

# DEMYSTIFYING EMPOWERMENT

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## ABSTRACT

It would appear that the concept of empowerment has become popular and is so widely used that it has become a fad. It is also generally poorly understood and this results in a degree of mistrust and cynicism. There is often a lack of clarity as to the role and contribution of empowerment in organisations, and how empowerment differs from concepts such as employee involvement and participation. The key dimensions, benefits and paradigm of empowerment are also misunderstood areas. To overcome these problems this literature and theory assessment attempts to define empowerment, to provide a basis for a healthy empowerment paradigm and to stimulate further theoretical and empirical research.

## OPSOMMING

Dit blyk dat bemagtiging as konsep só populêr en wyd gebruik word dat dit 'n gier geword het. Die konsep word maklik misverstaan en word, in 'n mate, met wantroue en sinisme bejeën. Dit ontbreek dikwels aan duidelikheid oor die rol en bydrae van bemagtiging in organisasies en hoedanig bemagtiging van konsepte soos werknemerbetrokkenheid en -deelname verskil. Die sleuteldimensies, voordele en paradigma van bemagtiging is areas waaroor onduidelikheid bestaan. Ten einde hierdie probleme te oorkom is daar aan die hand van 'n literatuur- en teorieverkenning gepoog om bemagtiging te definieer, 'n basis vir 'n gesonde bemagtigingsparadigma te bewerkstellig en verdere teoretiese en empiriese navorsing te stimuleer.

Empowerment has been advocated widely as a contributor to achieving a competitive advantage for organisations and socio-economic upliftment for communities. However, these claims can only be valid if they are indeed based on a well-documented, commonly accepted understanding and definition of empowerment.

Judging from published research and literature it is questionable whether sufficient theoretical research has been conducted firstly, to define empowerment and secondly, to establish a well-integrated empowerment framework or model. Key questions arising from the literature review in the area of empowerment relate to whether empowerment is similar to participative management, whether it mainly refers to an individual's locus of control, whether empowerment is a concept in its own right and whether it means that an open-ended, "whatever-it-takes" approach should be followed.

These questions prompted the development of a definition of empowerment without which various human resource and financial risks confront organisations: for example, driving empowerment efficiently within an organisation while the initiative itself lacks effectiveness; the risk of creating high, unrealistic expectations and notions of entitlement as a consequence of a fragmented understanding of empowerment; and potential financial risk arising from the uninhibited initiative of staff members. The near-demise of Barings Bank serves as an example of a situation in which one person single-handedly caused the downfall of an entire organisation through a number of illegal transactions – the power and risk taking boundaries may not have been adequately determined.

The purpose of the article is to provide an appropriate point of departure to test understanding and assumptions of empowerment through the definition of empowerment and discussing various contexts and guidelines for empowerment.

## THE DEFINITION OF EMPOWERMENT

### Three main streams

In the search for a definition of empowerment at individual level (as opposed to collective empowerment such as affirmative

action initiatives) three main streams of thinking emerged. Firstly, there were loose definitions and descriptions pertaining to what may be called the 'organisational empowerment perspective' in which aspects such as teamwork, information sharing and decision-making from an organisational level were highlighted (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Mills, 1994; Peters, 1994 and Steward, 1994).

Secondly, definitions focused on the 'individual empowerment perspective', with discussions relating to aspects at individual level such as motivation, followership, organisational commitment, locus of control and entitlement (Bendix, 1996; Block, 1993; Fenton-O'Creivy, 1995; Ivancevich and Matteson, 1987; Kelley, 1992; Loxton, 1993; Mabeta, 1991; Macher, 1988; Moerdyk and Coldwell, 1990; Nielsen, 1993; Oates, 1992 and Steward, 1994). The remaining stream of thinking incorporated 'the training and development perspective' as a focal point in defining empowerment, although this received the least emphasis of the three main directions (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Moerdyk and Coldwell, 1993 and Newstrom and Davis, 1993).

The following definitions extend somewhat wider than the typical focus on only one particular stream of thinking. Fenton-O'Creivy (1995, p.155) defines empowerment within the field of management as "providing employees with tools, resources, and discretion to further the interests of the organisation (as seen by senior management)". This author highlights both the 'organisational empowerment perspective' and the 'training and development perspective'. Moerdyk and Coldwell (1990) describe empowerment in terms of the organisation providing training and bridging programmes to generate knowledge and expertise (relating to the 'training and development perspective') and in terms of management assessing barriers to performance such as processes, procedures and cultural assumptions (relating to the 'organisational empowerment perspective').

Newstrom and Davis (1993, p.246) describe how the effect of powerlessness ("employees believe they are dependent on others and that their own efforts will have little impact on performance") contributes to low job related self-efficacy ("the conviction among people that they can successfully perform their jobs and make meaningful contributions"). In this regard, empowerment is seen as the process by which low levels of self-efficacy can be raised:

Empowerment is the process of identifying and removing the conditions that cause powerlessness while enhancing feelings of self-efficacy. Empowerment authorises employees to cope with situations and enables them to take control of problems as they arise (p.246).

Newstrom and Davis (1993) suggest four broad approaches to empowerment which address all three of the identified main streams of empowerment: organisational empowerment perspective (providing role models and giving emotional support), individual empowerment perspective (providing role models, social reinforcement and emotional support) and the training and development perspective (helping employees achieve job mastery and providing role models).

It is important, however, to note how the approach to a concept by the same authors can evolve over time and be redefined as a consequence. According to the most recent definition of empowerment offered by Newstrom and Davis (1997, p.227): "Empowerment is any process that provides greater autonomy to employees through the sharing of relevant information and the provision of control over factors affecting job performance". In addition, a fifth broad approach to empowerment, allowing employees more control (with the focus on the organisational empowerment perspective), has been included.

