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The Employee Empowerment in Information Technology Department

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Abstract

Many Information Technology (IT) Departments in major corporations are trying to shift the management practices from a traditional style of command and control toward the participatory management style. They encourage virtual teams, global mobile telecommuting, flexible hours, and greater participation of employees in the decision-making process in work groups. In this paper, we examine an employee versus a manager conceptual model of employee empowerment program and examine this issue in light of relevant theories of leadership, motivation theories, and cognitive science. The barriers to employee involvement are reviewed and some effective methods to remove these obstacles will be explored. Finally, the notion of delegation of decision making from managers to employees will be addressed in the context of the employee empowerment program.

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Introduction

We are in the early years of the twenty-first century and witnessing unprecedented changes in the marketplace. In this global economical and social environment, major companies are operating in real time around the clock interacting with their customers, suppliers, regulators, employees, and shareholders. The Information Technology (IT) departments of these companies are providing the infrastructure support in term of hardware, software, and people. IT departments are required to adjust to the rapid changes in business requirements in the same time while they are coping with fast technological changes as well. The combinations of these external and internal factors are making the old way of managing the human capital obsolete. Kakabadse et al. argue, “Managing the corporate IS/IT function are increasing complex” (2000). In order to deal with this complexity and the continual changes, it is absolutely necessary to include the employees in the decision-making processes. The concept of empowered virtual work groups is becoming more prevalent in IT Department. Since IT Managers are increasingly dependent on their subordinates to understand the technical solutions and expertise to propose IT solutions aligned with the business needs, they have to rely on their employees and play the role of coach and communicator to coordinate teamwork toward a common goal. Hence, the employees’ engagement becomes the key to a successful work environment, but the employees and managers have different conceptual models of the aims of empowerment (Hill & Huq, 2004). Therefore, it is important to set the stage and understand what the empowerment means and how it can be defined using various views such as functional view versus cognitive view. I shall examine the goals and objectives of empowerment and draw a conceptual model of empowerment for IT departments.

What is empowerment?

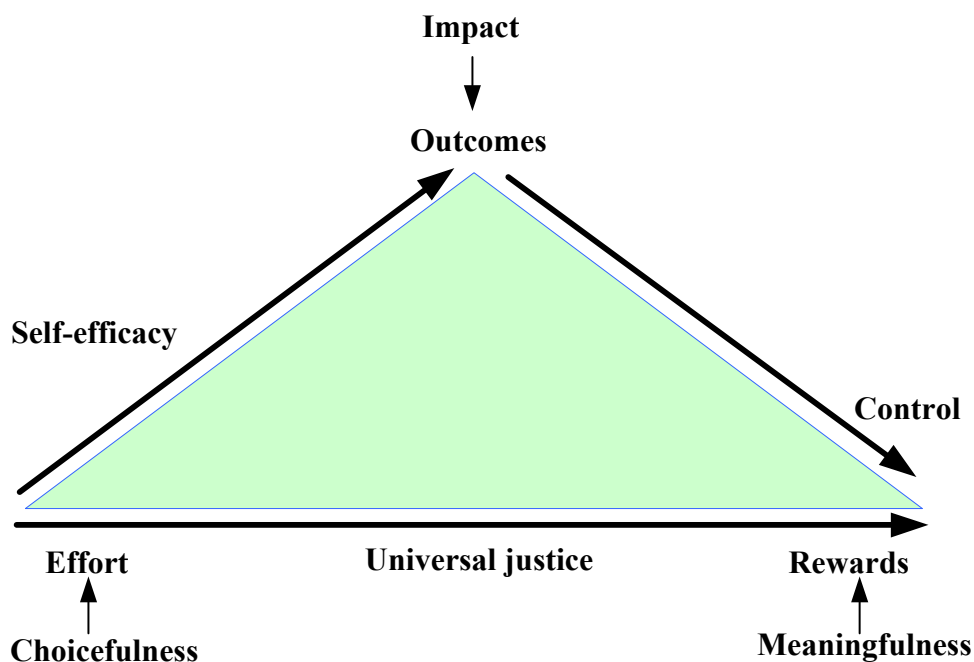
There are two views of empowerment. The first one is proposed by Robbins defining the concept of “empowerment as a participative management, delegation, and the granting power to lower-level employees to make and enforce decisions” (2005). This definition is consistent with a functional view of empowerment. According to this view, a manager intervenes to delegate more of his or her power to employees, to reduce direct supervision and to provide overall vision. The employees enjoy more flexible job descriptions. This framework presupposes that the amount of power in the organization is fixed; hence the management can simply distribute its power throughout the hierarchy to empower the employees. This way, an organization could achieve the goals of the employee empowerment creating better business outcomes, happier and motivated workforce.

