COUNCIL for OPPORTUNITY in EDUCATION

Brewer, E. W. (Spring, 1998). Empowerment as a means for performance improvement. *Opportunity Outlook (Journal of the National Council of Education Opportunity Associations)*, *13*(1), 30-33.

Empowerment as a Means for Performance Improvement

ERNEST W. BREWER

Defining Empowerment

The *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1993) defines empowerment as giving someone official authority, freeing and enabling them to act. This of course implies that authority is directional, from the top down. It does not indicate whether the would-be receiver truly believes he/she really has the authority and the responsibility to use the power. Nor does it indicate whether or not those above them will support management decisions or whether those below will comply or resist new or changing directives. True empowerment exists when everyone in an organization actually feels that he or she has a say and a stake in running the organization. Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, and Wright (1996) defined empowerment as, "giving employees responsibility and authority to make decisions regarding all aspects of product development or customer service" (p. 28). French (1998), and Bowen and Lawler (1992), emphasized the autonomy of the employee and the necessity of creativity for the success of empowerment programs. Whatever the definition, empowerment encompasses four important elements, according to Dobbs (1993): participation, innovation, access to information, and accountability. Organizations must nourish these qualities if employee empowerment is to be actualized.

Sorohan (1993) noted that before any organization embarks on an empowerment program, several management characteristics should be considered and understood. He listed the following:

1. The goal of empowerment is to achieve interdependence.
2. Empowerment is both revolutionary and evolutionary.
3. Every level of the organization must be involved in the process.
4. Change is a public event. Therefore, everyone must be kept informed.
5. Change requires a framework, but not hard rules.

Bird and Gandz (1996) suggested that empowerment involves delegating decision-making authority and influence to various working members of an organization. They note that three steps must be accomplished to achieve empowerment. First, all members of the organization must be involved in the process. Secondly, department, customer, vendor, and stake holder communication channels must be revamped. Finally, the authors suggest that compensation must be aligned with performance.

With these essential factors in mind—with a commitment from management to understand conflict as a creative process and to use specific communication skills to facilitate change—an empowerment program may proceed.

Implications

Liden, Wayne, and Bradway (1996) suggested that managers ask these two questions: (a) Will employees in the proposed groups be working independently, or will they depend on one another to complete their tasks? (b) Would requiring members to make decisions as a group improve or decrease members' work efficiency? (p. 75).

Van Slyke's (1996) research found that most empowerment attempts fail due to ineffective execution. This study is further supported by Bird and Gantz (1996), who suggested that empowerment without leadership leads to anarchy.

One significant analysis of empowerment is the Type Z organization which is defined by Ouchi in his 1981 book, *Theory Z* (in contrast with MdGregor's Theory X and in extension of McGregor's Theory Y). Ouchi's theory and organizational structure are based on the Japanese form of management which created a boom in productivity. The Type Z organization or the Japanese form of management involves a consensual, participative style of decision-making. Dobbs (1993) emphasizes the necessity of employee participation in an empowerment program, arguing that if employees want to be empowered, they will be.

Why Create an Empowered Organization?

According to Kanungo (1992), an employee's experience of powerlessness serves as a form of alienation and adversely affects the quality of work life and productivity. As a result, both individual workers and the organization suffer.

People can be motivated to act in a manner that will benefit the organization, and consequently themselves, when they feel empowered. Empowerment could be a sort of altruistic, self-benefiting exercise. But how, specifically, could empowerment benefit an organization? The following is a capsule of Ouchi's (1981) description of Type Z organizations:

> The holistic orientation of Type Z companies...inevitably maintains a strong egalitarian atmosphere...that forces employees at all levels to deal with one another as complete human beings [and] creates a condition in which depersonalization is impossible, autocracy is unlikely, and open communication, trust, and commitment are common. Egalitarianism implies that each person can apply discretion and can work autonomously without close supervision, because [he/she is] to be trusted. This feature, perhaps more than any other, accounts for the high levels of commitment, of loyalty, and of productivity in...Type Z organizations.

Commitment and loyalty are linked to productivity—if an organization or program promotes those two qualities, it experiences higher quality work and lower turnover. The result? Higher productivity.

