

# Managing behind the scenes: A view point on employee empowerment

Henry Ongori

University of Botswana, Department of Management, Private Bag 00701, Gaborone. Botswana.  
E-mail: Ongorih@mopipi.ub.bw. Tel: +267-3555109. Fax: +267-3185102.

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Empowerment is a concept which is widely used in management and many managers and professional in various organisations claim to be practicing it. Nowadays empowerment has occupied a central point in many organisations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Employee empowerment is said to have benefited many organisations, if managed and nurtured properly especially in enhancing employee commitment and reducing employee turnover. In this era of globalisation there is need for employees' empowerment in order to enable organisation to respond quickly to any changes in the macro- environment. Therefore, the aim of this paper was to find out what should be done in organisations to enhance employee empowerment and reduce employee turnover. The methodology adopted in this paper is to review critically the existing literature on employee empowerment both online and print. This study will contribute greatly to existing literature specifically in inspiring managers to develop various strategies on how to empower their employee in organisation and reduce employee turnover. The outcome from the review indicates that employee empowerment is essential in this era of globalisation to enable the organisation to respond quickly to any changes in the environment and reduce employee turnover.

**Key words:** Employee empowerment, management, perspective, strategies.

## INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalization there is need for employees' empowerment in organisation so that employees will be in position to make quick decision and respond quickly to any changes in the environment. Organisation that are committed to employee empowerment they are in a position to motivate and retain their employees, although it's a complex management tool which needs to be nurtured and handled with a lot of care (Nick et al., 1994). Employee empowerment is a motivational technique that is designed to improve performance if managed properly through increased levels of employee's participation and self determination (Veccho, 1995). Employee empowerment is concerned with trust, motivation, decision-making, and breaking the inner boundaries between management and employees as "them" verses us (Yehuda, 1998). Employee empowerment will lead to improving productivity, performance and job satisfaction (Nick et al., 1994). Employee empowerment has been associated with the concept of power, implying that power in organisation should be re-shared from the top management to the lower management (Tulloch, 1993). In a free market economy where there is open competition, challenges to provide quality product

and services, high degree of innovativeness and turbulent changes in the macro- environment, employee empowerment is needed. The employee empowerment literature highlights that empowered workforce will lead to achieving a competitive advantage (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Forrester, 2000; Quinn and Spreitzer, 1997; Sundbo, 1999; Thomas, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is therefore to fill the gap of what should be done to enhance the employee empowerment in organisations and minimize employee turnover. It specifically focuses on what is meant by employee empowerment, various perspectives, strategies, benefits, and major criticism of employee empowerment. In addition, this paper highlights the practical recommendations on how to manage employee empowerment effectively in organisations. Finally, it concludes with conclusions and implications.

### Employee empowerment defined

Empowerment has been defined in numerous ways, but

most authors agree that the core element of empowerment involves giving employees a discretion (or latitude) over certain task related activities (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Schessinger and Heskett, 1991). Randolph (1995) defines employee empowerment as "a transfer of power" from the employer to the employees. Blanchard et al. (1996) for instance argued that that empowerment is not only having the freedom to act, but also having higher degree of responsibility and accountability. This indicates that management must empower their employees so that they can be motivated, committed, satisfied and assist the organisation in achieving its objectives. However, transferring power to the employees should be done with due diligence, at the same time the employees to whom the power is transferred to, must be held accountable for their actions. Accountability would instil discipline in utilizing scarce resources to benefit the organisation and other stakeholders. Employee empowerment takes place through sharing information, autonomy in making decisions and improving intellectual capacity. Wellins et al. (1991) proposed that an organisation that empowers its employees will be able survive in the free economy.

Mohammed et al. (1998) states that empowerment is a state of mind. An employee with an empowered state of mind experiences feelings of 1) control over the job to be performed, 2) awareness of the context in which the work is performed, 3) accountability for personal work output, 4) shared responsibility for unit and organisational performance, and 5) equity in the rewards based on individual and collective performance.

