Chapter 7. Empowerment in Organizations

Introduction

This short paper was originally written as part of my attempt to ground my "New Age" thinking about organizations and their future. In the early eighties I gave a number of talks to leaders and managers, mostly in Europe, on the material contained in "Leadership and Strategy for a New Age. At the end of each, people would come up to affirm the thoughts and feelings I had shared, and to question me about how I thought my precepts might best be put into practice. I had to say, frankly, that I did not know, that they knew as much about it as I did, or more. Then, once I was alone, I would ponder the questions they had raised, frustrated by my inability to see clearly the way ahead. I now know, or believe I know, that transformation begins with desire, and is sustained by strongly held intention which shapes and informs all that we do. But I wanted very much to have something to offer these good hearted, pragmatic men who so hoped for a program for change that they could put their hearts into. And skillful means do count for something, too, when those means flow from the an enlightened vision. Otherwise, much that we do in our attempts to transform organizations simply perpetuates the status quo, because it is grounded in the very consciousness that we are endeavoring to change.

I wrote "Empowerment in Organizations" in an attempt to differentiate power from empowerment, and to broaden people's thinking about the latter. In it, I suggest that empowerment can come through liberation of the heart, and not only the will and the mind, and I offer some rudimentary thoughts about "empowering technologies." I also address for the first time the crucial role of learning, as distinct from problem solving, in empowering organizations

and their members, and in making it possible for organizations to work in harmony with their environments.

Empowerment in Organizations

This paper addresses itself to the ways in which organizations empower and disempower their members. We shall consider ways in which current, "traditional" ways of organizing and managing fail to empower organization members, and we shall examine three avenues to empowerment: knowledge, will and love.

The empowerment of organization members is of special interest at this time, simply because business organizations need all the help they can get in coping with rapid change, turbulent environments, and competitive challenges. The hope is that we can empower individuals and at the same time link their interests with those of the organization, thus tapping into more powerful sources of motivation than we can through the application of external rewards and sanctions.

The Difference Between "Power" and "Empowerment"

We tend to think of power as the ability to impact others or cause them to act, regardless of their original intent. "Empowerment," on the other hand, refers to enhancing the ability of individuals to act for themselves, following their own motives and intentions. Empowerment thus has a connotation of "letting go of power," of giving power to another. Thus those who are especially interested in power may be disinclined to engage in empowerment of others. The study of empowerment is the study of how people can help and facilitate one another, rather than how they can motivate, manipulate and control others.

The Aches and Pains of Traditional Management.

There are many signs and signals that all is not well in traditionally managed organizations. We have sophisticated models for planning and strategizing, yet the environment seems more out of control than ever. We have better information systems, but we don't seem to make decisions more easily or better. We have learned a lot about human relations and we are more skillful and sophisticated about relationships, but we don't seem to have committed and happy workers. It seems as though we have to work harder and control more closely, just to keep even, and improved performance is hard to come by. Perhaps the reason is that the things we traditionally do to improve performance and solve problems are actually causing the troubles we face. Then, when we take action to improve the situation, we may actually be exacerbating our difficulties.

Illusions of Autonomy and Control.

We overlook the fundamental connectedness of things. Because we share a mechanical, atomistic view of the world, it is hard to live our lives in appreciation of our dependence on others and theirs on us. Similarly, our approach to organizing involves a fundamentally atomistic way of viewing things. We break tasks down into their smallest parts. We analyze, we isolate, in order to solve problems. When we see something wrong we go to fix it, often heedless of the relationships between the part we are fixing, and the many other parts which it affects. We suboptimize, striving to improve the performance of the part of the organization of which we are members, not knowing and often not caring that our improved performance may create a decrement in the functioning of other parts, or indeed of the whole. We give lip service to the

idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, but we do not act in our organizational or public lives as though we believe it.

Because we do not know how things we endeavor to control are connected to other things, we often do not really have control. We can interfere and tinker with things, but if the processes we are dealing with are even moderately complex, we cannot really be sure of our effects on them. We have impact on events, to the extent that we dispose of substantial resources and forces, but we do not control the outcomes of our actions.

