

# EMPOWERMENT AS AN ORGANIZATION TOOL

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Business and management principles are constantly evolving concepts. Employee involvement, of which empowerment is a contributor is one of the more current management trends. To understand how organizations have come to utilize this current methodology it is useful to step back in time to investigate the evolution of European and American management concepts. Before there were huge conglomerate organizations there were guilds. These were groups of artisans who had their own rules governing quality, prices, and other criteria. Within these guilds, individuals had the “freedom to design and produce unique goods that emanated their talents and creativity.” These guilds closely controlled the number of artisans and the ability of those artisans through a rigorous system where a master craftsman would train an apprentice. As the industrial revolution came of age factories became the norm for business structures as artisans moved to the city in search of larger returns. These workers became part of larger organizations in which “their personal identity and individual talents were not held to be important.” The boss told the workers exactly what to do it and those doing the work had “no say in any aspect of their job.”

As independent factories merged larger and larger organizations were created, this resulted in bureaucracy. This business model is “typically depicted as a pyramid divided into segments by a horizontal line,” the management of the organization is at the top, followed by “descending layers of command where the workers are the bottom segment.” As bureaucracy became unmanageable and unrealistic, organizations began to look for alternatives. They found employee involvement. This often involves “groups of two or more people who shared decision making powers and responsibility” regarding specific aspects of their individual jobs. Those groups are also generally responsible for how their “contributions affect the overall organization.” (Kalbaugh, 1998).

There is some debate about exactly when empowerment came into being as a valid managerial concept. However, most researchers agree that it is possible to “trace the concern about employee for participation to Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne studies.” (Herrenkohl, Judson, & Heffner, 1999). Other researchers are more specific in their assertion that the “historical roots for empowerment can be traced to the Human Relations school in the early 1930's.” These researchers point to an argument advanced by Mary Follette. She asserted that “man can overcome his physical, biological, and environmental limitations through a system of cooperation rather than competition.” (Korunkonda, 1999).

While the exact point where empowerment came into being may be difficult to ascertain, it is much more difficult to obtain a standard definition. Efforts to define empowerment have ranged from the simple one-liners to the more complex and encompassing. Listed below are several of the simpler and more straightforward definitions of empowerment that authors have offered:

- Merriam Webster's dictionary defines the verb to empower as “to authorize or delegate or give legal power to someone.”
- “Employee empowerment often refers to employees being more proactive and self-sufficient in assisting an organization to achieve its goals.” (Herrenkohl, Judson, & Heffner, 1999).
- “Empowerment as a means of liberating employees suggests that employees should be free to do what they think is best without fear of veto by the boss.” (Korunkonda, 1999)
- Employee environment “is a fancy way of saying that we are going to treat employees like adults. To empower employees we given the right information, set clear goals, and allow them to do the jobs they were hired to do.” (Caudron, 1999).
- “A common academic definition of empowerment is experienced choice, competence, meaningfulness, and progress.” (Jones, 1999).
- “Empowerment s a process whereby individual’s beliefs in his or her efficacy is enhanced.” (Lin, 1998).
- Empowerment is “recognizing the power that exists in a role, allow more, and expecting a person to express it.” (Porter-OGrady, 1998).
- Empowerment in the context a self-reliant and resourcefulness, “is about expectations, self-image, motivation and commitment.” (Robinson, 1998).
- “Empowerment combines both the ability and opportunity to judge correctly and do the right thing, as well as a preparation to do what must be done.” (Edgeman & Dahlgaard, 1998).
- “Internal and external cooperation subsumes team work and collaborative organizations, whereas employee fulfillment can be considered to subsume employee empowerment.” (Korunkonda, 1999).
- Empowerment is “conceptual job autonomy, the capacity to design one's work processes and to make key, non-routine decisions.” (Dobbin, & Boychuk, 1999).
- Empowerment “is not complete freedom to do as one or a team wants. It is tough-minded respect for the individual and a willingness to train and to set reasonable and clear expectations for him and to grant him practical autonomy to step out and contribute directly to his job.” (Heaton, 1998).
- In the “real expression of empowerment, specific expectations are already present with the role. Every individual: plays a part in determining his or her work, participate in evaluating the outcomes of work, has the authority necessary to be the work, acknowledges all changes in work, and must on decisions that affect his or her work and workplace relationship.” (Porter-OGrady, 1998).

