

Leadership and the Problem of Bogus Empowerment

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Empowerment conjures up pictures of inspired and confident people or groups of people who are ready and able to take control of their lives and better their world. The empowered are the neighbors in a community who band together and take action to drive out drug dealers; the longtime welfare mother who gets a job and goes on to start a business; the child who learns to read and to ride a bike. Power is a relationship between people with mutual intentions or purposes.¹ Empowerment is about giving people the confidence, competence, freedom, and resources to act on their own judgments. Hence, when a person or group of people are empowered, they undergo a change in their relationship to other people who hold power and with whom they share mutual goals. In a community, empowering citizens changes their relationship to each other and to other holders of power such as business and government. In a business, empowering employees changes their relationship to each other, management, and the work process.

You can hardly pick up a business book today without seeing the words *leadership*, *empowerment*, *trust*, or *commitment* either on the cover or in the text. Gone are the bosses of the industrial era. Organizations have entered a new age where employees are partners and part of the team. Not only are managers supposed to be leaders, but all employees are leaders in their own way. This is good. It's democratic. It shows respect for persons, and it sounds very ethical. So why isn't everyone happy? Why do business leaders worry

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about trust and loyalty? Why are employees cynical? One reason is that people are less secure in their jobs because of downsizing, technology, and competition from the global labor market. The other reason, and focus of this chapter, is that in many organizations, promises of empowerment are bogus. The word *bogus* is often used by young people to express their anger, disappointment, and disgust over hypocrisy, lies, and misrepresentations. This is how people feel when they are told that they are being empowered, but they know that they are not. When leaders promise empowerment, they raise the moral stakes in their relationship to followers. Failure to deliver can lead to even greater cynicism about leadership, alienation, and abdication of moral responsibility by employees and/or citizens.

When you empower others, you do at least one of the following: you help them recognize the power that they already have; you recover power that they once had and lost; or you give them power that they never had before. In his study of grass-roots empowerment, Richard Couto says there are two main kinds of empowerment. The first kind he calls psycho-political empowerment. It increases people's self-esteem and results in a change in the distribution of resources and/or the actions of others. In other words, empowerment entails the confidence, desire, and – most important – the ability of people to bring about real change. This is probably what most people think of when they think of empowerment. Couto calls the second form of empowerment psycho-symbolic empowerment. It raises people's self-esteem or ability to cope with what is basically an unchanged set of circumstances.² More often than not, leaders promise or appear to promise the first kind of empowerment but actually deliver the second.

In this chapter I argue that authentic empowerment entails a distinct set of moral understandings and commitments between leaders and followers, all based on honesty. I begin by looking at the cultural values behind the idea of empowerment, particularly as it applies in the workplace. My primary focus is on business organizations, but much of what I have to say about the moral aspects of empowerment applies to leaders and followers in community, nonprofit, and political contexts as well. I briefly outline how the idea of empowerment has evolved over the past fifty years of management theory and practice. Critical analysis of this history and the ways in which empowerment is manipulative and unauthentic then helps me talk about the moral aspects of empowerment and their implications for leadership.

Part I. The Social Values Behind Empowerment

The idea of empowerment has its charm. Americans treasure democracy and its accompanying values of liberty and equality. If democracy were the only goal of empowerment, Americans would have the most democratic workplaces in the world, but they don't. As Tom Wren points out, ever since

American independence, there has been a conflict between the values of equality and authority.³ This tension is clearly evident in all organizational life. However, there are other values in our culture that shape the leadership and values of the workplace. Charles Taylor identifies three values of the modern age that he says cause tremendous personal anxiety and social malaise: individualism, instrumental reason (which causes disenchantment with the world), and freedom (which people seem to be losing because of individualism and instrumentalism).⁴ Ideally empowerment is what makes humans triumph over the anxiety they have over these values and provides the antidotes to the social malaise.

In the workplace are constant tensions among individualism, freedom, and instrumental value and/or economic efficiency (I count these as two aspects of the same value). In a society where people value individualism and freedom, the challenge of leadership in organizations is the challenge of leading a flock of cats, not sheep.⁵ This means that leaders have to use more powerful means of control than they would in a culture where people live in accepted hierarchies. For example, Americans were first smitten with Japanese management because it was effective and seemed so democratic. What they failed to realize was that the Japanese could afford to be democratic because the social controls imposed by hierarchy and community were internalized in workers, hence requiring less overt control by managers. American business leaders face the challenge of maintaining control without overtly chipping away at individualism and democratic ideals. This is why the language of empowerment is so attractive.

Economic efficiency and instrumentalism are the most powerful and most divisive values in the workplace. They trump all other values, and our current faith in the market makes it difficult to sustain plausibly any other ethical values in an organization. The market is a mean, ruthless boss. Instrumentalism or the value of getting the job done is more important than the means and people used to get it done. Business leadership is effective if it gets results. Leaders and their organizations are successful if they make the most amount of money or do the most amount of work in the least amount of time. Not only are the ends more important than the means, but there is little if any room for things that have intrinsic but noninstrumental value in business. The greatest of all impediments to empowerment in business, and increasingly in all areas of life, is economic efficiency. It acts on rules that refuse to take into account special circumstances.