The second view of empowerment is proposed by Thomas and Velthouse (1990). They define it in term of cognitive motivational concept. It is mainly based on the following five tasks related cognitions: (1) choice fullness, i.e., the employee’s feelings of choosing what work activity they ought to put their effort on, (2) meaning, i.e., the employees’ determination of the intrinsic value of a particular work role, (3) competence, i.e., self-belief in the employee’s ability to fully perform specific tasks, (4) self-determination, i.e., the employee’s belief that he or she has control over decisions about work-related activities and behaviors, (5) impact, i.e., the employee’s belief that his or her actions can make a difference in the organization strategies, tactics, and outcomes.

These five cognitive motivational concepts can be represented graphically (as it is proposed by Busch, Havlvoiv, & Coetzer 1996) shown in the figure 1. This model reveals that

there are many functional and cognitive factors in work to understand the dynamic of power and empowerment. The idea of simple sharing of power with employees is not enough to enable empowerment. The cognitive aspects are important since the perceptions become reality. The purpose of this model is to show that there are many cognitive factors along with their interactions. In order to empower people, a manager ought to take into account these factors enabling the employees make effective decisions. Empowerment is a means to achieve participative management.

Figure 1. The facets of empowerment model



Goals and objectives of empowerment

Malone (1999) predicated that the empowerment is not just a fad for the twenty-first century. The nature of the decision-making processes is changing rapidly due to the introduction of new information technologies, Internet, wireless communications, and network centric

operations. In this context, the goal of empowerment is to create an empowered organizational culture. The characteristics of this culture are summarized in the table 1. It depicts important behavioral dimensions of empowerment from the manager and the employee viewpoint.

The creation of an empowered organizational culture is time consuming and requires the dedication of the top management and the involvement of the employees to make it happen. Turner (1997) gives practical advice to enable such endeavor. He noticed that the managers should set boundaries for the work group and the employees ought to take ownership of these boundaries. He assumes that the managers will share information about the workgroup’s strategy in one hand, and in the other hand the employees will use it to create the tactical plans and the course of actions to solve a particular business problem. In term of power sharing, the manager has to delegate the responsibility of decision-making to the employees. In return, the employees ought to accept such responsibility. As far as the risks and opportunities are concerned, both the managers and the employees share all risks and benefits.

Table 1 Empowering Behavior

Empowering Behavior	
Manager	Employee
Setting boundaries	Taking ownership
Sharing information	Using information
Giving up control	Identifying barriers
Busting barriers	Proposing solutions
Delegating responsibility	Accepting responsibility
Recognizing contributions	Making decisions
Taking risks	Taking risks

Listening with empathy	Contributing ideas
Teaching and coaching	Engaging in dialog
Trust	Trust
Accountability	Accountability
Learning from mistakes	Learning from mistakes

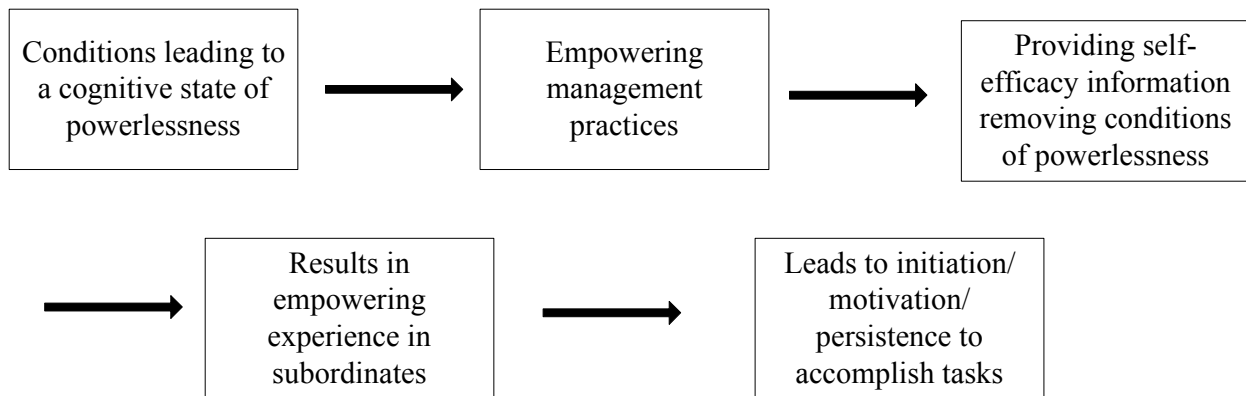
Management's communication with employees is a key success factor in the employee empowerment. The manager has to listen with empathy to employees' ideas, issues and concerns helping to build trust between managers and employees. It enables the managers to provide coaching and mentorship guiding the employees to engage in a positive dialogue and behavior. The immediate fallout of this engagement is to get the job done providing value-added products and services to the clientele. The establishment of trust and accountability are essential to an open communication dealing with mistakes and finding corrective actions jointly when things do not go as planned.

