

Employee empowerment and direct participation in management



In his opening lines Beirne (2007) posits that empowerment is one of the most controversial yet celebrated business subjects of recent years. Several writers have contributed to the ongoing debate about employee empowerment and direct participation in governing and managing today's organisations. To start off this essay, a clear definition of empowerment is in place. Several definitions of empowerment have been advanced. The definitions seem to vary across different socio-cultural and political contexts but certain central themes run through the literature. These include; 'self regulatory', 'self power', 'the feeling of common ownership', 'employee advancement', 'personal and personnel growth and development' and 'nurturing autonomy'. Page and Czuba (1999) define empowerment as 'a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives... a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they define as important' (abstract). Another definition advanced by Tan (2010) based on a management context is 'empowerment is the act of giving power and authority to a person to perform his designated tasks in whatever way he wants, and having the power in decision making'. Spreitzer (1995) noted that Thomas and Velthouse (1990) provide a broad definition which factors in many aspects of the multifaceted concept of empowerment. The researchers defined empowerment as 'increased intrinsic task motivation manifested in a set of four cognitions reflecting an individual's orientation to his/her work role; meaning, competence, self-determination and impact' (Spreitzer, 1995, p 1443). These definitions are arguably broad in context but it brings into perspective the arguments that will be made in this essay.

Empowerment largely represents power sharing down the hierarchy chain with employees given the leeway to participate in firm decision making. This is in stark contrast to early theories of scientific management (Taylorism) propounded by Frederick Taylor at the turn of the 20th century. The remit of Taylorism was that ‘workers could not be relied upon’, ‘lacked talent and intelligence’ and therefore ‘workers should be told what to do and when to do it’ (Kanigel, 1997). Empowerment can therefore be seen to have been generated from subsequent schools of thought such as human relations theories of management put forward by writers such as Elton Mayo, Henri Fayol, Victor Vroom and Abraham Maslow amongst others (Kyle, 2006).

The next three sections of the essay look at the benefits of empowerment, the challenges of managing innovation at work and the ways in which challenges can be managed and empowerment promoted in the work place. A concluding section summarises the main ideas advanced in the work.

The benefits of employee empowerment and participative work redesign programmes

An intriguing paper by Malone (1997) showed that empowerment is ‘a response to fundamental changes in the economics of decision making that are enabled by new technologies’ (p. 141). The argument advanced in this paper is that empowerment (and decentralisation) is actually an efficient way of operating in modern organisations where communication costs are minimal. Malone (1997) argues that as communication costs fall, firms can improve competitiveness by allowing their employees to ‘combine the best information available with their own knowledge, energy and creativity’ in order to foster and facilitate innovation (p. 142).

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Management researchers do not generally perceive empowerment as a 'response to new developments' (Malone, 1997) but as an approach to get the most out of their employees. Several researchers have highlighted the need for new management styles that promote employee involvement, employee autonomy, workforce participation and the development of self-managing work teams (Paul et al., 2000). The general consensus seems to be that employee empowerment turns to contribute significantly towards improving the commitment of the workforce, improving well-being at the workplace, improving employee motivation and therefore improving the performance of employees (Paul et al., 2000; Cohen et al., 2007)

Empowerment has particularly been successful in hospital management through primary nursing. The nursing case (discussed in the lectures) illustrates the role of empowerment in improving the quality of patient care and the levels of job satisfaction for nurses. As indicated in this case, this contributes towards reducing worker turnover rates and levels of stress.

One way of achieving employee empowerment is through the institution of training and development programs within the institution. Researchers in the management literature have established empirical links between employee empowerment through training and development and performance (See Koch and McGrath, 1996 and Jacobs and Washington, 2003). Empowerment can be expected to improve employee motivation as they feel more valued within the workplace. Kominis and Emmanuel (2007) showed that as motivation increases effort exerted increases and this will turn to improve performance. Denton (1994) used the case of Ford Motor Company to

illustrate how employee empowerment translates to corporate
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empowerment. Empowerment turns to humanize the work place. As employees are empowered they feel a sense of belonging, community and ownership and strive to protect the image of their company through their dealings. The result for Ford was the creation of a lasting legacy.

