

Employee Empowerment : A means of Efficiency and Productivity

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Abstract: The managers who believed in classical approach emphasized on direction, control, centralized authority and decision-making at higher level were regarded as non-entity and their views were never taken into account. Much water has flown under the bridge. Most organizations have employees who believe that they are dependent on others and their effort has little impact on performance. They also believe that they have no control in the organization of their work. This feeling of powerlessness sap their efficiency and generate a feeling that they cannot successfully perform their job and make meaningful contribution

The theme of employee empowerment received the attention of the managers in recent years and efforts are made to implement it. The relationship between managers and the employees whom they manage is undergoing a qualitative change. The managers who believed in classical approach emphasized on direction, control, centralized authority and decision-making at higher level were regarded as non-entity and their views were never taken into account. Much water has flown under the bridge. Seesaw change have taken place in sharing of authority and responsibility between the superiors and subordinates.

The style of leadership and the tenor of relations between the leader and the followers have changed a good deal. A manager today does not exercise as much control and authority as his counterpart few decades ago. He is regarded more as an advisor, coach and a sponsor. There is a paradigm shift from 'direction' and 'control' to 'support' and 'facilitation'. Manager is expected to understand his subordinates, show consideration for their problems and help them to help themselves in solving work-related problems.

The employees are regarded as associates where the difference between their role and that of their manager is very narrow. Decision making is relegated to the operating level where the workers are given freedom to decided about schedules, procedures and solve work-related problems. In the 1980's managers were encouraged to either consult or seek participation of their subordinates. Now managers have travelled a long way and go beyond participation. They even allow complete freedom to work their subordinates to have control on their. Self-managed teams where workers operate largely without boss is an innovative development of the 1990's.

Most organizations have employees who believe that they are dependent on others and their effort has little impact on performance. They also believe that they have no control in the organization of their work. This feeling of powerlessness sap their efficiency and generate a feeling that they cannot successfully perform their job and make meaningful contribution. This situation can be remedied by empowering employees. Empowerment is a process that provides greater autonomy to employees through the sharing of relevant information and the provision of control over factors affecting job performance. Empowerment helps to remove the feeling of powerlessness and at the same time enhance employee feelings of self confidence in job performance. Empowerment enables employees to have control over problems related to their jobs.

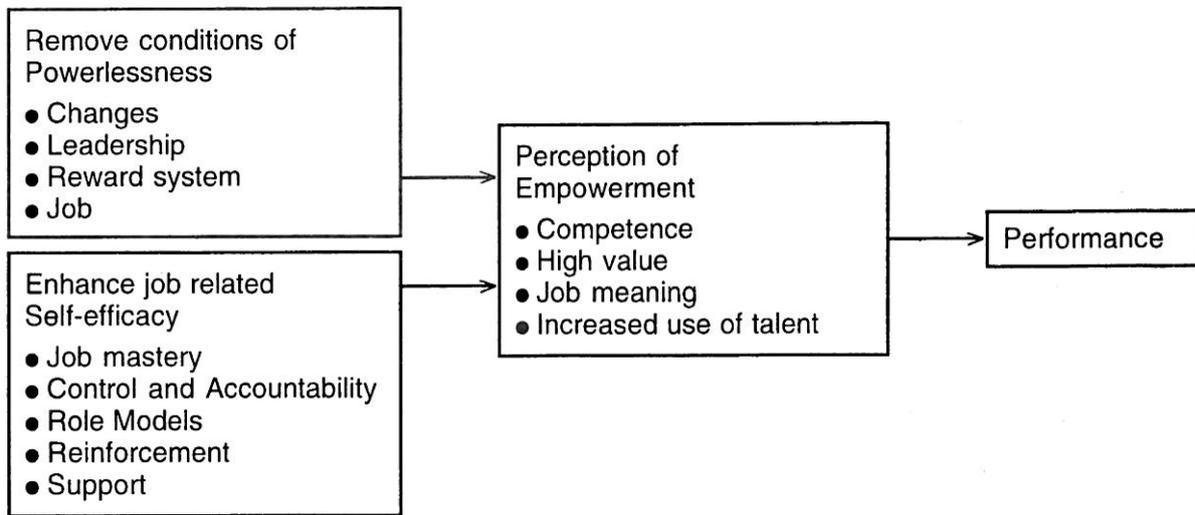
Many firms have reduced employee dependence on superiors and placed more emphasis on individual control over the work as well as responsibility for doing the same. This process is called empowerment because it replaces direction from an external source (generally the immediate supervisor) by an internal source (the individual's own desire to perform well). In a sense the process of empowerment implies providing workers with the skills and authority to take decisions which were earlier made by the managers. The aim of organization consisting of enthusiastic, committed people who perform their work efficiently. This situation is in contrast to an organization that makes people work in the spirit of compliance to avoid punishment.

