Improving employee performance by developing empowering leaders & companies

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abstract

Empowerment has been a buzzword in many companies for decades, and research shows that empowerment enhances individual, team, and company performance. In practice, though, empowerment programs often fail. People who institute the programs frequently have a narrow understanding of what empowerment is, and this limited view probably helps to account for the failures. Drawing on several decades of organizational-science research, we provide a more useful, robust definition of *empowerment* and describe obstacles that company leaders and other employees can throw in the path of empowerment initiatives. We then provide empirically driven, practical recommendations for overcoming the obstacles and for otherwise enhancing employee empowerment, such as having leaders model empowerment and changing the company climate to align with more empowering policies and procedures..

Core Findings

What is the issue?
While *empowerment* has become increasingly important to an organization's goals and effectiveness, programs that are designed to produce empowered individuals, teams, and firms often fail to yield expected results. Translating empowerment into practicable and effective interventions is therefore critical to organizational success.

How can you act?
Selected recommendations include:
1) Focusing on all four of the dimensions of empowerment—*autonomy, impact, competence,* and *meaningfulness*—when preparing employees for change
2) Providing direct feedback to employees about how their ideas and suggestions were received by higher level managers and how their ideas actually got implemented.

Who should take the lead?
Researchers and organizational leaders

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to be in any organization today and not hear references to the importance of *empowerment*. Indeed, many employees expect to be empowered.[1] In essence, employees are said to be empowered when they believe that they can exercise great control over work that they consider worthwhile.[2,3] Imagine, for example, a woman we will call Anna, who works for a tech firm and is responsible for making sure her clients are satisfied with their software purchases. As an empowered employee, she would have a lot of discretion in handling this task: For example, she might have the authority to bring in additional resources to troubleshoot software problems without having to consult any higher level managers. As a result of Anna being able to do her job efficiently, she would likely get repeat business from her clients, which would be good for the company and would reinforce Anna's sense of being capable and skilled. She would also feel good about making her customers happy.

More than 30 years of organizational science research supports the value of empowerment for individual employees, teams, and organizations overall.[4] The more empowered employees are, the more likely it is that they will be satisfied with their jobs, freer from stress, committed to their companies, effective in performing their responsibilities, helpful to other coworkers, and able to contribute creative and innovative ideas to their teams and organizations. These benefits occur across a variety of industries, occupations, and geographic regions.

Research has also shown that when leaders empower entire teams rather than just individuals, teams perform better and team members are more satisfied.[4–6] These effects hold up across various types of teams—such as production teams, project teams, and management teams. The larger and more complex the team is, the stronger the empowerment effect is.

The evidence for these effects is overwhelming. And yet programs that aim to produce empowerment often fail to achieve the expected benefits. For example, executives at Levi Strauss & Co., the clothing maker, wanted to empower the company's sewing plant employees in Texas and Tennessee in the 1990s. Their intentions were good: They wanted to reduce the monotony of doing the same tasks every day and to decrease repetitive-stress injuries. In the new scheme, employees would be able to choose different tasks to do on their own in their team, made possible by the training they received to do a greater variety of tasks compared with what they received in the old system. The results were disastrous: Productivity plummeted and costs increased. Consultants brought in to remedy the situation told the company it would need to build a new empowerment program from scratch. In our view, the company made the common mistake of not taking the necessary steps to change from a traditional structure to an empowered one. For example, supervisors were not trained on how to be coaches and facilitators rather than just bosses. When employees reached out for help, they were reportedly told by their supervisors, "Y'all are empowered, y'all decide."[7]

Another reason empowerment programs often fail may be that the concept of empowerment means different things to different people. Because the word *power* is embedded within *empowerment*, many managers and employees alike assume that it simply means transferring power—that employees take on some aspects of their managers' responsibilities and control. Yet programs based on this narrow definition seem unlikely to produce the desired effects.

Empowerment is much more than simply delegating or transferring power from management to employees.[8] In this article, we spell out the more comprehensive definition of *empowerment* that behavioral scientists have adopted, and we explain why knowing this definition is important for designing effective programs. We point out various obstacles to successfully implementing empowerment programs, provide suggestions for overcoming those obstacles, and lay out concrete steps that organizations and supervisors can take to build a climate that promotes empowerment and trust. We also offer advice on how companies can reinvigorate their empowerment programs over time

for sustained success and avoid the many issues that plagued Levi Strauss.

