

Research article

Literature Reviews on Approaches to Employees' Empowerment in Local Governance

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment in local governance proved to be important as it caters several issues and concerns of the constituents. In the light of political rivalry, it is important that heads of the departments, who are not subject for election matters, should empower their employees to deal with various challenges of their concerned institutions. This study is concerned in describing key concepts on empowering employees particularly on: empowerment as management tool, empowerment essential for decision-making, empowerment for control and competence, empowerment as cognitive element, empowerment as a learning exercise, empowerment viewed in delegation and accountability, and empowerment in management cooperation. After all, it is essential that department heads should ease their problems on dealing with constituents who can be handled by their employees. **Copyright © IJABM, all rights reserved.**

Keywords: business management, accountability, empowerment, local governance

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment as management tool

The common dictionary definition of empowerment, "to give official authority to: delegate legal power to: commission, authorize" (Grove, 1971,) is the one most understood by most people. As an example, Gandz (1990) writes, "Empowerment means that management vests decision-making or approval authority in employees where, traditionally, such authority was a managerial prerogative." However, this is not the definition of what is usually called employee empowerment. One author notes empowerment is, "easy to define in its absence—alienation, powerless, helplessness—but difficult to define positively because it 'takes on a different form in different people and contexts'"

(Zimmerman, 1990). When most people refer to employee empowerment they mean a great deal more than delegation. It is for this reason that many authors provide their own definitions.

Some of these are vague, and meant to be so. Block (1987) describes empowerment as "a state of mind as well as a result of position, policies, and practices." One has to read an entire chapter to understand what he means when he says,

"To feel empowered means several things. We feel our survival is in our own hands. We have an underlying purpose. We commit ourselves to achieving that purpose, now" (Block, 1987). Other authors (Blanchard, Carlos & Randolph, 1996; Blanchard & Bowles, 1998) use their entire book to define empowerment. Still others provide an excellent perspective of effective empowerment without mentioning the word even once (Freedman, 1998).

Other author provided definitions are simplistic on the surface, but have far greater implications than a first reading would suggest. For example, Caudron (1995) articulates empowerment as, "when employees 'own' their jobs; when they are able to measure and influence their individual success as well as the success of their departments and their companies." The casual reader may think that owning one's job is what the postal worker's union seeks to provide their members. Most would agree, however, that job security is not empowerment. Many employees must measure their jobs by submitting reports. Seeking one's own individual success is what the American dream is all about. And knowing that one makes a contribution to the success of the department and the company is a given in all but the largest organizations. It is only when these ideas are taken together in one package that they approach a definition of employee empowerment. Etorre's (1997) definition of empowerment as, "employees having autonomous decision-making capabilities and acting as partners in the business, all with an eye to the bottom-line" is more accessible to many readers. While many employees understand their contribution to the work at hand, how many know their contribution to the bottom line?

Empowerment essential for decision-making

It is this essential ingredient, information with which to make decisions, from which empowerment is created. Bowen and Lawler (1992) indicate, "We define empowerment as sharing with front-line employees four organizational ingredients: [the first being] information about the organization's performance. . . . [another is] knowledge that enables employees to understand and contribute to organizational performance." The other two ingredients Bowen and Lawler (1992) noted are, "rewards based on the organization's performance [and] power to make decisions that influence organizational direction and performance." In a later article these authors concluded that, "research suggests that empowerment exists when companies implement practices that distribute power, information, knowledge, and rewards throughout the organization" (Bowen & Lawler, 1995) The authors go on to note that, "if any of the four elements is zero, nothing happens to redistribute that ingredient, and empowerment will be zero" (Bowen & Lawler, 1995).

Another author uses this type of combination of concepts to define empowerment. Spreitzer (1995) indicated, "psychological empowerment is defined as a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Together these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation toward a work role." Spreitzer (1997) further noted, "the four dimensions are argued to combine additively to create an overall construct of psychological empowerment. In other words, the lack of any single dimension will deflate, though not completely eliminate, the overall degree of felt empowerment." This additive construct is distinct from Bowen & Lawler's (1995) construct noted above which is multiplicative, indicating that the absence of any one of their four elements (power, information, knowledge, and rewards) will completely eliminate empowerment.

