

Empowerment, Management & Organizational Behaviour

This short paper discusses positive and negative views of using “empowerment” as a motivational tool employers may embark upon to encourage employees to improve an organization’s management systems and as a result it’s performance.

Index

- 1. Introduction..... page 1
- 2. What is meant by this term empowerment? page 1
- 3. Does empowerment really affect motivation, how does it do this..... page 3
- 4. What strategies might be used to "empower" employees?..... page 4
- 5. How far can empowerment be taken?..... page 5
- 6. Can a point be reached in empowerment where employees might be accused of trying to shirk their own responsibilities?..... page 6
- 7. Summary..... page 7
- 8. References page 8

1. Introduction

What is meant by the term empowerment? Understanding this is an essential part of learning how it can be used as a motivational tool to make improvements in an organization’s overall performance and not just in its quality, health and safety and environmental management systems. This paper examines the strategies an organization can deploy to utilise empowerment through its employees to seek continuous improvement. It also considers whether or not empowerment can be taken too far? Are all employees happy with extra responsibilities? Will this extra responsibility have an adverse effect on its quality, health and safety and environmental management systems? Will employees see empowerment as simply a way of managers and supervisors shirking their own responsibilities?

2. What is meant by this term empowerment?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘to empower’ as ‘to invest legally or formally with power... to enable, permit’. Its central meaning is to enable people to do things that they would otherwise be unable to do. It means to remove the restrictions, artificial or otherwise, that prevent people from doing things that are within their ability to achieve.

Empowerment is a concept that has found popularity through the ‘Total Quality Management’ and as such does not have a precise meaning in terms of a motivational management tool. Empowerment is about getting the best from your employees by utilising them to their full potential. Many people find themselves in jobs where they are forced to leave their minds at the gate and collect them again when they leave. Empowerment is a process whereby an organization allows individuals to develop to utilise their competence to distribute and influence the organization’s systems and working methods to achieve and sustain continuous improvement.

Applying a common meaning to empowerment it describes those values, hopes and initiatives associated with distributing authority and sharing power throughout an organization. Its everyday use is exemplified in such phrases as: (Kinlaw, 1995¹)

- Pushing authority for decisions as far down the organization as possible
- Letting the people closest to a problem solve the problem
- Giving people a job and staying out of their way so that they can do it
- Increasing the sense of ownership that people have for their work and their organization
- Letting teams manage themselves
- Trusting people to do the right thing

Empowerment goes beyond plain delegation and one needs to be clear in distinguishing between the two. One example is if you were to give a 12 year old money to buy a pair of jeans, this is delegation. If you were to give the same child a clothing allowance, which can be spent how the child feels fit, this is empowerment. It is obviously not quite as simple as this, however the clothes analogy is a useful starting point. (Fox, 1994²)

The key to empowerment is to change the perceptions and attitudes of managers. Managers must be persuaded to change their views of employees as merely a labour force to manage in meeting the organization's goals. Empowerment is about viewing employees as 'human assets or human resources' which are free of the restrictions normally associated with the traditional hierarchical organizations not always capable of making the most successful use of their employees.

Empowerment is not something "done to" people. Managers cannot make people act in an empowerment manner. These management actions are not congruent with the philosophy of empowerment. Empowerment is an internal decision by an individual to commit to achieving organizational goals and objectives, to collaborate with others towards the accomplishment of common goals and to choose to act freely within the boundaries and structure of the organization for the purpose of achieving individual and organizational goals. (Duvall, C.K 1999³)

3. Does empowerment really affect motivation, and how does it do so

One of the key aspects of empowerment is its use as a motivational tool. Empowerment allows for many of the needs identified by experts such as Maslow, Herzberg, Maccoby and Adams in the field of motivational theories to be achieved (Man1, 1998⁴).

An individual's personality and behaviour can be viewed by the way they see themselves in the world. Below is a lexicon of the core traits that make up the stable aspects of an individual's way of thinking, feeling and acting in a consistent manner:

- **Beliefs** are how the individual sees themselves and the world to be e.g. “I am competent”, “The organization in which I work is effective” (Man1, 1998⁴).

An empowered employee will typically believe they are competent to perform a task and want to be developed to be able to perform other new and even more challenging tasks. This same employee will be able to say, “yes I made a mistake, however I have learned and shall strive not to make the same mistake again”.

- **Values** are how the individuals believes things ought generally to be e.g. “Competent people ought to be rewarded better than less competent people”, “People ought to help one another” (Man1, 1998⁴).

An empowered employee would typically have values such as;

- a desire to want to do the best for the organization
- a sense of companionship with colleagues to work as a team to achieve organizational goals together
- a sense of honesty with oneself and others within the organization

- **Needs** are what the individual identifies as what she or he needs, e.g. the need for physical and psychological security, the need for satisfying relationships with others, the need to think well of self (self-esteem); the need to fulfil one’s potential (Man1, 1998⁴).