In addition to the values of instrumentalism, individualism, and freedom, I add a fourth social value that I call “niceness.” It might sound strange to say that our culture values niceness at a time when there seems to be little civility. Niceness is not civility. Historian Norbert Elias traces the origin of civility to the sixteenth-century Dutch philosopher Erasmus. His book *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium (On Civility in Children)* is dedicated to a prince’s son. It chronicles the proper behavior of people in society with a special emphasis

on outward physical behavior. In short, it is an etiquette book about properly blowing one's nose, eating at the table, and relieving oneself. Published in 130 editions and translated into English, French, Czech, and German, Erasmus's book established the concept of civility as behavior that was considerate of other people in a society.⁶ Kant later points out that civility is not morality (because it doesn't require a good will), but the similitude of morality – an outward decency.⁷ Civility is the behavior that citizens should have toward their fellow citizens. It includes an obligation of citizens to be polite and respectful of the private rights of others.

Whereas the concept of civility develops as a form of outward consideration for others (for example, not picking your nose in public), niceness is used as a means of gaining the favor and trust of others by showing a willingness to serve. Niceness fits the description of courtly behavior, from which we get the term *courtesy*. This selection from the *Zeldler Universal Lexicon of 1736* captures the basic elements of commercial niceness:

The courts of great lords are a theater where everyone wants to make his fortune. This can only be done by winning favor with the prince and the most important people of his court. One therefore takes all conceivable pains to make oneself agreeable to them. Nothing does this better than making the other believe that we are ready to serve him to the utmost capacity under all conditions. Nevertheless we are not always in a position to do this, and may not want to, often for good reasons. Courtesy serves as a substitute for all this. By it we give the other so much reassurance, through our outward show, that he has a favorable anticipation of our readiness to serve him. This wins us the other's trust, from which an affection for us develops imperceptibly, as a result of which he becomes eager to do good to us.⁸

There are other distinctive facets of niceness that are embedded in the observations of social critics since the mid-twentieth century. The first element of niceness is the belief that social harmony means lack of conflict. In *An American Dilemma* Gunnar Myrdal explains one facet of niceness. He argues that American social scientists derived their idea of social harmony from liberalism based on the Enlightenment ideal of *communum bonum* or common good. Radical liberals wanted to reformulate corrupt institutions into places where natural laws could function. The radical liberal, who could be a communist, socialist, or anarchist, wanted to dismantle power structures of privilege, property, and authority. In the utopia of the radical liberal, the concept of empowerment would not be useful. People wouldn't need to be given power or made to feel powerful, because the restraints that institutions had on their lives would in theory be removed. However, the dominant view in the social sciences (and certainly among those who were management theorists) was conservative liberalism. The conservative liberal took society as it was and, under the influence of economics, adopted the idea of social harmony as stable equilibrium.⁹ The social scientists studied

empirically observable situations and terms such as balance, harmony, equilibrium, function, and social process. They pretended that these terms gave a “do-nothing” valuation of a situation, but behind these words carry a veiled set of value judgments. Myrdal notes: “When we speak of a social situation being in harmony, or having equilibrium, or its forces organized, accommodated, or adjusted to each other, there is almost inevitable implication that some sort of ideal has been attained, whether in terms of ‘individual happiness’ or ‘the common welfare.’”¹⁰

Traditionally, management theorists have tacitly accepted the valuations behind these terms. Empowerment, like harmony, is assumed to be a good that brings about individual happiness. Social harmony in an organization meant accommodating and adjusting to people. Conflict or disharmony was a sign of failed leadership. Niceness comes out of this one-dimensional picture of stable equilibrium and harmony. If no one complains and yells at work, then there is social harmony. Furthermore, the “do-nothing,” value-free stance of social scientists is in part responsible for some of the manipulative theories and practices in management.

David Riesman captured another root of niceness in his 1950 description of the emerging American character. In *The Lonely Crowd* Riesman described inner-directed people who can cope with society because they are directed by internal, general goals implanted in them by their elders. Riesman observed that these people are becoming few and far between. Inner-directed people have less need for empowerment because they have what they need built in. The more prevalent character type identified by Riesman is the other-directed person. These people are shallower, friendlier, and more uncertain of themselves.¹¹ Other-directed people take more of their clues on values and goals from the outside: They want to be liked and have a strong need to belong.

In his book, Riesman described a society dominated by other-directed people, in which manipulative skill overshadows craft skill and expense accounts overshadow bank accounts. Business is supposed to be fun, and managers are supposed to be glad-handers who joke with secretaries and charm their bosses and clients. Most important, Riesman noted the trend that continues today of rewarding highly skilled people with management positions and power over other people. Hence the skilled engineer who gets promoted has to become a skilled glad-hander. The growth of the service industry shaped this character type into the model leader-manager and employee. To be successful in a service, one has to be friendly, likable, and nice. Since Riesman’s day, bank accounts matter more and expense accounts are smaller. What remains the same is the powerful value of the glad hand. Our society may be less civil, and perhaps because of it niceness has been commercialized into the courtly norm of friendly bosses, bankers, and waiters all intent on gaining favor with customers and superiors in order to facilitate a smooth transaction.

As practiced in business, niceness consists of not getting into conflict and behaving in a commercially friendly fashion. Because people don't seem to behave this way naturally, we need the help of the therapist to attain niceness. In *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* Philip Rieff says that truth has become a highly personal matter he calls "psychic truth."¹² He thinks that therapeutic effectiveness has replaced the value of truth in our culture. Truths that make people feel better and help them adjust and fit in are far more desirable than truths that rock the boat. If our culture places more importance on psychic truths than on real truths, and if some "truths" or therapeutic fictions are effective because they make people happier, then leaders only have an obligation to make people feel empowered. They don't have to give them actual power.

