To make empowerment successful, executives need to start with some probing questions about what this concept means and about their own management style.

The Road to Empowerment: Seven Questions Every Leader Should Consider

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Organizations are demanding more from their employees than ever before. Higher customer expectations, increased globalization, more sophisticated technology—these are a few of the conditions at work. It’s an environment where traditional command-and-control hierarchies are increasingly less appropriate. Instead, employees must learn to take initiative, be creative, and accept responsibility for their actions. They need to be “empowered”—or so a growing consensus indicates.

Despite feelings that empowerment can give an organization competitive advantage, and despite the fact that many managers agree that empowerment is desirable, companies often run into problems with implementation. This article explores the reasons this promising concept often proves elusive. To do so, we draw on over a decade of experience working with organizations as they struggled with empowerment, as well as from intensive research that examined the antecedents, consequences, and processes of implementing employee empowerment in large organizations. Taken as a whole, this research points to seven key questions managers must confront if they hope to implement empowerment effectively. The seven questions are shown in Exhibit 1. A discussion of each follows.

What Do We Mean When We Say We Want to Empower People?

Empowerment is a complex concept. It tends to mean different things to different people. In fact, in our own work, we find two contrasting perspectives that often come into play when people think about empowerment. Consider the following experience.

A few years ago, we worked with a Fortune 50 manufacturing company that, like many companies today, had become unresponsive to the changing needs of the external business environment. The top management team could see that the company was on a downward trajectory. They concluded that they needed to empower their workforce and proceeded to make this a top priority in their business plan. After a frustrating year with little apparent progress, they asked us to analyze why so little had been achieved.

We began by individually interviewing the corporation’s 12 most senior executives.
EXHIBIT 1
CRITICAL QUESTIONS ON EMPOWERMENT

1. What do we mean when we say we want to empower people?
2. What are the characteristics of an empowered person?
3. Do we really need empowered people?
4. Do we really want empowered people?
5. How do people develop a sense of empowerment?
6. What organizational characteristics facilitate employee empowerment?
7. What can leaders do to facilitate employee empowerment?

We asked each to define empowerment and to describe what would be necessary to facilitate the concept. The interviews were insightful for their lack of consensus.

Approximately one-half of the executives believed that empowerment was about delegation and accountability, i.e., it was a top-down process wherein senior management developed a clear vision and then communicated specific plans and assignments to the rest of the organization. The senior managers would provide employees with the information and resources needed to accomplish their tasks, then let employees make the required procedural changes and process improvements. The results, in their view, would be greater managerial control as well as increased clarification and simplification of employees’ work.

In short, this group believed that empowerment was about delegating decision making within a set of clear boundaries. Their implicit strategy for empowerment was:

- Start at the top;
- Clarify the organization’s mission, vision, and values;
- Clearly specify the tasks, roles, and rewards for employees;
- Delegate responsibility; and
- Hold people accountable for results.

The other group of executives saw empowerment much differently. They believed that it was about risk taking, growth, and change. Empowerment meant trusting people and tolerating their imperfections. When it came to rules, they believed that the existing structures often presented a barrier to “doing the right thing” for the company. They assumed that newly empowered employees would naturally make some mistakes, but that mistakes should not be punished. Empowered employees would “ask for forgiveness rather than permission.” They would be entrepreneurs and risk takers, acting with a sense of ownership in the business. They would engage in creative conflict, constantly challenging each other. Exposing and resolving differences would create a synergy.

In short, this group of executives saw empowerment as a process of risk taking and personal growth. Their implicit strategy for empowerment was:

- Start at the bottom by understanding the needs of the employees;
- Model empowered behavior for the employees;
- Build teams to encourage cooperative behavior;
- Encourage intelligent risk taking; and
- Trust people to perform.

These two perspectives are very different. We call the first, with its top-down view, the “mechanistic” approach to empowerment. The second, with its bottom-up view, we label the “organic” approach. The most important contrast between the two involves the implicit but potentially volatile assumptions people make about trust and control.

When we relayed our observations to the senior management team, they responded with a heavy silence. Finally, someone
from the first group voiced a core concern about the second group's perspective: "We can't afford loose cannons around here." A person from the second group retorted, "When was the last time you saw a cannon of any kind around here?"