In dealing with organizational problems, then, we need to empower ourselves, and we can do it by becoming more aware of the connectedness of the events and processes with which we deal. All of the approaches to empowerment which are advocated in this paper have in common that they attempt to redress our tendencies to analyze and isolate by helping organization members to become more aware of connections, and to connect themselves to others in empowering and satisfying ways.

Three Modes of Organizing: Knowledge, Will and Love.

Of course, no organization is organized solely according to one of these organizing principles. Most traditional business organizations organize around knowledge in the service of will. That is, the organization is driven from the top by leaders who are motivated to succeed through action (will). The organization develops a strategy (knowledge) through which it pursues a position of advantage in the marketplace. Internally, tasks are defined and divided in a rational or bureaucratic way (knowledge) to implement the strategy. Organization members are motivated through the application of rewards and sanctions (will) to carry out the plans of higher management.

Seeing Connections: Empowerment Through Learning and Discovery.

If we are in fact disempowered by our failure to apprehend the connections among events, such that we do not know the probable effects of our actions, then it must be empowering to learn the connections and thus to be able to have things come out as we intend. As it turns out, however, learning connections among events is a task which cannot be undertaken from the top, by the top, and for the top of the organization. It requires the involvement and hence the empowerment of organization members at middle and lower levels as well.

Strategy as the Search for Meaning and Purpose.

Normally, strategy is thought of as the search for advantage in the marketplace. That orientation tends to focus the gaze of the organization narrowly on markets and competitors, in a will-dominated thrust to overcome obstacles and achieve victory over opponents. Most business organizations are impatient of and unresponsive to unsolicited feedback from such "stakeholders" as government, stockholders, consumer and conservation groups, etc., viewing their contributions as irrelevant at best, and interfering and obstructing at worst. Strategy is decided internally, by the leadership of the organization, and is a reflection of their perceptions and intentions, driven by their personal motivations.

An alternative point of view, however, is to consider the organization not as an individual entity, but as a part of a living systems which includes all the environment whether considered "relevant" or not. According to such a view, living systems thrive when they are in balance with their environment, receiving what they need to live from it, and giving back what is required to maintain the ecosystem. According to such a view, for an organization to thrive requires that it

adapt and harmonize with its environment so that it is "in balance," nurtured and supported by its ecosystem, and nurturing the larger whole in its turn.

The consequence of an "ecological" view of strategy is not that a business organization would avoid competition; it is rather that it would become much more sensitive to inputs and other messages from the environment, seeking those messages rather than endeavoring to screen them out. In becoming receptive to inputs, the organization would discover or "be given" its strategy by the larger system of which it is a part. Instead of strategy being a search for advantage, strategy becomes a search for meaning and purpose.

In this view, the location of strategy making shifts towards the interface between the organization and its environment, where the inputs and messages from the larger system are monitored and interpreted. Strategy thus comes to involve many more people at lower levels of the organization than the top. With participation in the strategy making (or we should say, strategy discovering) process comes an increase in participation and empowerment for many organization members.

The Poverty of Success: Learning From Failure

In most business organizations, success (meeting goals, having intended results) is the signal to move on to something else. At most, we learn from our successes that such-and-such a series of actions led to a desired result. We are unlikely to learn the richer skein of connections which links our particular outcome to the circumstances surrounding our achievement. On the other hand, when we fail, we are often punished, sometimes by being removed from the situation in which we failed. We tend to conceal failure from others and to avoid looking at it ourselves.

Innovative organizations are beginning to encourage people to take risks and to fail, because failure is rich with opportunities for learning about connections. When something you try doesn't work, you go back and look harder at the situation, searching out influences which you may have overlooked and which may be creating your unintended results. If you look hard enough, you may end up completely reevaluating your understanding of the situation. To permit and encourage failure and to insist on its publication and examination by all concerned leads to increased knowledge of those connections among events and processes which empower organization members in the performance of their tasks.

Control Systems vs Appreciation Systems.

Basically there are two ways to integrate the activities of individuals in the service of organizational objectives. One is for the people at the top to get as much information as they can, decide what is to be done, and then tell those lower down what to do and how to do it. Each person or group is then responsible for optimizing its own performance of the received objectives without regard to whether or not what they are doing optimizes the performance of the organization as a whole.

