



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

## Let's get real about empowering employees

### Are your managers serious about sharing power?

**F**rom a safety theory perspective, empowering employees to make their own decisions about applying safe practices to their work is a good thing, but is this what really happens? Recently, Dr. Rozana Huq published her research on what employee empowerment means, both in theory and in practice.<sup>1</sup> Her empirical research findings focus on four critical themes: power-sharing, participative decision-making, devolution of responsibility, and a people-oriented leadership style.

Dr. Huq's research focus included a large organization (a British-owned communications company, employing more than 2,000 people) and a small organization (a privately-owned manufacturing company, employing 54 people).

#### Power-sharing

Huq considers Dr. Jean Neumann's definition of employee empowerment as "passing on previously withheld power and authority to employees further down the hierarchy" as useful.<sup>2</sup> Many managers fear sharing power will lead to losing power. Huq points out Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan's research reveals that management science literature has avoided the issue of power.<sup>3</sup>

Little, if any, power-sharing was practiced in the large organization. A serious disconnect existed between the kind of "power" managers thought they were giving and what employees believed they were receiving. Employees were not interested in political power, but wanted "more discretion and responsibility for decision-making within their own work situation and greater scope for utilizing their capabilities."<sup>4</sup>

The owner of the small operation did



not share power with non-management personnel. After promoting a number of experienced factory floor operatives to middle management and team leader positions, the owner shared power with some of the middle managers only. A number of these selected middle managers had difficulty learning the "new behavior of power-sharing," but most embraced the idea of being empowered because they felt it allowed them to make day-to-day decisions in running the affairs of the business. In other words there was a sense of "ownership."<sup>5</sup> According to Huq, this sense of ownership was not present in the large organization.

#### Participative decision-making

Huq refers to Jeffrey Gandz's definition of participative decision-making, which states "authority to make decisions and take action must increasingly be vested in those who are closest to the problem if maximum speed is to be achieved...empowered people respond faster."<sup>6</sup>

In the large organization, management intellectually understood the notion of allowing employees to make their own decisions; the problem was in letting this occur in a highly-regulated industry. It was feared wrong decision could lead to a regulatory violation. At the non-management level, many were uncomfortable with this new responsibility. Management had failed to

provide employees with the skills and tools to make their own decisions.

At the small organization, participative decision-making was viewed as extremely important. The owner conscientiously delegated decision-making to a chosen number of his middle managers, not all, and they were held accountable for their decisions. Even so, the extent to which a decision could be made was unclear; especially with the newly appointed team leaders. Factory floor operatives knew their jobs, so they seemed to just get on with their work without waiting for a decision to be made.

#### Devolution of responsibility

Huq utilizes Jawahar Nesan and Gary Holt's statement that "authorizing employees to be responsible for their own work makes them simultaneously an inspector and processor...greatly reducing non-value added procedures and enables individuals to be involved in the improvement of the business."<sup>7</sup>

Huq's work revealed that due to "command and control" management in the large organization and the lack of trust among middle management about employees making the right decisions in the highly-regulated industry, non-management employees were not given the opportunity to be responsible for their work. The advent of the employee empowerment program was viewed as a significant culture change in the organization. Huq comments that the participative decision-making and the devolution of responsibility "enhanced internal controls, raised self-esteem and self-efficacy among non-management personnel."<sup>8</sup>

Middle management in the small organization viewed devolution of responsibil-

ity as a critical success factor (CSF) for empowering employees. In fact, it was so important that it was tied to a weekly bonus system, unlike in the large organization. The five critical success factors everyone was responsible for were: output, quality, waste, housekeeping and safety. Middle managers and team leaders welcomed the opportunity to take on the responsibility. It gave them a purpose to come to work.

## A people-oriented leadership style

Huq draws on Robert Ripley's and Marie Ripley's description of a people-oriented leader as "interactive, encouraging participation, sharing power and information willingly, and leaning towards a democratic people-oriented leadership style."<sup>9</sup>

The large organization's CEO wanted to change the leadership style from "cops to coaches" using the four principles of "Directing, Coaching, Supporting and Counseling."<sup>10</sup> Some managers adopted the new style, but most found it very difficult to practice, resulting in inconsistent signals coming from managers. The excuse of being in a highly-regulated industry again was trotted out for not being able to let go. Managers were seen as merely "going through the motions."

The owner of the small organization

insisted on an element of control, but he believed the company's leadership style must change from "command and control" to "Directing, Coaching, Supporting and Counseling."<sup>11</sup> The "element of control" the owner applied toward his non-chosen middle managers, team leaders, and non-management employees was in line with his belief that leadership is about "telling people what to do, not letting people do whatever they wanted to."<sup>12</sup>

## Closing remarks

If your employee-oriented safety initiative seems to be floundering, ask yourself, does management:

- share their power with their employees?
- seek out employee input on safety issues in order to make decisions?
- allow employees to make their own safety decisions regarding their work and then support their decisions once they are made?
- provide necessary skills, training and resources for their employees to take on the responsibilities of making their own safety decisions?
- display a leadership style that is autocratic, or is it more people-oriented?

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1 Huq, R. 2010. Employee Empowerment: The Rhetoric and The Reality. Triarchy Press. Devon, UK.

2 Neumann, J.E. 1992/93. *Empowerment and the Authoritarian: Psychodynamics in the Service of Organizational Change*. The Tavistock Institute Review. pp. 25-30. London, UK.

3 Hardy, C. and Leiba-O'Sullivan, s. 1998. The Power Behind Empowerment: Implications for Research and Practice. Human Resources. 51.4: 451-483.

4 Huq, op. cit. p. 49.

5 Huq, op. cit. p. 59.

6 Gandz, J. 1990. *The employee empowerment era*. Business Quarterly. 55.2:74-79.

7 Huq, op. cit. p. 16.

8 Huq, op. cit. p. 55.

9 Huq, op. cit. p. 18.

10 Huq, op. cit. p. 55.

11 Huq, op. cit. p. 64.

12 Huq, op. cit. p. 64.