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THE PATTERNS OF EMPOWERMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF CONDITIONS
AFFECTING EMPLOYEE-EMPOWERMENT EFFORTS

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Linda Ann Compton Martin
December, 1994

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DEDICATION

To Ken and Alice.

Unconditional Love
is the most
empowering intervention of all

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Were I to here thank everyone who rendered aid on this long and labored trek, I would create a document double in length to the one you now hold. Still, I must allow space to thank the men and women of "The Company" who opened their offices to accommodate my relentless presence and questions. The welcome, cooperation and openness I was afforded there made this research a joy. Too, I must thank my major professor, Dr. Ron Taylor, for his willingness to share his insights into qualitative research methods in general, and mine in particular. I have learned much from his strong tutelage of what a scholar and teacher should be. I would like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. George Everett, Dr. Herbert Howard, Dr. Lorayne Lester and Dr. Susan Lucarelli for their constant support and the many hours they spent in helping me refine my work. And for steadfast logistical support far beyond the call of duty, I must thank Betty Bradley.

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to the question of "why." I shall thank you all personally and at length.

Finally, I thank Mrs. Birdie Tompkins. The bulk of this work was done while living in her scholarship house. Never there lived a more generous spirit.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to examine conditions that facilitate and conditions that impede efforts to empower employees. The research venue was five customer service departments in the regional offices of a multi-state service provider referred to here as "The Company." All employees of The Company had undergone empowerment training within the two years preceding the research.

The research design comprised a triangulation of qualitative methods guided from a perspective of symbolic interactionism. Three-hundred twenty-eight employees were observed in routine action in The Company offices for six weeks, and field notes were kept regarding employee behavior. All employees were asked to complete a 10-item questionnaire regarding Company empowerment efforts and the individual's response to those efforts. Forty-six percent of participants responded and results were reported as mean and modal responses. Finally, nineteen employees consented to in-depth, non-directive interviews regarding their work. These interviews were transcribed and coded in order to identify repeated patterns of response among all interviewees.

Findings suggest that both individual and corporate conditions influence empowerment efforts. Individuals revealing a pattern of empowered behavior also revealed self confidence and a strong work ethic. Corporate conditions facilitating empowerment efforts included non-regimented task design; job-specific training; management's provision of positive feedback, information, resources and supportive policy, and a stress-minimized working environment.

Collectively, these findings suggest that empowerment efforts should be supported with adequate resources and with training for managers who, in their interaction with employees, appear to strongly influence employees' efforts to engage in empowered behavior.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Pervasiveness of Empowerment.....	2
Benefits of Empowerment.....	3
Successful Empowerment Efforts.....	6
Unsuccessful Empowerment Efforts.....	7
Dearth of Empirical Research.....	10
Toward a Definition of Empowerment.....	10
The Purpose of This Study.....	12
The Organization of the Dissertation.....	12
II. HISTORICAL, SCHOLARLY AND THEORETICAL	
CONTEXT.....	14
Historical Perspective.....	14
Review of Scholarly Research.....	21
Theoretical Perspective.....	28
III. METHODOLOGY.....	31
Research Questions.....	31
Research Setting.....	31
Pilot Study.....	32
Research Design.....	33
Rationale for Qualitative Methods.....	33
Rationale for Triangulation.....	36
Selection of Participants.....	40

Data Gathering.....	41
Analysis of Data.....	46
IV. RESULTS.....	52
Summary.....	52
Coding of the Complete Model.....	54
Conditions that Influence Efforts to Empower Employees.....	59
Conclusions.....	81
V. CONCLUSIONS.....	83
Limitations of the Study.....	83
Summary of the Findings.....	84
Alignment of the Findings with Previous Work.....	86
The Dual Nature of Empowerment: Individual and Organizational.....	88
The Need for Management Training.....	89
Empowerment at The Company.....	91
Implications of the Findings.....	93
Recommendations for Successful Empowerment Efforts.....	97
Recommendations for Further Research.....	98
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	100

APPENDIXES.....	111
Appendix A. Survey Questionnaire.....	112
Appendix B. Consent Form.....	114
Appendix C. Survey Results.....	116
VITA.....	118

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

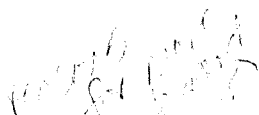
"Power is America's last dirty word. It is easier to talk about money--and much easier to talk about sex--than it is to talk about power."

