Empowerment: A matter of degree

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Executive Overview

Without question empowerment is THE topic of the day. Articles, books, consultants, and seminars all offer the practicing manager ideas, techniques, methods and reasons to immediately put this new powerful employee motivation/productivity tool to work. Yet, there is still a fair amount of ignorance as to what exactly employee empowerment is, how it might be implemented, and exactly what can be gained through its implementation. In this article we attempt to define empowerment, lay out a process by which it can be assessed, and offer an implementation strategy for managers.

What exactly does it mean to be empowered? Consider these two scenarios: five employees from a small motor assembly line are called into a conference room and told that in the future they will be expected to be on the lookout for problems on their line and to spot defects in the quality of their motors. They are told that, in the future, management will meet with them monthly to discuss problems and possible solutions. The employees leave, empowered. In the same plant, a small motor design group is told that in the future they will be expected to seek out market change information, stay abreast of technological improvements in small motors as well as in manufacturing processes, and accept responsibility for keeping the division not only competitive but innovative as well. These employees are also empowered.

In the first scenario, the employees are being asked to expand their traditional job role to include responsibility for the quality of their output by reporting problems and offering possible solutions. In the second scenario, employees are being asked to expand their traditional design role by taking responsibility for anticipating changes in the marketplace that could have an impact on their product, and developing product designs that will allow the company to remain technologically competitive.

Empowerment began when these employees were asked to accept responsibility for the definition of the content of their jobs and the quality of their work. And, empowerment came from having the authority to do something about problems they faced while doing that job. Essentially, empowerment involved passing decision-making authority and responsibility from managers to employees. In this setting, the old excuse that "I'm just supposed to do what management tells me to do and not anything more," was no longer viable.

A Matter of Degree

Empowerment is commonplace in the service industry in such companies as American Airlines, Marriott, American Express, and Federal Express. In this industry, empowerment means turning the front line loose, encouraging and rewarding employees to exercise initiative and imagination. Fundamentally,
the empowerment process is one of "directed autonomy" whereby employees are given an overall direction yet considerable leeway concerning how they go about following that direction.3

However, more than autonomy is involved. Empowerment also necessitates sharing with employees information and knowledge that enables them to understand and contribute to organizational performance, rewarding them based on the organization’s performance, and giving them the authority to make decisions that influence organizational outcomes.4 Seen this way, the concept of empowerment is something broader than the traditional concepts of delegation, decentralization, and participatory management as the responsibility for the decision-making process is stretched beyond a mere contribution to a specific decision area. In our view, empowerment assigns the manager or frontline employee decision responsibility for the entire job and for knowing how the performance of that job fits within the organizational purpose and mission.

Empowerment enables individuals or teams to make effective decisions about the jobs they do . . .

It is the issue of power that differentiates empowerment from earlier approaches to employee participation that tended to emphasize employee input but made no real change in the assignment of power and authority. The purpose of employee empowerment is not only to ensure that effective decisions are made by the right employees but to provide a mechanism by which responsibility for those decisions is vested in individuals and teams.5 Empowerment enables individuals or teams to make responsible decisions about the jobs they do; it involves management sharing relevant information about and control over factors that impinge upon effective job performance.

Obviously, empowerment is a matter of degree rather than an absolute. Managers may find more is not necessarily better. For example, a manager could choose to provide higher degrees of empowerment for some individuals and teams doing certain tasks than for others. Indeed, even within a given individual’s job or a given group’s task responsibilities, different decision areas could be empowered to different degrees. A computer manufacturer, for example, may wish to empower a product line manager with complete authority to negotiate prices within a certain level of variation to meet competition. However, the same organization might not be willing to empower that same individual with the discretion to make even minor modifications in product design.6

The Job Content/Context Grid
Managers may be frustrated in determining how to implement the empowerment concept since most of the writing on this topic has not focused on implementation issues. They may also be frustrated in managing the delicate balance in giving employees control over their own work processes without at the same time losing control over what employees do. What would happen, for example, if management empowers its employees by assigning both authority and responsibility over the job and the employees decided to do different jobs, make a new product, or do nothing at all related to the goals of the organization or even the goals of the work group next to it? Obviously, empowerment must occur within some limits. This is the real challenge in implementing any empowerment strategy.

