents of employees' service delivery efforts, brand advocacy, and initiatives to improve service levels (cf. Barnes et al., 2015; Yoo et al., 2014). However, the role of managers in these processes has been underinvestigated. Thus, this work cross-fertilizes these strands of research.

Beyond this high-level contribution, this study also offers specific theoretical contributions answering three specific research questions: 1) What are the antecedents to FLEs' personal learning? 2) How does FLEs' personal learning relate to the generation of ideas for service improvement? 3) How does a manager's perceived career success moderate (i.e., facilitate or hamper) the relationships between FLEs' personal learning, its antecedents, and the generation of ideas for service improvement?

By answering the first and second research questions, this study contributes to the frontline literature by providing in-depth insights into frontline learning processes. Indeed, only a few studies have focused on how on-the-job insights can be transferred from the front line to the organization (e.g., Bell et al., 2010; Nembhard & Tucker, 2011; Ye et al., 2012). At the same time, extant studies in frontline environments have considered employees' learning processes (e.g., Ye et al., 2012) and innovative behavior (e.g., Stock et al., 2017) but have not distinguished among different types of personal learning. This study distinguishes between service-related and context-related knowledge generated on the front line and demonstrates that these two types of personal learning have divergent antecedent structures as well as differential effects on FLEs' generation of ideas for service improvement. It thus provides valuable insight for companies looking to harness frontline-driven innovation.

Furthermore, this study offers several contributions by addressing the third research question. To start, this study introduces the concept of a manager's perceived career success in frontline service management. Although the concept of manager career success has a long-standing history in psychology (Judge et al., 1995; Ng et al., 2005; Spurk et al., 2016) and management research (Bozionelos et al., 2011; Seibert et al., 2001a; Turban & Dougherty, 1994), to the best of the authors' knowledge, it has not been considered in the frontline service domain.

In addition, in its conceptual grounding and empirical results, this study solves an ongoing debate in the literature on the role of a manager's career success in subordinates' learning and innovation activities. Because this is the first study to simultaneously investigate the exploratory and exploitative stages of individual learning in the front line, it reveals that successful managers' expertise and referent power may provide an important motivational force in the exploitative stage. Manager career success effects in the exploratory stage are more nuanced and less straightforward.

Finally, because of the difficulty in obtaining sufficient respondents at different hierarchical organizational levels of the frontline learning process, many studies employ a qualitative approach (e.g., Wägar, 2008), a scenario-based lab survey approach (e.g., Wirtz et al., 2010), and/or a single-level field survey approach (e.g., Lages & Piercy, 2012) to frontline learning. In contrast, this study relied on a unique multilevel and multisource dataset on FLEs and their managers.

6.2 Managerial implications

Service organizations can realize continuous service improvement in the front line by considering an easily assessable characteristic of service managers: their perceived career success. Unobtrusive questions in recruitment interviews or yearly performance review talks can reveal whether managers consider themselves successful (e.g., "Compared to your coworkers, how successful is your career?"). Managers who are low in career success are advised to empower their subordinate frontliners. Providing FLEs with full information, enabling high levels of initiative, and trusting employees' judgments in decision-making are essential principles of empowering leadership. It is important for these managers not to penalize employees for making poor on-the-job choices and not to make or influence service operational decisions. Only in this way will employees be encouraged to increase their understanding of how best to communicate with customers or organize elements of the service job more effectively.

Regardless of whether managers perceive themselves as successful, empowering leadership helps employees to better understand how their job fits into the bigger picture of the organization. The resultant insights may lead to better cooperation between sales and service departments (Alavi et al., 2018) or between R&D and service departments (Ernst et al., 2010) and thus generate higher quality products or services.

Managers who perceive themselves as less successful should also provide more structure to FLEs' work than their successful counterparts. In particular, increased structure can improve FLEs' understanding of their work context and environment (note that the peak of the curve in Figure 2, panel B is slightly more to the right for managers with low career success). Hence, clarifying standard customer policies and service procedures for FLEs is important. This is especially relevant because employees increasingly struggle to find and read their handbooks and often do not know how to handle demanding or aggressive customers. Making service guidelines easily accessible on an FLE's mobile device may be an effective strategy (GuideSpark, 2014). While less successful managers should help employees find and remember the firm's service policies, they should not strictly enforce them. Such strong formalization of policies is less effective in boosting employee learning. Striking a balance between formal policies and flexibility is important for both successful and unsuccessful managers in stimulating learning about the service job.

