



Rethinking Empowerment

... what it means, why it's important and how to enable it

In the early 1980's Edward Deci and Richard Ryan began developing their self-determination theory (SDT 1985); put simply, humans are intrinsically motivated to satisfy their needs by learning, extending and applying their skills. Furthermore we have a natural tendency to be curious and active in our world, rather than being passive. In 2000 Deci and Ryan identified the need for "supports from the social environment" (p262) stating, "the human spirit can be diminished or crushed and that individuals



sometimes reject growth and responsibility" (p68). For motivation and self-determination to occur, a person's social environment must fulfil the psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Peter Senge in 'The Fifth Discipline' (1990) opens with a simile that our approach to problems by breaking them apart is like breaking a mirror, then reconstructing the pieces expecting to see a whole reflection. The result is a fragmented image of the reality and people who stand back to look into it would be quite correct in surmising that the mirror doesn't work. Senge refers to a potential for organisations to have a learning disability where people 'become their position' (p51) failing to see how their behaviour affects other people or parts of the organisation and subsequently blaming others for problems that arise as a result of *their* actions. This can be reinforced by leaders who fail to enable 'thinking together' (p11) whereby individuals engage in reflective dialogue and experience success by being part of something bigger than themselves, by being generative.

John Heron (1999) in 'The Complete Facilitator's Handbook' talks about whole person learning. Fundamental to 'whole person learning' is the learner's interest and commitment to the subject matter which influences their understanding, skill development, retention and practice (pp 22 & 37). Heron explains the necessity for *self-generated* interest and commitment, for these cannot be *imposed* without being negatively impacted. In other words, individuals hold the power to engage in their learning and to retain it and to put it into practice.

David Rock in his book 'Quiet Leadership' (2006) begins with a quote '*people don't need to be managed, they need to be unleashed*' (Richard Florida in Rock 2006: xix). Rock goes on to describe the '*quiet leader*' who spends less time telling people what to do and more time listening and enabling people to think better and to use their full repertoire of skills and potential. As our knowledge of neuroscience and social behaviour increases, the significance of the 'social environment' is becoming more evident.

Kouzes and Posner in 'The Leadership Challenge' (1st ed. 1987 to 5th ed. 2012) describe the five core practices of exemplary leadership. These include '*Enable others to act*' where the leader recognises and inspires each persons' capability and power; and '*Encourage the heart*' where leaders encourage and acknowledge contributions, team members share in the rewards and people feel like heroes!

Roger Schwarz in Smart Leaders Smarter Teams (2013) reinforces the notion of problems in the workplace relating to how people think about leadership, individual and team responsibilities. He identifies the tendency for leaders to unknowingly thwart the team's ability to lead from within and to make sound decisions. This is referred to as '*unilateral control*' mindset, evident in many workplaces; the unwritten rule that the leader makes all the decisions and ultimately, the leader's solution prevails! Yet most leaders would describe themselves in terms of their '*espoused mindset*' guided by principles

of participation, speaking up, challenge, shared decision-making, accountability. Rather than it being the leader's job to solely manage the team's performance and hold them accountable, smart leaders enable team members to hold each other accountable for their practice and outcomes.

So how does all this relate to empowerment?

One definition of empowerment is *"the giving of an ability, enablement or permission"* (Collins English Dictionary). That suggests it's in the control of someone else, just as Sinek says (see below). Though not all leadership models and resources name empowerment as a leadership skill or attribute, the outcomes of empowerment are very similar to those of effective leadership; productivity, customer service and change for the better (<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/benefits-employee-empowerment-1177.html>). And many of the named leadership attributes contribute to empowerment eg shared vision and decision-making, responsibility and accountability, genuine listening, a balance of support and challenge. Furthermore, given the positional power most leaders hold, it makes sense that their ability to create environments and conditions that empower employees makes empowerment an inherent attribute and leadership skill. However, positional power can be misused or abused, either deliberately or unknowingly, e.g. many leaders believe they are empowering staff by allowing them to participate in decisions, some decisions, not all decisions, and often not the decisions that employees feel they are most impacted by. So the leader's view could be 'yes you can contribute to decisions but I'll tell you which decisions you can be part of"! This in itself is disempowering, and even more disempowering is the approach "I'll tell you which of your decisions can be acted upon" or "my leadership responsibility is to ensure you agree with my decision"! It's a fragmented approach to decision-making that usually results in a fragmented view of the impact of the decision and is not empowering for those involved.

