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THE ROAD TO EMPOWERMENT: SEVEN
QUESTIONS EVERY LEADER SHOULD
CONSIDER

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The Road to Empowerment:

Seven Questions Every Leader Should Consider

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Executive Summary

  While many contemporary organizations recognize the need for empowered employees, they frequently run into problems attempting to implement empowerment programs. This paper explores the reasons why implementing employee empowerment is so difficult in large organizations. We draw on years of experience helping organizations to develop effective programs aimed at developing empowered employees. We also draw on an intensive research program which has examined the antecedents, consequences, and strategies for implementing employee empowerment in large organizations. We structure the paper around seven critical questions aimed at understanding the challenges of implementing employee empowerment:

- What do organizations mean when they say they want to empower employees?
- What are the characteristics of empowered employees?
- Do organizations really need empowered employees?
- Do organizations really want empowered employees?
- How do employees develop a sense of empowerment?
- How can organizations facilitate employee empowerment?
- What can leaders do to facilitate employee empowerment?

  A key conclusion of the paper is that most empowerment programs are embedded in a more mechanistic perspective on empowerment. This perspective assumes that empowerment is a set of managerial practices focused on cascading power to lower levels of the organization. Yet, this perspective is incomplete by itself. We seek to counter this imbalance on a mechanistic perspective by developing what we call an organic perspective on empowerment. In this perspective, empowerment embodies personal risk, trust, and initiative. We conclude that it is only by juxtaposing these two perspectives that we can begin to fully understand what it means for organizations to effectively empower their employees.

The Road to Empowerment:
Seven Questions Every Leader Should Consider

There is a growing consensus that employee empowerment can be a source of competitive advantage for contemporary organizations. As a result of increased globalization, technological sophistication, and heightened customer expectations, organizations are demanding more from their employees than ever before. Traditional command and control hierarchies, where top management directs employee behavior, are less appropriate in today's business environment. Instead, employees must learn to take initiative, be creative, and accept responsibility for their actions. Organizations need empowered employees.

Despite recognizing the need for empowered employees, organizations often run into problems attempting to implement empowerment programs. This paper explores the reasons why, despite the fact that most managers agree that employee empowerment is desirable, employee empowerment is difficult to implement. We draw on over a decade of experience working with organizations as they struggle to empower employees to make deep change. We also draw on an intensive research program that has empirically examined the antecedents, consequences, and processes of implementing employee empowerment in large organizations. Synthesizing our prior research and experience, we provide key learnings on the effective implementation of empowerment. We organize our discussion around seven critical questions:

1. What do we mean when we say we want to empower people?
2. What are the characteristics of an empowered person?
3. Do we really *need* empowered people?
4. Do we really *want* empowered people?
5. How do people develop a sense of empowerment?
6. What organizational characteristics facilitate employee empowerment?
7. What can leaders do to facilitate employee empowerment?

What Do We Mean When We Say We Want to Empower People?

Empowerment is a complex concept. It tends to mean different things to different people. In fact, in our own work, we find that there are two very contrasting world views or perspectives that come into conflict when people think about empowerment. Consider the following experience.

A few years ago, we worked with a Fortune 50 manufacturing company that recognized it was losing its competitive edge in the marketplace. Like many companies today, this organization had become unresponsive to the changing needs of the external business environment. The members of the top management team could see that the organization was on a trajectory to a slow death unless they made some kind of deep change to revitalize their organization. They concluded that they needed to empower their workforce and proceeded to make empowerment a top priority in their business plan. After a frustrating year with little apparent progress in the empowerment of their workforce, they asked us to work with them to analyze why so little had been achieved.

We began by individually interviewing the twelve most senior people in the organization. We asked them to define empowerment and to describe what is necessary to facilitate employee empowerment. The interviews were insightful to us because they revealed little consensus on the meaning of empowerment. There were sharp differences in the senior managers' assumptions about empowerment.

