

Empowerment and Process Consultation: Two Sides of the Same Coin
by
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Abstract

Empowerment is a topical area of management study particularly given the current economic times that bias organizations to consider practices that maximize efficiency and minimize costs. While it has been shown in some studies that organizations that utilize empowerment have realized positive performance benefits, the relationship is far from unequivocal. This paper suggests that the utilization of Process Consultation as a model of “service provider – client” relationship formation is complementary to the foundational values and objectives of empowerment, and will have an increased probability of demonstrating the kind of organizational commitment that will result in improved organizational performance.

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Introduction

Empowerment is currently a popular topic on which consultants and management have focused, their desire being to bring about increases in employee proactivity and self-management. The belief has been that these changes in employee behaviour will assist organizations in achieving their goals. The literature has, however, been equivocal about how justified these beliefs are. This may be due in part to the existence of a great variety of definitions that has interfered with the achievement of conceptual clarity. How empowerment has been defined changes according to the context in which it is used. Non-management conceptions¹ define empowerment through a notion of powerlessness and oppression. It is perceived as the transformation of those without power into equitable partners (Lincoln, Travers, Ackers, & Wilkinson, 2002). West (1990) has maintained that empowerment must not be defined simply as the giving away or gaining of power, but as the eradication of oppressive power and the enablement of the whole population to enter a free and fair world. However, this definition is very “cosmic” and adds little to one’s understanding of the concept as it occurs in the management literature beyond reminding us that in some of its permutations, it can be a politically radical and utopian ideal. And the nature of this ideal hints at the potential problems created by its application to the business environment notwithstanding that there have been demonstrations of its value (Robbins & Langton, 2003, pg. 383).

Process consultation (PC) has been described as a consulting approach that provides individual access to power and choice, rather than fostering dependency. It encourages self-responsibility and egalitarianism. The outcome of any PC approach to change has been seen to be increased commitment to decision-making and action taking.

The above descriptions demonstrate complementarities between the two concepts. This paper thus suggests that a combination of empowerment and process consultation principles will have an increased probability of demonstrating the kind of organizational commitment that will result in improved organizational performance.

Empowerment and its use by management

When I hear the word empowerment, I reach for my gun. It’s like new bottles for old wine. (Taylor, quoted by Osbaldeston [1993])

In the management literature, effective organizations are characterized as those that produce excellent results by any measure of costs, quality, or efficiency while simultaneously enhancing the energy and commitment of organizational members to the success of the enterprise. This “energy and commitment” is frequently part of the empowerment definition adopted by North American organizations (Forrester, 2000). The belief has been that encouraging the creation of conditions that will foster employee decision-making will translate into organizational benefits (e.g., Wetlaufer, 1999). And this is a particularly topical consideration given that many business organizations in Canada and the United States face increasing pressures from international competition, governmental regulation and their own internal ineffectiveness and inefficiencies. Moreover, each year, organizations have spent

hundreds of millions of dollars to transform their information management systems with the expectation that through significant technological change equally significant organizational performance improvement will occur. However, a 1996 survey conducted by Standish Group International, Inc. has shown that a staggering 73% of “big information-systems” project implementations fail to meet their target expectations; are only partly used; are completed late, over budget and with fewer capabilities than specified; and are canceled at some point during the development cycle (Wall Street Journal, 1996). More recently, there has been little improvement despite attempts to improve organizational performance through spending in the technical realm. At the same time, the U. S., and to a lesser degree, the Canadian economies have been underperforming. As a result, instead of investigating ways in which the empowerment of employees through their increased engagement in change strategies could be utilized to improve organizational performance, the default reaction has been significant employee downsizing. As an example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor, mass layoffs increased 36% from 2000 to 2001². This has been due, in large part, to a failure to effectively integrate the human side with the technological aspects of the change, in other words, a failure to employ the so-called “systems approach” (Lytle, 1998; Nadler & Gerstein, 1992) which carries with it the expectation that employees will operate in an empowered workplace.

