

Empowerment and the Bureaucracy

By Ken Macher

Every evening across America millions of people talk about their frustrations at work. If you listen you will hear people who love their trade but not their jobs. Their complaints are usually not about their functional tasks, but about dealing with people and the system—about lack of support, problems with a boss or subordinate, seemingly irrational changes in priorities, infighting, and so on. Organizations are, by nature, bureaucratic and political. While politics and bureaucracy are necessary and beneficial to some degree, they inevitably create forces that stifle individual commitment and initiative.

Some people, however, are able to make remarkable contributions within organizational limitations. Despite the imperfections of their superiors and their companies' cultures, they find ways to achieve fulfilling results. In *The Change Masters* Rosabeth Moss Kanter describes such people as "...organization loyalists acting on their values to

remedy what they see as less than optimal situations for a company and a job that they care about. [A person of this kind] ... can be an activist who remains loyal to the organization and its mission."

What are the characteristics of people who can empower themselves in the midst of bureaucratic limitations?

This shift occurs because their deepest needs are met—the needs for meaning, for power or significance, and for true camaraderie.

One, obviously, is technical competence in their particular field. Yet many people have technical expertise and are still only marginally effective. Beyond technical competence three other characteristics stand out:

- a sense of meaning about work;
- the ability to exert power and influence and to make a difference when it matters;
- the ability to work in good faith with others.

People who develop these characteristics make a fundamental shift from a passive to a creative orientation concerning their roles and responsibilities. As a result they become willing and able to invest themselves fully in their work. They think and act like partners in the business rather than employees. This shift occurs because their deepest needs are met—the needs for meaning, for power or significance, and for true camaraderie.

Commitment and initiative

Research data and common experience show that most organizations fail to capture people's commitment and initiative. A frequently cited study by the Public Agenda Foundation in 1983, *Work and Human Values*, found that half of the nonmanagerial workforce worked only hard enough to keep their jobs. Performing research for the Boston University Center for Applied Social Science, Donald Kanter and Philip Mirvis uncovered "highly cynical" attitudes about work: 80 percent of employees did not trust their management; only 10 percent felt that business was providing good value for the dollar to the consumer.

Organization leaders are generally blamed for the absence of commitment and initiative among employees.

Macher is president of Management Advance, Inc., 2043 Castleway Dr., Atlanta, GA 30345.

Indeed, they do share part of the responsibility. Most executives excel at the personal level and tend to be intelligent, strong-willed, and resourceful. When relying on their own initiative they are extremely capable of getting things accomplished. When it comes to empowering others, inspiring and sustaining excellence, or aligning people, they are often less successful.

What is not fully appreciated by managers and professionals in the middle of organizations is that no one has real control. Executives often feel more like victims than captains of the political bureaucracy. They suffer from the same sense of disenchantment and powerlessness as middle managers over political maneuvering, resistance to change, and lack of support. Although top executives do exercise significant influence, it is a myth that conditions transform at their command.

Therefore, it is not a question of who has ultimate responsibility: everyone is in it together and shares in what is best and what is worst about organization life. Looking to others for salvation or blame merely reinforces feelings of powerlessness. The good news is that regardless of position or title, all people have leverage and choice.

From a training perspective, it is important to realize that people can and do grow in their ability to lead themselves, to take initiative, and to "make waves" gracefully in their service to the organization. Organizations that recognize the need for greater innovation and commitment among people may want to develop training to help people grow in this way. Let's look at the basic elements and rationale for one such course.

Giving meaning to work

The accompanying figure illustrates one way of thinking about the range of commitment possible toward work. In the organizations I have observed, I place most people between + 1/2 and +2 on the scale. Institutions can survive and even do well with this level of commitment, but the results are substantially inferior to those accomplished by groups that experience intense commitment. Similarly, the personal fulfillment of individuals at the +1 and +2 range is adequate, but it pales in comparison to the experience of investing fully in something greater than themselves.

People commit to an enterprise that,

first of all, has meaning for them. Some organizations and leaders animate people with a sense of purpose. Most do not. Yet, in the absence of inspiration from an outside source, people are endowed with the ability to create their own meaning. A passage from Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* captures this spirit: "A realm of personal power is developing—the power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, and shape his own environment."

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Cynicism about work and membership in organizations is not a natural emotion. Neither is apathy. These are psychological protections against chronic frustration or a sense of betrayal. Empowered people, first of all, take personal responsibility to ensure that their work has meaning and that they do not become cynical.

Finding inspiration

People find inspiration in work in two areas. The first has to do with mission—what they choose to achieve. The other is about values—what values they choose to stand for and to exemplify by their actions. If the organization's stated purpose is credible, it provides the context for their personal vision; even so, they must define the contribution they choose to make.

Creating a personal vision is a capacity that can be developed. The same is true for learning how to communicate that vision authentically. Effective training gives people a safe opportunity to experiment with clarifying their mission and values. They explore the personal standards by which they judge themselves. If appropriate, they discuss their relationship to the organization's mission and values, how it translates for them and their functions. This exercise can be important for anyone, but it is particularly crucial for middle managers and supervisors who, whether they fully realize it or not, are ambassadors of the organization's cul-

ture. When they feel strongly about something—by being either enthusiastic or cynical—the feeling is contagious.