An empowered employee would typically have needs such as;

- achievements within the organization to be recognised; although it should be noted that as the individual becomes more accustomed to the values of such recognition, which come from being part of an empowered organization / team, it is more likely this employee will gain greater satisfaction from the achievements of other colleagues being recognised.
- the power to be able to improve and influence an organizations doctrine
- the freedom to manage responsibilities without supervision

- **Emotions** are feelings of love, pride, anger, fear, dismay, joy etc that can derive from, support or conflict with our beliefs, values and needs as we interact with the world around us (Man1, 1998⁴).

- An empowered employee would be able to manage their emotions in such a way as to ensure that they can be used positively for the overall good of the organization as well as their colleagues. An empowered employee would have a ‘positive mental attitude’ an as such would be self motivated to perform to the best of their ability.

In an empowering organization it is necessary to understand that motivating employees comes not from traditional methods, such as bonus and reward schemes, but from meeting and developing an employees values, beliefs, needs, emotions and ultimately their perception(s) in a manner that helps to achieve better organizational performance and clearer more efficient doctrine. This doctrine will not only include the organization's quality, health and safety and environmental management systems needed to meet compliance and regulatory bodies, but also includes specialist procedures and instructions required by production, servicing, human resources and administration departments etc.

4. What strategies might be used to “empower” employees?

Well-intended comments such as, “We need empowered subordinates in this organization”, or “Let’s get an empowerment program started” are often heard even at the highest levels of management. While statements such as these are well intended, these statements also reflect a misunderstanding of what empowerment in the truest sense and application of really means. The use of force, the idea of empowerment being taught in a program, and the prevailing attitude that someone in a position of authority can empower an employee are simply incongruent with the conscious decision of an individual to act in an empowered manner (Block, 1987⁵)

Deliberate success is neither idealistic nor impracticable just sound management strategy that recognises and respects individuals as more than just a labour force. Empowerment is only possible where management strategies and styles are strong but not domineering. Deliberate success can only be achieved where these strategies are embraced freely by the employees, who strive to meet collective goals and collaborate personal achievements.

Successful empowerment comes from the removal or at least reduction in the social distance between manager and subordinate. To truly empower your employees it should be remembered that unlike delegation you cannot retain the power and accountability or simply seize it back just because the going gets tough. It is necessary to remember empowerment is being given the opportunity to manage yourself to enable you to contribute to the organization to your highest level of competence and influence.

Involving and allowing employees to participate in accepted management practices such as meetings, whether planning, production, safety or quality etc and to have an input and feedback into the decision making processes of these meetings, will allow employees more opportunity to solve problems and implement solutions. Developing employees in teams, improving competency are all strategies that will bring about change and help to improve the organization's performance. This is where empowerment will have its biggest influence on the organization's quality, health and safety and environmental management systems. By allowing those closest to the problem to develop the solutions and systems they are more likely to be appropriate to the business needs, thus increasing the likelihood of them being implemented successfully by their users.

The success of strategies to achieve continuous improvement via an empowerment program can be viewed as follows

1. how an individual employee embraces empowerment within their daily duties to produce results that are not only favourable to the organizations goals, but also to the individuals own needs.
2. as the organization as a whole embraces empowerment the collective goals and objectives will become easier to achieve as skills, knowledge and information flows more freely, resulting in a gradual change in traditional hierarchy attitudes and behaviours.
3. as members of teams share satisfying, unsatisfying and mutually beneficial work experiences, both social and personal needs are met. This results in a more ebullient motivated workforce ready to embrace further change on the road of continuous improvement.
4. structure and doctrine is developed that supports both the individual's and organization's need for success.

A less structured strategy but still equally important in the overall stratagem of the organization towards empowerment is the use of mentoring relationships between experienced (expert) and less experienced employees. This peer teaching approach is essential as an employee must reach their maximum or agreed level of competency before they can be empowered to act independently.

5. How far can empowerment be taken?

Empowerment can only be taken as far as the levels of competence that an employee or group of employees can reach, as in the traditional hierarchical organizations it can be stated that employees reach 'a level of incompetence'. Managers are endlessly urged to be leaders, many are judged to lack sufficient leadership qualities. This is one of the reasons that employers have sent supervisors and managers on an endless belt of training courses sold with the promises they will develop leadership skills. Here lies the central contradiction, if you have a really effective team, the apparent weaknesses in the team are made good by his or her colleagues. (Jenkins, 1988⁶) For this very reason the team can grow only as far as its collective competence and does not allow for the 'shining star' to reach the pinnacle of success. This will prevent those people with the most promise seeking employment within an empowered organization, which can only benefit the competition. Likewise will these same individuals readily accept a title of team leader rather than a prodigious management title, clearly pretentiousness and snobbery has no place in an empowered organizations and will limit its ability to attract the very best people for key organizational positions.