One half of the senior managers believed that empowerment was about delegation and accountability. Empowerment was a top-down process where senior management developed a clear vision and then communicated specific plans and assignments to the rest of the organization. Top management would provide employees with the information and resources needed to help people accomplish their tasks. Then employees would make the required procedural changes and process improvements. The result was greater managerial control, increased clarification, and simplification of employees' work. In short, this group of senior managers believed that empowerment was about delegating decision making within a set of clear boundaries and scope. Their implicit strategy for empowerment was:

- Start at the top
- Clarify the organization's mission, vision and values
- Clearly specify the tasks, roles and rewards for employees
- Delegate responsibility, and
- Hold people accountable for results.

The second half of the senior managers saw empowerment much differently. They believed that empowerment was about risk taking, growth, and change. Empowerment meant trusting people and tolerating their imperfections. When it came to rules, the senior managers in this group believed that the existing structures often presented a barrier to doing the right thing for the company. These senior managers assumed that newly empowered employees would naturally make some mistakes but that they should not be punished. Empowered employees would ask for forgiveness rather than permission. Empowered employees would be entrepreneurs and risk takers with a sense of ownership and commitment for the organization. They would engage in creative conflict, constantly challenging each other. Exposing and resolving differences would create a synergy among empowered employees. In short, this group of senior managers saw empowerment as a process of risk taking and personal growth. Their implicit strategy for empowerment was:

- Start at the bottom by understanding the needs of the employee
- Model empowered behavior for the employees
- Build teams to encourage cooperative behavior
- Encourage intelligent risk taking, and
- Trust people to perform.

These two viewpoints or perspectives on empowerment are very different. We call the first group's perspective, with its top-down view, the "mechanistic" approach to empowerment. In contrast, we call the second group's perspective, with its bottom-up view, the "organic" approach to

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empowerment. The most important contrast between these two perspectives on empowerment involves the implicit but potentially volatile assumptions people make about trust and control.

When we relayed our observations to the senior management team, they responded with a heavy silence. Finally, someone from the first group expressed a core concern about the second group's perspective on empowerment -- "We cannot afford loose cannons around here." A person from the second group retorted, "When was the last time you saw a cannon of any kind around here?" An intense conflict emerged between the two groups. Each could not understand the other's perspective. Not surprisingly, the top management team eventually dropped the notion of empowerment from their business plans.

The surfacing of the contrasting set of assumptions made it clear to us why the senior manager had made little headway in their objective to empower the work force. Though all the executives assumed that the empowerment of the workforce was the right thing to do, they were in deep conflict, not only over the meaning of empowerment, but also over how it should be implemented in their organization. Such conflicts are common in contemporary organizations and represent a primary reason why empowerment efforts are likely to fail.

For people intending to implement a program of empowerment, it is important to understand the implicit assumptions and different perspectives on empowerment. As will be seen later in the paper, the successful implementation of empowerment does not require a choice between the mechanistic or organic views. It requires something much more complex -- the integration of both views.

What are the Characteristics of an Empowered Person?

Most practitioners as well as authors of the popular business press are advocates of the mechanistic approach to empowerment. In a recent issue of Organizational Dynamics, for example, Alan Randolph articulated three steps necessary to "navigate the journey to empowerment." First, he emphasized the need to *share information* so that people know how they and the company are performing, and if their actions are making a difference. Opening the books to employees and sharing sensitive information about the company's market share and growth opportunities, as well as sharing information about the competition's strategies, are a step in the right direction. Frito-Lay, for instance, has computerized its entire product development system so that everyone in the organization has information about the sales volumes across product lines. The Honda plant in Marysville, Ohio, has a large scoreboard that gives ongoing information about the plant's performance.

Second, Randolph emphasized the need to *impose a structure* on employees. Creating a clear vision, clarifying organizational goals, and identifying individual roles help to set direction. Decision making rules and performance management processes ensure employee accountability for the decisions made. For example, the Ritz Carlton has created a clear vision focused on customer satisfaction and has instituted clear boundaries on what actions are within bounds for employees to satisfy customers. Employees are limited to $2,500 on the amount they can spend to satisfy a disgruntled guest.

Finally, Randolph advocated the *development of teams* as replacement for traditional hierarchy. Such teams need a strong leader -- a leader who is capable of providing guidance, encouragement, and support -- to help teams overcome any difficulties they may encounter. For example, the insurance division of Aid Association for Lutherans, a large fraternal benefits organization,

replaced its multilevel hierarchy with regional self-managing teams which are responsible for servicing the client. The teams do everything from underwriting to claims.