Judging from the most recent formal definition for empowerment offered by Newstrom and Davis (1997), there is an increasing emphasis on the organisational empowerment perspective. Although the broad approaches to empowerment recommended by Newstrom and Davis collectively cover the three main streams of empowerment, the formal definitions in themselves lack the holistic view. The definition of empowerment by Zemke and Schaaf (1989) seems to overcome this problem and includes all three components or main streams:

Empowerment is the next necessary step beyond simply training employees to do their jobs. It means encouraging and rewarding them for extra effort, imagination and initiative – and tolerating their mistakes when well-intentioned efforts fail to work out exactly as planned. The goal is that best of all business worlds where empowered employees confidently and capably address unique problems and opportunities when and as they occur (p.66).

#### Meta-classification

A meta-classification enables discussion of the various definitions of and approaches to empowerment under the respective main streams which emerged from the literature assessment. Cook (1993) formulated a broad classification of empowerment into three components, which formed part of his 'development cube'. According to Cook (1993) personal empowerment is achieved through the interaction of various dimensions – organisational, individual and competence at individual, intragroup and intergroup levels. Furthermore, these three dimensions should be developed at a rate at which they are balanced, according to organisational, individual and job requirements.

It would appear that the simple classification of empowerment definitions into separate main streams is too linear and non-systemic and that it is essentially the *interaction* between the various main components which produce the desired empowerment results. Cook's (1993) empowerment components accurately and succinctly describe empowerment from a holistic, systemic perspective and are therefore seen as an ideal point of departure for an understanding of the essential empowerment requirements. Therefore, these dimensions identified by Cook (1993) will be used as the basis of the discussion and will replace other attempts at categorisation. As applied by Cook (1993) 'organisational empowerment' will be labelled as the 'objective' dimension, 'individual empowerment' as the 'subjective' dimension and training and development as the 'competence' dimension.

Cook (1993, p.8) describes the dimension of **objective empowerment** as "an employee's development from oppression to influence and opportunity in organisational terms". He further states that people can be empowered objectively at individual level through exposure to empowering leadership; decision-making authority at task level; removal of organisational restrictions such as poor information sharing, discrimination and bureaucracy (which discourages self-expression and encourages dependency); direct rewards for competence and innovation; job enrichment through exposure to success experiences, job rotation; more challenging tasks and provision of opportunities through participative management.

**Subjective empowerment** according to Cook (1993, p.10) refers to the development of self-efficacy, a sense of "I can", within the person relative to a specific task or function. In similar terms Newstrom and Davis (1993, p.14) describe self-efficacy as "a person's belief that he is capable to perform a task, to fulfill role expectations, to make a meaningful contribution or to meet a challenging situation successfully". Self-efficacy, according to Cook (1993), can be built through introducing people to experiences of success in a series of tasks with increasing difficulty; through giving people positive feedback, support and encouragement. Motivation, the sense of enjoying other people's high expectations and confidence in oneself (Pygmalion effect) and reliance on one's own initiative (inner locus of control) represent additional three key elements of subjective power (Cook, 1993).

Cook (1993, p.6) describes **empowerment in competence** as the process of developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to carry out tasks successfully: "people are empowered to the extent that they develop the ability to do their job well, to manage relationships effectively and to manage their own time, careers and health".

When one or two dimensions are developed at the expense of the other dimension(s) people can, according to Cook (1993, p.6), broadly be described in terms of the following categories:

- **Token:** promotion to a senior position, but unmatched development in subjective power and competence dimensions;
- **Outsider:** someone who has competence and knows it (subjective power) but does not receive power or recognition via the organisation (objective power);
- **Underachiever:** a competent person who is promoted and given development and opportunity (objective power) but who lacks subjective power; and
- **Lost asset:** someone who has competence but lacks the confidence to express it (subjective power), thus not being recognised and developed along the objective power dimension.

In essence, the development cube of Cook contains eight possible segments of empowered and disempowered employees (Cook, 1997), extending beyond the documented "Token, Outsider, Underachiever and Lost Asset" segments (Cook, 1993). Cook (1997) described a further segment, the 'Loose canon' – as being someone who receives power and recognition through the organisation (objective dimension), who has a high level of self-confidence (subjective power) but who lacks the competence dimension. By assessing the eight possible positions of the development cube, the following additional segments have been described: the empowered segment of 'Stewards' (high levels of alignment between the three dimensions) and the disempowered segments of 'Blinkers on' (low competence, low objective power, but having a high degree of subjective power) and 'Lost case' (low ratings across all three dimensions).

Judging from the required interaction between these dimensions to achieve empowerment, empowerment does not, for example, mainly refer to an individual's locus of control, which only relates to the subjective empowerment dimension. In general, authors typically describe empowerment by focusing

on one empowerment dimension at the cost of the other two dimensions. Only in selected cases are all dimensions included (Newstrom and Davis, 1993 and Zemke and Schaaf, 1989).

Evaluation of the literature indicated that Cook (1993) has made a meaningful contribution to understanding empowerment, as is evident from the following explanations:

- Identification and classification of the essential empowerment elements, namely the objective, subjective and competence empowerment dimensions.
- The development cube makes provision for a contingency approach to managing empowerment, since allowance is made for situational dynamics in the identification of disempowered segments of employees.
- Some reference is made to possible contextual influences relating to empowerment, such as power operating at different levels: within an individual (training and development at a personal level) between individuals (advancement of protégés is faster and quicker than that of other people) and between groups (for example affirmative action seeking to empower women and blacks).
- The emphasis on empowerment as a result of the interaction between the objective, subjective and competence empowerment dimensions indicates a systemic approach to the concept, recognising the complex inter-relationships and interdependencies between the dimensions:

The development cube suggests that all three should be raised in keeping with each other, according to the mutually agreed requirements of the job, the individual and the organisation (Cook, 1993, p.7).

