

From Latitude to Entitlement: A Conceptual Model of the Boundary Conditions on High-Autonomy Employment Relationships

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Abstract

Many founder-led and growth-stage organizations adopt a relational, high-autonomy approach to managing people: employees are given wide latitude to pursue engaging work, are included in decision making, are treated as whole persons rather than role occupants, and are afforded substantial flexibility. This approach frequently produces strong early results, including high engagement, discretionary effort, loyalty, and organically expanding responsibility. Yet a recurring and under-theorized pattern follows: a subset of the very employees who flourished under the model becomes entitled, territorial, and resistant, asserting that their approach is the only legitimate one and that the organization cannot function without them. This paper is positioned as a conceptual model of the boundary conditions on autonomy. It is not an empirical demonstration; rather, it specifies which links in the proposed chain are already supported by published evidence and which remain conjectural, and it translates the argument into testable propositions. The paper advances six complementary mechanisms drawn from organizational behavior and social psychology—(a) psychological contract escalation, (b) psychological ownership and territoriality, (c) reinforcement-and-reference-point entitlement formation, (d) the structural vacuum and informal power consolidation, (e) power-induced behavioral disinhibition, and (f) idiosyncratic-deal spillover and social comparison—and assembles them into an integrative developmental path model with named mediators, moderators, and event timing. The central argument is that the shift is best understood not primarily as a defect of individual character but as a predictable, emergent property of the relational model itself when autonomy is granted without bounding structure. The paper distinguishes the distinct outcomes the model predicts (entitlement, territoriality, knowledge hiding, voice suppression, and performance effects), proposes a multi-wave field design timed around latitude-constraining events, and

closes with implications for practice that preserve autonomy while restoring legitimate boundaries.

Keywords: psychological contract, psychological ownership, employee entitlement, job autonomy, territoriality, idiosyncratic deals, boundary conditions

From Latitude to Entitlement: A Conceptual Model of the Boundary Conditions on High-Autonomy Employment Relationships

Across small and growth-stage enterprises, a particular philosophy of managing people has become both common and admired. Rather than treating employees as interchangeable occupants of fixed roles, the organization extends wide latitude. People are encouraged to pursue the parts of the work that excite and fulfill them; they are brought into decisions as participants rather than as recipients; and they are engaged “as persons” rather than merely “as employees.” Communication is frequent, flexibility around work and life is generous, and input is genuinely solicited and acted upon. Under such conditions, the scope of an individual’s responsibility tends to expand organically, and many employees effectively author their own roles as the business explores and grows. The early returns are typically excellent: high engagement, discretionary effort, loyalty, and a felt sense of shared ownership in the enterprise’s success.

And yet a troubling, recurrent pattern follows. Over time, a subset of the very employees who thrived under this model begins to change. The latitude that once fueled contribution hardens into a sense of entitlement. The person comes to believe that the organization cannot function without them, that their way of doing things is the only legitimate way, and that requests, feedback, or redirection from leadership are illegitimate intrusions. Collaboration gives way to obstinacy, gratitude gives way to expectation, and the relational warmth that defined the early relationship curdles into what leadership experiences as disrespect. The puzzle is sharpened by its irony: the conditions that produced flourishing appear, in the same individuals, to seed the dysfunction.

This paper takes that pattern as its object of inquiry. Three commitments fix its scope and guard against overclaiming. First, it is a conceptual analysis based on a single-case practitioner observation within a founder-led, multi-location enterprise; the aim is not to test claims empirically

but to bring relevant theory to bear and generate competing, testable explanations. Second, it is explicitly a model of boundary conditions: the claim is not that autonomy produces entitlement, but that it does so under specifiable conditions—chiefly the absence of bounding structure—and is otherwise generative. Recent work underscores why this qualification matters, showing that autonomy is multidimensional and that its effects are contingent rather than uniformly positive, turning unfavorable when monitoring is low or performance pressure is high (Jang & Kim, 2025; Theurer et al., 2018). Third, the paper is careful to separate what the published literature already supports from what remains conjectural; several individual links in the model are well established, whereas the full developmental sequence from latitude to entitlement has not been directly tested and is offered here as a set of propositions rather than findings.

To that end, I advance six mechanisms drawn from organizational behavior and social psychology and treat them as complementary rather than rival accounts. The central argument is that the shift from latitude to entitlement is best understood not primarily as a defect of individual character but as a predictable, emergent property of the relational, high-autonomy model itself when implemented without bounding structures. If correct, this reframing matters: it relocates the problem from the moral failings of particular employees to the design of the employment relationship, and it implies that the remedy lies less in selecting better people than in building a better structure around the very practices that make the model work.

