

## A conceptual model of empowering leadership for organizational excellence

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### Keywords

Empowerment, leadership, organization, leaders, structure

### Extended Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to make a categorical assertion that the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands a new kind of leadership – a leadership that is distributed across the organization. The traditional leadership approach, one that is based on hierarchy and authority, no longer fits with the demands of the contemporary world. Organizations, today, have to confront a plethora of challenges such as global competition, resource crunch, technological advances, political risks and economic uncertainties. The modern business environment is characterized by hyper-turbulence, complexity, speed, change and competition. The steady decline of leadership in the last decade across a variety of organizations, as evidenced by the collapse and bankruptcy of iconic organizations, attest to the fact that leadership is no longer the preserve of the privileged few at the top as knowledge and information have become more widespread. The world has become flat because the global playing field is level and barriers to entry into many industries are almost extinct. Dealing with these challenges calls for imaginative, creative, innovative, caring and effective leadership that does not rest in the hands of the few at the helm of the organization but one that involves others in decision making and facilitate wider participation and accountability. In the years to come, the high performing organizations will be those that encourage less centralized decision making, less top-down direction, and less autocratic management that brings about a fit between the flexibility of the employees with the fluctuations of the environment. Therefore, the crux of the argument in favour of empowering leadership is that leadership has to begin at the lower echelons of an organization because modern organizations need a flexible, autonomous, and entrepreneurial workforce.*

*Leadership is about influencing the behaviours of followers. Empowering leadership is about sharing power to influence the behaviours of the followers so that a leader is able to "...multiply himself through others". Empowering leaders enable others to grow and develop into leaders. They recognize that developing people into leaders is a reflection of their own leadership ability.*

*Despite its popularity, empowerment in the modern workplace is random and relatively scarce. Due to various obstacles and difficulties in making empowerment work in organizations, its application in organizations is treated with caution, sometimes with outright derision. Some organizations – W L Gore, Semco, Google to name a few – have designed their management structures around the idea of empowerment and have achieved astounding success. In some organizations in the United States and European countries, empowerment has become a permanent feature. However, the enthusiasm for empowerment as a way of organizational leadership remains lukewarm.*

*Part of the reason for the lack of enthusiasm for empowerment is the familiar management practices that organizations have come to adopt. Contemporary management is a distillation of practices that have been extracted more than a century ago from Taylor's principles. Notwithstanding the awareness of limitations that Taylor's principles and bureaucratic structures impose upon organizations, contemporary management is saddled with issues ranging from lack of creativity, slowness of response,*

lack of entrepreneurship, increasing levels of job dissatisfaction to employee disengagement in the workplace.

Even though there seems to be resurgence in interest in empowerment the importance given to empowerment in the workplace is all too rare in modern management. It is, therefore, unsurprising that most employees are disengaged with their work and their bosses. It appears that leaders in organizations are so deeply engaged with themselves and their narrow objectives that they suffer from disengagement with their employees.

The Global Workforce Survey, a landmark study conducted by Towers Watson Global Workforce, a highly respected global professional services company, by surveying about 90,000 employees across 18 countries, exposed some unpleasant facts about employee disengagement in the workplace. The survey revealed that:

- 33% want to work for just one company
- Just 38% think their leaders have a sincere interest in their well-being
- Just 47% think their leaders are trustworthy
- Just 42% think their leaders inspire and engage them
- 59% think their direct manager is effective at managing but
- 53% question whether managers have time for the people aspects of the job
- 61% question how well managers deal with poor performers.

The undertone of employee disengagement might have found voice through the survey but the findings are a revelation about employee disenchantment that is pervasive across organizations around the world. Implied in the survey is the clarion call for leaders to motivate people by mission, not just money; inspire people by values, not just persona; and connect emotionally, not just intellectually. Managers and employees are so deeply divided and different in their ways and expectations of each other that neither can understand the other!

In spite of the benefits that empowerment purports to bring to the workplace, its application in the modern workplace is sparse. The primary reason behind the reluctance of empowering people stems from the fact that most managers are not sure as to how to make empowerment work in the organization. There are three major reasons that act as inhibitors to empowerment:

- 1) managerial attitudes about subordinates that the latter are not competent enough to accomplish the work;
- 2) personal insecurities of managers that they will lose recognition and rewards associated with task accomplishment and;
- 3) the managerial need for control so that the manager is able to direct and govern what is going on.

This paper focuses on carving a roadmap to enable leaders to engage in empowering leadership. It is divided into four major sections: the first section is entitled, 'Setting the Stage'. It focuses on creating the context and the key factors that are so vital in creating an atmosphere that engages people through indirect leadership. The second section discusses how to 'Facilitate the Process' of empowering leadership. This part delves into key aspects to systematize empowering leadership. The third section provides strategies to sustain an Empowered Organization once the facilitation process is set in place. The fourth section, why Empowerment flounders, cautions leaders against pitfalls that prevent an organization from becoming empowered or make an organization regress into becoming disempowered.