Employee Empowerment Is Actually Four Things, Not One

Behavioral scientists consider *empowerment* to be an umbrella term that contains four distinct but related dimensions. One is the power-transfer aspect that everyone thinks of first: *autonomy*, or the extent to which people have control over carrying out their work.[3] A customer service representative with low autonomy would have little authority over how he or she handled complaints. In contrast, a customer service representative with high autonomy, like Anna, would have great latitude in making sure customers are satisfied, such as by being able to issue credits or provide an additional product or service within reason.[9]

The second dimension is *impact*, or the extent to which an individual's work is perceived as making a difference in a company.[3] A software engineer who does low-impact work may handle a very small piece of code and never fully realize how this code allows a software product to function more effectively. An engineer who does high-impact work might be responsible for introducing code at various points in a software product's life cycle, thereby easily grasping how his or her work ultimately has a significant influence on the overall functioning of the product. When people see how the tasks they perform actually matter to the larger organizational mission and to people inside or outside the company, they tend to be much more motivated to go the extra mile.

The third dimension is *competence*, or the extent to which people believe they can carry out their work skillfully.[3] A medical technician in a hospital might be given additional responsibilities for various aspects of patient care without the requisite training and development critical to successfully completing the assigned tasks. Conversely, another technician might spend six months shadowing a more seasoned colleague and then be given responsibility for a broader array of patient-care tasks. If people do not feel competent at what they do, they will likely be

reluctant to take the risks to achieve the stretch goals that many organizations value today.

The last dimension is *meaningfulness*, or the extent to which people personally care about the work they do.[3] Clearly, different people find various tasks more or less meaningful, and one could say that meaning at work is in the eye of the beholder. A good example of meaningful work might be that done by a pediatric cardiac surgeon, as saving the lives of children every day would provide the type of transcendent meaning most of us could only dream about. Whatever the case, individuals who find what they do to be personally meaningful will often have a very high level of dedication and persistence because of the fulfillment that comes with performing tasks that are important to them. In fact, research has shown that meaningfulness is a powerful driver of employee motivation and performance.[10]

In summary, employees are said to be empowered when they believe that they have autonomy in their day-to-day work, think their work has an impact on an organization, feel competent at handling their responsibilities, and find their job to be personally meaningful.[4] Of course, a person could conceivably experience the four dimensions to different degrees, but research suggests that most individuals, when surveyed, score equally high or low across all the dimensions.[4]

The view of empowerment we have described borrows heavily from research on motivation. For example, the importance of impact and meaningfulness is described in research on the influential job-characteristics model, which posits that redesigning jobs in certain ways—for example, by giving people greater variety in the tasks they perform—helps people feel more motivated, which in turn leads to better job performance and greater job satisfaction.[11] The competence dimension is based largely on Albert Bandura's classic research on self-efficacy, which proposed that when people feel more confident about the tasks they are doing, they will perform better than those who feel less confident.[12] However, the forest is as important as the trees here. Using

"we showed that autonomy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for empowerment"

several statistical analyses, researchers have consistently demonstrated that overall unitary empowerment (a measure assessing all four dimensions together) explains organizationally valued outcomes much more powerfully than do any of the dimensions alone.[4] That finding means that rather than studying the dimensions in isolation, researchers interested in empowerment should bring all four dimensions together to explain the factors that enhance individual and collective performance. Thus, the explanatory power of empowerment requires thinking of the concept as a gestalt: all four dimensions are intertwined and feed off of one another to achieve their effects on organizational outcomes.

The importance of these interactions helps to explain why a focus on autonomy alone—and use of the terms *autonomy* and *empowerment* interchangeably—is misguided.[8] Giving people complete control over a job that they find boring, routine, and meaningless is not empowering. Indeed, empowered teams are more likely to enhance their productivity when they are performing complex tasks, because this type of work is more likely to result in feelings of competence and a sense of meaningfulness and impact.[13] When we compared the effects of autonomy alone against the effects of multidimensional empowerment on a variety of team outcomes (such as team productivity and customer service), we found that multidimensional empowerment resulted in better outcomes. In other words, we showed that autonomy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for empowerment.[14]

Empowerment should not be viewed as a panacea for all organizational needs, and it is not the only intervention that produces desired outcomes. In specific situations, companies may achieve better results by forming partnerships with outside companies, hiring consultants, or restructuring their organizations. Also, empowerment can be a powerful tool for organizations, but it requires employees to be ready and willing to take on more authority and responsibility and organizations to be ready and willing to support them.