The Initial Conditions: Why the Relational, High-Autonomy Model Works

The early success of this model is not accidental; it is precisely what several well-validated theories would predict. Self-determination theory holds that motivation, performance, and well-being are sustained when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A management approach that lets employees

pursue work that excites them satisfies autonomy; that allows responsibility to expand as they demonstrate capability satisfies competence; and that engages them as persons rather than functionaries satisfies relatedness. The model is, in effect, an unusually complete delivery system for intrinsic motivation.

Adjacent constructs reinforce the point. Psychological empowerment, understood as a felt sense of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact, is associated with initiative and effectiveness and is fostered by the very conditions described here (Spreitzer, 1995). When employees “make a role for themselves,” they are engaging in job crafting, the proactive reshaping of task and relational boundaries to fit their strengths and interests, which is linked to engagement and meaning (Nie et al., 2023; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Soliciting and acting on input grants voice, a core element of procedural justice that strengthens perceptions of fairness and commitment (Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1990). And the warm, individualized leader relationship reflects high-quality leader–member exchange, which predicts trust, discretionary effort, and reciprocal obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Consistent with this account, contextual work-design research finds that job autonomy generally predicts innovative work behavior, although the strength of that relationship depends on the surrounding context (Theurer et al., 2018).

Underlying all of these is the logic of social exchange and the norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). When an organization invests generously in a person, beyond the strict letter of the wage-for-labor bargain, the person typically feels obligated to reciprocate with loyalty and effort (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In the language of psychological contract theory, the relationship shifts from a narrow, economic transactional contract toward a relational contract

characterized by open-ended, socioemotional, and trust-based obligations (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). The relational contract is the engine of the model's early returns.

Crucially, the same conditions also begin to manufacture psychological ownership. A recent meta-analysis integrating the antecedents and consequences of the construct reports that job autonomy is among its more robust correlates, with a positive pooled association of roughly $\rho = .46$ (Zhang et al., 2021). In other words, the very latitude that drives engagement is also, by the best available synthesis, a reliable engine of felt ownership. As the remainder of this paper argues, that is precisely the mechanism through which the model can later turn against itself.

The Shift: Distinguishing the Outcomes to Be Explained

Before explaining the shift, it is worth specifying with some precision what is to be explained. A weakness of casual accounts of the “difficult star employee” is that they fuse several distinct phenomena into a single moral verdict. The published literature, by contrast, treats these phenomena as separate constructs with separate measures, antecedents, and consequences, and the present model follows that practice. Five outcomes recur in the pattern, and they should not be collapsed.

The first is psychological entitlement, a stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is owed favorable treatment irrespective of contribution (Campbell et al., 2004). Entitlement in the workplace is associated with conflict with supervisors, perceived unfairness, and reduced willingness to absorb ordinary demands (Fisk, 2010; Harvey & Martinko, 2009). The second is territoriality, the marking and defending of claimed terrain; recent work distinguishes its forms—marking, defending, and expanding—and shows that they relate differently to subsequent behavior (Brown et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2023). The third is knowledge hiding or hoarding, the intentional withholding of information, which is conceptually and empirically distinct from territorial

defending even though the two often travel together (Chen et al., 2023; Ghani et al., 2020). The fourth is voice suppression and reduced openness in the surrounding team—the dampening of others’ willingness to speak and exchange information (Tost et al., 2013). The fifth is the set of performance effects, which the literature shows can run in either direction depending on which territorial form predominates (Chen et al., 2023). Alongside these sits the experiential residue that leadership reports most vividly: a perceived erosion of respect for legitimate authority.

Keeping these outcomes distinct is not pedantry. As Table 1 summarizes, each has its own validated measurement tradition, and each is predicted by a somewhat different part of the model that follows. A study that measured only “entitlement” would miss the territorial and informational dynamics that do the organizational damage; a study that measured only “territoriality” would miss the perceived-breach mechanism that times the shift. The practical payoff is that the framework generates separable, separately falsifiable predictions rather than a single diffuse claim.