David Bowen and Edward Lawler offer similar prescriptions in their research on empowerment. In addition to emphasizing the need to share information and develop teams that have the power to make decisions, they also emphasize the need for training and rewards. First, they suggest that employees need relevant *training and knowledge* about how to be empowered. They must learn about how to work collaboratively in teams. They must have tools for problem solving. They must understand firm performance. For example, Johnsonville Foods brought in finance professors from a local community college to teach their employees, many with no more than a high school education, how to read financial statements. Second, Bowen and Lawler emphasize the importance of *rewards*. Empowered employees must be compensated for their increased responsibility and accountability. They require incentives to take risks and be creative. Intel, for example, offers stock options to all employees so that they can benefit from a strong company performance.

In short, these authors argue that managers can empower employees when they share information, provide structure, develop a team-based alternative to hierarchy, offer relevant training opportunities, and reward employees for the risks and initiatives they are expected to take. All these practices are part of the empowerment process. They are, however, incomplete by themselves. Often, empowerment programs that emphasize all of the above elements still do not achieve the desired results. In many cases, despite the implementation of these "empowering" managerial practices, employees are still hesitant about taking initiative and remain risk averse. We suggest that these practices are biased towards one particularly important and incorrect assumption in the mechanistic model -- they assume that empowerment is something managers do to their people.

Our research on the characteristics of empowered people suggests a more complex view of employee empowerment. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review, in depth interviews asking individuals to describe experiences of empowerment and disempowerment, and extensive survey research, we found that empowered people have four characteristics. Rather than specific management practices, these characteristics reflect the personal experience or feeling of empowerment.

- · Empowered people have a sense of *self-determination* (this means that people are free to choose how to do their work; they are not micro-managed)
- · Empowered people have a sense of *meaning* (this means that people feel their work is important to them; they care about what they are doing)
- · Empowered people have a sense of *competence* (this means that people are confident about their ability to do their work well; they know they can perform)
- · Finally, empowered people have a sense of *impact* (this means that people believe they can have influence on their work unit; others listen to their ideas)

These four dimensions reflect the psychological experience of empowerment rather than a set of managerial practices. To be empowered according to this definition, people must "feel" empowered. From our research, we found that empowerment is not something that management does to employees, but rather a mind set that employees have about their role in the organization. While management can create a context that is more empowering, this definition assumes that employees must choose to be

empowered. They must see themselves as having freedom and discretion, as feeling a personal connection to the organization, as confident about their abilities, and as able to have an impact on the system in which they are embedded. Management cannot mandate these things on employees; instead, employees must experience these characteristics as authentic.

Organizational efforts that assume an empowered employee is a passive recipient of a brilliant program design are doomed. Managers who seek to empower the workforce should understand that empowered people empower themselves. Organizational characteristics can facilitate and increase the likelihood of people empowering themselves, but most "design" assumptions that we encounter fully miss this critical point.

Do We Really *Need* Empowered People?

In the world of global competition, flat organizations, continuous change, and high quality customer-focused effort, empowerment has become almost sacred. Most organizations automatically subscribe to the rhetoric of empowerment. But why? What do we gain from having empowered people? The benefits described in the popular business press are extensive, but not well documented. Our systematic empirical research on middle managers provides important evidence about the benefits of empowering employees.

We found empowered middle managers to be significantly different from disempowered middle managers in several ways. First, empowered employees see themselves as more effective in their work and are evaluated as more effective by those with whom they work. Second, empowered employees see themselves as innovative, not afraid to try new things or to create more innovative ways of doing things. In addition, both subordinates and superiors rate empowered people strongly on their ability and willingness to be innovative. Third, empowered employees are transformational in their leadership ability. They engage in upward influence and report making second-order or quantum change when stimulated to make change. Because of their strong sense of personal meaning, empowered people are also seen as charismatic by the people that work for them. This charisma facilitates individuals' ability to bring transformational change to their organization. In each case, people who rate themselves as highly empowered provide substantial benefits to their organizations.

Thus, returning to our question above, in today's fast-paced global economy, people who are more effective, innovative and transformational are very attractive indeed. Empowerment appears to be worth the effort. This, however, turns our attention to a slightly different but important question -- do we really want empowered people?