Let's take a closer look at three of Ouchi's words.

Commitment. This word would represent every manager's dream world. If all personnel were committed to their work and to the organization, supervisors seldom would have to push their employees. The work atmosphere would be pleasant because people would go about their business without perpetual reminders or nagging. Dobbs (1993) argued that empowerment programs which involve employees in every facet of decision-making were more likely to produce this ideal. Rothwell (1990) asserted that management must free up the potential of employees rather than constrain it by rules, regulations and work practices. She listed six methods of achieving real culture change and commitment: communication (especially upward), consultation, harmonization, representation, financial sharing, and training.

Loyalty. Loyalty, another desirable quality, means that personnel feel that they truly belong to a group—that their input matters. As a result, they do their best and stick around to receive their just rewards. A loyal employee base means low turnover rates, more continuity and consistency, and less money spent on training new staff. The culmination? Goals are achieved and productivity is enhanced. One way to help ensure employee loyalty is to explain clearly the goals of the company and then to lead by example. Managers who enable employees to succeed are likely to produce loyal, productive employees (Barner 1994). Gorden (1996) argued that for employers to earn the loyalty of emplyees and the productivity that comes from their empowerment, loyalty must become a two-way street. Empowerment is simply rhetoric unless management is able to demonstrate a genuine commitment to employees and show them that they are as important as profits.

Productivity. The goal of every organization or program is to be productive. A TRIO program wants to increase its clientele base; a Educational Opportunity Center wants to place as many welfare mothers as possible into a postsecondary program; and so on. Commitment and loyalty are linked to productivity—if an organization or program promotes those two qualities, it experiences higher quality work and lower turnover. The result? Higher productivity.

Types of Empowerment

Bird and Gantz (1996) identified four major types of empowerment—*role*, *reward*, *process*, and *governance*. In *role* empowerment, employees have input in the decision-making process concerning their job roles—work schedules, etc. *Reward* empowerment, on the other hand, allows employees to decide on how pay structures should be determined within the organization in addition to what kind of fringe benefits the employees may receive. In *process* empowerment, employees are empowered to influence processes and procedures such as controlling budget allocations or designing the production methods of a department. Lastly, *governance* empowerment involves employees influencing the overall direction of their organization through activities that may include serving on corporate boards, determining where the company's profits should go and even assisting in selection of plant locations.

How Do You Empower People?

As briefly defined above, empowerment does not mean merely handing over authority. Rather, it involves the true internalization of power and responsibility by an organization's members. In order to accomplish this, workers must have—and feel that they have—the competency, self-confidence, authority, and responsibility for the actions they take and the decisions they make. How is this achieved?

Developing Competence. Authority not only refers to the content of formal job descriptions and roles but also to competence. Competence is prerequisite to power, which leads to authority. If everyone knew his or her job "like the back of their hand," there would be few unresolved crises. Take, for example, the Three Mile Island incident in which an employee close to the problem lacked the knowledge and authority to close a valve that would have prevented that major disaster. Kirkpatrick (1992) noted that technical competency is necessary. Also essential is a sense from the employees that their competence is being relied upon to the fullest. Employees who think their knowledge and skills are going to waste will likely produce less efficiently.

Competence is developed through training in which personnel are given the skills to do their jobs better. Because jobs usually grow and change, training should be ongoing so that a worker's skills keep up with the job demands. Train, train, train! Don't just hand over responsibility to someone who may be inadequately equipped and then blame the person when something goes wrong. To avoid this, Barner (1994) argued that employers must enable their employees to become empowered. He defined enablement in this context as, "helping people develop the necessary competencies to manage their own empowerment effectively" (p. 33).

Sharing Authority. Once they develop competence, personnel must then be given the opportunity to put their skills to good use. In this case, good use means allowing the employees to make their own decisions. Since they've been given authority, they shouldn't have to get constant approval from above. This saves time and develops a worker's confidence and decision-making skills.