Table 1

Distinct Outcomes Predicted by the Model and Their Measurement Traditions

Outcome construct	Working definition	Representative measurement / source
Psychological entitlement	Stable belief that one deserves more and is owed favorable treatment regardless of contribution	Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al., 2004)
Territoriality (marking, defending, expanding)	Behavioral marking and defense of claimed terrain; “expanding” extends claims to new terrain	Territoriality scales incl. expanding (Brown et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2023)
Knowledge hiding / hoarding	Intentional withholding or concealment of requested information and know-how	Knowledge-hiding measures; linked to breach + ownership (Ghani et al., 2020)
Voice suppression / reduced openness	Dampening of others’ willingness to speak and of open information exchange	Team open-communication / openness measures (Tost et al., 2013)
Job-performance effects	Net effect on in-role and contextual performance, which can be positive or negative	Mediated by territorial form and information exchange (Chen et al., 2023)

Note. Distinguishing these outcomes lets the framework generate separable, separately falsifiable predictions rather than a single diffuse claim about “difficult” employees.

These symptoms are not idiosyncratic to one firm. Reviews of the entitlement construct in management note its drift from a compensation term to a broad descriptor of expectations that

exceed reasonable contribution (Naumann et al., 2002), and the dark-side literature documents how prosocial, high-investment behaviors can shade into liabilities over time (Bolino et al., 2013). The task, then, is to explain why a relational, high-autonomy model would reliably produce these outcomes in some of its most engaged participants. The following mechanisms each supply a partial answer.

Six Complementary Mechanisms

Mechanism 1: Psychological Contract Escalation

The first mechanism locates the shift in the psychological contract, the employee's subjective beliefs about the terms of a reciprocal exchange (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). Relational contracts are inherently open-ended and inferred; their terms are read from a pattern of treatment rather than stated explicitly. Each accommodation—flexibility, expanded latitude, or acted-upon input—is therefore liable to be encoded not as a discretionary gift but as an implied promise. Over time, the set of perceived obligations escalates: what leadership intends as ongoing generosity, the employee experiences as the new baseline of what is owed.

The decisive move occurs when leadership exercises an ordinary prerogative—redirecting a project, declining a request, or asserting a decision right—that collides with the now-expanded contract. Because perceived obligations have inflated, the prerogative is interpreted as a breach. Contract breach reliably triggers feelings of betrayal, anger, and reduced obligation, and violation is closer to the norm than the exception in employment relationships (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Breach, moreover, has documented behavioral consequences relevant here: it is associated with knowledge hiding, which links this mechanism directly to one of the distinct outcomes identified above (Ghani et al., 2020). On this account, the obstinacy and perceived disrespect are not gratuitous; they are the predictable response of someone who believes

a promise has been broken. The mechanism predicts that the shift will be precipitated by, and timed to, moments in which leadership constrains previously unconstrained latitude, and that the intensity of the reaction will track the size of the gap between expected and delivered treatment.

Mechanism 2: Psychological Ownership and Territoriality

A second mechanism turns on psychological ownership, the state in which a person feels that a target—a role, project, or the business itself—is “mine” (Pierce et al., 2001, 2003). Three routes generate ownership: exercising control over the target, coming to know it intimately, and investing the self in it. The relational, high-autonomy model maximizes all three. Wide latitude grants control; deep involvement in building the business produces intimate knowledge; and authoring one’s own role is an act of profound self-investment. The model is, in effect, an ownership-manufacturing machine, which is much of why it elicits such devoted early effort. This is among the better-established links in the chain: a meta-analysis confirms that autonomy is a reliable antecedent of psychological ownership (Zhang et al., 2021), even as a critical review cautions that the construct’s measurement, foci, and boundary conditions remain contested and should be handled carefully (Dawkins et al., 2017).

Ownership has a documented dark side. Brown et al. (2005) theorize that felt ownership motivates territoriality: the marking and defending of one’s claimed terrain against incursion. Newer evidence sharpens the prediction. In a study of 358 employee–supervisor dyads, Chen et al. (2023) showed that job-based psychological ownership prompts three distinguishable territorial behaviors—marking, defending, and expanding—and that these diverge in their consequences: territorial defending correlates negatively with information exchange and thereby impairs performance, whereas territorial expanding can raise information exchange and performance, with individual regulatory focus moderating which path dominates. Defensive territoriality predicts

exactly the observed symptoms. Resistance to others' involvement and the insistence that "my way is the only way" are forms of boundary defense; the indispensability claim is both a marker of territory and a deterrent to encroachment. On this view, the employee has not become a worse person; rather, the organization has cultivated a strong sense of ownership without retaining the formal ownership rights that would let it adjudicate competing claims. The mechanism predicts that territorial defense will be most acute around the specific domains in which the individual invested most heavily, and that attempts to share, document, or distribute those domains will provoke disproportionate resistance and reduced information exchange.

Mechanism 3: Reinforcement and Reference-Point Entitlement Formation

A third mechanism treats entitlement itself as something the environment teaches. Two processes combine. First, behavioral reinforcement: when requests and accommodations are reliably granted, the granting reinforces the asking, so that expectations expand to fill the space the organization keeps yielding (Bandura, 1986). Second, hedonic adaptation: people adjust to repeated positive conditions, resetting the reference point against which new treatment is judged (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). Generous flexibility that once felt like a gift becomes the unremarkable baseline; only treatment exceeding the new baseline registers as positive, while treatment at the old level now registers as deprivation. Entitlement, on this account, is not a fixed trait but a learned and adapted expectation.

An attributional component completes the picture. Harvey and Martinko (2009) show that psychological entitlement is sustained by self-serving attributions: individuals credit favorable outcomes to their own merit rather than to situational generosity. An employee whose responsibility expanded through the organization's deliberate latitude may come to attribute that expansion entirely to personal indispensability, concluding "I earned all of this," which licenses

further demands and corrodes gratitude. The mechanism predicts that entitlement will be strongest where accommodation has been most consistent and least visibly conditional, because invisibility of the organization's agency is precisely what enables the self-serving attribution.

Mechanism 4: The Structural Vacuum and Informal Power Consolidation

A fourth mechanism shifts attention from the individual to organizational design. Freeman (1972), in her analysis of structureless groups, argued that the absence of formal structure does not abolish power but merely renders it informal, unaccountable, and concentrated in those positioned to accumulate it. A relational, high-autonomy enterprise frequently operates with minimal formal structure by design. In that vacuum, the employee who has assumed a wide role, accumulated tacit knowledge, and built the key relationships becomes the de facto holder of informal power, regardless of title.

Because this power is informal, it is also unchecked: there are no clear decision rights to constrain it, no role boundaries to bound it, and no redundancy to dilute it. The self-authored role hardens into a private fiefdom. This mechanism explains the indispensability claim as a substantially accurate description of a structural fact the organization allowed to develop, and it explains obstinacy as the natural behavior of someone who controls a domain that no formal process can override. The mechanism predicts that the shift will be most pronounced in organizations that grew quickly while deferring formalization, and that the symptoms will concentrate in the individuals holding the most bottlenecked, least-documented knowledge.

Mechanism 5: Power-Induced Behavioral Disinhibition

If Mechanism 4 explains how power accrues, a fifth mechanism explains what power does to behavior. Keltner et al. (2003) argue that elevated power activates the behavioral approach system, increasing goal-directed assertiveness while reducing inhibition, attention to others, and

perspective taking. Classic work on the “metamorphic” effects of power found that holding power over others can inflate self-evaluation and devalue the less powerful (Kipnis, 1972). The organizational consequences of this disinhibition have since been demonstrated directly. Tost et al. (2013), across three studies, found that a heightened subjective sense of power leads to verbal dominance, which reduces perceived openness and suppresses open communication within the team, with downstream costs for team performance. Although that work concerns formal leaders, the underlying psychological mechanism—power begets dominance, which begets others’ silence—plausibly extends to any actor who has acquired substantial informal power, which is exactly the situation that Mechanism 4 describes. This mechanism, therefore, supplies the link to the voice-suppression outcome and the affective texture of the shift—the experienced disrespect—without attributing it to premeditated malice. The behavior may be a relatively automatic consequence of a psychological state induced by the person’s position, consistent with the broader caution against over-attributing behavior to disposition. The mechanism predicts that disinhibited, dismissive behavior and surrounding voice suppression will intensify as objective and perceived power rise, and that they will be partially reversible if the power base is restructured.

Mechanism 6: Idiosyncratic-Deal Spillover and Social Comparison

A sixth mechanism concerns the cumulative effect of individualized arrangements. Idiosyncratic deals, or i-deals, are personalized employment terms negotiated outside standard policy (Rousseau et al., 2006). The relational model continuously generates i-deals: bespoke flexibility, custom responsibilities, and one-off accommodations. A qualitative and meta-analytical review establishes that i-deals operate at multiple levels and that important multilevel questions remain open (Liao et al., 2016), and a recent review of the field emphasizes that the negative and “invisible” facets of i-deals are markedly under-studied relative to their documented

benefits (Simosi et al., 2023). That asymmetry makes the present argument timely but also, by its own logic, preliminary: the literature has not yet mapped the downside this paper theorizes.