First, he emphasized the need to share information so that people know how they and the company are performing, and if their actions are making a difference. Opening the books to employees and disclosing sensitive information about the company's market share and growth opportunities, as well as information about the competition's strategies, are steps in the right direction. Many successful companies do just that. Frito-Lay, for instance, has computerized its entire product development system so that everyone in the organization has information about sales volumes across product lines. The Honda plant in Marysville, Ohio, has a large scoreboard that gives ongoing information about the plant's performance.

Second, Randolph emphasized the need to impose a structure on employees. Creating a clear vision, clarifying organizational goals, and identifying individual roles help to set direction. In Randolph's concept of empowerment, decision-making rules and performance management processes ensure employee accountability for the decisions made. Again, successful empowerment programs do follow this principle. The Ritz-Carlton, for example, has created a clear vision on the importance of exceeding customer expectations, but imposed equally clear guidelines. Employees should make every effort possible to satisfy a disgruntled guest, but the cost of doing so is limited to $2,500.

Finally, Randolph advocated the development of teams as replacement for traditional hierarchy. Such teams need a strong leader—capable of providing guidance, encouragement, and support—to help them overcome...
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David Bowen and Edward E. Lawler III offer similar prescriptions in their research on empowerment. In addition to emphasizing the need to share information and develop teams that have decision-making power, they also emphasize the importance of training and rewards. First, they suggest that employees need relevant training and knowledge about how to be empowered. They must learn how to work collaboratively. They must have tools for problem solving. They must understand company performance. Again, examples of this element of empowerment are commonplace. For example, Johnsonville Foods brought in finance professors from a local community college to teach their employees, many with no more than a high school education, how to read financial statements.

Second, Bowen and Lawler emphasize the importance of rewards. Empowered employees must be compensated for their increased responsibility and accountability. Intel, for example, offers stock options to all employees so that they can benefit from a strong company performance.

In short, these authors argue that managers can empower employees when they share information, provide structure, develop a team-based alternative to hierarchy, offer relevant training opportunities, and reward employees for the risks and initiatives they are expected to take. All these practices are part of the empowerment process.

They are, however, incomplete by themselves. Often, empowerment programs that emphasize all of the above elements still do not achieve the desired results. Employees are still hesitant about taking initiative and remain risk-averse. We suggest that these practices are biased toward one particularly...
important and incorrect assumption in the mechanistic model—*that empowerment is something managers do to their people.*

Our research on the characteristics of empowered people suggests a more complex view, namely, that empowerment must be defined in terms of fundamental beliefs and personal orientations. This finding emerged from in-depth interviews in which we asked individuals to describe experiences of empowerment and disempowerment, as well as from our analysis of extensive survey research data. All in all, this investigation identified four characteristics most empowered people have in common.

- **Empowered people have a sense of self-determination** (this means that they are free to choose how to do their work; they are not micro-managed).
- **Empowered people have a sense of meaning** (they feel that their work is important to them; they care about what they are doing).
- **Empowered people have a sense of competence** (this means that they are confident about their ability to do their work well; they know they can perform).
- **Finally, empowered people have a sense of impact** (this means that people believe they can have influence on their work unit; others listen to their ideas).

These are not specific management practices, but rather characteristics reflecting personal experiences or beliefs about their role in the organization. Empowerment, then, is not something that management does to employees, but rather a mind-set that employees have about their role in the organization. While management can create a context that is more empowering, employees must choose to be empowered. They must see themselves as having freedom and discretion; they must feel personally connected to the organization, confident about their abilities, and capable of having an impact on the system in which they are embedded.

Efforts that assume an empowered employee is a passive recipient of a brilliant program design are doomed. Empowered people empower themselves. Organizational
characteristics can increase the likelihood of this happening, but most “design” assumptions that we encounter fully miss this critical point.

Do We Really Need Empowered People?

In the world of global competition, flat organizations, continuous change, and customer-focused efforts, empowerment has become almost sacred. Most organizations automatically subscribe to the rhetoric of empowerment.