Do We Really *Want* Empowered People?

Most top managers and supervisors would agree that people in organizations are generally intelligent and have good intentions. Many are aware of the findings discussed above regarding the real benefits that empowered people bring to the workplace and have truthfully concluded that empowering people is the right thing to do. Yet, the following scenario is all too familiar. Senior management designs an empowerment program and announces, in one way or another to employees, "You are now empowered -- act accordingly." Employees respond enthusiastically that they have been waiting to be

empowered. After some initial activity, nothing happens. In frustration, top managers and supervisors conclude, "These people just want someone to tell them what to do." So, why is it empowerment programs often do not achieve the intended benefits? Why do people fail to respond?

When thinking in the abstract or about ourselves, most of us are quite comfortable with notions of empowerment, initiative, risk, personal growth, and trust. We become much less comfortable, however, in thinking about these very same characteristics when considering how we manage our own subordinates. We wonder about how much autonomy our subordinates can handle without becoming "loose cannons." We worry about losing control.

The reality is that many of us implicitly discourage empowerment. We limit the potential for empowerment by reinforcing control systems which either intentionally or unintentionally send the message that we really do not trust people to act in empowered ways. These organization structures and systems form barriers that create pressures for conformity rather than encourage employee initiative and risk taking. In our research, we have identified three major barriers, common to most large organizations, that actively discourage employee empowerment: a bureaucratic culture, multi-level conflict, and personal time constraints.

Bureaucratic culture. A bureaucratic culture encompasses multiple layers of hierarchy which impede change. It emphasizes the maintenance of the status quo through a strong tradition of top-down change, the lack of a credible vision for the future, short-term managerial thinking, and a lack of management support for real change. Such a bureaucratic culture is reinforced by a reward system which emphasizes the status quo. The following quotation reflects the debilitating effects of a bureaucratic culture, "To get an initiative approved, five people must say yes, but to get it stopped, only one of the five has to say no." In short, a bureaucratic culture inhibits empowerment by creating barriers to change and learning.

Multi-level conflict. The second barrier stems from the multi-level conflict embedded in most organizations. Conflict between functions is the result of a structure which creates strong divisions between the various functions of the organization. Conflict amongst peers is the result of a performance management system which pits people against each other for raises and promotions, creating competition rather than collaboration. Finally, conflict between managers and subordinates over the means to achieve goals creates a hostile working environment where people worry about protecting themselves rather than doing what is right for the organization. Each of these sources of conflict works to inhibit feelings of empowerment by distracting employees from doing the right thing and recognizing the need for change.

Personal time constraints. The third barrier is the intense time constraints imposed on people. In today's business world, with the trend toward downsizing and layoffs, one person may be doing the job of two or even three people. Employees often complain about having less and less time for family life. Working under these types of stressful conditions, people often indicate that it is very difficult to think about initiating anything new.

These barriers are not the result of bad intentions on the part of management; instead, they are a natural consequence of the organizing process. The primary goal of most organizations is routinization and the maintenance of the status quo, not the encouragement of risk, creativity, and change. Given these barriers, no matter how much top management "says" that employee empowerment is desired, the average employee receives a very clear message about what management really wants. The subtle

message is "Conform, don't rock the boat!" The organization becomes a well-structured and natural "funeral parlor" for the empowerment of the its people.

In order to empower people, managers must lessen the barriers that are so powerful in maintaining control and order in the system, but which safeguard against employee empowerment as well. Managers must be willing to relinquish control, to risk releasing the potential of their people, to trust that employees will do the right thing if given the chance. Most of us would agree that giving up control -- to trust -- is a very difficult thing. Yet, any hesitation on the part of management sends a clear message to employees about just how much management really wants empowerment. These mixed messages indicate that, in spite our public sentiments about the importance of empowerment, many of us may not be willing to give up the control necessary to empower employees. Though we want to be empowered ourselves, we may not really want our people to be empowered.

How do People Actually Develop a Sense of Empowerment?

