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The emergence of empowered work teams in a regulated utility...

Exploring empowerment from the inside–out

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Research on workteams has focused mainly on the external aspects that seem to lead to success (the outside–in of empowerment). There's been little study on the individual's experience as they become empowered, or empowerment from the inside–out.

* This article is based upon research conducted for the Canadian Centre for Management Development to examine the different problems and opportunities associated with empowerment in regulated or governmental organizations and in non-manufacturing organizations.

Two of our original questions were: Can the structure of a public organization, which must have a certain amount of regulation and reporting to satisfy public demands for accountability, be loosened enough to allow for employee empowerment?

Can commitment based organizing be sustained without directly tying incentives and rewards to teams and organizational performance?

In this report we arrive at conclusions and make recommendations but from a scientific point of view these should be regarded as hypotheses, needing further testing.

Exploring empowerment in work organizations from the inside–out has helped us to see empowerment differently and stimulated us to create new theories and try new applications of old theories.

Our main focus in this study is on the inside–out of empowerment... Part of our motivation for this study was to see if what we think we know about the outside–in of empowerment matches what we could find out about the inside–out of empowerment; that is, do our models of how to successfully structure empowered organizations actually lead people to feel empowered? Therefore we approached each case with awareness of the current wisdom about the outside–in of empowerment, looking to see if that wisdom held. We were surprised by what we found, described later in this report.

Any difference between manufacturing and service workteams? Our second focus was to determine whether there was significant difference between workteams in manufacturing and in service. We were interested in what we could find out about the success factors in these types of work systems. We did find that the nature of the work may require very different models and visions of what an empowered workteam is.

Our research methodology — As normally occurs in field research on organizational change, the study we planned and the actual study that emerged had some discrepancies. We found five teams that fit our criteria for successful empow-

ered workteams and interviewed almost all their members. We approached the teams through our network of contacts and secured agreement to interview them. We made formal contact with three members of one *failed* team we identified and who subsequently agreed to be interviewed. We also made informal contact with members of two other failed teams but did not formally interview any of them. In all we interviewed 46 members of successful empowered workteams. Fortunately, our success cases provide an over-abundance of contrasts*.

In analyzing the data from these cases we have paid particular attention to these differences to try and understand what impact, if any, these varying contexts have on empowered workteams.

We used two different interview guides, asking half the group one set of questions and half another. This allowed us to collect twice as much data on each group without increasing interview time with employees:

Interview one... consisted of open questions and probes into the specifics of the team's history and operation. We tried to understand what the team, empowerment, and TechCo looked liked from their point of view. We also asked closed ended questions about changes in the time span of discretion they experienced in their jobs.

Interview two... was designed to collect information on two other areas of theoretical interest: psychological boundaries and a "facet" model of empowerment.

Background to empowered workteams at TechCo and the cases studied...

TechCo (not the company's actual name) is a regulated company in Western Canada. Until the 1980s it was a very mechanistic, bureaucratic organization with poor employee relations and a monopoly attitude toward customers. In the past decade it has attempted major organizational changes consistent with the new forms of organizing and the push for increased quality/customer service occurring in the private sector.

During a major strategic planning exercise, one strategic thrust endorsed by TechCo executives was to move toward greater use of self–managing or empowered workteams throughout the organization. Some targets were generated (that have been totally ignored) but no real mechanism for making this change was created. The main union does not support empowered workteams but is not actively trying to subvert them either. A few people in the organization have appointed themselves champions of the effort and have tried to provide limited training and consulting services but these appear to have had minimal impact.

What has happened is that experiments in using empowered workteams have emerged in various parts of the organization championed by individual middle managers. Some involve just one group, some involve whole departments. What is common to all of them is that one or more groups are left to run themselves; the level of management that used to supervise the work has been removed and the group now *reports* to a higher level of management, one that is not *on–site*.