Participative work redesign programs are empowerment programs in the wider sense. These are essentially programs which set out to involve employees in the planning and scheduling of their work. Like other empowerment programs, participative work redesign programs have been shown to improve motivation and commitment, increase employee output, reduce employee turnover and reduce absenteeism (Pearson and Chatterjee, 1984).

In Kanter's (1977) structural theory of power in organisations, Kanter argues that to allow for empowerment employees must be given the right resources, provided with sufficient information, and have access to programs that will enable them develop, improve and enhance their performance. As noted in Ozaralli (2003) for empowerment to work effectively, there must be a culture of trust, mutual respect and commitment in the organisation. This indicates that empowerment is a two way process; senior managers seek to empower employees - employees show commitment, developing themselves to effectively manage new powers. Both elements must be present for empowerment to work effectively and this might make the implementation of empowerment programs difficult in practice.

On the subject of why empowerment might present a dilemma, Paul, Niehoff and Turnley (2000) argue that empowering employees creates belief about

entitlements, once these beliefs are unfulfilled (which they argue, will eventually be the case) there is a breach of psychological contract (between employer and employee) and such a breach leads to counterproductive behaviour on the part of employees. This leads us to the practical challenges of empowerment at work

Challenges in managing change & innovation at work

Current trends in globalisation and development have pushed businesses to continuously adapt by implementing several changes within their work environments. Business leaders are constantly seeking out better ways to do business, ways to cut costs, improve output and eventually improve profitability. Arguably one of management's most colossal challenges will be the management of organisation change. This challenge is significantly amplified by the fact that change is sometimes inevitable.

Empowerment can be viewed as one of those 'change processes' or an innovation that can be introduced within a work place. The major hurdle here is that change such as the introduction of empowerment schemes involves the alteration of human behaviour- employee behaviour. Change requires that individuals leave their comfort zones and engage in different tasks, take more responsibilities, participate in decision making and reshape their work processes. The effects of proposed changes always affect employees in different ways. Some employees might have to lose their roles and positions for others to be empowered. Because of this resistance can always be expected from those who are affected adversely by proposed changes. This is evident in the position the current coalition government of UK faces. The reduction in the deficit is largely perceived as a good thing for <https://assignbuster.com/employee-empowerment-and-direct-participation-in-management/>

the country but the steps taken to reduce the deficit are opposed (or praised) differently by different groups. University students are opposed to the proposals because it will mean they will have to pay higher tuition fees in the future. Most of the working class who do not have to pay such fees and who do not have children at university support these measures.

Like all change programs, it can be expected that management will encounter many challenges while seeking to empower employees. The proposals of the UK's coalition government to empower NHS doctors by giving them more powers and control over the management of their clinics have been received with mixed feelings. Certain doctors are concerned that this will mean they will spend more time on management and less time on actually serving their patients. Some doctors welcome such changes arguing that it will cut unnecessary bureaucracy, improve responsiveness and therefore boost their overall performance. Clearly, major challenges will be faced by the government in pushing through such innovation which empowers NHS doctors.

Though theoretically sound, empowerment programs are often met with many practical challenges. I will review some of these challenges by asking some pertinent questions which can undermine the success of empowerment schemes.

Are the benefits of empowerment to employees clear? The benefit of empowerment programs to managers is always clear to employees. They see this as a way for managers to 'get more for their money' through increased delegation of responsibility. Sometimes the benefits of such programs to

employees are not very clear as they usually do not mean increased wages. Managers can therefore find it challenging to sell the 'empowerment idea' to their employees.