However, it is suggested that certain areas of Cook's contribution require enhancements. Firstly, the only reference to a possible definition for empowerment is given as: "The essence of personal empowerment, then, lies in a person becoming more powerful". With the emphasis on "powerful" this definition may lend itself to entitlement and unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, since the emphasis is on personal empowerment in the workplace, the definition may perhaps be refocused to refer to 'a person developing both his personal and job-related efficacy, utilising opportunities provided by the organisation'. Secondly, little attention is given to the incorporation of available literature (albeit scarce) on how views on empowerment relate to the competence dimension. In addition, there is insufficient focus on the possible range of contextual elements, which may impact on the analysis, interpretation, and managing of individual empowerment in the workplace. Lastly, although the labels given to various disempowered segments of people are very useful in summarising and describing empowerment deficiencies, one should guard against stereotyping and labelling, since this is against the very nature of empowerment.

The dimensions identified by Cook (1993) are confirmed by the work of several other authors who indicate similar sets of empowerment elements. Possibly the earliest indication of the three dimensions is to be found in the work of Hersey and Blanchard (1977), which focuses on situational leadership. Their description of job maturity, with the emphasis on skills and knowledge relates to the competence empowerment dimension, whilst the concept of psychological maturity can be categorised under the subjective empowerment dimension. The specific situational leadership style of the manager relates to aspects such as involvement in decision-making given to the individual, aligning with the objective empowerment dimension.

Moerdyk and Coldwell, 1990; Newstrom and Davis, 1993 and Zemke and Schaaf, 1989 have also described the empowerment dimensions by indirectly addressing them in their respective discussions on empowerment, whilst Human (1991), and Bowmaker-Falconer (1991, p.189) popularised the phrase of empowerment or competent performance meaning "to be able, willing and allowed". Various descrip-

tions of the types of power such as role, expert and resource power (Steward, 1990) and interpersonal and structural power bases (Ivancevich and Matteson, 1987) can also be categorised under the three dimensions.

The following section illustrates how authors have selectively elaborated on certain empowerment features and aspects, categorised under the headings of the objective empowerment dimension, the subjective empowerment dimension and the competence empowerment dimension. Although these contributions in themselves are incomplete for full understanding of empowerment, they are valuable in the sense that the impact of certain human resource management concepts on empowerment are discussed, enhancing one's understanding of the respective empowerment dimensions.

#### Objective empowerment dimension

Bowen and Lawler (1992) regard employees as empowered if they receive information about organisational performance, are rewarded for contribution to organisational performance, have the knowledge and skill to understand and contribute to organisational performance, and have the power to make decisions that influence organisational direction and performance. Peters (1994) also emphasises the importance of giving people the information they need to make decisions in order to empower them.

Steward (1994) and Zemke and Schaaf (1989) describe empowerment with the emphasis on the objective dimension and decision-making. They describe empowerment as a feeling of commitment and job ownership through the ability and authority to make decisions, be responsible, and be measured by results. The devolution of decision-making responsibility to people closest to the problems to be solved, is also highlighted. Mills (1994) describes empowerment as the commitment to establish greater teamwork among employees with more responsibility delegated downward and across the organisation.

Trust is described as an important ingredient in empowering people: "The only way to make a man trustworthy is to trust him" (Peters, 1994, p.75). Empowerment requires managers to trust their staff to make their own judgements and use initiative, also trusting them to take sensible risks in pursuit of clear and agreed objectives. Trust also requires tolerance by management for errors, disclosure of errors by staff and a non-punitive moral standard – against objectively assessing incompetence or careless mistakes (Steward, 1994).

#### Subjective empowerment dimension

The concepts of motivation, commitment, powerlessness, self-efficacy, authority and entitlement are discussed in the following section.

#### Subjective empowerment dimension: motivation

Cook (1993, p.11) explains that the following generally accepted approaches to motivation have been incorporated into his description of empowerment: each individual has different needs, and the specific motivational tactics will therefore vary from one individual to the next (empowerment should thus be needs-based); challenging and inspiring goals are motivating; people should see the link between their effort and their performance and between their performance and their rewards (this relates to the Expectancy Theory of motivation); and a leader should clarify and interpret the organisation's vision into specific goals and objectives which excite followers of the vision.

Kelley (1992) offers interesting insight into the underlying reasons and motivations as to why people become followers of a particular cause. This is of importance to empowerment as a change tool since not all people are motivated by the organisation's vision or the vision or charisma of a leader. They choose between seven "paths" of followership, as suggested by Kelley (1992), for example, choosing the path of a loyalist, exhibiting personal loyalty to a leader, or the path

of a comrade, having a desire to be part of a community. By understanding an individual's main path of followership and his relationship with the organisation, management can empower and reward the individual in a relevant, motivational way.

Furthermore, employees could potentially be plotted along an empowerment continuum according to their readiness and willingness to change and according to whether they want to be empowered or not. An understanding of where employees are positioned on such a continuum (Table 1) could assist management in gradually moving employee segments closer towards a paradigm and experience of empowerment. Steward (1994) describes traditional management skills as planning, communicating, coordinating, controlling, directing, leading and motivating, whilst new management skills required for empowerment would be facilitating, enabling, consulting, collaborating, mentoring and supporting.

TABLE 1  
EMPOWERMENT CONTINUUM

WANT TO BE EMPOWERED	FENCESITTERS	DO NOT WANT TO BE EMPOWERED
New Style Management 70%*	"Wait and see", "what's in it for me?" Proportion of people who first want to assess potential personal gain before committing to empowerment	Traditional Style Management 70%*
Traditional style Management 30%*		New Style Management 30%*

\* Note: these hypothetical percentages are intended to illustrate a possible critical mass supporting a particular management approach. The specific empowerment objectives and context should play a significant role in determining the management approach applied.

**Subjective empowerment dimension: commitment**

Macher (1988) describes organisational commitment as having a close relationship with empowerment, where empowerment can enhance commitment to the organisation. The point is also emphasised that everyone is in it together, that all people have leverage and choice and that looking to others for salvation or blame merely reinforces feelings of powerlessness. Macher depicts a range of commitment to work, stating from experience, that most people can be placed between + 1/2 and + 2 on the scale, which is illustrated in Table 2.