We were able to get the support of the VP of human resources at TechCo who sanctioned this study and created opportunities to gather information and make contacts within the organization. We proposed to study examples of successes and failures and try to identify what made the difference. We made contact with individual managers and networked to find cases to study.

While there was generally easy access to successes, we had much more difficulty identifying and interviewing those involved with failures. As in most organizational environments people don't want to be associated with failure and tend to redefine failures into something else or try to hide them and forget them. As a result we were able to intensively study five cases of success.

Our study of failures has been much less systematic. We were able to identify a few failures and talk informally with people associated with those. Even though it does provide some comparative data, it is not as systematic as we would have liked.

The five success cases were defined as successes on the basis of having operated without a supervisor/manager for over a year, had registered satisfactory performance and were considered fully capable of sustained satisfactory performance by others in the organization.

We asked members of each team who the significant stakeholders (especially internal customers and suppliers) were outside of each team. We contacted some of these by phone to get their views about the team. In all cases we talked to the manager the team reported to and representatives of each team's most significant customers. This allowed us to check on the actual level of performance of these teams, as viewed by outsiders, and further explore questions about psychological boundaries and empowered workteams. As part of our research strategy a first draft of our report was circulated to members of the empowered workteams for their comments and feedback.

Cautions and study limitations... We did find characteristic differences between those teams doing knowledge work and those doing service work.* Unfortunately this was confounded by the fact that teams doing service work were unionized and those doing knowledge work weren't. It is impossible to know if the differences we found were due to the type of work or due to the differences in status, employment relationship, and/or other characteristic differences between unionized and professional employees.

So that we don't overstate a perspective that still needs validation, in the remainder of this report we refer to the teams as unionized and professional. We could, however, validly refer to them as service and knowledge teams.

While empowered workteams were officially sanctioned at TechCo, there was no corporate wide implementation program. The generalizability of the results of our study are questionable for organizations taking a programmatic approach to implementation. Two things, however, make the results valuable:

1. Many managers who are trying to implement self–managed workteams operate in organizations like TechCo where change efforts are fragmented and local in nature.

2. Because these are successful cases of empowered workteams in a large bureaucracy they tell us something about Fritz's "path of least resistance" for implementation of empowered workteams in other large, bureaucratic organizations.

* Three teams involve unionized employees, one consists of non–unionized professionals and the fifth has a combination of professionals and unionized clerical. In one case the team's work is clerical, two cases involve service work and two cases involve knowledge work. Three cases are teams whose members do the same function while a fourth is mildly cross–functional and the fifth is extremely cross–functional. Three teams are in urban areas, one is in a suburb, and one is in a remote community. One team is all female, two teams are all male and the rest were mixed. In two teams members experience themselves as depending on each other for task completion while the other three have tasks where members tend to work independently.

"For everyone the demarcation point for when they became empowered was when the previous supervisor left, stopped supervising, and in several cases was not replaced."

"All teams still reported to a manager but it was someone they saw infrequently who did not interfere with their work and who consulted with them before making any decisions that might affect them."

"I wouldn't mind a good supervisor but no supervisor is better than a bad supervisor."

Empowered workteams at *TechCo.* from the inside–out

The view from the outside... When we read about empowered workteams from the *outside–in* perspective it seems the essence of empowered workteams is *teaming* — the processes and structures for forming and maintaining effective teams, including proper organizational structure and support systems.

The view from the inside–out... When people describe the essence of empowered workteams from the *inside–out* — operating without a supervisor close at hand — we were surprised by how powerful this aspect was for the people interviewed. It was clearly the most meaningful aspect of the change these people had experienced.

All teams still reported to a manager but it was someone they saw infrequently who did not *interfere* with their work and who consulted with them before making any decisions that might affect them. For everyone the demarcation point for when they became empowered was when the previous supervisor left, stopped supervising, and in several cases was not replaced.

Differences between unionists and professionals... There did appear to be a difference between the unionized groups and professional groups in this regard:

• Among members of the unionized teams we were sometimes told that it would be OK to have a supervisor if it were the right kind of supervisor.