It is obvious why niceness, as based on therapeutic lies, conflict-free environments, and the kind of bland friendliness that we experience when we go the store or a bank, is one of the values that lurk behind the history of empowerment in business. Leaders often prefer the nice kind of empowerment over the kind that leads to chaos and loss of control. As I have said, there is empowerment and bogus empowerment. I describe bogus empowerment as the use of therapeutic fictions to make people feel better about themselves, eliminate conflict, and satisfy their desire to belong (niceness); so that they will freely choose to work towards the goals of the organization (control of individualism), and be productive (instrumentalism). Leaders who offer bogus empowerment are unauthentic, insincere, and disrespectful of others. They believe that they can change others without changing themselves.

Part II. Empowerment and the Organization Man

C. Wright Mills offers one of the clearest articulations of bogus empowerment: "The moral problem of social control in America today is less the explicit domination of men than their manipulation into self-coordinated and altogether cheerful subordinates."¹³

Mills believed that management's real goal was to "conquer the problem of alienation within the bounds of work alienation."¹⁴ By this he meant that the problems of the workplace had to be defined and solved in terms of the values and goals of the workplace itself. By controlling the meanings and the terms under which alienation was conquered and satisfaction found, employers could maintain control without alienating workers. William H. Whyte echoed Mills's concern about psychological manipulation in *The Organization Man*, only Whyte zeroed in on people's need to belong. The workplace of the late 1950s is both radically different from and strikingly the same as today's workplace. Whyte criticized the social ethic that makes morally legitimate the pressure of society against the individual. The social ethic

rationalizes the organization's demand for loyalty and gives employees who offer themselves wholeheartedly a sense of dedication and satisfaction. The social ethic includes a belief that the group is a source of creativity. A sense of belonging is the ultimate need of the individual, and social science can create ways to achieve this sense of belonging.¹⁵

Whyte feared that psychologists and social engineers would strip people of their creativity and identity. He attacked the use of personality tests to weed out people who don't fit in. He also challenged the notion that organizations should be free from conflict. The critique of the workplace in Whyte's book is similar to the critiques that liberals have of communitarianism. Community-oriented life looks good, but it is ultimately oppressive and authoritarian. In the 1950s social critics worried about the conformity of people to institutions and the values of suburban life. Today we worry about lack of consensus about values and the breakdown of urban and suburban communities. There is an increasing effort in the workplace to build teams and emphasize the value of groups. No one seems worried about loss of creativity and submission of individual identity to group identity. Managers care more about the problem of the individual who isn't a team player, and a majority of management theorists today believe that groups and teams are the foundation of all that is good and productive.

Whyte says, "The most misguided attempt at false collectivization is the attempt to see the group as a creative vehicle."¹⁶ Contrary to popular management thinking today, Whyte does not believe that people think or create in groups. Groups, he says, just give order to the administration of work. Whyte describes an experiment done at the National Training Lab on leaderless groups. Theoretically, when the group "jelled," the leader would fade into the background, to be consulted for his expertise only. These groups resulted in chaos, but as Whyte puts it, the trainers hoped that the resulting "feeling draining" of the group would be a valuable catharsis and a prelude to agreement.¹⁷ According to Whyte, the individual has to enter into the process somewhere. If everyone wants to do what the group wants to do, and nothing gets done, then the individual has to play a role in the process. However, Whyte wonders if we should openly bring individuals into the process or "bootleg" it in an expression of group sentiment. Basically, he sees the leaderless group as intellectual hypocrisy. The power and authority of groups simply mask the real power and authority of leaders.

Whyte urges people to cheat on all psychological tests given during job interviews and at the workplace. He takes a strong stance against the organization and what he sees as the social scientist's coercive idea of belongingness. Another famous illustration of the struggle against the organization is in Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, published a year before Whyte's book. In the novel a personnel manager asks the main character, Tom Rath, to write an autobiography in which the last line reads, "The most significant thing about me is. . . ." Rath, revolted by the exercise,

debates whether to say what the company wants to hear (the therapeutic lie) or write about his most significant memory, concerning a woman he met during the war. Caught between truth and fiction, Rath holds on to his dignity by stating the facts – his place of birth, his schooling, and the number of children in his family. He writes that the most significant thing about him is the fact that he is applying for the job. He also says that he does not want to write an autobiography as part of his application.¹⁸

Rath draws a fine line between himself and the organization. Whyte misses the moral in the first scene of Wilson's book: Telling the truth strikes a much stronger blow for individual dignity than beating the organization at its own game. Wilson's novel resonates with students today because all of them at some time will have to decide how truthful they have to be in a job interview or with an employer and how much of themselves they are willing to give to an organization. It is sometimes hard to tell the truth when you want someone to like you. The thin line is not about the amount of hours or work one does. It is the boundary that people draw between their inner self and the parts of them needed to do their job. It is the line that allows a person to be both an individual and part of a group. In the modern workplace it isn't always easy to draw this line; some workplaces use programs with the language of leadership and empowerment in them to erase the line between the two parts.

