Relocating empowerment as a management concept for Asia

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ABSTRACT

Management theories, especially those in the area of human resource management, are predominantly Western-centric in origin and in the empirical testing that underpins them. The purpose of this paper is to explore perceptions of one such theory, employee empowerment, in an Asian context. Information gathered from an open ended questionnaire and focus groups provide an in-depth examination of hotel managers' perceptions and practice of empowerment in the workplace. This study provides tentative indicators of significant culturally-driven differences in the understanding and application of employee empowerment (in terms of both research and practice) between Western and Asian contexts. The results of this study indicate that empowerment in Asian cultures relates much more to the individual and his/her merits, in contrast to organizationally-driven empowerment in Western countries. The findings also indicate that empowerment by hotel managers is related to the level of personal trust the manager has in an employee.

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1. Introduction

Researchers and practitioners define empowerment, as a theoretical concept and as an applied management tool, in different ways. Bowen and Lawler's (1992) discussion of empowerment relates the concept to practice that includes sharing information, rewards, knowledge and power with front line employees. Employers give front line, non-managerial employees, those described by Bateson and Hoffman (1999) as "boundary-spanning workers" mediating between the organization and its customers, opportunities to make their own decisions and to develop their abilities and job performance skills (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1992). Management researchers seek to expand the conceptualization of empowerment beyond discretionary power and job autonomy. For instance, Spreitzer (1995) claims that researchers need to operationalize empowerment as a psychological construct reflecting an individual's feelings of self-control and self-efficacy; Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, and Drasgow (2000) argue that empowerment should capture the nature of the relationship between managers and their subordinates.

Hospitality and tourism management researchers (Ghillyer, 1994; Hales & Klidas, 1998; Klidas, 2001; Lashley, 1994; Timmerman & Lytle, 2008) claim that a level of vagueness surrounds the question of what empowerment means in terms of why empowerment is employed, the source of authority for the empowerment, to whom empowerment is given, where and when empowerment should be applied, and what caveats should accompany empowerment. In spite of this search for the characteristics of empowerment, addressing its perceived benefits in the workplace, Harley (1999, p.42) addresses its perceived benefits in the workplace, "Advocates of empowerment tend to promote it with considerable fervor, claiming that it has the potential to generate the kind of 'win-win' outcome beloved of unitarists. That is, while improving organizational performance and contributing to the 'bottom line', it simultaneously (and necessarily) leads to improvements in the experience of work for employees."

Sutton, Verginis, and Eltvik (2003) address empowerment issues within specific businesses contexts, in their case for restaurant managers in Dubai. Similarly, Leong (2001) examines restaurant managers' perception of the practice in U.S. chain restaurants, and Hales and Klidas (1998) study five star hotels in Amsterdam. Other case studies of empowerment include Scandinavian Airlines (Carlzon, 1989), Federal Express (Bowen & Lawler, 1992), Club Med (Horovitz & Jurgens-Panak, 1992), Harvester restaurants (Ashness & Lashley, 1995; Pikard, 1993), Delta Airlines (Glover, 1989), Scott's Hotels/ Marriott (Goymour, 1992) and Ritz Carlton (Carper, 1991; Ghillyer, 1994).

Much of the literature on empowerment is Western-centric, while little work addresses the application of the concept beyond the developed country environment. Research casts serious doubt (e.g., Baum, 2006) on the applicability of workplace empowerment, in its westernized form, within cultures where managerial structures are, perhaps, more formal and power distance is greater (to use Hofstede's (2001) language). An exception to this research vacuum is Thang, Rowley, Quang, and Warner's (2007) consideration of empowerment in Vietnamese firms. They explain:

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Whereas Vietnamese are willing to take more responsibility and authority when doing so is associated with additional benefits, they show more hesitant attitudes in delegating power. Assigning authority to lower ranks usually occurs when a sufficient amount of trust has been accumulated with these employees. The dynamics of trust mirrors the long history of uncertainty in daily life. … Vietnamese do not tend to trust people easily but to take a prolonged period to interact, observe and step-by-step test their working hypothesis about the degree of trust they give a person…. In a nutshell, expectations for effective shortcuts to employee involvement and empowerment in the context of Vietnam are naive. Although it is likely involvement and empowerment can grow on the ground of Vietnamese cultural values (Thang et al.'s 2007, p.121).

