



EMPOWERMENT IN MANAGEMENT PRACTICE - THE EXPERIENCE OF POLISH ENTERPRISES

Joanna M. Mczydłowska^{1*}, Urszula Widelska²

^{1*2}Department of Management, Białystok University of Technology

Correspondence Author: joanna@moczydlowska.pl

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Abstract

Empowerment is a concept difficult to define in a clear and precise way. In the literature of the subject empowerment is referred to as a management strategy, management philosophy, management method, as an organizational phenomenon, as well as a process or a set of managerial activities and practices. Without a solution to the definitional dilemma, the authors treat empowerment as both a management concept, i.e. a set of coherent ideas to explain a specific fragment of organizational reality and a management method, which is a coherent set of organizational activities that some organizations have successfully implemented and turned into management practice.

The purpose of this article is to present the scope and manners of implementation of empowerment as a management method in enterprises. The study was conducted in north-eastern Poland.

Introduction

Empowerment is combined with motivating employees by expanding their autonomy and self-control, which is to lead to a deep involvement in the formulation and achievement of organizational objectives. Empowerment is development of earlier theoretical trends in management: participatory management and job enrichment [9]. As J. A. Conger and R. N. Kanungo accurately emphasize [3], a full understanding of the concept of empowerment requires consideration of two interpenetrating levels: organizational and psychological ones. In the organizational sphere, empowerment is a far-reaching transfer of power to employees. In the psychological sphere, it is a special state of consciousness of employees: awareness of their independent role in the organization and the subsequent decision-making rights. Therefore, empowerment is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, covering virtually all areas of the organization. It combines an organizational level (organizational empowerment) with the psychological sphere, individual for each employee, and this is its strength and uniqueness. M. Bugdol [2] broadens the perspective of empowerment even further, postulating four levels to realize the implementation of this concept: organizational, pedagogical, psychological, and sociological ones (see Figure 1).

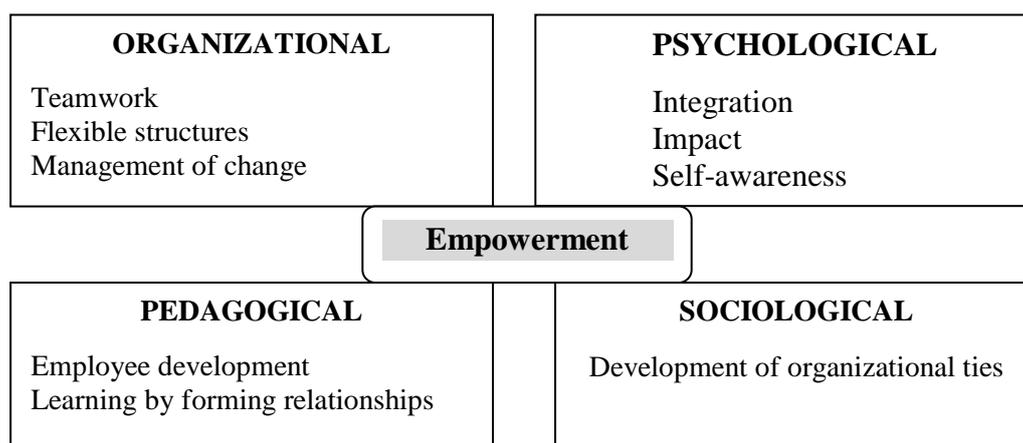


Figure 1. Dimensions of empowerment

Source: own study based on M. Bugdol (2006), *Wartości organizacyjne [Organizational values]*, Wydawnictwo UJ, Cracow, pp. 42-73.

It is worth paying attention to the dynamic nature of empowerment. Its essence is to enable employees to take creative action and manifest their own initiative by providing them with the possibility of making decisions while retaining responsibility for their



implementation [9]. It is generation of enthusiasm of employees and their commitment by transfer the right to autonomy and control of activities [10].

What is new in this concept, that is an attempt to create within the organization a specific micro-society characterized by several features:

1. vision – understood as goals to be achieved, but without defining precisely how to achieve them;
2. partnership – a principal and a subordinate form a team whose activity is focused on the goal;
3. responsibility – the resignation of hierarchical structures in favour of complementarity between the employees, full cooperation based on mutual assistance;
4. self-control – every employee has clearly defined objectives and access to the relevant data needed to achieve them, and monitors the degree of their achievement themselves on the basis of their skills;
5. trust – leaders build relationships with colleagues on trust, also employees must trust each other working on the achievement of specific objectives;
6. leadership – managers implement a number of organizational roles: a mentor, coach, coordinator, counselor without the use of pressure, force or imposition of specific solutions;
7. the attitude of commitment – specific care of employees about the actions taken to achieve individual and organizational goals;
8. good judgment – intuition based on the knowledge of an employee, which allows to evaluate individual, team and organizational effects of work;
9. climate for innovation – the culture of the organization that promotes creativity and innovation;
10. the free flow of information and knowledge between employees and functional divisions [8].

Empowerment has a chance to cause a relatively higher level of motivation of employees compared with motivation in organizations that do not apply in practice this concept of management. Conscious participation of employees in the process of the organization development can be assessed only in positive terms and as such is the goal of human management formulated by many managers.