The Race for the Worker's Soul

In the 1960s the centralized bureaucratic organization of the 1950s gave way to the sensitive approach to management. The National Training Labs developed sensitivity training and T-Groups to transform bossy managers into participative ones. After much crawling around on the floor together and getting in touch with their inner feelings, few managers were transformed. During the 1970s and 1980s, management fads designed to capture the souls of workers bombarded the workplace. Fueled by global competitive pressures, managers were ready to try anything to get people to work hard and be productive. In 1981, William Ouchi's *Theory Z* and Richard Pascal and Anthony Athos's *The Art of Japanese Management* were best-sellers. The "new" idea from Japan was job enrichment and quality circles – after all, it worked for the Japanese. In 1982, the mystical Eastern touch of these two books gave way to Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman's blatantly evangelical *In Search of Excellence*. Peters and Waterman realized outright that the role of a manager is to make meaning for employees and create excitement. They argued that excellent organizations do not produce the conformist described by Whyte. They assure us that "In the very same institutions in which culture is so dominant, the highest levels of true autonomy occur. The culture regulates rigorously the few variables that do count, and it provides meaning."

Nonetheless, in these organizations “people are encouraged to stick out, to innovate.”¹⁹ If a strong culture provided meaning, it could reach to the very souls of employees, hence allowing for great freedom and creativity within the boundaries of the culture and the meanings provided by the culture. This kind of organization is designed to foster Mills’s cheerful subordinates.

Popular books on management and leadership exert more influence on the way organizations are run than do most studies done by scholars in the fields. Another 1982 best-seller was Kenneth Blanchard’s *The One-Minute Manager*. Blanchard’s adult fairy tale portrayed a kindly and therapeutic manager who inspired fealty and commitment. It makes the manager into a combination Mr. Rogers-Captain Kangaroo. Some companies required all of their managers to read it; it sold over three million copies. In the 1990s, real softies can regress and read what Winnie the Pooh has to say about management.²⁰ The fairy-tale format continues to be popular. Books such as *Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment* and *Heroz: Empower Yourself, Your Coworkers, Your Company* by William C. Byham and Jeff Cox take the form of heroic and inspiring fables.²¹ The fables include knights and dragons and demonstrate how sharing power with workers can revitalize a company. Stephen Covey is the top evangelical crusader of leadership literature in the 1990s. A recent article described “Coveyism” as “total quality management for the character, re-engineering for the soul.”²² Covey preaches that businesses have to focus on making employees “feel good” about the organizational structures in which they work.

In the 1980s and 1990s the word *leadership* began taking the place of the word *management* in business books. The semantic change is also a conceptual change from the idea of a manager as a boss who commanded and controlled the process of production to the leader who inspires people to work towards mutual goals. Joe Rost says that in the old industrial paradigm, leadership was nothing more than good management.²³ Empowerment is at least implied in most recent articulations of leadership in business books today. What is confusing about this literature is that it continues to be written for people who usually hold the position of manager. In ordinary discourse people talk about managers who lead and managers who manage. The carefully crafted distinctions made in the scholarly leadership literature are not always present in popular discourse. What we do see in ordinary discourse is that leadership has positive connotations and is sometimes used as an honorific, whereas management is either neutral or slightly negative.

The management fads of the 1980s and 1990s have appealed to business leaders (and those who aspire to be business leaders) because they make them feel powerful, inspiring, adventuresome, and lovable all at the same time. The lovable leader is an attractive image, especially given the lack of respect and trust for authority figures in our society. Lovable leaders are nice because they are democratic and they do not openly exert power over others. Practicing lovable leadership requires some therapeutic fictions. CEOs

of large corporations have spent fortunes on consultants and training programs. The goal of most of the programs has been to make work more enjoyable and participatory and to push power relationships between employees and management into the background. All of this is done in hope of creating a more competitive business. Sometimes these programs have backfired.

In 1987, the California Public Utilities Commission asked Pacific Bell to stop its leadership-development program. The program intended to move away from the old AT&T culture, empower low-level managers and give them more responsibilities, cut middle managers, and become more customer-focused. At Pacific Bell twenty-three thousand of sixty-seven thousand employees took the two-day training.²⁴ Charles Krone created the Leadership Development program that came to be called “Kroning.” This New Age program aimed at getting all employees to use the same language and think at all times about the six essentials of organization health: expansion, freedom, identity, concentration, order, and interaction. The program was based vaguely on the Armenian mystic Gurdjieff’s Law of Three, which teaches that there are no constraints that can’t be reconciled.²⁵

After a two-month investigation of this \$40 million training program, the commission reported that employees complained of brainwashing. An employee survey turned up repeated descriptions of the program as Big Brother, thought control, and mind restructuring. Employees also claimed that the Krone program used obtuse language and unnecessary concepts that made some people feel stupid. The irony was that the investigation discovered that a large majority of employees expressed a love of and commitment to Pacific Bell and mistrust of its management.²⁶ A Meridian survey of two thousand Pacific Bell employees concluded that top managers at Bell “blame the employees for the lack of productivity and are trying to make them think better. However, the Pacific Bell workforce already knows how to think.”²⁷

Thirty years after *The Organization Man*, corporations spent \$30 billion dollars on training. Most of the training was in skills, but in 1986 about \$4 billion went to programs such as Krone’s and Werner Erhard’s rehashed EST franchise called Transformation Technologies Inc. In 1987, *California Business* surveyed five hundred corporate owners and presidents and found that half their companies used some form of consciousness-raising.²⁸ These programs focused on the same themes espoused today: empowerment, leadership, and positive thinking. They are distinctive because they used such unorthodox training techniques as meditation, biofeedback, and hypnosis. For example, a company called Energy Unlimited escorted executives across hot coals as a means of empowering people. Although many of these programs now look silly to the outsider, they gained serious followers among corporate managers. Their impact on other employees is unclear. We rarely hear about cases in which employees complain about a company motivational program. That’s why the Kroning scandal is so interesting. Most employees are a captive audience: Their success in the organization is contingent on buying into these

programs. Motivational human potential courses often create a short-lived sense of euphoria among employees and/or a Hawthorn effect. They raise the expectation that employees will be enriched and empowered. However, after the dust settles, everything seems the same until the next initiative.