(Kanter, 1979)

Harvard Business Review editor Rosabeth Moss Kanter wrote in 1979 that it was time for power to come out from undercover, time to examine it as a critical element in management science. What followed was a boom in attention to the distribution of power in organizations, spurred on by the June 24, 1980, airing of the NBC documentary, "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?" considered by many to be the birth of the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement in the U.S. (Bahls, 1992). TQM is a management philosophy based on two tenets: the customer defines quality, and quality can arise out of an investment of trust in employees (Becker, 1993). One of the foundations of TQM is the involvement of all employees in the problem-solving and decision-making processes (Barclay, 1993). This redistribution of power characterizes participative management, a management style in which employees are "empowered" to share in the decision making and responsibilities that were previously the sole province of management. Under TQM, the rationale for worker

participation is increased productivity. The worker's input is needed because the worker who performs a given task has information about that task which uniquely positions him or her to improve the work (Scotti, Cohen, Toppert & DeSantas, 1993).

This chapter will first establish the pervasiveness of empowerment programs and the benefits of those programs. Next it will examine some of the more spectacular successes attributed to employee empowerment as well as the explanations for some failed programs. Finally, the lack of empirical research will be addressed, and a conceptual and an operational definition will be established prior to a statement of the purpose of this research.



Pervasiveness of Empowerment

The '80s saw an amazing embrace of the participative management style (Appelbaum, 1993; Nohria & Berkley, 1994); 80% of the U.S.'s largest companies have some type of employee involvement effort in place (Axelrod, 1992). CEO's at Pepsi cite their reasons for operating with a new philosophy of employee empowerment as a hope that by pushing decision-making opportunities closer to the market, new ideas for improving work will come from employees "flexing their authority and trying different things" (Keller & Jabbonsky, 1992). Ohio Bell Telephone Company hoped to enhance customer service, promote job satisfaction and to

increase profitability (Redlefsen, 1988). Johnson & Johnson found participative management paid off in high quality and morale, and low absenteeism (Stoddard, 1991). General Electric CEO Jack Welch encouraged empowerment in his "Work-Out" program (Tichy & Sherman, 1993), and Xerox credits its ability to reclaim market share from the Japanese to "an empowerment strategy that devolved responsibility and accountability to employees closest to the customer" (Walker, 1992). The philosophy of empowerment has diffused throughout a wide variety of management settings: the healthcare industry (Dveirin & Adams, 1993; Flower, 1992; Smith, 1992); the hotel industry (Reimann, 1993); the steel industry (Ambrosia, 1994; Dumaine, 1992); the banking industry (Lamb, 1993; Keen, 1990); the auto industry (Adler, 1993; Kiser, 1993; Parker, 1993); the telecommunications industry (Merrills, 1989; Redlefsen, 1988); public utilities (Kaufman, 1991; Topaz, 1989/1990); the U.S. Forest Service (McKenna, 1993); and the U.S. Air Force Mobility Command (Bemowski, 1992).

(Benefits of Empowerment)

Both Kanter (1983) and Hunt (1979) attest to the advantages of focussing collective brainpower on problems or issues in empowered systems. These systems enjoy a marketplace of ideas from which the best elements can be drawn rather than simply drawing from the ideas of a single

powerholder and hoping for the best (Smith, Anderson & Brooking, 1993). Kanter finds that innovation thrives in these conditions; that ideas are freed to be turned into action. She points out that, far from being the brainchild of a powerholder, many industrial innovations were first suggested by users of the products. This decentralization of the decision-making process is a distinct advantage of empowered systems (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Vogt, 1987). By moving the decision-making process closer to the level at which those decisions will be implemented, the quality of decision outcomes is believed to improve.

