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Empowerment as a Way to Facilitate Change

Can Process Consultation Help?

By Henry A. Hornstein

ORGANIZATIONS IN TODAY'S competitive, global business environment are required to be optimally responsive to continuous change, or die trying. The results of this challenge have not been encouraging. Many organizations that were listed among the Fortune 500 in the 1980s and 1990s are no longer in business because of their failures to adapt to the changing marketplace (Beer & Nohria, 2000). The rate of failure of many organizational change initiatives such as Total Quality Management, Business Process Re-engineering, leveraged buy-outs and other acquisitions, and large IT initiatives suggests that even when the will exists, those in power in organizations lack the knowledge required to manage change effectively.

In an attempt to increase the experience of success, and avoid extinction, business enterprises today have grabbed at the many tools and techniques that have been willingly offered by consultants. Each has promised that their pet process will be the path to the Holy Grail. However, my twenty-five years of consulting experience and constant reading of the prodigious change management literature have revealed something else. These pet processes inevitably fail to establish a systemic perspective on change that balances the contributions of the social and economic systems.

As is the case in any system, when imbalance is introduced, self-correction results. To date, the self-correction has included failures in the attempts to introduce change because, I maintain, a critical component, i.e., the social system, has been considered only as an afterthought. John Kotter said it best when he stated,

> Behavior change happens mostly by speaking to people's feelings…In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problems or solutions in ways that influence emotions, not just thought. (Kotter, quoted by Deutschman, 2005, pg. 55)

This paper contends that change processes based on an empowerment approach generate improvements in both financial performance and in people. I also suggest that process consultation should form the foundation of the multiple associations that exist within organizations and that it underlie the client-consultant relationship. I make this contention because the value set and practices inherent in process consultation seem to be consistent with and supportive of empowerment.

HOW MY STORY SUPPORTS THIS DIRECTION

I felt compelled to write this as a consequence of primarily two career "events." First, in my organization consulting experience in many organizations across a variety of industry sectors, I noticed that most of the engagements undertaken by my management consultant colleagues were premised on setting up a dependent relationship with the client. That is, the consultant was the approving or disapproving "parent," and the client was the incapable "child" who could not be trusted to competently look after his/her own organization.

Moreover, as a novice organization consultant, I was taught and coached to adopt consulting styles that have been labeled by Peter Block (1999) and Ed Schein (1999) as "expert" and as "pair of hands," and to adopt a very mechanistic, hierarchical style of leadership.

An engagement was successful or not largely based on how well the consultant performed; the client was considered to be only a small part of the equation. My training encouraged me to cultivate dependent relationships with my clients. These dependent relationships almost guaranteed that the client would be minimally better off after my work with them was completed. I now believe that this is a fundamentally flawed way to construct my relationship with clients.

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Second, from 2000 to 2004, I had the pleasure of supervising approximately 30 Masters students while I was full-time faculty at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. These students needed to engage in, and document, major consultation projects with real clients as part of the requirements to successfully complete their degrees. In the large majority of cases, these students were mid-career professionals seeking formal credentialing. They worked in a wide variety of organizations representing different industry and business sectors. Their roles also showed great diversity, and included engineers, government department directors, industry managers, HR practitioners, and independent training and OD consultants.

At the beginning of the graduate program, without coaching, these experienced, competent "students" almost exclusively defaulted to favoring the two kinds of consulting roles that I mentioned above, namely, expert-doctor and pair-of-hands—roles based on a dependent consultant-client relationship. Additionally, rarely have I seen any consultants from the large firms approach clients in any other fashion, despite what they say in their marketing material.

The above two significant events compelled me to reexamine my own developmental journey as an OD/change consultant. I concluded that my own consulting style had "evolved" from one that was premised on traditional approaches to learning and client-consultant relationship formation, to one that was more systemic, participative and collaborative.

Why had I and some of my OD colleagues seen the need to do this, while the consulting process that I had seen practiced by many management "big-house" consultants continued to be based largely on traditionalist and hierarchical beliefs and values? This question became even more important as, in the course of my review of the change literature, I discovered that successful change initiatives required, among other things, the creation of cultures that emphasized flexibility, communication, adaptability and employee involvement rather than bureaucracy and the accompanying hierarchy (e.g., Lines, 2004).

