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EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT

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Augmenting Empowerment At The Workplace

Most organisations assume that they understand the meaning and value of Employee Empowerment, but not all are able to effectuate it to their best advantage in their business practices.

DR. FARAH NAQVI



Employee empowerment is the means provided by organisations to employees allowing for a fair degree of autonomy and control in their day-to-day activities. This enables them to own up responsibilities and make critical work-related decisions. In an attempt to understand the way in which organisational theorists have defined employee empowerment, two kinds of empowerment emerge.

- Structural empowerment: Associated with the delegation of power by managers to employees
- Psychological Empowerment: Based primarily on self-determination and intrinsic value

Most definitions of empowerment refer to some aspect of control over decision making and work processes. Some chose to define it through the concept of 'job enrichment' and 'participative management' (Lawler *et*

al., 1992; Cummings and Worley, 1997). Another author aptly states that empowerment is, 'easy to define in its absence—alienation, powerlessness, helplessness, but difficult to define positively because it 'takes on a different form in different people and contexts' (Zimmerman, 1990).

Most organisations assume that they understand the meaning and value of Employee Empowerment, but not all are able to effectuate it to their best advantage in their business practices. Also, when we talk of enhancing employee empowerment at the workplace, the focus is primarily placed on job design, business practices and macro factors like organisation culture. Therefore, it is essential to throw light on factors related to the employee, the leader, and the use of VoE technologies for enhancing employee empowerment.





Seeking empowerment to being worthy of it

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argued that psychological empowerment and increased intrinsic task motivation is manifested in a set of four cognitions, viz. meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. A mere desire for autonomy and control over decision-making in your work is insufficient.

An employee, especially a new entrant in a company, must prove himself worthy of it by his competence and performance. The best way to achieve one's personal and professional goals is by strengthening the linkage between effort and performance. The first step forward for achieving this is by opting for a job where the person feels that the personality- job fit can be maximised. This will maximise the 'meaning' dimension of psychological

empowerment that involves a fit between the requirements of a work role and beliefs, values, and behaviours (*Brief & Nord, 1990*). Second is to continuously invest in seeking knowledge, upgrading skills and staying updated with the latest developments in one's field. This will strengthen the self-belief in one's capability to perform activities with the requisite skills termed as 'competence' and 'self-efficacy' (*Gist, 1987*), a critical component of psychological empowerment.

'Selfdetermination', an individual's sense in choosing between initiating and regulating actions (*Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989*) and the 'impact' or the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work (*Ashforth, 1989*) significantly impact an employee's sense of empowerment.

For this, it is very important that the organisation provides access to information to employees to enable robust decision-making. Meanwhile, employee striving for workplace empowerment, apart from indicating initiative must also focus on developing the skills needed to carry out the additional responsibilities and earn the confidence of the manager by exhibiting personal mastery.

Leaders wisdom on empowering employees

Leaders try to empower their employees by delegating authority, sharing information, involving them in decision-making and asking for their input. Allan et al. (2018) conducted a study exploring *'when empowering employees work and when it doesn't'*. They examined the results of 105 studies that involved data from more than 30,000 employees from 30 countries. The analysis revealed that those leaders who empower are a lot more effective at influencing employee creativity and citizenship behaviour. Also, by empowering their employees, these leaders are more likely to be trusted by their subordinates, and empowered employees are more likely to be powerful, confident individuals, who are committed to meaningful goals. However, the results also suggested that empowering leadership can lead to additional stress and impair employees' routine performance since factors such as 'trust' and 'experience' can affect how the leaders' behaviour is perceived by employees.

And, this is where the leader's wisdom comes into play to decide the amount of power and autonomy must be given to the employees. The leader can begin by seeking employees input and creating a favourable work environment where employees can engage in dialogue and discussion related to their work. A leader should aim at creating a safe space where the employees can freely discuss the ongoing projects, their needs, obstacles, opportunities and anything critical to their work. This will not only provide opportunities of professional growth

to employees, but also give closer and factual insight to the leader when confronted with doubts related to whom to empower when to empower and how much to empower.

Providing employees with a voice

Every successful organisation aims at attracting the best talent, enhancing employee engagement and productivity, improving retention and building brand value. This calls for paying close attention to employee sentiments. Workplaces that value their people assets are optimising the use of technology (VoE) to capture the employee's sentiments. Organisations are leveraging technology to not only cut costs and get customer feedback but to gain useful insights into factors critical to workplace performance, desires, expectations, positive and hindering forces. To better understand what companies are doing in the area of employee listening and the extent to which employees are willing to participate, IBM analysed data from the 2015 IBM Smarter Workforce Institute Work Trends Survey- a broad-based survey of over 24,000 employees from 23 countries, a cross-section of industries and job functions, and thousands of companies.

They also conducted interviews with 12 organisations that had improved their listening capabilities. The research revealed that listening programmes helped employees feel more engaged and was associated with positive business results. Organisations that were using multiple listening methods reported higher ratings for organisational performance and reputation. 83% of surveyed employees said they would participate in an employee listening programme. Only 62% of Baby Boomers surveyed believe management will act on their input, compared to 78% of Millennials. HR practitioners who use multiple listening methods rated their organisational performance and reputation 24% higher than those who do not. Gartner, a global research and advisory firm in its report published in October 2019 had noted VoE as


“Empowering leadership can lead to additional stress and impair employees' routine performance since factors such as 'trust' and 'experience' can affect how the leaders' behaviour is perceived by employees.”

“Every successful organisation aims at attracting the best talent, enhancing employee engagement and productivity, improving retention and building brand value. This calls for paying close attention to employee sentiments.”

one the four key trends in emerging human capital technologies.

The report also predicts that by 2022, 35% of organisations will utilise conversational user experience and natural language processing interactions in their talent acquisition. There is a sharp rise in VoE technologies as companies begin to appreciate that employee voice matters. However, when implementing voice-of-the-employee mechanisms, companies should remember that- ‘don’t only provide a voice to your employees but listen to them too’. This implies that when opting for any VoE technology, the organisation must invest in a meticulous investigation to see how well it aligns with their business strategy. The objective of listening to employee voice should go beyond mapping employee sentiments and inspiring participation to uprooting bottlenecks to employee satisfaction and productivity and lead to appropriate follow up actions.

Competent and empowered employees who feel their feedback is heard can be an excellent resource for optimum resource utilisation, cost minimisation and promoting innovation.

Research by Seibert et al. (2011) published in the journal of applied psychology indicated that contextual antecedent constructs like perceived high-performance managerial practices, socio-political support, leadership, and work characteristics are strongly related to empowerment. Employee empowerment has been associated with better job performance, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organisation. This gives enough impetus to strive towards enriching employee experience by considering employee empowerment as a process of continuous improvement; to enhance employee competence and self-efficacy, identify and remove organisational practices that induce powerlessness and maybe work on structural and systemic changes that need modification. 

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