Empowerment: Freedom within Constraints

"We've got as far as we can by directing and controlling, it's time to be more empowering."

There's a lot to be said for direction and control. People know where they stand and what's expected, even if they don't agree with it. Managers feel like managers, powerful and in charge. And you can drive performance hard by setting challenging targets, standardising processes and monitoring closely. Trouble is people don't always give their best when they feel controlled. In fact when people feel over-controlled at work they may actually learn to give their least unless they are controlled, which unfortunately reinforces managers' belief that the only way to get the best from them is to control them; quite a neat, self fulfilling prophecy.

So is there another way? Is it possible to get results by tapping the human desire for autonomy, responsibility, recognition and personal achievement. Well, there is some evidence that participative, achievement oriented approaches to management can give people a greater sense of involvement **and** enhance performance. If you can manage people this way, they may well give that little bit extra, go the extra mile and use their initiative; not because they have to, but because they can, they want to and they know they'll be supported and recognised for it. Trouble is it's not that easy to do. And worse still, not everyone seems to want it.

Do managers want it?

You'd think most managers would welcome the opportunity to improve team performance by adapting their leadership style. But while many find it easy to talk the talk, the reality of changing behaviour and walking the walk may not be so easy. [1]Some managers just **don't know how to do it**; they've been brought up on command and control and it's all they know. Other managers **don't want to**; they don't believe it will work for them or their business. There are some who just **can't do it**; the need for power and control is so hard-wired it's who they are and there's no giving it up. And then there are those who **think they are doing it,** but whose team members tell you that with every question and check on 'how things are going' they experience control in disguise.

Feeling out of control

Being less controlling is a risky proposition for a lot of managers who at the end of the day see themselves as being paid to 'be in charge' and remain accountable for the results of the people they manage. The idea challenges the managerial sense of identity; *'How can I be a manager if I'm not in charge? What's my job if it's not organising and controlling? Will I be needed if I empower everyone?* And if we get past that it can raise negative feelings around being exposed or out of control; *What if people don't deliver? If I don't know what's going on? If they don't do it the way I want it? Will I carry the can for their mistakes?* No wonder many just stick with what they know. But in doing so they mistake giving up control with being out of control.

Empowerment

Some management theorists call this letting go of control 'empowerment'; a word much used, much maligned yet not well understood. Many a workplace argument about empowerment has been won and lost without anyone ever questioning what it actually means. Ask a sample of people in your organisation and you'll soon see what I mean. Even among theorists there are wide ranging interpretations. Is it just about delegating a bit more? Or is it increasing staff involvement in decisions? Is it about greater communication and sharing of company information? Or is about employee participation, works councils and profit shares schemes? Or maybe it's about really devolving managerial power to staff? You tell me.

Empowerment is not a single concept, nor universally defined. It is individually and contextually defined. It means different things to different people and at different levels in an organisation too. To do 'empowerment' you first need to define what it means to you in the work you do. And clarify what it means to the people you want to 'empower.' Many empowerment efforts fail at the first hurdle through a mismatch between managerial and staff expectations.

Six dimensions of empowerment

One research team [2] noted that when they asked people to talk about empowerment six themes frequently recurred. From a manager's point of view, empowerment can be about:

- **Involving employees in decision making** – like when you ask the team to contribute to decisions about office furniture, a change in working hours or a new computer system.

- **Giving people information beyond their job** – like sharing reasons for decisions or information on team and business performance; discussing company wide issues, competitors, customer feedback; encouraging contact with people beyond the team.

- **Giving people skills and tools** – by training them properly in new systems, developing new skills and capabilities, making sure work tools are appropriate, reliable, serviced and available.

- **Giving people job autonomy and independence** – allowing people to schedule their work, choose tasks, take on a whole job, follow things right through, do things their way.

- **Allowing creativity and initiative** – letting people try out different ways of doing things, adapt procedures, find ways around problems, develop ideas, use all their skills at work.