Two risks are especially relevant. First, recipients may come to treat what was once a negotiated, conditional concession as a permanent entitlement, conflating a deal with a right. Second, i-deals function as status markers and invite social comparison among coworkers, which can recalibrate perceptions of fairness (Adams, 1965; Festinger, 1954). The team level matters here in a way individual accounts miss: Vossaert et al. (2023) show that the prevalence of i-deals within a team helps or hinders team outcomes depending on the team's power structure and on organizational i-deal scarcity, so the consequences of one person's accumulated deals are conditioned by the surrounding distribution of resources and status. A related dynamic involves idiosyncrasy credit. Hollander (1958) showed that individuals accumulate latitude to deviate by first conforming and contributing; having banked such credit, they may later "spend" it on nonconformity that the group tolerates. The high-contributing early employee accrues substantial idiosyncrasy credit, which can subsequently underwrite obstinacy and rule-bending that a newer employee could not get away with. Across these processes, the perceived fairness of the exchange is continually renegotiated against shifting reference points; once accommodation is read as entitlements and as evidence of standing, ordinary equity processes are disrupted (Colquitt et al., 2001). The mechanism predicts that entitlement and obstinacy will be most evident in long-tenured, high-credit employees who have received the most numerous and least formalized i-deals, and that team-level outcomes will hinge on team power structure and resource scarcity.

What the Evidence Supports and What Remains Conjectural

Because the paper is theory-generating rather than theory-confirming, intellectual honesty requires marking the evidentiary status of each link. Several of the model's individual edges rest

on meta-analytic or multi-study evidence; others are plausible extensions or are supported only indirectly, and the overall developmental sequence—the claim that these edges assemble, in order, into a single trajectory—has not been tested at all. Table 2 lays out this stratification. The honest summary is that the parts are better supported than the whole: the model is best read as an integration of established components into a novel, still-untested sequence.

Table 2
Evidentiary Status of the Model’s Principal Links

Proposed link	Evidentiary status	Key sources
Autonomy → psychological ownership	Established (meta-analytic)	Zhang et al. (2021)
Psychological ownership → territoriality (marking/defending/expanding)	Established (multi-study)	Brown et al. (2005); Chen et al. (2023)
Territorial defending → reduced information exchange → lower performance	Established (dyadic field study)	Chen et al. (2023)
Heightened power → verbal dominance → reduced openness / voice	Established for leaders; extension to informal power is conjectural	Tost et al. (2013); Keltner et al. (2003)
Perceived contract breach → withdrawal, knowledge hiding	Established	Morrison & Robinson (1997); Ghani et al. (2020)
i-deal accumulation → entitlement / unfairness; team effects	Partly supported; negative side understudied	Liao et al. (2016); Simosi et al. (2023); Vossaert et al. (2023)
Structural vacuum → unaccountable informal power	Theoretical; not directly tested in this context	Freeman (1972)
Full developmental sequence (latitude → entitlement)	Conjectural; untested	Proposed here

Note. “Established” denotes meta-analytic or multi-study empirical support for the isolated link; it does not imply that the link has been tested as part of the developmental sequence proposed here.

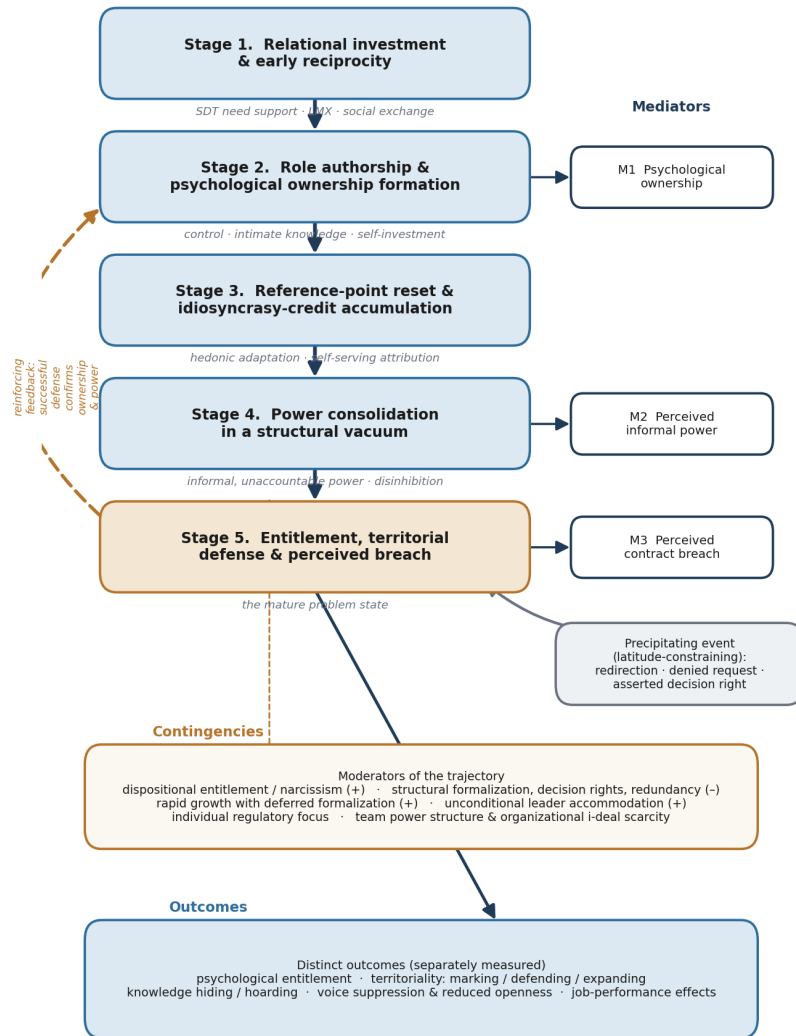
A Testable Path Model: Propositions, Mediators, Moderators, and Timing