   – One who consulted with members...
   – Treated them with respect...
   – Was able to manage the team's relations with other parts of the organization well.

One interview participant in a unionized group said what appeared to be the view held by most: "I wouldn't mind a good supervisor but no supervisor is better than a bad supervisor."

• Among the professional teams, however, there was a strong desire to not have a supervisor; self–regulation by the team was much more valued.

Among the professional groups we got the sense that there would be much more resistance to re–introducing supervision. In fact in one case where supervision was re–introduced due to a divisional reorganization, the team had successfully resisted it.

What's the purpose of workteams at TechCo? When asked what the purpose of empowered workteams were, members of all groups stressed two things:

1. Reduction of costs through less overhead (managers).
2. Speeding up problem resolution (by not having to go through supervisor to deal with others or wait to check things out with a supervisor).

It was striking how consistent this message was, given that these teams had nothing other than being empowered workteams in common.

The unionists' view... Unionized team members tended to highlight the ability to make daily job related decisions without having to wait for a supervisor. In particular they valued the ability to deal directly with whomever they needed to, inside or outside the company, to get things done. In all three cases members felt that what needed to be done was always clear so that empowered workteams were about letting people do what they already knew needed to be done. In each of these teams some members also talked about greater ownership and pride in their work and being able to provide better customer service.

The professionals' view... Professional teams highlighted an improved capacity to service customers (both inside and outside the company), a greater sense of ownership for the work, and the ability to react more quickly to a changing environment. The change that professional teams seemed to value most was that they could now focus their attention on satisfying their customer's needs, not their supervisor's needs.

Decision making scope: professionals and unionists — The professional teams appeared to have more input into areas other than task decisions, like goal setting, budgeting, hiring, performance appraisal, and so on. Unionized teams were empowered mainly in terms of job autonomy and had to work through a manager to influence other aspects of their worklife.*

Organizational outcomes of empowered workteams

All teams reported increased productivity and efficiencies from being empowered... Often their advancements were in the form of doing things that would have violated company–wide procedures but in the local case was more productive. ▣

Teams and customer satisfaction — All teams reported increased customer satisfaction from their ability to respond locally to customer needs. In all cases, as supervision diminished, teams turned to their customers as their source for performance feedback and goal setting. We were told numerous anecdotes with the following common story line:

Since becoming an empowered workteam they had done things that responded more quickly and effectively to customer needs that they had not done in the past.

Sometimes this was due to removal of past organizational barriers because they were now empowered and sometimes this was due to increased motivation from a greater sense of ownership and responsibility.

Teams on innovation and budgetary control... Some teams reported increased innovation leading to improved efficiencies and/or improved customer satisfaction. Creating and implementing new and better ways of accomplishing their jobs seemed to be easier as a team. *A software innovation...* One team had developed innovative software that had drastically cut their task completion time. They credited having control over their own budgets with their ability to buy computer equipment that allowed them to create these efficiencies. Members did not believe they would have received supervisory support to buy this equipment as supervisors have large incentives to run their areas frugally and to not spend capital dollars, regardless of the potential payoff.

The impact of control over budgets... Another interesting result of control over budgets was that team members became far more aware of resource limitations and regularly questioned the value received for money spent. Teams tended to view themselves as small businesses or sub–contractors; different teams used different metaphors consistent with the type of work they did. All their metaphors, however, held the common image of being in business for themselves.

As a result, teams tended to develop more of an *investment orientation* to how they spent their budgets. They reported having tougher norms on costs and expenses than prior to being a team and viewed capital spending more in terms of pay–back for the company.

Examples of increased productivity and efficiency...

A little overtime saves more in the long term... For example, a couple of teams pointed to the practice of always quitting on time (per company instructions) to avoid overtime. Prior to the introduction of teams, instead of working for one more hour and completing a job, the employee would have to return the next day and take many hours to set up in order to complete the last hour of work. Under empowerment employees can finish a job with a little overtime and leave feeling a sense of accomplishment while saving the company money.