Finally, service improvement from the front line only materializes when individual learning transforms into active contributions. FLEs are naturally inspired to share their new insights about how to better serve customers. Insights about how the service job relates to the organization as a whole lead employees to generate ideas for service improvement when they work under a successful manager. Hence, although service companies with relatively unsuccessful managers (e.g., start-ups with inexperienced supervisors) can stimulate frontline learning processes, they do need to hire more experienced, successful managers to turn learning into actual service improvement. As doing so is not always a viable strategy, it is important to find alternative strategies for FLEs to generate new ideas for service improvement from context-related insights. Options may include organizing interdepartmental networking activities or providing FLEs with inspirational stories of how better cooperation between departments benefits the service job and the firm's customers.

6.3 Limitations and future research

Despite the merits of this study, it has several limitations that also provide avenues for future research. This study builds on previous research that has identified correlations between manager career success and both personality traits and leadership styles (e.g., Grimland et al., 2012; Judge et al., 1995; Ng & Feldman, 2014; Ng et al., 2005; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). However, the exact psychological mechanisms underlying the moderating effects of manager career success on the frontline learning process should still be empirically validated by future research. This may be especially valuable for the potential counterbalancing elements of perceived career success; career success may put performance pressure on FLEs but also give employees confidence that the manager has the power to influence organizational processes.

The hospitality sector is often used for data collection in FLE research (e.g., Hartline et al., 2000; Slåtten & Mehmetoglu, 2011), but more complex settings such as healthcare (Marinova et al., 2008) or field service (Schepers et al., 2016) are also conducive to employee learning. Such settings further allow for a distinction between contributions to service improvements and contributions to product improvements, which may be especially interesting to substantiate the added value of frontline service in product-driven businesses.

Innovation-related learning tools and methods are gaining traction with academics (Hasu et al., 2014) and practitioners (Power, 2011; McGregor & Doshi, 2018). Future research could further build on the findings of this study by shedding light on various innovative learning tools and methods, such as community learning events (Locock et al., 2020) that direct managers can use to inspire exploitative and explorative FLE learning so they can innovate or improve services during the event.

Finally, the service improvement literature has identified multiple types of data obtained from customers that are relevant for generating service improvement ideas

(Edvardsson et al., 2012), namely data collected in a customer's usage situation, outside the usage situation, in context, or out of context. Building on the findings of this study, further research could investigate how FLEs process these types of customer data to improve service. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate what FLE characteristics condition the effectiveness of the learning process, especially when combined with manager characteristics. For example, if the manager is highly successful and the employee also wants to be successful, the fit between the manager and employee in this area may create a synergy that can lead to more advanced initiatives.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

