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EMPOWERMENT AS A STRATEGY FOR IMPROVING STAFF - MANAGEMENT RELATIONSHIP IN AN ORGANIZATION: AN OVERVIEW

By: BELLO M. L.

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, University of Ilorin, Ilorin.

ABSTRACT

The world of the manager has changed significantly since the 1980s. When reorganization was discussed in the 1980s, it was the manager who was doing the reorganizing, and the blue collar and clerical staff who were reorganized. Somehow the 1990s have been different. The New World, for good or evil, is about professionalism and the new gurus are concerned with teamwork and empowerment. Empowerment in this New World is about increased efficiency and its output. The key word for the facilitation of this new thinking is empowerment and the morality or indeed prudence of such a process is a very hot political issue in current management thinking. This paper is divided into four sections, section one deals with introduction while section two deals with the concept of Empowerment, section three discusses in details the principles and techniques of fostering empowerment in organization, while section four concludes the study.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most well-researched findings in organization and management science over the last four decades has shown that when environments are predictable and stable, organizations can function as routine, controlled, mechanistic units. Under such conditions, workers can be expected to follow rules and procedures and to engage in standardized, formalized behaviour. Managers can maintain control and issue top-down mandates regarding the strategy and direction to be pursued by the organization. This is not the way most businesses are today (David et al 1991). Emery and Trist (1965) described four stages of organizational climate:

- Placid — An environment where companies can 'graze'. There is plenty of everything for everyone.
- Clustered — Where smaller companies are joining together to form 'empires'.
- Reactive — Where organizations are looking to optimize their position against

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others in what is seen to be a relatively static and stable market place.

Turbulent — Where very little can be predicted and the rule is "decide where you want to be and go for it".

The modern jargon attached to our present way includes such words as 'hyper-turbulence'; 'complexity'; 'speedy'; 'competition'; 'chaotic'; 'revolutionary change'; suggesting that we are in Emery and Trist's turbulent environment. Under such conditions, prescriptions for organizational and management effectiveness call for a flexible, autonomous, entrepreneurial workforce (Peters-1992; Ducker-1988), rather than one which relies on management for direction and control. Less centralized decision-making, less top-down direction and less autocratic leadership are all prescribed as prerequisites for high performing modern organizations.

When environments are unstable and unpredictable, when they change a lot or change in unpredictable ways, organizations must be more flexible and organic. Workers are expected to be adaptable and self-managing. Managers must involve others in decision-making, and facilitate broad participation and accountability (Eisenhart and Galunic-1993; Lawrence and Lorsch-1967)

However, Cameron et al (1987) had observed that, instead of becoming adaptable, flexible, autonomous and self-managing, individuals in rapidly-changing, complex environments tend to react in the opposite way. Both managers and employees tend to become less flexible, less adaptive, less autonomous, less self-managing, more stable, more rigid and more defensive when they face turbulence and change.

If people become more dependent on top managers in uncertain time rather than more independent, how can we ever foster effective performance? How can we ever expect a workforce in a changing environment to develop the prescribed characteristics for effectiveness that is, to be adaptable, flexible, autonomous and self-managing? The answer to these questions is to use empowerment. But what is empowerment? What does it mean to be an empowered worker? What is the set of management skills associated with empowerment?

THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

The word empowerment has been in vogue in the 1980s and 1990s yet as a concept it is by no means new. The concept of empowerment has been referred to in many research works in the last few years, and it has become popular to use the term to refer to everything from team building to decentralized structures. In fact, the word has been so overused that its precise meaning may have become obscured. It may be helpful, therefore, to provide a brief background of the roots of empowerment. This should help avoid confusing empowerment with other related management behaviours. Empowerment has roots in the disciplines of psychology, sociology and theology, dating back decades, even centuries.

The concept of mastery motivation, observed White (1959) emphasizes the way people strive for competence in dealing with their world. Similarly, concepts introduced several decades ago include "effective motivation" an intrinsic motivation to make things happen, psychological reactance which refers to seeking freedom from constraints (Brehm, 1966), "competence motivation", a striving to encounter and master

challenges (Harter, 1978), and personal causation, a drive experience free agency (Decharms 1979). In each of the preceding studies, the root concepts are similar to the notion of empowerment which is, the inclination of people to experience self-control, self-importance and self-liberation.

In sociology, notions of empowerment have been fundamental to most 'rights' movements (e.g. Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Gay Rights) (see Solomon, 1976, Bookman and Morgan, 1988), in which people campaign for freedom and control of their own circumstances. Moreover, much of the writings attacking problems through social change, has centered fundamentally on the empowerment of groups of people. (Man, 1844, Alinski, 1971). That is, people seek social change in order to increase their access to an empowered condition.