Decisions take less time... Another common story of increased efficiency had to do with drastic reductions in time to make decisions and/or service customers. Some of the reported changes had reduced decision processes that might have taken many weeks down to a few hours. In four of the successful cases members seemed quite proud of the money they had saved the company.

1

The team with a *reputation*...

The team that did not receive as favorable reviews was one of the unionized teams.

While this team of union members was seen as competent and committed (some stakeholders gave very positive comments), a group of supervisors in related areas gave some negative ratings:

- In particular they were concerned that the team was not *accountable* for its actions and acted out of self–interest too often.

- This group also appeared to be resentful of the attention this team was getting, feeling that their work groups were just as, if not more, effective.

While it may be true that this team is less effective than its members reported, the manager of this team had productivity data that showed the team to be well above average in its function and the organization had given the team an award for excellence. This raises questions about the validity of the poor external reviews of the team.

2

We must emphasize that these are *self–reported results of the teams...* We did not collect actual productivity or customer satisfaction data so we cannot confirm their impression. We did, however, talk to representatives of groups each empowered workteam interacts with and obtained external observations about each team's performance. In four out or five cases the observations were very favorable. These teams were seen as being highly productive, innovative and committed to their work. **2**

Intrinsic benefits to being a member of an empowered workteam — The strongest and most consistently reported benefit of working without a supervisor, and therefore being in an empowered workteam, was a reduction in stress.

We were surprised by the strength of this finding. This was often given as the most tangible, positive, personal benefit of being in an empowered

* This is consistent with Canadian labor law and union doctrine which has drawn an exclusive divide between supervisory roles and contract employee roles. When employees start making management decisions (e.g., hiring) the labor code would be violated as this type of behavior is prohibited because of historical problems with company dominated unions.

Variance in *closeness* as a motivator for teams...

While each of these intrinsic motivators appeared to be operating in all the cases, there were differences. Strikingly, the empowered workteam that was all female reported a major increase in social support and sense of belonging as a result of their workteam experience.

An all female team developed a high level of intimacy and in our interviews said they had come to greatly value and depend on the social support they received from one another. Nothing similar was reported by any other team.

A professional team did have members who reported increased satisfaction and sense of belonging from greater cooperation among members in getting the work out and ensuring each other's success. There was not, however, the same sense of *family* that had evolved in the all women's group.

In the other teams only a few members reported increased social cohesion (belonging, intimacy or social support) as a motivating factor and with much less intensity than the all–female team.

3

"The strongest and most consistently reported benefit of working without a supervisor, and therefore for being in an empowered workteam, was a reduction in stress."

workteam. When we probed further, the kinds of stresses people described were *little things* that build up over time:

• Not worrying if one is five minutes late to the office...

• Not having to explain to someone who doesn't really understand the work why one is doing something a certain way...

• Being able to decide how and when one will complete a piece of work without worrying about having to justify oneself, and so on.

Other benefits or motivations for being a team member, as stated by those interviewed included:

• Virtually all members of the successful teams said they preferred working as an empowered work-team, though some members of unionized teams appreciated the advantages of good supervision...

• Many found going to work a lot more appealing and linked this to less stress and a more informal atmosphere...

• Many reported an increased sense of personal responsibility and ownership for the work they do and found that motivating...

• A number of respondents mentioned more control over budgets and resource allocation as being motivating — especially control over purchasing decisions about what *tools* to buy to do their work...

• Another common observation was that the prior system was *fear–driven* whereas the new approach was more trusting and *self–driven*...

• The ability to deal directly with whomever one needed to, without having to go through an intermediary (supervisor), seemed to be a big motivator for members of all empowered workteams.

Was the positive effect from being a team member or being treated as an adult? During interviews members stressed the reduction in frustration at getting work done they experienced from this change. Thirty to forty percent of those interviewed said that being a part of an empowered workteam had been a personal and/or professional growth experience and that had been motivating for them.