An improvement in overall quality of product or service is widely held to be the primary contribution of an empowerment program (Dobbs, 1993; Kiser, 1993; Juran, 1988; Deming, 1987; Ishikawa, 1985; Kanter, 1983). In addition to quality, productivity is said to improve in empowered systems (Ambrosia, 1994; Alfus, 1993; Burbidge, 1993; Landwehr, 1991; Sirbasku, 1991; Sargent & Stupak, 1989; Kuttner, 1985).

Collectively, these benefits leave companies with empowered workforces better able to mobilize to meet challenges encountered in the course of conducting business. Companies were encouraged in the business press to embrace empowerment as one strategy for meeting the growing competition of world markets in the early '90s (Mehrman & Harris, 1992; Wellins, 1992; Shelton, 1991; Sirbasku, 1991).

Conger & Kanungo (1988) suggest that within these systems higher goals are consistently established and met. This may be the result of the empowered system's ability to mobilize both people and resources (Kanter, 1979). Accomplishment, action and momentum are characteristic of these systems because empowerment liberates energy (Vogt & Murrell, 1990).

The benefits of empowerment "trickle down" through an organization to have a positive impact on human issues. An empowered system's success rests on more shoulders (Vogt & Murrell, 1990). This sense of shared responsibility can improve morale (Ambrosia, 1994; Burbidge, 1993; Betof & Harwood, 1992; Metzger, 1991; Shelton, 1991; Sirbasku, 1991; Lutz, 1990; Bennis, 1989; Kuttner, 1985; Kanter, 1979). Employees are allowed rather than forced to participate (Vogt & Murrell, 1990) resulting in more enthusiastic participation by employees. Employees begin to see that their leaders have both trust and confidence in employee ability (Argyris, 1975); in turn, the authority to lead is based on those same foundations of trust and confidence. Conflict resolution that is satisfactory to all parties involved is characteristic of empowered systems (Vogt & Murrell, 1990). These systems avoid the personnel problems resulting from leadership based solely on the authority of office (Zalesnick, 1979). The improved working conditions generated by an empowering system can result in reduced employee turnover (Niven, 1993).

Empowering a system, then, would appear to enhance both productivity and quality while creating a workplace that is "user friendly." If the supply of post-baby-boom, well-educated workers is dwindling just as international business competition booms (Toffler, 1990), then the empowered system would be one that could both retain employees and provide a competitive economic edge.

(Successful Empowerment Efforts)

Savings in the millions of dollars have been attributed to empowered employees. Consolidated Rail began a participatory management program that resulted in 150 operational improvements estimated to have saved Conrail \$6.5 million by 1985; Paul Revere Insurance Company's program resulted in 6,000 operational/procedural changes that saved the company nearly \$5 million ("A Winning Trio," 1985). Pacific Gas and Electric Company eliminated a layer of management by empowering employees to make decisions without supervisory control, thus saving an estimated \$8 million a year (Kaufman, 1991). General Electric undertook the "Winshare" empowerment program in 1986; seven years later the company attributed a savings of \$50 million to the program (Filipczak, 1993). Eastern Airlines forged a power-sharing agreement with the International Association of Machinists in 1983 and reported productivity gains of \$47.2 million by the next year (Kuttner, 1985).

Constellation Bancorp's National State Bank attributed its growth from \$600 million to \$2 billion in assets to its four-year empowerment program (Keen, 1990).

The successes attributed to an empowerment program include a increase in revenues of 75% at Nordson Corporation (Benson, 1990); Foxboro decreased costs by 55% (Hitchcock, Jan. 1993); Gates Rubber Company reduced work-in-process by 300% while improving quality (Hitchcock, Feb. 1993); The San Diego Zoo reduced worker compensation claims to roughly one-fifth that of traditional zoo departments (Austin, 1993); People's Utility District of Oregon does more work for more customers with 20% fewer staff (Topaz, 1989/1990); and just one workteam at Dupont saves the company \$600,000 annually in warehouse costs (Gooley, 1993).

