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NOTES AND COMMENTS

Editor's Note : The article printed below is a truly extraordinary example of employee empowerment. The methods followed by the organization studied would be considered revolutionary anywhere in the world and even more so in India. In fact, one sometimes wonders how the whole effort did not end in chaos. The company has apparently succeeded in developing a work force and a leadership, almost devoid of the foibles of most other humans.

EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT : A NEW STRATEGY FOR CREATING A HIGH PERFORMANCE WORK FORCE

M M Bagali*

Developing and Managing Human Resources forms the major component of organizational development and growth. There are many ways through which HR is developed and managed. The present buzzword is Empowerment. The present study highlights how it was possible for an organization to develop an outstanding organization and thus create a place to work, where each one was proud and happy to be associated with the organization. The study found many strategies for managing HR, which were unique in the Indian context. The study pleads for a shift from all the theories of HR management towards a culture of **empowerment and employee ownership**.

Introduction

We are living in a time of complex challenges in our collective lives. A whole gamut of leadership crises is evident in our organizations and businesses. From all areas of our society, and from the world at large, we hear about crises of ineffective structures and relationship. In the face of these challenges, we are called to rethink and renew relationships in our organizations and our way of managing and developing Human Resources. For all these, a paradigm shift is needed, not only to cope with the present situation, but to know how one has to march in order to stay at the top in business in the years to come.

In fact, how to make profits on the one hand, and develop energetic and passionate employee resources on the other hand will be the factor most looked for in the years to come. Managing human resources has not remained the same as before. Employee involvement, high commitment, work culture, self managed teams, delegation of decision making were the buzzwords and the formulae for success from 1980 to 1990. However, theories have been rewritten and new models developed because of rapid development and global competition. To catch up with the pace of these rapid developments and to survive in the present competitive world, the approach to human resources development by management has to be seen differently and scientifically worked out.

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If Japan and Japanese organizations are admired, it is for their unique way of managing and developing their human resources. The Japanese management ethos has a long-lasting bearing at the workplace. Practices such as open lines of communication, clear objectives, high ethical values, discipline, encouraging creative work and leadership at all levels produce miracles. Similarly, the stress on equality for all, an open appraisal system, displaying a high level of trust and faith in people have produced almost miraculous results. The present buzzword in developing and managing human resources is Empowerment and creating an employee ownership culture. What does this mean in practice?

The present buzzword in developing and managing human resources is Empowerment and creating an employee ownership culture. What does this mean in practice?

Empowerment: A new paradigm in HRM

Gurus daily preach the need for empowering the work force. Literature on empowerment now abounds. Empowerment means to vest authority in employees, so that they do not remain just the subjects of authority but can exercise it at their own level. Empowerment is getting employees to do what needs to be done rather than merely doing what they are told to do. This means the transfer and the acceptance of power to the lowest appropriate level, so as to create opportunities for initiative, responsibility and finally commitment in all. Another way of looking at employee empowerment is by sharing responsibility and power appropriately at all levels in the organization, and thus helping people develop themselves by making

independent decisions to attain set goals. Empowerment is thus also a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and their removal both through formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing opportunities to prove efficacy.

Empowerment is seen as a process, resulting in individual employees enjoying autonomy, while performing their jobs. This also ensures accountability on their part and thus develops a sense of ownership and increases the sense of fulfillment, while achieving shared organizational goals. Empowerment is also a means of sharing decision making power with all. When one looks at all these definitions, one can sense that empowerment is an advanced means of human resources development and management. Organizations are managed differently, depending on their size and the composition of their personnel, their style of leadership and the way policies and programmes are drawn up. Culture plays an important role in these matters and if empowerment is a success and can be extensively practised in the West and in Japan, this is because of their organizational and national culture. Is such empowerment possible in India? The culture, the level of thinking and maturity, the attitudes, the management-employee relationships, the very composition of the work force characteristic of India, leave the answer to this question wide open. The industrial society of India is dominated by labour unions with the attitude and the thinking that we are paid to work and so we work according to our pay. Management too clearly holds the idea that workers are paid to perform a task. In such a culture, the very idea of empowering employees is hardly thought of.

The industrial society of India is dominated by labour unions with the attitude and the thinking that we are paid to work and so we work according to our pay. Management too clearly holds the idea that workers are paid to perform a task. In such a culture, the very idea of empowering employees is hardly thought of.

Organization do not grow by themselves. They have to be developed, nurtured and continuously directed towards excellence and growth. In the process, they begin to adopt new ways. Clearly, for an organization to excel in the present century, it needs to adopt new ways of managing and developing its human resources. Empowerment and empowering employees at the work place is the answer. Why is this so? How will an organization change by practising empowerment?

