

After the Teambuilding

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What's Wrong With Empowerment?

First in a Series on Empowerment

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The concept of empowerment is suffering. For years so many management consultants and gurus spoke about empowerment as if it were the key to a successful future, the panacea for all corporate ills and the magic satisfaction pill for the employees. Empowerment, once a shining possibility for all business, is now a tarnished, embarrassed conceit.

The message from many organization's management seems to be "You are empowered UNLESS you do something I don't like." Consultants are hired to tell the people that they are empowered, to engage them in taking a more active role in the company; and then a crisis happens and management disappears into the executive suite where they "take control" the way they are accustomed to. Empowerment goes out the window, management takes over, and the employees are left wondering what's going on.

Every time employees are told "you are empowered" and then "no, you're not" it is less likely that they will respond positively to future attempts at empowerment. This undermines the company's attempts to develop a more healthy working environment for both the employee and the organization.

So why do organizations attempt to use an empowerment model and then back off? Should we throw away the whole idea of empowerment? Is it best to run your organization on the command control model and be consistent instead of trying to empower in an on-again off-again fashion?

We have seen in many instances every-

one wants empowerment so it would seem unwise to discard it too quickly, but for a more meaningful answer to the question, we should look a little deeper. What does it mean? What is the source of empowerment? Why *do* people want it? And why does it fail?

What does empowerment mean?

To answer this question, first we go to the dictionary. **Em·pow·er** (em-pou-er) *verb, transitive em·pow·ered, em·pow·er·ing*, To invest with power, especially legal power or official authority.¹ But this is just a beginning. Empowerment includes many things, and is invested with myriad personal interpretations and inferences. Thus, empowerment is too conceptual to be implemented without considerable explanation and much preparation.

What does empowerment mean to you? Look at the following list, which is hardly exhaustive, and note the elements that are at the heart of empowerment to you.

- I have decision making authority
- I determine my priorities
- I interpret instructions
- I define my work
- I am fully accountable for the result
- I am trusted
- I can modify the process
- I have the freedom to decline
- I have flexibility
- My boss is my partner
- I freely give & receive feedback
- I have the resources for the job.

More than likely, there were some things

on this list that aren't important to you. Even so, these *are* important to others. People have their own personal interpretation of empowerment and often these differences conflict. This is especially true when you bring together the manager's interpretation and the employee's interpretation.

To the management group trying to empower their employees it is important to remember this, clearly define what empowerment means and make sure everyone knows it, managers included.

To know the pains of power, we must go to those who have it; to know its pleasures, we must go to those who seek it. Charles Caleb Colton, Lacon (1825)

Where does empowerment begin?

The source of empowerment is accountability. **Taking Accountability** is declaring your intention to perform a task, produce a result or manage an area (which means "to produce a result in an area or set of areas") **AND to be held to account for that task, result or area.** Practically speaking, being held to account means that when it goes right or when it goes wrong, the buck stops here.

When you empower people as a manager, you are giving them license to act on behalf of their accountabilities. This does not mean that you leave them alone. You have every right to get progress reports (more about those in an upcoming newsletter) and to get an accounting of their progress and results.

When you empower a manager, (yes, it goes both ways) you are agreeing to give straight feedback, make grounded requests for support or resources, accept feedback and to volunteer information when problems happen or when solutions are found. You are also agreeing to hold your manager to account when he or she makes a promise.

Accountability, like empowerment, is a two way street. When you have a

culture in which there is mutual accountability, you have an environment in which empowerment can thrive.

Why is it tough to implement?

There are several types of conflict that increase the difficulty of implementing the empowerment model. Many of them stem from the military or command/control model.

There are exceptions, but organizations are mostly designed on the military model of management using the military-style hierarchy in which the top person tells his/her direct report to accomplish X, and he or she takes that to his or her direct reports, and so on. Communications go up and down the hierarchical ladder with the additions and interpretations each level wants to add.

There is a certain logic about managing an organization through lines of increasing authority. Hierarchies persist in organizations because they have been useful. Entire generations have been comfortable with the military model because so many people were trained to operate that way in the military itself.

So, even when managers have committed to empowering their employees, they feel they are doing the best for the company when they retreat from the empowerment model in a crisis. Unless they have very good advice at the moment of the crisis, they feel they must do what they know. They would feel they are being irresponsible if they didn't.