Initially, managers need to think of all jobs as having two dimensions: content and context. Job content represents the tasks and procedures necessary for carrying out a particular job. Job context is much broader. It is the reason the organization needs that job done and includes both how it fits into the overall organizational mission, goals, and objectives and the organizational setting
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within which that job is done. Organization structure, rewards systems, mission, goals, objectives and so forth make up the rich tapestry of job context. So, for example, context includes how workers doing one job interact with those doing another related job, or the reward system used to compensate workers. In addition, managers need to view decision making not simply as an act of choice making, but as a five-stage process—identifying the problem, discovering alternative solutions, evaluating the pros and cons of those alternatives, making the choice, and, finally, implementing and following up on the impact of that choice.

In the scenarios described earlier, the two groups were both empowered to participate in the decision-making process regarding their job tasks but in different ways and at different levels. The assemblers were allowed to make suggestions as to alternative solutions, and, perhaps, even to contribute their thoughts as to the relative merits of these alternative solutions. Management maintained authority to make the final choice and for follow-up. The scope of the design team's decision-making power was greater. Here, they were being empowered to identify problems, discover solutions, evaluate them and, ultimately make the choice, take responsibility for implementation, and follow up on any problems subject to management's review. While these two examples represent two different degrees of empowerment, both reflect empowerment strategies focused primarily on job content. In both cases, management retained responsibility for determining the objectives, mission, goals, and structure within which the groups performed. The question of what happens if employees are also empowered to make decisions about job context is provocative and may well represent the ultimate goal of empowerment strategies. To help managers gain a better perspective, we have created a grid, shown in Exhibit 1.

As shown on the horizontal axis of the grid, an employee's or team's decision-making authority over job content progressively increases in relationship to greater and greater involvement in the decision-making process. For example, at the far left at the first step of the decision-making process, there is little authority, but as one moves to the right the level of authority and involvement increases. Similarly, as one moves up the vertical axis, authority and involvement over decisions related to job context increase. Let's now turn to the five points identified on the grid to gain a better understanding of the varying strategies for empowerment available to managers.

Point A (No Discretion) represents the traditional assembly-line type of a highly routine and repetitive job. The job is designed by someone other than the worker and monitored by someone else. There is literally no decision-making power associated with this job in terms of either job content or job context. The employee is utilized from the neck down. Many of the workers interviewed by Studs Turkel held jobs which provide excellent illustrations for this point on the grid.7 Others have noted that the most stressful workplaces are electronic sweatshops and assembly lines where a demanding pace is coupled with virtually no individual discretion.8

Point B (Task Setting) represents the essence of many empowerment programs used today.9 Here, the worker is given a great deal of decision responsibility for the job content and little for the context. The worker is empowered to make decisions about the best way to get the assigned task accomplished. In these cases management defines the mission and goals and the worker is empowered to
find the best way to reach them. Management hopes that through the use of this empowerment strategy their workers will apply their job knowledge and intellect to discover ways to continuously improve what they do in their jobs.

Point B represents a significant departure from Point A because employees are totally involved in making decisions about job content. Jobs are redesigned by employees or teams. They may redesign their tasks to add more content or to develop a variety of new employee skills. In addition, they are now energized and free to decide how to do their work, get more feedback, and understand their jobs more fully. Under this strategy, many employees find such enriched jobs more motivating and satisfying, leading them to do higher quality work. Even when management confines empowerment to job content decisions, employee motivation may be enhanced for those who strongly value feelings of accomplishment and growth. The likely success of this strategy, however, will depend on other reinforcing factors outside the employees' control, such as organizational structure, reward systems, and top management support.

