Review Essay

Democratic Social Engagement

Books Discussed:

Emery, M. (1999). *Searching: The theory and practice of making cultural change.* Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Gratton, L. (2004). *The Democratic Enterprise: Liberating your business with freedom, flexibility and commitment.* London: Prentice Hall.

Hackman, J. R. (2002). *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

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There is much literature on employee empowerment and citizen engagement, but little of it has a solid theoretical basis. Reviewed here are three authors that do attempt to specify the requirements for employee empowerment and citizen engagement based on empirical research. Two of the authors (Gratton and Hackman) focus their work primarily on the workplace and thus employees. The third (Emery) develops a more generalizable theoretical framework to do with purposeful people-in-environment thus speaking to both employee empowerment and citizen engagement. All three ground their work in a view of democracy and argue that some view of democracy is necessary for understanding empowerment and engagement. This review will suggest that these three authors have both similar and different world views and suggest that a reading of all three will provide perspective for both scholars and practitioners in the field.

Historically, most researchers agree that, in our times, it was Kurt Lewin's influence that focused questions about democracy. While studying the difference between totalitarian and democratic social environments, Lewin, Lippitt & White (1939) discovered a third variant that they called laissez-faire. In laissez-faire contexts people are free to do whatever they want. This is chaos or anarchy rather than empowerment. These environments are characterized by uncertainty, no clear purpose, and the absence of structure, rules or regulations. The consequences for people in such environments are negative since the social environment is fragmented and conflicted with relatively high negative affect. Democratic social environments have a clear social purpose, a well defined and legal structure and agreed upon rules and regulations. These environments are healthy for people and characterized by high performance and high positive affect. The key difference between totalitarian and democratic social environments is that, in democracy, the formal and legal framework and its consequences are *agreed upon*. In totalitarian environments only the elites decide what the purpose, structure, and rules are. Everyone else is destined to follow or to get out. The elites, or leaders can consult employees or citizens or invite them to participate in roundtables, town hall meetings or summits to test opinions and responses to their agendas if they so choose, but they do not really have to consider what is said. Whereas, in democratic social

environments, all participants are involved in making the decisions about purpose, structure, rules and regulations and these are implemented only when and if there is broad social agreement. Anyone breaking the policies thus created can be expected to responsibly accept the consequences precisely because he was involved in creating them.

The twin threats to democracy are regression into totalitarianism and disintegration into chaos, anarchy, or laissez-faire. To maintain democratic social environments that truly empower people either in the workplace or in the community, two conditions must be met. The majority of members need to be aware of the issues of the day and there needs to be some formal way for members to discuss these issues and to participate in decision-making (Emery, 1989).

The three books reviewed here each have a different perspective on democratic forms of organizing. Each author has a long history of theory and practice empowering employees and/or citizens. While both Gratton (2004) and Hackman (2002) focus largely on the work environment, this may be because empowerment efforts recently have been focused largely on the workplace with perhaps more specific learning that can be generalized to other social environments. Emery (1999) takes a broader perspective developing approaches to empowerment useful in both organizations and communities. All three authors are speaking about a direct participative form of democracy, not representational democracy and therefore identify empowered employees and citizens as those who are directly involved in making the decisions that affect them.

Merrelyn Emery is a Visitor at the Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University. She worked as a scholar-practitioner for over forty years with Fred Emery and others to develop an integrated theory and practice of democratization or empowerment. She is currently a director of the Fred Emery Institute in Australia. *Searching: The theory and practice of cultural change* captures in one place most of what has been learned from her extensive experience. Associated for a number of years with the work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, England she takes an explicitly socio-ecological perspective describing the characteristics of the environment and how to structure it for empowerment. She defines the meaning of socio-ecological systems as purposeful-people-in-environment and follows Ackoff and Emery (1972) by pointing out that people can act in different ways in the same environment or the same way in different environments. One could always have acted differently. That is, the environment and the behavioural choices that people make are co-implicative. Human beings always have choice and display willpower aligned with their purposes. Thus while democratic social environments may not guarantee empowerment and engagement, such environments will create the possibility and strongly encourage collaborative and cooperative behaviour whereas either totalitarian or laissez-faire environments will encourage self-focused defensive and competitive behaviours.