According to the authors, one of the main barriers to the implementation of empowerment stems from the psychological dimension of this method of management. Empowerment is based on the belief that every member of the organization has an internal power resulting from the experience, knowledge and internal motivation and the ability to identify, activate and use this power. K. Blanchard [1] even includes in the definition of empowerment the ability of people or teams to make deliberate, right choices and take action based on them, which bring profit to the organization. One can venture a question at this point whether this is not too optimistic, a little wishful vision of employees? Is this “ability” indicated by K. Blanchard widespread? Does every employee, or at least most of them have such high intellectual and emotional competencies, so far developed self-awareness to recognize in themselves and release the power which is described by the quoted author? Do managers have this ability commonly enough to “infect” their colleagues? Unfortunately, in relation to many organizations the answer to the above questions must be: no.

Another question is whether the integration of personal goals with organizational objectives inherent in the essence of empowerment is a common phenomenon today? In the event of a significant rotation of employment and the growing popularity of flexible working it may be more than difficult to prove. An employee hired to complete a short-term project is rarely interested in long-term, strategic goals of the organization, because his attention is focused on the possibilities of obtaining further attractive orders from another employers. Also there is resistance from the organization to the admission of such employees to the most sensitive organizational knowledge, including information about the activities and results of the company. Therefore, one can venture to say that empowerment is most applicable to the group of key, relatively permanent employees who form the core personnel, whereas to a lesser extent refer to freelancers, whose number in the labour market is increasing rapidly, and the strength of relationship with one particular employer decreases.

Material and methods

In order to achieve the goals of the study, the conclusions have been supported by the results of qualitative research conducted in the years 2011 – 2013 among entrepreneurs in north-eastern Poland. **The following research problems were formulated:** what potential benefits the managers and entrepreneurs recognize in the use of empowerment in management practice? What are, in their opinion, the main barriers to using this method? **The study involved a sample of 20 representatives of companies from the IT and tourism sectors and 20 from the machine industry. There was an individual in-depth interview (IDI) conducted with each participant of the study. Another source of empirical material was a focus group interview (FGI) conducted among corporate managers in these sectors.**



Results and discussion

Modern business must face with the dynamic environment. Traditional methods of building a competitive advantage based on the product ceased to be effective. Creating market advantages forces such enterprise management which will maximize the intellectual potential of the organization. Hence, the competition among modern companies is not limited only to the effects of their production. Adapting to the changing and diverse needs of the target markets is the need to seek innovative methods to stand out on the market, also in the minds of target markets. Achieving this state of affairs seems to be possible only in the case of the creative involvement of employees in the process of creating value for the customer. The employee ceases to be a person involved in the manufacturing process. Currently, such a level of commitment is expected from them that will be creative and innovative. The employee becomes the creator of the company value, focused on the current and potential market segments and aware of the challenges of dynamic environment. In such circumstances, empowerment should be perceived in terms of a management method enabling active business operations in a changing environment.

The research results confirm the need for a strong creative involvement of employees in the manufacturing process. Opinions expressed in the research process seem to confirm the validity of the implementation of empowerment. As it was indicated, the essence of empowerment is enabling employees to take creative action and manifest own initiative by providing them with the possibility of making decisions while retaining responsibility for their implementation. Enterprises from machinery industry and electronic trade and services sectors are innovation oriented industries. Creating an innovative offer requires unlimited creativity of employees involved in the process of creating new products and technologies. The idea is that the employees do not only have to, but above all want to and know how to improve the potential of the organization for which they work. In the opinion of all participants of FGI studies in surveyed companies, achieving this state of affairs is difficult, but on the other hand, more and more necessary. Education system of graduates in the region was identified as a major barrier limiting the creative use of empowerment. The modern employee should be equipped not only with knowledge, but also interdisciplinary skills. Employers representing the machinery and information technology industry have expressed the view that it is not possible to build the potential of the organization without teamwork skills and creative thinking. Employees equipped with the knowledge, but without those skills cease to be a creative resource of the organization. Probably they will be able to perform the command of a superior properly, but they will not be able to participate in the process of creating value for the customer. The high requirements of employers are not only the result of extensive changes in the market environment. North-east Poland is a region that is characterized by the lowest absorption rate of innovation in Poland (Podlasie, due to the amount of expenditure on innovation activities per one company conducting such activities in 2011 took thirteenth place in comparison with the other Polish provinces). Building their market position, representatives of selected sectors must take into account not the best image of the region. Creative employees, including empowerment, may contribute to the image creation of a company based on the unique distinctive competencies.

In the course of research, all representatives of management participating in the IDI study also identified internal barriers limiting the scope of implementation of empowerment. As it is known, providing employees with the conditions for creative action is more effective if their competences and skills are above average. Unfortunately, companies of Podlasie do not have developed methods to attract talents in the recruitment process. It turns out that many talented graduates find employment in other regions of the country and abroad. Entrepreneurs identify both, objective and subjective reasons in this field. The level of remuneration in the region is among the lowest in the country, and building competitive advantages for most of the surveyed companies is based on low costs. On the other hand, the companies have not developed a recruitment model aimed at creating the potential of the organization in the long term, and the management of human potential adapt to current tasks and needs.

Conclusions

Empowerment is certainly a challenge to modern organizations. Its implementation may be particularly important in the case of building the intellectual capital of the company. Innovative companies particularly should be targeted on empowerment, especially those whose commercial success is dependent on the development of unique distinctive competences.

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