Empowerment for control and competence

Researchers tend to provide definitions of the concept of empowerment which reflect observed end results or their research into concepts which are known and are or may be precursors to empowerment. In his 1995 dissertation, Menon indicates, "the empowered state was defined as a cognitive state of perceived control, perceived competence and goal internalization. . . . The empirical results supported the view that empowerment is a construct conceptually distinct from other constructs such as delegation, self-efficacy and intrinsic task motivation." In this case the constructs of delegation, self-efficacy and intrinsic task motivation are known quantities, each with its own previously tested

validity. Conger and Kanungo (1988) noted in their literature review that, "scholars have assumed that empowerment. . . [is] the process by which a leader or manager shares his or her power with subordinates. Power, in this context, is interpreted as the possession of formal authority or control over organizational resources. . . This manner of treating the notion of empowerment from a management practice perspective is so common that often employee participation is simply equated with empowerment." However, they also note, " We believe that this approach has serious flaws." Instead, the authors offer this definition, "empowerment is. . . a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information." (Conger & Kanungo, 1988) implied here new roles for managers and supervisors that is, removing conditions that foster powerlessness and providing feedback about performance, in other words mentoring.

Other researchers have attempted to classify what has been written and practiced previously, and found it lacking. Quinn and Spreitzer (1997) provide two such classifications. In the, "mechanistic approach" managers and researchers "believed that empowerment was about delegating decision making within a set of clear boundaries. . . Delegate responsibility; and Hold people accountable for results." In the, "organic approach to empowerment" researchers and managers "believed that it [empowerment] was about risk taking, growth, and change. . . understanding the needs of the employees; model empowered behavior for the employees; build teams to encourage cooperative behavior; encourage intelligent risk taking; and trust people to perform." However, they found these two approaches lacking; some combination of the two is needed. In the end, they indicate, "empowerment must be defined in terms of fundamental beliefs and personal orientations. . . Empowered people have a sense of self-determination. . . Empowered people have a sense of meaning. . . Empowered people have a sense of competence. . . empowered people have a sense of impact" (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997).

Empowerment as cognitive element

The most comprehensive definition of empowerment in the literature can be found in Thomas and Velthouse (1990) article entitled "Cognitive Elements of Empowerment: An 'interpretive' model of intrinsic task motivation". The definition they provided is: To empower means to give power to. Power, however, has several meanings... authority, so that empowerment can mean authorization. . . capacity. . . However, power also means energy. Thus to empower also can mean to energize. This latter meaning best captures the present motivational usage of the term. Our perception is that the word empowerment has become popular because it provides a label for a nontraditional paradigm of motivation. . . change [has] forced a search for alternative forms of management that encourage commitment, risk-taking, and innovation. . . the newer paradigm involves relaxed (or broad) controls and an emphasis on internalized commitment to the task itself. . . We use the word empowerment to refer to the motivational content of this newer paradigm of management.

In her excellent literature review of employee empowerment, Linda Honold (1997) indicates, "to be successful, each organization must create and define it [empowerment] for itself. Empowerment must address the needs and culture of each unique entity." It is in this spirit that I offer my own definition of empowerment. I have drawn on several of the authors noted above and below for concepts. I will provide credit in the appropriate sections below.

Most managers and scholars emphasize that an organization's most important tool for gaining a competitive advantage is its people and; in order for the firm to attain success employees must be involved and active. People are your firm's most underutilized resource. In the new knowledge economy, independent entrepreneurship and initiative is needed throughout the ranks of your organization. Involvement in an organization is no longer a one-way street. In today's corporate environment a manager must work towards engaging organization forcefully enough to achieve its objectives. Managers assume more leadership and coaching tasks and work hard to provide employees with resources and working conditions they need to accomplish the goals they've agreed to. In brief, managers work for their staff, and not the reverse.