Do employees really want to be empowered? Are employees willing to take on extra responsibility? This is a major stumbling block to empowerment programs. Usually empowerment results in increased responsibility without an associated increase in financial reward. For employees empowerment means expending some discretionary energy which might not be compensated, acknowledged or appreciated. As such some employees can prefer the status quo where their reward is commensurate to the work they do.

Is empowerment the culture of the organisation? This is also important as certain cultures (work or individual) can make empowerment difficult. One of Hofstede's cultural dimensions is high uncertainty avoidance and high power distance. These sorts of cultures do not allow for employee empowerment as employees in these cultures loathe risk taking and therefore decision making, and work well under situations where hierarchy can clearly be identified.

Does the work structure actually allow for empowerment of employees? Despite the criticism that has been levelled on Taylor's principles of scientific management, these principles are still very useful in many institutions today. Considering a large factory employing hundreds of factory level workers for example, I argue that 'empowerment' might be a difficult concept to implement within such an environment given the organisational structure.

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When should management 'hands-off'? Empowerment requires that management allow employees to participate in critical decision making and management should delegate responsibility to such employees. The buzzword around empowerment is trust. The literature advocates that management should trust employees and allow them the leeway to make serious decisions. This could be problematic given that employees could have limited experience in the area despite training. Supervision by senior management might still be required and this in effect constitutes waste.

Reference to the nursing case study

The case study (nursing case) highlights other potential challenges in an empowerment program in a hospital scene. The case starts by putting primary nursing (a program that empowers nurses, improves their performance and job satisfaction) in a positive light. The case highlights the role of 'sectionalism and elitism' in hampering the success of such empowerment programs. Empowerment in the nursing case meant that nurses took full control of their patients sometimes carrying out simple tasks which were traditionally carried out by trained doctors. This potential blurs the boundaries between the different professions (such as doctors, nurses, hospital managers) involved in administering health care. The case highlights opposition from some medical experts registered in accounts provided by Pearson (1988) and Walby et al., (1995).

The case also highlights the potential for segregation and discontentment which might arise from an empowerment program. Not all groups of workers can receive the same treatment in an empowerment program. In the case,

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the need for primary care meant that registered nurses (RGNs) had to be given preferential treatment (training and development) and provided the resources and support to assist their decision making with respect to the patients under their care. Other junior nurses (grades A, B, F and G) received little attention as no empowerment program was designed for them. These grades of nurses are bound to feel less valued in the work place which might affect their motivation and lead to counterproductive behaviour.

This occurrence is potentially not limited to a hospital setting. Empowerment programs are always staged to achieve a certain goal which could be improving the quality of a service or adapting to other changes in the work environment. This means that certain groups of employees will be at the forefront of the program while others will feel less involved and therefore less valued. The challenge therefore is how empowerment programs can be used effectively so that some employees don't feel left out or let down by senior management.

Guidance to senior management on how to overcome difficulties and promote empowerment at work

The management literature is littered with varying recommendations on how the difficulties of instituting change and promoting empowerment at work can be managed. Several models of change management have been developed and tested over the years. This discussion shall proceed by reviewing recent change models and discussing their implications in practice i. e. how management can manage change successfully. I consider empowerment as a major organisational change and should therefore be approached in the same way organisational change is approached. In an <https://assignbuster.com/employee-empowerment-and-direct-participation-in-management/>

organisation where delegation is not the custom or culture employees might find it unacceptable if the managers starts to delegate duties. This may be looked upon as an unwelcomed shift of responsibility without a corresponding increase in reward. In the subsequent discussion, I will recommend certain measures that can be used to promote empowerment once employees are ready to be empowered. Inspiration for these recommendations will be drawn from ideas presented by different writers (see Beirne, 1999, p. 219, for example).

How to manage organisational change in general

An early model of organisational change management was presented by Kurt Lewin in his 1951 paper (Clarke, 1994; Okumus and Hemmington, 1998).

