



Empowerment, expectations, and the psychological contract—managing the dilemmas and gaining the advantages

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Abstract

Empowerment, participation, self-managing work teams, employee ownership and profit sharing are but a few of the many current forms of employee involvement in workplace decision making. Few theorists or practicing managers question the concept of employee involvement or its potential benefits. However, most employers realize that the degree of involvement varies with the organizational situation, the persons involved and the nature of work. Empowerment creates a dilemma. Empowering employees results in creating beliefs about entitlements that must be unfulfilled eventually. Unfulfilled beliefs about entitlements may constitute a breach of the psychological contract between employer and employee. A breach of the psychological contract may result in employee behavior that is counterproductive in terms of organizational goals. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a vast amount of discussion of new management styles that promote individual or work group involvement (Lawler, 1992; Lazear, 1998; Klein, 1991; Greenberg and Baron, 1997; Blau and Boal, 1989; Cohen and Ledford, 1994; Goodman et al., 1988; Ketchum, 1992; Mantz et al., 1990; Wellins and Byham, 1991; Suman, 1976). Managers are encouraged to allow a high degree of workforce participation, group involvement and autonomy, and to develop self-managing work teams. These management styles are

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intended to empower employees and thereby to increase workforce commitment and to humanize the workplace. Increased commitment and a more humane workplace environment in turn, are intended to result in improvements in work performance and good citizenship behavior as well as the quality of work life (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986; Podsakoff et al., 1997; Cohen et al., 1997).

Involvement approaches are not new. Their foundation concepts have been discussed and promoted for several decades (Tubbs, 1994). These approaches gained new prominence in the 1980s because American businesses faced new competitive challenges that demanded higher levels of performance. In response to the demand for improved performance some American businesses changed their organization and management systems to be more participative by involving employees in problem solving, decision-making and the financial success of the business. Initially employee involvement was manifest in such programs as quality circles, gain sharing plans and self-managing work teams. More recently the concept has been expanded to include pushing power, information, knowledge and rewards to lower levels of the organization (Lawler et al., 1989).

The extensive benefits claimed for involvement-oriented approaches are neither easily obtained nor certain (Lawler, 1992). Practices such as empowerment, participation, autonomy and involvement are promoted in varying degrees in the workplace. Determining how much employee involvement is appropriate in a given situation is a matter of judgment. Many variables influence the decision, its implementation and its impact on employee behavior.

Among the important variables that influence the degree of employee involvement in organizational decision processes is employee beliefs about what they are entitled to receive. Such employee beliefs constitute a psychological contract with the employer and breach of that contract can be detrimental to the types of employee behavior that involvement approaches are designed to elicit (Morrison and Robinson, 1997, Robinson, 1996). Indeed, the process has a snowballing nature in that involvement raises aspirations and expectations of even greater involvement. (March and Simon, 1958; Porter and Steers, 1973; Wanous et al., 1991). When the process slows down or ends and employees realize that their expectations will not be met they are disappointed (Wanous, 1992). Their disappointment may lead to frustration (Fogler, 1979; Greenberg and Fogler, 1983) organizational commitment. (Greenberg, 1990).

This manuscript reviews literature on employee beliefs about entitlements and aspirations as significant consequences of the development and installation of high involvement systems in organizations. The objective of this review is not to attack involvement as an approach to management in organizations but to encourage further study of its degree in specific situations. One specific dilemma of application is the possibility that empowerment may create beliefs of entitlements that cannot be met thereby resulting in a breach of the psychological contract.

1.1. Empowerment (involvement)

Empowerment is the process of passing authority and responsibility to individuals at lower levels in the organizational hierarchy (Wellins et al., 1991). To achieve empowerment

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