Empowerment as a learning exercise

Empowerment is the oil that lubricates the exercise of learning. Talented and empowered human capital is becoming the prime ingredient of organizational success. A critical feature of successful teams, especially in knowledge-based enterprises, is that they are invested with a significant degree of empowerment, or decision-making authority.

According to Wehrich and Koontz (2005) empowerment means that employees, managers, or teams at all levels in the organization are given the power to make decisions without asking their superiors for permission. In recent years, it has become fashionable to advocate a variety of empowerment approaches. The notion underlying empowerment is that those closest to the task are best able to make the decision-provided they have required competencies. Actually, the notion of empowerment is historically based on suggestion schemes, job enrichment, and worker participation. This also requires that those employees accept responsibility for their actions and tasks.

Some of the reasons for the interest in empowerment are the global competitiveness, the need to respond fast to the demands and expectations of customers, and the better-educated work force who demands greater autonomy. Empowerment of subordinates means that superiors have to share their authority and power with their subordinates. Thus, an autocratic leadership style, when used as the only way to manage, is often inappropriate for the 21st century organization.

Effective management requires that empowerment be sincere, based on mutual trust, accompanied by relevant information for the employees to carry out their tasks, and given to competent people. Moreover, employees should be rewarded for exercising their decision authority. One must also realize the impact of subordinate empowerment on their superiors. The needs of superiors must be recognized by, giving them tasks that are more challenging.

Stephen Robbins (2009) quoted that a positive organizational culture emphasizes not only organizational effectiveness, but individual growth as well. No organization will get the best out of employees if the employees see themselves as mere tools or parts of the organization.

John W. Newstrom (2007) in his book implies that employees today are actively seeking opportunities at work to become involved in relevant decisions, thereby contributing their talents and ideas to the organization's success. They hunger for the chance to share what they know and to learn from the experience. Consequently, organizations need to provide opportunities in meaningful involvement. This can be achieved through employee empowerment- a practice that will result in mutual benefit for both parties.

Larry Hammond (2009) used this approach-finding and exploiting employee strengths- at a time when you'd least expect it during the darkest days of the business. Hammond is Chief Executive Officer of Anglaize Provico, an agribusiness company based in the United States. The company was in the midst of its worst financial struggles and had lay off one quarter of its workforce. At that nadir, Hammand decided to take advantage of what is right. "If you really want to [excel], you have to know yourself- you have to know what you're good at and you have to know what you're not so good at", says Hammond. With the help of consultant Barry Conelie, Anglaize Provico turned the company around. "You ask Larry what the difference is and he'll say that its individual using their natural talents", says Conelie.

"The great leader is a great servant" asserted Ken Melrose, Chief Executive Officer of Tao Company and author of *Making the Grass Greener on Your Side*. A manager's role becomes creating an environment where employees can achieve their potential as they help move the organization toward its goals. Instead of viewing themselves as resource controllers and power brokers, leaders must truly envision themselves as flexible resources willing to assume numerous (and perhaps unaccustomed) roles- coaches, information providers, teachers, decision makers, facilitators, supporters or listeners- depending on the need of their employees.

The central key to empowerment is effective leadership. Empowerment can't occur in a leadership vacuum. According to Melrose, "I came to understand that you best lead by serving the need of your people. You don't do their jobs for them; you enable them to learn and progress in the top".

Empowerment viewed in delegation and accountability

In their article in *Organizational Dynamics*, Robert Quinn and Gretchen Spreitzer (2009) made an interesting point regarding what may be viewed as two diametrically opposite perspectives, empowerment is about delegation and accountability, senior management has developed a clear vision and has communicated specific plans to the rest of the organization. This strategy for empowerment encompasses the following: start at the top; clarify the organizations mission, vision and values; clearly specify the tasks, roles, and rewards for employees; delegate responsibility and hold people accountable for results.