But why? What do we gain from having empowered people? The benefits described in the popular business press are extensive, but not well documented. Several findings from our research on middle managers may help fill this void.

We found, for example, that empowered middle managers are significantly different from their disempowered colleagues in several ways. First, empowered employees see themselves as more effective in their work and, moreover, are evaluated as more effective by those with whom they work. Second, they see themselves as innovative and show less fear of trying something new. (Again, their subordinates and superiors share this view.) Third, empowered employees are transformational in their leadership ability. They engage in upward influence and report making second-order or quantum changes when stimulated to make change.

Because of their strong sense of personal meaning, empowered people are also seen as charismatic by the people who work for them. This charisma facilitates their ability to bring transformational change to their organization. In each case, people who rate themselves as highly empowered provide substantial benefits to their organizations.

Let’s return to the question at hand—What do we really gain? The answer, it seems, is simply this: If a company wants and needs people who are more effective, innovative, and transformational, then empowerment appears to be worth the effort. This, however, turns our attention to a slightly different but important question—does the company really want this to happen?

Do We Really Want Empowered People?

Most top managers and supervisors would agree that the people in their organizations are generally intelligent and have good intentions. And many are aware of the findings discussed above regarding the benefits that empowered people bring to the workplace. They have truthfully concluded that empowering people is “the right thing to do.”

Yet, an all-too-familiar scenario often develops. Senior management designs an empowerment program and announces, in one way or another to employees, “You are now empowered—act accordingly.” Employees respond enthusiastically, saying that they have been waiting to be empowered. But nothing very different happens. In frustration, management concludes, “These people really just want someone to tell them what to do.”

Why is this pattern so common?

When thinking about ourselves, most of us are quite comfortable with notions of empowerment, initiative, risk, personal growth, and trust. We become much less comfortable, however, in thinking about these very same characteristics when considering how we manage others. We wonder how much autonomy they can handle without becoming “loose cannons.”

The reality is that many of us implicitly discourage empowerment by reinforcing organizational structures and control systems that either intentionally or unintentionally send the message that we really do not trust people. These structures and control systems create pressures for conformity rather than encourage employee initiative and risk taking. Our research has identified three major barriers, common to most large organizations: a bureaucratic culture, multi-level conflict, and personal time constraints.

Bureaucratic culture. A bureaucratic culture encompasses multiple layers of hierarchy that impede change. It emphasizes the maintenance of the status quo through a
strong tradition of top-down directives, the lack of a credible vision for the future, short-term managerial thinking, and a lack of management support for real change. Moreover, this culture is often reinforced by a reward system that emphasizes the status quo. One manager's comment, taken from our interviews, says it all: "To get an initiative approved, five people must say yes; but to get it stopped, only one of the five has to say no."

**Multi-level conflict.** Conflict between functions results from a structure that creates strong divisions between marketing, manufacturing, customer services, and other areas. Conflict among peers results, in part, from a performance management system that pits people against each other for raises and promotions. Finally, conflict between managers and their employees over the means to achieve goals creates a hostile working environment in which people worry about protecting themselves rather than doing what is right for the organization.

**Personal time constraints.** Given the recent trend toward downsizing and layoffs, one person may now be doing the job of two or even three people. Employees often complain about having less and less time for family life. Working under these stressful conditions, they find it is very difficult to think about initiating anything new.

These three barriers are not the result of bad intentions on the part of management; instead, they are natural consequences of the organizing process. The primary goal of most organizations is routinization and the maintenance of the status quo, not the encouragement of risk, creativity, and change. No matter how much top management "says" that employee empowerment is desired, the average employee receives a subtle, but very clear message—"Conform, don't rock the boat!" The organization becomes a well-structured, slow-moving ocean liner. And ocean liners do not change course quickly.

To empower people, managers must lower these barriers, all of which are so powerful in maintaining control and order in the system, but which also block employee empowerment. Managers must be willing to relinquish control, to risk releasing the potential of their people, to trust that
employees will do the right thing if given the chance. Most of us would agree that giving up control is very difficult. Yet, any hesitation on the part of management sends mixed messages. Though we want to be empowered ourselves, we may not really want our people to be empowered.