Delegating. Too often, supervisors try to do everything themselves. They end up with a bunch of under-utilized subordinates and no time to do anything well. This poor staff utilization actually hurts the organization because those workers become less efficient and develop poor morale. In an empowered organization, all personnel are well-trained and optimally utilized. Management is not afraid of losing control of the project or foolish enough to think their personnel, which they spent a lot of money to hire, can't be trusted to take over when necessary.

Dobbs (1993) noted that in order for employees to exercise authority competently, they must have access to relevant information and be held accountable for the authority they exercise. Information is almost always a key to power. If they are to make decisions without close supervision, employees must have access to information. If they are given the needed information and are permitted to use it appropriately, employees must then be held accountable for the decisions they make. Dobbs noted that the increased accountability may help ease managerial anxiety about turning over once restricted information.

Building Confidence, Not Fear. No matter how much confidence you have in your personnel, they should always be supervised because even the best human beings make mistakes. But management must avoid Big Brother tactics that make everyone feel that the boss is out to get them for every missed detail. Gordon (1996) described this aspect of empowerment as a change from management by control to management by commitment. Maintain an open-door policy, have regular meetings to monitor progress and resolve problems. Let your personnel know that their opinions and problems matter. Yet be prepared to be a good listener and to be encouraging. When people feel they can trust the supervisor, they'll be more likely to speak up when things are not right. If they are fearful, they'll try to cover their mistakes perhaps until a problem blows up. By then it might be too late to save anything—including face.

Encouraging Outside Professional Activities. By promoting outside involvement, management tells their people that they think well enough of them to have them share their experiences and expertise with others in their field. While participating in outside professional activities, employees represent their home organization. This helps to promote their sense of belonging. Furthermore, these activities help keep workers up-to-date with the latest advances in their fields. They can bring back new ideas and technology, which can benefit the organization and give the employees a measure of additional recognition.

Getting to Know One Another. In many organizations, personnel often are not familiar with many of their colleagues, especially those from other departments. By helping them to become acquainted, management fosters a stronger sense of belonging and camaraderie. And who knows when these people might have to work together? To facilitate commingling, management can coordinate interdepartmental get-togethers and informative tours of the various departments. Members of different departments could also be placed on committees in other departments, or even conduct scheduled, informational/training sessions for the other entities.

Schron (1997) pointed out that when relationships within all levels of an organization are strengthened the organization is better able to take on major challenges when presented with them. Various levels of employee support and recognition outlined by Schron include bringing employees together for social functions, acknowledging personal achievements/milestones, publicly recognizing professional achievements and donating employee's time for a charitable cause. As Schron explained, when two people from different parts of an organization are lying on blood donation benches, they are linked in a common cause. This linkage will be easier to reestablish for business when the need arises.

Setting Up Appropriate Systems. Structured evaluation methods allow people to know how their organization functions. Aspects such as job-skill measurements, reward systems and achievement ratings should be spelled out so workers always know where they stand. Everyone recognizes favoritism and unfairness when they see them—and they can see them from miles away. Appropriate reward systems allow managers to treat all employees fairly.

Making Decisions Together. Since the adage, "Two heads are better than one" is still true, then it makes sense that input from various sources can strengthen a decision. Shared decision making is a sure-fire way to move a staff toward empowerment. By encouraging all members of the organization to add their opinions, knowledge and expertise to the decision-making process, a wealth of information can be pooled. Sound decisions can be reached based on the synergistic maximum amount of information available within the organization. For example, if management is thinking of changing certain aspects the initial client interview, counselors should be among the first consulted. They are closest to the situation—not outsiders or "consultants" who cannot possibly feel nor notice the subtle-but-important ramifications that specific changes may entail. Furthermore, if the counselors are included in the decision-making process, they will feel more personally involved with the changes and more willing to cooperate and adapt.

Orsburn, Moran, Musselwhite, and Zenger (1993) outlined in their book eight levels of employee involvement: (a) information sharing, (b) dialogue, (c) special problem-solving, (d) intra-group problem solving, (e) inter-group problem-solving, (f) focused problem-solving, (g) limited self-direction, and (h) total self-direction. Of the eight levels, Orsburn, et al. (1993) indicated that in each level through level 6, "Involvement is an adjunct to the formal operating stucture." They further suggest that in contrast, levels 7 and 8 "require a partial or full restructuring of organizational systems to support full-time self-management by the teams" (p. 34).