The other way is for the organization members all to have a good grasp of the mission and general direction which is desired, and for them to keep in close touch with each other as they do their work. The idea is then for each person or group to see how their efforts are meshing with the efforts of others and to adjust their own behavior so as to optimize the performance of the whole. This more organic approach redistributes information, decision making, direction and control of performance much more widely in the organization, and is thus greatly empowering for organization members.

Control systems such as Management Information Systems (MIS) used by higher management in traditional organizations serve the needs of top management in running the business. For the more organic process a different kind of information system is used which we may call the Management Appreciation System (MAS). The MAS collects information from all organization members and distributes it to all, permitting them to "appreciate" or understand what is happening to the system as a whole. Bulletin boards, teleconferencing, system flow charts and newspapers are all examples of more or less rudimentary Management Appreciation Systems. They empower their users.

Empowerment Through Will.

There is currently a good deal of discussion of visioning, values and purpose as motivators of organization members. Visionary leadership exercized through charismatic leaders has the power to empower members with a sense of identification with a (possibly noble) purpose larger than the self. In joining voluntarily with others in pursuit of a cherished vision, each experiences him or herself as larger, stronger and hence enhanced. The individual then willingly makes personal sacrifices for the good of the whole.

The Aligned Organization: Self Motivation Through Commitment.

Organization alignment refers to the process of developing a shared understanding and acceptance of the organization's purpose and a vision of the desired future. Guided by this vision, organization members are then empowered to direct their own efforts. The role of higher management becomes that of facilitator rather than controller and director, providing resources to self motivated people who are pursuing the common vision. The aligned organization has great power to evoke voluntary commitment, dedication and sacrifice on the part of its members.

Examples of aligned organizations are particularly common in the military of all nations, particularly among elite groups such as the U.S. Marines, the British Special Forces, or formerly, the Nazi SS units.

Empowerment Through Love.

Most discussion of late regarding leadership and empowerment in organizations has centered on empowerment through will and knowledge, or more accurately, knowledge in the service of will. The current candidate for the most exciting new organizational concept appears to be the "aligned organization," or its nearly identical cousin, the "high performing system." I am somewhat suspicious of the aligned organization because of its potential for exploiting, or "taking over" organization members, and because of its prevalence in war and the military. The aligned organization is not noted for its sensitivity to nuances of communication from its environment, nor for its harmony and adaptation to the ecosystems of which it is a part. Rather, it tends to be aggressive and "daimonic" in its proclivity for expanding beyond all limits which are imposed from the outside. In other words, it appears to need checks and balances, and these are not provided from within.

Attunement: Empowerment Through Resonance and Responsiveness.

As organization alignment is the expression of knowledge in the service of will, so "attunement" may be thought of as the expression of knowledge in the service of love. Love is a powerful motivating force in people's lives, and anyone who has experienced love knows that it can be personally empowering in the sense that loving makes us feel larger, stronger, and more able to give to others. However, we tend to be suspicious of the workings of love in business organizations, and so it tends to go underground or stay "in the closet." By love we simply mean

the strong feelings of affection and positive value which people experience towards the work they do, the products they create, their organization, their co-workers, or the customers they serve.

When we experience love, we tend to become both responsive and responsible. We care, and we take care of the things, organizations and people we love. We seek closeness, and we attune or harmonize ourselves with those we feel close to.

Egalitarian Networks: Empowerment Through Communication.

In the attuned organization, integration of effort takes place through communication and mutual responsiveness. People feel good when they are attuned or "in harmony," and so they seek to know others' needs and intentions and come to agreement or consensus about what is to be done and how it is to be done. Attunement thus requires a good deal of personal, face-to-face communication and discussion of values and needs at deeper levels than is common in many businesses. Such communication takes a lot of time, but has the advantage that after a while people know each other very well, and are able to act in harmony without discussion.

Support and Caring: Developing the "ties that bind."

The attuned organization tends to do a superb job of taking care of the people in it, by being sensitive to their needs and devoting time and resources to meeting personal needs. People feel good about being part of the organization and are willing to give their time and energy to maintain and support it.

The downside of attunement is that people may become so concerned about one another's feelings that they cannot confront important differences. Such differences may have to do with policies and values, ways and means, or they may be differences in ability, motivation and task

contribution. Just as the aligned organization may exploit the individual and sacrifice him or her for the mission of the whole, so the attuned organization may sacrifice task performance for the needs of the individual.