Oates (1992) points out that every organisation has its hard core of people who are reluctant to take on more responsibility. To them work is merely a way to earn a living. Such people feel a basic contractual level of commitment to the organisation and get satisfaction from community or social life involvement.

The interactive dynamics between empowerment and other human resource variables such as commitment should be assessed to enable pro-active management of potential risk areas. Empowerment segments may be identified if an empowerment-commitment matrix is constructed (as depicted in Figure 1).

TABLE 2  
RANGE OF COMMITMENT TO WORK (Macher, 1988, p.43)

Actively Hostile	Alienated	Retired on the job	Formal Commitment	Concerned but limited sense of power	Personal ambition	Deep Commitment
-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
Actively works against management or the organisation.	Mistrusts organisation's motives toward consumers and/or employees.	Avoids work and responsibility - hides out.	Completes assorted tasks, no more.	Technically competent; concerned for quality. Feels victimised by system.	Pushes hard to achieve personal goals. Knows how to work within the system.	Sense of meaning and purpose beyond purely personal ambition. Pushes hard to make a difference.

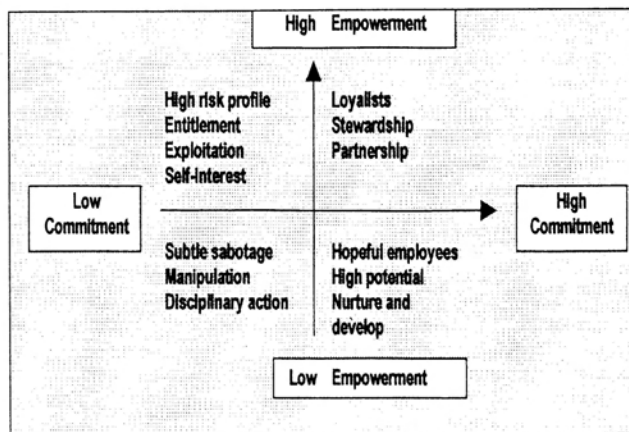


Figure 1: Hypothetical empowerment-commitment segmentation matrix.

Low levels of empowerment (as a result of misalignment of any of the three empowerment dimensions) combined with, for example, high levels of commitment, may yield employees with the potential to develop, and these people should be nurtured. Alternatively, a highly empowered, but low-commitment individual (e.g. no buy-in into the vision or values of the organisation) may directly or indirectly undermine organisational integrity.

**Subjective empowerment dimension: powerlessness versus self-efficacy**

The development of self-efficacy attitudes to address powerlessness in the workplace is recommended by Fenton-O'Creedy (1995, p.155), summarising the work of Conger and Kanungo who suggest "that empowerment is the process of fostering self-efficacy beliefs among employees. This implies both removing sources of powerlessness and providing employees with positive feedback and support". In similar terms, Newstrom and Davis (1993, p.246) describe how powerlessness - people not feeling capable of controlling their own destiny - contributes to feelings of low self-efficacy in the workplace. They go on to define empowerment "as the process of identifying and removing the conditions that cause powerlessness while enhancing feelings of self-efficacy". However, these authors only focus on job-related self-efficacy without taking into account the spillover effect of powerlessness as experienced in broader societal terms, as is the case in South Africa.

In discussing the exclusion model relating to Black empowerment, Moerdyk and Coldwell (1990) point out that in the past blacks have experienced legislative and social barriers beyond their control at the socio-political level (job reservation, influx control, inferior education, Group Areas Act) and at organisational level (discriminatory practices in terms of recruitment and selection, promotion, performance appraisal). This, together with being dominated by other cultural groups in organisations resulted in people becoming powerless, leading to symptoms of learned helplessness.



Mabeta (1991) also describes helplessness in South Africa as being a direct consequence of political powerlessness: people were unable to make decisions on important issues that affect their lives. This situation has been exacerbated by the inability of interventions to help people help themselves. Mabeta recommends that an internal locus of control be encouraged and that communities be included in the conceptual stages of a planning process. Rotter (1966) states that people with an internal locus of control (self-determination) believe they are masters of their own destiny and take personal responsibility for controlling their lives. People with an external locus of control, on the other hand, believe that they are controlled by outside forces over which they have little influence.

It would appear that an internal locus of control is desirable to enable people to achieve self-efficacy in the process of empowerment, to redirect learned helplessness. Given South Africa's historical non-ownership and limited control over circumstances amongst blacks, experiences of success and continuous reinforcement are important to encourage the development of an internal locus of control. From an organisational perspective, Bendix (1996) states that as long as traditional management structures and power hierarchies remain intact, nothing will really change and employees will remain powerless:

It can be very strongly argued that perceptions of inequity and powerlessness constitute the crux of the productivity dilemma; conversely, that only by democratisation and empowerment will organisations attain that seemingly Utopian state where employees will give more, rather than less, than is required of them (p.575).

#### Subjective empowerment dimension: authority

Nielsen (1993) and Steward (1994) describe empowerment as the sharing of power and argue that empowerment does not result in the loss of power, but in changes in the way it is applied. Steward (1994) further defines authority as essentially being the right to decide and command, and also to differentiate between being *in* authority and being *an* authority. Older styles of management typically relied on managers being *in* authority, where the manager made the rules and staff had to obey them. Along similar lines of thought, Bendix (1996) suggests that the restructuring of power relationships should be characterised by a replacement of 'power over ...' with 'power to ...'. She also cautions that:

In the true sense of democracy, management needs to give employees some say over their own destiny, both in the narrow confines of their particular jobs and on a broader company level. At the same time managers should not hide behind democratisation as an excuse relinquishing their leadership roles. A leaderless organisation is not democratic but anarchic (p.576).