This model presented the management of change as a simple process involving three stages; unfreezing (...the old pattern), change (introducing the new pattern), refreezing (...the new pattern) [Okumus and Hemmington, 1998]. Needless to say, this model has been severely criticized for being over simplistic. Several models have been proposed for managing change.

What I take from these models is the role of employee readiness and participation in the change processes and its ability to significantly improve the chances of successful organisational change (See Armenakis et al., 1993 and 1999). With respect to the institution of empowerment programs, the 'employee readiness' concept suggests that prior to 'empowerment' staff are made ready through training and development programs, information sessions and participative deliberations etc. If staffs are fully informed and are part of setting up the empowerment program, then there will be little resistance to such programs and its chances of success will be high.

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Beirne (1999) contends that the literature on empowerment has documented the fact that 'the initial impetus to empowerment often comes from external factors, including consumer demands, technological innovations, quality audits, and more specifically, the Patients' Charter and 'internal' market' (p. 221). The implication of this is that several external pressures drive the need for empowerment thus presenting a second agenda and external priorities to the empowerment process. Effectiveness is thus reduced as the focus is on achieving other goals through employee empowerment. Considering for example a situation where there is the need for more front line managers during the Christmas period within a firm. Staffs are empowered through delegation to fill this decision making role. The tendency will be for staff to be pulled back from managerial roles when the peak period is over. This type of ad-hoc empowerment which is common in most institutions can result to counterproductive behaviour.

Employee wellbeing, development and empowerment needs to be crafted as one of the core strategies of the company. It should not be an issue that is regarded as discretionary within the firm and it handled differently by different managers. It should be stated as firm policy to increase its seriousness both for management and employees. This will show that the company as a whole values its workforce. John Lewis for example has what I will class as one of the most valued set of employees. The firm officially calls its employees 'its partners', allowing them to own shares in the firm in order that they can share in its profitability and its losses. This increases the sense of belonging and community and encourages employees to be innovative and hardworking.

At this stage management needs to ensure that both management and employees share the vision, mission and objectives of the firm. This could be through periodic publications, staff meetings and conferences to reinforce the visions and objectives of the firm.

It might also be important to set out clearly defined goals and guidelines outlining expectations so that employees are aware of set targets and time lines.

It is necessary to help staff to be ready for empowerment. It is pointless to delegate duties to staff who are not well trained, qualified or prepared to accept new levels of responsibility. Staff will resist empowerment and share decision making if they don't feel confident that they would be successful or meet the new expectations. Employee training and development can be used to improve staff skills and awareness to ensure that they are ready to take on new roles and make informed decisions. This will also build their confidence and allow them to be innovative.

Empowerment will only be successful if management can trust and show that they trust employees. After delegation of duties, management should not spend time second-guessing or doubting employees. Management therefore needs to trust that employees will make the right decisions and perform tasks correctly. Without trust, the whole empowerment framework fails.

Management can further foster empowerment through the provision of sufficient information and resources to facilitate employee decision making. Staff should be properly assessed and their capabilities and strengths

highlighted. Staff will be more successful if their empowerment process matches their strengths and capabilities.

It is tempting for empowerment through delegation to be misinterpreted leading to failure. Management may turn to delegate the more mundane yet demanding tasks to employees. This will reduce employee interest and increase resistance to empowerment schemes. It is recommended that authority and power itself be delegated. Employees should be given the opportunity to participating in high level decision making and interesting tasks such as participating in committees or representing the company at certain events.

Again it is important to provide constructive feedback to employees acknowledging their achievements and providing suggestions on how certain aspects of their performance can be improved in the future. It is also important to solicit feedback and employee opinions to understand their concerns in order to make future improvements.

Conclusion

Several pertinent issues have been discussed in this essay on the subject of empowerment, workplace change and innovation. I have considered the benefits and challenges of empowerment schemes and have made certain recommendations to practising senior management on how employees can be empowered successfully in a corporate context. To surmise, I will reiterate that despite the challenges that managers face in implementing such schemes, the benefits of empowering employees cannot be overemphasized.