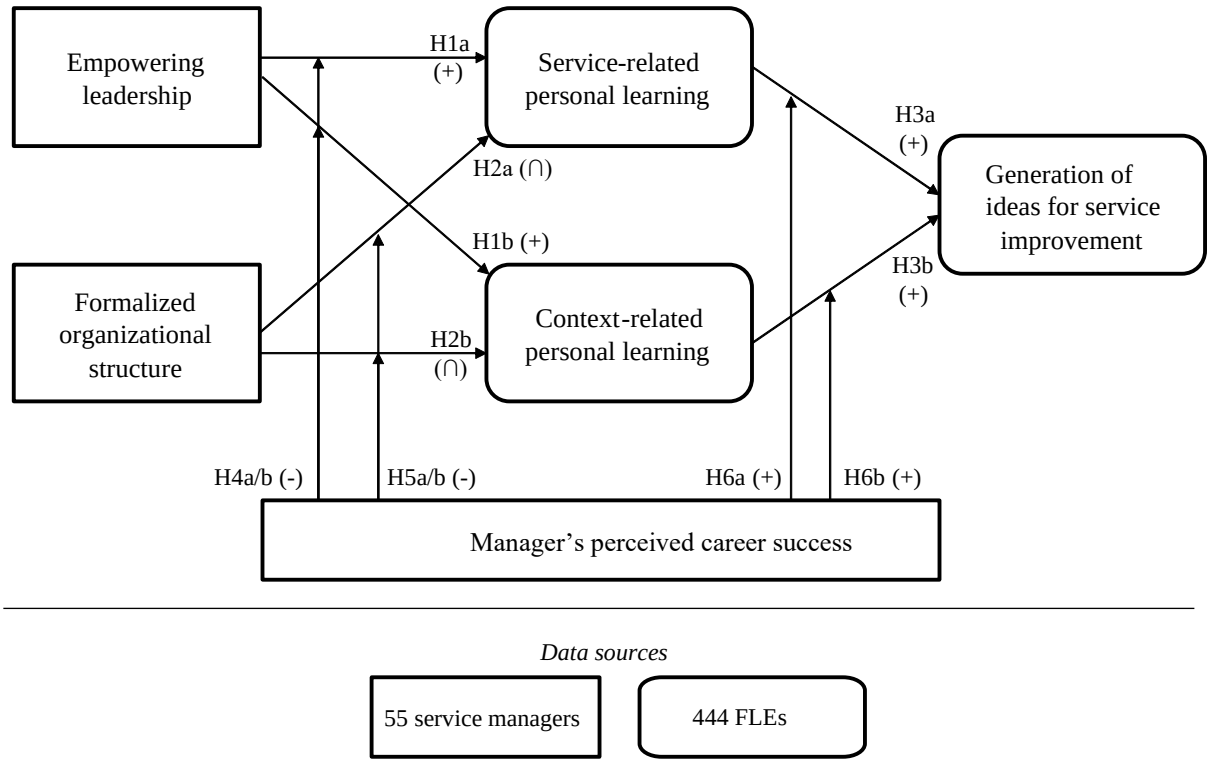
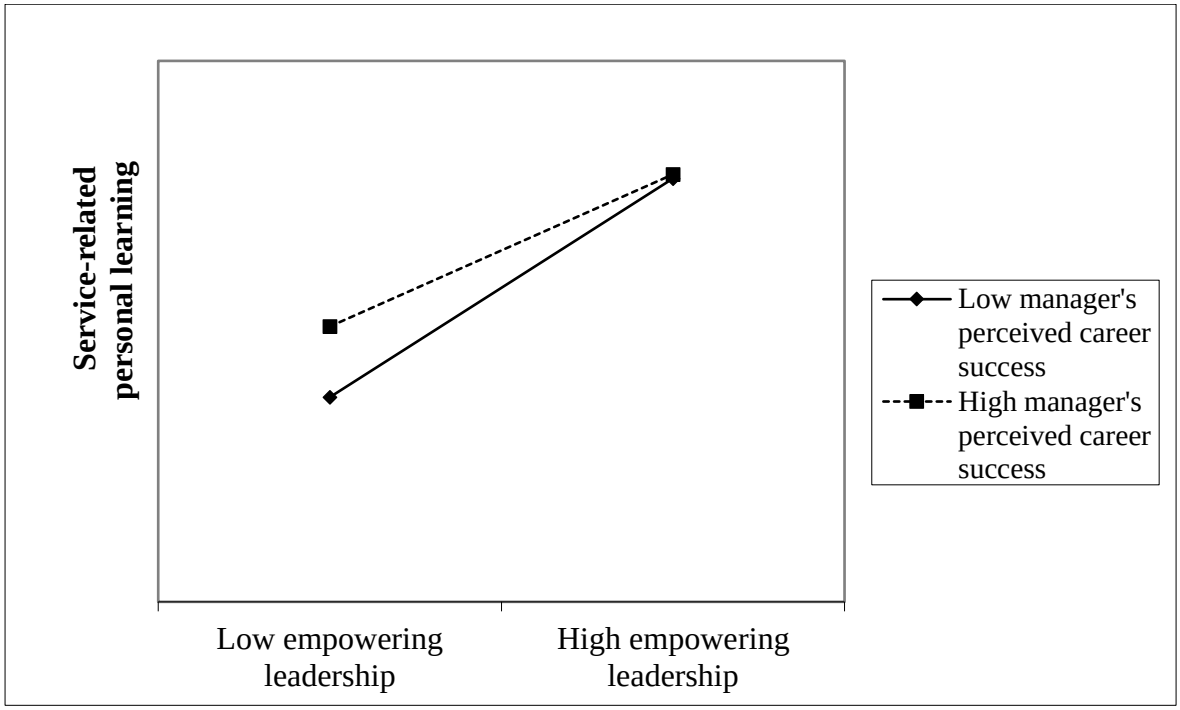
