EMPOWERING PEOPLE IN ORGANIZATIONS

How to Do It, How to Undermine It

In their essay *Building a Committed Workplace*, Dennis Jaffe and Cynthia Scott say that organizational transformation always requires a shift in power. How can an organization entrenched in the old control-oriented paradigm transform into one with genuine communication, joint decision-making and shared responsibility?

Jaffe and Scott discuss the critical necessity of developing empowered organizations: In the current climate of declining resources and increased competition, developing the human resource is of key importance for organizations of all kinds. The essence of empowerment is the shifting of the power of an organization to determine its future from being limited to a few top executives to the inclusion of the entire workforce. The implementation of empowerment is an intelligent ballance of freedom and constraint (not just, as some managers fear, unbridled freedom for all.) As consultants, the authors found that empowerment initiatives are invariably met with resistance, and they offer a realistic analysis of some of the obstacles to the empowerment process.

Organizational empowerment must go beyond working with individuals. As Jaffe and Scott note, "a bunch of empowered people do not necessarily create an empowered organization." Their model for moving toward empowerment prescribes change at three levels, all of which must be addressed if an organization is to become effectively empowered:

1. Individual mindsets
2. Personal and intergroup relationships
3. Organizational policies and structures

Several models of the new empowered organization are presently in good currency. Four of the most prominent are Peter Senge's *learning organization*, Charles Handy's *shamrock,* Charles Savage's *network*, and Scott and Jaffe's *circle*. All of these models point to an organization that is more interdependent, flexible, responsive, and customer-focused.

The problem with failed attempts at empowerment is usually the discrepancy between word and deed. Although the theories of empowerment may be on the cutting edge of organizational development, the psychology and structures of management may still be in the early 20th century realm of "command and

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control." The rhetoric of empowerment, and even the good intentions to foster it, are not enough, and in fact can make matters worse. Everyone knows the experience of the "workshop high," where participants tap their inspiration and motivation only to return to a workplace where nothing changes. This can lead to even more solidified attitudes of dissappointment and cynicism, which points to the critical importance of effective follow-through when implementing changes.

Nine Ways to Undermine Empowerment

A recent study of top executives indicated that 80% knew that their companies had to change, but only 20% felt that *they* had to change. Many managers who speak of empowerment habitually act, often unintentially, in ways that undermine it.

1. Incongruence
Speaking empowerment, but acting out directive and controlling.

2. Emotional Illiteracy
Not understanding the experiences of people facing total shifts in their worklife.

3. They have to change, not me.
The leader is regarded as an exception. Not true.

4. Not giving up control
Can be difficult to do, but worth it. Necessary for trust and innovation.

5. Isolation
Staying in the office, on the road, or on the phone to central headquarters.

6. No models of new behavior
People need to see new models, with time to practice, learn, and make mistakes.

7. Impatience

Persistance is required, not cutting off initiativess prematurely or jumping on new fads.

8. Middle management entrenchment

They are an endangered species. They need support to learn new ways.

9. Failure to see the need for psychological security

Change is frightening. Provide clear information, options, and time to adjust.

Reference:

Jaffe, Dennis T. and Scott, Cynthia D. Building a committed workplace: An empowered organization as a competitive advantage. In: *The new paradigm in business*.