#### Subjective empowerment dimension: entitlement

In debating the issue of empowerment versus entitlement, Block (1993) cautions that focus on empowerment may unintentionally reinforce the drive for entitlement, leading people to believe that they can do what they want and get what they ask for. The belief that the individual's needs are more important than that of the organisation and that the organisation exists for the individual's sake, is at the heart of entitlement. Entitlement is also created by the belief that the organisation owes people, because they've made sacrifices. Empowerment can be used as a weapon: "In the name of empowerment I have heard people ask for: more pay; more people; more empire; greater recognition and privilege; immunity from disappointment from those above; freedom to pursue strictly personal projects; and a risk-free environment" (Block, 1993, p.34).

It is important to view empowerment in a holistic fashion and to attempt to simultaneously develop all the empowerment dimensions – if the opportunities and objective empowerment are provided at the cost of development of the subjective and

competency dimensions, a culture of entitlement may arise. George Negota, of the ANC's department of human resource development, is quoted by Loxton (1993, p.23) in a discussion of the issue of entitlement (creating a culture of dependency on state hand-out and quotas as in the United States) versus empowerment, the desirable approach which encourages people to help themselves and not become dependent.

#### Competence Empowerment Dimension

From the survey of the empowerment literature it is apparent that researchers do not focus sufficiently on the knowledge, skills and experience required for effective and efficient work performance. Competence is referred to as virtually a given requirement within the empowerment equation, with the result that the attitudinal aspects receive greater emphasis and training and development issues are neglected. For example, Henkoff (1994) gives an account of Motorola's culture of empowerment, their ability to renew themselves and their technological advancements, but little mention is made of training or competency building. However, Bowen and Lawler, 1993; Moerdyk and Coldwell; 1990; Newstrom and Davis, 1993 and Zemke and Schaaf, 1989 emphasise training to build the required job competencies in their empowerment arguments.

One or two empowerment dimensions should not be developed at the expense of others: a person is powerless to perform without job competence (Cook, 1993). Even when people are promoted (objective empowerment) and they have an adequate level of self-empowerment, they will become powerless to perform if they lack the skills, knowledge, attitudes and competence to carry out functions successfully. The absence of any one or two dimensions will create disempowered categories of employees. It is also clear that the excessive focus on the subjective component by researchers in the field may give rise to unfulfilled expectations, due to the absence of enabling opportunities and competency building.

#### Empowerment: a new label for old wine?

In contrast to the various definitions relating to the objective, subjective or competency empowerment dimensions or combinations thereof, authors Kreitner and Kinicki (1995, p.275) label empowerment as a new word for existing, traditional concepts such as participative management:

Some call it **empowerment** or power sharing. Others use traditional labels such as participative management, participative decision making, and delegation. Regardless of the term one prefers, the underlying process is the same. Namely, the decentralisation of power (p.275).

Three criticisms can be levied against this viewpoint. Firstly, in effect Kreitner and Kinicki (1995, p.275) do not recognise empowerment as a new, emerging concept in its own right, but view it as a new label for existing, well-entrenched management approaches. As such, they contradict themselves by calling empowerment "a very exciting trend in today's organisations".

In the second instance, the underlying process of empowerment according to these authors is seen as the decentralisation of power. This simplistic assumption is only partly correct, in the sense that the decentralisation of power can be categorised under the objective empowerment dimension, whilst the remaining two dimensions of empowerment (subjective and competency) are not addressed in this definition. Empowerment, when viewed holistically and interactively, is more than simply "power sharing" as defined by Kreitner and Kinicki (1995, p.275).

Thirdly, Kreitner and Kinicki (1995) view empowerment as being the same as participative management, participative decision making and delegation. This view, however, opposes that of the approach endorsed by Newstrom and Davis (1993, p.248) who describe participative management as one of the

various behavioural tools available to implement empowerment. Other such tools are mentioned as mutual goal setting, job feedback, modeling and contingent reward systems. Bendix (1996, p.575) puts forward a similar argument, stating that unless tools such as quality circles, teambuilding, profit sharing, the reorganisation of work and improved communication structures are "supported by a complete cultural change, at the root of which lie the concepts of power sharing and empowerment, they are doomed to failure". Cook (1993) also lists participative management as one of the various ways in which the objective dimension can be developed, by providing opportunities.

To further clarify that empowerment is a concept in its own right the following additional arguments are put forward:

- Mills (1994) regards empowerment as an independent entity, with empowerment acting as the atom from which the molecules of different management approaches are constructed. (See Figure 2).

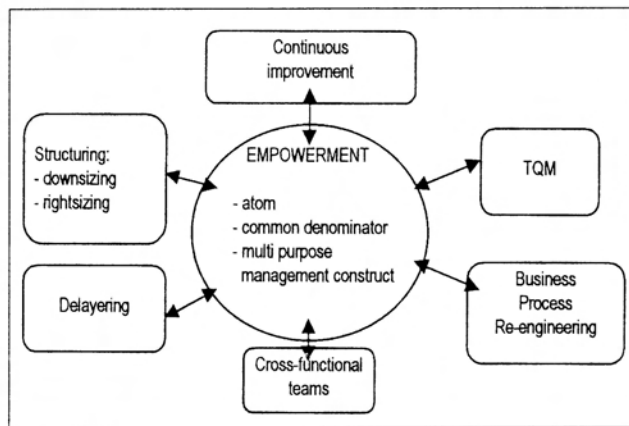


Figure 2: Empowerment: a core management construct. (developed from information extracted from Mills, 1994, p. 1).