Evolution of the notion of empowerment

Empowerment as a concept is derived from the notions championed by the Human Relations theorists of the mid-twentieth century. That is, Locke & Schweiger (1979) have traced the concern about employee participation to Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne studies. Lewin (1947,1952) combined the examination of scientific thinking with democratic values, and suggested that all organizations are systems whose performance requires a joint consideration of task and social processes. Furthermore, he involved the participants in change efforts in understanding and making decisions about desired changes. Then, following Maslow's conceptualization of a hierarchy of needs, attention focused on responsibility and autonomy, the opportunity to self-direct, self-reward and self-actualize (Herzberg, Mausner & Snyderman, 1959; MacGregor, 1960). Later, work motivation was closely tied to workers' needs for a participative or democratic leadership style supported by a flat organizational structure (Likert, 1976).

Then, in the 1980's, Lawler and his colleagues at the Center for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California began using the terms “high-involvement management” and “the new plant model” which were founded on the ideas of work re-organization (which includes team effectiveness, job rotation, and multiskilling), redesign of pay systems, the institution of formal participatory mechanisms (e.g., quality circles, town hall meetings, large-group decision-making and planning processes) and the altered role of the manager (Lawler, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1996). These high-involvement practices were based on four components: sharing information, developing knowledge, rewarding performance and distributing power.

Empowerment came into ascendancy in the late 1980's on the heels of Block's (1986) work that compared traditional, patriarchal management with new, empowered management. This new approach specified the need to augment decision-making and the making of commitments such that employees did not merely participate, but actually had power. The critical characteristic of empowerment was and is power and how to enhance it (Bardwick, 1991;

Block, 1993; Davidon & Malone, 1992; Peters, 1987). Others use phrases such as redistributing authority and control (Champy, 1995; Karsten, 1994); employees and managers sharing equal responsibility for results (Frey, 1993); maximizing employees' contribution to an organization's success (Jaffee & Scott, 1993); full participation of workers and leaders in decision making (Schutz, 1994). These findings indicate a range of different definitions. An ineffective consequence of this definitional variety is that there is no conceptual rigour. Thus, different manifestations of what constitute attempts to encourage the development of empowered workplaces have been described.

Failed attempts at organizational improvement: Empirical-rational solutions

As organizations have struggled to apply this notion, results have often fallen short of expectations. In fact, Argyris (1998) and others (e.g., Eccles & Nohria, 1993; Parker, 1993; Randolph, 1995; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997) have questioned the utility and appropriateness of the practice as a single organizational strategy. However, the failures that many organizations have experienced are more about flawed implementation than flawed conception.

Business Process Reengineering (BPR), a more recent model of performance improvement, is an example of the consequence of such a flawed implementation. Hammer & Champy (1993), the authors of this very influential model of organizational process redesign relied primarily on an engineering model that “mechanized” management practices, and tended to perpetuate traditional hierarchical structures. This is consistent with what Rynes & Trank (1999) have noted is the business community’s tendency to adopt “rational business logics” (p. 810). These “rational logics” flow directly from power-coercive and empirical-rational perspectives on planned change (Bennis, Benne & Chin, 1985). The empirical-rational strategy assumes that people are guided by reason and will calculate whether it is in their best interest to change. It assumes that if people understand the logic for change and see themselves as benefiting from the change, they will be more likely to change. Resistance to change comes primarily from ignorance and superstition. To counter resistance, individuals must be educated about the logic and benefits of change. Although the empirical-rational strategy may be effective for technical changes, it is not likely to be effective for adaptive change because it has a narrow, cognitive view of human systems. It fails to incorporate the affective and normative domains. Thus, although people may understand why they should change, they are usually not willing to make the painful changes necessary for adaptive change.

The power-coercive strategy focuses on forcing people to change through the use of external sanctions. This strategy emphasizes political and economic power. Political power implies an ability to apply sanctions when others do not align themselves with the change. Economic power brings control over resources and the ability to apply economic sanctions to force change on those with less power. Hence, this strategy's basic approach is to identify and apply levers of power and force others to comply. The power-coercive change strategy also has limited use in adaptive situations. In adaptive change, people must commit themselves to the collective purpose. The power-coercive strategy usually evokes anger, resistance, and damage to the fundamental relationships of those involved in the change. Thus, it is not likely to result in the kind of voluntary commitment that is necessary in most adaptive situations.

