

**CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS EMPLOYEE  
EMPOWERMENT IN MANPOWER TRAINING:  
A NEW DOMAIN OF ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY**

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**Abstract:** In response to the growing complexity and dynamics of global environment, the key to success is to encourage employee to be responsible for the success or failure of the enterprise. The process for securing that employee involvement and creating change is employee empowerment. This paper provides an overview of the employee empowerment considerations pressing upon the managers' attitude and proposes an overall empowerment process management model and training curriculum in effective quality service delivery. It also reports on a case study investigating the current and potential existence, implementation and levels of training in empowering management styles in ten international property management groups in Hong Kong.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the realm of organisational strategy, employee empowerment has become a new topic that attracts research academics and practitioners. An empowerment approach encourages those employees to have more discretion and autonomy in organizing their own work. It also involves quality service delivery system in which employees can face the customers "free of rulebooks" and are encouraged to do whatever is necessary to satisfy them. Recently, many researchers point out that organisational strategies towards empowerment, which was often omitted in earlier researches, is a critical factor in determining the success of customer satisfaction. This paper takes its starting point from a general dis-satisfaction with current perspectives on empowerment, aiming to highlight some related issues and implications that may shape professional management development to empowerment in the new millennium.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

While struggling with the changing climate in technological communication with access to the internet and electronic services, many organisations have brought in external experts who advise them on quality and restructuring. Empowerment is the process to give staff real authority in their work to achieve continuous improvement and job satisfaction in an organisation's performance for better quality products and customer service in order to remain competitive (Kinlaw, 1995). Empowerment encourages and allows individuals to take personal responsibility for quick response time to consumer needs and complaints with more warmth and enthusiasm. In recent years, employee empowerment has become a separate discipline that has attracted widespread discussion to achieve organisation's goals.

As to the individual perspective of empowerment, Spreitzer (1992) identifies four characteristics most empowered employees have in common: (a) sense of self-determination to choose how to do

the work, (b) sense of competence to perform the work well, (c) sense of meaning to care about what are doing and finally, (d) sense of impact to have influence on the larger environment. Empowerment, then, is a mind-set that employees have an overall feeling of psychological empowerment about their role in the organisation. Menon (1995) indicates that greater job autonomy, increasing meaningfulness of the job, mentoring behaviours of the immediate supervisors and job satisfaction may increase the organisational commitment of the employees and increase their psychological empowerment in the workplace. It is observed that employee empowerment strongly associates with the nature of the job and the leadership commitment in developing an empowered workforce.

Regarding the organisational perspective of empowerment, some studies focus on how the sharing of power within an organisation is affected by the structure and culture of the organisation. The overall theme of this perspective is the relocation of power from the upper levels of the organisational hierarchy to the lower levels of rank-and-file workers. Responsibility for the organisation success is shared by all members. An empowered workplace should be structured to encourage front-line employees to exercise initiative and imagination in solving problems, improving processes and meeting customer needs (Potterfield, 1999). Potterfield also addresses the need to create enthusiasm and commitment by development of organisational value and visions that are congruent with workers' values and visions. Furthermore, management job from this perspective is to create a culture of participation by providing a compelling mission, a structure that emphasizes flexibility and autonomy, rewards for participation and a lack of punishment of risk taking as well as ongoing involvement programmes (Honold, 1997).

## **EMPOWERMENT AND TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT**

The term empowerment is the process of giving staff greater authority or power to decentralize decision making without reference to higher levels and for which they are being held accountable whereby the managers give more discretion and autonomy to customer contact staff (Brymer, 1991). Empowerment programmes can transform a stagnant organisation into a vital one by creating a shared purpose among employees, encouraging greater collaboration and most importantly, delivering enhanced value to customers. It has been found that organisations with a commitment to employee involvement and empowerment also have a commitment to total quality (Lawler, Mohrman & Ledford, 1992). This concept stems from the current international strategy towards Total Quality Management (TQM). It is often based on a desire to gain competitive advantage, increase productivity and improve customer relationships through quality assurance issues. As to the origins of empowerment, empowered groups have often resulted from organizational change such as downsizing or by adopting a flatter structure. Therefore, employees often perceive empowerment as receiving additional tasks (Menon, 1995). Effecting such organizational change is probably the hardest aspect of establishing TQM. However, effective empowerment can bring most organisations many successes and achievements as employees learn about the connection among their decisions, actions and customer value. In addition, they become self-directed decision makers aligned with the shared purpose. In order to stimulate employees to become involved and empowered in business improvement programs, employees at all levels need to be given power, knowledge, information, and rewards that are relevant to business performance (Mohrman, Lawler & Ledford, 1996).