We next describe common barriers to successful empowerment and then offer advice for overcoming the obstacles. See Figure 1 for an overview of the benefits of empowering employees and how to achieve such empowerment.
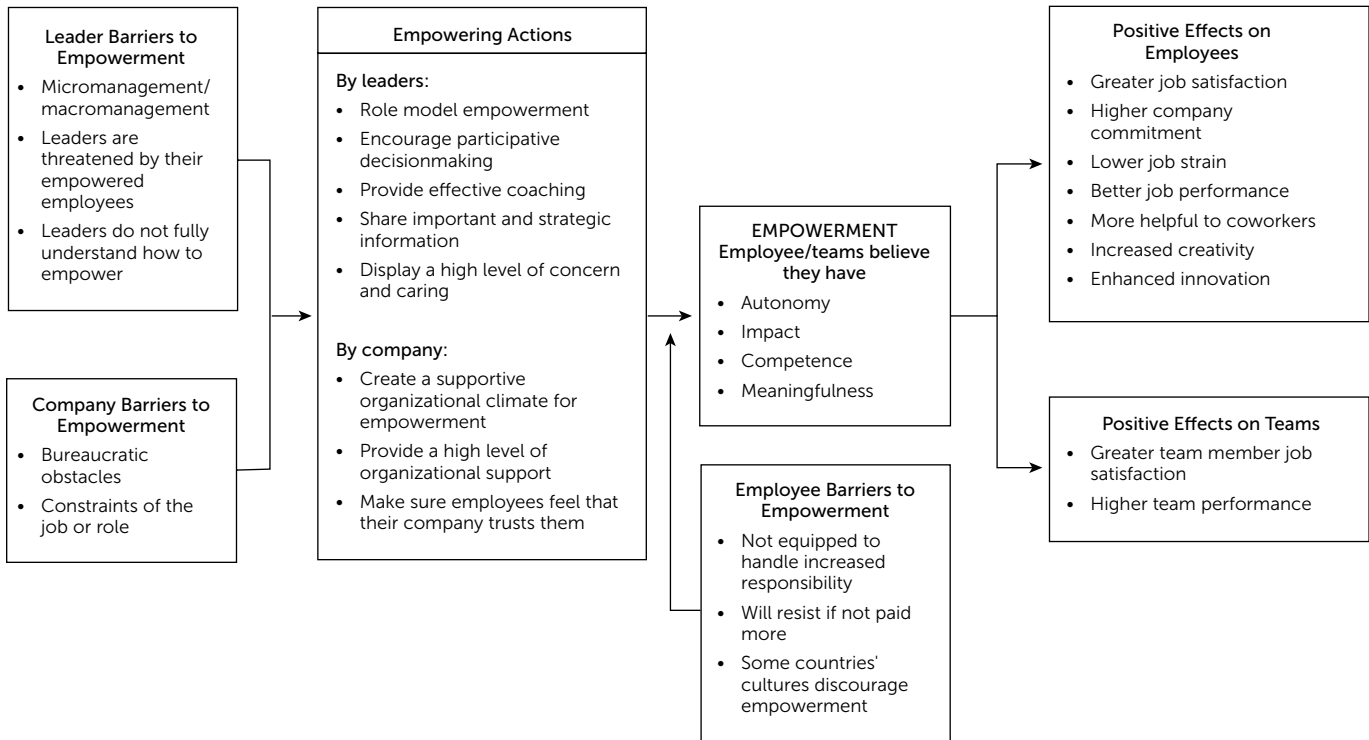
Obstacles to Successful Empowerment Programs

Barriers Posed by Employees

Sometimes the employees themselves are the reason that empowerment efforts do not work well. They may resist taking on a broader set of responsibilities because they lack the needed knowledge and skills or do not want to handle increased demands and stress. Also, employees may object to assuming greater responsibility if the change does not come with a corresponding increase in salary or a promotion. Although doing more with less has become a mantra in today's hypercompetitive business world, employees will likely view such increases in responsibility without a commensurate increases in compensation or status as unfair.[15] There are, however, cultural differences in employees' reactions to empowerment efforts. In countries where citizens place less emphasis on status and hierarchy in society and organizations, such as the United States and other Western countries, employees often are more motivated by empowerment programs.[16]

Barriers Posed by Leaders

Too often leaders (that is, managers at various levels) sabotage their own efforts at empowering those around them, in some cases because they do not know how to be empowering. A sweet spot exists for empowerment initiatives, and missing that target, by either underempowering or overempowering employees, is a common mistake.

