

Overview: Empowerment... a Productivity Magnifier

“Empowerment” is a term that is seen by some as the epitome of human resource practice, and as others with suspicion. It is often valuable for innovative businesses with strong training cultures and flat hierarchies. But like any business tool, empowerment needs to be assessed for its practical viability by individual businesses. This article looks at what empowerment is, its value, the theory behind it and how it works in practice.

What is Empowerment and what can it do?

Empowerment has meaning as both a systemic approach to decision-making and as an individual’s perception of their occupational freedoms when compared in context to their personal historical, familial or social experience (Baird & Wang, 2010: 577).

When organisations use empowerment to enhance an individual’s task responsibility and also alter their perceptions, it can have a number of outcomes, including:

- Improved employee performance
- Increased job satisfaction
- Higher commitment
- More responsive and flexible work teams
- Organisational innovation
- Greater organisational success

How can we get there?

In organisations where employees are expected to be empowered, structures and cultures must be geared towards supporting it, for example remuneration practices must take the expectation of individual risk-taking and decision-making into account (Gkorezis & Petridou, 2012: 3599). Even then, not everyone will necessarily accept empowerment policies as legitimate. While some may consider empowerment a ‘sham’, others approach it more intricately. The level and breadth of policies, procedures and expectations by the organisation’s stakeholders is a key factor in

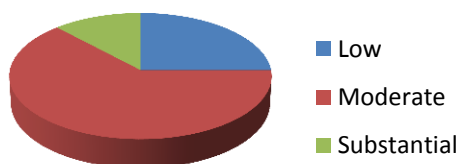
determining the strength of the adoption of an empowerment initiative, and it can range from being a superficial lip-service to a structural and cultural passing of significant responsibilities and autonomy to frontline workers. In practice, the level of adoption is the result of factors such as executive and employee support; remuneration that rewards taking responsibility; and the type and level of supporting training in the organisation (Haird & Wang, 2010: 575).

Implementing Empowerment: Some Questions to Ask

- Do we have a training culture?
- Are we providing suitable professional development to allow workers to take responsibility?
- Do we have a teamwork culture which will foster successful empowerment practices?
- Does empowerment have practical support at all levels—executive, managerial, frontline?
- Do structural elements such as policies and procedures enable and encourage empowerment?

Source: Haird & Wang, 2010

Table 1: Extensiveness of Empowerment in Organisations



Source: Haird & Wang, 2010

Empowerment is common, with most businesses divesting at least some responsibility to employees (see Table 1). However, within this overall statistic, empowerment can be limited to certain decisions or stages of decision-making. Haird & Wang (2010: 587) found that past the problem identification stage, the percentage of enterprises supporting empowerment decreased for frontline workers:

- Identification of problem: 49.5%
- Design alternatives and ultimate decision: 25.8%
- Solution implementation and control: 26.9%

Divesting the ability to control some of the work—and how to approach that work—to frontline workers has a number of outcomes for organisations. Initially, it can substantially effect an employee's greater perception of the organisation, and results in higher customer satisfaction, lower turnover rates, and stronger attention paid to safety. This satisfaction at the business-unit-level can be similar across the whole organisation. This suggests that by increasing empowerment, greater control can be achieved which enables decisions to be taken that otherwise may be blocked by bureaucracy, ultimately benefitting a range of other business performance metrics.

References

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