By contrast, the bottom-up view looks at empowerment as concerned with risk taking, growth and change. It involves trusting people to “do the right thing” and having a tolerance for failure. They would act with a sense of ownership and typically “ask for forgiveness rather than permission”. Here the salient elements of empowerment are: start at the bottom by understanding the need of employees; teach employees skill of self-management and model desired behavior; build teams to encourage cooperative behavior; encourage intelligent risk taking and trust people to perform.

Few will reach the top hierarchical positions in the organizations, but in the information economy, the strongest organization are those that use effectively the talents of all the employees. According to the Chappels Incorporated President, empowerment encourages employees to think beyond traditional functional boundaries and find ways to improve the organizations processes. By integrating the customer’s perspective into their effort, employees become more than just salaried workers: they feel responsible to the firm as if each production process was their own creation and responsibility.

Collin Powell (2005) stresses, “Never neglect details. When everyone's mind is dulled or distracted the leader must be doubly vigilant. Good leaders delegate and empower others liberally, but they pay attention to details, every day. The job of the leader is not to be the chief organizer, but the chief disorganizer”.

“Traditional leaders” empower others by keeping them "in the know," by keeping them fully informed on everything that affects their jobs," says Brian Tracy. (1998) "People want and need to feel that they are “insiders,” that they are aware of everything that is going on. There is nothing so demoralizing to a staff member than to be kept in the dark about their work and what is going on in the company.

In the new [knowledge-driven economy](#), Jack Welch, Chief Executive Officer, General Electric, "viewed empowerment as anathema. He believed in creating an open collaborative workplace where everyone's opinion was welcome."³ He wrote in a letter to shareholders: "If you want to get the benefit of everything employees have, you've got to free them – make everybody a participant. Everybody has to know everything, so they can make the right decisions by themselves." (Gregory G. Dess, 2005)

Empowerment in management cooperation

According to an article, *NLRB Rules Crown Cork & Seal Panel of Employees, Managers Is Within Law* by Kathy Chen in the July 26, 2001 *Wall Street Journal*, "Industry executives hailed the ruling, and predicted it would open the door to more companies using employees in major workplace decisions...Labor officials were cautiously optimistic, too. Nancy Schiffer, associate general counsel for the AFL-CIO, said the case underscored labor's position that labor-management cooperation can work, as long as employers really empower employees."

Most recently, Congress sought to pass the Teamwork for Managers and Employees Act of 1995 (Team Act). It was vetoed by President William Clinton who said, "This legislation, rather than promoting genuine teamwork, would undermine the system of collective bargaining that has served this country so well for so many decades ... rather than encouraging true workplace cooperation this bill would abolish protections that ensure independent and democratic representation in the workplace. " So, non-union employers who look for clear direction about the legality and scope of their ability to use work teams to involve, empower and enable employees to contribute, have waited. Until now.

Bottom line? A surface reading of the new NLRB decision indicates that if employee teams are truly empowered to implement their decisions about productivity, quality, performance improvement, safety, and work place organization, they are legal in the United States.

To free someone from rigorous control... and give that person freedom to take responsibility for his ideas, decisions, and actions, are to release hidden resources that would otherwise remain inaccessible to both the individual and the organization. Jan Carlzon, former Chief Executive Officer of Scandinavian Airlines System. Empowerment is the most difficult concept; which companies are attempting to implement. The problem is that executives don't understand what empowerment is and how it works. An executive who is not proficient or well-versed with the application of the right techniques, will find it difficult to implement employee empowerment program; more so, in an organization which is forward looking and aims at competing with other major leaders in the field. With employee empowerment, a very sensitive issue involving intricate techniques, the executive concerned has to move cautiously. The slightest wrong move will have disastrous consequences resulting, possibly, in the collapse of the organization sooner than later. It is here that this book has a vital role to play. It provides the right information on the initiatives the executive should take in implementing the employee empowerment program in its right perspective and to the best advantage of the organization.

Thomas and Velthouse (2005) defined the concept of empowerment as increased individual motivation at work through the delegation of authority to the lowest level in an organization where a competent decision can be made.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Dr. SA Vedra for the technical support of this study, and to all respondents and people behind the success of this study from Cortes, SDS and the MSU family.

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