

Training, Empowerment, and Change

A RECENT STUDY conducted by Rich Zavodsky, a manufacturing engineer in Dearborn, Michigan, provides a provocative look at the relationships between training for empowerment and employees' perceptions of empowerment.

The setting for the study was a large, Midwestern manufacturing company connected with the automotive industry. Nine years ago, this organization embarked on a journey to move from an autocratic management philosophy toward one based on participation and empowered quality management.

As part of the shift, the company initiated training programs to develop employees' communication skills, understand organizational mission values, and increase employees' knowledge about processes and process improvement. Previously, the employees who participated in the study had experienced very little training, and the training that was provided emphasized technical skills.

Four training programs were introduced:

- ▶ interpersonal communication skills (2.5 days)
- ▶ reinforcement of communication skills (1 day)
- ▶ mission, values, and guiding principles (1 day)
- ▶ excellence in process (1 day).

Participation in the programs was voluntary. Management hoped that the General Salary Role employees, who included engineers, secretaries, analysts, computer operators/processors, and related office personnel, would recognize that the culture was changing and would acquire the skills and perspectives now needed to succeed. Management also hoped that company managers and employees would: listen and reflect, give and receive feedback, confront and disagree, and support and encourage others without fear of reprisal and criticism. Adopting these behaviors was considered necessary to ease the transition from an autocratic environment to an empowered work culture.

Zavodsky's study focused on employee perceptions in six areas

considered important in assessing movement toward an empowered work culture. These were: empowerment, desired empowerment, training career movement perceptions, self-evaluation, and commitment.

Zavodsky found significant differences in participants' responses that were linked to employee seniority in the organization. Employees with more seniority reported more positive perceptions of empowerment, lower positive perceptions of desired empowerment, and less optimism of chances for advancement. He speculated about possible reasons for these differences. For example, employees with more seniority had worked with the company before the decision to move toward empowerment and participation had been made. Thus, they might be able to see the shift toward empowerment. Employees with less seniority might have expectations for empowerment, partly because they had only worked in an environment where empowerment was espoused.

Also, newer employees' stated desires to exercise abilities and skills and to be creative might be linked to their fresh eyes, in contrast to the older eyes of more experienced employees who have seen that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Findings on other aspects of the survey point to important anomalies that could be investigated further. For example, employees with greater seniority were also not as optimistic about opportunities for career advancement. Further investigation might uncover whether or not differences in values are rooted in changing perspectives over a person's life or specific to what particular peer group influences could be playing a part.

Half of the employees felt that management's actions supported the company's mission, values, and guiding principles, and half felt otherwise. Many lacked an understanding of their meaning. Why? And what can be done to counteract this lack of understanding?

As for the training programs, some did not recall participating, and

employees who reported that they had not participated felt more "empowered" than those who had taken the courses. Zavodsky questioned if the employees felt empowered because they made the decision not to take the courses. He also suggested a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether or not benefits from training justify what's being spent on it. Other questions that come to mind are: What proportion of high and low seniority employees participated in the training? How might this be influencing responses as well as the movement toward empowerment? Was enough training provided to achieve the intended results?

Employees reported having a higher commitment to the company at the time of the survey than when they first came to work. Furthermore, their responses to survey items related to desired empowerment were rated as the most important factor. According to Zavodsky, the survey found that while employees were committed to the organization, they still desired empowerment. The majority reported being satisfied with their jobs.

Zavodsky's report also indicates that this company's move toward empowered quality management is occurring, and the employees support this movement. However, as the findings show, more can be done to accelerate the change. Zavodsky argues that viewing "training" as a continuous process rather than an isolated set of programs would contribute to success. Another important avenue might be for the company to tackle what might be a larger issue: the expressed lack of understanding of the organization's mission, values, and guiding principles, and the perception by half of the employees that management does not act in accordance with them.

Editor's note: For a copy of the survey, "A Case for Continuous Training in Team Building Within an Empowered Organization," contact: Richard Zavodsky, Box 668, New Boston, MI 48164. Phone: 313/753-4171; fax: 313/467-8944; e-mail usfjmcmtk@IBMmail.com.