The normative-reeducative strategy involves a more collaborative change process. Individuals are still guided by a rational calculus; however, this calculus extends beyond self-interest to incorporate the meanings, norms, and institutional policies that contribute to the

formation of human culture. Using this strategy, the leader of change welcomes the input of others as equals into the change process. Change does not come by simply providing information, as in the empirical-rational strategy. Rather, it requires the leader to focus on the clarification and reconstruction of values. In this mode, the leader attempts to identify all values and works collectively through conflict. The emphasis is on communication with the followers rather than their manipulation. Hence, this strategy emphasizes involving others in an honest dialog while mutually searching for win-win solutions (Quinn, Spreitzer, & Brown, 2000).

In the present context, such models as scientific management and systems rationalism, tend to conceptualize organizations as "machine-like systems" and employees as "cogs in the machine" (Abrahamson, 1997). Another embodiment of this power-coercive and empirical-rational approach to change in the social system is the almost automatic response that organizational management demonstrates in response to organizational financial performance that fails to reach target. That is, they have bet that the one best way to ensure their future survival and prosperity is reliance on control-based practices, the main ingredients of a power-coercive approach to change. However, there is evidence to indicate that significant restructurings are only likely to be successful in the long run when combined with more participatory and empowerment-focused practices, that is, approaches consistent with a normative-reeducative change strategy (Rigby, 2001).

Rational models of management tend to assume that employees "work only because the formalized structures of machine- or system-like organizations control their actions and reward their efforts" (Abrahamson, 1997, p. 496). Under these assumptions, the appropriate role for management is to "engineer organizational machines and systems, to optimize production processes, and to reward employees for adhering to such processes" (Abrahamson, 1997, p. 496). Systems of management based on empirical-rational conceptions of change are narrowly focused on monetary exchange and adopt short-term and limited views of what employees and employers can offer each other (e.g., Coff, 1997; Rousseau, 1995). These empirical-rational and power-coercive approaches to change that are pre-eminent in business reflect a social contract that says that the social responsibility of business is to use its resources to engage in activities that increase profits. The rules that define this game specify open and free competition, which does not necessarily exclude deception or fraud (Friedman, 1962). Hammer has said in referring to this command-and-control, compliance-based view of the organization, "I wasn't smart enough about that. I was reflecting my engineering background and was insufficiently appreciative of the human dimension. I've learned that's critical" (White, 1996).

Power-coercive and empirical-rational forms of consulting are not what they say they are

The reengineering fad which has promised to remake organizations into “lean, mean fighting machines,” and which has appealed to executives’ wishes for magical benefits in as short a time as possible, in actuality has delivered mixed results at best (Burke, 1997). Though it appears that change management and BPR success are positively linked, it also appears that organizational experience in integrating them together is still in its infancy, and that more research is needed in this regard. In addition, integration of change management with BPR may take different forms, and thus, more research is needed to determine when and how a specific approach of change management can be used (Al-Mashari, Irani, & Zairi, 2001). However, suffice it to say that many of the reported failures of BPR are thought to be due to its primary focus on “technical aspects,” while effective change frequently requires a sociotechnical process that is consistent with normative-reeducative approaches (Robbins & Langton, 2003). Organizational Development professionals have understood and adopted a holistic, values-based and integrated perspective on organizational change long before the large consulting firms, which have only recently realized that a unique selling proposition is presented by the use of business integration. Thus, while it would appear that integrated methodologies were only recently developed in the major consulting firms (Farias & Johnson, 2000), they have been around for a much longer time in the consulting practices that are informed by principles consistent with an empowerment/normative-reeducative approach.

So, many of the large consulting firms (e.g., the “Big Five”) that have been hired as facilitators of change have tended to present themselves to customers as experts who would make recommendations and give advice about the “best” strategies for change. They colluded with the previously described “rational logics” perspective adopted by business by providing processes that would appeal to their short-term, engineering requirements. This was done in service of acquiring repeat work, and not necessarily because it was in the best interests of the organization (Hornstein, 2001). When such competitive, profit-driven practices are used in the provision of consulting services, it is likely that few increases in client capability will result.