Earlier in the paper, we argued that empowerment is not a set of management practices, but rather an individual mindset -- a proactive orientation regarding our role in the organization. How does this mindset develop? The Ford Motor Company developed an innovative program aimed at empowering the entire stratum of middle managers in the company. The LEAD (Leadership Education and Development) program involved a one week intensive executive education experience followed six months later by a two and one half day follow-up program. The first part of the program was structured around parallel strategic, cultural, and structural changes taking place in the company. Sensitive information about the strategic direction of the company, typically reserved for top managers, was shared with the participants. Personal reflections and in-depth cross functional discussions were frequent. Participants also had the opportunity to self-assess their own leadership behavior as well as receive personal feedback from their bosses, peers, and superiors. From our work with the Ford LEAD program, we became aware of an evolving cycle of personal empowerment which is illustrated in Figure 1 and described below.

Figure 1 about here

The Ford LEAD program provided new experiences and perspectives which in turn led the participants to define their role in the organization -- to think deeply about how they could refocus themselves in relation to their work role. Because of the exposure to new experiences, the participants began to see their role in the organization differently. They began to see themselves as a partner in the organization rather than just a "cog in the wheel." This first stage of the empowerment process involved an in-depth personal evaluation and cognitive reframing, which allowed individuals to visualize themselves and their environment through a different lens. This deep change reflected a second-order personal transformation, a change in the individual's schema or cause map.

New approaches to old problems typically accompanied this fresh interpretation of the situation. This redefinition of self and role caused individuals to engage in new patterns of action. The participants

experimented with out-of-the-box thinking and behavior. They took risks, tried unorthodox methods, and were more creative and innovative. In this stage, old habits tended to be broken, and actions were taken without going through traditional channels. There was greater trust in oneself and reliance on intuition and "pure guts." In most cases, these new patterns of action were second-order or revolutionary changes instead of the more common first-order or incremental changes individuals typically initiated during empowerment programs. Truly innovative outcomes resulted.

When these innovative actions were reinforced, the process of empowerment continued. The individuals reflected on, learned, and grew from their new experiences. When the new patterns of action was successful, individuals drew on that success to stimulate future action. In cases where new patterns of action were not successful, individuals learned from their mistakes, grew, and developed. In this stage of the empowerment process, individuals recognized the importance of a continuous learning mind-set and the need to remain flexible and adaptable in order to be responsive to a changing and ambiguous environment. In this stage of the empowerment process, cognitions became increasingly complex, which allowed for greater learning and growth. This personal growth, in turn, led to increased self-confidence.

Typically, at this stage of the empowerment process, participants felt highly integrated with and committed to the organization. What is more, those who worked with the empowered person were likely to feel energized themselves. As a result, these individuals were willing to engage in risk taking, tested new ideas, and often inspired co-workers to do the same. In this way, the process of empowerment was synergistic. It drew individuals together to higher levels of effort. In short, these newly empowered participants empowered their associates through their actions. As empowered individuals interacted with one another, they developed new perspectives and had new experiences. For example, they shared success stories and helped one another diagnose situations to develop appropriate coping strategies. In addition, they built networks to expand their power base in the organization. These new experiences and perspectives then stimulated the individuals to redefine, once again, themselves and their roles, and the process of empowerment continued.

When the system did not reinforce the new patterns of behavior, however, a disruption of the cycle of empowerment tended to occur. Empowerment includes taking risks and the possibility of failure. When people take risks, invariably they will make mistakes and experience failure. If those mistakes were punished, then individuals became disenchanted with their new paradigm and regressed to past learned behaviors. If they received no support or reinforcement, then the cycle of empowerment was halted and individuals actually felt more disempowered than before. They experienced a sense of violation and felt that they were misled when management proclaimed that employees should act in empowered ways. Under these circumstances, it was not unusual to hear employees say things like "The empowerment effort was a fraud. No one here wants real empowerment. They just want people to work harder doing the same old thing." Trust was broken, and cynicism resulted. This began a vicious cycle of disempowerment.

However when the system reinforced individual empowerment, and this happened over 90% of the time, the process of empowerment was more regenerative and dynamic. It began by transforming individuals' sense of self, stimulated them to try new behaviors, helped them develop a continuous learning mind-set, and increased their self-confidence. The empowered individual then worked to draw others into the process so that they too became empowered.

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Clearly, the Ford LEAD program was quite unique in its approach to empowering their middle managers. But are there some more general lessons about what organizations can do to facilitate this cycle of empowerment? This is the focus of our next question.