"Cognitive model" of empowerment, defines empowerment on a broad term with four components: choice, providing employee with genuine job enrichment and opportunities to have their voice heard, having real power for control and influence over work processes, which makes employees to be confident in discharging their duties. This model emphasizes that organisation have no option except to empower their employees for survival, motivational, job satisfaction, increase efficiency and to be globally competitive. The "model of work team effectiveness" postulated by Cohen et al. (1996) argued further that employee empowerment should be the primary focus for anyone trying to design effective self managing work teams in organisation.

### **Employee empowerment perspectives**

Conger and Kanungo (1988) suggested that, like the concept of power, empowerment can be viewed in two ways. First, it can be viewed as a *relational construct - empowerment* which implies the delegation of power. For instance Burke (1986) argued that "to empower implies the granting of power, delegation of authority". Similarly, Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) suggested that "for the use of the term 'empowerment' of members to be meaningful,

there must be a genuine shift in the locus of power away from management and to the shop floor.

### **Second motivational construct view of empowerment**

The Oxford dictionary defines the verb "empower" as "to enable". Thus, empowerment implies more than simply sharing power or authority and this is reflected in Conger and Kanungo's definition of empowerment. James Kouzes and Barry Posner (1993) give a concrete example on how a restaurant management empowered their employees, by allowing them to quick make decisions concerning their jobs and about customer satisfaction, the out come was marvellous, employees were in a position to make decisions quick without going back to consult their bosses and the end result was that customer satisfaction was high because the employees were better placed to solve customer problems on their own and on the spot. Many organisation development professionals also link employee empowerment to increased creativity (Senge, 1990; Wheatley, 1992; Weisbord, 1987). Pressures have increased on business, education, all organisations to become "learning organisations". Unless one is empowered, or empowers oneself, it is difficult to participate as a member of a learning organisation. Management of any going concern should know that it's through employee empowerment that employees feel highly motivated.

### **Organisational perspective**

Employee empowerment is a tool to enhance teamwork in organisation (Parker, 1994). The individual and members of the teams should be empowered, by so doing, the organisation would be able to achieve its objectives and this will make the organisation in question to be competing with others in terms of human resource utilization. Ketchum and Trist (1992) empowering teams should be a central concept for managers who wish to improve their organisation performance. Furthermore, Shipper and Manz (1992) argued that successful organisation always strives to become one large empowered team. Employee empowerment offers advantages to the organisation and to its employees. Most employees to a certain degree appreciate the greater responsibility and decision making as one way of empowering them.

### **Psychological perspective**

Wilkinson's (1998) psychologically employee empowerment affects the employee's inner natures (e.g. attitudinal shaping); their expressed behaviour (e.g. information sharing) or both (e.g. self imaging). This form of empowerment is internal state of intrinsic motivation (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Game et al., 1997;

Wilkinson, 1998). Lee and Kol (2001) argued that psychological state of employees is very important in empowerment process. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) model depicted that employee empowerment is based on four dimensions or "task assessment" that affected a person intrinsic motivation for the job at hand and these are:

- **Meaningfulness:** the meaning of a value of a task goal or purpose judged in relation to individual own ideals of standards.
- **Competence;** competence is an individual's belief in his or her capability to perform task activities skilfully.
- **Self determination (or choice);** autonomy in the initiation and continuation of work behaviours' and processes and impact:
- The perception of the degree to which an individual can influence certain outcomes of work.

In order for the individual to be empowered, the person must experience all four dimensions of empowerment mentioned above. Those organisations which want to tap the benefits of employee empowerment need to create an environment that will foster the empowerment in their organisation (Marc and Susan, 2000).

### Multi-dimensional perspective

Linda (1997) argued that one dimensional approach is not enough to view employee empowerment. Employee empowerment to be effective in organisations, management should view it as part of the system. Vogt and Marrel (1990) argued that power is a complex interactive process, whereas employee empowerment is an act of developing and increasing power by working with others. In addition, they identified six core dimensions to empower employees in organisations, educating, leading, mentoring/supporting, providing, structuring and one that incorporates all the above. This clearly indicates that empowerment is a multi-dimensional process which involves many elements in an organisation.