Simon Sinek of The Empowered Employee blog (05/11/10), states that empowered employees have the power to make decisions without having to check with their supervisor. It also means that empowered employees, who follow clear guidelines, are responsible and accountable for such decisions. Sinek goes further to say that this has little to do with the employee and more to do with the leader and workplace culture. Empowerment requires that basic needs, including psychological safety, be met, just as Deci and Ryan describe in SDT. Then it goes without saying that leaders can disempower employees, which can lead to others being disempowered. How so? Think about a visit to a café or shop where the service person is there to just do their job, so there's no smile, no greeting, definitely no 'extra mile' service and you walk away feeling pretty ordinary, not at all special. You'll most likely not go back there and you're unlikely to recommend to others – bet the boss wouldn't be happy with that!

On a more serious note, I had a very interesting conversation with a patient recently and it really highlighted the importance of employee empowerment in the healthcare setting. Just imagine the service you're accessing is healthcare, as a patient you have placed your health, maybe even your life, in the hands of health professionals. The person at the care interface, the one you encounter most, has a huge impact on your experience. Yet they've had minimal (if any) input into most of the important decisions about what happens to you; they've been told what to do and how it should happen. They don't feel particularly valued by the organisation and they fear getting into trouble from their direct manager or other important person if they step out of line or do something different. The fact that they've held other roles in their life and career where they've had to manage complex tasks and make important decisions, doesn't matter in this job; they have the smallest voice in the decision-making and management hierarchy, they have one job to do and they should just get on with it. So that's exactly what they do, they just want to get on with their job; nothing more, nothing less (or sometimes less).

Yet they may have information about you and your care that is not sought or valued by key decision-makers. The problem with this scenario is that the person caring for you is unlikely to be fully engaged in their work or to go the extra mile for you, and most importantly to advocate for you when necessary.

This scenario raises a number of questions:

- Why would otherwise confident, capable, self-managing people who are highly educated and experienced end up in such a disempowered state?
- Given what the research tells us about empowerment, why is it still so difficult to achieve or enact?
- What are the consequences of a disempowered workforce?
- Why would a leader who had the choice to enable employee empowerment, not do so?

When people are defined by a role, which is defined by a series of tasks, that's what they'll become. When people are considered to not have any leadership skills or power they stop using them so these skills become dormant and invisible! The disempowered state becomes safe and secure, the alternative is scary – it would mean taking action, responsibility and being accountable. So it becomes a vicious, self-defeating cycle that spreads within and across groups. As the saying goes, hurt people hurt people! The consequences of disempowerment are complex and multilayered. In the healthcare example given above, not only may the person not advocate for the patient, they may exercise the only power they have – over the patient. The research literature suggests that where nurses are disempowered, patients are disempowered, patient care and outcomes are impacted negatively, nurses experience job dissatisfaction, lose commitment to the job resulting in higher attrition rates and sick leave (Laschinger 1999, Manojlovich 2007, Duffield 2007, Regan 2011).