Did these attempts to redistribute power and responsibility in the organization succeed? On the one hand, employees were being promised more power and control over their work; on the other hand, some felt that they were being manipulated by the training programs. The standard answer given today is that programs to empower employees often failed because supervisors and line managers did not want to give up power.

Empowerment and Participation

Discussions of worker participation, including such issues as empowerment and the team approach, derived from two sources: industrial relations research and management research (largely based on organizational behavior). On the industrial relations side, discussion in the 1970s focused on workplace democracy. Admirable models of workplace democracy included democratic worker councils employed at the time in Yugoslavian industries. These councils allowed workers to play an active part in all facets of the business. Employees even elected their own managers. Other researchers in the 1960s and 1970s studied worker cooperatives in hopes of finding clues to constructing new forms of truly democratic organizations.²⁹ The workplace-democracy advocates wanted employees to have control of the organization as a whole and to discover new possibilities for organizing work.³⁰ Behind their thinking was the idea that participation was central to democracy, where citizens had a say in all significant institutions, including family, school, and work.³¹ Worker participation fit Couto's model of psycho-political empowerment. However, back in the Cold War era, real democracy in the workplace was considered un-American.

Researchers on the management side focused on quality of worklife and job enrichment and motivation. They were interested in giving employees more discretion over the actual task that they performed, not over the organization itself. A major emphasis was on making the employee feel good about work. This approach, which is the one usually emphasized in business schools, aimed towards therapeutic effectiveness and tended to fall into Couto's category of psycho-symbolic empowerment. One of the biggest problems with empowerment schemes is that the language used often raises unrealistic expectations about how much power and control employees actually gain over their work. They also fail to see any change in their relationship to other power holders. When employees discover the limits of their participation, they are disappointed. (One also wonders if people have addictive and/or insatiable desires for power.) For example, people in a quality circle

could suggest changes on the production line, but not changes in their work hours. Many managers were ambivalent about giving away their own supervisory power. The Japanese never had these problems, because supervisors usually headed up quality circles.³²

It is useful to compare the impetus for and terms of participatory schemes in other countries with those in the United States. In his study of the macropolitics of organizational change, Robert E. Cole tells us that in the 1960s Japan, Sweden, and the United States gave small groups more discretion to make work more interesting, attract employees looking for satisfying work, and motivate employees. The Japanese called innovations such as quality circles *decentralization of responsibility*. These small-group structures did not challenge the hierarchical structure of the organization. Sweden, in contrast to Japan, challenged the hierarchy of managerial authority and cast the early debate over these innovations in the political terms of *joint influence* and *democratization*. In the United States, while there were some union supporters of industrial democracy, discussion of empowerment was categorized in terms of *participation*, *quality of worklife*, *leadership*, and *employee involvement*.

Cole's study compares the amount of control given the workers and the success of the programs in different countries. The study concludes, "The Swedish tried more and accomplished less, while the Japanese tried less and accomplished more. By contrast, the Americans tried still less and accomplished very little."³³ The Japanese and the Swedes were clear about the boundaries of employee involvement. In Japan the aims were aesthetic: to give workers autonomy to make their work more challenging and enjoyable. The Swedes wanted to bring real democracy into the workplace. The Americans had goals similar to those of the Japanese. However, the language used by Americans, their adversarial labor climate, and cultural values of individualism and freedom made the scope of these programs appear to reach beyond the aesthetic aspects of work and hint at a greater say in the organization. Most participatory schemes were really benevolent ways of motivating people by making work more satisfying. What wasn't clear was whether a boring job in a democratic workplace was better than an interesting job in an undemocratic one. Americans tended to assume that the latter was the case.

The 1935 Labor Relations Act recognized the need to protect workers from bogus empowerment of participatory programs. Under it, quality circles and other similar participatory schemes are illegal unless employees have the right to choose their representatives and have a genuine voice in decisions. The act prohibited "sham unions" or in-house unions formed by employers attempting to keep out real unions. Because it is obvious to most people today that employers have to forge a cooperative partnership with employees to be competitive, the 1935 act looks like an atavism that ought to be eliminated. However, the law recognized that companies prefer cooperation and participation of their employees on their own terms. Most important,

companies fear the loss of control that would come with unionization. In most businesses, empowering employees does not change the balance of power within the organization. Unions are still the only institution in history that ever addressed the asymmetry of power between employers and employees. Unions can be a strong form of empowerment because they give employees an independent voice that terrifies most employers. Businesses have always had such an intense fear of unions that one has to question what they mean when they talk about empowerment.

Teams and Quality

Management language in the 1990s is a continuation of terms that started in the 1960s. *Empowerment* replaces terms such as *worker involvement*. The emphasis on power gets at what managers failed to deliver despite their claims over the past thirty years. What has become abundantly clear in research done on productivity is that workers do a better job when they have a say in the way they do their work, the redesign of their jobs, and the introduction of technology into the workplace. Yet, over the past twenty years managers have been constantly amazed by this phenomenon, which tells us something about the respect they have had for their employees.