### Strategies for success of employee empowerment

Malone (1997) asserts that, managers should act as coaches and help employees to solve problems in organisation. Managers empower their subordinates by delegating responsibilities and assisting them when they have problems. This make subordinates to be more satisfied with their managers in return they will perform to the manager's expectations. Employees need to be assisted in the process of empowerment. Managers frequently use coaching as one of the strategies in making empowerment successful in organisation.

Participative management allows employees' to participate in decision making process. A model of employee

empowerment postulated by Mallak and Kurstedt (1996) demonstrated that employee empowerment has been expounded upon the concept of participative management. The model has four elements which emphasize that management in order for employee empowerment to take a strong foundation in organisations managers should: intrinsically motivated behaviour leading to: internal justifications for their actions taken, whereby management releases some of their authority and responsibility to lower levels of the organisation that deal directly with the product or service.

Parker and Slaughter (1995) equated employee empowerment as management-by-stress strategy that pushes people and systems to the breaking point by forcing workers to do more. Lack of employee empowerment in organisation is considered as a stressor to individual and members of the team. Management has a prerogative duty to ensure that stressors are caused by lack of employee empowerment are minimised by encouraging employee empowerment. Employee empowerment is a management practice, which all managers should practice to improve organisational performance. Management needs to take into account the following facts to ensure that empowerment in their organisations is enhanced and nurtured.

### Empowerment through job involvement

Employee empowerment significantly enhances job involvement, job satisfaction; career satisfaction and organizational commitment (Noorliza et al., 2006). Employee empowerment makes employees feel that they are valued in organisations and will create a high degree of job satisfaction and commitment. Employees are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

### Leadership strategy

Good leadership is crucial for sustaining continuous improvement of employee empowerment in organisation (Zairi, 1994; Taffinder, 1995). Good leadership needs to be demonstrated at all levels of the organisation. A good leader in organisation is in a position to tap into expressed thoughts of others, give verbal expression to their feelings, able to delegate and empower employees which make the vision created be brought into fruition. Good leadership inspires the subordinates, creates a vision to be followed by the organisation, and empowers employees through training and development. Hamish (2004) "leadership is not only having innovative ideas", but it is also getting people to follow, not just in dragged single file, but with pride, aflutter in their hearts and expectations. Kirwan (1995) demonstrated that there are four key ingredients for empowering program to succeed in organisation and these include:

- Management must agree to support the program.

- Inauguration warrants fanfare
- Must be offered for ideas generated and accepted.
- Is essential for team leaders, program coordinators and evaluation committees to be in place to evaluate the progress of empowerment and advise the best way to enhance it.

Employee empowerment is not a product of any structure or system, but it is a process which is ongoing, dynamic and fluctuating. Thorlakson (1996) argued that employee empowerment is "getting workers to do what needs to be done rather than doing what they are told, and it involves delegation, individual responsibility, autonomous decision making, and feelings of self-efficacy". Employee empowerment program to succeed in organisation management must put in place a structure in the system to support the whole process (Joanne and Samuel, 1997). It is recommendable that employee empowerment takes place in an environment where is allowed, nurtured and promoted by the management and employees.

The management style of the future must change and accommodate the empowering culture in organisations. There are three closely inter-linked essentials which are the keys to success of employee empowerment in organisation. These include the following.

#### **Attitude**

It is the pivotal point of any progressive idea and relates to the psychological stance (or frame of mind) of an individual or group of individuals in respect of a concept, central theme or idea. In general, one's attitudes are learned from those in authority over one (parents, teachers, managers) and are reinforced by subsequent experience - unless or until some other different experience enlightens with a new message entirely.

#### **Commitment**

This implies a sense of duty and obligation to the company which employs one. All employees must be committed to ensure that organisation nurtures the process of employee empowerment. In addition, it also means that everyone in the enterprise, direct from the managing director downward must accept responsibility to make sure that the process of employee empowerment is successful in organisation.