Figure 1. Barriers to empowerment, actions that promote it, & potential benefits


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┌─────────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Leader Barriers to      │     │ Empowering Actions           │     │ EMPOWERMENT              │     │ Positive Effects on          │
│ Empowerment             │     │                              │     │ Employee/teams believe   │     │ Employees                    │
│ • Micromanagement/      │     │ By leaders:                  │     │ they have                │     │ • Greater job satisfaction   │
│   macromanagement       │     │ • Role model empowerment     │     │ • Autonomy               │     │ • Higher company commitment  │
│ • Leaders are           │     │ • Encourage participative    │     │ • Impact                 │     │ • Lower job strain           │
│   threatened by their   │     │   decisionmaking             │     │ • Competence             │     │ • Better job performance     │
│   empowered employees   │     │ • Provide effective coaching │     │ • Meaningfulness         │     │ • More helpful to coworkers  │
│ • Leaders do not fully  │     │ • Share important and        │     │                          │     │ • Increased creativity       │
│   understand how to     │     │   strategic information      │     └──────────────────────────┘     │ • Enhanced innovation        │
│   empower               │     │ • Display a high level of    │                                      └──────────────────────────────┘
└─────────────────────────┘     │   concern and caring         │
                                │                              │     ┌──────────────────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────────────┐
┌─────────────────────────┐     │ By company:                  │     │ Employee Barriers to     │     │ Positive Effects on Teams    │
│ Company Barriers to     │     │ • Create a supportive        │     │ Empowerment              │     │ • Greater team member job    │
│ Empowerment             │     │   organizational climate     │     │ • Not equipped to handle │     │   satisfaction               │
│ • Bureaucratic          │     │   for empowerment            │     │   increased responsibility│    │ • Higher team performance    │
│   obstacles             │     │ • Provide a high level of    │     │ • Will resist if not     │     └──────────────────────────────┘
│ • Constraints of the    │     │   organizational support     │     │   paid more              │
│   job or role           │     │ • Make sure employees feel   │     │ • Some countries'        │
└─────────────────────────┘     │   that their company         │     │   cultures discourage    │
                                │   trusts them                │     │   empowerment            │
                                └──────────────────────────────┘     └──────────────────────────┘
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Note. The actions recommended for leaders and companies are meant to overcome barriers to empowerment as well as promote it in other ways. Failure to overcome the barriers will lessen employee empowerment.

A prime example of underempowering employees is micromanagement: After encouraging subordinates to take on more responsibility, leaders sometimes end up closely monitoring the employees and making them feel overly constrained.[8] Instead, leaders have to delegate appropriately and trust their employees to behave in ways that are beneficial to the organization. Conversely, leaders may delegate responsibility and authority without providing needed coaching or guidance. (Remember the Levi Strauss supervisors' response to employee questions: "Y'all are empowered, y'all decide."[7]) This mistake is sometimes referred to as *macro-management*[17] and is just as bad as retaining too much control.

Empowerment does not mean relinquishing all leadership responsibilities; employees need to know the limits of their authority. When leaders fail to set clear expectations for what employees are supposed to take on, the results can be disastrous for both leaders and their subordinates.

One of the most significant impediments to employees' reaching high levels of empowerment occurs when leaders fear losing power and control and thus do not engage in the process enthusiastically. Managers might feel threatened by empowered employees, believing that power is a zero-sum game.[18] If they fear that empowering their employees means losing power themselves, they may be reluctant to engage. Or they may not want their employees to outshine them in performing their newfound responsibilities.[8,19] In truth, empowerment programs help maintain and increase the pipeline of leaders in companies, because low-level employees have a chance to prove themselves by taking on greater responsibility.

In a related worry, leaders may reason that if low-level employees are doing manager-level work, then upper management might conclude that midlevel managers are unnecessary. Yet managers who give more power, responsibility, and authority to their employees can focus on more appropriate leadership tasks

and actually gain more power. In many companies, managers' demonstrating the ability to empower their employees effectively is viewed as a critical stepping stone toward promotion.

The *science–practice gap*, as behavioral scientists call it, is another barrier to successful empowerment programs. Managers may not be aware of the research on empowerment in organizations, or they may not keep up with recent findings. They also may not have any exposure to or experience with empowerment practices.[20] As noted above, some managers still believe that empowerment means only one thing: giving power away. They do not recognize that increased autonomy needs to be accompanied by greater impact, competence, and meaningfulness, which collectively can enable employees to create more value for themselves, their leaders, and their company as a whole.