Empowerment is intended to encourage employees to be creative and to take risks. These provide a firm competitive edge in a fast-changing environment. Empowering employees is 'The hardest thing to do because it means giving up control', says Lee Fielder, a past president of Kelly Springfield Tyre Co. a subsidiary of Good Year. According to him, managers who try to tell employees what and how to do every bit of a job end up with only mediocre people, because the talented ones would not submit to control. To encourage risks taking, Generak Electric C.E.O. Jackwelch urges his managers and employees to 'Shake it, Shake it, and break it'.

Job design and work organization

The intense competition and performance in the market make organizations to look for improved efficiency and productivity. Towards this end the managers are showing concern to focus on techniques to make the jobs less routine and more interesting. They also search for innovative measures to improve work organization. The important aspect which should receive the attention of the organization is job design. If the jobs create interest and allow freedom to the job holder, that will enable employees to have control on their jobs.

The job design and work organization methods adopted in the past are found to be obsolete. They tend to create monotony and make the workers loose interest in the job. Assembly line of production and other jobs performed in a routine manner sap the morale of the employee. The job characteristics which should be present are shown in the following figure.



Job have to be designed in such a way that they ensure the following aspects.

- Skill variety, requiring a variety of different activities and application of a number of skill and talents.
- Task identity, implying completion of a whole or identifiable piece of identifiable piece of work.
- Task significance, having substantial impact on the lives or work of other people.
- Autonomy ensuring freedom, independent or descretion to the individuals in scheduling the work and deciding the procedures to be used in carrying out work.
- Feed-back, involving direct and clear information to the workers about the effectiveness of their performance. Job design has its roots in the experiments simultaneously carried out in England and India. These experiments are based on the socio-structural approach proposed by Emery and Trist. Job design involves a change in the perception and human nature, a faith that people are primarily motivated from which in and they would respond by being innovative.

Job Enrichment

In recent years a new technique based on the psychological needs of man has emerged which is totally different from other conventional methods and it is called job enrichment. This concept helps in employee empowerment because it tends to give more discretion and autonomy as well as increases responsibility. It focuses on the content of the join through vertical job loading and integration. It makes the work more meaningful. Direct changes are proposed in the work itself to provide for satisfying the employee's psychological needs. Researchers have pointed out that psychological needs such as growth, achievement, autonomy, self-actualisation and self fulfillment are relatively of higher importance in an employee's motivational profile. Empowerment entails that job or tasks should be challenging, meaningful, interesting and the work intrinsically more rewarding and satisfying.

Another concept which needs a mention in the context of empowerment is job enlargement. It refers to expansion of jobs horizontally. It increases job scope i.e. the number of different operations required in a job and the frequency with which the job and the cycle is repeated. Job enlargement curbs the problem of lack of diversity in over specialized jobs.

Management by Objectives (MBO)

MBO is an important concept in the corporate parlance, Peter Drucker was the first to discuss bout MBO in 1954 in his book 'The Practice of management.' It provides a systematic rational approach to management, and helps to prevent management by crisis. MBO is based on the assumption that people perform better when goals are set for them with their involvement.

MBO is based on three important aspects :

- People should know what is expected of them.
- Allow employees to set goals. MBO emphasizes that both the superior and the subordinate jointly decide the objectives and indicates that both can play a dynamic role in achieving the objectives.
- Both superior and subordinate make periodical review of the progress made in achieving the goals and identify the problems which impede the progress. The worker concerned is helped to grow and develop by training, counseling, coaching and advice. Many organizations practice the method of MBO in achieving the organizational goals. For them it is a way of managing the organization itself with involvement of people and empowering them in sharing information and having control over their job performance.

Participative management

This is another concept which occupies a vital role in this context of empowerment. Participation is the mental and emotional involvement of people in group goals and share responsibility for them. There are three important ideas involving in the approach :

- First and probably the most important is the involvement - mental and emotional rather than mere physical activity. A person's entire self is involved not just his skill. This involvement is psychological rather than physical.
- The second idea involved in participation is that it motivates people to contribute. They are empowered to release their own potential, initiative and creativity toward the objectives of the organization.
- Finally participation encourages people to accept responsibility in their group's activity. It is a social process by which people become involved in an organization and want to see that the organization works successfully. When they refer to their organization, they begin to say 'we', and not 'they'. When they find a job related problem, they say interms of 'ours', and not

'theirs.' Participation helps them to become good members and citizens of the organization instead of continuing as on responsible people performing duties in a routine manner.

Managers have recognized various benefits of participation. But these benefits were proved experimentally in classic studies in industry by Roethlisberger, Coch and French.

In India many types of participatives schemes were evolved and implemented. Starting from works committees (on statutory basis) to join management councils (on voluntary basis), and works councils and joint councils have organizations. But the functioning of these schemes have not been very encouraging inspite of the government support for these schemes. The problems impeding the progress of the schemes have to be identified more thoroughly, and effective measures need to be undertaken to infuse fresh life and make them work effective. In fact workers participation is a corner stone of labour policy of the Government of India.