The six mechanisms are not competitors to be eliminated in favor of one survivor; they are facets of a single process, and they can be assembled into a path model that is explicit about what mediates, what moderates, and when the decisive transition occurs. Psychological ownership (Mechanism 2) supplies the motive to defend; the structural vacuum (Mechanism 4) supplies the unchecked power to defend successfully; power’s disinhibiting effects (Mechanism 5) supply the

dismissive affect and the surrounding voice suppression; the relational contract (Mechanism 1) supplies the sense of grievance when latitude is constrained; reinforcement and adaptation (Mechanism 3) supply the escalating baseline of expectation; and the i-deal and idiosyncrasy-credit dynamics (Mechanism 6) supply the standing that licenses deviance.

Figure 1 depicts the assembled model as a developmental sequence with three named mediating states—psychological ownership (M1), perceived informal power (M2), and perceived contract breach (M3)—along with a precipitating event, a reinforcing feedback loop, and a band of moderators. The model’s most testable feature is its timing claim: the transition into the mature problem state is not gradual drift but is triggered by identifiable latitude-constraining events (a redirection, a denied request, an asserted decision right). This is what makes a multi-wave design, organized around such events, the natural empirical test.

Figure 1
 An Integrative Developmental Path Model of the Shift From Latitude to Entitlement



Note. Boxed stages form the proposed developmental sequence; M1–M3 are mediating states. Solid arrows denote hypothesized causal paths; the dashed amber arrow denotes the reinforcing feedback loop. Signs in the moderator band indicate the expected direction of moderation.

Note. Boxed stages form the proposed developmental sequence; M1–M3 are mediating states. Solid arrows denote hypothesized causal paths; the dashed loop denotes reinforcing feedback. Signs in the moderator band indicate the expected direction of moderation.

Stated as formal propositions, the model reads as follows. Table 3 then maps each proposition to its mediators, moderators, and the timing it implies.

Proposition 1 (P1). Relational, high-autonomy treatment increases employees’ psychological ownership of their roles and of the enterprise.

Proposition 2 (P2). Psychological ownership increases territorial behavior—marking, defending, and expanding—with defending in particular reducing information exchange and, through it, impairing performance.

Proposition 3 (P3). Repeated, unconditional accommodation resets employees’ reference points upward and, via self-serving attribution, raises psychological entitlement.

Proposition 4 (P4). In organizations that defer formalization during rapid growth, accumulated knowledge and relationships consolidate into informal, unaccountable power held by the highest-investment employees.

Proposition 5 (P5). As perceived informal power rises, behavioral disinhibition increases, leading to verbal dominance and suppressing voice and openness within the surrounding team.

Proposition 6 (P6). A latitude-constraining event is interpreted, in proportion to accumulated ownership, entitlement, and power, as a breach of the psychological contract, precipitating the mature state of entitlement and territorial defense.

Proposition 7 (P7). Successful defense following a constraining event reinforces ownership and power, deepening the antecedent states and raising the threshold for the next confrontation.

Proposition 8 (P8). The trajectory is moderated such that it is accelerated by dispositional entitlement or narcissism, by rapid growth with deferred formalization, and by unconditional leader accommodation, and is retarded by explicit structure—clear decision rights, bounded roles, documentation, redundancy—by individual regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention), and by team power structure and organizational i-deal scarcity.