Nonetheless, Williamson (2001), in referring to consulting in the IT industry, has advocated a consulting model in which the provision of expertise or acting as a “pair of hands” (Block, 1999; Schein, 1987, 1988) is the primary mode of interaction with the client. A fallacy in either of these approaches is that external consultants would always be in an informed enough position to effectively advise how next steps should be conducted. The “expert” role places responsibility for change in the hands of the consultant, instead of in the hands of the client, where it should be, and encourages the development of a dependent client-consultant relationship. The pair of hands role assumes that the client knows enough about his/her environment to be able to determine what will best address issues, and can therefore simply declare to consultants (who are, in most cases, hired for their technical expertise) what must be done. In some situations this may be true, but in many more, the client is too close to issues to be able to effectively diagnose, create actions and implement. Moreover, the client himself or herself is often part of what needs attention, and a failure to have a consultant act as a reflector results in the exclusion of an important source of information (Block, 1999; Schein, 1987, 1988). Whether expertise or pair of hands provision defines the client-consultant relationship, in the case of failure, it becomes easy to scapegoat the external agency, thereby abrogating responsibility. Learning is unlikely in those situations since there is little or no ownership of and commitment to the change (Argyris, 1998).

A growing body of evidence has shown clear linkages between human resource (HR) practices that are consistent with empowerment approaches and the behavioral sciences, and various aspects of firm financial success (e.g., Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg, 2000; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Huselid, 1995; Huselid & Becker, 1997; Watson Wyatt Worldwide, 2001). This further supports the value of using normative-reeducative approaches as foundational for the creation of effective management practices.

Extrapolating from these findings, it is reasonable to conclude that organizational consulting needs to be constructed to be consonant with the normative-reeducative model of learning which assumes that human motivation depends on societal norms and commitment to those norms and not the “rational” approach that seems so popular with current management. A normative-re-educative model assumes that change occurs if normative orientations commit to new attitudes, values and information. Power remains with the individuals and groups making change. Some of the world's most successful organizations have adopted change and organizational management approaches that utilize empowerment-based practices as a core element of their overall business strategies (e.g., Stewart, 1997; Stross, 1997).

Process consultation as defined by Block (1999) and Schein (1999) is based on just such a normative-reeducative process. It asks the question of how to involve an organization's employees in service of cultivating the conditions that will lead to an organization's ultimate implementation success.

Empowerment and process consultation

Pasmore (1994) has described organizations as legal fictions, created for the basic purpose of accomplishing tasks that individuals could not accomplish by working alone. Organizations exist in the form of agreements among people. They do not have independent minds. They act in ways that are determined by people. If organizations are agreements among people, it follows that changing the nature of the agreements can ultimately change the nature of the organizations. Good agreements (i.e., meaning that individuals are fully committed to helping organizations succeed, are willing to work together effectively, and are provided with personnel with the proper tools and resources) increase the adaptability and survivability of the organization. Poor agreements (e.g., when individuals feel compelled to protect their own interests instead of being concerned with the success of the organization; when structures interfere with cooperation and effective task performance; when tools are inappropriate for the tasks being performed; and when products fail to meet market demands) can lead to organizational failure. Examining these agreements is a good place to start, and adopting a systems perspective to consulting that is based on a normative-reeducative philosophy furnishes the way to proceed with the examination (Block, 1999; Lytle, 1998; Schein, 1999).

Block (1999) in his entertaining and insightful treatment of the consulting process questions the notion of “consultant as change agent,” because the assumptions inherent in this conception flow from an empirical-rational, bureaucratic view of management and organization that, as has become apparent, fails to be optimally responsive to the needs of the new marketplace and the knowledge workforce. He maintains that consultation is more about client engagement, relationship building, and authenticity that reflects, as O'Reilly (1994) has described, a new social contract between the organization and employees, one that provides choice in exchange for responsibility instead of security for loyalty. The focus of the relationship is: on establishing a clear understanding between the consultant and the client as to

what the “problem” might be; what information requires collection; how it is to be collected and from whom; what the organization “looks like;” what action(s) need to be undertaken; and getting clear on how to proceed.

Problems with the use of empowerment-oriented approaches have resided primarily in the over-reliance on a narrow psychological concept (Bernstein, 2003; Forrester, 2000). That is, as mentioned earlier, empowerment was originally seen as a transfer of power from those who had more of it to those who had less of it. The thinking was that if the less powerful were not acting as expected when power was transferred, it was because of some internal psychological processes that interfered with self-perceptions of power. This psychological concept of empowerment has evolved to focus on intrinsic task motivation and feelings of self-efficacy. And so, organizations have attempted to devise interventions to target these internal processes in order to “improve” the expression of empowerment. However, a fallacy with the conception is that organizations can in any meaningful way have access to employees’ inner workings. Bernstein (2003) has suggested that organizations cannot influence intrinsic motivation, and further that organizational transformation is not motivated by employees’ needs for self-development.

