

EMPOWERMENT -

IS IT WORTH THE STRUGGLE?



I was once empowered without realising it.

I had made a job move which, with hindsight, was overly-ambitious. As I sat in front of the Human Resource Director, on my first day, I decided to take the initiative.

'How do you see my priorities in my first year?', I enquired with bounce in my voice. 'Whatever **you** see them as', my new boss replied. Undeterred I went on... 'and my budget, how much will that be?' 'Whatever you can justify', came the response. Wilting a little I finally asked 'how would you like me to liaise with you?' 'Simply', came the reply, 'do what you believe needs to be done, and come to me for any help or resources you need. I'll let you know if we think you have pushed the boundaries too far'.

So that was it. The message was clear. 'We've employed you to do a job and to take us forward, so do it!' Having just come from an organisation in which disempowerment was achieved through fourteen levels of 'nay-saying' I have to admit I was in total shock! I realised that all the frustration which had caused me to leave my previous employers had, in an instant, been replaced by an uncomfortable amount of accountability, visibility and risk-taking. Was this actually what I wanted?

The same question can be, and should be, asked of anyone or any organisation seeking empowerment. **With flatter structures, less promotability and the desire for more self-managing work groups, it is easy to understand how attractive the concept of empowerment is to both organisations and employees.**

From the organisation's point of view, empowerment is always tempered with the reality of today. The balances it so often wishes its managers to achieve are:

LONG TERM/SHORT TERM

Be creative, innovative and risk-taking to achieve long term continuous improvement and competitive advantage. But never lose sight of the imperative to maximise cost effectiveness, efficiency and results in the short term.

SELF MANAGE/BE RESPONSIVE

Set your own objectives and performance standards in response to corporate goals. Make and implement your own plans and measure your own success. But be responsive to any corporate needs which may cut across your bows.

PARTICIPATIVE/AUTOCRATIC

Involve your team. Consult with them, collaborate with them, encourage participation and take them with you. But, do it fast! Accept that new regulations, financial expediency, unexpected market conditions and a host of other factors may, at any time, drive senior management to hinder your efforts with autocratic dictates that will frequently frustrate and almost always confuse.

MENTOR/MANAGE

Coach your people. Train your team. Grow and develop specialists to be generalists as well. Delegate decision-making authority. Equip, release and trust. But always check, monitor, assess and act to ensure that the highest quality is achieved in the minimum time and at optimum cost for customers.

HORIZONTAL/VERTICAL

Work to tight corporate guidelines and policies. Manage the information flow vertically. See the macro and the micro. Know your part in the internal supply process. But, consult with your peers, know what they're doing, what they require from you, how they perceive you and ensure that they want to include you in their plans. Ensure that your internal customers have a positive perception of your team; they are often the final arbitrators if there are to be cuts.

Organisations, it seems, increasingly accept the possibility, even the necessity of empowerment yet frequently revert to old behaviours. For their managers, the result must feel akin to driving a car in the company of an interfering instructor predisposed to the use of manual override at the slightest sign of a difficulty ahead.

Thus empowerment in many organisations merely produces schizophrenic managers and the effect on those they employ can be cynicism, demotivation and confusion. All this at a time when companies need, more than ever before, employee commitment, confidence and focus.

And the employees, how do they see it? Their instinct tells them that greater freedom, more responsibility to act and less interference from above is good for them. In practice they are excited yet wary. To them belongs a different set of schizophrenic thoughts.

CHOICES/CORRECTNESS

Empowerment gives the individual choices. When there is no-one to tell you what to do, and how and when to do it, **you** have to consider the options and take the decisions. That's exciting. But, what if your decisions do not gain corporate approval? The organisation says that you can make mistakes and even fail without negative consequences, but can you trust it? You will only know if you try, but will you take the risk? Choices are great if only you can be right all of the time!

COMPETENCY/CHALLENGE

To succeed with empowerment **you** work out the challenges and also the abilities required to meet them. That's exciting. But how do you know how much of a challenge to set yourself? How will you gain the abilities? What degree of 'stretch' can you and your organisation take? It's a judgement you will have to make and judgements mean personal accountability. Is this what you really want? To date someone else has always been accountable for your actions.

RISK/REWARD

To operate with empowerment means risk; risk of failure, risk of personal reputation, risk of future career. Risk can be exciting but it's only worth it if the prize is motivational enough. And yet who else practises empowerment within the organisation and is rewarded, financially or otherwise? It's talked about a great deal but who actually does it-very few. Can it be they don't consider it worth the risk?

FREEDOM/SECURITY

We all crave freedom. Freedom is exciting. We also all crave security. Thus empowerment is often a dilemma. If we have not been there before, freedom to take a voyage of discovery into the unknown can make us feel insecure. Very few managers know how to provide just the right amount of security with parameters. Organisations therefore rarely achieve the right balance between employee freedom and security. So what do we do? We hold back and contemplate!

INDIVIDUALIST/TEAM PLAYER

Individualism is exciting. It is something we pride ourselves about. We see ourselves as different and playing a unique role within the organisation.

We want to play that unique winning role yet we hear the need increasingly for teamwork, team contribution and acceptance by others. Being empowered, if others aren't or do not wish to be, can cause anxiety. The very difference encouraged in our behaviour can result in the opposite. We resort to a 'play it safe', 'stay one of the crowd' mentality. Acceptance by others can so often be more important than personal empowerment.

So, empowerment, what is the state of the art? The truth is both organisations and employees are struggling with it.

If you think about it empowerment is going on all around us. Parents empower their children. Sports coaches empower players. Teachers empower students. **What makes empowerment a success? Perhaps its really a question of joint ownership of the empowering process.**

You see, after the initial shock of my first meeting with my new boss I found out that I had been lucky enough to be working for a man who could balance unconditional acceptance and recognition of my efforts with conditional rewards. A man who knew just when to keep quiet and when to step in, when to offer support and when to let me seek it. He saw it as a joint effort. Perhaps that's it. The missing ingredient in today's attempts to empower is the concept of joint effort.

And should we also add wisdom? An old-fashioned word maybe, but it makes all the difference between growing up and maturity and after all that's all empowerment is-the process of growing up and maturing. We can only really achieve that together.

Empowerment can be a struggle. Usually it is. It is also the one thing that all of us as managers are called to. Unless we succeed, we shall leave a legacy of people unable to tackle the extraordinary challenges that we know will face us in the future. Empowerment of our people is therefore the most significant and vital contribution managers and organisations can make to securing an uncertain future.

It's up to us. One thing is certain; we all depend on the outcome.