Review of work done

A number of fairly recent studies have examined the question of empowerment and its positive effects on developing high performance organizations. This was the topic of Pierce, et al 1991. Empowerment and participation were treated by Foster (1992) and Perry (1992). Bowen (1995), Smilor (1996) considered Empowerment and leadership culture. Empowerment and a new-old paradigm of High performance was Hoerr's (1998) topic. Empowerment and Open Book Management was considered by Beyster (1999). The present author has examined the relations between empowerment and its implications in organization development and in developing a high performance work-force (1999,2000). Mackin and Rodgers (1996) dealt with Empowerment and Ownership culture, as also Kardas (1993). Rosen (1993) wrote on Empowerment and healthy Companies; while Empowerment and

leadership was Gates' (1995) topic. In India, little work has been done in the areas of employee empowerment to create high performance organizations. However, some studies exist such as Mahapatra's (1997) The Empowered Manager; Singh's (1998) Empowering Oneself; Jawahar's (1998) Empowerment Revisited. On a wider canvas, research needs to be taken up on many different factors to examine the relationship between empowerment and creation of a high performance organization. The present study probes the factors that make an organization an empowered one.

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OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

The present paper is based on research undertaken to study how a model company can be created with innovative work-place programmes, policies, practices and how, because of such innovative practices, empowered employees can change the very face of the organization and help it remain at the top of the field. At the same, we probed whether it was the system, the practices, the policies or the leadership that made the organization grow and excel, and the role played by an innovative approach to human resources development and management. The broader objective was to know the various strategies adopted by organizations to empower employees, and how they differ from one another.

Hypothesis

In our present work, we made several hypotheses.

- a) If an organization wants fundamental changes, it must change the fundamentals.

- b) Organizations with a high level of job autonomy have a high morale work force.
- c) The organizational environment can have a powerful influence on the perception of empowerment.
- d) Individuals can have high level involvement in shaping and influencing organizational activities when there is a positive climate.
- e) Both individual and organizational achievements can be fostered through a sense of belonging.
- f) Individuals who perceive that they have a high degree of access to information will report a higher level of commitment.
- g) Empowerment at the work place in an organization makes leaders unnecessary.

An important point of enquiry was why it was possible for the organization in the present study, though Indian, to grow systematically and what unique, innovative techniques were practised for employee empowerment.

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TARGET GROUP AND METHOD

The study was undertaken in a 115 years old engineering based company, with a total work force of 100 employees. The work place is a mix of highly qualified people and others in terms of their academic background. This is an important factor examined, that is, to know whether an educational background is important in the practice of empowerment and what its implications are. Since, empowerment and the practice of empowerment is a holistic idea, involving all, everyone in the organization formed the target group.

Data Collection

Many empowerment factors were identified such as accountability, attitudes, belief systems, career planning, communication, committees and councils, culture, decision making processes, delegation, discipline, ethics, the feedback system, the faith shown, group processes, industrial democracy, information sharing, leadership and management style, motivation, organizational ethos, power distribution, politics, trust, team work, worker participation and the like. These were put to the test at length. The collection and examining of the data was done in three stages:

First, a questionnaire and schedules were drawn up after identifying the relevant empowerment factors and these were tested.

Next, formal and informal observations and discussions were held at the work-place regarding the system and the practices in vogue.

Finally, based on these two observations a final discussion was held on the responses elicited to the questionnaire and the observations made.

RESULTS

The company has been following innovative practices in the development and management of human resources. As one worker put it, we all dream of excellence, we all think of excellence, and we all deliver excellence. The unique practices followed in this organization are:

As one worker put it, we all dream of excellence, we all think of excellence, and we all deliver excellence.

- a refined culture,
- a flat organizational structure,

- there are no designated positions,
- high respect is shown for human beings,
- there is a transparent ethos,
- there are open lines of communication and a participative culture,
- team work is stressed,
- a high level of trust is evident in interpersonal relations,
- each one is a decision maker.
- gossip is eschewed,
- there is an open system of feedback..

We shall now make some comments on each of these innovative aspects of the culture as they exist in the organization.