Lynda Gratton takes a socio-psychological perspective describing the benefits for individuals embedded within democratically empowered environments. She is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the London Business School where she focuses on Human Resource Strategy in transforming organizations. Her work emphasizes leadership and organizational policies that allow empowered employees to take responsibility. She uses three case studies of empowered employees that she calls *citizen's tales* to extract the socio-psychological characteristics of democratic organization.

Richard Hackman is a professor of social and organizational psychology at Harvard University and is well known in North America. In *Leading Teams* he argues that leadership theories place far too much emphasis on the leader as the primary cause of team behaviour and he identifies a set of enabling conditions for real self-management in organizations. Although not explicitly stated, his is a socio-technical perspective with a major emphasis being placed on job and team design to create an enabling environment.

Together, these three books offer the scholar-practitioner (manager or consultant) with much of what is known about how to create empowering social environments in the workplace and the community. Each is based on years of empirical field research and the research is simply and clearly discussed. Each, moreover, reflects the work not just of the author but of a network of scholar-practitioners. Each has practical organizational and/or community examples. Emery speaks out of a global network connected to her work in Australia through the Fred Emery Institute. Gratton speaks from a network called the *Leading Edge Research Consortium* with companies such as Hewlett Packard, Kraft Foods and Citibank while Hackman is connected to the American network around Harvard, Columbia University and the Centre for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California. The interested reader may reflect on the similar and different perspectives emerging from these different networks of scholar-practitioners and reflect that more integration or at least interaction across the oceans would be helpful. One may understand the general confusion and reluctance to engage employee/citizens directly in decision-making as a consequence of the lack of agreement between these domains. Yet, careful reading across domains does create a strong case for pushing our values and beliefs in democracy further and does indicate that employee empowerment and citizen engagement are two sides of the same coin.

Searching explains how to make the fundamental cultural change required for sustainable participative democratic forms of governance, organization and citizen engagement. The result of nearly fifty years of integrated conceptual and practical development, Emery shows that what is required is a shift from over 200 years of mechanistic assumptions toward a contextual paradigm that expects novelty. First, she explains the basic building blocks of the conceptual orientation, the paradigm shift required, the basics of open systems theory, historical contexts and the tools or methods involved. Then, she expands on the details of each of the conceptual components in an internally consistent theoretical framework that explains how the power of the methods for achieving this cultural change to direct participative democracy is generated. Part II of the book details the practice of creating cultural change, provides guidelines for practitioners and illustrates the flexibility of the methods with case examples.

Emery's is an essentialist stance in which social environments are concrete, objective and knowable by people who perceive the informational structure in their environments directly through what she calls *ecological knowing*. People are seen as purposeful systems that can be ideal seeking. Emery's integrated set of concepts includes an emergent set of human ideals. Replacing the old ideals of good, truth, plenty and order are a new set including homonomy (a sense of belonging), nurturance, humanity and beauty. Working from basic material universals gathered from extensive action research in the field, rather than from abstract universals, Emery then builds a coherent framework including the two genotypic organizational design principles, and a set of factors for productive human activity in any social environment. She diverges to explain human consciousness and normal human remembering and forgetting, presenting a strong case for why human beings are impacted causally by their social environments. Thus she argues against leadership, human relations,

industrial democracy and the like, criticizing such perspectives for remaining within a mechanistic world view or paradigm.

This is not the easiest book to read, yet it contains most of what one will find in both Gratton and Hackman, with a more carefully developed conceptual framework. The concepts presented offer a new common sense once one understands the contextualist paradigm within which Emery is writing. The concepts are not hard, but the book demands a careful reading as each sentence is packed with information. It is a book that both the theorist and the practitioner will want to keep on the shelf and refer to often. Emery describes a social science in which both theory and practice are one and are aimed at solving real world problems.