- Holistic empowerment can only be achieved through the interaction of the objective, competence and subjective empowerment dimensions (Cook, 1993).
- The concept relies on a combination of human resource and organisational development techniques such as participative management, quality circles, communication programmes, delegation, job enrichment and self-managed teams to facilitate the development of empowerment (Bendix, 1996; Cook, 1993; Cordery, 1995; Fenton-O'Creevy, 1995 and Newstrom and Davis, 1993).
- Fenton-O'Creevy (1995, p.155) regards practices such as quality circles and self-managed teams as methods to increase employee involvement, the ultimate goal of employee involvement being empowerment: "Empowerment, in this sense of a psychological construct, is a principal goal of most forms of employee involvement". This author also quotes Conger and Kanungo (1988) who define empowerment as a psychological construct.
- Cordery (1995, p.402) gives further insight into employee involvement practices, pointing out that participation is a key component of organisational democracy and that it "usually refers to employee involvement in decision making within enterprises". Influence is regarded as a central theme, ranging on a continuum from no decision making to consultative decision and to joint decision making. According to Cordery (1995) job enrichment and structures such as autonomous work groups typically lead to the personal participation of employees in the decision making process, as opposed to the more distant participation through an employee representative on a committee.

#### Towards establishing a holistic definition of empowerment

After considering the strengths and weaknesses arising from the various empowerment arguments and definitions dis-

cussed previously, the following definition of empowerment is put forward:

Empowerment, the purpose being to optimise both individual and organisational performance, is a continuous process through which an employee is compelled to simultaneously develop job competence (knowledge, skill, experience and attitude), self-efficacy (internal locus of control, taking responsibility, enthusiastic acceptance of job challenges and believing in himself) through seeking, utilising and contributing to involvement and development opportunities in the organisation, such as participative management, goal setting and job enrichment. Empowerment is the total synergistic effect which is generated as job competence, self-efficacy and the utilisation of organisational opportunities overlap and interact.

In addition, the following issues are put forward for consideration:

- In the interest of achieving objectives, productivity and good organisational citizenship, empowerment should be compulsory for all employees. If defined as above and integrated with a stakeholder accepted performance management system, refusal to participate may represent performance or attitude related problems in certain individuals or work groups. Employees should therefore feel compelled to be empowered.
- Employees should, in the interest of enhancing self-efficacy, take responsibility for seeking and negotiating opportunities within the organisation – over-reliance on the organisation to remove the conditions which cause powerlessness and an attitude of waiting for opportunities to be handed down on a plate are signs of disempowerment.
- The employee's relative level of maturity in terms of job competence, self-efficacy and ability to recognise and utilise opportunities should be respected and integrated into his development curve.
- Employees should have the right to question the organisation's understanding and definition of empowerment. If, for example, empowerment is simplistically viewed and applied as job enlargement, employees may legitimately resist 'empowerment' initiatives which may perhaps only result in more work.

The continuing process of empowerment will affect and be affected by the organisation's systems, culture, technologies, architecture, leadership and management practices. As a paradigm-shifting intervention, empowerment should be part and parcel of strategically focused processes to be sustainable over the long term. It must become a way of life, supported by the entire organisational fibre. Having established a definition, various benefits and guiding elements of empowerment will be discussed next.

#### EMPOWERMENT BENEFITS AND GUIDING ELEMENTS

##### Human benefits of empowerment

From a broad, philosophical perspective, empowerment can address fundamental human needs, which have become neglected in the workplace. Macher (1988) argues that people generally love their trade but not their jobs, and that this is a result of the lack of support for the human dynamics within a system. Expressed more abstractly, the underlying need for empowerment can be summarised as an attempt to rehumanise the workplace (Block, 1993; Galagan, 1991; Mills, 1994 and Senge, 1990). The central theme of this argument is that there are close relationships between the work and the personal lives of people. People seek purpose, hope, freedom and dignity in both their private and working lives and they strive to align and integrate the various dimensions of their lives.

In a broader sense, Mills (1994) states that both government and business worldwide are placing their hopes on the success

of empowerment through effective grassroots action. This is particularly true for South Africa. Bendix (1996, p. 573) describes a global shift which involves a shift from nationalism to globalism, social and ideological convergence, the removal of class distinctions and the rise of mass democracy. She states that the demands facing South African organisations "are not merely the whim of a new government", but "the natural outflow of a historical change leading us in a completely new direction". The following changes, according to Bendix (1996) are part of this new direction: firstly, greater awareness of rights, with employees increasingly demonstrating a strong concern for democracy, ethical and transparent management and social responsibility; and secondly, the removal of status differentiation within the organisation. Toffler (1990, p. 7) also describes a global power shift from a similar perspective.

Judging from these perspectives, it would appear that there is an increasing awareness of and demand for empowerment, rooted deeply in individual needs, expanding to broader societal pressure.

### Economic benefits of empowerment

Although the philosophical premise of empowerment emphasises the human element, empowerment is not a humanistic or socio-political tool. It has been linked to world-class performance and quality improvement initiatives (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Freemantle, 1993; Henkoff, 1994; Peters, 1994; Steward, 1994; Tschohl and Franzmeier, 1991 and Zemke and Schaaf, 1989).

Mills (1994) summarises the main benefits of empowerment as being cost reduction, psychological satisfaction, responsiveness to customers and faster decision-making. Oates (1992) reports that American corporations have focused on empowerment in an attempt to find a way to compete more effectively with the Japanese. Empowerment is seen as a key contributing factor in Western society in achieving increased levels of productivity. Kreitner and Kinicki (1995, p. 275) also emphasise that the overriding goal of empowerment is to increase productivity and competitiveness in leaner organisations by increasing the legitimate power of organisational contributors.

According to Bowen and Lawler (1992), Freemantle (1993), Henkoff (1994), Peters 1994, Steward (1994), Tschohl and Franzmeier (1991) and Zemke and Schaaf (1989), empowerment of workers who have direct customer contact to make customer-service-related decisions yields positive image perceptions and customer satisfaction, which is an effective way of ensuring that the organisation is seen as professional, friendly and efficient. This is achieved through quicker responses to customer needs, improved self-confidence of employees and warmer and more enthusiastic customer interaction. Employees also become a great source of service ideas and generate good word-of-mouth advertising and customer retention.