What Organizational Characteristics Facilitate Employee Empowerment?

When an organization decides to implement a program aimed at employee empowerment, managers often say "Give me specifics. Tell me what do I need to do and when?" Most of us crave a simple strategy and quick action. Yet empowerment is anything but simple and quick -- it reflects the embracing of uncertainty, the use of trust, and the exercise of faith. At the outset of this paper we argued that two different perspectives on empowerment exist -- one mechanistic in nature and the other organic. We have learned that either perspective by itself provides an incomplete picture of the empowerment process -- both perspectives are essential to sustain employee empowerment.

The organic perspective suggests that empowerment requires people who are willing to embrace risk, take initiative, and make change. However, managers are unwilling to empower their subordinates unless they can trust that empowerment will not result in "loose cannons" who act in their own self-interests at the expense of the organization. Managers have to believe that in sharing control with subordinates that they are not losing control. This is the crux of the mechanistic perspective on empowerment. The challenge thus becomes how to facilitate both perspectives simultaneously.

In our empirical research, we discovered four key levers for psychological empowerment in the workplace. These levers integrate both the mechanistic and organic perspectives on empowerment. The first lever is a *clear vision and challenge*. Highly empowered people feel that they understand top management's vision for the organization and the strategic direction of the organization. In order for employees to understand the vision, of course they must have access to the strategic information about the future direction of the organization. Such a vision provides a clear direction so that employees feel they have the capability to act autonomously in their work rather than just waiting for permission and direction from top management. Such a vision must also provide challenge to employees, stretching their capability to improve themselves and the organization.   Ed Lawler does a beautiful job of articulating this lever in his recent book, From the Ground Up. He emphasizes the importance of developing and communicating an organizational mission in the form of a statement expressing "strategic intent" – that is an animating dream or stretch goal that energizes the company. For example, British Airlines stated in 1987 that its goal was to become the "World's Favorite Airline." Thus, strategic alignment is one key organizational lever for empowerment.

The second lever is *openness and teamwork*. In order for people to feel empowered, they must feel that there is a corporate culture that emphasizes the value of the human assets in the organization. Such a culture is very difficult to build amidst the focus on downsizing so dominant in today's business environment. It is only through a culture that emphasizes the human assets of the organization that employees feel a sense of participation, flexibility, concern, creative problem solving, and cohesive teamwork. Empowered employees must feel that the people in their unit work together to solve problems -- that employees' ideas are valued and taken seriously in decision making.   For example, Levi Strauss emphasizes the importance of its employees in its mission statement: "We want our people to feel respected, treated fairly, listened to, and involved. We want a company that our

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people are proud of and committed to, where all employees have an opportunity to contribute, learn, grow, and advance." Consequently, openness and teamwork through participation in organizational decision making reflect another organizational lever for employee empowerment.

The third lever is *discipline and control*. Highly empowered people report clear goals, clear lines of authority, and clear task responsibilities. While they have autonomy, they are aware of the boundaries of their decision making discretion. They know for what they are responsible, and what others have responsibility for achieving. They have clear, but challenging goals and objectives aligned with the vision of the organization. The key focus of this lever is to reduce the disabling potential of uncertainty and ambiguity that are so often accompany empowerment efforts in organizations. For example, Marriott has developed "safe zones" so that employees understand which kind of situations allow for empowerment and which do not. And as mentioned earlier, the Ritz-Carlton sets limits on the amounts that employees can spend to please a disgruntled guest. Without a basic level of structure and control, employees experience chaos rather than empowerment. For these reasons, clear expectations and authority encompass a third organizational lever for employee empowerment.

The fourth lever is *support and a sense of security.* In order to feel that the system really wants empowered employees, individuals need a sense of social support from their bosses, peers, and subordinates. Employee efforts to take initiative and risk must be reinforced rather than punished. If this support is missing or weak, employees will worry about seeking permission before acting rather than asking for forgiveness in the case that they make mistakes. They must believe that the company will support them as they learn and grow. If they take risks, but are punished by the system, then the result is disempowerment rather than empowerment. This is exemplified in an often told story at UPS. Some years ago, an empowered employee ordered an extra 737 to ensure timely delivery of a train load of packages left behind in the Christmas rush. Clearly, this employee went beyond his zone of authority. However, rather than punish the employee, UPS praised his initiative and the story survives as proof that the company stands behind such empowered efforts. Thus, support and security in risk taking reflect another set of organizational levers for employee empowerment.

