What is empowerment?

By Brian Ladden

Attempts to define empowerment have proved difficult because of the multiple dimensions of empowerment and the fact that it takes different forms in different organisation.

The earliest perspective on empowerment focuses on bestowing power while later ones see empowerment as the process of an individual enabling himself/herself to take action and control work and decision making in autonomous ways.

The organisation has the responsibility to create a work environment which helps foster the ability and desire of employees to become empowered. They must remove barriers that limit the ability of staff to act in empowered ways. These barriers can be structural, cultural, or lack of competency. The individual, for their part, needs to take power for empowerment to happen.

Early theories of empowerment asserted that is if a manager gives power to his subordinate, he has less power himself. Now it is believed that when a managers' empowers their team they actually increase their power as their team grows and develop. This idea is founded in the notion that power is dynamic and can change and indeed expand.

Empowerment is sharing power with front line employees. Empowered companies implement practices that distribute power, information, knowledge and rewards throughout the organisation.

Pardo del Val and Lloyd (2002), provide the following comprehensive definition of empowerment incorporating the main ideas of other researchers:

"Empowerment will be defined as the involvement of employees in the decision-making process (Mitchell, 1973; Vroom and Jago, 1988; Cole *et al.*, 1993), inviting the members of the organisation to think strategically and to be personally responsible for the quality of their tasks (Bowen and Lawler, 1995), animating, favoring and rewarding employees for behaving always in a way they consider more suitable to satisfy customers (Bowen and Lawler, 1992) and to improve the organization's functioning (Hermel, 1990)".

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Empowerment is easy to define in its absence-alienation, powerlessness, helplessness but difficult to define positively because it takes on a different form in different people and contexts. For empowerment to be successful each organisation must create and define it for itself. Empowerment must address the needs and the culture of each unique identity. A sense of commitment and ownership of the concept must be created.

This researcher proposes the following definition of empowerment:

"Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that creates the conditions whereby workers take ownership of their own job and have the autonomy to perform it in a way that is consistent with the overall vision of the organisation."