Clearly, alignment and attunement are in some ways polar opposites and need to be kept in balance for an organization and its members to get full value from both processes. Alignment gives a sense of external mission, of work to be done in the world, of purposes greater than one's individual concerns. Attunement keeps the individual safe and taken care of, maintains the people and their relationships, and heals them when they are hurt. Both are needed, and in most business organizations we have far more conscious acceptance and valuing of alignment and of the will than we do of attunement and the workings of love.

Technologies for Empowerment

Most of the methods and techniques of modern management have been developed to run the bureaucracies in which most of us work. They are designed to permit those at the top of organizations to get the information, make the plans and exercise the controls needed to run things. These methods and techniques are empowering for those at the top, but not for the members in general.

With the increasing turbulence and complexity of the environments in which most organizations exist, the rapid pace of change, and the difficulty of controlling a workforce which values its own autonomy, it is becoming harder and harder to run organizations from the top. It becomes necessary to empower the "other ranks," and to find ways of integrating their semi-autonomous activities. New and unusual techniques and methods are needed which can accomplish these purposes. Many such techniques are known, but are yet not widely used. My

colleague, Juanita Brown, calls these "transformational technologies." Some of them are listed in the paragraphs that follow.

Investigative Technologies

By this term is meant a host of methods which have been devised in very expensive research and development activities, complex construction projects, plant startup, etc., to help those involved understand and communicate the complex events and processes with which they are involved. Below are listed some of these methods:

- Journal and log-keeping of personal and technical events and changes

- System mapping, participated in by all members, not just the management

- Iterative decision making, to get everyone's input in reaching consensus

- "Discussion arenas" where conflicting parties can explain but not fight

- Debriefing, where all participants try to figure out what happened

- "Premortems" in which we imagine what could possibly go wrong

Technologies of Excellence

This term is used to denote the methods and techniques used by managers in the companies identified as "excellent" by Peters and Waterman in their now famous book, "In Search of Excellence." Many of the methods used by the managers they studied and interviewed are empowering for employees, such as the following:

- Contact with customers; listening to customers; following up complaints.

- "Management by walking around:" listening to employees.

- Dedication of top management to an overriding ideal, e.g., quality

- Celebrations and rituals to recognize employees' achievements

- Building trust in place of controls

- Encouraging initiative, risk-taking; rewarding failure

- Informality and elimination of executive "perks"

- Using champions for implementation and "skunkworks" for innovation

- Facilitative management: keeping bureaucrats off the backs of producers

Evocative Technologies.

This term refers to techniques and methods which may be thought by some to be a bit "way out," but which seem to offer promise if they can be introduced in ways which don't overly upset "the troops." The following are examples:

- Myths, legends, tales and stories

- Using music in meetings to set mood and climate

- Values clarification activities

- Visioning exercises: imaging the desired future

- "Affirmations" to create desired results through "intentionality"

- Group graphics to capture the feelings and values in meetings

- Group meditation, "Quaker meetings" for attunement

- Training in aikido, to learn harmonious ways of dealing with conflict

In my view, then, the now increasingly common notion of empowerment as alignment to common purpose is too limited. The vision of the aligned organization is too narrow, and its pursuit of success can be so frantic that it becomes disconnected from external reality and from human values. Balanced empowerment occurs not only at the level of will, but at the levels of knowledge and love. By learning together, we are all empowered, and not just to do more. The

significant power of learning together is that it enables us to transcend the endless cycle of

problem-solving in which we are all caught in modern organizations, where each solution leads

inevitably to a host of unintended consequences that become new problems.

When we add love to the equation and move beyond competition to cooperation, we

empower one another through mutual support. We are stronger, because we are no longer alone.

We add to our skills and resources the talents of our compatriots. We do not have to protect

ourselves from the political machinations of our co-workers. We can take more risks, because

we know there will be others to pick up the torch if we should stumble and fall. We experience

less stress, and we stay healthier.

I strongly believe that in the future, organizations will find that empowerment through

love and learning will provide the true competitive edge. It will not only be a time of

achievement, but we shall reclaim our enjoyment of one another in the workplace.