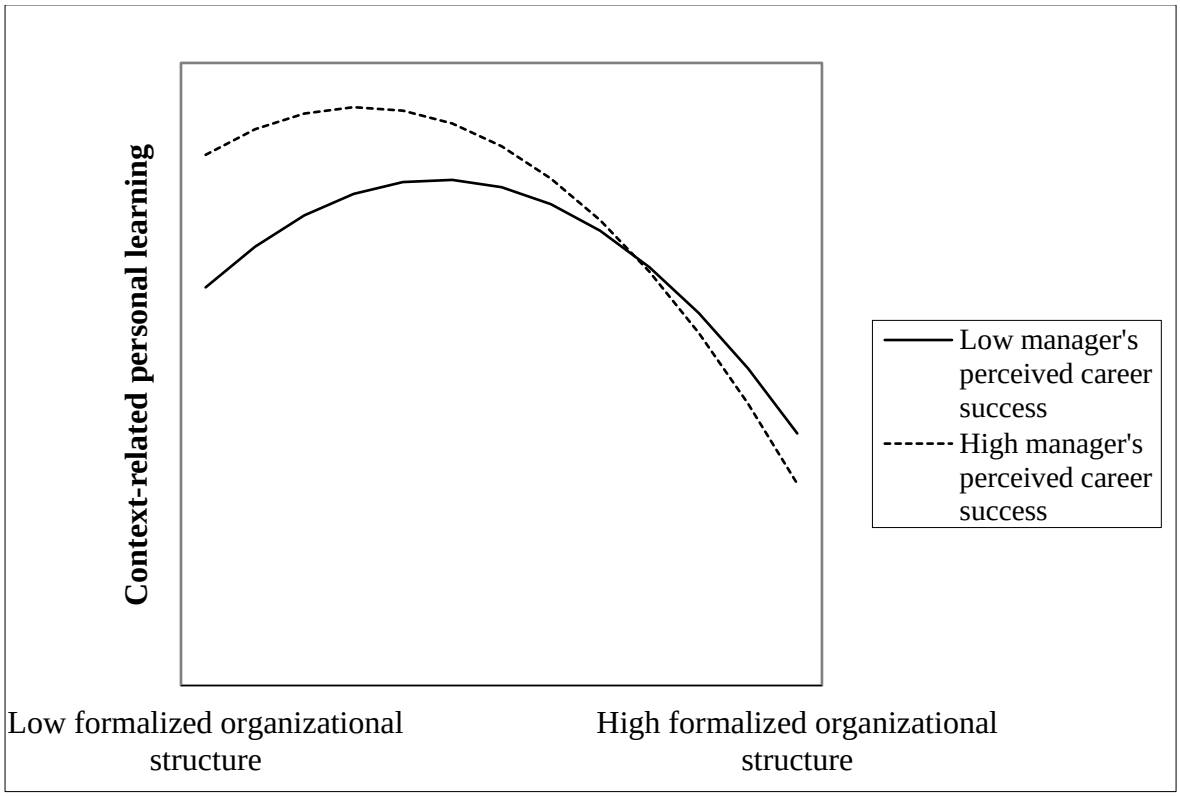


