



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Empowerment: Beyond Delegation

By Maj Paul Cooper

“As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.”

– Bill Gates.

There may have been a time when ‘leadership’ was seen as the ability to get things done through directing specific activity down a chain of command, and then managing progress through a rigorous regime of supervision. But is there a better way? According to Bill Gates, there is. And it is not just the head of the world’s most successful ICT company who thinks so. ‘Empowering leadership’ is rapidly becoming recognised as THE way to unlock the hidden potential in others and is at the heart of CGS’s strategy of ‘maximising talent’. But what is ‘empowerment’, what can it do for us, and how can we put it into practice?

Effective delegation is central to empowerment. But, empowerment is so much more than managing organisational workloads. Empowerment encourages free thinking and the bottom-up generation of ideas to do things better. In this, empowerment is the driving force behind

innovation. At its most basic level, empowerment can be achieved simply through a culture of encouraging input, collaborative planning, and reasonable challenge: allowing others to contribute, rather than just following blindly.

Empowerment is something that is felt. When someone is 'empowered' they feel valued, motivated and are more fulfilled. They feel more satisfied, with greater autonomy and greater self-respect. This in itself makes empowerment a worthy objective and noble pursuit. Empowerment addresses all but the very basic levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, specifically the need to feel belonging to something greater than self; self-esteem and prestige; and self-actualisation or realising one's own potential. Service in the Army, more than most organisations, is not simply about doing a job. The Army is a vocation with unlimited liability. Those who sign up deserve to have these higher needs fulfilled.

Empowerment is not something that is simply done 'to' followers by leaders. Nor is it something done 'by' followers to themselves. Rather, it is a subtle blend of activity and mind-set by leader and follower, combined with a culture of innovation and initiative. Empowerment must be wanted, resourced, built on mutual trust, and delivered with levels of authority aligned with the responsibility that is being given. It is no good for a leader to state they are empowering a follower without giving the necessary support and authority to enable what is being asked to be done. Empowerment is, therefore, more than simply delegating tasks to others. It is about sharing power and influence to effect change. It is about bringing followers on-board as partners, through shared ownership, to pursue a common goal.

Several recent studies, including research by Pepperdine University and the University of Iowa have shown unequivocally that empowerment increases productivity. But in order to release this productivity, the leader must set the conditions for empowerment to flourish. They do this by conducting the following four essential actions.

Build capability

Capability is a combination of education, training, knowledge, authority, experience, resources, support, freedoms and constraints. Before an individual can be truly empowered, this mix must be correct, or at least the path to self-realisation must be clear. Initiative is vital, as a leader cannot always provide everything. But, there must also be a culture of openness and willingness to ask questions to overcome obstacles collaboratively if required.

Foster self-motivation

It is generally accepted that the best form of motivation is self-motivation. 'Motivating' followers through threat of punishment or promise of reward is considered in several proven leadership theories, including transformational leadership, as having only short-term effectiveness and likely to only yield results up to a minimum standard. Peter Northouse, author of *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, describes how people are likely to be motivated if: they are confident in their own ability, their efforts will result in a positive outcome, and the outcome is worth the effort. This requires realistic targets, and a vision that people can believe in. Empowerment is itself a powerful motivator. It creates job satisfaction and the feeling of being a valued part of a team. This is the essence of transformational leadership: followers are motivated to go above and beyond in pursuit of a vision and cause greater than themselves.

Guide and assure

Having established a follower's capability and motivation, the next factor to determine for effective empowerment is the appropriate levels of guidance and assurance. This must be a carefully balanced activity. Too much direction and there is a risk that the follower feels untrusted and disempowered. Too little direction carries the risk of failure, the follower feeling isolated and disillusioned, and frankly, may be a dereliction of duty on the part of the leader. In almost all cases, guidance will include some aspect of mentoring and coaching. What is appropriate beyond that will be determined by many factors, including the task itself, the capability and motivation of the follower and the level of trust that already exists between follower and leader. Done correctly, empowerment can be an effective vehicle for personal and team development.

Provide opportunities

The final component of empowerment is providing suitable opportunities to practice and exploit its benefits. In the field, applying 'Mission Command' is established and well-understood. But Mission Command is more concerned with speed of decision-making and the seizing of opportunities by those closest to the crisis rather than motivation or personal development. In camp, opportunities for empowerment are being realised, albeit slowly. Training is a great example, with empowerment at the heart of the British Army's latest 'Battle Craft Syllabus'; by delegating its planning and delivery to the lowest appropriate level junior commanders learn their trade more deeply and training is delivered by those closest to the

output. This allows more senior commanders to focus on training more appropriate to their level.

Reap the benefits for your team

Empowerment yields multiple benefits beyond simply increasing productivity and operational effectiveness. Empowerment leads to greater job satisfaction, greater retention, provides progressive through-career personal development and provides appropriate role modelling for junior ranks. But perhaps the greatest benefit is fostering greater ownership of the organisation and its vision. This engenders greater teamwork and, above all, makes the Army a more satisfying and fulfilling place to be.

Effective empowerment requires four essential ingredients: capability, motivation, and opportunity, practiced with the right levels of guidance and assurance. Responsibility must be accompanied by sufficient authority. And whilst individuals can do much to enhance each of these factors for themselves, ultimately it is the leader who sets the culture and conditions for empowerment to flourish.

Questions:

1. When was the last time you felt empowered? What had the leader done to support you? How can you do the same to those who follow you?
2. What are the risks of empowering your subordinates in your team?
3. What practical, tangible, steps can you take to empower your subordinates *right now* that would overcome those risks?
4. Does the delegation of power disempower the leader? Is this something to be afraid of?
5. Mission Command is more concerned with speed of decision-making and seizing of opportunities than motivation or personal development. Do you agree?
6. Do you feel comfortable asking your leadership for greater autonomy and empowerment?

Further Reading

- *Turn the Ship Around* by David Marquet
- *Empowering Leadership* by Douglas L Jones
- <http://thearmyleader.co.uk/david-marquet-intent-based-leadership/>

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