This has also been my experience with my many clients over the years. That is, in situations where there was overt attention to involvement, power-sharing, communication, flexibility and adaptability, clients were more likely to have successful change experiences. When there was investment in preserving the status quo and hierarchy, the results were often much less than satisfactory. In many of these instances, attempts to fix blame for failure and mete out punishment were unsavory side-effects.

Thus, I set out to identify whether the "empowerment process" really lived up to its reputation for organizational performance improvement. My experience seemed to support this, and I wanted to determine whether the use of empowerment practices is valid beyond anecdotal confirmation. As stated previously, I wanted to identify what consulting process would in fact complement and perhaps even facilitate empowerment.

I hoped that empowerment was worth the investment of time, effort and dollars. The alternative, which has shown such an impressive record of survival, frankly has grown less and less attractive over time, as I have seen its negative consequences to those who labor day after day in organizations. Those negative consequences have included a variety of stress related disorders, and disturbances of mental health.

The intent of this paper is not to present an exhaustive review of the large amount of information that explores change, empowerment and consultation. Nonetheless, some of the relevant literature is examined.

WHAT IS EMPOWERMENT?

Empowerment has evolved from the theories of the Human Relations theorists like Elton Mayo (1945) and Frederick

Herzberg (1959). It is tied to Ed Lawler's (1996) exploration of high-involvement management, which is based on four components: sharing information, developing knowledge, rewarding performance and distributing power. Its critical characteristic was and is power and how to enhance it. It has been referred to in phrases like these:

- redistributing authority and control
- employees and managers sharing equal responsibility for results
- full participation of workers and leaders in decision-making.

Empowerment is currently a popular topic on which consultants and management have focused in their desire to bring about increases in employee proactivity, responsible self-organizing and self-management. The hypothesis has been that these changes in behaviour will assist organizations in achieving their financial goals. The literature I have read, however, has been equivocal about how successful empowerment has been in assisting organizations to achieve these goals. This may be due in part to the existence of a great variety of definitions that has interfered with the achievement of conceptual clarity. This in turn may have led to the use of many different practices and tools in organizations, all purporting to facilitate organizational performance improvements.

What has become evident to me is that how empowerment has been defined changes according to the context in which it is used. Non-management conceptions define empowerment through a notion of powerlessness and oppression. It is perceived by some as the transformation of those without power into equitable partners.

West (1990) has maintained that empowerment must not be defined simply as the giving away or gaining of power, but as the eradication of oppressive power and the enablement of the whole population to enter a free and fair world. However, this definition is very "cosmic." It adds little to one's understanding of the concept as it occurs in management conversations, beyond reminding us that in some of its permutations, it can be a politically radical and utopian ideal. And the nature of this ideal hints at the potential problems created by its application to the business environment, notwithstanding that there have been demonstrations of its value.

Having said all of this, what is empowerment? The answer is unsatisfying but comes down to "It depends." As I suggested above, it means different things to different people and is dependent on what is going on in the organization at any point in time.

Nonetheless, it is clear that there are three foundational items:

- High involvement,
- Sharing "appropriate" decision-making responsibility between management and the rest of the employees, and
- Sharing of power.

Empowerment is not to be bequeathed by management—it is not something to be given away. Instead, the three "conditions" just mentioned form the basis for creating the environment under which it is likely that empowerment will develop.

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HOW SUCCESSFUL HAS EMPOWERMENT BEEN?

Empowerment as an organizational strategy for achieving improved financial performance has met with resistance from many managers, despite their claims of support. A growing body of evidence has shown clear linkages between human resource (HR) practices that are consistent with empowerment approaches (e.g., redistributing authority and control, shared responsibility for results, joint decision-making) and various aspects of firm financial success (Applebaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg, 2000).

Nonetheless, my experience across many organizations in a variety of business sectors, has been that managers who largely continue to operate with beliefs consistent with hierarchy and bureaucracy, are reluctant to embark on a change path that is unknown to them. They may publicly espouse the desire to move to an organizational culture that is characterized by empowerment, but privately they express many reservations. Resistance is quite persistent.

Problems with the use of empowerment-oriented approaches have resided primarily in the over-reliance on a narrow psychological concept (Bernstein, 2003). That is, as mentioned earlier, empowerment was originally seen as a transfer of power from those who had more of it to those who had less of it. The thinking was that if the less powerful were not acting as expected when power was transferred, it was because of some internal psychological processes that interfered with self-perceptions of power.