Higher-order competence

A sense of purpose is the initial ingredient for empowerment, but it is not enough. Neither is technical competence. I have known many talented and committed people in various fields—engineering, marketing, nursing, finance—who did not feel good about the fruits of their efforts. In fact, the stronger their initial commitment to a mission or high standards, the more disenchanted they were likely to become. In time they would lower their vision of what was possible and settle for mediocrity, become cynical, or leave the organization. Their problems were always about bureaucracy and politics. Their frustrations always centered on their inability to do a good job or to be dealt with fairly within the system.

By the same token, their superficial complaints may be about other things. The Hay Group in *Research for Management* makes the interesting point that people who work in successful organizations are more satisfied with their pay than other people, even when their pay is lower. Those who feel that they are contributing members of a vibrant organization place less emphasis on purely financial rewards. Disenchantment over salary is sometimes a smoke screen covering a deeper source of dissatisfaction: the inability to feel good about one's work.

To manifest their vision within an organization, people must be able to exert power and influence, while working in good faith with others. Mastering such political acumen based on integrity is what I call higher-order competence. It is organizational statesmanship. Without these abilities, people tend to feel victimized and impatient over time. Although they blame the organization for their fate, they often share the responsibility. The following story is a case in point.

Doug was an experienced and respected systems analyst in a home health-care company with operations nationwide. Six months before I met him he had accepted an assignment in his company's western region to manage the cleanup of some serious accounts-receivable problems. It was a large, important job and represented

Doug's opportunity for moving forward in the organization.

When we met things were not going well. The billing system continued to have glitches, and rates of collections were unacceptable. In addition, several key staff people had left, and Doug was feeling stress to the point of burnout. The vice president was about to conclude that Doug was in over his head. Doug, for his part, felt he had been placed in an impossible situation and left to fail. In any event, his career and marriage were in danger, and the region had a ten-month-old cash-flow problem with no relief in sight.

Who is responsible for this situation? The answer: Anyone who could have done something to make it work. Doug had legitimate complaints about how he had been managed. His assignment was the kind that eats up good people; in other words, most other qualified managers would have failed at the task. The vice president, a difficult man to approach about problems, was not giving Doug sufficient support and attention.

On the other hand, Doug did not manage the situation to make the job achievable. He could have negotiated his needs up front, during the honeymoon phase of the project. Instead he accepted the assignment as given, al-

though he had reservations from the start. When he saw his worst fears materializing, he could have drawn upon his people for support. Instead he attempted to solve the problems alone. He needed expert help in the collections areas and might have tried to sell

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the idea to his vice president, but he was afraid that asking for help would put him in a bad light.

Despite his technical expertise Doug was unable to make a significant contribution. Some people, on the other hand, find ways to contribute despite the political and bureaucratic obstacles. They overcome the tendency toward caution and are assertive about their problems and ideas. They are able to gather necessary support and resources, rather than complaining that no one seems to care.

In the 1986 November-December issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Janice Klein and Pamela Posey re-

ported a study comparing exceptional supervisors to average ones. The study supports the importance of the qualities above. Some of the main differences between supervisors were that the average ones were "... less flexible, less innovative in their approach to problem-solving, and slower to change. They were also less likely to initiate actions not demanded by the situation. . . . In essence, they accepted the system and its constraints as givens and rarely moved beyond their confines."

Higher-order competence is based on the courage and ability to exert influence—to engage people with harmonious intensity, to take risks, and to challenge, but with an integrity and sensitivity that builds trust and support. The training curriculum to develop these skills and values is divided into three modules:

- relationship maintenance;
- ethical influence;
- constructive confrontation.

Relationship maintenance

Work relationships, like marriages, rarely stay the same. They may erode over time or strengthen and grow deeper. Relationship maintenance is the conscious effort to nurture bonds with key people.

Range of commitment to work

Actively Hostile	Alienated	Retired on the Job	Formal Commitment	Concerned but Limited Sense of Power	Personal Ambition	Deep Commitment
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
Actively works against management or organization.	Mistrusts organization's motives toward consumers and/or employees.	Avoids work and responsibility; hides out	Completes assigned tasks, no more.	Technically competent; concern for quality. Feels victimized by system.	Pushes hard to achieve personal goals. Knows how to work within system.	Sense of meaning and purpose beyond purely personal ambition. Pushes hard to make a difference.

Some of the traits important to relationship maintenance are:

- proving trustworthy;
- maintaining clear agreements and expectations;
- dealing with people and problems directly;
- being open about motives and avoiding hidden agendas;
- sharing information freely;
- giving credit and exposure.

Although these values sound like apple pie and motherhood, they actually run counter to the cultures of many organizations. To act according to them often requires courage. It is not easy, for instance, to confront an important client about his or her lack of support, or to stand alone in opposition to an idea that is championed by one's boss and peers. The skill is to break with counterproductive norms without being hostile or rebellious.