The twentieth century began with scientific management with its physical control over production. It will end with Total Quality Management (TQM) and its social control over production. They are two sides to the same coin. Scientific management separated the mind from the body of the worker to mass-produce goods. TQM puts workers together in teams to produce quality goods and services. Both systems assert a high level of control at all phases of production (albeit using different means of control), and both systems have been extremely successful at improving production of goods and services.

Teams are a powerful form of social control. Peer pressure from the group keeps everyone in line and pulling his or her weight. Teams affect the individual more directly than does the larger culture of the organization. If the group puts out a measurable product, it can “keep score,” which makes it accountable and allows for direct feedback and reinforcement. Hence, it is not surprising that along with excitement over teams some businesses engender a religious fervor for Total Quality Management. Originating from statistical quality control, TQM pieced together quality circles, team approaches, and leadership into a new philosophy that required leaders “to accept TQM as a way of life.”³⁴

In his book on leadership and TQM, Richard Pierce advises front-line supervisors to act like leaders and become “more participatory and less authoritarian.” According to Pierce, participatory means listening to employees’ ideas and, when appropriate, implementing their ideas. The author goes on to say that employees, too, have to change. They need to know “that

improved quality performance on their part, while vital, may bring no added compensation (“What’s in it for me?”), but in the long run, productivity and quality improvement are necessary for survival.”³⁵ Behind TQM is the idea of reinstating a craft ethic in workers, which includes pride in workmanship and the intrinsic value of a job well done. Though this is a positive and rewarding model of work, it cannot be isolated from the context in which a job is done and the kind of work that is done. In this setting the manager does not want employees to behave as if they are engaged in an economic transaction. Yet the employer bases most of his or her decisions regarding the employee on economic considerations. This is a good example of a therapeutic fiction: Everyone pretends that work is not guided by the values of instrumentalism and economic efficiency.

A great attraction of TQM for business leaders is that it gives the impression that they are giving up control and being democratic (and nice), but they end up with more control. Furthermore, TQM has been very effective in improving the quality of goods and services. However, TQM theorists are not satisfied at stopping with improved quality. They assert that quality is a matter of ethics and that quality requires ethical leaders at the top giving customers what they want. One writer concludes that “companies have a moral obligation to live up to the promises they have made in advertisements, product brochures, and annual reports.”³⁶ Ethical commitment in TQM focuses largely on a company’s obligations to customers. True believers assume that TQM is intrinsically ethical because employees are empowered to participate in decisions and management listens to their employees. This is a fairly thin description of an ethical arrangement. The key issue here is the relationship of employees to management. Listening to employees and allowing them to participate in decisions does not mean that their relationship to management or each other has changed, especially if the listening and participation takes place between parties of unequal power. Furthermore, TQM says that managers should treat employees like customers. This is a therapeutic fiction. Can a business really treat employees like customers? It’s a nice idea, but it breaks down in practice.

In a recent book documenting the wonders of teamwork in various organizations, Kimball Fisher emphasizes the importance of authenticity. He says that the key values of a team leader are belief in the importance of work, a belief that work is life, a belief in the “aggressive” development of team members, and a conviction to “eliminate barriers to team performance.” Team leaders have to be themselves, or authentic, Fisher quotes a manager as saying. “The distinction between the work person and the family person is unhealthy and artificial.”³⁷ In today’s volatile economic environment, rhetoric like this rings false because, as Robert Frost said, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, /They have to take you in.”³⁸ We don’t have many workplaces that do that. Team leaders also know that no matter how hard they or their team work, it may still not be enough. Kimball is right

that authenticity is a fundamental part of leadership, but unauthentic in his denial of the distinction between work and the family. People may choose to lead lives with no distinction between work and home, but this choice is up to the individual and often rests on the nature of his or her work.

Part III. What Makes it All Work

Sincerity and Authenticity

At this point, some readers may be irritated by the unkind portrayal of management practices that most people consider a vast improvement over scientific management and traditional bureaucratic forms of work. Clearly there are sincere and committed business leaders all over America who really care and do their best to make work more rewarding for employees. I am not claiming that all the management theories and programs of the past fifty years have been designed to fool the American worker, nor am I saying that all of the social scientists behind these theories and the consultants who develop these programs are evil manipulators. Yet I do ask the irritated reader to consider the irony of the effort put into empowerment programs in an era of downsizing, when the ultimate fate of workers is not decided by business leaders but by the invisible hand. I have painted this dark picture to underscore the bankruptcy of empowerment without the honesty necessary for authentic empowerment. Clearly not all empowerment programs are intended to manipulate people, and some leaders really do want to empower their followers. However, to do so, they must be sincere and authentic.

In his book *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling tells us that the public value of sincerity, like the concept of civility, emerged during the sixteenth century, a period of increasing social mobility in England and France. The art of acting with guile and expressing certain false emotions publicly became a tool for taking advantage of new social opportunities. Trilling says that sincerity was devalued when mobility and acting became accepted behaviors in a mobile society. People considered the sincere person stupid and unsophisticated. Audiences were no longer interested in seeing plays about “hypocrite-villains and conscious dissemblers.”³⁹ It was more interesting to read or watch plays about people who deceived themselves. Authenticity replaced the notion of sincerity as a subject of dramatic interest.