You may've wondered why the picture of the crab at the top of this article? There's a saying that the only thing a crab is good for is holding back other crabs! The effects of disempowering a group can result in them taking their feelings of frustrations, anger and dissonance out on other group members and peers. Members who strive to rise above or leave the disempowered group are held back by their peers. Those who make it to the next level will often continue to disempower their previous colleagues as they exercise their newfound power in a culture that continues to disempower them! Just as everything the literature tells us; once a group is disempowered they manage their own disempowered state – you need not do a thing, it's a learned behaviour. The group determines whether the process of empowerment will or will not take place in the individuals. And the process of enabling empowerment, which requires recognition of one's disempowered state, can in itself feel disempowering! This is why the notion of empowering others is incorrect and impossible – you can only create the conditions that enable empowerment; it's up to each individual to transform and the group to allow it to happen. Like a pod of dolphins that is group-oriented and derives satisfaction from helping others achieve their goals! Dolphins as leaders encourage others' strengths and motivate them to succeed.



Will your legacy be a bucket of crabs? Or a pod of dolphins that instil a sense of goodwill and fairness, are curious by nature, and thrive on kindness and compassion?

What can leaders do to enable empowerment?

Telling employees how to be more responsible and consumer focused, and to embrace change and to strive towards the organisation's vision is futile – they already know what to do, they are simply not empowered to do it! Leaders must address the cultural issues that lead to disempowerment, which will require a long-term commitment. Following are some points for consideration.

- Oppression in the workplace needs to be dealt with, not ignored and tolerated.
- Employ people who have the right skills and fit the team and workplace culture.
- Genuinely engage every employee as a whole person who brings many talents apart from their job role.
- Create opportunities and provide the necessary information for decision-making.
- Increase your own self-awareness through reflection and by seeking feedback.

Leaders and managers often wonder what they can do when their staff are already disempowered. Well the reality is that if they are already disempowered and disengaged it's difficult to reverse – it's not something you can do to someone. It may be a case that their previous managers and leaders have disempowered them so you are now living that legacy. Your challenge is to un-dis-empower!

The reverse is even worse for employees. Have you ever worked in a job where you have an empowering leader who is inclusive and values your input and your role? You are engaged, you take responsibility and there is shared accountability. Problems are looked at from all aspects within the system rather than blaming individuals – you 'think together'. You are supported to fulfil your job description and you get regular positive feedback. You know your manager talks positively about you and your work. They listen to you and focus on your perspective. It felt great, you were engaged. Then your manager / leader moved on, and the next one was totally opposite to everything described above. Henceforth, when a new manager comes along you find it difficult to trust them and to see their efforts to enable your empowerment as genuine. What you need is to be un-dis-empowered!

How Can A Facilitator Assist With Employee Empowerment?

1 Enable the whole person.

The *whole* person brings many different skills and talents to their work besides those listed in their job description. This recognition will enable self-generated interest in and commitment to their job and initiatives.

2 Create a safe space.

A space where everyone feels safe to speak openly is necessary to enable engagement and collaboration. A neutral facilitator can challenge without judgement, unlike a manager or supervisor.

3 Engage everyone.

Group processes to engage everyone to 'think together' requires skill. It allows dialogue from multiple perspectives. An internal person may be perceived as having the balance of power, and impede engagement.

4 Unleash creativity.

A facilitator will encourage freedom without judgement and enable people to think creatively and imaginatively, to come up with brave ideas and think outside the square, all of which contribute to innovation and improvement.

5 Increase self-awareness.

Being self-aware about assumptions, fears, strengths, influence, responsibilities and accountability is necessary to enable self-empowerment. Employees are more likely to be open about self with a facilitator, than their manager.

6 Guide the group to shared understanding and outcomes

Facilitator neutrality enables people to share issues and solutions from different perspectives to develop shared understandings and goals. Otherwise staff can feel that they are being driven towards a predetermined outcome.

7 Instil ownership of decisions

Drawing on group information and knowledge to make well-informed decisions sets members up for success. When contribution is sought and valued staff are more likely to own that decision, and to act like heroes!

For more information and support with facilitation, whole person learning, workplace engagement strategies and mentorship, or to arrange a free strategy meeting contact pauline@7sensesconsulting.com.au