Barriers Posed by Organizations

Empowerment programs should be aligned with the overall mission and culture of the organization and with the specifics of a job's requirements. Achieving this alignment can be tricky in organizations that have bureaucratic obstacles or when specific jobs come with rigid protocols, such as those that ensure safety. For instance, restrictive policies, procedures, and rules may pose limits on employees, acting freely and relying on their own discretion. We saw this effect firsthand when working with a U.S. government court system. Bureaucratic and legal constraints, which could not be bypassed, impeded our attempts to help managers fully empower their employees. Employees who were promised more decisionmaking latitude and responsibility found themselves thwarted by restrictive policies and rules, and they actually experienced more frustration and disappointment than they would have if they were never promised any empowerment at all. Indeed, researchers have shown that using empowerment-related practices for highly constrained jobs can backfire, resulting in lower employee motivation: employees whose tasks do not require problem solving actually become less satisfied when they are given responsibility for managing their own work.[13]

Thus far, we have argued that empowerment, when effectively implemented, helps individuals, teams, and organizations be more successful. And we have identified a number of challenges that companies face when trying to implement or expand empowerment programs. How can managers overcome these barriers? In general, leaders need to ensure that employees are ready, willing, and able to fully engage in an empowerment program. Further, organizations should teach managers how to model empowerment[4,21] and establish empowering organizational structures.[4] Fuller advice follows.

Recommended Practices for Enhancing Empowerment Programs

Guidelines for Preparing Employees

Empowerment programs should focus on all four of the dimensions of empowerment—autonomy, impact, competence, and meaningfulness—when preparing employees for change. These components have value: A study published in *Harvard Business Review* reported that 90% of workers would take a pay cut to do more meaningful work.[22] As noted, employees will need additional training and development to take on increased authority and responsibility. This might mean internal training for expanded jobs or external leadership development programs that focus on enhancing the skills needed to influence others. Some employees may find empowerment intellectually taxing and emotionally stressful, particularly in the beginning. Ensuring that coaching and counseling are provided can help support employees through the transition. And, if the transition occurs without an immediate increase in pay or a title change for employees, employees need to hear from their managers about how their new roles will lead to long-term gains in visibility and impact, which should, in turn, lead to future job advancement.

Effective models of organizational change have some common themes, such as making sure employees recognize the need for change, being specific about what the change will entail,

$8 billion is spent on diversity training annually

Over 30 years empowerment has been recognized as a positive for organizations

50% of US organizations are expected to offer implicit bias training in the future

"leaders must let go of any fears they have about losing control over the decisionmaking process"

encouraging buy-in for the change, and having the appropriate structures and resources in place to sustain and reinforce the change.[23] At the onset of the transition, as we noted earlier, leaders and employees alike need to be ready, willing, and able to implement empowerment programs. What can be done to prepare people for the programs?

- **Ready.** It is critical to communicate the reasons why empowerment is needed.[24]

- **Willing.** Research has shown that employees' willingness to commit to organizational changes that increase empowerment—which they may view as threatening—depends on being convinced that the change is necessary and legitimate and that the employees will be supported.[25]

- **Able.** Quite often, empowerment is part of a larger suite of human resource programs referred to as *high-performance work systems* (HPWS). HPWS are designed to staff the organization with capable employees that fit the organization's mission and culture and to provide employees with the information and discretion necessary to capitalize on their capabilities and commitment.[26] Because empowered employees will take on new and additional duties, they require training and support.[27]

In one example of the importance of enabling employees to take on new responsibilities, John Mathieu (one of the authors of this article) and his colleagues in 2006 described a successful empowerment program that involved a large network of service technicians. The organization moved from a model in which individual technicians completed work orders assigned to them by their supervisors to one in which geographically assigned teams managed their own work assignments. In addition, team technicians were collectively responsible for outcomes.[28]

How Leaders Can Facilitate Empowerment

Be a Role Model. The conventional management wisdom to "walk the talk" is supported by research on leader behavior that fosters empowerment.[4,29] Leaders who are themselves empowered and who show dedication and diligence can inspire their employees to make similarly strong efforts and to feel good about being empowered. For example, if managers model empowerment by taking on more responsibility without expecting or receiving a new title and a higher salary, they may inspire employees to do the same without resentment. There is also tremendous power in leaders, sharing their own empowerment journeys with their employees. Indeed, storytelling is an important way that managers can instill a sense of confidence in their employees. Employees can see empowerment in action and trust that their leader really does want them to undertake a similar journey.[8]