It appears that most of the simpler, more straightforward definitions revolve around the individual. The more complex definitions tend to focus on both the individual and the organizations. Take for instance the statement by Maccoby that “ there are two

traditional meanings of empowerment. One means investing authority in a role or person, this also implies acceptance of personal responsibility and accountability. The second means enablement. It suggests that to create an empowered organization, one needs to create a learning organization.” (1999). Another author was frustrated by the lack of an agreed upon operational definition and as such, he created one. The operational definition that he developed “accounted for both the workers actions and the organization support for those actions. Empowerment was defined as a set of dimensions that characterize environments interaction with persons in it so as to encourage their taking initiative to improve process and take action.” (Herrenkohl, Judson, & Heffner, 1999).

To support the operational definition that was created, Herrenkohl, Judson, & Heffner listed the various definitions from which it was derived. Those definitions included: “1 - sharing power with or moving power to those who do the work, 2 - redistributing authority and control, 3 - employees and managers sharing equal responsibility for results, 4 - maximizing employees’ contribution to the organization's success, 5 - full participation of workers and leaders in decision making, 6 - pursuit of the shared vision and purpose through team effort, 7 - self-motivation, which develops through a full understanding of responsibility and authority commensurate with those responsibilities, 8 - capability to make a difference in the attainment of goals, 9 - a synergistic interaction among individuals, which leads to expansion of power for the groups, 10 - role of the learning process, 11 - stimulate skill development and motivates increased contributions to the organization's success.” (1999).

While some researchers and authors are focusing on developing definitions of empowerment, others warn against it. Jones feels that “definitions of popular terms such as empowerment, tend to carry a strong evaluative component. Because of this practitioners are best advised to take a wait and see approach to definition. Only later, after the positive evaluative glow has passed, is it meaningful to attempt precise definition development.” (1999). Others see value in developing definitions, but they warn of having a limited scope. “Empowerment comes in a number forms. Employee involvement, the team concept, and high performance work teams are all very common in their goals and style. Any of these terms could easily be substituted for empowerment.” (Heaton, 1998). As such, practitioners would be advised to define empowerment in terms of its larger organizational uses and impacts.

### Uses of Empowerment Initiatives

Authors argue that “empowerment systems influence how work is organized across industries and levels of management.” (Dobbin, & Boychuk, 1999). This is largely due to the usefulness of empowerment in organizations. It is not just a feel good practice; it is a productive and useful practice as well. Due to the significant impact that empowerment can have, organizations are changing the manner in which work is organized to take advantage of those uses.

A very common use of empowerment is in problem solving. Employee empowerment is considered it “to facilitate self-control, the liberation of minds, and the creation of

problem-solving skills.” (Korunkonda, 1999). Empowerment is an excellent problem solving tool and “is often invoked as a means to accomplish creativity.” (Jones, 1999). An excellent use of the empowerment process is “to identify a break in the process. This is an opportunity to take a fresh look at what is possible and to distinguish facts, versus opinions and interpretations. These conversations can then take place for determining the actions necessary to create a whole process solution to the breakdown.” (Willis, of 1999). Allowing people and groups and to make decisions regarding processes can be highly beneficial to organizations.

Problem solving is often used in regards to quality. This is another instrumental use of empowerment. Employees can be empowered “to make decisions, build relationships, and take steps needed to improve quality within the system designed by management.” (Korunkonda, 1999). One such system is TQM, which is a way of managing to improve the effectiveness, flexibility and competitiveness of the business as a whole. It is no exaggeration to say that two recurrent themes throughout literature on TQM are teams and employee empowerment. “Empowerment of staff, providing ownership of the process, and commitment to continuous development” are considered to be critical to the successful implementation of TQM. (Moon & Swaffin-Smith, 1998). Employee empowerment is considered ‘crucial to TQM on three grounds: 1 - empowerment involves providing better information and skills and delegating authority to the non-managerial employees so they can perform more tasks and perform them better, 2 - the idea of self control as opposed to management control, 3 - the assumption that empowerment results in employee satisfaction, which is needed to provide customer satisfaction and continuous improvement.” (Korunkonda, 1999). While see as highly beneficial to TQM, some experts fear that “excessive reliance on teams and empowerment on the basis of faith and anecdotal evidence rather than hard-core empirical evidence could be fatal long-term outlook for the TQM movement.” (Korunkonda, 1999). Another popular quality system that sees empowerment as a crucial element is the Six Sigma initiative. This is where the performance level equates to 3.4 defects per million opportunities for defects to occur. It is crucial that there are empowered “team members who in the trenches, getting their hands dirty” who are making decisions regarding quality. (Hellinghausen & Myers, 1998).