Figure 2. Interaction plots

Panel A



Panel B



Panel C

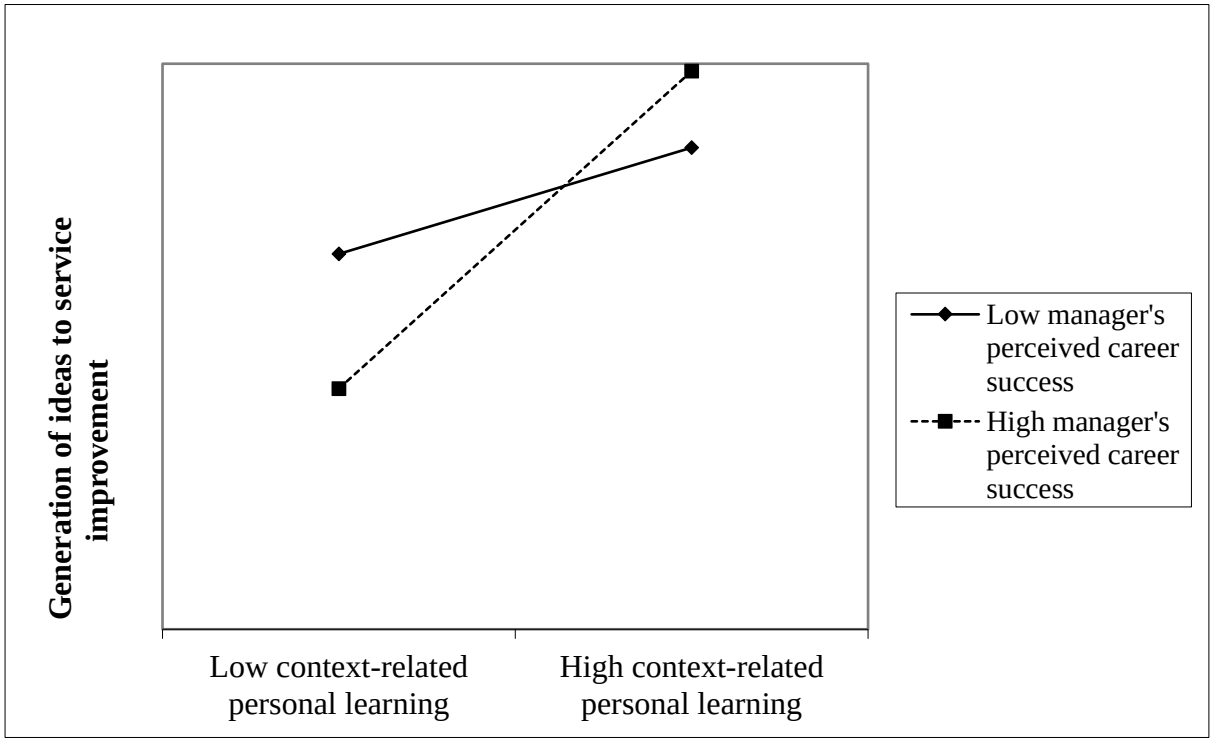

Generation of ideas to service improvement
Low context-related personal learning
High context-related personal learning
Low manager's perceived career success
High manager's perceived career success