Even with the best communication methods in the world, a participative management program could fail if the existence of subculture in a large organization is ignored. In that regard, Kekale, Fecikova, & Kitaigorodskiaiaf (2004) warns that in large company one has to take into the consideration the existence of subcultures with their values and beliefs. Any universally planned uniform changes will probably fail to satisfy the expectations in large sectors of the organization. Therefore, the implementation of employee empowerment has to follow an incremental approach. It should start small and grow it by adjusting to the existing subcultures. One important enabler of such program is to conduct employee empowerment awareness

training. This training will help to communicate the vision of an empowered work group. Leadership behaviors are essential to enable an empowered work environment ensuring organizational alignment in a gradual fashion.

The empowerment is a journey and passes through many stages. Conger (1989) has shown stages of the empowerment process (figure 2). The first stage is to identify the conditions leading to cognitive state of powerlessness. The second stage is to adopt an empowering management practices and philosophy. The third stage is to enable self-efficacy resulting in subordinates’ empowerment.

Figure 2. Stages of the Empowerment Process



The fourth stage leads to the employee empowerment experience. The fifth stage is leading to the initiation, motivation and persistence to accomplish tasks following the new way. The ultimate outcome is the employees’ satisfaction and higher productivity.

The leadership style and the IT employee empowerment Conceptual Model

Hill and Huq (2004) argue “empowerment means different things not only in different organizations, but also to different people within those organizations”. The Information Technology organization evolves in a highly competitive environment, thus it is necessary for

the leadership to be clear about the goals and objectives of empowerment. They have to define a clear conceptual model of the targeted outcome of this program. Elmuti (1997) argues, the more a company is in a competitive industry, the more it will be open to self-managed team. He reiterates that it is difficult to enable employees' empowerment in an autocratic style of management. Finally, he abdicates that the management be more responsive to its employees' needs for coaching and leadership.

The formulation of a conceptual model of empowerment based on the above considerations can be seen using Elmuti principles. In a nutshell, he suggested starting with the definition of terms, vision, mission, goals, and objective backed by a communication plan and an execution plan. He continued on by insisting that one has to learn from mistakes and do things the right way. So, before undertaking new task one has to make sure that the previous task has been consistently performed and mastered. It follows suits by performing new tasks as well as the basic ones. Finally, this process repeats itself iteratively all over again.

From a strategic view point, the leadership has to think about re-engineering the organization structure allowing the formalization of self-managed work teams, the decentralization of decision making, the creation of a shared values culture and building company wide trust among stakeholders. The reward system needs revamping to encourage the employees to meet business objectives. Work groups could define the boundaries of a given business process and provide peer review and feedback mechanism to make sure group member efforts and activities are aligned with agreed upon goals and objectives set conjointly with management.

Niehoff & Turnley (2000) analyzed psychological effect of an empowerment program and concluded that employee's expectations in term of gaining more power than expected and in the absence or diminishing power, could cause the reverse effect of employee satisfaction. So, it is important to have a right balance of power sharing, expectation and clear conceptual model of empowerment.

Benefits of empowerment

Kim (2002) concluded that the participative management practices have a positive effect on employee's job satisfaction. It seems this fact encourages Kim to recommend that "the essential implication is that executive leaders and managers should become aware of the importance of manager's use of participative management, employees' participation in strategic planning processes, and the role of effective avenues of communication with supervisors. When agencies implement leadership development programs or other training for managers and supervisors, they should consider including participative management and employee empowerment techniques as key components of the programs".

Sumukadas & Sawhney (2004) reported that employee involvement programs have resulted in workforce agility specially the power sharing practices. Base on the literature reviews and empiric studies; there are two kinds of benefits of empowerment. The first kind is the tangible benefits such as: 1) it is much easier to find the best solution to a business problem, 2) the diverse ideas are shared and implemented, 3) the decisions are made at lowest level of the organization, 4) the workgroup is recognized for its efforts and performance, 5) the individual have the opportunity to influence the goals of the workgroup, 6) the acquisition of new skills and knowledge are encouraged and facilitated, 7) the organization structure becomes flattened and

less hierarchical, 8) the managers have more time to lead and not to micro-manage employees' activities, 9) this provides meaningful, measurable positive business impact.