While empowerment can be extremely useful to an organization, it is also vulnerable to abuse. “The term empowerment is common currency, but the genuine practice of empowerment is rare.” (Moon & Swaffin-Smith, 1998). Indeed organizations see that a link between employee empowerment and satisfaction can be readily established.” However, organizations often overlook that the link exists because both are “consequences of employee fulfillment practices.” (Korunkonda, 1999). It is a common misconception that empowerment alone will lead to employee satisfaction. Many organizations implement empowerment practices to pacify the employees. This can be dangerous in that when the notion of an empowered organization is turned solely “to ideological use, it serves to “con” employees into believing that they have more, rather than less power.” This occurs when the required resources are “exclusively available to top managers and directors, enabling power to build upon power.” (Snell, 1998).

### Benefits and Costs of Empowerment Initiatives

While there is no question as to the usefulness of empowerment in organizations, the question with any initiative is always, what are the benefits? “The benefits that can be derived from empowerment include employee commitment, quality products and services, efficiency, responsiveness, synergy and management leverage.” (Lin, 1998). To be a bit more specific, empowerment is beneficial because “Everyone can see and manage their work as part of the interconnected system. People are trusted and responsible adults, which is how they behave. A collection of small, self-contained teams or business units are many times more flexible and responsive at meeting threats and capitalizing on opportunities. Ownership, commitment, energy, and passion levels are high. Everyone focuses on meeting customer and stakeholder needs. People have more control over the work, the vicious cycle of learned helplessness is replaced with a virtuous recycle of hopefulness and leadership. The feedback loops are much clearer and closer to the customer.” (Clemmer, 1998).

Results from companies using the empowered team concept show that: “dynamic results occur with committed and creative teamwork, employees become more confident and motivated to the team process, and the better and stronger company in the end result.” (Hellinghausen & Myers, 1998). In addition, “individual team members offer a broad set of skills and ideas, cross functional teams can greatly facilitate project implementation as many systems project require cross functional cooperation, innovativeness and customer satisfaction can be improved as teams are empowered to make customer decisions in without having to wait for managerial approval, and finally, the quality of work life is improved as employees are more in control of their own destiny.” (Johnson, 1999).

While these may indeed be beneficial, most organizations are concerned with the bottom line benefits. “The National Center for Employee ownership has shown that companies, after implementing employee ownership practices such as empowerment, show improvements in measures like sales grow, employment growth, and a decline in workers compensation claims.” (Day, 1999). Currently, U.S. companies that are “employee owned outperform their counterparts by between 8% to 14% in returns to capital, market share growth, and job creation. They are less prone to job shedding during recessions and are also less susceptible to strikes.” (Pereira, 1998).

However impressive the results of employee ownership may be, many companies are not ready or willing to transition to employee ownership. Indeed, it is not necessary to have a successful employee empowerment initiative. Over the past decade or so, numerous rigorous studies have “demonstrated the enormous economic returns obtained through the implementation of what are variously called high involvement, high-performance, or high commitment management practices. This evidence is drawn from studies of the five-year survival rates of initial public offerings, studies of profitability and stock prices in large samples of companies from multiple industries, and detailed research on the automobile, apparel, semiconductor, steel manufacturing, oil refining, and service industries.” (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999). A study of 100 German companies “operating in ten industrial sectors found a strong link between investing in employees through initiatives such as

empowerment and stock-market performance. Companies which place workers at the core of their strategies produce higher long term returns to shareholders than the industry appears.” (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999).

Immediate and short-term benefits are always a good thing, however, without long term survival of the organization, they lose significance. A study of the “five-year survival rate of 146 non-financial companies that initiated a public offering in the U.S. stock market in 1988. By 1993, only 60 percent of these companies were still in existence. The empirical analysis demonstrated that with factors such as size, industry, and even profits statistically controlled, both the value the firm placed on human resources and how the organization rewarded people were significantly related to the probability of survival.” (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999). Based on research, some authors “believe that organizations that embrace empowerment, and proactively record and use corporate memory, will have an advantage in the global market. Current literature suggests that empowerment and organizational memory” are beneficial to organization’s long term survival. (Johnson, 1999). In short, the payoff of empowerment is a more educated, more flexible organization, able to respond instantaneously to changes in the market, and turn on a dime for the customer if necessary.” (Willis, of 1999)