We have to wonder, however, how much this change also increased their sense of simply being able to act as responsible adults, and of these, which was the greater motivator. The descriptions of stress reduction and the other motivators described by those interviewed remind us of early work in organization theory that showed how mechanistic organizational structures are at odds with normal psychological development in adults toward increasing amounts of affiliation, self–esteem, autonomy and self–actualization.

While each of these intrinsic motivators appeared to be operating in all the cases, there were differences. Strikingly, the empowered workteam that was all female reported a major increase in social support and sense of belonging as a result of their workteam experience. **3**

Unionized teams did not seem to experience much change in their organizational impact as the work they did had not changed due to becoming an empowered workteam. The way they did the work, however, had changed significantly. As noted above, many were proud of the way they had saved the company time and money through more effective strategies for doing and completing work than mindlessly following an 8 am to 4 pm schedule.

The professional teams, in contrast, had changed some aspects of their work as they responded to customer needs and opportunities to further the organization's aims. Members of professional teams reported that their work had expanded into more strategic and value added areas and that this was highly motivating for them. **4**

While performance data seemed, to some extent, to influence member behavior in the professional teams, this was not true of the union teams.

While each of these intrinsic motivators appeared to be operating in all the cases to varying degrees, there were differences.

Motivators for unionists...

• Members of unionized teams tended to emphasize increased autonomy and more effective task completion as the key motivators. In the union teams, the work itself, and their beliefs about the proper way to do the work, drove member behavior.

• Unionized teams had not developed new performance measures and were not paying attention to the old ones very much (except to know that they were better than average in the company or to win some prize).

Motivators for professionals

• Members of professional teams tended to emphasize increased impact on important organizational outcomes as the key motivator.

• Both professional teams had developed objective performance measures of the team and these focused on their impact on the company's customers. Professional teams had a greater sense of the need to continuously justify their function within the company during this time of re–organization and downsizing and used performance data to do so.

4

In the union teams, the work itself, and their beliefs about the proper way to do the work, drove member behavior.

Extrinsic benefits to being a member of an empowered workteam — As far as extrinsic motivation goes, there was very little we could find at *TechCo*. There had been little change to monetary or non–monetary rewards to support or encourage empowered workteams. Pay is either based on individual salary scales (professionals) or determined by a labor agreement. The only extrinsic reward we could find was a company wide awards program that had recently been implemented to recognize effective groups in the company. Three of our successful cases had been recognized by the award and two of these teams seemed to sincerely value the recognition. For the isolated team, the free trip to a big city for the awards banquet was also a highly valued aspect of the award.

Our perspective on how to implement empowered teams in a bureaucratic organization

Studying these successful teams at *TechCo* gives us a perspective on how empowered workteams can first be implemented in a large bureaucratic organization.

On the importance of interdependence — Many writers on empowerment today contend that teams require interdependent tasks to pull them together or they will just be a collection of individuals and not able to properly self–regulate. As it turns out, only two of our success cases (both unionized) had what could be objectively called an interdependent task structure (members relied on each other's work to be able to complete their own work) and in one of these many tasks were done independently by members. Some members of a third team (professional) talked as if they depended on each other though the actual nature of the task didn't require it. The other two teams had no illusions of task interdependence. For the most part, in four of these cases, these were groups of people who operated independently to get their everyday work done. The structure of four successful empowered workteams had this one similarity: they were groups of people who provided the same service to different customers. In some teams these were dedicated customers and in others individual team members serviced whatever customer walked in the door. Having common tasks and a common customer base provided these teams with *task identity*, giving them common identity around the work they do. This also made them able to share work and learn from each other.

Introducing teams into a bureaucratic structure... In designing a new organization, one would probably want to focus on teaming people who have interdependent tasks. In changing an old organization into an empowered workteam organization, however, the path of least resistance may lie with groups that are not strongly task interdependent but provide the same service to different customers. The less task interdependence, the less coordination and conflict and therefore, the less need for high level interpersonal skills or someone to mediate conflicts.