How Do People Actually Develop a Sense of Empowerment?

Recall our earlier point that empowerment is not a set of management practices, but rather an individual mind-set—a proactive orientation regarding our role in the organization. How does this mind-set develop?

To answer this question, consider The Ford Motor Company's innovative program aimed at empowering an entire stratum of middle managers. The program, known as Leadership Education and Development (LEAD), involved a one-week intensive executive education experience followed six months later by a two-and-a-half-day follow-up program. The first part of the program was organized around parallel strategic, cultural, and structural changes taking place in the company. Program leaders shared sensitive information, typically reserved for top managers, about the company's strategic direction. Participants had opportunity for both personal reflection and in-depth cross-functional discussions. They were asked to assess their own leadership behavior and also received personal feedback from their bosses, peers, and superiors. From our work with the Ford LEAD program, we became aware of an evolving cycle of personal empowerment illustrated in Exhibit 2.

The Ford LEAD program provided new experiences and perspectives which in turn led the participants to redefine their roles in the organization—to think deeply about how they could refocus themselves in relation to their work. They began to see their roles differently—as partners in the business rather than "cogs in the wheel."

This first stage of the process involved an in-depth personal evaluation and cognitive reframing, which allowed individuals to visualize themselves and their environment through a different lens. This deep change reflected a second-order personal transformation, a change in the individual's schema or cause map.

New approaches to old problems typically accompanied this fresh interpretation of the situation. This redefinition of self and role caused individuals to engage in new patterns of action. They experimented with out-of-the-box thinking and behavior. They took risks and tried unorthodox methods. Old habits were broken, and the participants acted without going through traditional channels. There was greater trust in themselves and reliance on intuition and "pure guts." In most cases, these new patterns of action were second-order or revolutionary changes instead of the more common first-order or incremental changes individuals typically initiated during empowerment programs. Truly innovative outcomes resulted.

When these innovative actions were reinforced, the process continued. The individuals reflected on and learned from their new experiences. When the new patterns of action were successful, they built on that success to stimulate future action. In cases where new patterns of action were not successful, they learned from their mistakes. They recognized the importance of a continuous learning mind-set and the need to remain flexible and adaptable in response to a changing and ambiguous environment. Cognitions became increasingly complex, which allowed for greater learning and growth. This personal growth, in turn, led to increased self-confidence.

Typically, at this stage of the empowerment process, participants felt highly integrated with and committed to the organization. What is more, those who worked with the empowered person were likely to feel energized themselves. These colleagues were also more willing to engage in risk taking, test new ideas, and inspire co-workers to do the same. In this way, the process became synergistic. It drew individuals together to higher levels of effort.
Most of us crave a simple strategy and quick action. Yet empowerment is anything but simple and quick. It demands a willingness to embrace uncertainty, trust people, and exercise faith.

In short, these newly empowered participants empowered their associates through their actions. They shared success stories and helped one another diagnose situations to develop appropriate coping strategies. In addition, they built networks to expand their power base in the organization. These new experiences and perspectives then stimulated the individuals to redefine, once again, themselves and their roles, and the process of empowerment continued.

When the system did not reinforce the new patterns of behavior, however, this disrupted the cycle. Because empowerment includes risk taking, it opens the possibility of making mistakes. If those mistakes were punished, then individuals became disenchanted with their new way of thinking and regressed to past behaviors. If they received no support or reinforcement, then the cycle of empowerment was halted and individuals actually felt more disempowered than before. They experienced a sense of violation, feeling that they had been misled. It was not unusual to hear employees say things like, "The empowerment effort was a fraud. No one here wants real empowerment. They just want people to work harder doing the same old thing."

However, when the system reinforced individual empowerment (this happened over 90 percent of the time), the process was more regenerative and dynamic. It began by transforming individuals' sense of self, stimulated them to try new behaviors, helped them develop a continuous learning mindset, and increased their self-confidence. The empowered individual then worked to draw others into the process so that they too became empowered.

Clearly, the Ford LEAD program was unique in its approach. But it does reveal a number of general principles that organizations can use to facilitate the empowerment cycle.

What Organizational Characteristics Facilitate Employee Empowerment?