(Unsuccessful Empowerment Efforts)

As companies rushed to embrace participative management, a 1985 Harvard Business Review article warned that once the easy productivity gains were made, the novelty of power sharing would wear off (Kuttner). A 1990 Carnegie Mellon University study suggested that unions do more to improve productivity than employee involvement programs (Brown, 1992). An early 1990 survey by the American Society for Quality Control revealed that 36% of respondents in companies that professed to have quality programs did not participate in the programs ("People," 1991).

Industry Week addressed this phenomenon in an article titled "The Aimless Empowered" (Frohman, 1992). While most companies were not eager to have their failed empowerment efforts publicized, the 115-employee Overly Manufacturing Company was featured in the Business section of the June 21, 1993, Newsweek in an article detailing the chaos and "self-directed anarchy" resulting from empowerment efforts (Levinson, p.47).

Disenchantment with empowerment programs began to grow in the early '90s (Kennedy, 1994; Matthes, 1992; Kaufman, 1991) and the business press began to address the reasons. Empowerment was called a "fad" or a "buzzword" (Drucker, 1993; Niven, 1993; Spice & Gilburg, 1992; Foxman & Polsky, 1991); with Nohria and Berkley (1994) pointing out that even the best management ideas are popular for no more than ten to fifteen years. Empowerment as a fad, it was suggested, was embraced by companies as a ready-made package without any clear understanding of how to implement a program and no attempts to tailor the program to the company's needs (Nohria & Berkley, 1994; Duck, 1993; Beer, Eisenstat & Spector, 1990; Garvin, 1991).

Many writers pointed to a lack of empowerment training provided to instantly empowered employees (Landes, 1994; Niven, 1993; Bernstein, 1992; Doyle, 1992; Manz, 1992; Thier, 1989) and/or a lack of training in participative styles for managers (Landes, 1994; Bernstein, 1992; Doyle,

1992; Hirschhorn, 1989; Thier, 1989). It was suggested that managers felt threatened by the prospect of self-managed subordinates eliminating the need for managers (Bahls, 1992; Letize & Donovan, 1990) and either consciously or unconsciously undermined empowerment efforts by adopting only the aspects of empowerment that suited them (Bahls, 1992; Brown, 1992), for example, giving subordinates opportunity for input in decisions while maintaining tight control of the budget (Bernstein, 1992).

Empowerment efforts given only lip service from management with little follow through, as is often the case (Adler, 1993; "People," 1991), create an environment of mistrust in which managers, fearing obsolescence, offer little support to employees who in turn fear that empowered action will result in management's disapproval (Adler, 1993; Nelson & Taylor, 1990). Too, employees with minimal training in self-management often consider empowerment as merely the power to do more work (Kennedy, 1994). Perhaps the worst blow to empowerment efforts came in a Harvard Business Review interview with "the godfather of modern management," Peter Drucker, who decried the empowerment concept as a mere shifting of power at a time when power must be replaced with responsibility to build achieving organizations (Drucker, 1993).

Dearth of Empirical Research

Despite the pervasiveness of employee empowerment programs and the accounts of their phenomenal success, there has been little empirical empowerment research. The importance of social power in organizations was established in research as early as 1959 in work by French and Raven, yet nearly twenty years later, Cotton found "little in the way of empirical investigation of power in organizations" (1976, p.307). A decade later, in their seminal work integrating the theory and practice of empowerment, Conger and Kanungo (1988) wrote "Although empowerment has been discussed by several management scholars, little empirical work has been performed" (p.480). Even the business press admits that only anecdotal observations and non-empirical evidence support the TQM model (Barclay, 1993). The first dissertation focusing on an examination of empowerment appeared in 1988 (Tymon) with subsequent dissertations citing the lack of empirical research as well (Britt, 1993; Spreitzer, 1992). Indeed, there is not even an agreed upon definition of the construct of empowerment; the term is used loosely, suggest Thomas and Velthouse (1990), in reference to a group of related concepts.