Figure 3. Conceptual framework with results

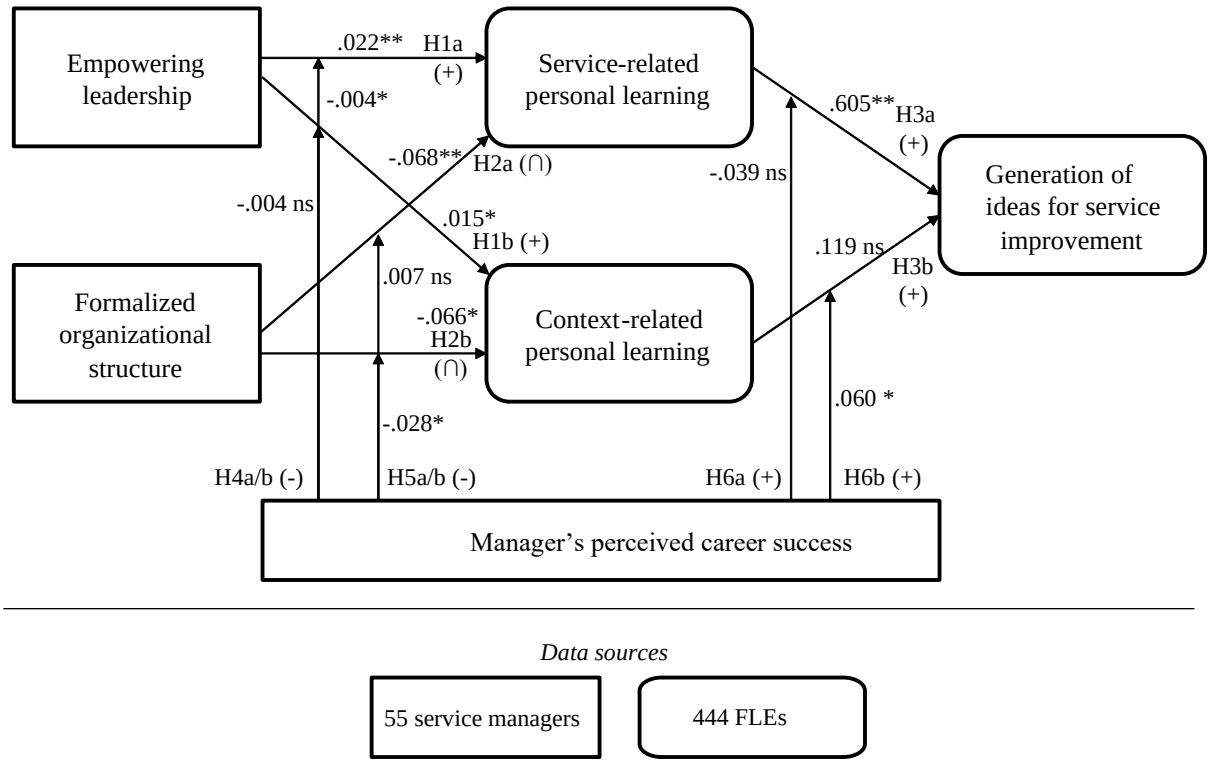


Table 1. Literature review on FLE learning

Authors	Journal	Type of individual learning (orientation)		Supervisors' involvement	Type of FLE		Type of dependent variable		Main theoretical underpinning	Other variables	Findings
		Exploratory	Exploitative		Sales	Service	General sales/ service performance	Innovation-related performance			
Sujan et al. (1994)	JM		✓		✓		✓		Theory of job performance	Positive and negative feedback, performance orientation, working hard and smart, sales performance	Learning and performance goal orientations guide salespeople's behavior. Learning goal orientation motivates working both smart and hard, whereas a performance goal orientation motivates only working hard.
Kohli et al. (1998)	JMR		✓	✓	✓		✓		Path-goal theory; Goal setting theory	Supervisory orientations, salespeople goal orientations, sales performance consequences	Supervisory behaviors (as perceived by salespeople) have a significant influence on salespeople's learning and performance orientations. Although the conceptual model includes supervisors related antecedents of learning orientation, the study does not indicate how salespeople generate new knowledge. Therefore, the study does not capture the exploratory part.
Harris et al. (2005)	JAMS	✓	✓		✓		✓		Learning theory; Control theory	Goal orientations, customer and selling orientation, work satisfaction	Learning orientation is related to customer orientation, while performance orientation is related to selling orientation. Antecedents to learning orientation are considered, but causality between the psychological concepts can be questioned.
Porath & Bateman (2006)	JAP		✓		✓		✓		Goal orientation and action control theory	Goal orientations, feedback seeking, proactive behavior, emotional control, and social competence, job performance	Learning and performance goal orientation predict sales performance. Self-regulation tactics mediate the relationship between learning and performance goal orientations and performance.

Turley & Geiger (2006)	EJM	✓	✓		✓		✓		Qualitative study with no clear theoretical framework apart from the grounded theory approach	Personal dispositions, situated teaching mechanism, learning transfer, transformation of the learner, transformation of the client relationship	Salesperson's relational learning is personal, occurs in action, is contextual, is natural, is open-ended, and is often unconscious. Antecedents of learning are personal dispositions and situated learning mechanisms.
Lam et al. (2010)	JM	✓		✓	✓		✓		Distant learning process	Market orientation of top managers, middle managers, peers and salespeople, network size of top and middle managers and peers, organizational identification of peers and middle managers	Top managers serve as market-oriented role models for middle managers and work-group expert peers. In turn, these two groups become top managers' envoys and role models of market-oriented behavior for frontline employees.
Ahearne et al. (2010)	JM		✓		✓		✓		Theory of change; The goal orientation	Goal orientations, stages of the process of change: decline, recovery, restabilization	Salesperson learning orientation is related positively to larger initial declines, steeper recovery slopes, and higher restabilization levels in the change process. Performance orientation is positively related to smaller initial declines, but shallower recovery slopes and lower restabilization levels in the change process.
Ye et al. (2012)	JAMS		✓			✓		✓	Theories of deliberate learning	Knowledge generation, articulation and updating, workload, goal convergence, learning consequences	Organizations capture new knowledge generated by frontline employees in addressing productivity–quality trade-offs during customer interactions and transform it into updated knowledge for frontline use.
Domingues et al. (2017)	ML		✓	✓	✓		✓		Path-goal theory and contingent reward mechanism	Goal orientations, leadership behavior, sales performance	Transactional leadership strengthens the positive link between learning orientation and sales performance, whereas transformational leadership weakens the positive link between learning orientation and performance.
Itani et al. (2017)	IMM		✓		✓		✓		Theory of reasoned action	Attitude of usefulness of social media, social media use, adaptive selling, competitive intelligence	Salesperson's attitude toward social media usefulness and salesperson's learning orientation are related to salesperson's usage of social media to assist in day-to-day job tasks.
Terho et al. (2017)	IMM		✓		✓		✓		Expectancy theory and motivation–opportunity–ability (MOA) framework	Customers and internal networking, value base selling, salesperson's performance	A salesperson's learning orientation and networking competencies are critical antecedents of value-based selling that enhance salespeople's performance.
Hohenberg &	JAMS		✓	✓	✓		✓		Fit theory	Learning orientation, performance orientation, failure avoidance	Supervisor–sales rep fit affects the sales success of innovations but only negligibly