It is essential, however, to assess how particular authors defined and approached empowerment to arrive at the cited benefits. As previously stated, few authors have defined empowerment holistically (Newstrom and Davis, 1993 and Zemke and Schaaf, 1989), whilst the remaining authors quoted described empowerment by emphasising only selected dimensions of empowerment. What is of importance here is that the benefits claimed to be as a result of empowerment, appear to have been based on fragmented, incomplete understanding. This begs the question of whether these benefits can actually be linked to empowerment and perhaps not to other interventions. From another perspective, one might argue that if these benefits are indeed the result of even a fragmented understanding of empowerment, the full potential of empowerment benefits can have much greater impact and has not been brought to fruition.

The potential benefits of empowerment, if defined and applied correctly, are quality, commitment, creativity and initiative, by using a wide range of employees skills, knowledge and capabilities. Empowerment is a key ingredient of the service-

quality revolution, where employees, teams and business units are measuring themselves on bottom-line results, based mainly on customer and team-member evaluations. In South Africa empowerment initiatives can contribute significantly to workplace democratisation, also potentially resulting in wider societal empowerment benefits.

### Guiding elements

In itself, the correct definition and application of empowerment cannot guarantee the desired benefits. Empowerment, as an organisational behaviour intervention, is dependent on the modifying effects of organisational culture. If, for example, management layers tend to hold 'Theory X' views of people, that most people dislike work and will try to avoid it if they can, they are unlikely to support learning, delegation or any of the various empowerment techniques, but probably more likely to stereotype and limit the growth of people.

When planning and implementing empowerment the following guiding elements should be considered, since up-front agreement on how empowerment should interrelate with the organisational culture should generate greater levels of support and commitment: stewardship, which advocates a basic shift in governance and how power is applied (Block, 1993); the creation of win-win employee partnerships to balance power, accountability, trust and respect (Block, 1993 and Nielsen, 1993); the development of a learning culture (Senge, 1990) through encouraging a questioning attitude in employees (Argyris, 1994; 1995); recognising the different levels of cognitive abilities of individuals (Jaques, 1986 and Stamp and Stamp, 1993); the preservation of organisational integrity in an age of empowerment through various strategies (Simons, 1995 and Sharp Paine, 1994); the establishment of an appropriate paradigm (Veldsman, 1992) and clarifying the areas of individual versus organisational responsibility in the empowerment process, which can possibly be described as a delicate balance between that which the organisation contributes and that which the individual volunteers. The organisation's removal of barriers (Zemke and Schaaf, 1989) and individuals utilisation of opportunities when barriers have been removed (Betof and Harwood, 1992 and Zemke and Schaaf, 1989) form part of this element.

The following section outlines the various backdrops to empowerment by discussion of environmental impacts both internal and external to the organisation. Inclusion or exclusion of these trends in planning for empowerment will influence the overall effectiveness of empowerment initiatives.

## CONTEXT: AN OPERATING ENVIRONMENT OF EMPOWERMENT

### Business strategy and market impacts

Miles and Snow (1995, p. 535) state that "strategic management assumes that the interaction of business environment, the way in which the organisation attempts to compete in that environment, and internal management determines performance". Empowerment, as part of this "internal management", extends beyond being a mere organisational development technique to be applied by human resource practitioners. It is a powerful concept which, due to the composition, benefits, risks and implications thereof, potentially influences overall organisational effectiveness, which Miles and Snow (1995, p. 535) describe as the competitive advantage and the strategic positioning of organisations. Cameron (1995) emphasises that quality as defined by consumers is at the present time the most frequently applied definition of organisational effectiveness, rendering organisational processes, attributes and behaviour only relevant if they contribute to customer satisfaction.

Veldsman (1992) points out that each organisation has to define its own, unique strategic rationale for embarking on a process of using a particular intervention and should continually communicate and test the understanding of this rationale at all levels until the minimum level of required understanding



has been reached. Veldsman (1994) also provides important checkpoints for introducing 'magic potions' such as empowerment into organisations, being the assessment of the need for the intervention; where and how an organisation must change to resolve its predicament; the definition of the required organisational qualities to be successful in terms of its strategic intent, architecture and people components and the establishment of success criteria such as speed, quality, cost, customisation, innovation and responsiveness. The ability of an intervention to add value to the meeting of the criteria should also be determined.

In developing business strategies Treacy and Wiersema (1995) have identified three main components of a dedicated operating model which is geared towards producing unsurpassed, ever-improving value: operational excellence (delivering low cost, zero-defect products and services), customer intimacy (unique, customised products and services) and product leadership (innovative products and services). It is important to note that while one discipline may govern the business, the remaining disciplines should be maintained at an acceptable threshold. Whichever discipline is chosen, it will have implications for the extent and type of empowerment required.

The choice of business strategy, for example customer intimacy versus operational excellence (as developed by Treacy and Wiersema, 1995) can dictate the approach to managing empowerment and the selection of the appropriate empowerment implementation techniques. An approach to empowerment should be closely aligned to its strategic response to its markets and environments.

**Environmental impacts**

Whilst market and business strategies are mostly dictated by customer needs and other competitive forces, the organisation also has to respond to other environmental trends, such as political, social and legislative forces. The recent launch of the new Labour Relations Act in November 1996 heralds a new era in labour relations in South Africa. According to a publication by the Department of Labour (1996) the purpose of the Act is to advance economic development, social justice, labour peace and the democratisation of the workplace. The Act is focused on the reinforcement of workplace democracy, through amongst other mechanisms, the establishment of workplace forums which may engage with employers in a consultative relationship with regard to non-wage issues such as education, safety, training and the introduction of new work methods.