In her opening chapter *What Democracy Means,* Gratton reviews classical Greek democracy, traditional liberal democracy, direct democracy, competitive elitist democracy, and legal democracy. I read her overview of each with excitement and found her differentiations interesting. Unfortunately, her views lack depth and in some cases, understanding. In my view she misinterprets both classical Greek democracy and direct democracy which she equates with socialism and communism. Emery does not share Gratton's view of direct democracy preferring instead to clearly differentiate representative democracy from participative democracy. Gratton seems to strongly support representative democracy coupled with laissez-faire capitalism. However, such a mixture can create laissez-faire social environments in which rugged individualism and a kind of social Darwinism become the norm. The three citizen stories that Gratton presents are success stories, but these are not likely representative of all employees in the companies studied. In laissez-faire social environments, some people do very well but it is only in participative democratic social environments that the majority do well. Emery suggests that participative democratic forms of organizing are built up from self-managing groups of people, rather than from individuals.

In the same chapter, Gratton outlines six tenets of the democratic enterprise. These are:
- The relationship between the organization and the individual is adult-to-adult.
- Individuals are seen primarily as investors actively building and deploying their human capital.
- Individuals are able to develop their natures and express their diverse qualities.
- Individuals are able to participate in determining the conditions of their association.
- The liberty of some individuals is not at the expense of others.
- Individuals have accountabilities and obligations both to themselves and the organization.

She applies what she calls three litmus tests to each tenet. Each must meet the test of coherence, or the capacity of all six tenets to be mutually reinforcing; economic viability within the capitalist framework; and, practicality or the implementation of democracy in a company through supporting policies and processes. In the latter case she finds Emery's approach impractical, stating: "The long term democratization of organization is a legitimate conversation (Purser & Cabana, 1998). But my concern is the realistic steps that can be taken now" (Gratton, 2004 p34). These simple statements unfortunately show each author's apparent lack of awareness of the other's historical work as Emery presents several pragmatic examples of democratized organizations in the real world. The book referenced by Gratton, written by Purser and Cabana is an in depth study of North American examples of democratized organizations using Emery's framework.

Emery on the other hand, might suggest that Gratton's six tenets reflect some of the six factors for productive human activity that have been known since Emery & Thorsrud (1969).

And she would suggest that these apply in any environment, not just in the workplace. The first three of these refer to the content of work. The optimal amount of these factors will be different for each person – that is, you can have too much or too little of them.

- *Adequate Elbow Room* – people need to be able to make decisions about how they do their work, but also have enough direction and structure so that they know what to do.
- *Opportunities for Continuous Learning* – people are able to get feedback that is specific and timely, and set goals for themselves that are reasonable challenges.
- *Sufficient Variety* – each person has the amount of task variety that is right for her/him, enough to prevent boredom, but not so much that it prevents settling into a satisfying rhythm of work.

The second three factors refer to the social environment (workplace or community); people can never have too much of them:

- *Mutual Support and Respect* – conditions are conducive to people providing support and respect for each other.
- *Meaningfulness* – people have a sense that their work contributes to the social good and are able to see how their part of the work leads to a final use or purpose.
- *A Desirable Future* – people have a career path that allows for personal growth and the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

Gratton's tenets describe what I would call a new social contract, or the restatement of an old social contract in modern language. Her discussion of these tenets is cleverly crafted and even motivational. Nice to hear, but lacking the environmental factors that Emery describes. While it appears, in a first reading that Emery and Gratton share a lot in common, a deeper analysis suggests that there are profound disagreements between these two scholars.

Hackman also identifies a set of job characteristics that foster internal work motivation. They are remarkably similar to Emery's, so there seems to be some convergence amongst the various perspectives at least when it comes to the requirements for human beings to feel empowered and to be productive. The differences seem to be in the conceptualization of the social environment in which human beings are embedded. Where Emery sees the environment as causal or co-implicative and requires a designed environment or organizational structure, Hackman sees the environment as enabling and requires it to be supportive, which requires tight and effective management and leadership. Like Hackman, Gratton perceives the environment as primarily providing an enabling set of polices, practices and procedures as developed by good management.