Encourage Participative Decisionmaking. Most leaders have probably heard about the advantages of letting employees have a say in decisions that managers ultimately make. In this case, conventional wisdom lines up nicely with the behavioral science research. When employees have input; when they feel listened to, respected, and valued; and when they believe they have a voice, they will experience higher levels of empowerment and, in turn, will perform better and have higher job satisfaction.[30,31] The most important thing about employee participation in decisionmaking, however, is to make sure that employee input is truly heard, considered, and, when appropriate, acted on. Little is more demotivating to employees than a leader's going through the motions of taking suggestions or holding employee roundtables and then not implementing any employee-generated ideas. Leaders can enhance the process of participative decisionmaking by providing direct feedback to employees about how their ideas and suggestions were received by higher-level

managers and how their ideas actually got implemented.[32] Further, leaders must let go of any fears they have about losing control over the decisionmaking process; otherwise, such concerns could short-circuit employee participation.

Provide Coaching. To be able to take responsibility for making good decisions on their own, employees will need coaching and clear communication from their leaders. How do the employees' roles and responsibilities contribute to the larger purpose of the group or company? What does a successful result look like? How can they get help with their expanded responsibilities? How much should they keep the leader in the loop? And how much authority do they actually have?[8] Leaders who add responsibilities without providing such coaching and support— that is, leaders who macromanage—can cause empowerment programs to dissolve into mass confusion and failure. Likewise, leaders who are heavy-handed and end up coaching by micromanaging also diminish any true employee empowerment experiences. Thus, establishing expectations very early in the empowerment process is key for long-term success.[18,33] Effective coaching can also help to overcome employee resistance, especially for those who feel uncomfortable taking on unfamiliar roles. Leaders may need to provide extra coaching when difficult assignments and challenges arise, but they must do so without taking over.

Share Strategic Information. Expanded employee responsibilities should come with greater access to big-picture information. When employees know more about how their role fits in with the overall goals of their organization, they are more likely to feel that their work has impact and is meaningful. Remember that many employees would trade a higher salary for greater meaningfulness at work;[22] this fact underscores the value of sharing strategic information. Leaders should be as open as possible about where the company is headed, how its strategy is working (or not working), and how employee efforts contribute to these high-level objectives.[8] Having open forums in which employees get a chance to ask questions is key,

because it allows people to see the big picture and the struggles of an organization and clarifies how individual efforts connect to the greater whole.

Display Concern & Caring. Leaders must attend to their relationships with empowered workers. Solid evidence shows that high-quality relationships between managers and employees correlate with a host of positive outcomes for organizations, such as better job performance, greater organizational commitment, and higher job satisfaction, as well as lower intentions to quit.[34] And when employees feel that their leaders have their best interests at heart and will take the time to understand their individual situations, they are much more likely to experience high levels of empowerment.[8] Such behavior could also help to offset some of the discomfort employees feel when they are taking on new responsibilities. Of course, relationship building takes time, and the process and duration will vary with the personalities of the individuals involved. Nevertheless, managers who are inclined to eschew small talk with employees as a waste of time would do well to reconsider that view, because small talk can be a valuable component of relationship building.

Summary. These five leadership behaviors might be viewed simply as good overall leadership practices. We do not disagree. All these actions would be expected to advance employees' well-being irrespective of empowerment. Even so, the practices are critical for enabling employees to become empowered and for empowerment programs to be successful. Leaders who fail to undertake any of these behaviors can hamper the success of their companies' empowerment efforts. As noted, plenty of research supports the view that leaders who exhibit the five behaviors described in this section increase employee empowerment, and we encourage leaders to stay abreast of this research so as to continue to close the science–practice gap.[8]

How Organizations Can Increase Employee Empowerment

In addition to steps that individual leaders can take to enhance employee empowerment,

actions at higher levels of the organization are needed as well, to reinforce leader behavior.

