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Creating an empowering culture: examining the relationship between organizational culture and perceptions of empowerment

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Abstract

A study of front line employees in four textile plants located in the Southeastern United States is used to examine how organizational culture may support empowerment efforts. Our results indicate that organizational cultures that were perceived as being more collective and more doing-oriented were related to significantly greater perceptions of empowerment. Power distance was related to empowerment and organizational commitment in unexpected ways. Implications for both theory and practice are discussed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Empowering employees is an important component of total quality management (TQM). TQM has been defined as "... a set of organizational strategies, practices, and tools for organizational performance improvement" (Lawler et al., 1995, p. 45) and TQM advocates argue that it cannot be successful without employee involvement (Deming, 1986). Cardy (1996) notes that empowerment programs have become strongly associated with TQM in the

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United States and may be the critical factor in explaining successes and failures. “One of the most important principles of TQM concerns employee involvement, or as it is often called, empowerment” (Lawler, 1994, p. 68).

Empowered employees support TQM efforts by (1) calling attention to quality problems in the work place and (2) continuously trying to improve the way they do their jobs. Empowerment efforts support these goals by giving employees the power to make decisions formerly made by managers, by providing employees with the information needed to make good decisions, by providing training necessary to understand the business, and by tying employee rewards to their performance (Lawler et al., 1995). In one review of the TQM literature, Zeitz et al. (1997) found that empowerment or employee involvement was identified as a TQM-related dimension in a large number of studies (Berry, 1991; Carr & Littman, 1990; Dean & Evans, 1994; Denison, 1996; Hofstede, 1984; Hunt, 1992; Juran, 1995; Lawler et al., 1995; Litwin & Stringer, 1968; McMillan, 1989; Payne & Mansfield, 1973; Ross, 1993; Schmidt & Finnegan, 1992; Scholtes, 1988; Weatherly & Beach, 1994). Organizations that (1) aspire to involve employees in organizational decision-making (such as that required by quality programs), (2) value the mental labor of all employees (a key to quality success) and, (3) work under the assumption that all employees can contribute to improving the organization might take comfort in being on their way to creating an “empowering culture,” and, thus, ready to reap the associated benefits regarding quality.

Our objective in this paper is to further examine the importance of organizational culture in understanding the employee perceptions of empowerment that are necessary to support TQM efforts. Researchers are beginning to examine the relationship between organizational culture and empowerment. In a study of front line service workers in the hospitality industry, Sparrowe (1994, 1995) found that a constructive organizational culture (that is, a culture with humanistic-encouraging, affiliative, achievement, and self-actualizing beliefs) (Cooke & Lafferty, 1986) fostered perceptions of empowerment. Similarly, Spreitzer (1996) found that a participative organizational climate (that is, a climate in which acknowledgment, creation, and liberation of employees are valued) was significantly related to perceptions of empowerment. Drawing from these results, we propose that organizational culture will be related to employee reactions to empowerment programs (Liden & Tewksbury, 1995; Sparrowe, 1994, 1995).

2. Perceptions of empowerment

While discussion of employee empowerment has been prevalent in the popular literature for many years, theoretical research on psychological empowerment has been appearing only recently in scholarly journals (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) conceptualize empowerment as a set of four task assessments or cognitions that individuals make as they attempt to interpret their work situation. The four dimensions of empowerment include meaning, impact, competence, and choice.

Meaning is described as the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own standards or ideals (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Meaning involves

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