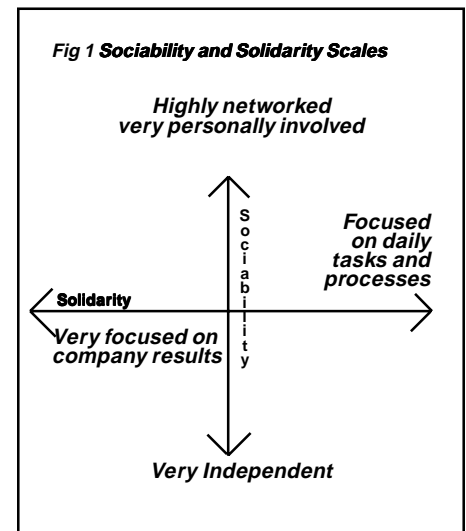
But the employees feel gyped. They have great ideas. They are close to the customers, close to the manufacturing line, close to suppliers. They wonder why their advice and input isn't sought in times of crisis.

At the same time, new entrants in the workforce are not accustomed to the military model and they have little patience with fuddy-duddies who are stuck in the past and have to go to the safety of their offices when anything really tough happens.

Also, it might not be the "right" culture for the circumstances in your company. If an organization wants to imple-

ment an empowerment model, it must take into account what type of culture it has and what kind of strategic architecture is in place.²

Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, in their article "What Holds the Modern Company Together?"³ suggest that a company can be assessed on "sociability" and "solidarity" (see fig.1, below). High Sociability is indicated by the ability of the organization's personnel to get along and depend on each other. There is a premium on socializing outside the office and liking each other. High solidarity, on the other hand, indicates relationships which are based on common tasks, mutual interests, or shared goals that will benefit all parties. Companies with different combinations of these two scales have different organizations, from very intricate network-based organizations to very results-oriented,



highly fragmented organizations.

Different organizations require different cultures. A sales organization with staff working out of their homes and on the road most of the time shouldn't try to have a highly networked culture. It is appropriate for them to have a fragmented culture. If the organization has a culture which doesn't work for it, there will be strife, disconnectedness and frustration.

It is the same for an organization trying to put the empowerment model in place when *whole* organization isn't

prepared to embrace it. If your upper management is not interested in changing their style, they shouldn't encourage empowerment below. If a middle manager wishes to empower his or her salesforce, but not the customer service group, there will be problems.

Any change in an organization causes a certain amount of strife. A new CEO, a new bill paying system, a new organizational structure, a new reporting system: all of these require a new

Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it. **Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (1952)**

way of dealing with things that used to be taken for granted. All of a sudden, you have to pay attention to things that used to be invisible.

When a new culture is introduced into an organization, even if it is one that people want, it is going to require a rethinking of many areas that will surprise everyone.

A past client, a division of a Fortune 100 company, had been downsizing regularly every October.⁵ They redesigned their culture to be "An organization that works for everyone." Everyone included the employee, the management, and their customers and vendors. They had a project oriented around employee satisfaction and targeted 100% satisfaction during the company surveys. Then they were told to downsize. The challenge was then for the managers to continue to include the employees in the downsizing process and to make sure that they didn't lose their cultural goals. Because they were willing to re-examine how they responded to the downsizing challenge (which was not something they had envisioned at the time of the cultural redesign) they managed to downsize by 25%, while at the same time improving employee satisfaction by 60% and customer satisfaction by 150%. This organization didn't abandon the cultural model they were implementing

when a crisis happened. They evaluated the crisis inside the model and took their action cues from the new culture.

How do I know we're ready?

Whereas I highly recommend a culture of empowerment because of the benefits the company reaps over time, it may not be appropriate to introduce a culture of empowerment in a given company. This depends on several things:

- How comfortable are the senior managers using the consultative approach in a crisis? Are they going to pull in the reins when the budget gets cut, or are they willing to ask the employees for their input on how to cut a budget?

- How likely are the employees to request accountability from the management? Is the rank and file willing to learn how to say "Wait a minute!" and insist on an accounting when their managers don't follow through? The company may not be like this now, but the likelihood must exist to successfully implement the empowerment model.

- How long has the company been a command/control or military organization? Some cultures are very hard to change. Employees aren't likely to take the risks associated with being empowered, or they are uncomfortable with the

Just as we outgrow a pair of trousers, we outgrow acquaintances, libraries, principles, etc., at times before they are worn out and at times -- and this is the worse of all -- before we have new ones. **Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms* (1764-99) Tr. H. Hatfield**

perceived lack of direction in an empowered environment.

- What kind of two-way communication structures are in place? If the employees are unwilling to send e-mail notes to their boss's boss, or there are things you "just don't say" to someone higher up in the hierarchy, an empow-

erment culture will require much more planning and effort.

- What kind of decision making is needed in your company? Do you have traveling managers who have to make snap decisions in the field? Do you have non-managers who have to make decisions about customer service? These organizations will be well served by a culture of empowerment but it will be harder to manage.