Create a Supportive Climate. Every organization has a culture—shared norms, values, and beliefs—that create an overall climate in which employees function. Organizational climates may need to be modified to promote empowerment company-wide.[4] Make sure that empowering leadership practices are instituted as broadly as possible throughout the company.[8] Although some work has shown that managers who excel at empowering employees can compensate for less-empowering managers,[35] we still advocate for trying to avoid isolated pockets of poor practice. Employees often move between different teams or divisions of a company, and ideally they would feel supported everywhere. Achieving an organization-wide empowering climate takes more effort than just making sure all managers individually display appropriate leadership behavior. The leaders must work together collectively to promote empowerment for all employees.[8] Supportive organizational climates will also help to overcome the barriers to empowerment that are associated with bureaucratic obstacles, policies, and procedures. If leaders have the leeway to break down burdensome practices—for example, a multilevel approval process—then employees can exercise their judgment and take more responsibility for their actions. Likewise, overly restrictive rules can constrain employees' decisionmaking and thus their autonomy.

A popular case study in the organizational research literature describes an empowerment program in an oil refinery, where both organizational policies and job requirements did not, at first glance, appear to be a good fit for employee empowerment because of the constraints posed by safety protocols.[36] The case study features a manager who taught employees the steps required for solving problems and then expected them to make good decisions, which they eventually did. Health care is another tightly regulated and high-consequence work environment. In these settings, empowerment programs must strike a balance between adhering to standardized practices and providing employees with the freedom to innovate.[37,38]

Provide High-Level Organizational Support. For employees to feel truly empowered, they must believe that their company wants them to be empowered, cares about their well-being, and has their best interests at heart.[4] This kind of support is particularly important when employees are expected to take risks or when they are asked to accomplish objectives and tasks that they have not handled before or that they are trying to do in a new way. They need to feel safe enough to think outside of the box without fear that their ideas will be summarily dismissed.[8,39] The organization must have structures in place to support employees' risk-taking behaviors. The HPWS mentioned earlier are an example of such a structure. They emphasize recruitment and selection of employees and leaders who are ready and willing to be empowered, and they provide appropriate training for those employees. In addition, HPWS offer rewards for engaging in empowerment practices. Indeed, research on HPWS has described a climate of support and shown that employees feel that their firms empower them.[32,40]

Cultivate Trust. Employees also need to know that their company trusts them with having the authority and responsibility to act in empowered ways.[4] We distinguish trust from support because simply wanting one's employees to be empowered and giving them more freedom and discretion is not a strong enough emotional foundation. It is when employees truly know that their company is going to trust them to do the right thing that they can exercise their newly empowered status.[4] Trust should help to create positive gain spirals or feed-forward loops of empowerment, because each time an employee takes a higher level action and receives positive feedback, the employee will feel more empowered to take on the next challenge. Employee empowerment improves performance; in turn, better performance allows for higher levels of empowerment.[8] Such positive spirals can have exponentially more positive effects for employees and their organizations. A high level of trust from companies is necessary to make

"employees who feel that they are not empowered are likely to be less productive and less satisfied"

sure employees know that they can indeed use discretion in the workplace to generate new ideas and innovate.

Summary. In general, leaders need to ensure that employees are ready, willing, and able to be empowered, and organizations should teach managers how to lead employees,[4,21] in addition to instituting empowering organizational practices.[4] The empowering organizational practices we have discussed represent good company-wide approaches to motivating and leading employees. These practices have also been shown by research to increase employee satisfaction with their empowerment.

How Do Companies Prevent Empowerment Programs From Losing Steam?

An empowerment initiative should not be seen as a one-time change but rather as an ongoing process that will require periodic reinvigoration, given that the basics of sustenance are review, revise, and refresh. For example, one study contrasted two empowerment interventions that started out equally well, with one sustaining its effectiveness and the other losing its momentum.[24] In the successful effort, after individual employee goals were set and action plans were developed, managers reviewed progress with employees frequently. In the unsuccessful effort, managers lost focus and failed to review progress, and empowerment efforts fizzled.

Regular review offers a chance to revise action plans and goals. The study on the two empowerment interventions demonstrates that if an empowerment program is not flexible enough to adjust in response to changing conditions or

to aspects that are not working, it will stagnate and become less relevant. Building in planned reviews and expected revisions helps to instill a continuous improvement culture and paves the way for revitalization efforts.