Refined Culture

Everything in the process of organizational development starts with the type of culture that an organization possesses. Culture defines the values, the beliefs, the thinking of the organization and the principles it stands for. As the CEO put it, if empowerment and employee ownership is found in this organization, this is only because of the culture that has been created in it. The first task was to create a climate of progressive culture, because the work place is a combination of many facets of each individual's thinking and perceptions. Refined culture is not just a matter of thinking, it should be continuously practised by all. While everyone in an organization will share the organization's culture, not all will do so to the same degree. There can be a dominant culture, but also a number of subcultures, but they should be refined. This is pivotal, because, all practices in empowering employees rest on the concept of culture. A few initial culture development areas are a climate of trust, of mutuality and freedom of expression. There should be a totally

transparent approach in values such as honesty, truthfulness, respect and value shown to the human being. Risk taking must be allowed, and also healthy criticism for the larger benefit. The "grape vine" must be discouraged. Common rooms are to be shared. The concept of the organization as being above the individual must be held by all. Another officer stated that these are important factors and the roots for the success of empowerment strategies. Culture helps create an organization, but a refined culture helps create a healthy work force.

Flat Organizational Structure

This can be seen in two ways. There are no designated positions in practice; but on paper there is a hierarchy for legal purposes. Otherwise, each one is a manager and even a CEO. Each one has the right to work in the entire department and each one does his work on his own. There are no messengers, peons, or other subordinate personnel. Everyone is a self made man or women and performs all the jobs required of him or her. A unique feature of this organization is a "no bell" culture. Even for going to lunch or for the start or end of a shift, employees know the time and work accordingly and not because a bell is rung. You need to perform a particular job, you may use any place, as long as the work fulfills its designated objectives.

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There is no red-tapism, if any individual wants to meet the CEO or any other official, he can approach the person straight without any hierarchical procedure or formal permission. This is a unique

practice which requires a high level of innovative thinking and much maturity in the work-force. As one employee put it, by virtue of being a flat management, it becomes easy for us to improve on the job and to learn.

No Designated Positions

Yes, there are designated positions, but this is only to help outside visitors so as to guide them in the organization. If at all one person is separated from another, this is done only on the basis of the job one needs to perform at a particular place on a particular machine. We do not have any room boys, letters to deliver, no separate dining rooms, no separate water or tea arrangements, or difference in the food prepared and no separate queues for anything. If I (as CEO) need anything, I have to fetch it myself. The dining hall is common and, as all line up, I too line up like anybody else. As the CEO puts it, "we are bonded by our work relationship and you are respected, to the extent you do good work."

A worker puts it otherwise. When asked how you feel, when you sit with your CEO and eat, the answer reflected, mature thinking: "when you are dining, it is difficult to understand how many CEOs there are, because each is treated like a CEO by the others and each behaves like a CEO himself. Nobody thinks he should be respected because he is the top man, nor do I feel I should show him extra respect. Issues of a disturbing nature are left at the work place and the dining hall is to eat one's food. We don't mix the two. This is how the organization's culture has been built up over a period of time. As an officer says, the culture of sharing is such that anyone can use the CEO's chair provided he works to fulfil the organization's objectives. Clearly there is no fixed mindset and less ego. This is responsible for the visible empowerment at work.

High Respect for Human Beings

The CEO is as equal as any employee in the organization and any employee is considered to have the same intrinsic worth as the CEO. Every employee is respected regardless of what his position is in the organization. If you are working for and contributing to the organization, you are respected. But, everyone is a contributor and hence everyone is respected here. Even lower rank workers are treated as equal members of the organization. Everyone is held in high esteem and the self worth of each person is held high. As the CEO puts it, you must start by raising their self-esteem. Treat them as winners and they become winners, respect them and they will respect you. Treat them as equal owners of the company and surely they will give their best and produce high quality work. The path to this high level of respect was not easy, particularly for managers who were asked to change from authority figures to advisers, counselors and guides. Initially, it was very tough, but now if you look back you clearly see that people consider this as a nice place to work in. In fact, as the CEO puts it, greater emphasis was laid on and work was done in the area of dissipating egos; and our experience has shown that when egos and status clash, empowerment is impossible. Education is of primary importance and each one had to be educated in this direction. As an HR Executive puts it, initially, one has to be told about all these practices through education; otherwise, there might be misunderstandings and the consequences would be serious and our objective would not be achieved.

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Transparent Ethos

The practice of a totally transparent approach requires a high level of maturity on the part of employees working in the organization. The organization does not have a "secrecy" and "confidentiality" practice. These words are never found on any policy, paper or on any wall of the rooms. Such a level of transparency is practised that everybody knows what is going on in the organization. Every policy, mission, goal, objective, planning, activity is known. As the CEO puts it, my room does not have any sign "knock and enter" or "no admission without permission". Any one can come in at any time and discuss business plans or work-place issues with me. In fact, when I have a guest from outside, any employee can come in, sit down and discuss, if he has a point to make. He can even watch the discussion going on. Guests for me, are guests of all in the organization. If any guest comes in my absence, any employee, if he feels he can deal with him can sit and discuss our business plans. As one employee puts it, being transparent also means accepting its consequences, failures and risks. If people are afraid of risks, nothing new will happen. This is how an employee ownership culture is built up and each one sees himself as an owner of the organization.