Point C (Participatory Empowerment) represents an area more typical of autonomous work groups which are given some decision-making involvement in both job content and job context. Such groups usually are involved in problem
identification, alternative search, and recommending the best alternative in job content. They are also involved to the same extent in the decision-making process regarding job context. While research is sparse, there is some evidence of higher job satisfaction and productivity in such groups. The best known American success story is the Saturn plant of General Motors in Spring Hill, Tennessee, where autonomous work teams have been established to emphasize teamwork, efficient use of resources, and a continuing effort to improve quality. The teams at Saturn operate at the mid-range of the decision-making process along both the job content and job context dimensions.

Point D (Mission Defining) represents an unusual situation and one seldom discussed in the literature of empowerment. Here employees are empowered to decide on job context, but not the content. An example might be a team in a unionized maintenance operation that is given the task of deciding whether or not an outside vendor could do a particular task more effectively than current employees. This decision to outsource would alter the mission of the unit dramatically. The union contract or the current technology may determine the continuation of the current job content as well as which occupational categories should perform the specified tasks if the task is retained in-house. Assuming management assures the union employees of continued employment, an empowerment strategy to maximize employee control of the job context might well be an effective way to implement such a dramatic change.

Point E (Self-Management) represents an area in which employees are given total decision-making authority for both job content and job context. To do this requires considerable faith in the ability of the employees to utilize their new-found empowerment in ways that will contribute to the organization's effectiveness. It requires extensive involvement of the employees in the development of the mission and goals of the organization and confidence that the employee is ready, willing, and able to make decisions in his or her job that reflect wise, intelligent and appropriate contributions to the organization's objectives. Empowering a person to make both job content and context decisions that optimally respond to changing environmental conditions, technological innovations, and competitive challenges is the ultimate expression of trust. For obvious reasons, few companies permit many people, outside of those in the top management suite or high-level salespeople, to operate at the self-management level.

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Reports of the few available illustrations of this level of empowerment credit it with many positive benefits including higher productivity, better attendance, less turnover, and improvements in both product quality and the employees' quality of work life. One example is Chaparral Steel where supervisors have responsibility for their own hiring, training, and utilization of new employees. Employees are asked how their jobs can be redesigned to "add more value." Self-management teaches employees to compare their outputs and goals and to administer their own reinforcement to sustain commitment and performance.

Self-management may be achieved with or without formally designated work teams. A good example of the latter is W.L. Gore and Associates. This company exists without titles, hierarchy, or any of the conventional structures associated with a company of its size and sales of approximately $1 billion a year. The company has been highly successful and profitable for more than 30 years. Growth has been financed without debt.

Empowerment at Gore is nearly total since employees have decision-making authority and responsibility over both job context and content. Culture and
norms support employee empowerment. There is no fixed, assigned authority and associates work without structure or management.18

One employee related her early experience at W.L. Gore and her total control of both job content and job context as follows:

Before I came to Gore I had worked for a structured organization... I came here and for the first month it was fairly structured because I was going through training... "this is what we do and this is how Gore is" and all of that, and I went to Flagstaff for that training. After a month I came down to Phoenix and my sponsor said, "Well, here’s your office"—it’s a wonderful office—and "Here’s your desk" and walked away. And I thought now what do I do, you know? I was waiting for a memo or something, or a job description. Finally, after another month I was so frustrated. I felt what have I gotten myself into? I went to my sponsor and I said "What the heck do you want from me? I need something from you," and he said, "If you don’t know what you’re supposed to do, examine your commitments and opportunities."19

Self-management may not be the appropriate level of empowerment for most organizations or even most employees. An incremental process may be more appropriate. When asked whether self-management could be used by other companies, the President, Bill Gore, stated that it works best when "put in place by a dynamic entrepreneur or a start-up company."20 Established companies could find it very difficult to use self-management because too many hierarchies would be destroyed. When you remove titles and positions and allow people to follow whom they want, it may well be someone other than the person who has been in charge. Gore’s success in implementation illustrates the importance of the organizational structure in making empowerment strategies succeed. Gore has a culture which emphasizes teamwork, mutual support, freedom, motivation, independent effort, and commitment to the overall system.