Toward a Definition of Empowerment

\ While there is no clear agreement on a definition of empowerment, a pattern of concepts is evident in the myriad

definitions offered in the management literature. Focusing on the work of scholars in the field, a concise definition of power in organizations is found in Kanter's "Power Failure in Management Circuits" (1979): It is the capacity to mobilize people and resources to get things done (p.213). Conger and Kanungo (1988) extend that concept of capacity to an individual's belief in his or her own efficacy. Thus, an individual who believes that he or she can have an effect on how "things get done" is empowered. Murrell maintains that power is not zero-based, not finite, and therefore that empowering an individual creates power in the organization rather than merely redistributing it (Vogt & Murrell, 1990; Kanter, 1979). This conceptual definition lays the groundwork for the operationalized definitions found in the business press:

Employee empowerment is the practice of allowing employees to make their own decisions and solve work-related problems by themselves (Deeprise, 1993).

Employee empowerment involves providing employees with the necessary tools and giving them the authority to plan, implement and evaluate their work (Hogg, 1993).

Empowerment involves eliminating restrictive management policies and training workers to make decisions on company operations (Kiser, 1993).

Employee empowerment involves eliminating boss control and allowing employees to exercise their own judgment and act with responsible freedom (Bell, 1991).

To synthesize, "power turns ideas into action" (Kanter, 1983, p.216); empowerment frees employees to turn their ideas into action.

The Purpose of This Study

✓ Having at this point established the pervasiveness of employee empowerment programs, the phenomenal success of some, the failure of others and the lack of research of most, offered here is a study designed to examine some of the conditions that facilitate empowerment efforts as well as conditions which impede those efforts.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter Two will provide a foundation for the reader of this research by examining the history of employee empowerment, the scholarly research to date, and the theoretical perspective from which to view the methodology, analysis and findings. In the tradition of qualitative research design, this literature review was compiled by the researcher after the data gathering and analysis phases of the project. Chapter Three offers a case study research design to identify empirically those conditions that impede efforts to empower employees. Chapter Four examines the findings resulting from the study. Chapter Five concludes

the dissertation with a discussion of the implications of the findings, the alignment with previous empowerment work and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

Historical, Scholarly and Theoretical Context

"For many years we paid for hands and legs . . . we were under the Frederick Taylor method of management; we told everyone what to do with their right hand and their left hand and so forth. We need more than that today; we need a great deal more There is no doubt that the employee knows more about the job than any member of management can ever know, and so the employee must be enrolled in this battle to try to become more and more competitive."

GM Vice-President for
Industrial Relations
Alfred Warren,
mid 1970s

Historical Perspective

The first modern perspectives on organizational behavior emerged in the early 1900s (Daniels & Spiker, 1991); this section of Chapter Two will track trends in employee management from this early period through the decade of the '80s to show the emergence of a participative management philosophy and the concept of employee empowerment.

The early 1900s were dominated by the Scientific Management philosophy in which organizations were perceived as machines driven by managers who had absolute control (Daniels and Spiker, 1991). The "drive system" was characterized by management's pressuring workers to generate greater and greater output while inspiring in the worker a

fear of management (Jacoby, 1993). Management, in this era, perceived the workforce as unreliable and largely hostile to reasonable authority (Harris, 1993). Based on these perspectives, Frederick Taylor developed the concepts of Scientific Management around the theme that managerial effectiveness arose from efficient task design, hence his famous time-and-motion studies. Scientific management holds that there is one best way to do a job, identifiable by a time-and-motion analysis, after which the manager plans the work and the worker follows the plan explicitly (Taylor, 1919). Taylor's principles were widely embraced once their effectiveness was demonstrated at Bethlehem Steel where productivity rose 30% while costs were cut in half; unfortunately, company officials responded to the increased productivity by laying off what they perceived as now surplus workers (Daniels & Spiker, 1991). Taylor himself had great respect for the worker, and in that respect were found the seeds of later management philosophy that embraced employee participation. In 1912 testimony before a Special House Committee, Taylor said that Scientific Management requires:

the deliberate gathering in on the part
of those on the management's side of all
the great mass of traditional knowledge
which in the past has been the physical
skill and knack of the workmen which they
have acquired through years of experience.