Although researchers know relatively little about perceptions of empowerment and related issues in the hotel sector in Asia other than in Vietnam (Thang et al., 2007, p.121), they can identify some enlightening information. A recent study on empowerment by Humborstad, Humborstad, Whitfield, and Perry (2008) empirically examines the impact of empowerment on the service willingness of hotel employees in Macau. In their study of a sample of 290 hotel employees, the findings conclude that empowerment has a positive effect on a willingness to deliver higher levels of service. Similarly, Hui, Au, and Fock's (2004) survey of hotels in Beijing found service employees' willingness to accept and exercise discretionary power their manager allows to be essential for the successful implementation of empowerment. The two studies provide insights on the implementation of empowerment in what researchers can see as Chinese high power distance organizations. Nevertheless, these studies only seek insights from the perspective of service employees, and the results do not reflect the impact of empowerment from managerial perspective. To fill this void in the context of a high contact service such as hospitality, the present study focuses on the managerial perspective in order to gain insights from a theoretical point of view but also to provide useful information to hotel managers on the implementation of empowerment in hotels in China.

The key questions here, therefore, are (1) how do managers perceive empowerment? and (2) in what form and to what extent does employee empowerment work in hotels in Asia and, specifically, in China? Hence, this study explores the nature of empowerment in the Chinese hospitality setting and debunks some of the misunderstandings that may exist about this widely discussed theme.

Hotels in China are for the subject of this study because of the rapid expansion of both domestic and international chains in the past 20 years, with a consequent importation of management theory from the West and its adoption within a Chinese cultural and political context. This paper builds upon evidence that many such businesses have successfully developed their management practices and service styles by combining international management skills with Chinese culture (Cai, Zhang, Pearson, & Bai, 2000). Therefore, it is appropriate to illustrate the application of Western-centric management theory to an Asian context through a study that explores the viability of implementing employee empowerment in the Chinese hotel environment.

The present study provides an in-depth examination of the perceptions and practices of employee empowerment by hotel managers in China. Apart from providing valuable information to hotel managers, the findings of this study should be of value to international hotel companies and expatriate managers working in international hotels in China who wish to gain a better understanding of how best to manage hotel employees within Chinese culture. Furthermore, management initiatives that claim to empower employees yet represent divergent interpretations of the core concept are of wider value to study. Leong's (2001) survey of 46 U.S. restaurant managers on the impact of mentoring and empowerment on employee performance finds that a manager's perception of empowerment has a significant effect on

employee success and self-confidence. Lashley (1996, 1997) proposes a pragmatic analysis of the paradoxical nature of the potential impact of empowerment by addressing the managerial meanings and motives of empowerment and the use of empowerment. What is clear is that all factors that are considered to influence managerial empowerment initiatives can be as powerful and positive as they can be damaging and negative.

Why are managers unwilling to empower their subordinates? The reasons include habit (decision making and problem solving are embedded in managers' ways of thinking), fear of anarchy, personal insecurity, lack of skills (to mentor and support their employees), lack of top management example and job/promotion insecurity (Clutterbuck & Kernaghan, 1994). Even when managers implement empowerment, Sutton (1997) argues that cultural perspectives can be a barrier to empowerment. Such barriers can include traditions of hierarchy, fear of retaliation, the attitude that empowerment is "not my job," failure to identify empowerment, and suspicion and pessimism. In Chinese society, along with many other Asian cultures, collectivist/group orientations are very strong, so group members may predetermine opinions and consider people who deviate from the norm to have bad or weak character (Littrell, 2002). To what extent does this type of unique cultural environment affect employee empowerment in Chinese hotels? This study provides some insights that can assist in evaluating the influence of cultural factors on employee empowerment.

The main research question for this study is: Which factors affect employee empowerment practices in an Asian context, using China hotels as a research environment?

The related sub-questions include the following issues. How do Asian hotel managers define empowerment? Why should hotels and their managers apply empowerment? Whom should managers empower? Where or in what situations should empowerment be applied? What support and training should accompany empowerment? What limits should be applied to the extent of empowerment? What are the factors that help or hinder the implementation/sustainability of empowerment?

2. Method

The researchers collected primary data from a classroom survey and two sessions of focus groups in Hangzhou, China. The forty-five participants were students pursuing a Master of Science in Hotel and Tourism Management. All of them held middle and senior management positions within the hotel industry in China. Open ended responses drawn from the research questions were sought through a classroom survey questionnaire to gauge perceptions of employee empowerment and to seek wider understanding of this theme. The same set of questions was later used in focus group discussions, designed to elicit more in-depth responses.

The main themes in the questionnaire and the key topics in the subsequent focus group discussions include the following points: perceptions of the meaning of empowerment; the value and limitations in applying empowerment; whom, where, in what situations empowerment can be implemented; what policies are required to accompany the implementation of empowerment; and, the obstacles to implementing or sustaining empowerment.

A team of researchers, all of whom have had hotel and tourism related working experience in China, designed, agreed upon and validated the content.

Recruited from the group of survey respondents, two volunteer groups of focus group participants, each comprised of six members, were invited to participate in the discussions. The discussions were designed to elicit qualitative elaboration of the questionnaire findings. Focus group methods are well established in tourism research (e.g., Vermon, Essex, Pinder, & Curry, 2003; Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & Van Es, 2001) and provide opportunities to explore key themes and issues in depth.