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Psychological empowerment of non-supervisory employees working in full-service restaurants

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the construct known as psychological empowerment as it was perceived by non-supervisory employees in full-service restaurants. The research instrument used in this study was first developed by Spreitzer (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1992) and modified by Fulford and Enz (J. Manage. Issues 7 (2) (1995) 161). Subjects of the survey represented three restaurant chains in Midwest United States. Nine hundred twenty four surveys from 66 units were received representing a 46.2% usable response rate. Factor analysis revealed a three-dimensional factor structure for psychological empowerment. Findings related to demographics of the respondents and psychological empowerment, as well as the dimensions of psychological empowerment are presented.

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1. Introduction

The dynamic business environment has been forcing service organizations to modify their traditional management techniques. Many of the guides previously developed for the manufacturing sector, and commonly used by restaurant businesses, are becoming obsolete. Unyielding operational procedures, simple job descriptions, and established standards have been the major philosophies in the manufacturing model practiced by service firms. The traditional management

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paradigm of the manager in control and the employees being controlled has often been utilized in the restaurant business. However, the techniques used in accordance with traditional management principles often have become less effective, as competition emerges and more demanding customers with individual needs come on the changing environment (Durnford, 1997). Therefore, adapting new management techniques has become necessary for all organizations to deliver the highest quality services and products in globally challenging circumstances.

Employee empowerment, one of the newer techniques utilized by organizations, has been receiving accelerated attention from scholars and practitioners alike (Donavan, 1994; Townsend and Gebhardt, 1997). Likewise, empowerment has been considered a dynamic and complex phenomenon (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998). Researchers have approached the definition of empowerment from several orientations (Conner, 1997; Rudolph and Peluchette, 1993). The self-generated exercising of judgment (Bell and Zemke, 1988), and giving authority to make everyday decisions (Sternberg, 1992), are among the definitions of empowerment.

Conger and Kanungo (1988) criticized the examination of empowerment in management literature for concentrating only on participative management techniques as the means of sharing power or delegating authority. They also questioned previous approaches to empowerment, believing these approaches do not always show how employees feel about empowerment. Conger and Kanungo believe that understanding of the construct is limited and confusing; therefore, it needs to be examined more meticulously.

2. Theoretical background

The most noticeable origins of empowerment come from Douglas McGregor (Kinlaw, 1995). His “Theory Y” approach was based on a belief that employee motivation, productivity, and participation can be sustained by designing jobs that are motivation intensive. McGregor emphasizes that management by direction does not work for every organization, because the typical devices of control, rewards, incentives, and assurances no longer continue to exist in the mind of workers.

Studies by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) have resulted in a cognitive model of empowerment. Empowerment was conceptualized in terms of changes in cognitive variables (task assessments), which determine the motivation of individuals. They state that an individual’s assessment of how high his or her feelings are concerning these assessments is positively related to feelings of empowerment.

There were four assessments in Thomas and Velthouse’s (1990) study of empowerment. The first assessment, impact, is the degree to which the behavior is considered to “make a difference.” Competence, the second assessment, refers to the belief that one is able to perform the task activities skillfully when he or she tries, in essence self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Kinlaw (1995) claims that competence was the strongest control mechanism for empowerment, because empowerment only works when people want to be competent. The third assessment, meaningfulness, relates to the value of the task, goal, or purpose. A person’s perception about how meaningful

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