

Introduction to the Special Issue on Employee Empowerment

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“In the wake of cost cutting and downsizing staff (but not work), people are burned out – doing as much or more work with fewer resources and less support (Towers & Perrin, 2003).” According to Towers & Perrin, this is the single most important factor affecting strong negative emotion about the current work experience. Unfortunately, while there has been a lot of talk about empowering employees, and there is increasing evidence that empowerment is directly linked to improved results, it is quite another thing to do it in today’s competitive global environment. Although one can find many definitions and many approaches to fully engage employees’ productive creative efforts in the workplace, real employee empowerment remains illusive.

A recent *Economic Times* article states that employee engagement means “high energy and enthusiasm, and consistently high levels of performance. An engaged employee has a natural flair for innovation, drive for efficiency, and a talent for building supportive relationships” (Ganguly, 2003). The Randall and Cole model discussed in a recent *Human Relations* article defines employee engagement as consisting of five commitments that affect absenteeism and turnover. They are: organizational commitment, job involvement, occupational commitment, work involvement, and group commitment (Cohen, 2000).

Brower (1995) argued that empowerment requires authority, accountability, alignment of direction, and ‘ableness’ in a context that requires information, supportive functions, and leadership. More recently, Hackman (2002) stated that the five conditions of employee empowerment are: team based organization design; a compelling direction; an enabling team structure; a supportive organization context; and expert leadership and team coaching.

In *Public Administration Canada*, the authors define empowerment as “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal and organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information (Kernaghan & Siegel, 1999 quoted in Teofilovic, 2002).” Teofilovic (2002) agreed with Lowe (2001) that empowerment in the public service may require dismantling the bureaucratic structure in favor of a more flexible organizational structure. Unlike bureaucracies, empowering organizational structures are collaborative team based organizations (Beyerlein et. al, 2003; Emery, 1993).

Work teams and information sharing are the building blocks of employee empowerment. Empowered employees own their jobs, can measure their individual and corporate success, are energetic and passionate about their department, their position and their peers, are able to participate in the corporate decision-making and planning process, and want to perform better at their jobs because they feel personally rewarded for doing so. The purpose of empowerment is often to foster trust and ongoing interactions between employers and employees with the end goal of continuous improvement (Caudron, 1995; Khan, 1997; Lawson, 2000).

Empowerment has become a widely used management term in the last decade or so, though in practical terms it remains a vague concept imbued with a web of different meanings. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines empowerment as “the action of empowering” or “the state of being empowered.” Thus, empowerment is not power itself, but “...a process by which the latter is bestowed to an end or purpose (Lincoln et. al., 2002).” Most of the published case studies come from large private corporations. However, unlike the private sector, the public sector is accountable to taxpayers who are not quite so clear that flexible organizations are what they want to see in their government. Consequently, public sector managers are not certain how to implement employee empowerment in their organizations.

Nevertheless, governments across Canada are under pressure. Citizens are demanding more accountability, more participation, better decision-making, and more innovation in government. Around the world, citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with representative democracy and demonstrate this by voting less and choosing other ways to be involved, such as in NGO’s. In the workplace, employees are also seeking more involvement in decision-making and more meaningful and challenging work. While the private sector has effectively re-engineered itself, in the view of some, the public sector continues to lag behind.

Several governments in Canada have embarked on a revitalization program of some kind. The Canadian Federal Government is seen, in some areas, as leading the pack. However, bureaucratic structure continues to impede one of its core principles – empowerment.

The definition of empowerment used in the request for papers for this special issue of *Innovation* was:

The exercise of joint responsibility by both management and non-management people. This joint responsibility requires all members to be both leaders and followers in order to shift between these roles. The power to lead others is based on skill, knowledge, and experience for the matter at hand. Power transfers from one person to another as the situation changes. Having control in any given circumstance can be held by many or by few. In empowered organizations, control shifts from control by hierarchy to control by the product of all. (Taylor & Felten, 1993)

In their book, *The Self-Managing Organization*, Purser and Cabana (1998) describe the co-optation of human relations ideology and implore us to understand that true empowerment requires more than leadership, development and coaching to affect a shift in management style. Yet, after many years of trying, John Ralston Saul (2001) can still speak of a kind of pseudo-empowerment and false populism that seems in vogue today.