Table 3
Propositions With Named Mediators, Moderators, and Implied Timing

Path	Proposition (abbreviated)	Mediator(s) / mechanism	Moderator(s) and timing
P1	Autonomy → psychological ownership	M1 ownership (control, knowledge, self-investment)	Stronger with longer tenure; baseline, early

Path	Proposition (abbreviated)	Mediator(s) / mechanism	Moderator(s) and timing
P2	Ownership → territoriality → ↓ info exchange → performance	M1 → territorial defending/expanding	Regulatory focus; concurrent
P3	Unconditional accommodation → entitlement	Reference-point reset; self-serving attribution	Visibility/conditionality of accommodation; gradual
P4	Deferred formalization → informal power	M2 perceived informal power	Growth stage; documentation/redundancy (–)
P5	Power → disinhibition → ↓ voice/openness	M2 → verbal dominance	Magnitude of power; concurrent, partly reversible
P6	Constraining event → breach → entitlement/defense	M3 perceived breach	Size of expectation gap; event-triggered (key timing)
P7	Successful defense → confirms ownership/power	Feedback to M1, M2	Each unresolved confrontation; cumulative
P8	Moderation of the whole trajectory	—	Entitlement/narcissism (+); structure (–); i-deal scarcity & team power structure

Note. Mediators M1–M3 correspond to the states in Figure 1. “Timing” indicates when in the sequence the path is expected to operate and is the basis for the multi-wave design proposed below.

Toward an Empirical Test: Comparable Designs and a Proposed Study

How might the model be tested? It is useful first to note how adjacent questions are studied. Work on autonomy, psychological ownership, and i-deals is dominated by survey-based, multi-wave, multilevel, dyadic, and meta-analytic designs rather than by single-case conceptual inference. Representative examples include meta-analytic synthesis (Zhang et al., 2021), two-wave surveys designed to reduce common-method bias (Jang & Kim, 2025; Nie et al., 2023), employee–supervisor dyadic studies (Chen et al., 2023, with 358 dyads), and team- and organization-level multilevel work (Vossaert et al., 2023). Sample sizes in this literature commonly run from a few hundred employees or dyads to several hundred, with meta-analyses pooling thousands of participants. The shared analytic strategy is to test mediation and moderation while guarding against common-method bias. Against that backdrop, the single-case theorizing offered here is a starting point whose value lies in specifying constructs and a sequence precisely enough to be tested by these stronger designs.

The strongest next step is a multi-wave field study that measures the model’s constructs repeatedly and, critically, is organized around latitude-constraining events. Because the model’s distinctive claim is about timing (P6), the design should capture autonomy, psychological ownership, i-deal accumulation, perceived informal power, psychological entitlement, perceived contract breach, and several distinct outcomes—territorial marking/defending/expanding, knowledge hiding, voice and openness, and performance—both before and after identifiable constraining events. A second, complementary design operates at the team level, capturing bottlenecks, documentation coverage, team power structure, and organizational i-deal scarcity, because recent evidence shows that these team-level conditions shape whether individualized arrangements help or hinder collective outcomes (Vossaert et al., 2023). Table 4 maps each construct to an established instrument and to the proposition it would test.

Table 4*A Proposed Multi-Wave Field Design Mapped to Constructs and Propositions*

Construct	Candidate measure / operationalization	Tests
Job autonomy (multidimensional)	Work Design Questionnaire autonomy facets	P1
Psychological ownership (M1)	Pierce-tradition PO measures (Pierce et al., 2003)	P1, P2, P7
Territoriality	Marking/defending/expanding scales (Chen et al., 2023)	P2
i-deal accumulation	I-deals inventory (Rousseau et al., 2006); count/formalization	P3, P6, P8
Perceived informal power (M2)	Sense-of-power scale; network centrality; bottleneck index	P4, P5
Psychological entitlement	Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al., 2004)	P3, P6
Perceived contract breach (M3)	Breach/violation measures (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994)	P6
Voice / open communication	Team open-communication / openness measures	P5
Knowledge hiding	Knowledge-hiding scale	P6
Performance	Supervisor-rated in-role and contextual performance	P2

Construct	Candidate measure / operationalization	Tests
Latitude-constraining events	Event logs / experience-sampling around redirections	P6 (timing)
Moderators	Narcissism/entitlement traits; structure & decision-rights audit; regulatory focus; team power structure; org i-deal scarcity	P8

Note. A two- or three-wave panel with measurement bracketing constraining events would allow the mediation, moderation, and timing claims to be tested while reducing common-method bias; a parallel team-level sample would test the collective effects in Vossaert et al. (2023).