While the benefits of empowerment are impressive, nothing is without costs. The cost associated with empowerment can be intimidating. “Highly decentralized project teams often fail to meet their deadlines” and the “speed of delivery can thereby be impacted.” Conflicts between team members “can significantly decrease team innovativeness and performance.” Empowered teams “may need to be facilitated by experienced managers to counteract potential conflicts” resulting in the need to have trained managers available. “Reliability can also be affected” as teams may not “follow standards set out by the organization.” Yet another cost is “the investment in selection and training.” Even with training, employees “may not have the experience in dealing with the consequences of their decisions.” (Johnson, 1999). “Once democracy is unleashed in the organization, maverick employees can get out of hand, divisive actions can develop, or strategic coherence can be threatened.” (Lee, 1999). It is important that organizations be aware of and prepared to deal with the costs when entering into an empowerment initiative as nothing worth having comes easily.

### Reasons for Implementing Empowerment

While there are many reasons for implementing empowerment one that is commonly referred to is that it is simply the right thing to do. The philosopher Kant believed that one command is categorical, that is “necessarily binding on all rational agents, despite any other considerations.” Kant’s categorical imperative says that “we should act in such a way that we can and will obtain the maximum of our action.” Some experts believe that Kant’s categorical imperative is “a valid principle for determining what is morally correct.” In “applying this to organizations, in order for business to be morally acceptable, all parties must be treated with mutual respect because we as people deserve it.” (Borowski, 1998). While this argument and other like it surface several times in the

literature, it has yet to be given as a reason by an organization implementing empowerment.

Most organizations will refer to their employees being their greatest asset when rationalizing an empowerment initiative. The “competitive edge does not lie in technology alone but in the human resources that use that technology. The human side of organization has the power and capability to work together to undertake an accomplished projects that achieve the strategies of the business.” (Willis, 1999). “You have to believe that people are you most valuable assets and capable of immense achievement. You have to help people find meaning and fulfillment in what they do. If you don’t believe in the unseen human potential, you will only get status quo performance – business as usual.” (Covey, 1999). Many experts echo this when they acknowledge that while the employee may be a competitive advantage, most people “are performing at low levels because of personal or organizational disintegration. They possess much more intelligence, talent, and creativity than their present jobs require or even allow.” (Covey, 1999).

Organizations are beginning to see this as a problem and are implementing empowerment to overcome it. In attempts to build upon the company’s strengths, many organizations are taking “the most knowledgeable and skilled employees from each department are teaming them in company projects and giving them the authority to make total project decisions.” (Hellinghausen & Myers, 1998). Organizations are realizing that empowerment of front line workers is critical if the organization is to understand core business processes. The reason for this is that frontline workers are closest to those processes and they're probably the only ones who really understand how they work.” (Johnson, 1999).

While front line employees are usually closest to the technical work processes, they are sometimes also closest to the customers. When managers do not “make employees feel significant and integral to the company, morale suffers and stress builds. Enthusiasm turns into apathy and frustration, which usually is communicated to the external customers.” (Bernan, 1999). Empowerment programs can be used to help transform a stagnant and apathetic organization “into a vital one by creating a shared purpose among employees, encouraging greater cooperation, and most importantly, deliver enhanced value to customers.” (Dover, 1999). Indeed empowerment is gaining momentum not just as a tool to overcome employee apathy. “The use of empowered employee teams to solve problems, lower costs, increase quality, and in short, improve customer satisfaction, is gaining momentum in today's global business environment.” (Hellinghausen & Myers, 1998). This makes sense in that “the paramount objective of empowerment is to do whatever it takes to satisfy customer in a quick and efficient manner. Empowerment is a powerful tool that increases revenues and improves the bottom line.” (Potochny, 1998).