This need for a compatible culture illustrates the dangers of not using an incremental approach and a major reason that many managers are fearful of trying any empowerment strategies. What happens, they wonder, if we empower an employee who doesn’t really understand the organization’s culture, mission, or, most importantly, how that person’s job fits within the mission? Wouldn’t we be putting ourselves, they would ask, in a situation like that exemplified by the Swiss marketing person who misunderstood the market statistics and chose not to produce the digital watches his company invented? He was empowered to make decisions on both job content and context, but lacked the ability, knowledge, and vision to effectively utilize this degree of empowerment.

Implementation Strategies and Implications
Implementation could begin by focusing on decisions related to job content by gradually moving through the various decision-making stages from problem identification through implementation/follow-up. Later, after both employees and managers become comfortable with empowerment in job content, increasing levels of empowerment in job context could be added by increasing the level of decision-making authority, from problem identification, up through implementation and follow-up. Thus, this approach would focus first on the job content and, later, the empowered employees would become involved in making decisions about job context as well. At each step, management could determine what difficulties were created, how they should be addressed, and whether or
not the individuals or teams are ready, able, and trained to move on to the next stage of decision involvement and responsibility. Alternatively, a company might empower employees to simultaneously address problem identification and alternative development for both job content and job context much like what was done at the Saturn plant.

For either of these approaches or any other mid-range strategies, management needs to first determine where it would like to be on the grid and then develop a plan to move its employees incrementally toward that point. The grid simply illustrates the stages of employee empowerment which allows managers to decide what level of empowerment his or her organization is ready for and what can be done to implement that desired degree of involvement in making job related decisions.

Of course, there are some organizational limitations. Employee empowerment may be less appropriate where the basic business strategy emphasizes low cost, high volume operations, the tie to the customer is short term, technology is simple and routine, the business environment is highly predictable, and where employees have low growth needs, low social needs, and weak interpersonal skills. Alternatively, where service is customized or personalized, relationships are long term, technology is complex, the environment is unpredictable, and employees have high growth needs, social needs, and strong interpersonal skills, the potential gains from employee empowerment can be significant.²¹

Obviously, most organizations are not a pure type of either. They are, instead, a mixture of all of the characteristics described above. Some departments, employees, or jobs in the organization may be more appropriate fits for employee empowerment than others. Management could initially implement some limited form of empowerment in areas where the match appears potentially fruitful. From here, problems could be worked out and the empowerment process gradually expanded. Indeed, those companies engaged in quality management efforts, organizational reengineering, or attempts to re-energize their corporate culture through the introduction of more participatory management styles may all find the incremental strategy useful.

Since the workforce is so diverse, managers should recognize that some employees are better suited for empowerment than others. The art of good management is to determine what degree of empowerment to extend to different employees. The grid is a useful first step in thinking about designing and implementing employee empowerment processes which will always be a matter of degree.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, is for managers to carefully assess themselves, their organizations, and their employees. Are managers ready to give up decision-making authority or are they distrustful of their subordinates? Are employees ready or willing to participate in empowerment programs or are they disinterested in the organization in general and their own job in particular? While these questions cannot be answered definitively, steps toward finding answers can be taken. By acknowledging the five steps in the decision-making process, the grid can be used to introduce empowerment incrementally into the organizational setting at any managerial level and for any job category. Both management and employee will have the opportunity to discover through the inclusion of employees in, for example, the identification of job content
problems, how comfortable or capable each is in utilizing empowerment strategies. If they try it, they might well find out they both like it and that the many benefits claimed as a result of empowerment can be gained or at least seen in this limited approach.