Homburg (2019)										orientation, role stress, innovation sales success, sales unit revenue	influences the sales success of established solutions. This difference occurs because both supplementary and complementary relationships between supervisors' and sales reps' goal orientations can alter reps' role stress regarding innovation selling.
Current paper	JBR	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	Social learning theory	Empowering leadership, formalized structure, generation of ideas for service improvement	Study builds on both exploratory and exploitative learning. Individual learning of FLEs is seen as a social process in which manager's perceived career success plays an important role.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Service-related personal learning	3.93	(.69)	–												
2. Context-related personal learning	3.53	(.79)	.65**	–											
3. Generation of ideas for service improvement	4.87	(1.38)	.48**	.37**	–										
4. Education FLE	5.53	(2.83)	-.06	-.06	.05	–									
5. Industry experience FLE	4.99	(5.46)	.10*	.01	.06	-.19**	–								
6. Status FLE	.39	(.49)	.03	-.03	-.03	.17**	-.08	–							
7. Mastery orientation FLE	3.87	(.74)	.58**	.49**	.42**	-.08	.05	.04	–						
8. Empowering leadership	4.66	(1.56)	.09	.08	.10*	-.04	-.07	-.02	-.02	–					
9. Formalized org. structure	5.89	(1.06)	.05	.04	-.03	-.08	.05	-.00	.04	-.08	–				
10. Manager's perceived career success	5.54	(.99)	.03	.09	-.01	-.01	.09	-.01	.05	.08	.37**	–			
11. Education manager	5.24	(2.31)	-.04	-.08	-.03	-.01	-.09	-.05	-.03	-.09	.05	-.13**	–		
12. Industry experience manager	11.28	(7.18)	-.04	-.01	-.02	-.14**	.17**	-.05	-.03	-.21**	.11*	.05	-.22**	–	
13. FLE–manager dyadic tenure	1.52	(1.43)	-.01	.09	.05	-.14**	-.03	-.07	.04	.13**	.23**	.06	.04	.19**	–

Notes: *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed), $N_{employees} = 444$; $N_{managers} = 55$. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Table 3. Scale items and loadings

CFA Model 1	*Factor Loading*	*95% CI*
Empowering leadership (Cook et al., 1984)		
Seven-point Likert-type scales (1="Strongly disagree," and 7= "Strongly agree")		
(CR = .91; AVE = .77)		
Thinking about how you *manage your employees*…		
I permit employees to use their own judgment in solving problems.	.80	.436 –.815
I allow employees a high degree of initiative.	.93	.689 –.957
I trust employees to exercise good judgment.	.89	.462 –.846
Formalized organizational structure (Hartline et al., 2000; Hage &Aiken, 1967)		
Seven-point Likert-type scales (1="Strongly disagree," and 7= "Strongly agree")		
(CR = .79; AVE = .56)		
Thinking about how the *work is organized and structured* within your unit…		
Most people here make their own rules on the job. (R)	.69	.781 –.975
People here are allowed to do almost as they please. (R)	.86	.831 –.987
How things are done here is left up to the person doing the work. (R)	.66	.646 –.891
Manager's perceived career success (Turban & Dougherty, 1994)		
Seven-point semantic differential scale (1="Very unsuccessful" , and 7="Very successful")		
(CR = .91; AVE = .77)		
How successful has your career been?	.87	.750 – .946
Compared to your co-workers, how successful is your career?	.85	.713 – .933
How successful do your "significant others" feel your career has been?	.91	.819 – .974

CFA Model 2	*Factor Loading*	*t-Value*
Service-related personal learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002)		
Seven-point Likert-type scales (1="Strongly disagree," and 7= "Strongly agree")		
(CR = .86; AVE = .50)		
I have learned how to communicate effectively with other people.	.71	26.45
I have improved my listening skills.	.72	23.15
I have developed new ideas about how to perform my job.	.73	24.55
I have become more sensitive to other people's feelings and attitudes.	.70	19.80
I have gained new skills.	.61	15.00
I have expanded the way I think about things.	.77	27.41
Context-related personal learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002)		
Seven-point Likert-type scales (1="Strongly disagree," and 7= "Strongly agree")		
(CR = .84; AVE = .48)		
I have learned about how another department functions.	.56	13.72
I have increased my knowledge about [the company name] as a whole.	.72	28.08
I have learned about other people's perceptions about me or my job.	.77	26.16
I have increased my understanding of issues and problems outside my job.	.74	21.48
I better understand how my job or department affects others.	.73	23.90
I have a better understanding of organizational politics.	.60	14.66
Generation of ideas for service improvement (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Lages & Piercy, 2012)		
Seven-point semantic differential scale (1="Not at all characteristic of me", and 7="Extremely characteristic of me").		
(CR = .88; AVE = .72)		
I make constructive suggestions for service improvement.	.81	26.62
I share creative solutions to customer problems with other unit members.	.88	33.73
I encourage co-workers to contribute ideas and suggestions for service improvement.	.85	41.05