As a tool managing directors may use empowerment to introduce a 'lean and efficient' workforce capable of increasing market shares and profits as well as providing continual organizational growth. Empowerment will initially give positive results, however it will not be long before the competition embarks upon the same road, often learning from your mistakes and improving on your systems.

What is the opposite of 'empowering'? It must be somewhere between 'castrating' and 'enmeshing'. Rationalise the middle, if it is silted up, but for goodness' sake, don't disempower it. You need it to bring about change. (Fox, 1994²)

In the current climate, many firms feel they are under pressure to cut numbers. It is a mistake to take this to far – especially where it applies to the basic key tasks of the business. You have to have sufficient numbers in a team to free the team leader physically to trouble shoot and problem solve up and down the process. (Jenkins, 1988⁶)

6. Can a point be reached in empowerment where employees might be accused of trying to shirk their own responsibilities?

Empowerment will result in the de-layering of the traditional management structure, normally from chargehand, supervisor up to middle management levels. Whilst managing directors may see this as the opportunity to stream line the organization, the responsibilities held by each of these positions needs to be identified and redistributed evenly. Clearly there is scope for middle management to push their responsibilities downwards and unlike delegation they will be able to lose the accountability as well. The effect this may have on the once employed chargehands and supervisors, who are now merely members of an empowered team, is to see this as management strategy to push additional work and responsibilities upon them without perhaps the rewards that would be associated with promotion into a management position.

As responsibility is pushed downwards and employees levels drop there is a danger that productivity will take precedence over quality, health and safety and environmental management systems, as employees basic instinct to preserve their job allows short cuts to be taken so targets can be met.

7. Summary

Empowerment is about attempting to improve the probability of employee success, which is philosophically and pragmatically different from the traditional hierarchical organizations, which can be strongly imbued in long-established cultures attempting to reduce the risk of productivity and employee failure.

These traditional hierarchical organizations also have doctrine and practices that have been developed on the basis of compliance rather than empowerment in attempting to reach maximum efficiency or agreed benchmarks. The paradoxical result of such traditional structures has been to allow employees to work solely within their area of responsibility whether implied or defined within their job descriptions. This also allows managers as well as employees to hide behind rules and regulations rather than use sound judgement and common-sense in response to problems and or organizational changes. Effectively management encourages employees to 'shrink' their role within the organization to suit department goals and targets, therefore decreasing the overall potential of organizational success.

Every organization has a pool of knowledge ranging from past experiences to individual expertise and know-how. Empowerment is about utilising employees as assets and resources, pooling collective competency to increase and develop new levels of expertise. Empowerment is about sharing power equally and removing the traditional management structure, thus allowing decisions to be made as close as possible to the employees responsible for the task in hand. Empowerment will allow for organizational doctrine such as quality, health and safety and environmental procedures and instructions to be developed by those most capable of understanding how the organization functions. Empowerment brings openness and honesty to the workplace and helps to remove the traditional 'grapevine' method of communication, without which many organizations could not function.

Empowerment should not be viewed as the holy grail, as it is not without its limitations and pit falls and there will always be times where traditional management skills of directing and overseeing will be required. Empowerment also has an inherent dark side and is often a strategy that is used by organizations to restructure, downsize and or de-layer, this effectively will force employees to do more with less. Empowerment frees the constraints of traditional manager / subordinate structures and relationships, it however does not give employees the freedom to do as they choose and there has to be a balance between empowerment and control.

Empowerment like total quality management is not solely about increasing an organization's efficiency and performance, it is a strategy for continuous improvement.

Chairman Mao once wrote;

Go to the practical people and learn from them; then synthesise their experience into principles and theories; and then return to the practical people and call upon them to put these principles and methods into practice so as to solve their problems and achieve freedom and happiness.

References

1. Kinlaw, D.C (1995), *The practice of empowerment*. Hampshire: Gower Publishing Ltd
2. Foy, N. (1994), *Empowering people at work*. Hampshire: Gower Publishing Ltd
3. Duval, C.K (1999), *Developing individual freedom to ac: empowerment in the knowledge organization participation & empowerment: An International Journey*, Vol. 7 No 8 pp. 204-212
4. Man1. (1998), *Quality management and organizational behaviour* - University of Portsmouth
5. Block, P. (1987), *The empowered manager*. New York: Macmillan USA
6. Jenkins, D (1988), *Managing empowerment*. London: Random House Business Books