- How educated are the managers in your company in the whole idea of culture change? Is their education limited to popular understanding or have they read journal articles on culture change both pro and con? At the very least, everyone should read the articles referenced in this newsletter.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of issues for a company to consider before implementing a culture of empowerment but these should be considered first. Trying to have a culture of empowerment in an organization without the basic conditions is frustrating at best.

Why do people want it?

Empowerment is so appealing despite the difficulties because of the variety of parts to it. Everyone sees what they want in the model - that which will fix what they don't like (more than likely this is comprised of how *others* would need to change how *they* operate) - but they don't look ahead to see what *they* would be called upon to change.

Some examples:

- Younger workers have not been indoctrinated to the military model as much as older workers are. They are accustomed to challenging authority, demanding an accounting for promises made and taking the initiative in situations. They like the empowerment model for its seemingly anarchistic tendencies. They hear "give them license to produce the result" and think that is license to go off on their own doing things that perhaps aren't integrated into the company's other systems, procedures, etc.

- Military model managers like the empowerment model because they see the possibility of people being more productive. But they forget that they don't get to dictate the methodology or "drop in" on a meeting to change whatever they want.

- Management also wants the empowerment model because they are having to work hard to gain loyalty from their workers after the downsizing of the 80's and 90's and they see this model as a means to do that.

Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future. *John F. Kennedy, Address, Frankfurt, West Germany, June 25, 1963*

Management gurus are enthusiastic about the empowerment model because when it is implemented correctly it can provide enormous returns to a company.

What are some of the problems?

Any change in the culture is disruptive to an organization. You can't just have one meeting in which you announce that there will be a culture of empowerment. There needs to be careful planning and the current cultural characteristics that are going to thwart the desired culture must be revealed and understood. You must put plans in place that will handle the problems that will arise when people fall back into old (non-empowerment) habits.

Not everyone is going to feel comfortable with being given latitude inside of which to make their own decisions. Many people are fearful of making the wrong decision and suffering the consequences. I don't know if they will ever "come around" to this type of management style. But suggest not worrying about it. Continue to include them in the decision-making process. Ask for their advice, their input. Implement their ideas where appropriate. If they lose their fear

of reprisal, they may join in. It is possible that they won't, though, and you should have a plan for working with these people. They will feel crowded out and can make trouble for the organization if you haven't already thought this through.

Do you have any tips?

If you pass the "readiness test" I recommend that you go ahead with your intentions to implement the model.

- After the initial kickoff of the culture, it is important to isolate certain projects⁴, ones with lots of employee participation and high leverage for the business. Declare them to be models for the empowerment culture. As people practice the management principles pertaining to these projects, they begin to start using them in other areas, too.

- Make sure there is someone very highly placed who is accountable for the success of the implementation. This person should have the ear of the CEO or president, be someone who takes action and has an ability to stick with an idea without getting discouraged.

- Take some symbolic action which is high leverage but not difficult to do. Many organizations implement a new dress code, remove the reserved parking spaces or eliminate the executive dining room. One company moved the executives from the top floor closer to their reports.

Do you have any questions or need some coaching about how your company could use the empowerment model? Call for 1/2 hour of free coaching.

- Have a predetermined process for dealing with problems and crises. Even if it is just to publish the problem and take suggestions—or open the executive meeting to observers from any area of the company, have something in place to be followed when problems arise.

- Finally, make sure your management is fully aligned with the implemen-

tation of the model and that you will have their continued support for the duration.

Conclusion

Empowerment is worth it. An empowered organization has people who are operating with accountability, producing results, respecting each other, and spending time on issues that affect the overall direction of the company rather than on political issues which make no difference. People want empowerment: it has in its very foundation mutual respect and productivity. The main reason it fails is that management doesn't take into account what needs to be done in preparation and to maintain a new operating style.

But it *is* worth the effort to build this type of culture. It won't happen overnight but when it does, watch out!

Upcoming issues

Watch for other newsletters on the subject of empowerment. Sample topics of upcoming newsletters are:

- How to lead a culture change to empowerment; and
- How to deal with nay-sayers.

Also, watch for "Progress Reports: Their Use and Abuse" and "How to Toot Your Own Horn" coming soon.

¹The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from InfoSoft International, Inc. All rights reserved.

²Strategic Architecture is the set company characteristics that touch all parts of the organization. Payroll, communications systems, budget practices and promotion protocols are examples of elements of a company's strategic architecture.)

³Goffee, Rob and Jones, Gareth, "What Holds the Modern Company Together?" *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1996, pp 133-148 Reprint No. 96605. ©1996, by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.

⁵McCabe, Joseph, Jr., editor, "Finance Can Lead the Way for Change, *Management Accounting*, October 1995, pp. 16-17

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