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Empowerment

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‘Empowerment’ is an often misunderstood and abused buzzword. A lack of empowerment has frequently been used as a sweeping justification for all kinds of organizational problems. Likewise, people generally speak of being empowered as a universal solution—the pathway to the promised land. In the best examples, teams of workers are encouraged to manage themselves to solve their own problems, allocate resources as they consider necessary to get a job done, and generally function as an entrepreneurial unit responsible for what they produce, including customer satisfaction.

Unfortunately, there are many more examples where the pursuit of ‘empowerment’ has simply reinforced and sometimes aggravated existing cultural impediments to change. This is usually the case when the concept of empowerment stops being about responsibility and instead becomes about entitlement. This typically shows up as some form of recurring complaints, in which being ‘empowered’ means being left alone, being allowed to be autonomous, and, if things go wrong, implicitly accepting whatever excuses are offered. In other words, the call for ‘empowerment’ becomes a ‘racket’ in which people say they need or want power, but in which they continue to behave as though they are powerless.

What is Empowerment?

To be empowered means that I am responsible for my commitments in the Organization. It means I have the competency or capacity to take action or have others take action appropriate to fulfilling whatever I am intending to accomplish. This does not mean I am able to do everything personally, or that I know everything I need to know, or that I have the authority and all the resources I think are necessary to do the job.

Empowerment is an operating state. It is a way of being, a relationship between a person and their circumstances. To say “I am not empowered” is to declare that the circumstances or situations I am in are senior to and more powerful than I am. I am effectively declaring that I consider my commitments and correlated actions are insufficient to changing the circumstances.

Empowering others is a bit of a misnomer. In the final analysis, *we can only empower ourselves*. We do this by taking a stand for being empowered and then taking action in that context, regardless of the circumstances.



Management can and should provide clarity about what it means to be empowered and offer people opportunities to take an empowering stand for themselves and others. Management may provide this through structural definitions, systemic changes, policies or through coaching and education. In the broadest sense, *any management style should be empowering in the sense it provides what is needed for people to generate and express commitments to accomplishing unprecedented results.*

Empowerment: A Relationship with Circumstances

Empowerment does not and cannot occur in isolation. It is not a reflection of someone's personal feelings or point of view. It is not a result of permission or being granted autonomy.

Being empowered is never at the exclusion of others being empowered.

Empowerment always occurs in the relationship between an individual and the organizational context within which they are working. For example, a player can be empowered in a relationship with a coach or in relation to a team's vision, but never independent of some relationship.

To be empowered, one needs to be empowered in relation to some domain of action. It is inconceivable that someone would be viewed or that they would even experience themselves as empowered at all times and in all situations. For example, I experience myself as being empowered within the domain of organizational transformation, primarily in the areas of competency development, process design and culture change. I can both *declare* myself as being empowered and I am also able to ground the assessment that I am empowered. Were I to have a concern or have a commitment involving some other area or domain, I would necessarily need to either build an alliance (relationship) with someone who is empowered in those other areas OR I would have to execute a strategy for getting myself empowered.

Empowerment is NOT Authority

Management can structurally provide for people to empower themselves by giving them authority in some domain. The decision to grant authority (or not) should be a function of being efficient, based on an assessment of competence and trusting someone to act on behalf of the Organization.



Having authority, however, does not assure people will be empowered. It sometimes even gets in the way: people think they are supposed to be empowered, but continue to experience that they are not. Numerous studies have shown that the top people in an organization often experience being the most disempowered. Rosabeth Kantor, a consultant and Harvard professor, reports that CEOs are among the most disempowered by virtue of the fact that they consistently report an inability to have the people reporting to them deliver on what they are requesting or, in many cases, to even keep the promises they are making. While these conditions are often explained away as ‘cultural problems’, they are more accurately seen as empowerment issues.

It is easy for people to confuse boundaries with empowerment. It is intelligent for management to clarify a person’s boundaries in the Organization. For example, saying to an associate that they do not have the authority to commit certain kinds of resources without your permission is a declaration of an authority boundary. An empowered associate would know that part of getting the job done ***included*** requesting permission. He or she would ***not*** view the lack of authority as a limit to power, but simply one of the variables to deal with in expressing one’s commitments.