A step further, says the CEO: when I am going on a business tour, all the details of my tour, the places, and the persons to be met, are put up on the notice board. My employees know where I am, what I am doing, and in fact, what the deal is and its worth. This is how we create positive thinking and remove suspicions and doubts. Even our company accounts are open to all, a practice of open book management. Thus all can see our financial position, and understand the financial effects of their jobs. They also share in the financial successes of the company through

frequent profit sharing bonuses and stock options. In fact, the quantum of profit sharing is decided by the employees and the management's role is only to pay, so says the finance manager. Clearly, the trust level must be very high.

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Open lines of Communication

Knowing things is knowing an organization. Communication among all is clear so that each employee knows all the activities of the organization. Meetings, their outcomes, future plans are kept open and everyone has the right to know and it is every person's duty to communicate. In fact, transparency in communication and information sharing is a way of life in the organization, adds an employee. The basic idea is to remove doubts and suspicions. To cite an example, the CEO says that even a watchman tells others where the CEO is, what he is doing and what was the outcome of any meeting. Indeed, the visiting guest, the business deal and its worth are known to a person like the watchman. This shows how we value each person in the organization and do not restrict information only to a few. As the person who is concerned with HR says, the company is working to find newer ways for open lines of communication and information sharing and this is paying off. When the employees know every affair in the organization, says an HR executive, their feelings are positive towards the organization and they put more energy into their work. This is empowering employees. Similarly, if any employee has an idea, he can share it with any other without anyone's formal permission.

Participative Culture

Participation is a way of life and work in the organization. Everyone has the freedom to form a committee and can formulate a plan, strategy or programme in the organizational development process. The number of members to be in a committee, its responsibility, function, and its area of work are decided only by the employees. The work of the committee is communicated to all through a display of information. Today, as an executive puts it, since each employee takes part with full responsibility, productivity is high and employee turnover is almost nil. What is still more remarkable is the high level of satisfaction of each employee on the job. In the words of the CEO, one must create a conducive work environment. In doing so, one needs to follow a very different approach towards HR development and management which will lead to a total participative approach.. Initially it was the management that took all the initiatives, but now things have changed: organizational strategy preparation, writing out the mission of the organization, the code of conduct, goal setting, the statement of values, discipline are now looked after by the employees. As an employee proudly says, everyone can take a part in the proceeding of the Annual General meeting and unnecessary expenditure, if any, can be questioned.

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Team Approach

Team work constitutes an important element in organizational development. All in this organization believe that people achieve more together which is the

philosophy of teamwork. While constituting teams, the composition is very important; each person is free to join the team of his or her choice. However, the CEO stresses that while people choose their teams, it is always ensured that they take account of the nature of the work and their own skills. Also, each team is made accountable for its actions. Even the functioning of the teams is transparent and an employee says, each mission or goal of the teams is put up on the notice board and communicated to all, so that each knows what is going on and suggestions and improvements are welcomed. Team and group working is a part of work here and since there is total transparency and open lines of communication, lessons from every team are always shared.

High level of Trust & Faith

The CEO asserts that trust in human beings is the key to everything. Thus time clocks were thrown out long ago. The CEO goes on to say, "I personally believe that unless you have trust and faith in your employees, you cannot expect big returns and create a good healthy work place. Trust is a way of life and there are many instance and systems indicating this." When an employee wants to take a day off, we do not follow any paper procedure of applying for leave. The group decides on it (in some case the department does) and even I, as CEO, am not aware of such leave taken by an employee. The group is given full authority to act at such times and the extra work is distributed among the group members so that things continue as before. The trust level is high here because nobody doubts or spies or questions the absence. The moment a person says, he needs a day off, the straight answer is always "YES", says an employee. An employee, when asked, what he felt about the system, simply responded "I am being trusted here, what else is needed to work in an organization". Another instance, given by

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Another angle of the culture is seen when a failure takes place. No individual is then blamed, but the whole group takes the responsibility. Making victims is not the culture of the organization, as one puts it. There is such a culture of trust and togetherness that accountability is always with all. When asked, how one could develop such a climate, an employee, who is proud to work in such an atmosphere, says, "we have not come here to make our living; we have come here to develop and live with the organization. When management treats us as bosses and owners, nothing can make us think small."

