

# *Re-thinking Empowerment:* Why Is It So Hard to Achieve?

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To date, empowerment remains one of the most promising, yet mystifying, concepts in business. First introduced into the corporate world in the 1980s, it quickly became a buzzword with great promise. So far, however, it has had only selective impact. The attraction was simple to understand; senior managers covet employees who accept responsibility, take a proprietary interest in their work, and willingly work hard. At the same time, employees want to feel valued, involved in their jobs, and proud of their work.

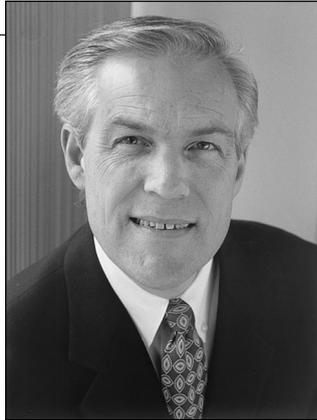
The bottom-line is that managers and employees want very compatible outcomes—outcomes associated with empowerment. Why then, has it been so hard for most companies to find real empowerment? Why has the concept fallen into such disrepute? My research and experience in a wide variety of companies has taught me that the answer is at the same time simple and complex. It is time to rethink our understanding of this powerful tool.

## NOT A FLAWED CONCEPT

The concept of empowerment is not flawed. Indeed, many companies in a variety of industries have successfully created cultures of empowerment. The list includes such well known companies as General

Electric Co., Pacific Gas & Electric, Marriott Corp., and a variety of lesser-known companies like AES Corporation in Virginia, Springfield Remanufacturing Corporation in Missouri, and Chesapeake Packaging Company in Maryland. Yes, empowerment can work and can work very well. But achieving it means turning inside out the assumptions about how managers and employees interact. Few managers and employees really understand empowerment, and they understand even less about how to shake free of their traditional, hierarchical mindsets and behavior patterns, and how to adopt a mindset and repertoire of behaviors consistent with empowerment. Whether we focus on managers or employees, the problem boils down to the need for massive change in people and organizational systems.

This paper will explore the core elements of empowerment and examine why people's ingrained assumptions about organizations make empowerment both difficult to comprehend and even harder to achieve. It will also focus on the complex interplay between organizational and human systems that must be changed if movement to empowerment is to occur. The creation of this new, very different culture will be broken down into three stages, and I will show how three interlocking tools build on a foundation of information flows to resolve the wide array of issues that arise at each stage of changing to empowerment.



**W. Alan Randolph** is professor of management in the Merrick School of Business, University of Baltimore. He is also a consulting partner with the Ken Blanchard Companies, Escondido, California. Alan holds a bachelor's in industrial engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology and a master's and Ph.D. in business administration from the University of Massachusetts. He has published in a variety of professional and academic journals on topics like empowerment, leadership, project management, and international management. In 1995 he published "Navigating the Journey to Empowerment" in *Organizational Dynamics*.

Recent books include *The 3 Keys to Empowerment: Release the Power Within People for Astonishing Results*, with Ken Blanchard and John P. Carlos (Berrett-Koehler, 1999), *Empowerment Takes More Than A Minute*, with Ken Blanchard and John P. Carlos (Berrett-Koehler, 1996), *Getting the Job Done! Managing Project Teams and Task Forces for Success*, with Barry Z. Posner (Prentice-Hall, 1992). He recently published a 10-booklet discussion series titled *Power Up for Team Results*, with Ken Blanchard, John P. Carlos, and Peter B. Grazier (Berrett-Koehler, 2000). Randolph engages in consulting work on empowerment, performance management processes, project management, and self-directed teams.

## JUST WHAT IS EMPOWERMENT?

My informal yet extensive research in a wide variety of companies indicates that most managers continue to define empowerment as "giving people the power to make decisions." Although relocating the locus of decision-making is a critical part of the empowerment process, that step alone is just another manifestation of the manager acting as director and controller. The manager still mandates the decisions people are allowed to make. This definition of empowerment also misses the essential point that people already possess a great deal of power—power that resides in their knowledge, experience, and internal motivation. To achieve real empowerment managers must embrace this wider concept and must focus on ways to "release the power within people to achieve astonishing results." Sounds simple, right? Well, not so fast! There are other players who can inhibit this release of power.

Employees, too, misunderstand empowerment. Many of them feel that empowerment means they will be given free rein to do as they please and the freedom to make all the key decisions about their jobs. Employees often fail to grasp that empowerment means sharing risks and responsibilities as the price for freedom to act, pride in their work, and ownership of their jobs. Indeed, empowerment entails much greater accountability for employees than in a hierarchical culture. But it is precisely this frightening increase in responsibility that creates a sense of engagement and fulfillment on the job. Empowerment is a strange combination of opportunity and risk.

In one retail food company, senior management became intrigued with the idea of "empowering their people." They held an all-company meeting and announced that they would begin to increase the decision-making options for people at all levels of the organization. As they did so, they were surprised to find that little if any change in people's behavior was noticeable. The middle managers were extremely concerned about losing control of the results for which

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