This psychological concept of empowerment has evolved to focus on intrinsic task motivation and feelings of self-efficacy. And so, organizations have attempted to devise interventions to target these internal processes in order to “improve” the expression of empowerment. However, a fallacy with the conception is that organizations can in any meaningful way have access to employees’ inner workings.

Bernstein (2003) has suggested that organizations cannot influence intrinsic motivation, and further that organizational change is not catalyzed by employees’ needs for self-development. So, a more realistic goal for organizational empowerment is to actually provide employees with the power to make decisions, rather than attempting to convince them individually that they actually have power.

In conclusion, then, the jury is still out on how pervasive an influence empowerment has been on organizations attempting to improve their effectiveness and performance. However, as has been mentioned previously, many of the practices that are common to empowerment (e.g., employee involvement, shared decision-making, redistributed authority and control) have been demonstrated to be necessary for successful change. This argues for the legitimacy of empowerment-informed approaches.

The power-coercive strategy usually evokes anger, resistance, and damage to the fundamental relationships of those involved in the change. Thus, it is not likely to result in the kind of voluntary commitment that is necessary to effectively manage complex and/or continuous changes.

BUT ORGANIZATIONS SEEM TO HAVE NOT LISTENED

Historically, organizational performance improvement efforts have generally not had empowerment as a core feature. The implementation of initiatives like Business Process Reengineering or the institution of large ERP IT systems have most often been premised on mechanistic management beliefs.

They are almost always based on power-coercive and empirical-rational perspectives on planned change (Bennis, Benne & Chin, 1985). These perspectives are hold-overs from Scientific Management. They operate using power as a club to force compliance, or try to convince rationally through argument. The power-coercive strategy focuses on forcing people to change through the use of external sanctions. This strategy emphasizes political and economic power.

Political power implies an ability to apply sanctions when others do not align themselves with the change. Economic power brings control over resources and the ability to apply economic sanctions to force change on those with less power. Hence, this strategy’s basic approach is to identify and apply levers of power and to force others to comply.

Hierarchy drives decision-making. Employees are expected to do what they are told. Win-lose struggles or passive disengagement are frequent outcomes of this approach. Employees are treated as irresponsible and untrustworthy, and resistance is seen as a problem rather than as an indicator that something may be wrong with the approach. Downsizing is frequently a direct consequence.

But when the dust settles after an organizational upheaval, the attitudes engendered by this strategy do not meet flexibility requirements of the new workplace, and have often left those organizations in a precarious position insofar as their long-term survival is concerned. For example, Kothen, McKinley, & Scherer (1999) have stated that, “While the espoused purpose of… downsizing is to reduce costs and increase ‘competitiveness,’ empirical research raises doubts about whether these goals have actually been achieved” (pg. 263).

The power-coercive change strategy then seems to have limited use in situations that need to maintain or build adaptability. In adaptive change, people must commit themselves to the collective purpose. The power-coercive strategy usually evokes anger, resistance, and damage to the fundamental relationships of those involved in the change. Thus, it is not likely to result in the kind of voluntary commitment that is necessary to effectively manage complex and/or continuous changes.

REFOCUS ON EMPOWERMENT—BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY

Thus, while the research that I have seen and my experience have confirmed that traditional change management practices premised exclusively on power-coercive practices are ineffective and maladaptive ways to manage the change process, the empowerment alternative is not a guarantee of success. That is, the exclusive focus on empowerment also has been shown earlier in this paper to have problems. So, then, how are we to reconcile this?

Beer & Nohria (2000) have suggested that it is problematic to maintain a singular focus on economic value when making organizational change. Mike Hammer, the originator of BPR, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in 1996 stated quite clearly that he had ignored the important issue of the human system when he conceived the process. Since then, many industry leaders have also come to realize intellectually that the human systems contribute significantly to organizational financial success. However, the move from expert thought to widespread action has lagged.

Many researchers, such as Becker, Huselid, Pickus & Spratt (1997), have illustrated the connection between organizational capabilities and culture on the one hand and financial performance on the other. They point out that the organizational capability represented by companies' human resources, because they cannot be easily bought or replicated, may be the only source of sustainable competitive advantage.

It seems, then, that rather than adopting an "either-or" approach to determining how to manage change effectively (i.e., either the economic or the human), a more inclusive process that integrates the strengths of both may be more viable.