“Empowerment strategies are viewed with both admiration and cynicism, depending on the personal experience of the observer. Empowerment is not a do-good / feel-good strategy. When implement effectively, empowerment is a powerful energizing tool that drives an organization towards its corporate goals. It can be a source of competitive advantage.” (Robinson, 1998). The success or failure of many companies “may depend

on their ability to strategically incorporate empowerment and organizational memory in order to gain and retain the advantages offspring their own employees might have to offer.” (Johnson, 1999). In today’s work environment, empowered teams help to keep a company one step ahead of the competition, with better products that are better tailored to fit the customer's needs.” (Hellinghausen & Myers, 1998). “Successful companies need people to share ideas and information, innovate, resolve customer problems on the spot, and participate in high performance teams.” (Maccoby, 1999). It appears that empowerment is a very important factor in sustained business success. As such, many organizations are attempting to “reap the full will benefit of empowerment” by choosing “to push decision making down to workers who deal daily with core processes.” (Johnson, 1999). If nothing else, “teaching people to make responsible decisions saves valuable time.” (McCarthy, 1999).

In a changing world, organizations must change just as surely and individuals must change. In response to environmental influences, “recent years have seen an increase in organizational flattening, the tendency to shrink the organizational structure through the removing of layers in the hierarchy.” (McConnell, 1998). While there is no doubt that organizations must change, there is growing disparity as to how they should go about the process of change. One aspect that most experts agree on is that “change efforts originate from and are dependent on people's commitment and willingness to embrace new business processes and approaches, and view them as opportunities for personal involvement and assess.” (Anonymous, 1998). Taking this into consideration, the following are some approaches that companies have used to ensure a successful change to a new way doing business. “1 – Communication, set proper expectations. If you fail to communicate at every stage, progress will stop. 2 - Defining an understanding roles. Specific roles and responsibilities need to be broken-down so that everyone knows what is expected of them, both during and after the paradigm has shifted. 3 - Facilitate rather than force. 4 - Trust. A high degree of trust and honesty is imperative between all levels and departments within the organization. 5 - Leadership. Successful change demands early and continuous top management understanding, commitment, approval, and involvement. 6 – Time. People need repeated opportunities to think, talk, and discover the process as well as the benefits. 7 - Education. Managers need to be educated about what the new way of doing business entails and how to manage it. Employees need to be reassured that adequate training and coaching will be provided. 8 - Internal change champion. The change agent must have the power to overcome regular road-blocks, understanding what is necessary to motivate employees, and maintain and support the vision.” (Willis, 1999).

Overall, it can be said that “companies that are successful at handling change find some way to push complacency down and urgency up.” (Kotter, 1999). Building upon this idea, “many organizations are moving to empowerment in order to generate better decisions for employees and to adapt to industry changes.” (Johnson, 1999). Indeed, some experts believe that “a major step in transforming an organization is to empower employees to act on the vision.” (Lin, 1998). Leaders and their workforces are beginning to take responsibility for making change successful and in turn are “creating organizations that can successfully stay had the competition and prepare for the future.”

(Willis, 1999). This is often done by practicing the principles of empowerment. “Empower others by removing blocks, by changing systems or structures that seriously undermine the change vision, and by encouraging risk-taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions. This helps increase the effectiveness of internal change processes to cope with external change.” (Kotter, 1999). While empowerment can be useful, if not essential to making change efforts successful, “establishing empowerment can mean great upheaval and change in an organization,” sometimes compounding an already daunting change process. (Willis, 1999).

Companies that see their people as assets, strive to meet customer needs, and adapt to changing environments are taking steps to be high performing organizations. “High performance practices include decentralization, self managed teams, egalitarian cultures, and free access by employees to knowledge and information. These practices are combined with selective hiring practices and assurances of employment security.” (Lee, 1999). In these high performance organizations there is generally “more motivation and inspiration to achieve vision and strategies, employee relationships that help create passion, minimal bureaucracy so that energy is not killed, an executive compensation that does not infuriate employees.” (Kotter, 1999). They also use “leadership practices that energize workers who are attuned to strategic goals. The result is more leadership from more people, a clearer sense of direction, long-term visions, productivity and innovative strategies to support the vision, and directors to focus on the big picture.” (Kotter, 1999).

Empowerment contributes heavily to all of the above components of a high performing organization. With effective empowerment, the employees “learn of the connections between their decisions and actions and customer value. In addition, they become self directed decision makers aligned with the shared purpose and receive the reinforcement and support needed optimize the value provided to customers.” (Dover, 1999). All of this requires that employees “believe that quality begins with them and they make their decisions based on correct principles.” (Covey, 1999). As desirable as all of this may be, employees cannot be forced to be supportive in producing a high performance organization as “high-performance is voluntary.” (Avery, 1999).

It is the voluntary component that seems to have researchers focusing on employee motivation. Some experts have suggested that organizations “put aside be realistic search for a programmatic Holy Grail and begin to look within an organization at the untapped capacity and its ability to produce zest.” (Lin, 1998). In order to product “zest” organizations must understand what basic human motivation is. Woodruff puts forth a theory that people are driven by one of three motives: achievement, affiliation, and influence. Those “who are driven by achievement like to test themselves against their environment and obtain standards of excellence.” Those who are driven by affiliation are “most concerned about the quality of their relationships.” Finally, those who are driven by influence are “concerned about their impact on other people, convincing someone of their point of view, or empowering others around them.” (1999).

Understanding human motivation is not enough; organizations must have beliefs and actions that support the development and maintenance of employee motivation. As such,

it has been shown that companies with high employee motivation “believe that employees want and deserve: 1 - meaningful work, 2 - high standards, 3 - a clear sense of purpose and direction, 4 - a commiserate level of interest and investments in them, 5 - a level playing field, meaning reciprocal caring coupled with a sense of justice and fairness, and 6 - to be and feel competent.” (Catlette, & Hadden, 1999).

While an organization’s beliefs can help develop a motivated workforce, they can also do just the opposite. Organizational assumptions and beliefs that “hurt employee motivation include: 1 - people need paternalistic employers who will take care of them because they cannot take care of themselves, 2 - the more you give people without expecting anything in return the happier and better off they will be, and 3 - if you run a kinder, gentler organization it will foster love, peace, goodwill, and the world will be a better place.” (Catlette, & Hadden, 1999). While these beliefs may be well meaning, they are detrimental to attempts to develop employee motivation.

Regardless of what the beliefs may be, companies must exhibit actions to support these beliefs; otherwise they are just rhetoric. Indeed, companies with high employee motivation “share three things in common: 1 - they keep people solidly behind the core purpose, 2 - they let people know they are cared about, first as people then as professionals, and 3 - they remove obstacles from the paths of their workers.” (Catlette, & Hadden, 1999). Many companies do these things through empowerment as it “is an effective means of promoting the highly desirable quality of empowerment.” (Lin, 1998).

### Failure of Empowerment Initiatives

It is estimated that failure of empowerment initiatives are “as high as 70 percent” (Allen & Alvarez, 1999). The majority of these failed empowerment initiatives follow a similar pattern or process: “the announcement, the initial reaction, chaos, and the backlash.” The initial reaction in “a mix of guarded optimism and cynicism.” Many employees and managers see the potential benefits but “are apprehensive about added responsibility.” This apprehension can be compounded because the “personal benefits in terms and satisfaction, recognition, compensation or career development are not always clear.” Nevertheless, a flurry of activity follows the initial announcement. “Employees are enfranchised with new authority and responsibility and the company creates new measures of employee and organizational performance.” Indeed, progress has begun toward an empowered workforce. “Eventually, conflicts arise as the principles of empowerment are applied to real decisions and actions.” The result of all this conflict is “perceived chaos.” Some managers respond to this “by exerting more control over direct reports.” They interfere with empowered individuals or teams “out of fear that they lack the skills, information, or commitment needed to make appropriate decisions.” Thus, the backlash occurs and “overworked, under rewarded employees become defensive and cynical.” Eventually, senior management allows the program to die quietly. (Dover, 1999).

One of the most common explanations is that the employees simply were not capable, or were not ready to be empowered. This may be a cop-out, but it may also be true as an

undermining factor of empowerment can be “the attitude or mental map held by the individuals.” (Allen & Alvarez, 1999). Peter Block warns against empowering victims, cynics, and bystanders. He states that “they do not seek empowerment, they seek entitlement or appeasement. To empower them is to sabotage the company’s efforts as they are operating from self-serving agenda.” The victim “feels little sense of control over their personal well-being, they are convinced that their attitudes are a product of their environment.” For the cynic, “the key issue is not control, but disapproval. They see only the cost and never the value of a venture or relationship.” The bystander “cannot endure the pain of unsatisfied needs, so they cope by pretending that the situation the relationship is not important.” These mental maps go against the principles of empowerment and will be not only unsupportive, but also detrimental to empowerment initiatives. In order for empowerment to work, an organization must be cognizant of who it empowers. “People who are ready to be empowered are in charge of their lives. They focus on what they can change and consequently have a deep sense of personal peace.” (Allen & Alvarez, 1999).