The question of authenticity takes us back to Mills, Whyte, and Wilson’s *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Mills believed that people had to sell their personalities to work in bureaucratic organizations; Whyte was concerned with the toll of conformity on the individual; and in the opening scene of Wilson’s novel, Tom Rath is both sincere, in that he tells the truth, and authentic, in that he tries to come to grips with who he is. Nevertheless, the remainder of the novel is really about his struggle to be truthful to himself. It’s ironic that the phrase “man in

the gray flannel suit” has come to characterize a boring conformist organization man. Tom Rath is anything but that. He is a man wrestling with the organization and struggling to be honest with himself and others.

According to Trilling, we have deprecated the value of sincerity by treating it as such a common commodity in society and the market place. If this is true, then the really valuable emotional commodities are authenticity and “true” emotions. Thus, either people who serve customers will require even better acting skills, or training will have to dig even deeper into the employee to evoke the appropriate real emotions. If training programs could get at people’s real feelings, find the “hot buttons,” employees would either no longer have to act, or they could engage in “deep acting.” This may be the real reason for the use of intrusive motivational programs like EST and the Krone program. It also lurks in the background of the ideology of strong cultures. Make the workplace your family and carry to it all the sense of caring and responsibility that you feel naturally for family members. Although this sounds sinister, it is true that most organizations want their employees to have a certain “genuine” feeling about their work, the people whom they work with, and the organization. At Pacific Bell, employees really cared and were concerned about the company. Perhaps one thing that we learn from the Krone case is that attempts at engineering appropriate attitudes and emotions can actually undercut genuine feelings for a company. If a workplace is run honestly, people do care and are friendly; however, their emotions have to be free to be real. Nonetheless, the broader issues at stake remain the line between motivation and manipulation of emotions, and the claims that an organization can make on the inner self and emotions of an employee.

The principle of authenticity applies to organizations as well as individuals. Often motivational programs and leadership programs are just polite lies within a company. Quality of worklife and employee involvement programs and redesigned jobs benefit employees by making their work more interesting. They intend to make employees feel empowered and feel that the organization cares about their development. Nonetheless, there is a difference between feeling empowered and really being empowered. One wonders if employees willingly buy into the fiction of empowerment because of their own need to believe that they have power and control. If so, symbolic empowerment works because employees are unauthentic.

Reality and Truth

The obvious difference between authentic and bogus empowerment rests on the honesty of the relationship between leaders and followers. Honesty entails a set of specific practical and moral obligations and is a necessary condition for empowerment. In the beginning I outlined three social values behind empowerment: individualism; freedom; and instrumentalism and economic efficiency. The fourth value, which encompasses the first three, I

have called niceness. I characterized the value of niceness as a kind of self-interested social harmony, commercial friendliness, and therapeutic truth. All the values color the way that people view the context of their work. To empower people, leaders must take into account the social and economic conditions under which they operate.

The issue for most businesses is not democracy in the workplace or the workers' need for self-esteem or self-fulfillment. Plainly and simply, it is competitiveness. According to today's conventional wisdom, businesses of the twenty-first century have to be lean, mean, and flexible. This condition requires a flatter organization structure and employees willing to learn and change with the changing demands of their job, the market, and technology. Companies must innovate constantly, which means workers need the flexibility and work ethic of the old craft guilds.⁴⁰ This is what TQM tries to do and why there is so much discussion about commitment.

In this new business environment, in a sense employees already have more power than they had in the past and employers have less. Information is a source of power. On the one hand, the use of and access to information technologies in the workplace give employees far more power than they had in the past. On the other hand, computerized control systems can impose even stricter discipline on workers and replace layers of management. Competition is the reality of company life, and the market rules the lives of business leaders. Business leaders, especially those who are responsible to stockholders, have significantly less power and control over their firms than in the past. The decisions of even those with the best of intentions are dominated by the demands of the market.⁴¹ Internal power shifts occur not necessarily because one group intentionally gave up power, but because the demands of technology and economic efficiency required a new distribution of power. Power also decreases in organizations because of flattened organizational structure. Why does this matter? It matters because empowerment requires good faith. It is a kind of giving. You don't tell people that you are giving them power that they have already gotten through structural and technological changes.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to empowerment today is downsizing, despite low unemployment figures. Although most workers remain unaffected by it, downsizing strikes fear into the hearts of all workers because it reminds them of the fundamental way in which they are totally powerless over their lives when business leaders act as if they are powerless to do anything but downsize. It would seem virtually impossible to empower people in organizations that do not make a strong commitment to keeping their workers employed through good times and bad. In their enthusiasm for downsizing, some companies may discover that they have demoralized workers who lack the security necessary to produce the creative and innovative products needed to be competitive in the world market.

The second requirement for empowerment in the workplace is a commitment by employers to go to great lengths to protect employees' jobs. For

example, consider the case of Malden Mills. On December 11, 1995, the factory burnt down. Owner Aaron Feuerstein distributed Christmas bonuses. Furthermore, for the next three months he continued to pay his employees their full salaries while the factory was being repaired. If job security is related to empowerment, there is a sense in which Feuerstein's workers felt more empowered than those who took part in the AT&T and Xerox leadership programs that same year. One can write this off as old-fashioned paternalism, but I doubt that any company initiative could produce in employees the trust, commitment, and self-esteem of the employees at Malden Mills. Many companies try smoke and mirrors, but moral action is stronger and longer lasting than any therapeutic intervention. The great moral leaders of business choose moral commitment to people and society over economic efficiency. When they come out ahead, they demonstrate to other business leaders that when employees really are the most important resource, ethics really pays.

