When common sense becomes uncommon: participation and empowerment in Russian companies with Western participation

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Abstract

This article starts by mapping the growing (Western based) literature that deals with participation and empowerment by outlining two clusters of writings—those that glorify these phenomena and those that problematize them. The article then examines why participation and empowerment, as introduced in the Western literature, do not work in Russian organizations. Explanations are found in one-man authority, anti-individualism and dependence, tightly coupled hierarchies, lack of knowledge sharing, and double-bind situations. The arguments are illustrated by examples from two case studies of Russian companies with Western participation.
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Participation in a company relates to employee involvement in the decision making process and to the concept of influence. The higher the degree of subordinate influence over decisions, the higher the degree of participation. The term emphasizes persuasion rather than control: true participation is characterized by no exercise of coercive power. Empowerment refers to the degree to which employees are encouraged to make certain decisions without consulting their superiors and to which organizational dynamics are initiated at the bottom. The notion is associated with delegating or, more broadly, with enabling. Although the ideas inherent in the terms of participation and empowerment go back to the 1920s, empowerment and participation are an important part of life in today's organizations and their managers' language (empowerment was the management word of the year in 1989).

1. Empowerment: "a cutting-edge technology"

A sizable amount of research examines the positive effects of participative decision making and empowerment. Employee commitment to the organization is seen as an important source of competitive advantage and participation

is associated with accepting responsibility and applying creativity. The literature reinforces the conviction that employees want to possess and exercise more power and that organizations desire employees who are able to determine their own work and the development of their own careers and of the organization. The focus is often on prescribed methods, recipes and keys: various functionalist frameworks and models help explain how to operationalize empowerment by relating it to organizational culture, mutual trust, belonging, freedom, and employees' commitment (Dessler, 1999; Roth, 1997). Pfeffer and Veiga (1999) summarize the optimistic view on participation and empowerment by claiming that:

> [...] people work harder because of the increased commitment that comes from having more control and say in their work; people work smarter because they are encouraged to build skills and competence; and people work more responsibly because more responsibility is placed in hands of employees farther down in the organization. These practices work not because of some mystical process, but because they are grounded in sound social science principles that have been shown to be effective by a great deal of evidence. And, they make sense. (40)

Blanchard, Carlos, and Randolph (1999) point out that "empowerment is a cutting-edge 'technology' that provides

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both the strategic advantage companies are seeking and the opportunity people are seeking'' (5). They generalize the applicability of empowerment by stating that it ''can assist *any* leader (who is willing to make some key changes) tap the knowledge, skills, experience, and motivation of *every* person in the company'' (emphasis added) (Blanchard et al., 1999). All in all, participation and empowerment seem to excite, mobilize, and energize and their advocates seem to turn them into ideas that are taken for granted and unproblematic.

2. Empowerment: a critical view

Some authors contrast the optimistic and often romanticized views by going beyond their superficial value and acknowledgment. According to Beirne (1999), bland success stories have less to contribute to an empowering practice than empirically based insights into problematical experiences, false-starts and failures. Empowerment schemes might lead to failures due to uncontrollable difficulties and tensions, organizational contradictions, irritation, disappointment, mistrust and political constraints.

Managers often claim that participation and empowerment are used to increase equality at the working place. However, since management develops these techniques and introduces them to the workers, it actually perpetuates inequality: one (minor) part of the workforce creates frameworks within which the others are invited/motivated/forced to act in. According to Handy (1995), ''if the individual is seen as an instrument, even an 'empowered' instrument, he or she is there to be used by others for their purposes. Such an instrumental contract, no matter how well intentioned or how benevolently interpreted, is a denial of democracy'' (192). Sievers (1994) asserts that ''motivating workers through incentives is a way—as it is for parents—to hide one's own contempt and the guilt feelings connected with it. And as everybody feels with a child who does not really want all these toys and sweets but takes them, workers, too, sometimes buy into what is sold to them as job-rotation, job-enlargement, job-enrichment, etc.'' (19). Participation and empowerment are among those techniques sold. Quinn (1999) argues that in most employment situations empowerment is a game of give-and-take, at the same time both liberating the employee whilst burdening him or her with increased responsibilities. Jahoda (1979) states that the participation issue is now nothing but a hobby of the academics without resonance among those who do the real work. Dachler (1978) concludes that not only the answers but also the very questions concerning participation issues remain unclear and ambiguous.

Another critique is that empowerment frequently comes from technical and operational priorities, often with little sensitivity shown to the ethical issues that are contingent upon managerial exigencies (Beirne, 1999). The ethics of empowerment are seen to be as much a question of ideol-ogies as they are of evidence (Quinn, 1999). Denham et al. (1997) highlight the fact that managers are often resistant towards reducing their formal power and authority by involving their subordinates in the decision making process.

3. Contextualizing participation and empowerment

The vast majority of theoretical frameworks and models on participation and empowerment are developed in the West, mainly in the U.S.A. As such, they reflect important features of the Western[1] culture and are not really vocal about other perspectives of what might be appropriate in a context different from their own. They build normative recipes on the basis of a number of underlying assumptions, but are silent about the diversity of localities existing in different cultural, legislative, social, political, and organizational contexts.

The present article is in line with the perspectives that detect the problematic nature of participation and empowerment. However, it tries to avoid fragmentation in the sense that reality consists of good and bad parts, which can be idealized or denied. Instead, it discusses the meaning and the applicability of participation and empowerment by seriously taking into account the specific national cultural and organizational context in which they are applied. The article highlights the need for and the importance of context to understanding widely recognized and appreciated approaches and techniques. It argues that there are contextual constraints to the success of applying participative and empowerment practices. The case material provided here clearly demonstrates that in post-socialist organizations in Russia these practices do not work at all or are not as successful as in the West.

4. Two Russian companies with Western participation

4.1. Company 1: O&G

O&G[2] is a Russian project organization that operates in the oil and gas industry. It is located in a major city in the European part of Russia. The company was founded in the late 1920s and had a monopoly position within its field—it

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[1] The notions ''Western'' and ''Westerners'' were introduced and frequently used by the respondents in this study, Russians as well as foreign expatriates. This is an ambiguous notion formulated on a highly aggregate level. It has gained broad acceptance mainly in terms of dichotomies, such as West–East, Western Europe–Eastern Europe or Europe–America in spite of an apparent diversity within each of these aggregations and even though they are factored down to many smaller entities based on national cultures, national identities, and socio-cultural contexts. The result of this desegregation is a significant variety with regard to ''soft'' components—organizational practices and forms, management attitudes and behavior, leadership styles, human resource policies and practices.

[2] The company names have been disguised. They indicate the industry in which the respective company operates.