It is much easier, for example, to accommodate to a team member's scheduling needs when your schedule is not very dependent on theirs.

Problem solving — Groups in this sample varied on how much time and effort they put into group problem solving and decision making. Those which did more together did so because they wanted to be together, not because the task necessarily required it. Those groups also had the highest levels of satisfaction with their jobs, with empowered workteams and with the organization.

"...the path of least resistance may lie with groups that are not strongly task interdependent. The less task interdependence, the less coordination and conflict and therefore, the less need for high level interpersonal skills or someone to mediate conflicts."

While most didn't need each other to get work done, our successful cases did act like teams:

• All teams made significant group decisions...

• All teams had norms that made it OK to ask for help from peers...

• In all these groups people got along fairly well and coordinated their few interdependencies easily.

What does it take to be a team? When it comes to contextual factors that make it possible to be a team our overall finding can be summed up as:

Any group that wants to be a team can be a team.

It seems that the desire to work cooperatively without a designated supervisor can overcome just about any *barrier* we could envision.

Time a barrier? Not for this team... One team, one that has task interdependencies, has a very difficult time meeting together. The only feasible place for them to meet and coordinate is a restaurant but if they do that it reinforces a public perception that *TechCo* workers are slackers and someone calls the company to complain.

People's ingenuity in overcoming barriers to something they want to do is enormous. This team, like all our successful cases, is very concerned about customer satisfaction and doesn't want to create angry customers. Somehow the team has managed to overcome this barrier through an intricate networking arrangement where they meet in public in pairs to exchange information and coordinate actions.

Teams have to have management support! Well... Conventional teaming wisdom is that the introduction of empowered workteams must be clearly and visibly supported by senior management. *TechCo* is an organization going through continuous, albeit fragmented, change. There is much about the organization's structure and policies that do not support empowered workteams.

For example, the successful cross–functional team reported into three different divisions of *TechCo*, each with their own vice president. This team had a less than clear reporting structure and didn't seem to care. Some members on the team were experiencing pressure from their respective divisions to act in ways that would be counter–productive to the team and members seemed to be having no difficulty resisting these nor did they appear to feel badly about it!

In our sample there was more cynicism than belief in senior management support... All groups had experienced resistance from managers they believed were threatened by the empowered workteam concept:

• Some in unionized teams felt there was more support the higher up the hierarchy one went...

• Professional teams, however, had more opportunity to see the contradictions and confusion among senior managers when it came to dealing with empowered workteams.

On balance the data appears to show that managers are more likely to show support for empowered workteams when the team is a number of levels below them but have a harder time dealing with teams that are on a similar *level* in a decision making process.

• All teams reported initial resistance from managers previously used to dealing with the group's supervisor.

Policies and procedures within the corporation that required having a supervisor's signature (most HR procedures, for example) created problems for members, but these were always resolved (sometimes by everyone agreeing to pretend to comply with procedures). These irritants and lack of management support did not stop our successful cases from valuing the team and persevering, apparently because of strong intrinsic motivation to be self–managing.

It is important to note that none of the successful teams reported receiving any special training or extensive consultation. There were no changes to reward systems, organizational structures, or personnel policies to support the use of empowered workteams (though one professional group had been able to influence HR to allow it to do a team appraisal instead of individual appraisals for each member).

As empowered workteams, with no direct supervisor, the success cases were significant departures from past organizational practice. To be successful they each had to resist varying kinds of pressures. Procedures and policies didn't quite fit them. Sometimes they ran into managers or professionals unaccustomed to dealing directly with a unionized employee around the kinds of decisions that were being made. Then there was the problem of how to handle performance appraisals.

A key benefit of these early, successful groups may be that they teach the rest of the organization how to interact with and support a wider program of empowered workteams.

