

Book Review

Rosana Huq.

Employee Empowerment – the rhetoric and the reality.

Devon, UK: Triarchy Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Joanne Murphy, School of Management, Queen's University

Bridging the gap from academic theory to 'real world' practice is always a challenge in the area of management research. Rosana's Huq's new book '*Employee Empowerment – the rhetoric and reality*' meets that challenge eloquently. The work, based on original empirical research, takes the reader through the history and background of employee empowerment and helpfully situates this concept in relation to other well known concerns around total quality management (TQM) and continuous improvement (CI). Huq writes clearly and concisely, in a style that will appeal to managers, but with firm academic credentials and references that make this book useful for students and academics alike.

In particular, Huq focuses on the significance of power within organisational interactions and the need for the concept of 'employee empowerment' to be more clearly defined in relation to these complex dynamics. Her themes of powersharing, participative decision making, devolution of responsibility and a people orientated leadership style, reflect clearly the main academic debates, but also the areas that managers and leaders need to think about carefully, before (and during) embarking on an employee empowerment process. By underlining the lack of a clear understanding within organisations of what 'power' itself means, Huq raises important issues about our understanding of 'empowerment'. She also identifies that while the guidance literature on empowerment focuses on the distribution and reallocation of power throughout organisational hierarchies, it rarely gives nuanced enough guidance about the reality of doing this effectively. She also draws attention to the fact that some employees will find the process of empowerment difficult and challenging – a situation which if not dealt with carefully can lead to major tension.

While the book focuses on empowerment, the issues it raises are of wider concern, particularly in respect of organisational change and leadership. Moving towards a distributive approach to power requires real commitment to the skilled management of structural and cultural change. This is a very serious undertaking for any organisation, big or small. Most important, is the necessity of sufficiently engaged leadership at all levels of the organisation in the process. Other writers (Dawson, 2003) speak about the need to identify varying needs and concerns within different employee groups and the importance of recognising unique experiences at all levels of organisations. The issues of visioning and strategy loom large, and the centrality of appropriate and contextual leadership to success is clear. Much leadership research focuses on the role of leaders in precisely these situations and the book may have benefited from a more in-depth review of that literature and the concepts around leadership and engagement, but was perhaps not possible in the time involved. Future research by the author may look at this issue in more depth with a specific focus on the leadership behaviours, approaches and attitudes that best facilitate active employee empowerment.

Her case studies are rich in perspective and authenticity and bring the difficulties of empowerment to life, in a valuable way. The identification of two organisations (one large and multinational, the other small and local) and the amount of data collected, gives her findings considerable weight. Linking the findings back to both the academic research and also to the organisations she studied, allows for crucial ‘practice to policy’ learning points to be identified, bridging the gap between those who ‘think’ and those who ‘do’ within the management world. Behaviours such as fostering creativity, risk taking, decision making boundaries and resourcing are all important for leaders to consider. I have no doubt that this small, accessible volume will be of considerable use for practitioners, students and academics and would happily recommend it to all with an interest in this under researched, but fascinating area.

About the Author:

Joanne Murphy is a Lecturer, School of Management, Queen’s University, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Reference:

Dawson, P. (2003). *Understanding Organisational Change: The contemporary experience of people at work*. London: Sage.