

HRD and Empowerment

Change, like charity, begins at home. HRD must empower itself before it can lead organizations. Here are several ways in which HRD professionals can pave the road to empowerment for themselves and their profession.

By William M. Kahnweiler

Employee involvement. Inverted pyramids. High-commitment work cultures. Self-managed teams. Empowerment. The buzzwords of the 1980s have become organizational bywords for success in the 1990s.

Empowerment zealots are coming out of the woodwork. Gurus preach daily on empowering the workforce. Literature on empowerment abounds. But the gap between theory and practice is wide. In a 1989 study of 485 upper-level managers in 59 organizations, most of the managers who were polled said that they advocate greater participation by employees. But the same number said that they have failed to provide the means to make empowerment a reality.

HRD specialists are, and have long been, on the empowerment bandwagon. We have encouraged, promoted, and nurtured empowerment since before it became a buzzword. But we still have our blind spots.

HRD must work to pave the way for empowerment. How can we do that? We have to understand and appreciate the barriers. We must convey empathy to the resisters. And we must recognize how we may unknowingly contribute to the barriers and resistance.

Understanding the barriers

Some organizations move toward empowerment because their competitors, suppliers, or customers are doing it. Such attempts often meet resistance—employees can tell the difference between an excuse for empowerment and a commitment to it. HRD can help managers identify their true motivations before they embark on misguided efforts that are likely to fail.

Resistance also comes from supervisors who are reluctant to allow their staffs to have more autonomy. Managers often perceive employee empowerment as a reduction of their own powers. The role of HRD is to anticipate such fears at the outset and to help people confront them.

Even when managers demonstrate a genuine commitment to empowerment, employees may not accept it. Many employees prefer being told what, when, and how to do their jobs, especially if they've worked under an autocratic leadership style for years. It's safer to follow directions. If managers make all the decisions, employees aren't to blame when things go wrong.

Another reason for employee resistance to empowerment is that more active participation can mean bigger work loads. HRD people should appreciate the dilemma that presents for employees. Don't assume that all employees welcome empowerment.

Many managers say that their leadership style follows Theory Y, which

assumes that people will perform well if simply given the opportunity. But their behavior with subordinates indicates that they manage more according to Theory X, which assumes that people are basically lazy and must be carefully controlled in order to perform well.

Most of us can recall instances in which such Theory X practices as the threat of punishment increased our motivation to comply with a supervisor's expectations. That phenomenon holds true in the boardroom as well as on the shop floor. Throw in tight deadlines, irate customers, and the need for quick decisions, and you have the recipe for autocratic rule. When our backs are against the wall, we're more likely to respond with immediate, direct action than with attempts to empower others.

HRD professionals have to be willing to admit that in some circumstances empowerment may be inappropriate, undesirable, or impossible. Put another way, HRD shouldn't rigidly adhere to Theory Y.

Peter Block contends that when managers face a choice between giving up control and getting exemplary performance, or maintaining control and getting mediocre performance, most will choose the latter. It's particularly true when an organization's culture implies that employees shouldn't make mistakes or trust anyone but themselves. HRD must appreciate and respect the power of those messages. If not, empowerment efforts will fail before they begin.

Any significant organizational change typically produces a decrease in productivity at first. Even when no

barriers exist, people still need time to acquire and refine the skills they need to make the new order work smoothly. Efficiency, quality, and productivity usually suffer during the start-up phase. Then resisters may say, "I told you so. This empowerment stuff is really a bunch of hogwash."

When initial results don't support the use of empowerment, HRD practitioners may become frustrated or disillusioned because they're eager to be agents of change. Before efforts

begin, HRD people should alert everyone in the organization that there probably will be a dip in performance at first. A warning can help to mitigate negative reactions.

Conveying empathy

Bringing about empowerment takes more than simply recognizing the barriers. HRD must share its insights with those who are likely to resist change.

We may support our observations and arguments with charts, tables,

data, and live testimonials. But sometimes those methods only fuel the resistance. We may even be viewed as adversaries who must be defeated.