Self managed work teams

Self managed work teams represent the highest degree of employee empowerment. Development of self managed teams is the rage of 90's. A work team generates positive synergy through coordinated effort. Their individual efforts result in a level of performance that is greater than the sum of those individual inputs. Now-a-days managements are concerned with the growth of work teams that will help their organizations to improve performance. The use of self managed teams generate the potential for an organization to achieve greater outputs without increasing inputs.

Self managed teams generally comprise of ten to fifteen members who take upon themselves the responsibilities of their supervisors. Team work typically includes coordinated action for collective control over the speed of work, allocations of work assignments, arrangement of breaks and introduction of collective inspection procedures. The teams that manage themselves fully even select their own members can have a system of evaluating each other's performance. As a result the need for supervisory positions decreases and they may even be made redundant.

In Western countries the idea of entrusting the responsibilities for every thing to the groups has become a significant aspect of work reorganization. At GE's locomotive engine plant in Grove City, Pennsylvania about 100 teams make most of the plant decisions. They look after the maintenance, schedule the work and take decisions on equipment purchases. At the L-S Electro Galvanizing Co., in Cleveland, the entire plant is run by self managed teams. They attend to their own scheduling, rotate jobs on their own, decide production targets, decide pay scales which are linked to skills, lay off co-workers and even hire the workers. 'I never meet a new employee until his first day on the job' says the plant's general manager.

Xerox, General Motors Coors Brewing, Pepsi Co., Hewlett Packard, Honey Well, M and M/Mars and Aetna Life are just a few examples which have implemented the concept of self managed work teams. Approximately one out of five United States Companies now use self managed work teams and on an average forty to fifty percent of all U.S. workers are managing themselves through self managed work teams.

Texas Instruments' Defence Group won the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. The credit for winning the coveted award to self managed teams in the plant. These teams manage to achieve the same level of sales with 25 percent fewer employees.

Aid Association for Lutherans, one of the largest Insurance and Financial Service Companies in the United States claims that self managed teams were primarily responsible for increase in employee satisfaction and for company's increase in business volume by 50 per cent over a four year period while reducing the work force by 15 percent. The Edy's Grand Ice Cream Plant in front Vayne, Indiana introduced self managed teams in 1990 and these teams are credited with the plants' 39 percent reduction in costs and 57 percent in productivity. Whole Foods Market, a health food chain, claims that self managed teams are responsible for doubling sales between 1989 and 1992 and it is able to achieve a 3.7 percent operating margin compared margin compared to the average super market chain's 2.6.

Conclusion

The managers are always concerned with increasing efficiency and productivity of workers. They have adopted various styles and methods to achieve this objective. In the initial stages they believe total control and direction of the employees at work. All the decision making powers were exercised by them. With the growth of social sciences more and more knowledge and concepts came to the rescue of human behaviour and to motivate them for higher productivity. The work organization and designing of jobs received their attention when it was found that jobs involving routine type of activities without variety result in monotony and alienation of work. They took care to see that job design ensures that workers are allowed skill variety, autonomy and feedback. The concepts of job enrichment and MBO were also implemented with a view to empowering employees and affording them more freedom in performing their tasks. Various schemes of workers participation in management were also devised and these schemes are intended to either consult or involve workers in decision making and to delegate powers in relation to their jobs.

The managers who were initially reluctant to delegate powers to their subordinates have gradually realized that if teams are developed with complete autonomy making them responsible for accomplishing the targets, the performance of workers can be improved. Thus the concept of self managed teams has emerged and a number of organizations in the Western countries as well as in developing countries including India are adopting self managed teams.

The shift from working alone to working in teams requires employees to cooperate with others, share information, and sublimate personal interests for the greater good of the team. The team members possess technical, problem solving, decision making and interpersonal skills and they are prepared to assume different roles. The teams have a commitment to a common goal, establish specific targets, and develop appropriate structure and leadership style to provides direction. The teams are also accountable for the results both at the individual and the team level by having periodical evaluation, feedback and reward system. One striking feature of high performing teams is a greater degree of mutual trust among the members.

The team approach involves that managers have to learn to delegate powers to the subordinates and confine themselves to coordination and allocation of resources. Similarly the members of the self managed teams have to accept responsibility, making themselves accountable to accomplish the goals.

To sum up broadly there are six approaches to empowerment of employees.

1. Designing jobs in such a way that they encompass some aspects like skill variety, task identity, autonomy, feedback etc. This will make the job less routine and more interesting or the job holder.
2. Helping employees to achieve mastery over the job by providing proper training, coaching and counseling.
3. Allowing more control by giving employees discretion in performing the job and making them accountable for results.
4. Providing successful role models by allowing employees to observe their peers who have already performed successfully on the job.
5. Using social reinforcement and persuasion by giving praise, encouragement and feedback meant to raise self-confidence.
6. Giving emotional support by reducing stress and anxiety through clear role definition, task assistance and showing care.

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