#### **Involvement**

This is considered as the keystone of corporate success of employee empowerment. There is much evidence to prove that involving individuals in the planning processes and their abilities are utilized, there are higher chances of achieving the plans of the organisation. Equally, where

employees are involved in the identification, discussion and agreement of personal objectives (in relation to the corporate plan) there is a higher desire to ensure that the tasks for which one is responsible are carried out efficiently and effectively (Ralph, 1996).

Vision and goals of the organisation must be clearly spelled out by the top management. Employees must clearly understand the vision and goals of the top management. Management should encourage open communication and teamwork (Quinn and Spreitzer, 1997). Management needs to communicate to their employees regularly so that they are informed of what is taking place in their organisation (Marc et al., 1999). Employees are entitled to get right information to enable them to make informed decisions. Communication in particular, is arguably one of the basic employee empowerment tools, without proper communication, con-temporary organisations would cease to exist (Katz and Kahn, 1978).

#### **Benefits of employee empowerment**

Employee empowerment is critical for the success and survival of organisation in this era of globalisation. Employees employee empowerment provides significant benefits to the organisation and individual as highlighted below.

First, it makes employees feel that they are vital to the success of the organization. It is also a vote of confidence in the employee's ability to significantly contribute to the organisation objectives. Employee empowerment places people at the centre of the circle rather than on the fringes. This in the long run employees would be committed towards achieving organisation objectives. Employees, feel most valued through, empowerment, especially when they are n involved in decision making process of the organisation.

Second, empowerment builds commitment and creates a sense of belonging. Acceptance and ownership are basic human needs that are satisfied through the employee empowerment.

Third, empowered people join in creating their own destiny; work becomes exciting, stimulating, enjoyable, and meaningful. Employee empowerment builds trust and promotes effective communication. Delegation, empowerment, education, and not micro-management, is the job of a leader. Do not delegate an assignment and then attempt to manage it yourself. You will be an enemy of the overruled subordinate (Roberts, 1987).

Fourth, employee empowerment increases organizational effectiveness and employee wellbeing. For instance empowering employees has shown to improve efficiency and reduces costs on the assembly line in a transmission plant (Suzik, 1998). Employee empowerment leads to job satisfaction, job involvement, loyalty, higher performance and faster service delivery to customers (Fulford and Enz, 1995).

Fifth, empowered employees makes quick decisions

and suggestions that improve quick service delivery in their sphere of operations and this saves a lot of money and time in organisation (Sitterly, 1998). In addition, empowered employees provides exceptional customer service in several competitive markets and improves the profits of the organisations through repeated business (Bourke, 1998).

Sixth, employee empowerment promotes good relationship between the employee and the customers and the end result will be promoting good image of the organisation in the environment (Potochny, 1998).

Other benefits of employee empowerment in organisation include reduced workload of the top management, improve training of employees and boost their morale. Employee empowerment fosters competitive climate and facilitates change in organisation. In practice empowered employees has a high sense of self-efficiency, are given significant responsibility and authority over their jobs (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Ford and Fottler; 1995, Quin and Sprietzer, 1997).

### **Criticism of employee empowerment**

Kaplan (1991) suggests that employee empowerment often fails due to entrenched patterns and attitudes of employees'. Most employees are hampered in accepting change because of philosophically entrenched patterns and self-limiting attitudes. People may believe they want greater freedom and responsibility but, after years of being restricted, may prove unwilling or unable to take advantage of it. However, there are several factors which might discourage employees empowerment in organisation; these include poor credibility of management, mistrust in management, fearing of loosing jobs and employees unwilling to take responsibility for their actions.

Lack of information, management might decentralise resources in objective reality, but if employees are not informed that resources are available for their use (a perpetual reality), then access to resources will have little influence on feelings of empowerment (Spretzer, 1996), nor will employees utilize these resources to effect desired organisational outcomes. Employee empowerment is also criticized that it increases the scope of employee's jobs. This requires that employees should be properly trained to cope with wider range of tasks (Mohammed et al., 1998). Employee empowerment impacts negatively on recruitment process because it would ensure that employees recruited should have attitudinal characteristics and skills to cope with empowerment.