Implications for Practice

If the analysis is sound, the remedy is not to abandon the relational, high-autonomy model, which remains a powerful generator of engagement and contribution. The remedy is to pair autonomy with structure, granting freedom within an explicit frame rather than within a vacuum. Several moves follow from the mechanisms.

First, make the psychological contract explicit and renegotiate it periodically. Because relational contracts inflate when terms are inferred, naming what is discretionary, what is conditional, and what is genuinely owed—and revisiting these terms as roles evolve—limits the silent escalation that Mechanism 1 describes (Rousseau, 1995). Second, distinguish respect for the person from deference to the role. Treating someone as a whole person, listening genuinely, and maintaining ordinary role accountability are not in tension; collapsing the two allows person-respect to be cashed in for role-immunity. Third, build a legitimate structure early: clear decision rights, bounded roles, documented processes, cross-training, and succession planning. Such a structure directly dismantles the indispensability and informal-power bases identified in Mechanisms 4 and 5, and reduces the bottlenecked, undocumented knowledge that converts contribution into leverage.

Fourth, convert recurring i-deals into transparent, principled policy wherever possible. Formalizing accommodations reduces both the entitlement that comes from treating deals as rights and the comparison-driven unfairness perceptions that erode justice (Adams, 1965; Colquitt et al.,

2001; Rousseau et al., 2006), and it attends to the team-level distribution of deals that recent work shows to matter (Vossaert et al., 2023). Fifth, preserve voice while clarifying that voice is not veto. Soliciting input remains valuable, but leadership should make explicit that consultation does not transfer the decision right, lest acted-upon input be encoded as a standing entitlement to prevail—and lest a powerful contributor’s verbal dominance quietly suppress others’ voice (Tost et al., 2013). Sixth, name the dynamic relationally and early. Because much of the behavior may be a relatively automatic product of position rather than character (Keltner et al., 2003; Kipnis, 1972), addressing territoriality before it consolidates—through candid conversation and structural adjustment—is more humane and more effective than confronting an entrenched fiefdom later.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations bound these claims, and they are worth stating plainly. The paper is conceptual and theory-generating, built on a single practitioner-observed pattern rather than systematic data; the propositions are offered for examination, not as established findings, and the developmental sequence as a whole has not been tested. As Table 2 makes explicit, the model integrates several well-supported individual links into a novel sequence whose joint operation remains conjectural. There is also an attributional caution that cuts toward leadership: those who experience an employee’s behavior as disrespect may themselves over-attribute it to character and under-weight the situational and structural forces this paper emphasizes, and leaders’ own role in constructing the dynamic should be examined as carefully as the employee’s. The model likely applies most cleanly to founder-led, fast-growing, lightly structured organizations and less well to highly bureaucratized settings, and its boundary-condition framing should not be read as a claim that autonomy is hazardous in general—the contingency runs the other way, with autonomy

generative except under the specifiable conditions named here (Jang & Kim, 2025; Theurer et al., 2018).

Future work should operationalize the constructs with established instruments—including the Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al., 2004), psychological ownership measures (Pierce et al., 2003), territoriality scales (Chen et al., 2023), and i-deal inventories (Rousseau et al., 2006)—and track them longitudinally against the timing of latitude-constraining events, as outlined above. Such designs would allow the developmental sequence and its moderators to be tested directly, would help distinguish the situational account advanced here from a purely dispositional one, and would begin to map the under-studied negative side of i-deals that the model presupposes (Simosi et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The migration from latitude to entitlement is one of the more painful surprises of relational leadership, precisely because it appears in the people the organization invested in most. This paper has argued that the surprise dissolves once the pattern is seen as an emergent property of the model, under specifiable boundary conditions, rather than a verdict on the individual. Wide autonomy, deep inclusion, and person-level regard reliably build motivation, ownership, and power; in the absence of bounding structures, those same goods can consolidate into entitlement, territoriality, knowledge hiding, voice suppression, and degraded performance. Framed as a conceptual model with explicit mediators, moderators, event timing, and a candid account of what evidence already supports, the argument becomes testable rather than merely plausible. The implication for practice is not to love employees less but to structure the relationship more, so that the conditions that let people flourish do not, by their own logic, become the conditions that let them turn. The relational model is worth keeping. It is also worth building a frame around.

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