Notes: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

Table 4. Multivariate multilevel regression results

	Model 1: Main effects			Model 2: Interaction effects			
Dependent variable	***Service-related personal learning***	***Context-related personal learning***	***Generation of ideas for service improvement***	***Service-related personal learning***	***Context-related personal learning***	***Generation of ideas for service improvement***	
Variable	**coef. (s.e.)**	**coef. (s.e.)**	**coef. (s.e.)**	**coef. (s.e.)**	**coef. (s.e.)**	**coef. (s.e.)**	**Hyp.**
Intercept	3.928 (.028)**	3.528 (.032)**	4.881 (.061)**	3.923 (.029)**	3.563 (.035)**	4.866 (.058)**	
Control							
Education level FLE	.000 (.010)	-.001 (.012)	.059 (.021)**	.000 (.010)	.001 (.012)	.058 (.021)**	
Industry experience FLE	.011 (.005)*	-.003 (.006)	.011(.011)	.011 (.005)*	-.003 (.006)	.010 (.011)	
Status FLE	.017 (.055)	-.078 (.067)	-.184 (.117)	-.031 (.055)	-.088 (.067)	-.166 (.117)	
Mastery orientation FLE	.523 (.036)**	.511 (.044)**	.426 (.094)**	.528 (.036)**	.503 (.044)**	.425 (.095)**	
FLE–manager dyadic tenure	-.016 (.021)	.043 (.025) †	.043 (.043)	-.007 (.021)	.047 (.025)†	.059 (.042)	
Education level manager	-.008 (.013)	-.025 (.015) †	-.001 (.027)	-.003 (.012)	-.022 (.015)	-.006 (.026)	
Industry experience manager	.003 (.005)	.004 (.006)	-.000 (.009)	.005 (.005)	.003 (.006)	-.001 (.009)	
Main predictors							
Empowering leadership	.013 (.006)*	.013 (.007) †		.022 (.006)**	.015 (.008)*		*H1ab*
Formalized organizational structure	-.181 (.036)	-.043 (.043)		-.159 (.180)	-.072 (.051)		
Formalized organizational structure squared	-.052 (.023)*	-.051 (.027) †		-.068 (.024)**	-.066 (.029)*		*H2ab*
Service-related personal learning			.551 (.117)**			.605 (.118)**	*H3a*
Context-related personal learning			.125 (.096)			.119 (.097)	*H3b*
Interactions							
Manager Perceived career success				.007 (.010)	.020 (.013)	-.013 (.020)	
Empowering leadership × Manager Perceived career success				-.004 (.002)*	-.004 (.003)		*H4ab*
Formalized organizational structure × Manager Perceived career success				.007 (.010)	-.028 (.012)*		*H5ab*
Service-related personal learning × Manager Perceived career success						-.039 (.034)	*H6a*
Context-related personal learning × Manager Perceived career success						.060 (.028)*	*H6b*
Change in fit index		$\chi^2(8) = 391.577$**			$\chi^2(9) = 19.455$*		
Explained variance	26.6%		36.8%	28.8%	37.5%	28.6%	

Notes: † $p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed), unstandardized coefficients, $N_{FLEs} = 444$; $N_{managers} = 55$.

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Appendix

Quotes from FLEs on why they care about their manager's success

A	"To know I'm learning from someone who is held highly in the industry is comforting."
B	"I care about my direct manager's career as I find it interesting to know how they progressed and worked towards the role. My aim over the next few years is to progress in my own career and I feel they are a good example of how to do this."
C	"He is excellent at his job and has worked very hard to get there."
D	"because they are good at their job for one, and secondly they are very good to me at work which shows a lot about their character. I love a manager that is personable, it goes so much further."
E	"Because I want them to stay as my direct manager."
F	"I like him and want him to succeed and do well. His success might also mean my success."
G	"To know I'm learning from someone who is held highly in the industry is comforting."