A flexible, successful empowerment program can have benefits beyond improved operation of a company: It can serve as a foundation for other human resource programs. For instance, empowered employees are well suited for participating in systems that encourage the sharing of leadership across a team (shared-leadership systems),[41] taking the initiative to change their own jobs to make them more intrinsically motivating (job crafting),[42] and setting priorities when they belong to multiple teams simultaneously (orchestrating multiple team membership arrangements).[43]

Policy Implications of Empowered Employees & Organizations

If the people who set policies for organizations have doubts about the benefits of encouraging employee empowerment, the study reporting that 90% of people would take a cut in pay in exchange for having meaningful work should put their concerns to rest. That study, conducted in 2017 by BetterUp Labs, a leadership development platform based in San Francisco, asked 2,000 employees from various companies about aspects of empowerment. The investigators found that nine of out 10 respondents "would sacrifice 23 percent of their future earnings—an average of $21,000 a year—for 'work that is always meaningful,'" but unfortunately most respondents felt their current work was only "about half as meaningful as it could be."[44] Other work has shown that employees who feel that they are not empowered are likely to be less productive and less satisfied; in addition, they may experience burnout along with poor emotional and mental health. Empowered employees and organizations serve the public interest because of the many tangible and intangible benefits associated with employees' experiencing higher levels of autonomy, impact, competence, and meaningfulness in their work. Empowered employees who experience all

four of these dimensions end up being happier overall (that is, they are more satisfied with their lives than less empowered employees are),[45] because these benefits spill over into their personal lives.

When building an empowerment program, organizations should take both a bottom-up approach (selecting employees who are predisposed to responding to empowerment positively) and a top-down one (selecting leaders who are motivated and comfortable with empowering those around them). This strategy will properly align the "empowerers" with the "to-be-empowered."

Organizations also should attend to other policy implications. For example, David Lepak and Scott Snell have argued that to most effectively motivate employees, an organization should have a set of human resource practices that are aligned with one another rather than practices that are used independently.[46] These aligned practices might include not only ones specific to employee empowerment but also those focused on promotion from within, comprehensive and continuous training opportunities, performance appraisals that highlight learning and development, and compensation programs that incentivize new ideas and innovation.

Human resources policies should also hold organizational leaders and employees accountable for the amount of empowering leadership and the empowerment they demonstrate, respectively. For job performance appraisals of organizational leaders, human resources appraisal systems should be modified to include measures of specific empowering leadership behaviors, such as serving as a role model, coaching effectively, and displaying care and concern for employees. Multirater feedback can then be used to assess the extent to which leaders actually exhibited the behaviors. Much the same approach—that is, with a modified appraisal system and multirater feedback—could be used to assess the level of empowerment employees are demonstrating. In addition, reward systems should be modified to encourage leaders and employees to exhibit relevant behaviors. These reward programs

need not be costly. Indeed, simple feedback and acknowledgement go a long way in reinforcing employees' behaviors.[47]

Conclusion

In summary, there has been a disconnect between disappointing real-life experiences with empowerment programs and the empirical research that overwhelmingly demonstrates positive effects for both individuals and organizations. We maintain that the biggest source of the disconnect is the flawed way in which many empowerment programs are implemented. As in most areas of management, the devil really is in the details. We hope to help remedy the disconnect by raising three key points.

First, empowerment is often mistakenly viewed as consisting of only one dimension; that is, it is misunderstood as meaning simply the transfer of power from managers to employees. However, empirical behavioral science research shows that basing empowerment initiatives on this simplistic understanding is unlikely to improve performance. Employees will truly and completely experience the positive impact of empowerment only when increased power (referred to here as *autonomy*) is accompanied by their feeling competent and having the sense that their work is meaningful and impactful.

Second, to facilitate the effective implementation of empowerment programs, leaders need to be trained and rewarded for (a) being role models who demonstrate the hard work and empowerment they expect to see from their employees; (b) encouraging employees to actively participate in decisionmaking; (c) providing coaching so that employees feel more confident about being empowered; (d) when possible, sharing important and strategic information with employees so that they can see how their work fits into the big picture; and (e) displaying a high level of concern and caring so that employees know that their leaders have their best interests at heart.

Finally, organizations can help smooth the way to effective empowerment program implementation by making sure that they (a) create

a supportive organizational climate for empowerment by ensuring that managers collectively support empowerment initiatives throughout entire companies; (b) provide a high level of practical organizational support to ensure that empowering leadership is practiced as widely as possible throughout a company; and (c) display a high level of trust in employees so that the employees know companies have their back when they take the kinds of risks and initiatives expected when empowerment programs are in place. We believe that by instituting these important data-driven policies, companies will be much better positioned to power up their employees, teams, and organizations for maximum success.[48]

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