When an organization decides to implement a new program, managers often say, "Give me specifics. Tell me what I need to do and when." Most of us crave a simple strategy and quick action. Yet empowerment is anything but simple and quick—it demands a willingness to embrace uncertainty, trust people, and exercise faith.

Recall, at the outset of this article, we identified two different perspectives on empowerment—one mechanistic and the other organic—and argued that neither perspective by itself provides a complete picture. Both are essential to sustain employee empowerment. The challenge thus becomes how to facilitate both perspectives simultaneously. Based on our research, we suggest four key levers that can assist this integration.

The first lever is a clear vision and challenge. Highly empowered people feel that they understand top management’s vision and strategic direction for the organization. Given this understanding, they will more likely feel they have the capability to act autonomously in their work rather than wait for permission and direction from top management. Such a vision must also provide challenge to employees, stretching their capability to improve themselves and the organization.
Ed Lawler does a beautiful job of articulating this lever in his recent book, *From the Ground Up*. He emphasizes the importance of developing and communicating an organizational mission in the form of a statement expressing "strategic intent"—i.e., an animating dream or stretch goal that energizes the company. Thus, strategic alignment is one key organizational lever for empowerment.

The second lever is *openness and teamwork*. For people to feel empowered, they must feel they are part of a corporate culture that emphasizes the value of the organization's human assets. The Levi Strauss mission statement, for example, emphasizes this value by saying, "We want our people to feel respected, treated fairly, listened to, and involved. We want a company that our people are proud of and committed to, where all employees have an opportunity to contribute, learn, grow, and advance." This type of emphasis promotes openness and teamwork through participation in organizational decision making. Empowered employees must feel that the people in their unit can work together to solve problems—that employees' ideas are valued and taken seriously.

The third lever is *discipline and control*. Highly empowered people report that their organizations provide clear goals, clear lines of authority, and clear task responsibilities. While they have autonomy, they are aware of the boundaries of their decision-making discretion. They know what they are responsible for, and what others have responsibility for achieving. They have clear but challenging goals and objectives aligned with their leaders' vision of the organization. This lever reduces the disabling uncertainty and ambiguity that so often accompany empowerment efforts.

Marriott, for example, has developed "safe zones" so that employees understand which situations allow for discretionary decision making and which do not. And as mentioned earlier, the Ritz-Carlton sets limits on the amounts that employees can spend to please a disgruntled guest. Without this basic level of structure and control, employees experience chaos rather than empowerment.

The fourth lever is *support and a sense of security*. In order to feel that the system really wants empowered employees, individuals need a sense of social support from their bosses, peers, and subordinates. Employee efforts to take initiative and risk must be reinforced rather than punished. If this support is missing or weak, employees will worry about seeking permission before acting rather than asking for forgiveness in case they make mistakes. They must believe that the company will support them as they learn and grow.

An often-told story about UPS, now part of that company's culture, is worth repeating. Some years ago, a UPS employee ordered an extra Boeing 737 to ensure timely delivery of a trainload of packages left behind in the Christmas rush. Clearly, this employee went beyond his zone of authority. However, rather than punish the employee, UPS praised his initiative and the story survives as proof that the company stands behind such empowered efforts.

These levers reflect both the mechanistic and organic perspectives on empowerment. To create an empowering environment, managers need to exhibit continuous long-term dedication to the management of all four. It is only through the integration of the mechanistic and organic perspectives that sustained levels of employee empowerment can be achieved.

**What Can Leaders Do to Facilitate Employee Empowerment?**

Let's return, briefly, to our tale of the top management team that couldn't agree on what empowerment meant. Unable to resolve their conflicting assumptions on the roles of trust and control, they eventually asked us what we thought they should do.

We answered by posing a fundamental question: How many members of this management team are empowered? The question proved to create more discomfort than did the original revelation.

This question raises the most fundamental issue of all. *It is nearly impossible for unempowered people to empower others. Many execu-
tives, even at the highest levels, are not, according to our earlier definition, empowered. When people say, “Change begins at the top,” they usually mean programs must be designed at the top and cascaded down the organizational hierarchy. They do not mean that the people at the top have to actually change their behavior.

