Empower People
The Systematic Manager - Issue 9 (An Exploration)

How well does the authority you grant your people match their competence? How do you monitor the extent to which your people are empowered, and how do you ensure that there is continuing growth in empowerment?

The following is not in any way intended (or purporting) to be a definitive statement on the topic- but merely a ramble through some of the thinking that exists in this area, and perhaps a stimulus for further debate.

'Empowerment' is one of those management speak buzzwords that became vogue in the eighties and early nineties. It is a common cell in 'Jargon Bingo' cards, and draws derision from many who resent the onslaught of new terms. But 'empowerment' does not have a good simple alternative in the English language, and as a word, it sums up what is at the heart of the concept: equipping someone with the power to do what is needed.

Granting someone the 'power' to do what is needed involves more than simply authorising him or her. It reflects a process of equipping them with the ability, the resources, the facility, the understanding and the freedom to do what is needed.

In this brief exploration, we will look at four different aspects of empowerment:

- Identifying opportunities for empowerment
- Creating structures which empower
- Ensuring that the 'empowered' do what is needed
- Monitoring that the 'empowerment' is effective.

Identifying opportunities for empowerment

You cannot empower all of your staff. You can only empower those who report to you directly. If you attempt to empower those who work for others, you will disempower the people that they work for.

Understanding this will be very helpful in any strategies you develop to empower your people. Firstly it makes the whole exercise simpler – you only need to directly worry about those people you have a direct relationship with. Secondly, you know that any strategy to empower people below your direct reports must be achieved by working with your direct reports to make it happen. They will find this a lot easier when they can learn and benefit from your example to them.

So how do you identify opportunities for empowerment? The first place to look is in your own diary:

- What activities are you currently involved in, that reflect your need to add your authority to what another member of your staff could or should be doing?
- How many of your activities are not about the design and systematic performance improvement of your area?
- What things come to you for authorisation and approval?

T	**Test:** Test why you need to be involved in this activity.
O	**Opportunity:** Identify the opportunity to develop others.
P	**Plan:** Plan how you will bring this about.
B	**Back-off:** Back-off to allow your people to develop.
O	**Officialise:** Make the changes official.
X	**X-Check:** Check that things are continuing to work out.

The 'Top-Box' form (shown in outline on the right) is a means to think through how you could use the above list to provide greater empowerment to your direct reports. The 'Top-Box' form can be downloaded from the tools section of the Tesseract Web-Site: http://www.tesseracts.com/tool_50.html

Creating structures which empower

Some time ago, as part of their push on BS5750 (now ISO 9000) BSI produced a very useful short checklist of what people needed to do a good job. This list is produced over the page.

As the person responsible for empowering your staff, it is up to you to ensure that all of the items on the checklist are in place for the person being empowered. In the case of more-senior people it is possible to ask them to check out the list themselves and make recommendations, but the list still serves as a valuable check that empowerment has been properly planned:

- How clear is the person on exactly what is required and why? It is not uncommon for people to try to pass on tasks that they have not properly thought through themselves. The key question here is "Have I clearly defined the criteria that I will use to assess whether the job has been a success?"

> **What a person needs to do a good job:**
> - Clearly defined requirements
> - Appropriate training
> - Tools and resources
> - Objective basis for measurement
> - Know what to do if it goes wrong
> - Wants to do the job

- In the previous two topics we looked at developing people and providing them with supporting relationships (team membership) that would enable them to continue to develop. Where a person is not fully competent in the task, it is valuable to provide them not only with formal training, but also with planned coaching or mentoring opportunities to enable them to develop the necessary skills on the job. Video Arts produce an excellent video to support this thinking called 'The Helping Hand', which is now also available as a DVD-ROM training unit.

- Senior people should be able to secure the practical tools and resources they need by themselves. But it is important to ensure that this is the case, especially in terms of office space, computers, etc. However where the resources include certain key information or access to even more senior people, then this often proves not so easy. It is vitally important in these circumstances that such contact or information is established by the boss.

- As with the first bullet point, it is often the case that we are not particularly disciplined about jobs we do ourselves, but if we are to pass the task on to others we need to be far clearer about how they should measure their performance. This will enable them to build confidence, adjust themselves where appropriate, and flag up when there is a serious performance issue. This is often a difficult step, but thinking the measures through often provides new insight on the task and ensures a much higher quality handover.

Ensuring that the 'Empowered' do what is needed

One of the biggest concerns that people have with empowerment is that it has overtones of anarchy. And often in the past, empowerment has been done so poorly that anarchy was actually the practical result. This is especially topical as the level of home-working and e-business is on the increase.

I have often (too many times!) heard the complaint from central teams that the operating divisions are laws unto themselves, and as long as they meet budget they can do what they want. The central teams often want to introduce some important aspect for the future, such as 'culture' or 'e-business' or such like, but find it very difficult to get on the agenda.

The issue lies in what we ask the 'empowered' to do, and how accurately we communicate the rights that this confers upon them.

In his book 'The Living Company', Arie de Geus shows how the key commercial lever has moved from Land (until the Industrial Revolution) to Capital (until c. 1960) to Information, but that many companies manage their people as though 'Capital' was the most important thing. Often you will find that a person's role has very tight rules about what they can do with money, but almost nothing about how they should seek and manage the effectiveness of information.

People should not confuse 'empowerment' with 'enfranchisement' – business is not a democracy. Authorisation should not just confer rights, but also responsibilities, and those responsibilities should place just as much emphasis on information, learning, culture, behaviour, etc. as it does on finance.

For those of you who are interested in this topic as applied to home-working, the Harvard Business Review produced an extremely good case study on this http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/hbsp/prod_detail.asp?3685

Monitoring that the 'empowerment' is effective

The final area that we are looking at is that of ensuring that empowerment is effective. This fits into two categories.

The first is about ensuring that each individual empowerment is a success. Having passed on the task, how do you ensure that the task is being undertaken effectively without interfering at the detail level? This is more of an issue sometime after empowerment has taken place since during the process of empowerment appropriate provision of coaching and mentoring will provide the control that is needed.

Once the empowerment process is complete however, the boss still needs to retain confidence that things are developing as they ought. One time-honoured means of achieving this is the 'report' - but reports can often tend to the bureaucratic. Alternatively, there are three forms of reporting that, properly designed, can ensure that an overview is maintained without bureaucracy.

Quadrant Chart Reporting

My favoured method is Quadrant Chart Reporting, illustrated right, and explained in more detail on the Tesseract Web-site www.tesseracts.com . The quadrant chart provides insight not only into performance, but also into the quality of thinking that is underpinning it.

For tasks which are not so involved, the use of balanced scorecard reports can convey an ongoing picture of performance. Most people will already be aware of the balanced scorecard, but for those who are not: http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/hbsp/prod_detail.asp?5157

An even simpler form of top level reporting is the RAG report. RAG stands for Red, Amber and Green, which provides a traffic light system for flagging up performance issues in a quick, simple and non-cumbersome way.

The second area for ensuring empowerment is working, is to see how much empowerment is taking place. One very good means for achieving this is to analyse how much of your diary activities of last year are no longer in your diary for this year.