## **THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS**

The key to achieving empowerment for improved performance is for everyone in an organisation to have a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve by empowerment and what they must do

to achieve their purposes. The Empowerment Process Management Model (Figure 1) identifies the following six key steps in the planning, initiating and evaluating of an organisation's initiative to extend and strengthen empowerment. These steps make a closed loop process whose output is continuous improvement (Kinlaw, 1995).

- *Define and communicate* the meaning of empowerment to every member of the organization.
- *Set goals and strategies* that become the organizing framework for staff at every organizational level as they undertake their own efforts to extend and strengthen empowerment.
- *Train* staff to fulfill their new roles and perform their functions in ways that are consistent with the organisation's goals for leading an empowered workforce.
- *Adjust the organization's structure* so that it demands a flatter format, creates greater autonomy and freedom to act.
- *Adjust the organization's systems* (like planning, rewarding, promoting, recognising, training, and hiring) to support the empowerment of staff.
- *Evaluate and improve* the process of empowerment by measuring improvement and the perceptions of the organization's members.

These six elements in the model are linked together within a single rectangle to emphasize their relatedness. Around this large rectangle is a series of smaller rectangles which identify sources of critical inputs. The empowerment process can only be undertaken successfully if the following kinds of information and knowledge are well understood:

- *meaning of empowerment*;
- *payoffs* expected;
- *targets for empowerment* which provide a set of alternatives that everyone can use in targeting specific opportunities to empower themselves and others;
- *strategies for empowerment* which provide multiple alternatives for reaching the targets which individuals and organizations identify;
- how *controls for empowerment* differ from traditional controls and how these controls can be developed; and
- *new roles and functions* in which managers and other members of the organization must become competent for their performance to be compatible with the meaning and purposes of empowerment.

To minimize mistakes during the process and progress of empowerment, the necessary conditions must be created at the outset. These include the commitment from managers who are the key players in an empowered workplace, full involvement of employees / customers / suppliers and open communications. As empowerment does not exist in some universal form that can be applied to every kind of organisation, each organisation must test and learn as it goes. More importantly, staff must be well equipped with the kind of training required for empowerment such as high level analytical and problem-solving skills. This means that staff must be able to depend on their own good judgment and apply that judgment to more and more aspects of their work.

To sum up, the forces of global markets, escalating customer expectations, emerging technologies, shrinking natural resources and the new entrepreneurial spirit have altogether called for the need to reshape organisations and change the way of operation. It is believed that greater employee

empowerment is that breakthrough opportunity for all businesses to leverage in improving their sustainable performance.

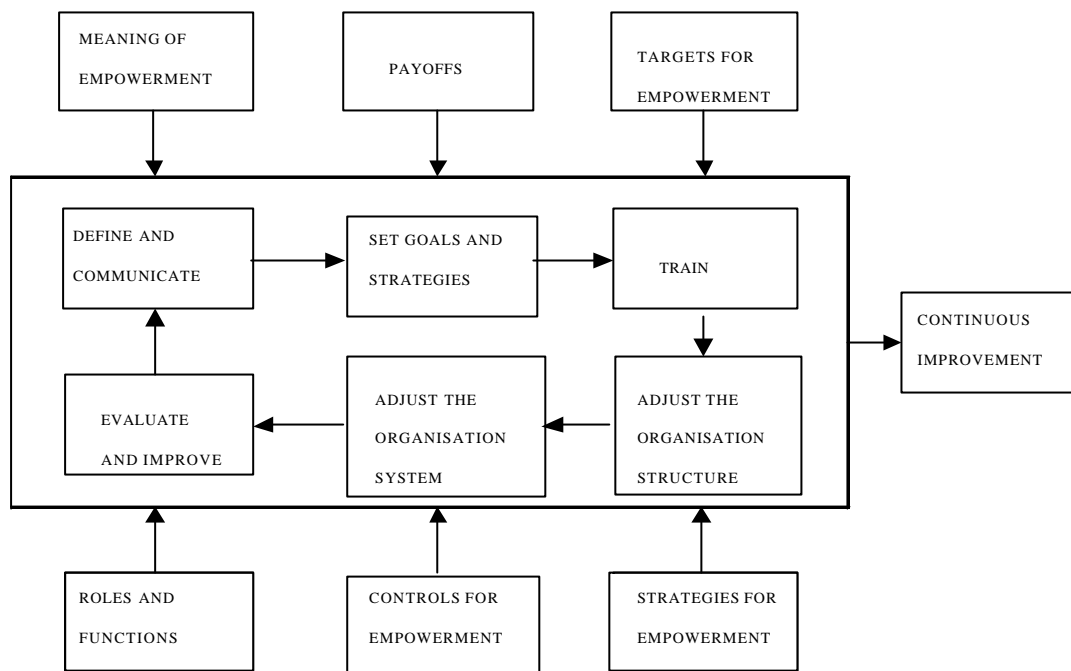


FIGURE 1: EMPOWERMENT PROCESS MANAGEMENT MODEL

Source :The Practice of Empowerment - Making the most of Human Competence, Kinlaw D. C.(1995)

## ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

This case study project is ongoing and at this stage only an initial survey has been concluded. This involved informal interviews with company employees at different levels, including senior management, in five Hong Kong companies and five multinational corporations. The objectives of the pilot study were to gain a better understanding of the thinking and operation of the selected companies. The interviews comprised a faxed pre-interview question sheet followed by a one-hour in-depth interview with each of the subjects. Questions centered on the corporate office’s definition, support, commitment and philosophy of empowerment now and in the future.

These findings present interesting prescriptive accounts of the reception of empowerment processes. Currently four of the ten companies are empowering a limited selection of employees, namely front line staff. At existing staffing levels, all of the companies considered that they employed sufficient property managers to make operational decisions. All of the companies considered empowerment to be a long-term policy that needed slow and careful implementation. All senior managers considered empowerment to be an educational process that started at college and needed to be followed up with constant education and training in the work place. Senior managers further perceived that different levels of empowerment were appropriate to different countries and that this depended on educational levels and when the country opened up to outside (economic) influences. They further believed that empowerment could only be implemented when basic operational training needs, systems and standards were fully established. Senior managers held the opinion that in the Asian culture, employees did not want to take responsibility, and instead rely on the manager to make decisions. It is

noted that the growth and development of empowerment in Hong Kong has been much lower than the western developed countries. There are difficulties to progress employee empowerment as; according to the training managers; staff can not be trusted; people have poor judgment; and the value system is different because of relationships between expatriates and locals.

It is also observed that before employee empowerment can be seriously considered, the following three conditions should be met. Firstly, the empowerment philosophy has to be supported by the corporate office, and the general manager has to be fully committed. Secondly, the desired outcome of the programme has to be agreed upon by the general manager and the executive committee. Thirdly, specific goals and target dates should be established.

More recently new professions have emerged, led by respected individuals to be flexible, skilled and visionary to accept changes as everyday part of working life. Facilities Management services is a newer profession for corporate institutions and government bodies to outsource their workplace noncore business. Here too the leading figures have experience in leading a team and technical knowledge of workplace management in such areas as tenancy administration, property management and logistic services (Becker, 1990). Similarly, an emerging Management Consulting culture is becoming essential to the survival of the service professions to think holistically, creatively and flexibly through chaotic environments (Gibson, Jones, Robinson & Smart, 1995).

## **THE IMPACT OF CULTURE**

Empowerment requires the creation of a strong corporate culture which both encourages staff at all levels to feel they can make a difference and helps them acquire the confidence and skills to do so. Hirst (1992) and Simmons & Teare (1993) suggest that a commitment to service quality improvement requires the development of a “service-driven culture”, or a “total quality culture”, based on approaches to professional development which ensure greater employee empowerment, customer focus and continuous improvement. Culture and status play a big part in traditional Chinese firms. The concern of “losing face”, by making a wrong decision, is so strong that no decision is often made.

Culture is to do with human values and behaviour. It has an element of thinking about TQM (Batten, 1994). Managers must be concerned with the culture of their organizations. There are activities generally described as a part of a TQM effort that directly lead to creating a cultural change. These characteristics as outlined in the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria include: (a) participative management and openness, supported by encouraging employee involvement, empowerment, the use of teams, education and training and extensive communication; (b) a rational approach by fact based decision making, clear mission, objectives, statistical tools and statistical process control, evaluation and improvement cycles, etc.; (c) flexibility with customer focus, continuous improvement and (d) integrity with emphasis on customer values, public responsibility.

As the business market becomes more globalised, as individual managers become more mobile and firms more international, so some convergence towards new globally defined professions might be expected. Traditionally a handful of largely Western countries have determined the state of the world economy and the way in which business is transacted. Hong Kong draws slightly on cultural traditions which are different from those of the Western countries and which have influenced their business practices. So, a new management style might emerge, one which will influence the new rules of business. Thus, despite convergence in professional practices, no blame culture, encouraging accountability and responsibility, may be important in determining from where manager in service market will emerge.

## **EFFECTIVE QUALITY TRAINING CURRICULUM**

A joint study conducted by Developmental Dimensions International and the Quality and Productivity Management Association revealed that training is an integral and essential part of the TQM initiative. Executives and managers know that employees must be trained if they are to understand the concept of quality and to master the use of empowerment management (Svenson & Riderer, 1992).

Organisations that achieve success in quality related training efforts provide effective training in four stages. The first stage, *conceptual training*, exposes employees to the concept of quality and the impact it can have on an organisation, with relevant examples based on experience. Its effectiveness is greatly enhanced when it is followed up immediately with specific plans and changes in organisational systems that focus on the prevention of problems and on continually delighting customers by means of customer satisfaction measurement. Concept courses involve TQM Philosophies; Customer-Focused Organisation; Company Approach to Quality and Customer Satisfaction.

The second stage, *quality tools training*, provides the basic tools and training on how to apply them in the work environment. Employees should be given sufficient time to practise the skills they are being taught by hands-on experimentation with quality tools, such as data collection, histograms, cause and effect, graphs and pie charts. Quality tools courses consist of Team Leader Skills; Systematic Problem-Solving Model; Cause Analysis; Measuring Performance; Deciding on Solution / Process Improvements.

The third stage, *leadership training*, is aimed at executives and managers who lead the initiative. Managers who have completed leadership training need ongoing feedback to determine how successfully they are implementing the new management techniques. Leadership courses involve Strategic Quality Planning; Executive Leadership and TQM; Leading an Empowered Workforce; Building a High Performance Organisation: Issues and Options.

The fourth stage of training, *special topics*, addresses topics and aspects of quality specific to job functions. Special topics should be tailored to train employees in the right areas and paths for particular functions and levels of employees. Special topics courses consist of Information Technology; Benchmarking; Business Process Re-engineering; ISO 9000; ISO 14000; ISO 18000; Quality Function Deployment; Empowerment Management; Malcolm Baldrige Award Criteria; TQM in Support Functions; Measuring Customer Satisfaction.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

To sum up, TQM programmes that do not have management commitment and employee empowerment are bound to fail. Managers believe that, with top management commitment, by involving employee in problem solving, decision-making, and business operations, then performance and productivity will increase.

Even though Hong Kong has started empowering some employees with mixed success, it has not been perceived as a viable management style in Hong Kong for some considerable time. The reasons given for this can be due to a lack of perceived need, lack of understanding, lack of trust, lack of an open supportive company culture and Asian cultural inferences. In order to achieve any form of empowerment management, managers need to be committed and take employee suggestions and opinions seriously.

To be able to participate to empowerment, employees need to be sufficiently educated. Furthermore,

the local education system is teacher centred, which leads to low initiative, enthusiasm, and self-confidence. The educational environment is not creating people who eagerly participate. The authoritarian style of management, which prevails in local companies, also hampers any form of participation of the employees. With supportive management and training empowerment does work in some selected property services companies. Employees should be encouraged to control their destiny and participate in the processes of the organisation. To be effective, employees should be given power, information, knowledge and rewards that are relevant to business performance.

TQM calls for a change of culture with the support of management that requires employee empowerment for quality improvement at all levels. Empowerment also leads to greater levels of satisfaction among the workforce whereas empowered employees give faster and friendlier service to customers as well. There is a significant, positive relationship between success with organisational process improvement and the presence of all three cultural elements related to quality improvement: customer focus, employee empowerment and continuous improvement.

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