

Enablement: The Key to Empowerment

BY ROBERT BARNER

Here are some tips to help enable employees to manage empowerment effectively.

If organizations really want to help empower employees, they have to do more than just accede authority and control; they have to help employees manage their new autonomy.

Employee empowerment is the transfer of power and authority from managers to lower-level employees. A better term might be "enablement." Enablement involves helping people develop the necessary competencies to manage their own empowerment effectively. When enablement isn't part of an empowerment effort, the effort is likely to fail.

Consider this scenario:

A company's managers attend a two-day training seminar on ways to encourage employee empowerment. The program also shows managers how to make a successful transition from their roles as directors and administrators to new roles as coaches and technical advisors. Nonmanagerial employees participate in a similar training program on self-empowerment, taking the initiative, and balancing autonomy with accountability.

It all sounds great. But months later, the company sees no results

from the training. Many employees still shirk responsibility. They don't seek opportunities to improve their work, and they still bow to managers in making decisions.

To understand why many empowerment-training programs fail, it's important to examine empowerment in the context of today's difficult business conditions. In trying to survive, many organizations are leaving decision making in the hands of top-level managers. At the same time, employees are feeling insecure about their jobs and are reluctant to initiate actions that could elicit criticism. Such organizational environments are hardly conducive to employee empowerment.

What HRD can do

HRD people can help their organizations identify and change restrictive work procedures and policies that discourage empowerment. One way is to foster empowerment as part of an overall improvement effort. As process-improvement teams analyze work processes, they may be able to identify problematic steps—those that tend to inhibit empowerment because, in part, they're governed by

restrictive authorization methods.

An example of a restrictive authorization method would be a system that makes an employee who is responsible for providing field support to a major customer go through three management levels to obtain authorization for travel to the customer's work site.

HRD people also can help prepare employees to meet the challenges posed by empowerment. They can help employees evaluate their readiness to take on additional responsibilities, to set performance goals, and to monitor their own performance. Information for the evaluation can come from traditional employee-feedback surveys or from interviews of managers, conducted by the employees on their staffs.

In addition, models can show employees how others have achieved empowerment. A model can consist of videotaped interviews of employees who have successfully implemented process-improvement efforts, or a computer data base of the names of employees who have successfully completed projects similar to ones in progress. Models can help show employees that they can make

substantial contributions to the organization regardless of their job positions. Models can also provide valuable learning experiences through tangible lessons.

Last, enablement requires training in two kinds of skills: technical and job-survival. Technical skills help prepare employees to take on more job responsibilities; job-survival skills enable people to overcome roadblocks to good performance. Often, the different means lead to the same end.

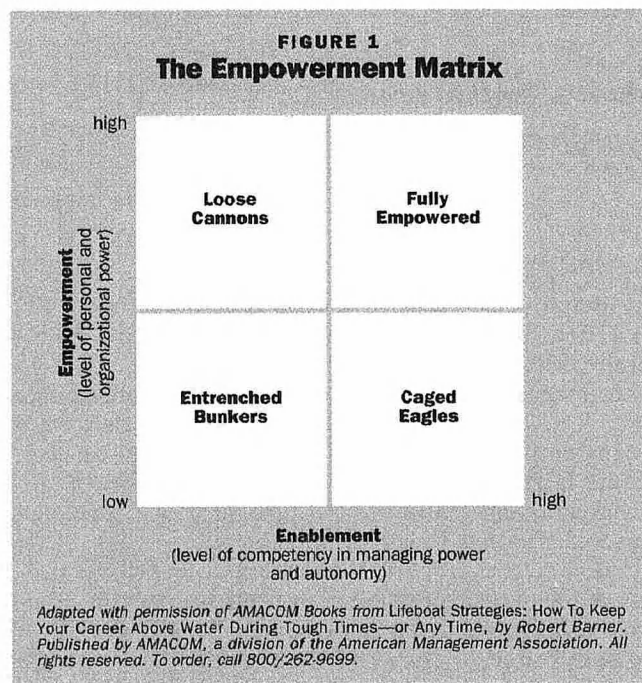
Employees who learn new technical skills may be given tasks previously performed by managers. For example, learning a software program on spreadsheets may help an

interrelated and equally important factors: empowerment and enablement:

► Empowering people typically refers to the process of shifting power and authority or helping people get in touch with their own personal power.