People develop these traits easily when the traits are the organizational norm or when they are practiced by a respected role model. The key to successful training in statesmanship is to create a microcosm of a direct and honest organization during the few

days of the program. And the trainer must be an authentic model for the values listed above.

Ethical influence

To make a real difference, people must be able to affect decisions and circumstances. That is what politics is all about. Nothing is inherently wrong with politics; the problem is in the way it is practiced. Members of organizations often feel they must choose between remaining true to their values and achieving their professional goals. Ethical influence is based on the premise that straightforward, nonmanipulative politics is an effective approach to power and self-respect. The key is to tell the truth about our motives, to be

candid in describing situations, and to honor the needs of others.

People's most important initiatives usually depend upon the support and goodwill of others over whom they have no authority. In the short term they can gain that support by manipulation. Eventually, however, they become entangled in a political web of their own making—intrigue, indirectness, and hidden agendas make it more difficult to get things accomplished. Direct, straightforward attempts to influence build trust and simplify matters, and the process of ethical influence is a guide for dealing directly with allies and opponents. It is not commonly practiced because to be honest and direct in the short term is often uncomfortable and painful. Yet that is what true empowerment is all about: to be a leader to oneself; to do the uncommon—and often difficult—thing because it is in keeping with one's values; and to do it skillfully.

Constructive confrontation

To create harmony at any price guarantees mediocrity in organizations. Outstanding organizations have their share of friction—real creativity and innovation cannot exist without it. Confrontation is not only inevitable, it is healthy; the problem is often in the way we think about and handle it.

The ability to engage people concerning personal or organizational differences is a critical area of higher-order competence. Mastery in constructive confrontation requires skillful use of traditional conflict resolution techniques, within a context of

- an honest desire for productive solutions, regardless of blame;
- an awareness of the role of emotions—our own and those of our adversaries—particularly feelings of being threatened or of losing control;
- befriending confrontation, seeing it as healthy for the organization and for personal growth.

The applications of empowerment training

To support quality and service initiatives. I spoke recently with members of a *Fortune*-100 company who had implemented a major quality program. The process was a year old, and although some good things had happened, they had some concerns about the speed of change and the ability of the organization to sustain this focus over time.

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The type of training I am describing here can play a role in such a situation. First, it helps to wean people from total reliance on top management for motivation. Ideally people arrive at a deep personal belief in high standards. Their commitment is heightened by executive support, but not dependent on it. When the bells and whistles of the new quality program stop, commitment remains.

Second, people develop an innovative mindset. Their horizons of what is possible in terms of initiative widen. They become adept at proposing ideas and suggesting alternatives to entrenched customs. As long as top management does not squash initiatives, people begin to test the waters of true involvement.

To empower management. In addition to standard management training, a number of areas of development are critical to developing an empowered management team.

First, managers must recognize their responsibility as ambassadors of organizational values and purpose and realize that they are always sending messages, consciously or not. Are decisions based on merit or tradition and status? Is collaboration among departments and shifts promoted? What are the standards of quality and service? To what degree are they prepared to compromise these standards? Managers provide strong leadership when they are clear about their beliefs and the translation of those beliefs into specific policy and practice.

Second, managers must develop greater skills in dealing with their superiors and peers. Good relationships with these people are often key to exercising initiative. To get things done, and especially to innovate, managers must be able to build alliances and resolve differences across departmental boundaries. And to be of true service to their bosses, they must learn to tell the truth and influence them.

Finally, managers must deal with the real possibility of being topped-out in their careers. Traditionally professional success has been equated with promotions. In many organizations today, however, there are fewer promotions and more qualified people than ever. Many talented and spirited people have little chance for upward mobility. While this is a genuine disappointment, it is possible to overcome it. Empowerment invites managers to create

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meaning and challenge for themselves in their current positions. While accepting that they may not become the CEO, they may recognize that personal greatness is achievable where they are.

To overcome the paralysis of change. Today, many organizations exist in an environment of change and uncertainty. Mergers, acquisitions, reorganizations, shifts in leadership or mission, and the introduction of new technology all contribute to a state of continual turbulence. Often, despite the wishes of top management, the bureaucratic culture encourages caution during times of uncertainty. At the extreme, the prolonged period of waiting until things settle down becomes paralysis. People revert to the safety of past roles and routines at the very time an

organization needs creative initiative to meet new conditions.

The empowered response to change is just the opposite. People come to realize that no one has the ultimate answer and that the organization needs people who will take responsibility for leadership in their domain—whether it be an entire division or a three-person maintenance group.

Empowerment training sends a clear message that taking responsibility and initiative is encouraged. And it gives people some tools for proceeding in the face of inevitable roadblocks.

To make the transition from success to greatness. Many organizations strive for success; and it is no small matter to achieve it. Fewer organizations, however, strive for greatness. Whether it is IBM or the Boston Celtics, the organization that approaches greatness has captured the spirit of many of its people. The majority of its members experience a sense of meaning and pride about their work. They feel significant and that they have the power to make a difference. And they experience the magic of working in intense camaraderie with others. 

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