As management becomes more comfortable with the idea of shared decision making and employees become trained in how to make decisions, the degree of involvement and empowerment may be increased through the adding of further steps in the decision process. This incremental approach, focused first on job content and later on job context, will permit management to learn the extent to which both it and its employees are ready, willing, and able to become empowered. It may not work for all employees or all managers in all situations. This approach opens the door, however, for the beginning of its use in any organization and at any level.

Endnotes

The authors would like to thank Patricia Greenup of the School of Health Related Professionals, University of Alabama at Birmingham, for her research assistance.
2 Ibid., 88.
6 Since employee empowerment has only recently been implemented in most organizations, empirical evidence concerning its benefits to an organization is sparse. However, some researchers have reported extremely positive outcomes. See especially, R.B. Blackburn and B. Rosen, "Total Quality and Human Resources Management: Lessons Learned From Baldridge Award-Winning Companies," The Academy of Management Executive 7(3), August 1993, 49-56; M.D. Fullord and C.A. Enz. "The Impact of Empowerment on Employee Attitudes and Behaviors." Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Council of Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Educators, Chicago, IL, August 4, 1993; and R.T. Sparrowe. "Empowerment in the Hospital Industry: An Exploration of Antecedents and Outcomes." Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Council of Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Educators, Chicago, IL, August 5, 1993.
9 See especially, E.E. Lawler, S. Mohrman, and G.E. Ledford. "The Fortune 1000 and Total Quality," Journal for Quality and Participation, 15 (3), September 1992, 3-10, where they found that Fortune 100 companies are sharing only a limited amount of power with a limited number of employees. Most of that sharing relates to how to do the job rather than what needs to be done.
14 Lawler, et al., op cit.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 57.
20 Ibid., 59.
21 See Bowen and Lawler, op cit.

About the Authors

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Executive Commentary

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In a world burgeoning with constant technological advances, increasing global focus, ever-expanding marketing opportunities and emerging new organization structures, empowerment of individuals and teams is needed more than ever. The abundance of complexity and opportunity combined with too little time and the need for more localized decision making, call for new strategies in this area. To this end, the authors make a noteworthy attempt to move beyond the theoretical to the practical in identifying such strategies and the issues related to them. Unfortunately, because empowerment is so frequently misunderstood and, therefore, misapplied in organizations, both employees and their managers have been left with a sense of dissatisfaction and even discouragement, wary of any new empowerment initiatives or suggestions. In such organizations managers often wonder why employees don’t take more responsibility when they ask for it and it is offered to them. On the other hand, employees are thinking, “With fewer resources and no additional compensation, how can they expect us to do more?” Content and context are not, as the authors indicate, co-managed. As a result, a kind of perpetual impasse emerges, blocking positive outcomes on either side.

Consistent with many of the authors’ recommendations, I have noticed there are several factors that are critical to the successful implementation of an empowerment strategy.

- Empowerment as a philosophy, not a technique. In conversations with managers in a variety of industries, I have noted a striking characteristic common to those who are more successful in implementing an empowerment strategy. They do not see empowerment as a set of methodologies or skills, but as a fundamental orientation toward how work should be accomplished. For these managers, empowerment is a perceptual “frame” which helps differentiate the empowerment strategy from the myriad initiatives which precede or coincide with it. When this perceptual frame is used to envision the future of the organization, choices about specific change tools and methodologies often become clearer.

- Clear, thorough assessment. Empowerment certainly is, as the authors state, a matter of degree. Managers must first understand the powerful hold of organizational culture. History and structure do, in large part, predicate behavior by creating paradigms about what is or is not possible to achieve. Second, managers must have a clear sense of how much and how quickly they are willing to let go and share, carefully calibrating this
with the readiness levels of individuals and teams within the organization. After all, an empowerment strategy requires new types of behavior on the part of managers as well as employees. Unless managers plan ahead, integrating input from key customers and, where needed, skilled organization change consultants, they may find themselves in a swamp up to their necks in empowerment "alligators." In other words, they may find themselves or their employees forced into actions they find inappropriate or uncomfortable given the organization's culture.