Decision making Style

The CEO asserts that if we have been able to create such a workplace, it is only because we are clear about concepts of objectivity and subjectivity, in dealing with all matters at the work place. Decision making is always based on issues and not on subjective or personal factors. Each one is given a say in deciding the issue under consideration and no one is favoured because of his position. One employee said "I always am cautious, because of the full freedom given here in deciding matters concerning the organization, which makes us very careful. We can all decide on future courses of action and what policies are to be formulated. I feel great satisfaction when I know even I can write my own career plan and decide on the next step. If a matter concerns the work, there is no need for permission from the management and we

can act independently. Posting decisions in an appropriate place makes them known to all." Another employee states "we feel happy to take quality decisions because there is no suspicion or cross checking."

Absence of Gossip

If any person is found gossiping at any time, that person would lose his job. An organization can develop to great heights only if the thinking is of a high standard and for this, the attitudes and perceptions of the employees must be of a high standard. Developing a refined culture is what matters so that the organization gives high value to individuals and gossip simply is not entertained. No one is allowed to play with the weaknesses of others. Whether big or small, qualified or not, contributing more or less, officer or employee, everyone is a member of the family and each is a contributor. The absence of gossip makes everybody feel secure. When each one is responsible and accountable, no grape vine is possible. At the same time, fun and humour are very high in the organization, which shows it is healthy and positive. If you are aiming at a high quality work force, there must be fun in the organization. Then the tendency to gossip gets diffused.

At the same time, fun and humour are very high in the organization, which shows it is healthy and positive. If you are aiming at a high quality work force, there must be fun in the organization. Then the tendency to gossip gets diffused.

Feed back

Open feed back is crucial and for feed back to be a success, one must be willing to give it without fear. However, there must also exist an atmosphere and a system in which employees are not afraid of giving it. The CEO rightly says, the secret is to

create willingness among all employees to give open feedback where everyone, from top to bottom, can speak his mind without the fear of retaliation in one's professional life. He further adds, the process isn't easy and you don't get an instant reaction, while empowering the employees in this area. As one employee proudly claims, there is no organization in this region, where the employee can openly criticize the top boss's action, if the need arises. This is an organization, where one can freely and openly criticize the system, if this needs to be done. All feedback is taken and discussed at appropriate levels. Management sees each feedback as an improvement area. One employee even stated that he was chosen as "The Best Feed Back Employee" when I gave my opinion on how and why the company should invest in Yoga and gymnastics. As a result, there are now separate gymnastics facilities costing Rs. 20-30 lakhs, something incredible, anywhere else.

A Systems Approach

Empowerment is not only sharing responsibility and giving power, but, includes other systems, which are part of the empowerment process as seen in this study. This style of functioning is something unique in the Indian context and truly noteworthy. The common thinking in the Indian labour community that we are paid to work, shows how difficult it is to develop an employee empowerment and ownership culture. When asked how it was possible to create such a system resulting in a high performing work-force, the CEO replied that if such culture had been developed over the years, it is because a whole system was created and worked on continuously.

The experiment is a long journey, but the implications are also far reaching: a highly motivated work-force, a creative and innovative approach at the work-place,

each one taking responsibility, widespread ability to take decisions, high job satisfaction at the work-place, very low turnover, less absenteeism, high quality work, discipline, open discussions, these were the outcome of this practice of empowerment. Of course, there are no industrial problems and there is perfect peace. As an HR executive says, "we have several committees set up by the employees, but none in the area of industrial relations such as a dispute settlement committee, a grievance handling committee. Clearly the employees are happy." Empowerment is not just sharing responsibility and power, but creating a work place from where everybody can go back with a big smile on their face each day. At the same time, productivity is high and a good impression is created among customer.

Conclusion

The principal reason why the organization has been able to create such empowerment is the leader and the type of leadership given. The leader has been like a drum major leading a band and walking in front of it. Also, certain traits are necessary in the employees of an organization, if it is to succeed in practising empowerment. These are: assertiveness, self motivation, transparency, tenacity in character, growth oriented attitudes, less egoism, an extrovert nature, willingness to be an open communicator, team working ability, willingness to take risks, openness to new ideas. It should also be noted that empowerment and empowering employees is a holist approach and all systems and people should join hands in working at it. If one element in this system is missing, empowerment can hardly be practised and the organizational development will be defective.

We are likely to see more efforts at empowerment in the future. Today,

employees at every level expect to be treated as valued members of their organization. Experts believe that organizations must foster empowerment or become extinct. HRD can play an important role. There is nothing that Indian organizations need more at this moment than a true renaissance of human resources development and management. Empowerment and empowering employees in the organization is the answer.

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