In the following section, I build the argument that process consultation provides a set of values and practices that are complementary with empowerment, and suggest that it underlie the establishment of consultant-client relationships, and those relationships that will facilitate the introduction of empowerment practices into organization change processes.

EMPOWERMENT AND PROCESS CONSULTATION

Process consultation has been described as a consulting approach that provides individual access to power and choice, rather than fostering dependency. It encourages self-responsibility and egalitarianism. The outcome of any PC approach to change has been an increased commitment to decision-making and action taking, two important characteristics of a successful change process (Block, 1999).

Ed Schein has been credited with being the first person to coin the words "process consultation" (Schein, 1999). He has defined it as follows:

> Process consultation is the creation of a relationship with the client that permits the client to perceive, understand, and act on the process events that occur in the client's internal and external environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client. (pg. 20)

There are several key underlying assumptions implied by this definition:

- Managers have a constructive intent to improve things; but they often do not know what is wrong and need special help in diagnosing their problems.
- This help can be provided by outside consultants, but managers typically do not know the kind of help a consultant can offer to them.
- The consultant's role is to educate the managers on both the options available as well as how to diagnose and fix the organization's problems.

According to Schein, helping managers become less reliant or dependent on the consultant has key benefits. These boil down to:

- increased likelihood of implementation success and permanence
- increased development of organizational capability development
- cost savings in the short and long term

Peter Block's (1999) perspectives on process consultation complement those of Schein. He maintains that consultation is about client engagement, relationship building, and authenticity, which reflect a new social contract between the organization and employees; namely, choice in exchange for responsibility instead of security in exchange for loyalty. The focus of process consultation according to Block is on establishing a clear understanding between the consultant and the client as to what the "problem" might be; what information requires collection; how it is to be collected and from whom; what the organization "looks like"; what action(s) need to be undertaken; and getting clear on how to proceed.

For both Schein (1999) and Block (1999), the collaboration and partnership that are encouraged by empowerment approaches are foundational to PC. As has been stated earlier in this paper, engagement of and commitment by employees has been demonstrated to support organizations in achieving their financial goals.

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It would appear, then, that PC provides an effective vehicle for the introduction of empowerment into organizations. And empowerment as an organizational strategy for increasing firm financial performance through partnership with employees is gaining a positive track record. This is especially the case when it is combined with economic processes like technological innovation. In these cases, empowerment-informed change strategies will likely have a higher probability of success than if power-coercive change mechanisms are used.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe that a non-uniform and non-systemic application of empowerment has probably resulted in its inconsistent positive results in change situations. These problems of application have often led to management purchasing "off-the-shelf" solutions to particular organizational needs. That is, empowerment has been treated only as a solution with sub-components or tools to be matched to particular problems rather than as a systemic application. Empowerment means different things in different organizations and different things to different people within those organizations. It has resulted in different outcome expectations for both management and employees dependent on their own needs. That is, from an employee perspective, empowerment has been seen as a way to equalize the power differential that exists between them and management. Managers, on the other hand, have tended to view empowerment as a means to an end—a way to get increased effectiveness and thus cost advantage. The failure of these expectations to share either common intentions or goals means that the psychological contract between manager and worker could fail, provoking feelings of distrust on both sides.

Process consulting provides a way to unify the introduction of empowerment approaches to change initiatives while at the same time building trust between management and employees. It places the client in the enviable position of being able to legitimately diagnose itself, and formulate action plans that have a high probability of success. It recommends employee engagement and partnership, and the sharing of power and decision-making. Most compelling, PC does not prescribe an exclusive focus on either the social or economic systems. It integrates them in the service of the client achieving what it wants to achieve in the most effective way possible.

The PC process encourages relationships among organizational members and between them and consultants to shift from being premised on compliance-based rules and regulations oriented hierarchies to vision-driven partnerships. This change would more likely engage employees in the determination and implementation of relevant action plans that mobilize their feelings of ownership and do not rely on dependent consultant-client relationships. This, in turn, would likely result in more persistent, employee-supported organizational improvements.

Taken together, the observations, personal experiences and research findings presented in this article make a strong case that change management should be approached from a systemic perspective. That is, the economic, technical system initiatives that organizations continuously implement need to concurrently consider the change impacts on the social, human systems rather than holding them separately. Moreover, this paper has suggested that empowerment and process consultation together provide effective vehicles for instituting organization change and for providing the means by which organizations can gain employee commitment and improve financial performance. ■

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