In theology, debates about free will versus determinism, self-will versus submissive, predestination versus faith and works, and humanism versus positivism have been hotly debated for centuries. At their root they are all variations on a theme of empowerment versus helplessness. The more recent literature on liberation theology, epitomized by the work of Friere and Faunder (1989) emphasizes the empowerment of individuals to take charge of their own destinies rather than relying on the dictates of an all-controlling, supernatural force. This does not mean that people who believe in a supreme being cannot feel empowered, rather, it implies that they can couple a sense of self-mastery and self-determination with their faith in a higher power.

Empowerment, then, is not a new concept. It has appeared in various forms throughout modern management literature. In the 1950s, for example, management literature was filled with prescriptions that managers should be friendly to employees (human relations), in the 1960s, that manager should be sensitive to the needs and motivations of people (sensitivity training), in the 1970s, that managers should ask employees for help (employee involvement), and in the 1980s, that managers should form teams and hold meetings with employees (Quality circles) (see Byham 1991). The continuation of these themes in the 1990s suggests that managers should empower people.

In the context of this paper, to empower means to enable, it means to help people develop a sense of self efficacy, it means to overcome causes of powerlessness or helplessness, it means to energize people to take actions, it means to mobilise intrinsic excitement factors in work. It is more than merely giving power to someone. Power does allow us to get things done but empowerment involves not only the capacity to accomplish a task, but also includes a way of defining oneself. Empowered people not only possess the wherewithal to accomplish something, they also think of themselves differently than they did before they were empowered.

HOW TO DEVELOP EMPOWERMENT

People are mostly in need of empowerment when they are faced with situations they perceive to be threatening, unclear, overly-controlled, coercive or isolating, when they experience inappropriate feelings of dependency or inadequacy, when they feel stifled in their ability to do what they would like to do, when they are uncertain about how to behave, when they feel that some negative consequence is imminent, and when they feel unrewarded and unappreciated.

Ironically, most large organizations engender these kinds of feelings in people, because, as Block (1987) noted, bureaucracy encourages dependency and submission. Rules, routines, and traditions define what can be done, stifling and supplanting initiative and discretion. In such circumstances, the formal organization, not the individual, is the recipient of empowerment. Therefore, in large organizations, empowerment is especially needed but difficult to achieve.

Nevertheless, Kanter (1983), Bandura (1980) and others have produced at least eight specific prescriptions for fostering empowerment that is, producing a sense of competence, choice, impact, value and security. These include: Fostering personal mastery, Modeling, Providing support, Creating personal enthusiasm, Providing necessary information, Providing necessary resources, Organizing team, Creating confidence.

FOSTERING PERSONAL MASTERY

Bandura (1986) found that the single most important thing a manager can do to empower other people is to help them experience personal mastery over some challenge or problem. By successfully accomplishing a task, defeating an opponent or resolving a problem, people develop a sense of mastery. Personal mastery can be fostered by providing people the opportunity to accomplish successfully more difficult tasks, which eventually leads to the accomplishment of desired goals. The key is to start with easy tasks, then progress by small steps to more difficult tasks until the person experience a sense of mastery over an entire complex of problems.

Managers can help workers to feel more and more empowered by helping them develop an awareness that they can succeed. Weick (1979), has observed that by adopting a soft approach, individuals are given opportunities to succeed in small ways, even though an overall challenge may be formidable, small works can occur when large problems are divided into limited units which can be attached individually, small wins may seem insignificant by themselves, but they generate a sense of movement, progress and success. When small wins are recognized and celebrated by managers, momentum is generated that leads people to feel empowered and capable.

Modeling

A second way to empower people is to model or demonstrate the correct behaviours that they are to perform. Observing someone else succeed at challenging activities, Bandura (1977), found, provides a forceful impetus for others to believe that they too, can succeed. It helps people presume that a task is do-able, that a job is within their capabilities and that success is possible. The manager himself may serve as the role model by demonstrating desired behaviour. On the other hand, it may not be possible for a manager to model desired behaviours personally for every single employee he wants to empower. The manager may not see an employee often enough to show him how to accomplish his work, or he may not have time for frequent demonstrations of success. As an alternative however, managers may be able to draw their employees' attention to other people who have been successful in similar circumstances. They might make it possible for employees to associate with senior or other visible people who could serve as role models, and they could provide opportunities for workers to be coached by these successful people. They can provide

employees with mentors who can discuss their own past experiences that were similar to those of the employees.

In other words, empowering people involves making available to them examples of past success.

PROVIDING SUPPORT

A third technique for helping others experience empowerment is providing them with social and emotional support. If people are to feel empowered, managers should praise them, encourage them, express approval of them, back them and reassure them. Kanter (1983) and Badura (1986) each found that a crucial part of empowering is having responsive and supportive managers. Managers seeking to empower their subordinates should find ways to praise their performance regularly. They can write letters or notes to workers, to their family indicating that the employee's good work has been noticed. They can arrange for opportunities where workers can receive social support from others by becoming part of a team or social unit. Managers can hold regular ceremonies where recognition is provided for employees' achievements.