While the people themselves may be a potential factor in the failure of empowerment initiatives, it is more commonly the effort that is put out by the organization that is to blame. In many organizations, “the volume of the sound and fury about ideas like empowerment is rarely followed with a similar volume of action.” (Harari, 1999). There is much vocalization during the planning and announcement stages; however, the effort level falls to almost non-existent as time goes by causing the effort to “fall into entropy.” For in order to maintain momentum, an organization must “provide more than rhetoric.” (Covey, 1999). Another failure of effort on the part of organizations is the form that empowerment takes. In many real life cases, “empowerment translates to nothing more the delegation of additional duties to employees.” (Korunkonda, 1999). It is much easier to simply delegate than it is to actually change systems in order to truly empower employees. Empowerment is a new way of thinking and organizations must “work at it from the inside out.” (Covey, 1999). This takes a great deal of patience and a great deal of effort that organizations either do not have, or are unwilling to exert, resulting in failed empowerment initiatives.

While few organizations will ever list leadership as a factor in the failure of empowerment initiatives, it is undoubtedly so. Despite the potential, empowerment programs often “fall victim to the very structural and cultural problems that made them desirable in the first place.” Many managers view empowerment as a threat and “continue to measure their value by the authority they wield.” Meanwhile, some employees mistake empowerment for discretionary authority, the power to decide things unilaterally, and lack the collaborative skills that management neglects, or refuses to teach them. Others resist the need to assume more power and cling to a comfortable dependence on the authority. (Dover, 1999). There are several other factors related to leadership that also play a roll in undermining empowerment efforts, including “lack of executive support, systems and structures that reinforce hierarchical management, and the fear of losing control by line supervision and middle management” (Allen & Alvarez, 1999). Indeed, managers often cringe at the use of the term empowerment, “they perceive their power being stripped and fear that decisions made by their staff.”

(Potochny, 1998). This fear can result in “endullment, which occupies the opposite end of the empowerment spectrum. Endullment is embodied in telling people what to do, creating confining boundaries, offering limited feedback, and allow limited ownership of one's job. The result is employees who are apathetic about both their work in the organization.” (Scontrino, 1998). While many leaders do secretly fear giving up control and the consequences of letting go. “Ultimately they find their fears are groundless, they find that hidden resources and capabilities emerge when there is a common vision and the value system.” (Covey, 1999).

While the people, the effort, and the leadership can all be contributors of failure of an empowerment initiative, more often than not, it is the organization's assumptions that serve as the deathblow to empowerment. The assumptions are what drive the implementation. If those assumptions are flawed, so will the implementation. Some of those flawed assumptions include: 1- “Defining power as discretion.” Most employees “define power in terms of discretion, the ability to make unilateral decisions, and therefore expect an empowerment program to increase their personal decision making ability.” This expectation can lead to conflicts between employees and managers about “limits of power and the actions that violate accepted practices.” 2 – “Linking power and self-reliance.” This link “reinforces an illusion that there are organizational heroes” who single-handedly solve impossible problems or save the company from failure. Unfortunately, this connection creates serious problems for empowerment efforts, since the majority of all organizational successes and failures are ‘a product of collective action.’ 3 – “Expecting individual contributors commitment.” Top managers who sponsor the program usually “expect employees to embrace empowerment, but employees can be just as threatened as managers by the new expectations.” A typical reaction to such added expectations is “resistance, which leads to a high degree of frustration among sponsors toward employees who refuse to get with the program.” 4 – “Assuming employees have the needed skills.” Many of our institutions have a top-down management style and as a result, “few employees or managers can perform, or even identify the critical skills of an empowered workforce.” 5 – “Becoming impatient.” This “usually happens if the empowerment efforts actually begin to work.” The opponents complain that the effort is “taking too long and consuming resources that should be directed elsewhere.” This impatience may be authentic in some companies, but is more often “a last gasp resistance to change.” (Dover, 1999).

This paper empowerment has been discussed in terms of its definitions, uses, benefits and costs, reasons for implementation, and reasons for failure. Hopefully, this is enough information to give the reader a general understanding of empowerment as an organizational tool. Should it be determined that this tool would be of use to an organization, in-depth study would be required in order to understand all of the factors that contribute to the success of empowerment initiatives. Those factors would include, but not be limited to the organizational culture, leadership, knowledge, commitment, accountability, trust, and teams. There is quite a bit of effort that must be put into a successful empowerment initiative. It is a tool that does not always contribute immediately to the bottom line, and should be treated as a long-term investment.

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