These levers reflect <u>both</u> the mechanistic and organic perspectives on empowerment. To create an empowering environment, managers need to exhibit continuous long-term dedication to the management of all four levers. It is only through the integration of the mechanistic and organic perspective that sustained levels of employee empowerment can be achieved.

What Can Leaders Do To Facilitate Employee Empowerment?

Earlier in the paper, we recounted the tale of the top management team that they had two different perspectives on empowerment and how they had become very uncomfortable about their conflicting assumptions on the roles of trust and control in empowerment. Eventually they asked us what we thought they should do. At that time we posed a fundamental question: How many members of this management team are empowered? The question proved to create more discomfort than did the original revelation.

This question raises the most fundamental issue of all. It is nearly impossible for unempowered people to empower others. Many executives, even at the highest levels, are not, according to our earlier definition, empowered. When people say, "Change begins at the top," they usually mean

programs must be designed at the top and cascaded down the organizational hierarchy. They do not mean that the people at the top have to actually change their behavior. However, we believe this is exactly what empowerment requires. Our research provides some important insights on how the behavior of top management must change in order for empowerment to take root in an organization. We will convey these insights in two sets of questions.

Asking Ourselves Some Hard Questions. Every executive, manager and supervisor should be required to ask themselves four basic questions about their behaviors to help empowerment establish a foothold in the organization. They are as follows:

- *If a sense of a clear strategic vision is a characteristic of an empowering environment, am I <u>continuously</u> working to clarify the sense of strategic direction for the people in my own stewardship?*
- *If openness and teamwork are characteristics of an empowering environment, am I <u>continuously</u> striving for participation and involvement in my own stewardship?*
- *If discipline and control are characteristics of an empowering environment, am I <u>continuously</u> working to clarify expectations around the goals, tasks, and lines of authority in my own stewardship?*
- *If support and security are characteristics of an empowering environment, am I <u>continuously</u> working to resolve the conflicts among the people in my own stewardship?*

The above questions all emphasize the word "continuously" because we have a tendency to have a check list mentality. "If I have to empower my people, give me a check list and I will get it done and then go on to the next thing in my busy schedule." Most people who design empowerment programs collude with this mentality. They end up designing "empowerment in a box" programs and little ever happens. Once people check an item off their list, they tend to forget about it and return to their normal pattern of behavior. Unless we continually monitor ourselves on our new behavior, change will not occur.

Some Harder Questions. If, as suggested above, creating an empowered environment requires continuous attention over time, then empowerment is hard work. Empowerment, however, requires even more. We consider now the most important questions of all -- a series of questions grounded in our definition of empowerment. Again we suggest that every leader in the company must ask these questions of him or herself:

- To what extent do I have a sense of meaning and task alignment, and what can I do to increase it?
- To what extent do I have a sense of impact, influence and power, and what can I do to increase it?
- To what extent do I have a sense of competence and confidence to execute my work, and what can I do to increase it?

· To what extent do I have a sense of self determination and choice, and what can I do to increase it?

These questions imply that before we can create an environment through which others can be empowered, we must empowerment ourselves. We must lead by example and begin by changing ourselves because leaders who transform themselves, trust themselves. Empowered people are empowering people. We have found very senior executives who are insecure and unempowered. The people around them continually struggle. In the end unempowered people cannot create environments where others are willing to risk empowering themselves. All of us need to regularly review these very hard questions.