Managers can empower others, then, by engendering a feeling that they are accepted, that they are a valued asset, and that they are an integral part of the overall mission or objective of the organization. This support can be provided either by the manager himself or by co-workers.

CREATING PERSONAL ENTHUSIASM

Creating personal enthusiasm means replacing negative emotions such as fear, anxiety or irritability with positive emotions such as excitement and anticipation. To empower people, managers help make the work environment fun and attractive. They make certain that the purpose behind the work is clear. They ensure that people's right brain (the side that controls emotion and passion) is involved in the work as well as their left brain (the side that controls logic and analysis). Bandura (1977) found that the absence of personal enthusiasm (he calls it positive emotional arousal) makes it difficult, if not impossible, for individuals to feel empowered.

David et al (1991) made a pertinent submission when they asserted that: *Managers need to be very clear about the vision and mission of their organizations. Empowerment without vision leads to chaos. Managers must have a clear picture of what employees are empowered to do and where they are going. This vision and mission must be linked not only to a desirable future, but also to personal values. Workers must see how what they are doing every day is associated with their basic beliefs. Managers can also increase workers sense of empowerment by holding periodic social gatherings to foster friendships among co-workers. In their office communications, they can occasionally include a joke or light-hearted message to relieve tension. They can use superlatives in providing feedback or describing successes (e.g. say 'terrific' instead of 'good'; 'fantastic' instead of 'acceptable'). They can make sure that employees are clear about how their work will affect the company's customers. Managers can schedule regular events where employees can hear compelling motivational messages.*

outcomes and responsibility for their own success. Individuals will reap the advantages of participating in an empowered team just because they are members. But they will experience even greater amounts of empowerment if they are able to maintain autonomy in the team, influence with other team members and responsibility for their own success in the team.

A manager who wishes to increase an employee's sense of empowerment through teams, therefore, might consider asking the person to join a team that will tackle an important problem that the organization faces.

Lawler (1992) identified three types of teams that managers can use to foster a sense of empowerment; suggestion teams, job-involvement teams and high involvement teams.

- Suggestion teams are formed mainly to generate ideas for improvement. Interaction with team members helps generate more ideas than any person would have had alone.
- Job involvement teams include self-managing work teams organized to accomplish tasks. Work is coordinated among all members of the team, and members take responsibility to teach one another their own jobs.
- High-involvement teams are organized to affect an entire organization. They function like semi-independent business, and are rewarded on the basis of how well they provide needed products or services to customers.

Thus managers can select among the three different types of team, or from all three types, in order to help individuals increase their sense of empowerment through team membership.

CREATING CONFIDENCE

The final technique for engendering empowerment is to create a sense of confidence among workers in the trustworthiness of the manager. Rather than being on-guard and suspicious of being mistreated, workers are secure in their feeling that the manager and the organization are honourable. This confidence helps drive out uncertainty, insecurity and ambiguity in the relationships between employees and the manager. Employees don't feel a need to be defensive or cautious.

Cameron et al (1993) have identified two reasons why individuals feel more empowered as they develop greater confidence in their manager. For one thing, the wasteful unproductive behaviours associated with mistrust and suspicions are avoided. When people distrust one another, they don't listen, they don't communicate clearly, they don't try hard and they don't collaborate. On the other hand, when trust exists, individuals are free to experiment, to learn and to contribute without fear of retribution. Secondly, individuals who are admirable and honorable always create positive energy for others and make them feel more capable.

In creating such a sense of confidence and trustworthiness, Cameron et al (1993) and Mishra (1992) have posited that five factors are especially important.

- Reliability: Managers who wish their employees to develop confidence in them need to exhibit reliability. Their behaviour must be consistent, dependable and stable. Their action must be congruent with their words and attitudes.

- **Fairness:** Managers must make clear the standard by which workers will be judged, and ensure that those standards are applied in an unbiased way.
- **Caring:** Managers must show a sense of personal concern for workers, and help each one feel that he or she is important to the manager. When correction is needed, caring managers focus on the mistake or the behaviour, not on the worker's personal characteristics.
- **Openness:** Confidence-building managers are open in their relationships. No harmful secrets exist, and relevant information is shared openly and honestly with employees.
- **Competence:** Workers need to be made aware of their manager's competence. Employees need to be assured that their manager has the necessary ability and knowledge to perform tasks and to solve problems. Without flaunting their expertise, skillful managers inspire a feeling on the part of employees, that their confidence in the expertise and proficiency of their leader is not misplaced.

CONCLUSION

The actions we have suggested to increase empowerment are not all relevant in every circumstance or with every person, of course, but developing the skill of empowerment is at least partly dependent on knowing what alternatives are available. Our list is not exhaustive; other activities may be equally effective in empowering people. But the eight prescriptions and the suggestions associated with each of them represent actions that we would want to practice as we try to improve our competence in the skill of empowerment.

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