The second kind is the intangible benefits of empowerment such as: 1) it allows leveraging the collective strengths of all group members; 2) the group takes the ownership of the statement of work and results, 3) it helps to create a culture of trust and collaboration, 4) it enhances the individual self-esteem, 5) it improves the communication among the managers and the employees, 6) it provides a more enjoyable working environment.

Organizational and individual roadblocks to employee empowerment

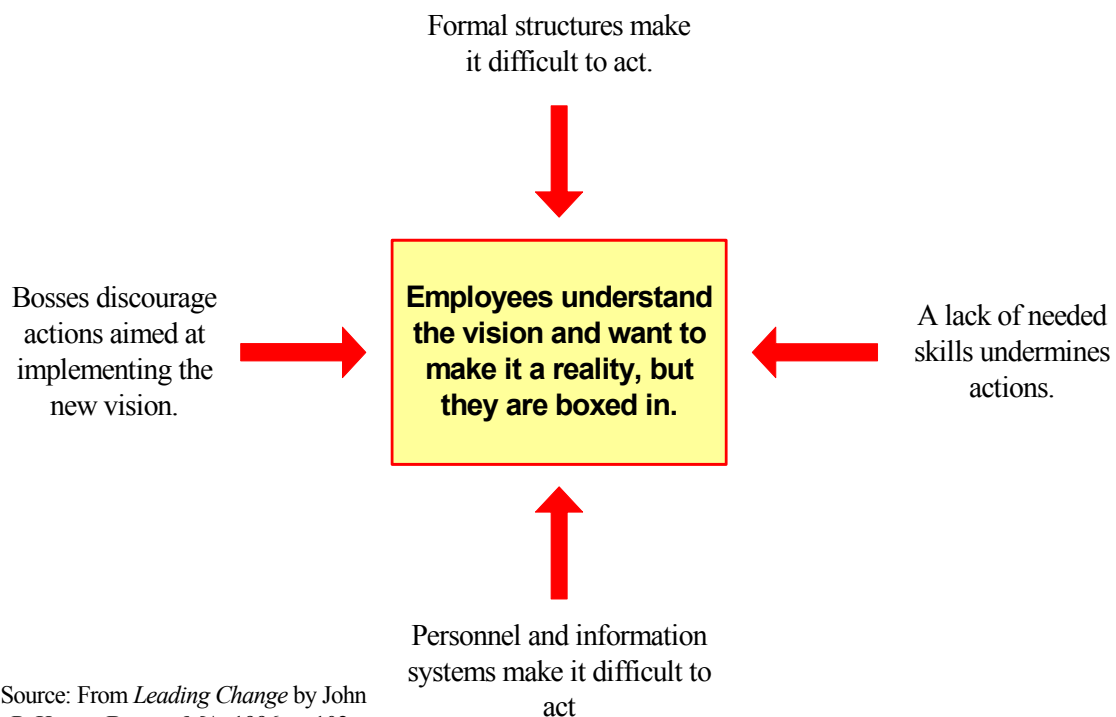
There are many challenges to the employee empowerment. Bushe, Havlovic, & Coetzer (1996) stated that in order for people to work together they need to know about their boundaries. These boundaries are identified as: authority, task, and political. The authority boundary is concerned with the question of who is in charge and has the power to execute the plan and influence others to do the job. The task boundary explains the question who is supposed to do what and provides the division of work among the team member. Finally, the political boundary is concerned with the question that who wants what and people's expectation in term of their responsibility and accountability.

It is true that some employees don't want to be empowered. They are happy to pursue a routine job and follow their supervisor's orders. On other hand, some managers will be not able to adapt to the participative management style since they are entrenched in their old command and control management style. Generally, it will take more time for a manager to coach the employees than just order them to perform a task. Empowerment requires personal change, taking initiative, and assuming responsibilities to define own work. It encourages a larger

collaboration within the group. The organization inertia and the organizational culture will not change over night and takes constant effort by the leadership and employees. This requires a paradigm shift from controlling to enabling behavior.

Kotter (1996) showed the barriers to empowerment in figure 3. In his view, the employees are engaged and understand the vision and are aware of the benefits of empowerment, but they are boxed in by many forces stacked against them. A major force is applied by the formal organizational structure creating inertia to act. The management might be reluctant to embrace new vision. There is a lack of necessary employees' skills undermining their actions. Finally, the existing information systems are antiquated and do not provide quality data and information to help the employees to execute their jobs.