We should follow our clients around for at least a week to learn more about their jobs and how they do them. We should find out how it feels to be bombarded with endless requests and demands, long meetings, dissatisfied customers and bosses, unexpected budget cuts, messy employee conflicts, and all the other problems that aren't listed in their job descriptions.

We can learn more from shadowing clients—whether they're senior executives, support staff, or line workers—than from conducting interviews or reading job descriptions. Seeing firsthand what they do enhances our capacity for empathy. It helps us to convey genuine appreciation for employees and their work.

When we look our clients in the eyes and tell them that we understand why empowerment isn't one of their top priorities, we plant the seeds of trust. And we must have employees' trust in order to help them overcome their resistance to change. That trust must be earned through our actions. Words are cheap.

Empowering HRD

HRD is in the organizational fishbowl. We're being carefully scrutinized, particularly in the area of empowerment. Our credibility is lost if we preach empowerment and yet treat our own employees and internal customers in disempowering ways.

Geoffrey Bellman prophetically stated in 1987 that most of us in HRD are overmanaged and underled. We're in the same boat with other employees whose potential isn't being fully tapped. When we enthusiastically proclaim that empowerment is the key to success, we may be yearning more for our own liberation than acting from a desire to empower others.

If we're perceived as self-serving, that only adds to the resistance. Our motivation must be sincere, whether we're external or internal consultants. We must even accept the possibility that empowerment may mean that we'll be out of jobs. Ideally, there'd be no need for HRD's support if its clients were fully empowered.

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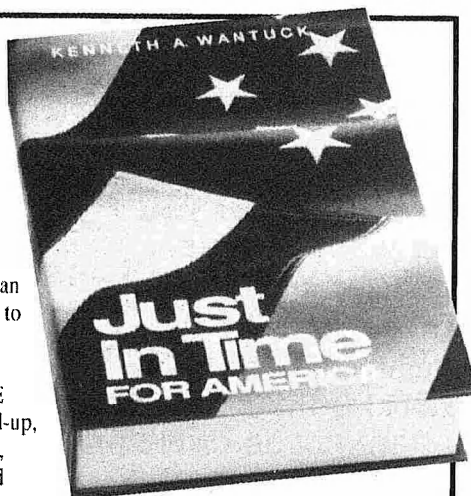
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But we must examine our own behavior. It's easy to point the finger at others for resisting. It's more courageous to admit our own culpability and to do something about it.

HRD promotes empowerment, but we may still have a need for control, may still be terrified of change, and may still want to hang onto our power. And even though we are adept at identifying others' development needs, we're often unable or unwilling to recognize our own.

In one case, an organization tried to move from decades of autocratic management to a more participative leadership style. It didn't use the term "empowerment," but that was its goal. After literally thousands of people worked for several years to achieve that aim, the organization discovered that first-line supervisors had been bypassed in the process.

Supervisors had interpreted the enthusiasm of management, employee ranks, and the HRD department as a warning to "be participative or else." The more management persisted, the more resistant supervisors became. Supervisors believed that management and HRD were preaching, "Do as I say, not as I do."

"Why should I stick my neck out and be democratic with my people when those guys in the corner office, my boss, and the HR people manage their shops as if they were each Attila The Hun?" asked one supervisor.

It requires more than a philosophical commitment to lead our organizations to empowerment. HRD must understand people's behavior and motivations. We must develop our skills in human relations. And we must summon the courage to face up to the disempowering sides of ourselves.

We're likely to see more empowerment efforts in the future. Most workers, seasoned veterans or new employees, will no longer tolerate despotic managers. Today, employees at every level expect to be treated as valued members of their organizations.

Experts predict that organizations must foster empowerment or become extinct. HRD can play an important role. We must share our insight on why empowerment is easier said than done. We must be empathetic. And we must practice what we preach. If we accomplish those goals, HRD will empower itself and thereby lead organizations to empowerment. ■