On the need to participatively decide on empowerment... In many cases these teams were empowered without having formally asked for the consent of their members. In two cases supervisors were not replaced without even asking the team members if they wanted to be self-managing. It was done by managers who judged the groups able to self-manage and simply informed them that is how they would now operate. *In other words, the decision to empower employees was done autocratically.*

In two other cases there was no formal choice process — people were not asked to volunteer. Rather, decisions to empower a team were made with some (but limited) input by those being empowered.

Yet in describing this virtually all team members said they welcomed the change and were easily able to take over the previous supervisor's responsibilities.

• All successful cases involved work groups that had already been working together for many years and the team members were already technically proficient at the tasks required...

In two of the three unsuccessful cases, these were newly formed teams with new mandates.

Teams need to be formed step by step. Right? Well... The writing on empowered workteams talks about the need to develop a team in stages, ensuring that people know what they are to do and can take on — first, task leadership and then people issues.

The results suggest that early success comes from empowering those groups that have members who are already highly competent at the work the group must do. A number of those interviewed stressed that incompetent members would make it a lot more difficult to be self-regulating. Contrast this with another area in *TechCo* that embarked on an extensive empowerment program involving a sophisticated structural reorganization and close attention to managing the implementation. This appears to have been a failure. This failure has been attributed to an inability by the teams to take on the previous supervisor's duties and/or lack of competence or inexperience to do the work required of the teams.

There's a great need for clarity in tasks and authority. Right? Well... Manufacturing organizations implementing empowered workteams put a great deal of effort into clarifying self-regulating processes:

• How decisions about what work is to be done will be decided...

• The nature of performance measures...

• The internal processes of the team.

Very little of that occurred with the successful cases at *TechCo*. Instead, teams self-regulated by focusing on customer needs and customer satisfaction while paying attention to costs. The key learning may be that in organizations which do service and/or knowledge work, clarity about who the team's customers are is essential to effective introduction of empowered workteams.

When the old supervisor was consultative, the teams fared better... In all but one of the successful cases the impetus for creating an empowered workteam came from the imminent departure of the current supervisor.

Either the present supervisor was being promoted and had recommended that the team be allowed to self-manage or the present supervisor was retiring and a more senior manager decided not to replace him/her. In at least two of the cases the original supervisor consciously worked to develop the self-regulating capacity of the team but that is less clear in the other three cases.

It does seem to be true of all the successful cases, however, that prior to being an empowered workteam they had a supervisor who relied on the group to coordinate its own work. A consultative supervisory style seemed to provide a form of on-the-job training for independent decision making, making it possible to take the next step to empowerment.

In two of the failed teams, members had not had this experience prior to being empowered. In the one failed team we formally interviewed members who cited the previous autocratic supervisor for the team's failure. This supervisor was blamed for generating employee insecurity and dependence on an authority figure.

"The key learning may be that in organizations which do service and/or knowledge work, clarity about who the team's customers are is essential to effective introduction of empowered workteams."

Was there any similarity in skills needed to function well as a team? When we asked what new skills and/or abilities members required to operate successfully in an empowered workteam the answers were quite idiosyncratic:

- Within the same team someone might say they needed increased interpersonal skills while another might say increased technical skills were needed.

- In one of the unionized teams where members work independently from each other, many noted wanting to ensure they had the technical skills to be able to make the right decisions.

- Among all teams the area for additional training most often noted was interpersonal skills — being able to deal with customers and with other team members more effectively.

- It did seem that members could share/train each other in the technical skills required for the job but not the interpersonal skills.

At *TechCo* almost none of the members in successful empowered workteams reported receiving any supplementary training related to being in an empowered workteam (though we know that in at least 2 of the cases they did receive some corporate training on what empowered workteams are and how they operate). The diversity of skills and deficits members bring to their teams leads us to conclude that trying to provide a *one size fits* all training program for empowered workteams is probably not appropriate or useful. Giving teams a training budget and letting members pick and choose the type of training each feels they most need when they need it will probably be more cost effective and successful.

