

An empowerment scorecard: commentary with Kevin Barham



Based in London, Kevin Barham is a management researcher and consultant. An Associate of Ashridge Business School where he was formerly Deputy Director of Research, he consults on international management and organizational development with particular emphasis on the international dimensions of corporate social responsibility.

He talks here about why the process of empowerment is crucial to organizational success, and sets out a practical self-assessment questionnaire tool for measuring and scoring the degree of empowerment in your organization.

Today's business environment is moving too fast for managers to be able to know everything about what's going on, act fast enough, or be consistently right enough of the time to control things effectively and stay on course. More and more firms believe the answer is not only to involve more non-managerial employees in decision making, but actually give them the power to make decisions about their own work. They hope this increased empowerment of individuals will make the organization more responsive to change and more proactive in serving customers.

Bringing about empowerment

Empowerment is the authority and capacity of people in an organization to make decisions and act on them. Employees in traditional hierarchical organizations do what their managers or supervisors tell them. Empowered individuals use their own initiative to achieve the organization's goals. A committee is not an empowered team. Committees investigate problems and make recommendations – empowered teams decide and act.

What does this mean for managers entrusted with achieving high-performance? Leaders have to be able to share power and responsibility and demonstrate their trust in other people's abilities. They have to be able to build the self-confidence of their people and tap into their self-esteem by celebrating their successes. They will be rewarded by new ideas, better communication, more effective decision making, and more committed decision implementation.

Empowerment is about improving the skills and capabilities of everyone at all levels, now and in the future, with the aim of enhancing organizational cooperation, commitment and enthusiasm. This recognizes that more work and decision making will be delegated in the future. To make this effective, employees will need to be empowered to act and apply their skills, and leaders and supervisors must develop direction, self-measurement tools and a supportive environment. It is hoped the results of successful empowerment will be improved personal, team and organizational effort through commitment and mutual support, greater flexibility in the face of business challenges, clarity of accountabilities and expectations, and focused energy for implementing vision and values.

The role of the manager in this context is to act as another resource to enable his staff members to get their jobs done. It is less about controlling than about coaching people, helping them to contribute and develop their own ideas. If management is there simply to beat up everybody about every problem, then people won't take risks any more.

There will be cover-ups and transparency disappears. The traditional management culture was delegate and control, but with the acceleration of the product development cycle, you

want your people to shoot for the best can-do schedule. If you admonish them every time they miss their schedule, the next time they will build in some contingency. If they do that, they will have trouble meeting their best can-do schedule. So a manager may lose months of time-to-market because of their personal attitude as a manager.

Changing managerial attitudes

It is easy for managers who have been brought up in old-style organizations to be cynical about empowerment. It certainly does require a different mindset from traditional ways of thinking about the manager's role. Customers increasingly value warmth of service, and many people want to give this kind of service, but are inhibited from doing so by the circumstances, systems and procedures under which they operate. Companies ought to be "releasing love in the workplace" if high levels of service are to be achieved. This involves looking for – and acknowledging – the good and positive in people, listening to their hopes and fears, seeing them as valuable and unique, responding to their needs, and nurturing their growth. As a management development executive in a leading multinational company said; "People must work with their hearts. You have to love them. The only way to empower people and develop this consciousness is if you believe in it."

Obstacles to empowerment

There are three main obstacles to empowerment – a reluctance to provide financial authority, fear of failure, and a lack of proper training opportunities.

- **Financial authority.** Changing managerial attitudes is a major undertaking. But changing traditional ways of thinking about management is not enough. People must be equipped with the resources they need to get the job done. One of the most crucial resources is money. A manager's power is often directly related to their authority to spend. Pushing spending authority down closer to where the work is done is a powerful way to signal empowerment is for real.
- **Fear of failure.** An organizational culture which creates a fear of failure is inhibiting. Such fear and the resulting unwillingness to take responsibility still runs deep in many organizations. Empowerment does not mean managers no longer have the power to reward or punish behaviour. If the company can learn something new from an error then it should, within reason, be allowed. On the other hand, repeated errors of the same kind in the same circumstances should not be tolerated. A distinction is sometime made between "profit and loss account" errors from which a company can recover, and "balance sheet" mistakes which can destroy a business.
- **Training.** Too many organizations think it is enough to decree, "from now on everyone is empowered." If the organization is still stuck in the fragmented frame of mind about training and development, it is highly likely people will not have all the skills they need to do their jobs. Parrots kept in a cage do not automatically take flight when the door is opened.

The degree to which people are and *feel* empowered is another important indicator. It shows the constraints within which team leaders are likely to operate and how much effort they may have to invest in liberating a team's mental attitudes.

A self-assessment questionnaire

Think about the real degree to which people in your organization currently feel empowered. Accord points to each statement below using the following ranking:

Totally true – 4 points; Largely true – 3 points; Neither true nor false – 2 points; Mostly untrue – 1 point; Completely untrue – 0 points.

1.	Top management makes sure everybody knows the organization's goals and values.	___
2.	Top managers spend a lot of time outside their offices communicating goals and values.	___
3.	Top management actively emphasizes the importance of people and respect for every individual.	___
4.	Trust is more important than strict rules and controls.	___
5.	Everybody knows the importance of being customer oriented.	___
6.	Top management pushes down authority and responsibility wherever possible.	___
7.	Free, open face-to-face communication is highly valued.	___
8.	Managers never take decisions before asking their staff for their opinion.	___
9.	People are not cynical about their ability to influence things.	___
10.	People feel a concern for the success of the organization.	___
11.	People feel they have a stake in the organization.	___
12.	Managers listen to all ideas and points of view.	___
13.	Financial and benefits packages are fair and reflect each person's contribution, knowledge and skill.	___
14.	Managers provide a supportive environment for their people.	___
15.	Managers know how to give constructive criticism.	___
16.	Managers know how to take and act on constructive criticism.	___
17.	People do not feel they need to be viewed as being right in all the actions they take.	___
18.	People have opportunities to discuss issues with their co-workers.	___
19.	People have all the technical skills they need to accomplish their tasks.	___
20.	People from different functions or departments meet regularly to discuss mutual problems and issues.	___
21.	People are clear about the results for which they are accountable.	___
22.	People know it is important to get the job done, even if it means disregarding formal procedures.	___
23.	Every individual knows they can make a real contribution to the success of the organization.	___
24.	People can take decisions without having to check back with their managers.	___
25.	Everybody knows what is expected of them.	___

The higher the score here (out of a possible total of 100), the greater the degree of empowerment you judge to exist in your organization.

Make an overall assessment of empowerment in your organization by ticking the appropriate box.

-	There is a very high degree of empowerment in this organization: 80 – 100 points.	<input type="checkbox"/>
-	There is a relatively high degree of empowerment in this organization: 60 – 79 points	<input type="checkbox"/>
-	There is a relatively low degree of empowerment in this organization: 40 – 59 points.	<input type="checkbox"/>
-	There is a very low degree of empowerment in this organization: below 40 points.	<input type="checkbox"/>

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