- **Holding people accountable to mission** – allowing people the freedom to focus on delivering the mission rather than working to process, procedure, rules, targets and goals.

These six 'dimensions' are useful prompts for thinking about what kind of empowerment you want to do. But be aware that behind the apparent agreement in a framework like this lies more complexity; individual interpretations of what any one of these dimensions means in practice can vary. Take autonomy as an example. While Anil and Andrew agree it's important, Anil thinks it's about having the freedom to take lunch when he wants, while Andrew wants the freedom to devise his own working methods and make decisions without referring upwards.

What do employees want?

Setting aside any managerial concerns about the risks of empowerment, you might reasonably assume that employees would be up for it. I mean who wouldn't welcome a few less shackles and a bit more influence? Well quite a few people actually. Research shows that not only do individual definitions of empowerment vary, people vary in their interest in it and the value they place on it. And given that paradoxically it's not very practical (or empowering) to empower someone who does not want to be, we find ourselves in a further pickle.

The bottom line is most people welcome a little more empowerment of the skills/tools and job autonomy variety (personally defined of course). But we need to be careful about assuming that empowering in other ways will ring everyone's bells. A classic 'across the board' empowerment approach may work wonders for Enthusiastic Eve. But it will hold less interest for Brendon the Bureaucrat who would rather not get involved in decisions, has little interest in the wider picture and does not want to use his initiative at work. For empowerment to work you not only need to agree what you mean but check the offer is of interest to employees, or coach and develop an interest in it. Empowerment is not a thing, it's a process.

Empowerment as process

The classic definition of empowerment is 'a *process* of sharing power with others', not a one off event but something that develops over time. It's certainly a much more subtle and ongoing process than simply attending a workshop and telling people they're now empowered. That way lies madness as people try to figure out what you mean. '*What have I been empowered to do what? When? With whom? Why?*' And it's not about giving up control or being out of control but a process of changing how and what you control. Not all at once. And not on everything.

Different types of control

Managers skilled at empowering staff use a range of levers to help control things. They use some conventional control systems to monitor critical things – costs, profit, volumes, processing times - key performance indicators that help alert them and the team to potential problems below deck. They simultaneously control and empower by focusing on ends not means, defining the goals to be achieved while giving employees the freedom to decide how they are achieved. They work to develop trusting relationships through which they feel able to let go and give others responsibility. They walk the talk, living the vision, mission and values to shape expectations and influence behaviour. And when there's some critical variable to be controlled they devise interactive ways to monitor it *with* others and so keep the ship on course. [3]

Freedom within constraints

In practice, most organisational empowerment efforts do not seriously devolve power or dole out freedom. They offer greater freedom but within constraints, setting boundaries to define limits to what people can do, to prevent organisation becoming anarchy. Think of a driving licence, empowering you to drive freely on public roads, but within limits. You only get it if you've passed your test, have to follow the rules of the road and can only drive certain types of vehicle. What's more if you break the rules there are well known consequences.

The licence sets the boundaries, defining what you can and can't do, based upon demonstrated competence. It's a useful analogy, giving power, freedom and responsibility to people who apply for it; based upon skills, within clear limits and with clear upfront consequences for transgression. But the boundaries don't need to be fixed, they can be elastic. [4] Much as a driver can train and become licenced to drive a bus or HGV, so you can stretch the boundaries of an individual or team's licence to work, as their skills, confidence and experience grow. These ideas are important in managing the risk that lies at the heart of empowerment, of managers losing control and employees failing to deliver.

More than just an illusion

While some argue that true empowerment in organisations is just rhetoric and illusion[1], there is clear evidence that participation pays. But to make it pay you need to be clear exactly what you mean, manage expectations well, develop employee skills to take on more and your own skills in managing through boundaries, trust and relationships[5] and in being comfortable feeling just that little bit more out of control.

References

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