A final point on 'support'... One last point of interest from our study was the impact of isolation on empowered workteams. Apparently, those working in isolated communities or the *Far North* are more likely to have experience working without supervision. The transition to being an empowered workteam seemed to have had the least impact on our one isolated team. They did not experience it as a big change. It was also interesting to note how strongly *customer–focused* they were since their customers were also their friends and neighbors. Working in isolated communities appears to increase team members' sense of responsibility and ownership for outcomes, especially when these are visible to others in the community.

* This was the team that had generated the highest levels of social cohesion among those we studied so it may be that their experience is not generalizable. We would be surprised, however, if most members of these teams did not experience working under supervision again as regressive and de–motivating.

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Potential problems with empowered workteams

Breaking up really is hard... One of the most interesting *problems* we encountered was that one of the success cases was having their work re–engineered and the team was being broken up. Clearly, improvements in information technology had made some of their work redundant and a few other groups, in other divisions, were also affected by these changes.

A task force consisting of representatives of the groups involved (including a member of this empowered workteam) had recommended the changes. The work of these various groups had been combined and a new organizational structure to house the work created. From an organizational point of view, the changes were rational and will likely lead to reduced costs and improved coordination.

Members of this empowered workteam, however, were being reassigned to new groups with conventional supervision. Members of this group were extremely despondent, some on the verge of clinical depression, over the break–up of the team.*

There seemed to be little evidence that managers at TechCo were at all concerned about the impact of this change on team members or on the climate for empowered workteams in the corporation.

Many team members seemed unaware of the reasons behind the reorganization and were at a loss to explain why the company had broken up what appeared to have been a highly successful empowered workteam. They did not seem aware (or did not want to acknowledge) that one of their own team members had been a part of the decision making process.

We can only speculate that others in the company observing this from the point of view of the team members would conclude that *TechCo* pays only lip service to the importance of empowerment. This highlights one of the very real problems of creating empowered workteams; when and how to disband successful ones in ways that support and enhance the experience of team members and the climate for empowered workteams in the organization. This case provided no answers to those questions.

'Mixed' teams don't always work... Another *problem* we ran into concerned the team with mainly professional members but which also had three unionized clerks as part of the team. The organizational and legal structures made it very difficult for the professionals and clerks to feel that they really were part of one team:

• The professionals got a management bonus while the clerks did not...

• The professionals seemed quite eager to have the clerks be full team members but the clerks were not all so enthusiastic...

• The clerks were not willing to do 'all-nighters,' as the professionals sometimes did, to ensure a job was completed on time.

One unionized clerk seemed to be ready and willing to be a full team member, while another viewed it as just another job and another was resistant to the idea at the beginning and worried it would undermine the union (though now seemed OK with it).

This team appears to have worked out these problems in a way that is satisfactory to everyone, reinforcing our earlier point that:

No matter what the barriers, teams that want to be teams can find a way to do it.

But this case does point out that trying to integrate unionized and professional employees into single teams will meet with greater structural problems than teams composed wholly of either group of employees. Until such time as the organization's systems are changed to support such empowered workteams, it may be best to avoid them.

Final thoughts

We found that the most crucial feature of empowered work teams for the individuals in them was not *teaming*, but the lack of a supervisor. The most motivating thing about being in an empowered work team was the reduction in stress resulting from no longer having to report to someone daily. Without supervisors to tell them what to do, teams seemed to naturally turn to their customers to tell them what to do.

In a fragmented, non–programmatic change effort, the path to success seems to be to start with groups of people who:

• Do the same work but work fairly independently of each other

• Have worked together for some time already...

• Are competent to do the work...

• Know clearly who their customers are...

• Have previously had a supervisor with a participative management style,

and then simply remove the supervisor. Such teams seem to have what it takes to operate successfully and get past the numerous barriers to empowered work teams found in the organization's structure and culture. Through their successful operation, these teams can teach managers how and where the organization needs to change to support the widespread use of empowered work teams. ◆

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