Gratton discusses each of her six tenets in some detail using examples from the three citizen's tales at the beginning of the book and applying her three litmus tests to each tenet. She then goes on to discuss the reasons for organizations to democratize, which have to do with evidence of solid economic performance, changing workforce demographics and the development of globalization. She discusses the roles of leaders and citizens and how to develop shared purpose. In this sense she includes from a different perspective what both Hackman requires as enabling and what Emery requires as structural and cultural change. Gratton however, falls short of requiring a new organizational structure as impractical in today's world.

While there is nothing particularly new in Hackman's *Leading Teams*, the book puts together years of particularly North American knowledge about high performing, or empowered organizations. In Part I of the book, Hackman suggests that there are five conditions for employee empowerment. These include:

- Being a real team rather than a team in name only which requires a team task, clear team boundaries with inputs, throughputs and outputs, delimited and explicit team authority, and stability over time.
- A compelling direction that energizes and orients attention and engages the talents of all employees.
- An enabling team structure comprised of a deliberate team-based design with output measures, norms of conduct agreed upon by everyone, and a carefully planned and negotiated team composition.
- A supportive organizational context including a supportive reward system, information system, and educational system.
- Exemplary leadership and coaching available to the team and members as required by them.

Part II of *Leading Teams* consists of a chapter for each of these enabling conditions and in Part III, Hackman discusses opportunities for organizational leaders. In the final chapter he discusses the state of the art including; what has been achieved by team-based organizations, some of the obstacles to change and what it takes to successfully implement a team-based organization.

What I appreciate about this book is that it written for the layman. Hackman provides rich stories and examples from his personal experience to make his points clear and he writes with a passion and deep commitment suggesting in part that teams can produce magical moments, not all the time, but often just when breakthrough performance is required. In this way he makes a strong and coherent argument for self-managed teams of empowered employees as the basic building block of effective organizations. He takes pains to spell out the supporting mechanisms in the social environment of the organization that are required for teams to express that magic. He is critical of overly simplistic theories and much of the research and practice and is not shy about saying why. In the end he suggests that what is required is a new way of thinking and in this respect, he begins to sound more and more like Merrelyn Emery. However, she would disagree with Hackman's notions about team leadership since, for Emery, self-managing groups do not have management appointed leaders. Emery argues that coaches are often just supervisors in disguise and that this creates confusion about responsibility and accountability thus disempowering team members.

I have argued elsewhere that real empowerment can happen only in democratic social environments (de Guerre & Hornstein, 2004) and that for both employees and citizens, who are the same whole person, there needs to be a congruence between their experience in the work environment and the societal environment in which they live (de Guerre, 2000). Citizen and employee empowerment then are threads in the same tapestry. In both situations, simple consultation, polling, or voting is not sufficient. People feel 'consulted' but not empowered. They perceive that their opinions do not really matter. Rather, what we are trying to learn is how to design and manage truly democratic social environments in the workplace and in the community.

In this sense, empowerment requires a trans-disciplinary discussion. Here we have looked at three authors whose primary research has been in work organizations. Only one of them has conceptualized the notion of purposeful people-in-environment and has bridged what has been learned in the workplace to multiple social contexts. These authors do not quote or debate each other's work. Indeed, they seem to be unaware of the similarities and differences among them. If, in addition, one considers the literature about participative, or deliberative, or

dialogical methods developing within, for example, the political science literature, or the anthropological literature, the scholar-practitioner can seem confused and unable to put ideals into practice. All three of these authors are using data from years of research and trying to integrate theory and practice in way that is useful for both scholars and practitioners. In this regard, their work should be applauded. More inter-disciplinary dialogue and more examples of real empowerment are needed in order to counter a tendency towards temporary or pseudo-empowerment that is more characterized by laissez-faire than it is by democracy.

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