Figure 3. Barriers to Empowerment



Source: From *Leading Change* by John P. Kotter. Boston, MA. 1996, p. 102.

Removing roadblocks to employee empowerment

We have seen in the previous section that most employees face barriers to their involvements in an employee empowerment initiative. The traditional command and control encourage the formation of roadblocks. By contrast, managers in a participatory management style are expected to remove the barriers. It is important to differentiate between two types of barriers within the organization. In one hand, the actual barriers are created for business reasons. They may include the published policies and procedures, the legal requirements, the government compliance and regulations, and the ethical standards. In the other hand, there are perceived barriers and are based on hearsay, the assumptions, old practices, and the fear of violating company's norms.

In order to remove barriers, one has to understand the difference between boundaries and barriers. The boundary can be set by the team intentionally based on their maturity. This can be moved as team progress and gains experience. The boundary is established to limit the scope of the team operations and facilitate structure learning. Barrier can be viewed as an impartial roadblock regardless of team maturity. It can be an organizational obstacle preventing employees from doing their job or it could be a person, a policy or a procedure.

A manager ought to analyze and understand the nature of the barrier. Then he or she can assess the situation and explain to the team the effects and consequences of such issue. The next logical step is to determine with whom he or she has to work to eliminate the barrier. It is important to identify the potential benefits and risks of alternatives being recommended and apply risk management for mitigation. From an operational perspective, a manager will follow suit with an action plan to remove barrier. It is common sense to start with smaller challenges by

involving top management support and choosing battles carefully. It is appropriate to tackle the bigger barrier when the time is right.

Delegating Responsibility

The employee empowerment basic assumption is that the manager adheres to a participatory management style philosophy. This presupposes the delegation of responsibility to the subordinates. But in order to make this delegation effective and efficient, a manager has to recognize the capabilities of the employees and build a trusting relationship to get the job done. The focus should be on results and not on micromanaging how the tasks are accomplished. The delegation can be considered as a way to develop the skills of the employees or to position people favorably with top management. The delegation has to be always at the lowest possible level to make the best use of employees' resources. As we discussed before it is important to set the boundaries and clearly explain assignment and providing resources needed for successful completion of tasks at hand. The ongoing feedback loop helps the employees and supports them to recover from their mistakes and learn from it for continual process improvement. There is a tendency for a manager to practice reverse delegation to mitigate a risk and an issue. A manager should not automatically solve problems or make decisions for the team. He or she has to focus on generating alternative solutions together with the employees.

Now, we agree on the notion of delegation, another important question comes in mind is that what to delegate? The first step to answer this question is to assess a manager's own workload and identify the tasks, projects, or functions that require the specific set of skills and authority. The second step is to identify the routine tasks, specific projects, or complete functions that could easily be done by other team members or outside resources. The third step

is to identify the tasks, projects, or functions that could be done by others with a minimum of coaching or the on-the-job training. The fourth step is to identify those tasks, projects, or functions that could be completed by a team member if the manager or one of their peers provided additional training or coaching. The fifth step is to identify the tasks, projects, or functions that may require the subject matter expertise from outside of the department or the organization.

Based on the information collected, a manager has many options in terms of degree of delegation. The first option is to keep the responsibility of task or function with the management and don't delegate. The second option is to assign work or action to an employee but not the responsibility. The third option is to delegate responsibility for determining how a task or a function will be accomplished. The fourth option is to delegate responsibility for defining what to do and determining how to do it.

Finally, with delegation comes the need to monitor how the delegation is working and adjustment might be needed based on the situation with appropriate communication methods and open door policy to encourage honest feedback mechanisms.

Conclusion

Employee empowerment remains an elusive concept. Even in the best of circumstances once all stakeholders understand it, it is difficult to achieve. Randolph (2000) reiterates that empowerment requires fundamental changes in an organization's culture, behavior, leadership style, and employees' shared risks and responsibilities. The autocratic leadership style defines the external commitment in terms of job description, behaviors, and performance goals for employees. In the other hand, the empowerment means building an organization from an internal commitment paradigm where the employees define their own tasks, action plans, and

goals in the context of the company's vision and strategy. The best way to achieve an empowered culture is to adopt multifaceted, counterintuitive and nonlinear processes. There are three major steps to do this. First, starting and orienting the process of change, second, making changes and dealing with discouragement, and third, adopting and refining empowerment to fit the organization subculture. This paper just scratches the surface of the potential benefits and obstacles to achieve empowerment. Additional studies and research are needed to analyze all the aspects of employee empowerment and find unifying theories to help to ascertain an organization behavior and stages needed to transform an IT department from within to achieve higher employee satisfaction and increase productivity.

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