Consequently, while there are many articles and books on empowerment, few seem to be able to point to successful cases, and none seem to tell public sector employees how to do it. And while there has been a lot of focus on partnerships, leadership, and delegation as a form of empowerment, the real necessity to redesign the organization structure from a rigid hierarchical bureaucracy to a flexible and adaptive more participative structure is not well understood. This special issue of *The Innovation Journal* will focus on discussion of these issues both theoretically and pragmatically.

Consequently, as opposed to a prescription or description of empowerment, you will find a wide range of thinking and critical reflection in the articles that follow.

Howard Doughty's article *Employee Empowerment: Democracy or Delusion* provides a Marxist critical theoretic perspective on empowerment from the point of view of power relations in the workplace. He provides a good review of labour – management history with both the theory and practice of employee empowerment and provides a perspective that will be important for any management that might want to empower employees. He explains employee and labour cynicism and warns against management-led empowerment programs. I would agree with his perspective in the sense that empowerment is not something that can be decreed from above, but must be freely given. It is in this sense that employee empowerment programs need to be jointly developed and led. Union involvement and support from the very early stages is essential to real employee empowerment in the workplace.

If the first step to employee empowerment is to gain the support and joint responsibility for outcomes with labour and management, the second step is to assist managers and leaders to learn how to learn.

In her article *Critical Challenges of the Learning Red Zone: Senior Managers in Empowering Organizational Change*, Marilyn Taylor describes her experience with executive coaching using a learning theoretic model. She describes the type of shift in perspective required to manage an empowered workforce and some of the difficulties that managers have in accomplishing this kind of change. She emphasizes that empowerment is more than delegation requiring fundamental organizational or contextual change and that this in turn requires sophisticated change leadership.

If empowerment cannot be decreed, employees and their unions are suspect, and true empowerment requires a shift in management perspective, not just style, then a logical next question might be, how does one design and implement an organizational change that leads to employee empowerment? In this regard, we have a series of suggestions.

Henry Hornstein argues that *Empowerment and Process Consultation* are two sides of the same coin. He recommends that using a grounded normative re-educative approach that involves employees in making local meaning rather than taking an off-the-shelf or programmatic approach will increase implementation success.

Michael Miles provides a description of *The Process of Engagement* using a Canadian Federal Government case study to articulate the need for a re-conceptualization of management values and beliefs about employees, organizations and management which are at the heart of their ability to commit to empowerment. He describes a management seminar designed and implemented in Veteran's Affairs Canada and using quantitative survey data he concludes that more study is required to understand the essential role of senior management leadership in change initiatives.

Active Adaptation of Municipal Government by Don de Guerre begins to explain some of the negative affect that Towers Perrin (2003) and others suggest is pervading today's organizations.

He hypothesizes that a new form of organization is emerging that can be characterized in part by a laissez-faire social climate. This results in two conclusions that seem self evident. First only the provision of human dignity and respect will lead to true empowerment. Partial employee empowerment by involving employees some of the time in some decisions does not work and is only pseudo-empowerment. Secondly, since holistic human beings are purposeful and the employee and the citizen is the same person, there needs to be a directive correlation between employee empowerment and citizen engagement for employee empowerment to be sustained.

Two non-refereed articles describe innovative solutions from practitioners. Ned Hamson, now of the Elan Institute and past editor of the *Journal of Quality and Participation* has seen a lot of different approaches to empowerment over many years. In his article, *Why Innovation Doesn't Work* he leads the reader through a kind of thought experiment that suggests a more reflective, dialogical, thoughtful and deliberate approach is necessary than any that have been tried so far. Patsy Blackshear takes a novel approach arguing for the importance and development of exemplary followers. In doing so, she causes me to reflect that empowerment can become a tautology. Not everyone wants to be empowered. As Blackshear indicates, many simply want a clear, fair and equitable model for measuring workforce performance levels. She provides such a model in her Followership Continuum.

I selected two books to review for this issue of *The Innovation Journal*. Both are pragmatically focused on the question of employee empowerment in different ways. Rosane Giovis reviews *Agents of Change* that discusses changes in large public sector organizations both in North America and Europe by seasoned scholarly practitioners and Amanda Hunt reviews a current fieldbook developed by the Centre for the Study of Work Teams at the University of North Texas. *The Collaborative Work Systems Fieldbook* is a collection of 34 current articles from the field.

About the author

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