► Enabling people involves helping them develop the competencies they need to manage additional power and autonomy.

Consider the matrix in figure 1. The vertical axis is empowerment—the extent to which employees have personal power and organizational autonomy. The horizontal axis is enablement—the extent to which they have the competencies needed to manage that power and autonomy.



employee take on responsibility for creating budgets. Employees who develop job-survival skills to accomplish existing work tasks better also are more likely to assume new responsibilities.

The stumbling blocks

One of the obstacles to empowerment is that employees may be reluctant to take on additional responsibilities, especially when they work in high-stress, downsized environments. In such situations, they may feel that their time, energy, and resources are already being stretched to the limits.

Empowerment depends on two

and higher levels of cynicism toward employee empowerment.

“Caged eagles” are able and willing to play larger roles in their organizations. But they’re often thwarted by restrictive organizational practices or controlling managers. They are enabled, but are not empowered.

Fully empowered employees are those who have both the competence and the autonomy required to make greater contributions to their organizations.

Some employees resist being empowered. They ask: “How do you expect me to manage my own performance when I can’t get my manager to define clearly the department’s

goals and priorities?” “How can I contribute to the company’s improvement program when I haven’t been given the resources I need to achieve the objectives?” “How can I cope with day-to-day pressures when I’m working for a stressed-out manager?”

When employees ask such questions, some trainers may answer with platitudes: “Just think of the situation as a great developmental experience; you’ll learn a lot from it!” Or, “No one can empower you but yourself.” The implication in those statements is that self-empowerment is just so much fairy dust. Instead, HRD people need to give employees training in the skills that are necessary for taking the initiative to overcome the obstacles to empowerment.

Staying on course

Here are several enablement strategies HRD specialists can use to help employees and work teams set sail for empowerment.

Lash to the mast. This strategy involves personal stress-management. High-stress work environments can produce stressed employees. Such employees tend to have trouble making decisions. They don’t adapt easily to change. As work problems erode their confidence, they feel ill-prepared to take on additional responsibilities. They’re also likely to be watched closely by their managers, or “micromanaged,” which further imperils their empowerment.

In organizations tossed by heavy storms, employees can “lash themselves to the mast” through several means. First, they can learn to identify their bodies’ warning signs of high stress. Next, they can help mitigate the negative effects of stress by eating properly, exercising, and quitting smoking. They can modify their own behaviors that create unnecessary stress. Last, they can take actions to deal with stressed managers.

When overloaded managers start to micromanage, employees can show that they are managing their own work effectively. One way is by creating checklists or project-tracking sheets on key jobs and posting them near their workstations. Another way is to give managers a weekly project-status report. It can be one page, with a column of assigned tasks and

another column that summarizes the work in progress and gives time frames. The report can highlight problem areas or potential pitfalls.

Take bearings. This particular strategy is crucial to enablement. During work overloads, phones ring incessantly, paperwork piles up, and a thousand tasks scream for attention. It can be difficult to set priorities and focus one's efforts. To make matters worse, managers may give conflicting directions, they may become inflexible about priorities, and they may be unwilling to listen to input.

To take bearings means to step back from one's own work to gain a perspective on larger organizational goals. Without the big picture, employees can work efficiently enough, but they may focus on activities that are only marginally important to the organization.

To get a broader view, employees should solicit feedback from their managers, their internal and external customers, and the organization. The feedback can help employees set work priorities and negotiate them with managers. Employees also should try to anticipate the potential pitfalls to project implementation and to forecast project-completion dates.

Some managers may be unwilling to support employees' efforts, often because the managers have overestimated the risks and underestimated the payoffs. Employees can overcome managers' resistance by creating a "decision chart." This is a chart that compares the potential risks and benefits of several decisions. To make one, list the potential effects—both good and bad—of various actions. Then rank those effects on a 1 to 5 scale, in terms of both the likelihood of occurrence and the degree to which the actions would influence work or team operations.