Employee empowerment is also criticized on the aspect of service delivery; it slows down the service delivery to the customers, simply because employee's attempts to individualize service for customers (Bowen and Lawler, 1992), thus reducing the overall productivity of the service. This would have negative effects to the customers and the organisation at large.

Empowerment is also criticized in the sense managers may abdicate all responsibility and accountability for decision making to juniors and in case of accountability purposes employees might be punished for failures, mistakes which are not the source and this makes them to flee away from empowerment.

### **Recommendations**

- Management should ensure that there is good leadership at all levels of the organisation. Good leadership is crucial for the success of employee empowerment in organisation. This will make employees feel valued and committed to work towards achieving the vision created by the management (Hamish, 2004). Empowerment policies will not be implemented at all levels of management, if leadership of the organisation is wanting. Good leadership at all levels of management crucial for the success of empowerment.

- Employees should be empowered in organisation because it's through empowerment that an organisation will be able to survive, grow competed, and face challenges posed by globalisation with confidence. Empowered employees are more adaptive and responsive to customer needs and other macro-environmental changes (Scott and Bruce, 1994). Previous research consent that adaptiveness is fact which is associated with autonomy in decision making influence (Niehoff et al., 1990; Scott and Bruce 1994), as well as freedom of employee to act (Spiro and Weitz, 1990).

- All managers should be involved and act as coaches in empowering employees (Malone, 1997).

- Employee empowerment is a continuous process, which needs to be encouraged, monitored, nurtured and enhanced in their organisations. Employee empowerment is not a destination, but a journey that no one reached at its final stage (Linda, 1997; Thomas and Vethouse, 1990).

- Managers, in various organisations must accept that empowering individual employees is empowering the entire organisation. Therefore, managers should empower employees from time to time to increase job satisfaction, commitment and reduces employee turnover.

- Employee empowerment to succeed in organisations, the management pyramid must be inverted. Old fashioned managers must step off their pedestals and for the first time serve their subordinates and give up control. Old fashioned manager must agree to changes and see empowerment as an opportunity to the organisation rather than as a threat.

- Leaders who empower employees must be at all levels of the organisation. Empowering leaders must not just

delegate and disappear. They must mentor their employees so that they have good chance of being successful in decisions they make. This mentoring process involves training and providing them with the necessary resources especially the information resource.

- Management should remove all barriers that impede the ability of employees not to practice empowered behaviour in organisations. The management has the responsibility to remove all barriers that limit the employees not to act in empowered ways. These barriers include time, tools, lack of training, and lack of coaching to mention a few. Thus management should ensure that employees do not feel under-compensated, under-titled for responsibilities they take, under-noticed, under praised, and under – appreciated.

### Conclusions and Implications

Employees should always be involved in decisions which affect their work and, it is one of the strategies which can be used by management to motivate and retain employees in organisations. In empowering employees in organisations management should consider external environment forces, the strategy of the organisation, the nature of the decision, the attitudes of the employees, the size and the growth rate of the organisation and desire for dependence vis-à-vis interdependence. Employees' empowerment goes hand in hand with accountability. Accountability instils discipline and creates sense of responsibility among employees. Employees' empowerment should be used by management as one of the strategies in achieving organisation objectives. Employee empowerment creates a high degree of commitment and reduces employee turnover. Management should trust their employees and encourage open communication in organisations.

This article will contribute to the existing literature of employee empowerment and will inspire managers to come up with various interventions to promote employee empowerment in organisations. This study specifically will make management to see employee empowerment as an opportunity to minimise employee turnover in organisation. In this era of globalisation the idea empowering the lower levels of management is being given great attention. In order the organisation to respond quickly to any environmental change there is need for employee empowerment.

In this context, the present theoretical article constitutes a preliminary work, being necessary to contrast the observed findings in order to get a clear view on employee empowerment. Furthermore, it is desirable that observed findings is contrasted against organisation performance by using triangulation methods.

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