Empowered Behavior In Our Organizations

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THE IRONY OF LEADERSHIP IS THAT YOU NEVER BElong. A leader is always something of an outsider. Leaders are prophets whom lesser mortals fail to understand. But through an empowerment process the mental of being a leader, even for a short while, even for one task, dawns upon these so called lesser mortals. For some it could be by intuition, for some it could be the coincidence of vision with opportunity, for many it could be pure chance, but for all it would be a time worth living through.

If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain.

If you want ten years of prosperity, grow trees.

If you want one hundred years of prosperity, grow people.

– Chinese proverb

What really is empowerment? And what, really is the need for it in modern management? In the past leadership theory has focused on traits, behaviors and situations. In doing so did it loose sight of the leader? How would one account for leaders like Nelson Mandela or Lee Lacocca within the existing theories? If it's the personal power to transform that made them great can we really fit them into our present beliefs on leadership?

Empowering or transformational leaders motivate followers to do more than they originally expect to do. They create this transformation by raising the sense of importance and value of the tasks by getting the followers to rise above their self interests for the sake of the organization or more appropriately the task at hand. of the followers to a higher order and nudge them towards self actualization. Empowerment now seems to be more than a hot buzzword but a competitive necessity in an ever changing and dynamic business environment.

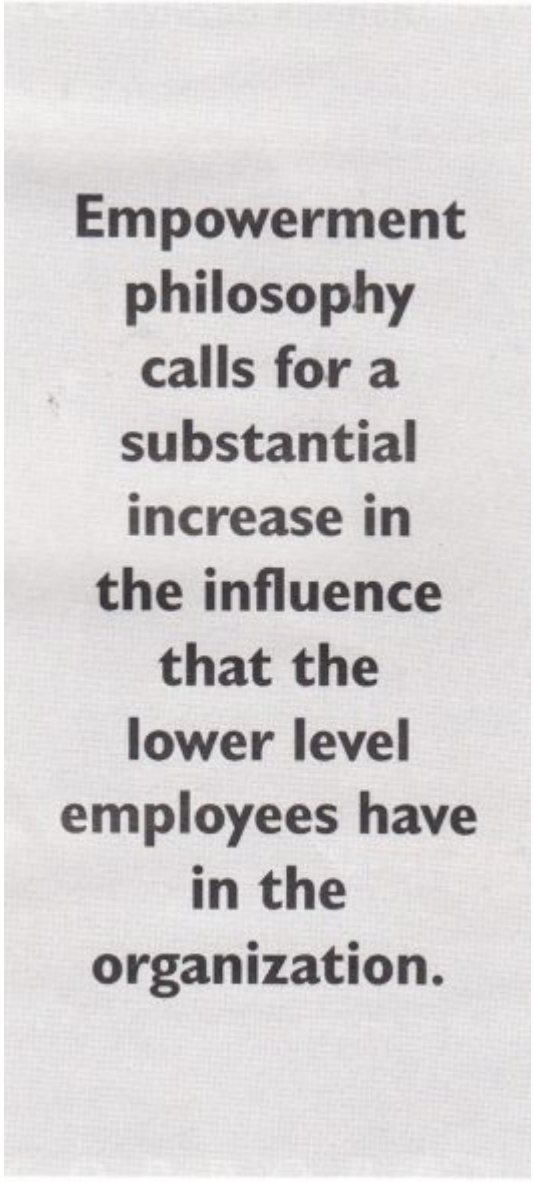
Another word for "empowerment" could be transformation or charisma. Here the discussion on empowerment naturally revolves around leadership. It's only leadership that can empower its followers. Followers cannot be and will not be empowered on their own for they will not have the vision nor the conviction to encompass the ultimate goal as would be the case with the leader. The empowering leader will eat, breath and live his vision. In short he would be sold first on it and in the process of living his vision will transplant it into his followers. He will create an atmosphere where the natural energies of his followers will be released. He will uplift them mentally and physically and instill an inner drive that will functionally motivate the followers to share his goal as if their own.

Empowering leaders share power and do so effectively. Their personal vision and energy inspires followers and this in turn has a major impact on the organization. Empowering leadership sees power as an expandable pie where- as the traditional leadership thinking promotes the idea that power is a fixed sum. That means if I have more power you have less. Naturally leaders who hold this view are reluctant to share power. They will hold tightly on to what ever little power they may perceive themselves to have. This view, however, cannot work within the empowerment

context as it seriously retards getting extraordinary things done. When subordinates feel powerless they tend to hold on to what ever shreds of power they have. Powerlessness creates organizational systems where political skills become essential and “covering” oneself and “passing the buck” become the preferred styles for handling interpersonal differences. Hence the observation that ‘powerlessness corrupts, and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely’.

The more everyone in the organization feels a sense of power and influence, the greater the ownership and investment they feel in the success of the organization. The expandable powerpie concept also leads to greater reciprocity of influence the leader and the follower are willing to be mutually influenced by one another. For the empowering leader this is a paradox; “I have to give power to receive power” and this in turn will make the followers more attached to the leader and more committed to carrying out their duties and responsibilities.

Change in the environment and within the organization itself seems continuous and constant. In the future only a motivated firm with highly skilled and empowered labor, which would display good vertical mobility in place of a rigid hierarchy, will hold up and survive. But for many this future has already arrived. In such organizations there is no room for the purely reactive leader who can be called a “fire fighter”.