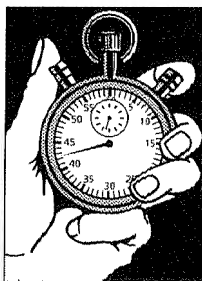
Trim the sails. "Trim the sails" is another way of saying, "get lean and mean."

Even in situations in which people have clear direction, they can be overwhelmed by the amount of work. Contributing to the problem of work overload are obsolete and cumbersome work processes, administrative bottlenecks, and ineffective work methods. Faced with those problems, people may focus their

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energies on just finding temporary relief. They may hire additional staff, extend deadlines, or let work standards slip. Instead, they need to find innovative ways to manage their work more effectively.

Employees can trim the sails in several ways. They can determine the amount of time they devote to value-added activities, they can reduce the time spent on unimportant activities, and they can eliminate inefficient work procedures.

One tool for accomplishing those objectives is a product/service/portfolio matrix. It compares the time and money spent on work activities with their return on investment. Figure 2 shows a matrix that compares the various programs offered by one training department, in terms of their cost per participant and also the importance of the skills to the company.

With the matrix, trainers can compare the cost of designing and delivering various training programs with the ROI for each one, based on the value rating given each program by trainees. Such matrices help

employees explain to managers the value of various work projects—and help justify the attention or lack of attention paid to different projects.

Beg, borrow, or steal. A common roadblock to enablement is the powerlessness employees feel when resources are cut. People who work in nonprofit organizations and companies experiencing cost constraints have to be especially creative in finding the resources they need to do their jobs.

It's important that employees with limited resources be able to determine accurately their resource needs for current and projected work activities. They should explore ways to maximize existing resources and learn how to negotiate effectively

with managers to get additional resources.

For example, a test engineer in a company experiencing major contract losses found that her training department was being underused. Fearing staff cuts, the engineer went to businesses in the community and sold them on the idea of leasing the company's test facility, equipment, and staff for conducting product tests. The other business owners jumped at the idea because they lacked the money to build their own test facilities. The engineer's firm profited from the leasing arrangement. And her training department avoided staff reductions.

Stay above the waterline. Empowered,

organizations by participating in focus-group sessions, cross-functional improvement teams, and customer-action teams; by inviting senior-level managers to their presentations inside and outside the organization; and by volunteering to work with managers on community projects.

Chart a course. Self-directed career development is a crucial skill toward enablement. To chart their own courses, employees must understand what they want from their careers and which skills they bring to prospective employers. They have to take full responsibility for advancing their own growth and development as professionals, especially in organizations undergoing rapid changes.

Employees who want to manage their own careers should conduct an assessment of their work skills, work values, and career objectives. They also need to assess the demand for their skills in the current job market. And they need to link their own personal career goals to organizational performance goals.

The next few years promise to be challenging and difficult for

HRD practitioners who are working with teams and trying to encourage employees to contribute to their fullest potential. The key is to make sure people are enabled as well as empowered. ■

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FIGURE 2 A Matrix for Comparing Training Programs

(A sample tool for comparing resources spent on work activities with their return on investment)

Rating (Importance of skills to the firm)	Investment (total cost per participant per day)					
	\$20-\$50	\$51-\$70	\$71-\$90	\$91-\$110	\$111-\$130	\$131-\$150
Extremely important					Building Customer Satisfaction	Sales Skills
Very important	Effective Speaking Skills					
Moderately important		Listening Skills				
Somewhat important					Service With a Smile	

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enabled employees don't wait passively for recognition; they take the initiative. They seek opportunities to show others the ways they can contribute. It is especially important in downsizing and restructuring organizations to be able to sell the value of one's job and job performance.

Employees "stay above the waterline" by gaining recognition for their work. They need to paint a picture for the organization of how their communication styles and performance are viewed by others. Employees should improve their performance and look for ways to increase their exposure to managers at all levels of the organization.

Employees can have greater visibility and a greater effect on their