So, a more realistic goal for organizational empowerment is to actually provide employees with the power to make decisions, rather than attempting to convince them individually that they actually have power. The approach to consulting advocated by Block (1999) and Schein (1995, 1999) is one that provides individual access to power and choice, rather than fostering dependency, and is thus the best complement to organizational empowerment.

Conclusions

In an examination of the history of empowerment as a popular construct, Bartunek & Spreitzer (1999) concluded that the definition used in the management literature (as primarily participation in decision making) “reflects a softening of the more radical definitions of power sharing implied in the other earlier literatures” (pg. 19). For example, the meaning of empowerment in contemporary management publications is very remote from its original meanings in the less applied sociological and psychological literatures. This “looseness” has allowed management to purchase “off-the-shelf” solutions to particular organizational needs. In so doing, empowerment has become a floating concept that means different things in different organizations, and, further, means different things to different people within those organizations. This has resulted in different outcome expectations for both management and employees dependent on their own needs. The failure of these expectations to share either common intentions or goals means that the psychological contract between manager and worker could fail, provoking feelings of distrust on both sides (Fox, 1974).

It should be noted that process consulting as it has been conceived and described by Block (1999) and Schein (1987, 1988, 1999) differs from that typically employed by most large IT/financial consulting firms, in that it focuses more on building ownership and commitment in the client rather than in the consultant. Rather than fostering dependent relationships in which the consultant is cast in an omniscient, expert role, while the client is a powerless child, the goal is an increase in client capability. Such an outcome places the client in the enviable position of

being able to legitimately diagnose itself, and formulate action plans that have a high probability of success.

Evans (1999) has observed,

“The theme is business transformation – change on a broad, deep, and profoundly important scale. IT will play an enormous role in powering new ways of dealing with customers, suppliers, employees, and partners, and in allowing everyone in a company to have greater access to the appropriate knowledge and information. *But the life of people who manage technology in business encompasses much more than IT: change, customer-centric focus, culture, innovation, motivation, and opportunity. Whatever the title, those are the challenges* [italics mine].” (pg. 10).

The obvious implication is that the nature of the relationships among organizational members and between them and consultants must shift from being premised exclusively on hierarchical, compliance-based rules and regulations oriented hierarchies to vision-driven partnerships. Because the social contract between organization and employee is so much different than it has ever been, expectations have been necessarily altered so that employees have begun to see themselves more as architects of their futures. For example, at the formerly paternalistic Prudential office in New Jersey where promises of employment security were exchanged for loyalty, a culture of expectation had been created. However, starting with the recession of the 1980’s, people began to realize that the company owed them little more than fair compensation for a day’s work. They started to understand that career progression would be their individual responsibilities, and they could no longer expect assignments to “fall into their laps” (O’Reilly, 1994).

The consulting process and the definition of empowerment that have been presented here are ones that recognize the importance of broadly involving organizational members in change efforts in their organizations to encourage feelings of ownership and commitment, as is expected from normative-reeducative approaches. Employees should not be passive recipients of the declarations of consultants who are nothing more than agents of management. It is well known that interventions and change efforts based in empirical-rational, and power-coercive approaches will result in employee resistance that is so strong that there will be significant obstacles to change. Hopefully, this paper has demonstrated that empowerment-informed approaches to employee engagement in change efforts (such as process consultation) will likely engage them in the determination and implementation of relevant action plans that mobilizes their feelings of ownership and does not rely on dependent consultant-client relationships. This, in turn, would likely result in more persistent, employee-supported organizational improvements.

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¹ Non-management conceptions of empowerment have addressed issues such as 1) the empowerment of women, 2) the elimination of powerlessness of minority groups, and 3) using education to increase the choices available to minority groups (Lincoln, Travers, Ackers, & Wilkinson, 2002)

² In 2001, there were 21,345 mass layoff events (defined as those covering 50 or more employees) resulting in 2,496,784 layoffs. Both of these numbers are 36% higher than the same figures for 2000.