Although new regulations in terms of bargaining councils, dispute resolution, strikes and lockouts may have an impact on empowerment interventions, the emphasis on workplace

forums has even more direct bearing on empowerment and democratisation of the workplace, to the extent that it may even be thought of as 'legislated empowerment', as the creation of such structures for ongoing dialogue is enforceable by law. The implications of workplace forums, according to Backer and Olivier (1996, p. 30) are that through the sharing of information, consultation and joint decision-making by employees and management on specific issues, a shift should be facilitated in the workplace, from adversarial collective bargaining on all matters to joint problem-solving and participation on specific subjects.

**Operating context**

Bowen and Lawler (1992) outline two implementation approaches to empowerment and how they differ according to key empowerment contingencies (illustrated below). Firstly, the production line approach entails (i) the simplification of tasks, (ii) clear division of labour, (iii) substitution of equipment and systems for employees and (iv) little decision-making discretion exercised by employees - "management designs the system, employees execute it". Fast food outlets can be used as an example.

Levitt (1972) described how service operations can be made more efficient by applying the production line logic. He argued that:

Manufacturing thinks technocratically, and that explains its success ... By contrast, service looks for solutions in the performer of the task. This is the paralysing legacy of our inherited attitudes: the solution to improved service is viewed as being dependent on improvements in the skills and attitudes of the performers of that service. While it may pain and offend us to say so, thinking in humanistic rather than technocratic terms ensures that the service sector will be forever inefficient and that our satisfactions will be forever marginal (p. 43).

This is contrasted with the humanistic empowerment approach where knowledge is shared, rewards are based on organisational performance and people have power to make decisions that influence organisational direction and performance. The performers of the tasks depended on for finding solutions to service problems.

The humanistic flavour of empowerment pervades the words of Peters, as quoted by Zemke and Schaaf (1992):

It is necessary to "dehumiliate" work by eliminating the policies and approaches (almost always tiny) of the organisation that demean and belittle human dignity. It is impossible to get people's best efforts, involvement and caring concern for things you believe important to your

TABLE 3  
THE CONTINGENCIES OF EMPOWERMENT (Adapted from Bowen and Lawler, 1992, p. 37)

Contingency	Production Line approach	Quality of fit between situation and approach					Empowerment approach
		Low			High		
Basic Business Strategy	Low cost, high volume	1	2	3	4	5	Differentiation, customised, personalised
Tie to customer	Transaction, short time period	1	2	3	4	5	Relationship, long time period
Technology	Routine, simple	1	2	3	4	5	Non-routine, complex
Business environment	Predictable, few surprises	1	2	3	4	5	Unpredictable, many surprises
Types of people	Theory X people with low growth needs, low social needs and weak interpersonal skills	1	2	3	4	5	Theory X people with high growth needs, high social needs and strong interpersonal skills



customers and the long-term interests of your organisation when we write policies and procedures that treat them like thieves and bandits (p. 68).

Bowen and Lawler (1992) state that historical evidence refutes the notion that empowerment is the best way to manage in all situations. For example, by the 1970's, research showed clearly that only employees who wanted to grow at work responded positively to job enrichment. These authors believe that the empowerment and production-line management approaches have their advantages and that each fits certain situations, according to the needs of both employees and clients. They suggest using a contingency approach as outlined in the Table 3 where each contingency is rated and the total contingency score indicates a preferred approach.

Score	Preferred approach
5-10 =	production line approach
11-15 =	empowerment = suggestion involved
16-20 =	empowerment = job involvement
21-25 =	empowerment = high involvement

The higher the total score, the more the benefits of empowerment will outweigh the costs.

Zemke and Schaaf (1989, p. 65) note that empowerment is a common theme running through many excellent service businesses such as Federal Express, American Airlines, and American Express. To them, empowerment means "turning the front-line loose" and "empowerment in many ways is the reverse of doing things by the book". Employees are encouraged and rewarded for taking initiative and using their imagination. However, by contrasting the production line and the empowerment approaches, Bowen and Lawler (1992) clearly illustrate the fact that empowerment does not inherently mean that an open-ended, "whatever-it-takes" approach should be followed and that the approach should be determined by the context.

Harrison (1994) describes the operating context in similar terms to Bowen and Lawler (1992), by discussing the conditions affecting the fit of mechanistic (similar to the production-line approach) and organic systems (similar to the empowerment approach). For example, in a mechanistic system, personnel expect high levels of structuring, routine and control from above, whilst personnel expect role flexibility, challenging work and autonomy in an organic system.

### CONCLUSION

The definition of empowerment aims to eliminate confusion and misunderstanding as regards empowerment through a clear focus on the core empowerment dimensions, contexts and implementation techniques; for example, there should be no further vagueness in terms of the correct relationship between empowerment and participative management and between empowerment and locus of control.

A commonly understood and accepted definition of empowerment should be developed, before qualitative or quantitative research is embarked upon in an attempt to enrich and quantify understanding of the concept. It is hoped that the perspectives proposed in this article are of value in stimulating further research and debate. Some issues, which need to be addressed and verified through empirical research, are the following:

- whether empowerment is a construct in its own right or a new-fangled word for a management approach similar to participative management;
- the key contributing constructs to empowerment (e.g. locus of control) vis-à-vis the three empowerment dimensions;
- the relative value of each of the different implementation techniques for empowerment – how one can best achieve critical mass;

- practical measurement such as identifying empowered and disempowered employee segments and accompanying potential action criteria are required;
- development of an overall empowerment implementation process which integrates practical empowerment techniques such as delegation and self-managed teams, whilst recognising the task maturity of individuals relative to organisational processes such as problem solving and planning; and
- extending the application of empowerment from an individual focus to apply to work groups.

Empowerment, which is an emerging, independent entity, represents the pinnacle of achieving optimal alignment between an individual's self-efficacy, competence and his utilisation of organisational opportunities. Judging from a ratio of one empowered segment to seven disempowered segments in the permutation of the various empowerment dimensions, true empowerment is indeed a challenge and a rare, but profound occurrence. The focus of human resource practitioners should therefore be on gradually increasing the quantum of fully empowered employees in the organisation, to go beyond mere survival to world-class performance and competitiveness.

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