- **Understanding, knowledge, and skills.** Employees and managers must develop a shared sense of what empowerment will look like when implemented. If warranted, they should participate in training to acquire the needed skills and knowledge to support the desired state. Sufficient time should also be allowed to permit both groups to fully understand their newly acquired skills and to practice applying them. During this time, empowerment experiments should be encouraged, mistakes tolerated, and opportunities given to recalibrate initiatives before reapplying them.

- **Minimal hooha.** Dramatic introductions with various bells and whistles often create assumptions and expectations which are inconsistent with the intent behind the changes introduced under an empowerment strategy. While it is certainly important to stress the benefits of an empowerment strategy, such benefits are too frequently oversold in the beginning stages of an implementation. Until measurable, valued results are achieved, it is difficult for many people to understand how the benefits extend to them.

- **Embracing failure as a learning opportunity.** During any change process, mistakes and failures happen. It is important to set behavioral standards and expectations early on with regard to how they will be handled. How failures are treated and learned from is central to the success of a change process. Nothing will stymie well-intentioned efforts faster than intolerance for mistakes combined with an unwillingness to examine and learn from them. The richest, most innovative ideas are frequently grounded in failed attempts or mistakes.

- **Patience.** Even at its simplest level, an empowerment strategy is seldom the quick fix some managers expect it to be. Patience, therefore, cannot be underestimated.

Despite its pitfalls and problems, empowerment is not just another trend, destined to fade over time. In fact, I suggest that the key question for most organizations today should not be "Why should we engage in an empowerment strategy?" but rather, "What are the consequences of not considering empowerment as a strategy?"

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The word empowerment has become a term that raises consternation and frustration at all levels of the organization today. How can that be when the word was originally meant to build heightened responsibility and ownership throughout the workplace??

That term, like many other terms attached to the latest management fashions, has rarely been defined in a clear and well-understood manner within our
organizations. Rather, it has been used as a catchall for solving all ills within the organization. It has become the label attached to the prescription for pushing authority further down in the organization, thereby raising expectations of the front-line workers that the workplace would be one of shared power. While management may have meant to inspire and motivate workers to take on more responsibility and authority, they have often failed to see the accompanying need for personal and organizational change to support the intent. This change requires a clear definition of outcomes, a process for building skill and capability at all levels for changing roles and behavior, clear direction for the organization, and finally, appropriate information and tools for taking on additional responsibility.

What does it take to get all employees to act as owners? It requires a deliberate and phased transformation in how organizations are designed and managed. In order to build the foundation for real empowerment, management must be willing to ask the tough questions of themselves about the desired outcomes and changed behaviors. A manager must be willing to carefully assess what gets in the way of those outcomes today and then step back from that picture and assess him/herself about personal beliefs and actions: What will I personally have to change and how will I go about making that change? What is the starting place for empowerment? Is it with me as a manager or an employee? What am I willing to commit and what do I expect in return? How do my behaviors and actions influence others around me and support the organizational outcomes I am responsible for? I want to be able to see the linkages between my personal responsibilities and the organizational processes that reinforce my actions. If these linkages are clear, supportive, and reinforcing, my ability to grow and empower myself is increased. If they are not, I'm likely to do whatever is required to get by, stay safe and put my energy into more meaningful life activity.

The age of ownership and responsibility begs us as organizational architects to look again at the processes we've crafted and ask ourselves to assess our expectations, our definitions and our progress both personally and organizationally. Have we empowered management to empower others or have we disenfranchised them without an alternative use for their time and energy? What have we learned over the past few years while working the notions of empowerment? Is it time to redefine the processes that ensure it delivers on its original intent or was that intent erroneous to begin with?

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