Conclusion

Both the mechanistic and the organic perspectives on empowerment provide a partial, incomplete picture of the empowerment journey. Each provides a different lens or interpretation of the empowerment process. Most of the popular business press is embedded in the more mechanistic perspective on empowerment. This perspective assumes that empowerment is a set of managerial practices for cascading power down to lower levels of the organization. Yet, the mechanistic perspective is incomplete by itself. We seek to counter this imbalance in the literature by more deeply developing the organic perspective on empowerment. In this second perspective, empowerment embodies personal risk, trust, and initiative. Yet, by itself, the organic perspective too is incomplete. The risk, trust, and initiative so vital to the organic model are unrealistic unless managers choose to model empowerment themselves by asking themselves the hard questions outlined above. It is only by juxtaposing these two perspectives that we can begin to fully understand the journey of empowerment. This journey is difficult because no written guarantees are provided -- no insurance policies or safety nets will save us if we fail. The possibility of failure is a constant companion who walks along side any empowered person. Nevertheless, people will be willing to risk that failure if they truly experience a sense of empowerment and are part of an environment which values and supports risk, trust, and initiative.

Selected Bibliography

The first author provides a more comprehensive look at the empowerment process within the context of deep change in his recently published book entitled *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (Jossey-Bass, 1996). He examines both individual and organizational processes that facilitate the organic perspective on empowerment.

A variety of sources discuss the challenges of the empowerment journey consistent with the more mechanistic perspective on empowerment. David E. Bowen and Edward E. Lawler III, "The Empowerment of Service Workers: What, Why, How, and When, " *Sloan Management Review* (Spring, 1992) emphasize the key roles of information, rewards, knowledge, and power in the empowerment process. They expand on these notions in a second article in the *Sloan Management Review* (Fall, 1995) entitled, "Empowering Service Workers." W.A. Randolph, "Navigating the Journey to Empowerment," *Organizational Dynamics* (Spring, 1995) describes the critical managerial practices focused on information, structure, and teams for facilitating the empowerment process. Finally, R.C. Ford and M.D. Fottler provide more specific ideas on how to implement empowerment in their article entitled "Empowerment: A Matter of Degree," *The Academy of Management Executive.* (August, 1995).

A variety of sources also examine some of the challenges of the empowerment journey consistent with the organic perspective. J. Conger and R. Kanungo emphasize the importance of self-efficacy in the experience of empowerment in their article entitled, "The empowerment process: Integrating theory and practice" in the *Academy of Management Review*, (1988). K. Thomas and B. Velthouse provide a multidimensional definition of empowerment that includes meaning, competence, choice, and impact in their article "Cognitive elements of empowerment" in the *Academy of Management Review*, (1990). G.M. Spreitzer provides an instrument for measuring psychological empowerment multidimensionally and examines the antecedents and consequences of empowerment in the workplace in "Psychological empowerment in the workplace: Definition, Dimensions, and Validation," published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, (October, 1995). More discussion of the cycle of empowerment and the LEAD program can be found in R.E. Quinn, N.B. Sendelbach, and G.M. Spreitzer. "Education and empowerment: A transformational model of managerial skills development." In J. Bigelow (Ed.) *Managerial skills: Explorations in transferring practical knowledge*. (Sage Publications, 1991). Finally, the second author provides additional discussion of the four sets of levers for psychological empowerment in her recent articles entitled, "Social Structural Levers to Individual Empowerment in the Workplace." *Academy of Management Journal*, (April 1996).

Bio for Robert Quinn

Robert E. Quinn holds the M.L. Tracy Collegiate Professorship at the University of Michigan Business School. His research interests focus on organizational change, leadership, culture, paradox, personal growth and transformation. Professor Quinn is the author of numerous publications. Recent books include Beyond Rational Management: Mastering the Paradoxes and Competing Demands of High Performance, Becoming a Master Manager: A Competency Based Framework, Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within, and Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture (forthcoming).

Bio for Gretchen Spreitzer

Gretchen Spreitzer is a faculty member in the Management and Organization Department at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business. She is also a faculty affiliate of both the Center For Effective Organizations and the Leadership Institute at USC. Her research focuses on the areas of employee empowerment and managerial development, particularly within a context of organizational and strategic change and decline. She has published widely in prominent journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Human Relations, Industrial Labor Relations Review, Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Inquiry,* and *Research in Organizational Change and Development*. She has consulted on these issues for organizations in the automotive, aerospace, financial services, and health care industries. Gretchen was recently named an Ascendant Scholar by the Western Academy of Management for showing early career promise of making major contributions to the study of management. She is on the editorial board of the Journal of Management Inquiry. She is also a member of the Academy of Management (where she served on the executive board of the Organization Development and Change Division). She completed her doctoral work at the University of Michigan School of Business.