

Organizational Consultation XXI

Empowerment: Part One

William Bergquist

In an appreciative-oriented consulting process, attention must be paid to empowerment of individuals and teams in the organization. The objective in this fifth consultative strategy is to Encourage the generation of diverse ideas among employees and other stakeholders and build commitment to the ideas that are generated and approved by the organization.

The term *empowerment* is widely bandied about today in corporate board rooms, human relations training laboratories and popular books on management. In recent years, Ken Blanchard, of *One Minute Manager* fame, has been one of the most articulate and influential spokespersons for empowerment. He notes that this term could easily become nothing more than a buzzword:¹

Empowerment has been and remains one of the most promising but least understood concepts in business to date. First introduced in the 1980s, it quickly became a buzzword full of promise but short on delivery. As senior managers if they want employees who accept responsibility, have a proprietary interest in the company and want to work hard for company results, and the answer is, of course, yes. Ask employees if they want to feel valued, be involved in their jobs, and feel pride in the work they do, and the answer is, of course, yes. Essentially, managers and employees want the same outcome. So why has it been so hard to achieve empowerment? Why has the concept fallen into disrepute?

Empowerment is a good term and is responsible in part for the growing interest of many organizational leaders in bringing their subordinates more fully into the dialogue regarding the way in which their organization should operate. However, the term often moves an organization no further than rhetoric and good intentions—for it lack the “muscles” of a practical, informed notion of the ways in which individuals and groups truly begin to effectively influence the ways in which an organization operates.

The Keys to Empowerment

Blanchard and his associates believe that empowerment is blocked because it requires a new mind set for all involved.ⁱⁱ While I would agree with Blanchard, that the block is in part conceptual, I would suggest that the block also is a matter of tools and strategies—and that an appreciative perspective is needed to achieve the goals of empowerment. As another team of experts on empowerment, Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe, have noted, empowerment concerns new ways of people working together.ⁱⁱⁱ Warren Bennis, who has written some of the most influential books on leadership, similarly identifies five unique ingredients in organizational empowerment which are not often found in contemporary organizations—this is the reason, according to Bennis, *Why Leaders Can't Lead*.^{iv}

Empowerment is the collective effect of leadership . . . People feel significant . . . learning and competence matter . . . People are part of a community . . . Work is exciting.

Bennis' description relates closely to that offered by Blanchard and by Scott and Jaffe. They are all describing a similar process—and all suggest that empowerment is challenging to existing frames of reference.

A new organizational mind-set requires a fundamental shift in personal attitude, group process and organizational structure.^v Let's look at each of these shifts, one at a time, expanding on the analysis that I offered at the start of this book. First, as Goodwin Watson noted many years ago, a shift in *personal attitude* is required for any sustained organizational change. Scott and Jaffe seem to agree with Watson. They indicate that a shift in attitude is particularly important when empowerment is the goal. Employees who are empowered, according to Scott and Jaffe: “feel responsible not just for doing the job, but also for making the whole organization work better.”^{vi}

Goodwin Watson further proposed that sustained organizational changes require a shift in *the processes of the group*. Scott and Jaffe similarly propose that empowerment is about group process improvement: “teams work together to improve their performance continually, achieving higher levels of productivity”^{vii} Finally, Watson would encourage a shift in *organizational structure* if empowerment is to occur. For Scott and Jaffe this means that: “organizations are structured in such a way that people feel that they are able to achieve the results they want, that

they can do what needs to be done, not just what is required of them and be rewarded for doing so.”^{viii}

Multiple Pathways to Empowerment

It would seem that any effective empowerment must ultimately incorporate a wide range of strategies and tools that impact on the structures, processes and attitudes of individual employees, work groups and the overall organization. Everyone seems to agree that these conditions are necessary. But they are *not sufficient*! The key to empowerment lies not only in the ways in which people work together, but also in the manner by which individuals and groups specifically work within one of the three domains: the *domain of ideas*. Empowerment concerns ideas. It concerns the creation of settings and the development of individual and group capacities to work with ideas. Empowerment exists when ideas are being freely generated. It exists when ideas are being discussed and tested out. In particular, empowerment exists when differences in opinion regarding ideas are not just tolerated. Differences are actually welcomed as the basis for expanded dialogue and further development of a solution or new program.

I cannot begin to review all the many ways in which empowerment can be engendered in an organization. Blanchard, Scott and Jaffe, and Bennis offer many valuable suggestions. For this appreciative perspective on empowerment, I have had to choose between a focus on the empowerment of individual employees and the empowerment of groups. Given the recent emphasis on group empowerment^{ix} and the increasingly important role that groups play in the contemporary, postmodern organization, I have chosen to focus on the group rather than the individual. Most of the concepts and tools being presented, however, are readily translated into individual actions.

I start in the following essays with a brief review of the literature on group functioning and focus on the stages of group development that underlie the creation of an appreciative group. I then turn to several general suggestions concerning group leadership, roles and evaluation, and identify four building blocks for group empowerment.

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- ⁱ Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, p. 2.
- ⁱⁱ Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, p. 2.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991, p. 4.
- ^{iv} Warren Bennis, *Why Leaders Can't Lead*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, pp. 22-23.
- ^v Goodwin Watson and David Johnson. *Social Psychology*. (2nd ed.) Philadelphia, Pa: Lippincott, 1972.
- ^{vi} Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991, p. 4.
- ^{vii} Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991, p. 4.
- ^{viii} Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991, p. 4.
- ^{ix} Edward Lawler. *The Ultimate Advantage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, xxxx; Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991; Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler