The Scope and Applicability of Employee Empowerment in Organizations -
An Empirical Study

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Abstract:

Employee, the key asset of every organization, is undoubtedly an indispensable factor determining the scope and success of any entity. No matter how capital intensive a company or industry may grow to be, one can’t but admit that certain roles and functionalities require human interference and no kind of technology can replace such human indulgence. Management pioneer, Douglas McGregor stated with conviction in his X and Y theory of motivation, that man is moving fast from the X theory to the Y theory whereby, an average individual not just accepts but seeks responsibility.

Empowering the employee is a move in the right direction. It is not just the mantra of organizations these days, but is soon becoming a fetish among all kinds of industry. Employee empowerment refers to a process where an employee is given autonomy to decide on aspects of his work and take responsibility for the results of his decisions. Where the idea is not to disrespect or disregard the superior/employer, such decision-making liberty can prove very helpful in employee retention, and subsequent succession planning. Though it can’t be denied that the benefits flowing from this practice is innumerable, what must also be understood is that it is not universal and all-pervasive. This study seeks to throw some light on situations where empowerment of the employee could do more harm than help. It is often misconstrued that empowerment is a tool that is applicable anytime, anywhere by anyone. The paper gives a glimpse of circumstances where employee empowerment may not be fruitfully employed. The study, in conclusion, also suggests certain innovative employee empowerment techniques.

Key words: autonomy, empowerment trap, universal applicability, all-pervasive
1.1 Introduction:

Employee empowerment is a process whereby: a culture of empowerment is developed; information—in the form of a shared vision, clear goals, boundaries for decision making, and the results of efforts and their impact on the whole—is shared; competency—in the form of training and experience—is developed; resources, or the competency to obtain them when needed to be effective in their jobs, are provided; and support—in the form of mentoring, cultural support, and encouragement of risk-taking—is provided. Employee empowerment may be understood as a strategy and philosophy that allows employees to make decisions about their jobs. Such strategy helps employees own their work and take responsibility for results of their decisions. Employee Empowerment is not an activity, but a process which enables the employee to think, act and control work independently. This tends to give a sense of elation to the employee who feels self-empowered. Where an organisation wishes to motivate, develop and retain employees; empowerment can prove to be a very powerful tool in achieving this end.

According to the Management Skills Advisor, employee empowerment is more about creating an extension of the team manager rather than forcing the manager to relinquish control. As employees learn from their managers, they can apply that knowledge to their daily tasks and then expand on what they have learned by applying their own personal experience.

The fact is that empowerment is never bestowed by the organisation/boss, but must initiate from the employee. It involves the employees acting in an empowered manner through displaying initiative, actions, responsible behaviour, etc. The organisation is only responsible for providing an environment which fosters ability of employees to think and act in an empowered manner.
1.2 Review of Literature:

From various studies previously conducted on this topic, it is evident that employee empowerment and involvement is the essence of a long term loyal relationship between the employee and the employer. One author notes empowerment is, "easy to define in its absence—alienation, powerless, helplessness—but difficult to define positively because it 'takes on a different form in different people and contexts'" (Zimmerman, 1990, p.169). A survey of employees in a fortune 100 company proved that employee involvement was significantly related to employee empowerment and the latter was considerably related to employee satisfaction. Thus, a high level of satisfaction is the key indicator to the intent to remain with the company.¹

MR. S. T. Menon in his study tries to analyse the concept of employee empowerment and states that, while the concept of job enrichment through vertical job loading has been in vogue for some time, the concept of employee empowerment is relatively new. It refers to a process which includes transfer of organizational power (Kanter, 1977, 1983), energizing followers through leadership (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burke 1986; Nielsen, 1986; Block, 1987; Conger, 1989), enhancing self-efficacy through reducing powerlessness (Conger & Kanungo, 1988); and increasing intrinsic task motivation (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990)²

A survey of best business practices in UK, declared that employee empowerment includes employee participation in decision- making and handing more responsibility and authority to the employee. However, several organizations are unwilling to hand down the power to employees and possess a mentality to ‘control’.³

In a study of private and public sector bank employees at Turkey, it was found that in come cases
employee empowerment yielded positive results while in others, the process did not seem to be successful. The researcher concluded that the results of empowerment cant be generalized and the theory can be strengthened only by a reliable study of a more heterogeneous population.4 There are several such studies and researches conducted, either trying to analyse the concept of employee empowerment or elucidating the pros and cons of the practice.

1.3 Research Methodology

The study was conducted completed with data collected and analysed from atleast 50 employees working at various levels in manufacturing and service organizations, in the district of Pune. They were interviewed about their work situations, rapport with employers, autonomy to make decisions in their work areas, their general demeanor in the organization, and their level of satisfaction in their current jobs. Similarly, a few (around 5 employers) were questioned about their approach and attitude towards empowering their employees and granting greater freedom to subordinates.

In addition to the above, data is also collected from various articles and research papers on the topic of employee empowerment. Such data has been accessed electronically, through various websites.

1.4 Objectives of the study

a. To clarify the concept of employee empowerment
b. To identify the list of ingredients that makes empowerment successful
c. To check if the practice of employee empowerment is universally applicable and all-pervasive
2.1 The Elements of Empowerment:

No recipe will give the proper flavor in the absence of key ingredients. Likewise, an organization which seeks to practice employee empowerment would not be doing a fair job, if the following vital elements are missing.

To start with, the organisation must demonstrate that it values its people. This will not happen overnight. It is the employers who must consciously make an effort to prove the same through their treatment of employees. Further, the management should share the goal, mission, direction for each group which; as far as possible are measurable/quantifiable. The most important prerequisite for empowerment to bear fruit is trust. The decisions and actions of employees must not be discouraged or looked down upon with suspicion. Since autonomy in decision making is the essence of an empowerment technique, it must be ensured that employees have access to all information necessary for this purpose. The organisation must give more opportunity and authority; not just more work in the name of empowerment. Empowerment results from work enrichment not enlargement. Empowerment of employees will bring about success when they are given autonomy in their work area; and constant, constructive feedback from time to time on how they are progressing. This will ensure that they are moving in the right direction and at the required pace. Problems are bound to arise in a functional organisation. The employer must attempt to resolve such problems, and not pin-point the problem people; though after due consideration of suggestions and inputs offered by employees. Employees who are suddenly showered with autonomy of decision making; and responsibility for results need to be guided in a proper manner. They must be listened to patiently, and asked questions on problem situations; and not directly told about what to do. This is because, employees prefer to be given their space,
and will be able to grow only if they are provided ample opportunity to resolve their problems and crisis. Empowerment of the employee is not expected to yield the expected results in circumstances where employees are under-compensated, under-appreciated, and under-praised for the extra effort they voluntarily invest in their work.

2.2 Principles of Employee Empowerment:

a) Clarity of role and purpose: Employee empowerment starts with choosing the right people who can garner a clear understanding of the job, its purpose and how their performance can help or hinder business outcomes. Employees need to have a sense that their contributions are valued and important. Whether working as a housekeeper in a hospital, or a CFO in a Fortune 100 company, their companies and managers need to help them recognize what difference they can bring about.

b) Opportunity for involvement and input: Providing employees an opportunity for involvement and input can act as one of the greatest motivators. Employees greatly wish to contribute ideas if they trust their managers will listen and express appreciation for their efforts. The simple act of genuinely listening to employees can have a considerable impact on empowerment.

c) Freedom to Fail: Employees are often hesitant to share ideas or take action for fear of doing the wrong thing. But when they know that their sincere efforts will be appreciated, and mistakes will be tolerated, they are more likely to take calculated risks.

d) The Ability to Make Decisions: Empowerment is all about the ability and scope of making decisions. Empowered employees have the authority to make decisions that
impact their work and their interactions with customers without having to ask their superior. This can motivate them to a large extent.

2.3 Benefits of Employee Empowerment:

a) Increased productivity and morale: When employees don't have to wait for approval from a manager or supervisor, workflow doesn't slow down or stop. Employees solve their own problems, and move on to the next task. Being able to make decisions and devise innovative solutions increases employee satisfaction as well; which tends to improve their morale.

b) Improved quality: When properly trained employees are empowered to solve problems, take risks or be creative in their approach to work, they are more likely to assume ownership of the tasks and strive to consistently produce quality results.

c) Job Satisfaction: Empowered employees having the ability to create a more efficient job process, gives a feeling of accomplishment that boosts employee morale. Employee decision-making has a direct impact on revenue, increases morale and make their interactions with clients more positive as a result of increased job satisfaction.

d) Improvement in processes: When employees are given more hands-on authority to improve their job functions, the results are often an improvement in company processes. Employee empowerment can help create a more functional employee manual by being modeled more on employee experience than human resources theories.

2.4 Employee Empowerment Traps:

If the pressing question is “Can Employee Empowerment fail?” the answer is a rather simple one,
“Of course, it can!!”

Notwithstanding the benefits of empowerment listed above, one can’t but admit that the process also has inherent drawbacks. In fact, while empowerment of the employee is very much essential and identified as a tool to reward and retain employees, it is not universal and all-pervasive. Noteworthy are some of the exceptions to the applicability of employee empowerment.

a. **Lack of clarity in definition**: The term “empowerment” has been ill-defined and this creates for the employer lots of confusion and dilemma. Employers have a major role to play in introducing and creating an environment where the employee feels empowered. Where they fail to understand the meaning of “empowerment”, successful adoption of the process is far from achievable.

b. **Age of organization**: An organisation in its initial stages of establishment cannot afford to entrust decision making to employees. On the one hand, the employee is new to the environment and needs to be given constant guidance, and on the other the employer prefers to restrict the scope of the employee so as to develop on his vision and mission for the organisation.

c. **Conservative organizational culture**: Where the management cultivates and dwells in a culture characterized by conservatism and conformism, there will be increased resistance to introduction of employee empowerment. Such organizations should first create awareness among employees about the process and be very gradual in adopting the practice, or else, it is bound to fall flat on its face.

d. **Level of employee expertise**: Empowerment of employees will be helpful only when the latter is equipped with adequate knowledge and skill in his job. Where the employee is in
the learning stages, it can be dangerous to grant him autonomy to make work-related decisions.

e. **Rapport between employer and employee**: Empowerment is not an activity but a process in itself. As such the process will succeed only through constant exchange of information and continued guidance flowing from the superior to the subordinate. Where the superior is inaccessible and bossy, empowerment can exist only in theory.

f. **Employee Attitude**: Employee empowerment yields benefits only where the employee looks upon it as a reward. Where decision making authority is granted to an employee who sees it as a burden, in addition to other usual work pressures; this may not a good technique to adopt.

g. **Employer Attitude**: Empowerment of the employee bears fruit in an environment which is identified by mutual respect between employer and employee. Only in those organizations where the employer values the employee and is genuinely interested in the latter’s growth and development can the former be a friend, philosopher and guide, facilitating the process of empowerment.

h. **Doubting employee decisions**: The employer may coach employees to make good decisions. Alternatively, he may himself set an example of good decision making. What he should not do, is distrust/change the decision made by an empowered employee. This would undermine their faith in their personal competence and impede empowerment for the future.

i. **Denial of information access**: The process of employee empowerment would fail to be fruitful, in a circumstance where employees are denied access to critical information. Where the employer fails to provide timely information, they should not expect the
employees to make the best of decisions, and should never complain of any shortfall on the part of the employee.

j. **Increased Risk**: While lack of information or denial of information to employees are a major impediment to the success of empowerment, the fact also remains that empowered employees may be having access to information that could damage the company if leaked; thus causing huge loss due to entrepreneurial failure.

k. **Slows down decision making**: Companies that need to make rapid decisions are better suited by a directive leader, who can make a quick decision about the work that needs to be done, and by whom. An empowering leadership style works best in an environment that is stable, where the goals are already established and employees can explore options and try new and innovative solutions. Today’s business is characterised by dynamism, which makes applicability of empowerment techniques unsuitable.

l. **Over and under-empowerment**: Empowerment can miserably fail when over done or under done. Over-empowerment results from a situation where the superior completely trusts his subordinate in decision making, so much so that the latter does not even bother to guide, coach or check on them. Under-empowerment is characterized as a process wherein the superior grants autonomy to make decisions, but interferes too frequently, thus denying the employee, space to learn and grow.

m. **Blame game**: A sure shot way to guarantee failure of employee empowerment is to blame/punish the employee for mistakes and lower than optimum results. This will scare them away from the process itself, or try to look for ways to blame it back on the management. The failure to give adequate support to employees can collapse empowerment mechanism.
n. **Mismatch of responsibilities and job description**: In situations where the employee feels under-compensated, under-titled, under-noticed, under-praised, under-appreciated; employee empowerment is a farce. If addition of responsibilities causes employees to think they are over-worked or underpaid, then adjustments must be made to match responsibilities with job description.

o. **Egotism and arrogance**: From an employee perspective, empowerment is indicative that employees are an integral part of the organization who have the authority to take decisions relating to their work. This may sprout a feeling of egotism and arrogance among them. This can mean big trouble for the organization while dealing with workers who avoid reporting to superiors and take feedback negatively.

p. **Non-applicability in Military forces**: It is an area which sees no scope and hope for empowerment at the lower levels. The most probable reason for this is the criticality in activity. The military, viz; army, navy and air force, are devoted to and entrusted the task of providing security to the nation. Only the most experienced persons, who are normally occupying positions at the tip of the pyramid of hierarchy, are allowed to take decisions and the subordinates follow their instructions and directions without question. Empowerment of persons in lower ranks may endanger the interests of the nation.

q. **Manufacturing Industry**: Though not all, many manufacturing organizations are against the idea of empowering employees. They contend that this will give employees the authority to even fix their production targets, which may not work in the interest of the organization and may not be in line with the overall organizational goals.
3.1 Findings, suggestions & conclusion:

In light of what has been already discussed, it might be appropriate here to discuss certain ways in which organizations may seek to empower their employees.

a. **Give a patient/empathetic listening:** Employees need to be convinced that they are valuable to the organisation and also deserve to be heard. Just giving a patient ear to their problems, grievances and suggestions on the job can adequately empower employees.

b. **Simple communication:** Though empowerment means giving autonomy to employees in decision making; the process needs to be preceded by a set of clear and complete instructions and guidelines that need to flow from the employer downwards. The use of complex vocabulary, technical jargon, complicated and long drawn sentences, frustrates rather than empowers the employee.

c. **Train the employee:** Empowerment is fruitful only when the concerned employees are trained adequately, on the one hand, to perform their job well and on the other, to make decisions promptly and properly. In the absence of clarity of purpose and sufficient training to supplement it, empowerment model has dim chances of working.

d. **Guidance through Questioning:** It would be wrong to keep correcting employees and pronouncing what is right or wrong. They are grown up people who want their space, and generally dislike being told what to do. The superiors may seek to guide employees by means of simply asking questions, and giving them an opportunity to arrive at the right answers/solutions.

e. **Optimize talent:** Find out the tasks that employee is an expert at, and assign such tasks to him. Not only will he enjoy doing it, but will excel. Such subtle identification of talent
and harnessing the same can instill a feeling of empowerment in the employee.

f. **Delegate and trust:** A chief factor constituting to the success of empowerment is letting go. The employer must allow some important part of his job to be done by the employee and must trust him to do well and excel. Where the employer hesitates to delegate or having delegated fails to trust that the job will be well accomplished, the process of empowerment cannot be expected to yield positive results.

g. **Encouragement:** Rather than teach and constantly correct employees at their tasks, encourage them through a proactive mentoring. Superiors must instill confidence and boost the morale of employees from time to time to indulge in decision making. What mature employees look up to, is a guide and mentor, not a teacher.

h. **Reward and recognize empowered behaviour:** On accomplishing milestones in the task, whole-heartedly appreciate and reward the employee. Don’t take the accomplishment for granted; and don’t appreciate for the sake of it. When the employee knows that his success brings as much happiness to his employer, he is intrinsically motivated and feels empowered.

i. **Frequent feedback:** Giving the employee powers to make decisions should not aim to relieve the superior completely. He must closely monitor the decisions of his employees, and provide constructive feedback in a timely manner. This can go a long way in helping the employees make the right decision in future.

j. **Create a plank – eliminate barriers:** Employees are disheartened when faced with layers of protocol and policies. The organisation must seek to cross-train; create multi-department teams so as to break such barriers between employees per se and with the employer as well.
k. **Vision/Mission Sharing:** The management should ensure that the employees are certain about the organisation’s vision and mission. This will help them understand that they have a larger role to play than their individual jobs itself.

l. **Information dissemination:** Employee empowerment is all about enabling employees to make job-related decisions. This would be a failure in the absence of effective information dissemination mechanism.

m. Vibrant and dynamic organizational culture: Employee empowerment, like many other HR practices, will be successful only in organisations which seek to be dynamic and adapt quickly to changes demanded by the situation. Those organizations which are characterized by a high level of vibrancy and dynamism achieve greatly because change is commonplace and faces less resistance. Organisations thus, must try to create cultures/environments where empowerment is nourished and sustained.

**Developing an effective Empowerment plan:**

Though empowerment has its myriad benefits to offer and a plethora of shortcomings, one must take care to dwell this concept in depth. It is one of the most recent trends in human resources management, and hence no organisation can seek to turn away from the empowerment technique. Most of the reasons listed for the failure of empowerment techniques are temporary/situational in nature and if adequate care is taken and the strategy well planned, it can still work. An organization may develop its empowerment plan using the following guidelines:

- **Prepare the employee's current performance metrics.** Identify the employee’s strengths and weaknesses, and prepare a plan to help the employee improve upon his weaknesses. The plan needs to consist of actionable and measurable tasks.
b. Schedule an appointment time with employees sought to be empowered and make sure the quality time is given which allows full focus without interruptions.

c. Meet with the employee during the set time. Go over employee results and talk about areas that need improvement. A crucial step here is to ask the employee how he will achieve the said tasks. Employees will take ownership and feel empowered when they have created their own action plan.

d. Ask open-ended questions that require thought and response from your employee. Offer suggestions to enhance the employee's plan. A compassionate gesture would be to ask how he feels about your suggestions.

e. Reiterate the employee's plan and ask if it sounds workable, or if anything needs to be added or omitted.

f. Set a time frame for the completion of the plan; or if the plan is an ongoing one, set a follow-up meeting time in consultation with the employee. The follow-up meeting should entail coaching the employee through motivation and feedback.

g. Monitor the employee’s progress; while constantly offering encouragement and recognition. Employees feel empowered when they are given room to correct their own deficiencies but still need to be monitored and mentored.

h. Offer short and informal sessions at short regular intervals to intimate employee progress. Employees respect superiors that show interest in their decisions and success.

Meet with the employees at designated time for meeting. Give recognition for work well done, as well as offer constructive suggestions for improvement. Care should be taken to keep the ambience of the meeting positive so as to foster an empowering culture.
Employee Empowerment is one of the most powerful techniques a leader can use to improve the performance of his or her team. Further, it is an essential element in the quest for remarkable service. The effort that one puts into empowering their employees will give returns beyond one’s wildest expectations.

One must, however, keep in mind that Employee Empowerment is not a management initiative. For employees to feel empowered there must exist a culture that nourishes and sustains it. Successful are those organizations that create an environment where employees will recognize their empowerment and enthusiastically act on it in all they do.

The above study is quite comprehensive in coverage and gives a bird’s eye view of the pros and cons of employee involvement, participation and empowerment. Though employee empowerment has myriad benefits to offer to the employees as well as organizations practicing empowerment, the current paper has attempted to analyze the hidden side of the coin called employee empowerment, in terms of its universal applicability and scope. It may be, without doubt, stated that though several organizations have successfully adopted and implemented this technique; if adopted at the wrong time, with a wrong set of employees/employers, in the wrong kind of situation/organization, and without clarity; even such a boisterous process may fall apart. This reinforces the fact that employee empowerment is not universal and all-pervasive, which restricts the scope and applicability of the process in various organizations.

References:


