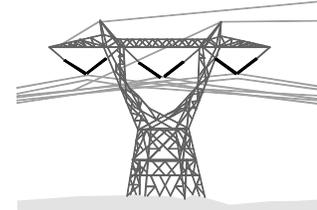


## EMPOWERMENT

Is it possible that there is a more overused word than **empowerment**? It has become de rigueur in mission statements, presidents' visions and marketing literature. Talk of empowerment is everywhere... journals, newspapers, workshop topics, and yes, of course, management consultants.

Just to test my total exhaustion with the word, I asked a very articulate twenty something technical professional his reaction... and got an earful. *To me the phrase is a nearly meaningless buzzword overused by virtually everyone I've ever met in management. To use it without a subject is incomprehensible to me. In other words, as I understand the word "empower" it should be associated with a subject. To me it's like someone coming up to me and saying they are going to permit me. Permit me to do what? If I am to be empowered, a necessary part of the concept is what I am to be empowered to do. Therefore, it is frustrating to me to be told I've been "empowered" with no idea as to what.*



**empowerment is an overused word and an under used process**

Now, I make no claim that this was a scientific study, but I do believe these comments are representative of the very group so many of us are trying to empower. This statement underscores the theme of this article which is that empowerment is an overused word and an under used process. Most of us don't know what it means to the workforce. Thus, it is frustrating employees and hurting company performance.

Empowerment does not come from a wand you wave over your firm, or from a memo you write. It cannot result from the systems, and command and control structures that exist in many organizations. Empowerment doesn't happen because you wish it to be so. It occurs when you delegate, as well as when you consistently and repeatedly transfer ownership and responsibilities for issues, problems, solutions, and goals, to employees. Let's look at an example.

What happens in your company when conflicting project deadlines occur? If managers intervene automatically, telling all involved parties what to do, the workforce is not empowered. If management does the following instead, then employees will understand the power they have to affect results:

- Educate employees about problem definition and resolution.
- Clearly articulate broad but acceptable outcomes.
- Through words and actions, reinforce freedom of action.
- Support employee decisions.

Individuals must know that the business' leadership expects them to think and take action like responsible adults, committed to the well being of the firm. When management supports employees in those efforts, they will know what it means to be empowered.

To think and take action requires information. Until senior management

acknowledges that their real role is to communicate, to coach and to develop their human assets, there will be no change from the way most of us do business today. The May-June 1995 *Harvard Business Review* (pg. 136) makes the following statement... *empowerment... is not an overnight transfer or an abdication of responsibility from a boss to a subordinate. It is a gradual delegation process that requires substantial top-management involvement... People want to learn and are greatly motivated and satisfied when they do. Top management's challenge is not only to help people develop themselves, but also to ensure that they do so in ways that support and reinforce the company's objectives.*

I believe another phrase for empowerment is employee involvement. According to a recent study conducted by the University of California's Center for Effective Organizations, American companies have been slow to integrate such practices into the way they do business. Some of the key findings:

- 37 percent of staff are not involved in employee involvement activities and have no share in managerial power;
- While 31 percent of employees are responsible for recommending improvements to management, they have no power and get little information or training to help them make decisions;
- Of the 12 percent of employees who participate in teams and are given some degree of control over the day-to-day decisions relevant to their jobs, most receive only information related to their tasks.

In Psychology 101 you learn that habits are hard to break and people don't change unless they are motivated to do so. The same can be said for a business transition to an empowered workforce. Unless employees understand 1) why; 2) what's in it for them; and, 3) what's in it for the company, there will be no impetus for doing things differently. Nothing will happen just because you want it to. The only thing that matters is if employees want to change and believe they can affect company performance.

Managers need to work on the programs and processes that enlighten and involve employees. You must support them with your words and actions. To use another well-worn phrase, *you need to walk the walk and talk the talk*. As a business leader, do you spend as much time with your top human resource professional discussing ways of connecting and aligning employees to business goals and objectives, as you do planning with your senior financial person? If so, then you understand that empowerment is more than today's favorite buzzword.

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