They need the “man on the white horse” who will boldly and charismaticaly say “That way” and then lead the charge.

But can this magic be limited to one person? Without the sophisticated and well qualified follower can a charismatic leader ever hope to empower and lead the charge? Lets try to quantify empowerment.

To empower (E) means to release the volcanic energy of the employees. Specifically it means to challenge them to autonomy (A)- that is for them to take full responsibility for their actions and expect them to be adults in a real fashion.

Challenge them to understand the meaning of human freedom, the importance of initiative, and the realism that arises from their knowing that nothing happens unless they make it happen. It is to give them direction (D) – that is goals. And then it means to support (S) them, to validate who they are, to give them attention and care, know what they are doing and let them know that their efforts are important to you. Hence the empowerment formula can be noted as follows,

E= A x D x S

One could multiply the above leadership virtues by each other to show that a zero in one gives you a product of zero. All three that is Autonomy, Direction and Support are essential for empowerment to take place. To ignore one is to invalidate the whole process

Following is a definition of empowerment within the organizational context which reads, ‘Empowerment exists in an organization when lower level employees feel that they are expected to exercise initiative in good faith on behalf of the mission even if it goes outside the bounds of their normal responsibilities; and if their initiative should lead to a mistake – even a serious one they trust that they will not be arbitrarily penalized for having taken that initiative.”

Empowerment philosophy calls for a substantial increase in the influence that the lower level employees have in the organization. Tom Peters calls this ‘pushing decision making authority to the lowest level possible’.

What the definition stated earlier means simply is that when something needs to be done, the employees should do it without waiting till they are told to do it. They should not sweep the problem under the rug and blame it on someone else.

Behavioral implications of such an empowerment process might suggest that employees are given a free license to act irresponsibly. Due to this many business leaders may seem uncomfortable with empowerment. This is why the quality of the employees is important. They should be mature and ready to shoulder responsibility. At the same time the leader’s goal or vision too should be clear.

Empowerment may make employees in an organization to re-look at their hopes, fears, expectations and desires from a more personal point of view. This would be possible as each will be in control of the process and to a larger degree the outcome. They will feel more confident that the future finally is in their hands and

it’s up to them to make the effort worthwhile. They would command a better feeling of reality and experience the significance of what the organization is trying to do.

Another facet of empowerment would be the self motivation of the employees. This should and has to be an ongoing condition in a person as there will be no frequent assessments or appraisals as there would be in a conventional situation. To a larger degree self alignment to the vision will be necessary from time to time. Whilst this would make employees more independent it would also require them to be knowledgeable and intelligent. They would also need to have the same commitment, energy, courage and conviction as the leader. It should be noted that empowering leadership in itself will not be effective, but paradoxically it will be the empowered followers that will make the leader effective.

Here it would be interesting to see why people work after all. As Karl Marx dreamt, is it to finally enter ‘the realms of freedom where labor stops? In philosophical terms, work distinguishes man from the world of animals. According to Marx it constitutes man’s existentially necessary “metabolism with nature” by furnishing two conditions: one by the maintenance of life through the production of consumable goods and shelter for survival and on the other hand by the permanent creation of material or the symbolic culture. But if we are to believe Marx in his understanding that work in itself does not transcend the individual but the extingushment of same through it does, then it may be contradiction to say that work constitutes the creation of a culture which is supposed to nourish man. If the goal of work is to end work then this view is self defeating. As we all know the symbolic culture we see around us is based on the accumulation of material wealth through work, rather than through the extigushment of same. Hence the rather opposing view propagated by Max Weber, another German, based on what he terms the Protestant ethic, where material success through hard work is considered as a obligation before god and society seems more pragmatic.

The conflict between the work and the end that’s envisaged through work could be opposing in nature on the surface but complimentary within the core. It’s like the conflict between the managers and leaders. Who is needed more? Are managers the type you love to hate as its leaders who capture our imagination? If the goal of work is to make work itself obsolete then empowerment may make the leader obsolete. Empowerment seeks to raise the level of the follower within the realms of the task from sublimation or obedience to a level of control and command.

If the empowered organization pushes down decision making to the lowest possible

ranks or to the front liners this would mean that it will be very flexible and flatter – with fewer layers of management. It would also mean that the need for middle management may disappear altogether. The top management creates and sells the vision and the front liners take the decisions and self propel forward.

In such a situation the hierarchical structure will have to be replaced with a more flexible one which can adapt to the task more easily. If the focus is shifted to the all encompassing end the bureaucracy will have to be replaced with a more free flowing structure, like in an opera where dozens of dancers form a swan and then disintegrate to chaos and regroup to form a flower. Empowered employees will form teams to tackle a job and then disband for the next task. In an empowered organization the hierarchy will consist of ideas, not of people. Whoever can generate the best idea to tackle a task will take the lead and the others will follow. I envisage the emergence of the “Kinked” hierarchy where middle management, altogether disappears.

A truly empowered employee may look at work in his job differently. Empowerment may make a person rise above the ordinary and develop a need for greatness. It may help reassess the work ethic and create a need for excellence. Empowerment may sanctify the work a person may do or could be doing. It would be not because the organization requires it but would be because in a way the salvation of an empowered employee would demand that what he does every day be crafted like a poem, be composed like a work of art and illuminated by a halo of profound significance.

In empowerment may lie the renewal of the work ethic. Kablil Gibran said it well;

Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, its better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.”