One way of seeing this is that what have traditionally been constraints can be transformed into breakdowns, and the breakdowns point the way through the organization’s authority maze to what is necessary to accomplish the commitment. In one sense, the hierarchy exists to serve the empowered associate. An excellent reference that expands on this notion is ***The Empowered Manager*** by Peter Block.

Empowering Conversations

Regardless of the approach or approaches taken to empower individuals or teams, the process will involve generating one or more distinct conversations throughout the organization:

Conversations for Relationship

These conversations build trust and assurances that taking personal risk is not only acceptable, but also required to be a leader on a team. The power of this conversation is in our relating to each other as a function of our commitments in the organization and in the world instead of relating to each other based on ungrounded or uncommunicated negative assessments and feelings about each other in a given moment. I propose the following ‘ground rules for effective dialogue’ as a basis for an empowering relationship:

- ✓ Acknowledge we are ‘up to something’ together—we have something that we are committed to accomplishing together.
- ✓ Promise to speak straight and to listen generously and tell the truth as we perceive it. Be open to and encourage negative assessments from others as a contribution and an opportunity for inquiry and learning.



- ✓ Stand *for* each other and honour each other's commitments (including their assessments) as being legitimate and authentic as our own. Acknowledge and appreciate each other and the team.
- ✓ Even in the most difficult disputes, there is much to acknowledge, including the fact that without a background of relationship, nothing of any consequence would be possible.

Conversations for Possibility

These foster creative dialogue unconstrained by practical, everyday limitations on what can and cannot be accomplished. These 'what if' conversations create openings for innovation and unprecedented or unreasonable commitments to emerge which otherwise are unthinkable or simply too risky, given the prevailing culture.

Conversations for Opportunity

In these dialogues, we anticipate barriers and breakdowns (or 'missings') that must be addressed to translate an invented possibility into reality. These conversations include: asking and answering questions, and making commitments related to resources required, accountabilities, conditions of satisfaction, roles, broad time frames and criteria for determining success. Assuming relationship and alignment about what we're trying to accomplish together already exist, this is probably the most substantive conversation when setting up and empowering a new team. This is the conversation in which the game is declared and the players make an offer—this is the 'deal'!

Conversations for Action

In these conversations, people, by virtue of making requests and promises, specify particular changes *in time* and declare their responsibility for making them happen. This is where the "rubber hits the road" in terms of something either coming into existence or being taken out of existence. For any process of coordinated action to work well, it is essential that all the players recognize they are co-creating a future in a network of conversations and, at the end of the day, *they are all responsible for the result.*

*Commitments always involve **both** speaking and listening for them to have any power in an organization. This is easily observed when we consider that all we need to do to **disempower** someone or ourselves is to simply stop listening or stop taking our commitments seriously.*



Conversations for Completion and Declaring Breakdowns

These conversations occur when action is stopped and people require a new opening in which to move forward. They are particularly important conversations for acknowledging and completing mistakes or failures or aborting projects that have not turned out or are no longer commitments for one reason or another. They are also important opportunities to acknowledge ourselves and others, to renew or abandon commitments, to nurture and build relationship, and to explore new possibilities. In other words, these conversations call for all other kinds of conversations.

Conclusion

In my experience, people are *not* empowered when they consciously or unconsciously become co-conspirators in negative conversations—when they speak as though they are not responsible for their being empowered—in which they are caught up in a labyrinth of ungrounded assessments, interpersonal ‘stories’ and suppression of authentic commitment.

People who say they are not empowered are essentially being victims of the system. They either lack access (including having a ‘blind spot’) to a conversation that would allow them a choice or they have a senior and conscious or unconscious hidden commitment that would be threatened if they were empowered.

Empowerment is a natural state for human beings, one that allows us to experience being free and able to responsibly express ourselves and our commitments in alignment with others and our strategic intent. In a world of accelerating change, global coordination, increased competition and fewer ways to distinguish what makes us different, true empowerment of everyone in an organization is more than just a concept—it is a prerequisite for winning.