Further Implications

Liden, et al. (1996) indicated that managers should exercise caution, stating that, ". . .empowering groups may be less appropriate when group members work independently, and the technology, for example, restricts the ability to restructure the tasks to increase interdependence" (p. 79). They further suggested that empowerment efforts. . . "could lead to decreases in performance" (p. 76). They stress the importance of fully understanding the dynamics of effective implementation. Kanungo (1994) warned against the implementation of empowerment as a manipulative device solely to advance the interest and objectives of the organization. When managers feel connected with employees as a result of sharing authority and interacting with them, managers will be interested in minmizing any sense of powerlessness or alienation among employees and maximizing employees' self-worth through empowerment as well as improving productivity.

Bird and Gantz (1996) identified change and dislocation, downsizing, irresponsible use of power and the "empowerment paradox" as four potential problems may occur in the implementation stage of an empowerment process. The specific problem of change often involves the anxiety of losing authority and control, possibly losing a job and for some, not understanding why empowerment is even necessary. Employees are often confused, embittered, and fearful of change. When employees are empowered, downsizing may need to take place and employees may feel that jobs could be lost in the process.

Irresponsible use of power is another potential problem in trying to implement an empowerment policy. The empowerment program must be well planned and closely monitored. Lastly, the "empowerment paradox" often occurs when employees are assigned to serve on teams and may be manipulated to repress any dissent by the top management. Thus, company leaders must create a positive environment for an empowerment policy to be fully implemented throughout the culture and structure of an organization.

Conclusion

An empowered organization is not one in which the employees are pampered and left without supervision or hierarchy. It is an organization that has at its disposal the knowledge, talents and skills of all of its members. When it pools its resources, the organization can make more effective decisions; have happier, more satisfied, committed, loyal and productive personnel; and can become successful in reaching its full potential by tapping the collective talents of all its people. By giving employees information, resources and training, and by following up with measurements and reinforcement, an empowered environment can be created.

References

Barner. R. (1994). Enablement: The key to empowerment. *Training & Development*, 56(8), 33-36.
Bird, J., & Gandz, F. G. (1996). The ethics of empowerment. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 15(4), 383-391.
Bowen, D. E., & Lawler III, E. E. (1992). The empowerment of service workers: What, why, how, and when. *Sloan Management Reivew*, 33, 31-39.
Dobbs, J. H. (1993). The empowerment environment. *Training & Development*, 47(2), 55-57.
French, W. (1998). Human resource management. (4th ed.). New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
Gorden, W. I. (1996). People shoud be as important as profits: From enchantment to empowerment. *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 62(9), 285-288.
Kanungo, R. N. (1992). Alienation and empowerment: Some ethical imperatives in business. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 11, 413-422.
Kirkpatrick, D. L. (1992). Training 101: The power of empowerment. *Training & Developmem*, 46(9), 29-31.
Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J. & Bradway, L. (1996). Connections make the difference. *HR Magazine*, 41(2), 73-76.
Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary (10th ed.). (1993). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.
Noe, R. A., Hollenbeck, J. R., Gerhart, B., & Wright, P. M. (1996). *Human resource management: Gaining a competitive advantage.* Boston, MA: Irwin.
Orsburn, J. D., Moran, L., Musselwhite, E., & Zenger, J. H. (1993). *Self-directed work teams: The new American challenge.* New York: Irwin Professional Publishing.
Rothwell, S. (1990). Employee communication and commitment. *Manager Update*, 1(3), 25-27.
Schron, J. (1997). It's the little things that count. *Industrial Distribution*, 86(3), 82.
Sorohan, E. G. (1993). We do; therefore, we learn. *Training & Development*, 47(10), 47-48.
Van Slyke, E. J. (1996). Busting the bureaucracy. *HR Focus*, 73(7), 15-16.

Dr. Ernest W. Brewer is Professor and Principal Investigator/Director of the UTK Federal Programs in the College of Human Ecology at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In addition, he is Coordinator of Graduate Programs in the Department of Human Resource Development and Editor of the *Journal of Educational Opportunity.*