The most fundamental issue is this: It is nearly impossible for unempowered people to empower others.

We believe, however, that this is exactly what empowerment requires. Our research provides some important insights on how the behavior of top management must change in order for empowerment to take root in an organization. We will convey these insights by posing two sets of questions every executive, manager, and supervisor should ask himself or herself.

Set 1: Some Hard Questions. The four questions in this set are as follows:

- If a sense of a clear strategic vision is a characteristic of an empowering environment, am I continuously working to clarify the sense of strategic direction for the people in my own stewardship?
- If openness and teamwork are characteristics of an empowering environment, am I continuously striving for participation and involvement in my own stewardship?
- If discipline and control are characteristics of an empowering environment, am I continuously working to clarify expectations regarding the goals, tasks, and lines of authority in my own stewardship?
- If support and security are characteristics of an empowering environment, am I continuously working to resolve the conflicts among the people in my own stewardship?

The questions all emphasize the word “continuously” in an attempt to break through the human tendency to adopt a checklist mentality, i.e., “If you want me to do something, give me a checklist and I will get it done and then go on to the next thing in my busy schedule.” Most people who design empowerment programs collude with this mentality by designing “empowerment in a box” programs. Once people check off an item from their list, they tend to forget about it and return to their normal pattern of behavior. Unless we continuously monitor ourselves on our new behavior, change will not occur.

Set 2: Some Harder Questions. If, as suggested above, creating an empowered environment requires continuous attention over time, then empowerment is hard work. Empowerment, however, requires even more. We consider now the most important questions of all—a series of questions grounded in our definition of empowerment. Again we suggest that every leader in the company must ask these questions of himself or herself:

- To what extent do I have a sense of meaning and task alignment, and what can I do to increase it?
- To what extent do I have a sense of impact, influence, and power, and what can I do to increase it?
- To what extent do I have a sense of competence and confidence to execute my work, and what can I do to increase it?
- To what extent do I have a sense of self-determination and choice, and what can I do to increase it?

These questions imply that before we can create an environment through which others can be empowered, we must empower ourselves. We must lead by example and begin by changing ourselves, because leaders who transform themselves trust them-
selves. Empowered people are empowering people.

All of us have observed senior executives who are insecure and unempowered. The people around them continually struggle. In the end, these people cannot create environments where others are willing to risk empowering themselves.

CONCLUSION

Both the mechanistic and the organic perspectives on empowerment provide a partial and incomplete picture of the empowerment journey. Each provides a different lens or interpretation of the process. Most of the popular business press is embedded in the more mechanistic perspective, which assumes that empowerment is a set of managerial practices for cascading power down to lower levels of the organization. Yet, the mechanistic perspective is incomplete by itself.

We must seek to counter this imbalance, in the literature and in our organizations, by more deeply developing the organic perspective. This second perspective embodies personal risk, trust, and initiative.

Yet, by itself, the organic perspective too is incomplete. The risk, trust, and initiative so vital to the organic model are unrealistic unless managers choose to model empowerment by asking themselves the hard questions outlined above. It is only by juxtaposing these two perspectives that we can begin to fully understand the journey of empowerment.

This journey is difficult because no written guarantees are provided—no insurance policies or safety nets will save us if we fail. The possibility of failure is a constant companion. Nevertheless, people will be willing to accept that possibility if they truly experience a sense of empowerment in an environment that values and supports risk, trust, and initiative.

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For a more comprehensive look at the empowerment process within the context of deep change, see Robert E. Quinn’s recently published book entitled Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within (Jossey-Bass, 1996). This work examines both individual and organizational processes that facilitate the organic perspective on empowerment.

focused on information, structure, and teams for facilitating the empowerment process. Finally, R.C. Ford and M.D. Fottler provide more specific ideas on how to implement empowerment in their article entitled “Empowerment: A Matter of Degree,” *The Academy of Management Executive* (August 1995).


Finally, Gretchen M. Spreitzer provides additional discussion of the four sets of levers for psychological empowerment in her recent article entitled “Social Structural Levers to Individual Empowerment in the Workplace,” *Academy of Management Journal* (April 1996).