Empowerment as a Reciprocal Moral Relationship

When leaders really empower people, they give them the responsibility that comes with that power. But this does not mean that with less power, leaders have less responsibility. This point is often misunderstood. Perhaps one of the most ethically distinctive features of being a leader is responsibility for the actions of one's followers. For example, transformational leaders don't have less responsibility for their followers when they transform them; the followers have chosen to take on more. Couto offers a good example of a bogus empowerment relationship. Couto says he listened in amazement as a hospital administrator "told federal health-policy makers about her hospital's patient advocacy program that empowered low-income patients to find means to pay their hospital bills."⁴² Is the administrator really giving people power, or is she simply unloading the hospital's moral responsibility on them? In the workplace, employees can only take full responsibility if they have the power and access to resources to influence outcomes. Empowerment programs that give employees responsibility without control are cruel and stressful. Authentic empowerment gives employees control over outcomes so that they can be responsible for their work.

When empowering employees, leaders must keep their promises. The best way to do this is to make promises that they can keep. When leaders empower employees, they need to be clear about the extent of that power and avoid the temptation of engaging in hyperbole about the democratic nature of the organization. An organization can always give employees more responsibility, but employees feel betrayed when they discover that they have been given less than the leadership's rhetoric implied. A leader who keeps his or her promises establishes the dependability necessary for trust.

Modern leadership consists of two ideals, trust and power, that often conflict with each other.⁴³ Trust has taken over from authority as the modern foundation of leadership. The moral concepts behind empowerment – responsibility, trust, respect, and loyalty – are reciprocal moral concepts: that is, they only exist if they are part of the relationship between followers and leaders. Like all the other moral principles that I have been examining in relationship to leadership and empowerment, they are related to truth and honesty. Honesty is one way to resolve the tension between power and trust. It is morally wrong to lie because lying shows lack of respect for the dignity of a person. This is why bogus empowerment is so devastating. Employees are made to feel foolish about falling for inflated claims and undelivered promises. Leaders lose credibility and respect because they have blatantly failed to respect their employees. Business leaders often overlook the reciprocal nature of these moral concepts, particularly the notion of loyalty or commitment. If leaders don't demonstrate in substantive ways that they are loyal and committed to their employees through good times and bad, they simply cannot expect employees to be loyal to them; and therapeutic interventions will be short-lived at best.

Last, if leaders are to establish a moral relationship with employees that allows for authentic empowerment, they need to think about reapplying constructively the traditional values behind empowerment. They must consider how to protect individualism even in team settings. Individualism has taken a beating by the communitarians in recent years, but there are some ethically important aspects to individualism, such as recognition and tolerance of difference and diversity.⁴⁴ Teamwork without tolerance of difference in opinion, gender, racial, or cultural background is unacceptable. Morally imaginative business leaders will challenge the dogma of instrumentalism and economic efficiency that sometimes mindlessly dominates all business decisions. It is difficult to say whether employees are more or less free on the job today than they were in the past. Though many are liberated from harsh physical toil and a dictatorial boss, others are caged in by competition, insecurity, and peer pressure. Empowerment means more than discretion on the job. It also requires freedom to choose and freedom from emotional manipulation.

To empower people authentically, business leaders have to be ready to overthrow some of the aspects of niceness. The truth is not always pleasant. It can disrupt the harmony of an organization and introduce conflict. When you really empower people, you don't just empower them to agree with you. Employees don't always feel good when they hear the truth, and leaders don't like to deliver bad news. As a result of the therapeutic fictions that are part of niceness, managers aren't forthright in their assessment of employees' work and teachers aren't forthright about the quality of their students' work. Assessment inflation makes people feel good in the short run, but it does not build the self-esteem necessary for empowerment in the long run.

I close with the notion of authenticity. Leaders cannot empower people unless they have the moral courage to be honest and sincere in their intention to change the power relationship that they have with their followers. If leaders want to be authentic about empowering people, they must first be honest with themselves. Too many leaders are not authentic. They talk about empowerment and participation and even believe that they are participatory, but in practice they lead in autocratic ways. Employees are “empowered” to organize their work, but when they do, management steps in and tells them how to do it their way.

James MacGregor Burns points to Franklin Roosevelt’s decision to support the Wagner Act as an example of authentic empowerment. According to Burns, Roosevelt knew that the act gave a substantial amount of power to the people. He didn’t necessarily like this fact; nevertheless, he supported the act.⁴⁵ Authentic empowerment requires leaders to know what they are giving away and how they are changing the relationship between themselves and their followers. This is the only way that they can commit to keeping their part of the empowerment relationship. It is difficult for leaders to give away their own power and even more difficult for them to take away power from others. Leadership is a distinct kind of moral relationship between people. Power is a defining aspect of this relationship. Whenever there is a change in the distribution of power between leaders and followers, there is a change in the specific rights, responsibilities, and duties in the relationship. Both sides have to be honest when they make these changes and have to understand fully what they mean. Bogus empowerment attempts to give employees or followers power without changing the moral relationship between leaders and followers. Empowerment changes the rights, responsibilities, and duties of leaders as well as followers. It is not something one does to be nice in order to gain favor with people. Over the past fifty years business leaders have tried to harness the insights of psychology to make people feel empowered. These attempts have often failed and led to cynicism among employees because business leaders have ignored the moral commitments of empowerment. Without honesty, sincerity, and authenticity, empowerment is bogus and makes a mockery of one of America’s most cherished values, the freedom to choose.

Notes

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27. *Ibid.*, 70.
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