(in Parker, 1993,
p.264-65)

The boom years of the '20s saw his theme of respect for the worker expressed again in the tenets of Mary Parker Follett's Administrative Theory (1924) in which the concept of shared power was first introduced: "One person should not give orders to another person, but both should agree to take their orders from the situation" (p.59). The workplace reforms of the '20s did not wholly embrace the practice of sharing power with the workforce; the reforms remained largely management dominated (Harris, 1993). The reforms of the '20s did, however, begin to change perceptions of fair treatment in the workplace (Jacoby, 1993).

The work of Chester Barnard in the late '30s was influenced by Follett's concept of shared power. His 1938 book, The Functions of the Executive, expanded on her work by identifying personal power as an employee motivator. Barnard's work also introduced the concept of the organization as a communication system, thus reinforcing the need for worker input (Dressler, 1980). It was also during this period that the Harvard Human Relations School of Management emerged out of the Hawthorn Studies. When workers in these studies continued to increase production regardless of interventions that made production increasingly difficult, it was concluded that the relationship between the workers and the researchers accounted for the results (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). Building on the results of the Hawthorn Studies, the Human

Relations School of thought held that interpersonal communication, group dynamics and employee values are variables in organizational effectiveness (Daniels & Spiker, 1991). Human Relations encouraged people-oriented management and employee participation in the decision-making process (Mayo, 1947). These employee participation concepts did not, however, replace the tenets of Scientific Management. They were simply perceived as a slightly more sophisticated technique for encouraging employee cooperation in management's plan (Daniels & Spiker, 1991).

The '40s saw the influence of Scientific Management in the emergence of Classical Theories of Management from Weber (1947) and Fayol (1949). Weber's Bureaucratic Theory called again for a machine-like organization as well as for a hierarchial system of authority, a comprehensive system of rules and procedures, and complete impersonality in employee matters (Weber, 1947). Fayol's General Management embraced many of the same concepts of authority, conceiving of the efficient organization as "one head with one plan," yet it allowed for departure from the chain of command when necessary and encouraged management to promote a sense of unity with subordinates (Fayol, 1949). Peter Drucker's 1946 book, Concept of the Corporation, encouraged company principals to redefine employees as a resource rather than a

cost (Drucker, 1993). This concept influenced theories of management for the next four decades.

The development of the Human Resources model in the '50s was heavily influenced by industrial psychology theories of the time (Appelbaum, 1993) and focused on motivation of workers via self-actualization. This view expanded the perception of motivation as being merely economically or socially driven and suggested that motivation could have its roots in the individual psyche, expressed in the individual's need to reach his or her full potential (Daniels & Spiker, 1991). The Human Resource model held that employee participation could help fulfill self-actualization needs, thus improving performance and morale (Miles, 1965).

In 1960 McGregor identified these newly emerging views of the employee as "Theory Y" assumptions and compared them to more traditional management approaches to employees called "Theory X." Theory Y holds that employees are inherently good and want to do good work (Moskal, 1990), that workers closest to a problem are best positioned to improve their work methods, and that employees thrive in an environment in which they are respected as capable of self direction (McGregor, 1960). Likert (1961) further categorized management styles into four systems with "system 4" closely resembling McGregor's Theory Y; he called this "participative management." Likert's research found that

organizations employing participative management were more effective than organizations employing the more traditional authoritarian styles (Likert, 1961). It is also during the '60s that the term "empowerment" emerged in the social lexicon, applied to the efforts of marginalized members of society to gain more control of their lives. Parker (1993) attributes the appearance of the concept in the workplace to a generation of young workers cognizant of the Black power and anti-war movements. Discontent with working conditions received national media attention in the early '70s with protests and strikes at GM's Lordstown, Ohio, plant focusing on the "democratic aspirations of a new generation of workers" (Parker, 1993, p.252). Nation-wide employee satisfaction surveys revealed a dramatic drop in respondents willing to label their employer "fair": 70% of respondents in the '50s were willing to do so; by the late '70s that figure had dropped to 20% (Lichtenstein, 1993). It was also in this period that American industry was beginning to experience enormous international competition (Lichtenstein & Harris, 1993).

Empowerment entered the management mainstream in the early '80s as a major component of Total Quality Management (TQM). National television aired a documentary in 1980 featuring Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the American who guided Japan's economic ascendancy after WWII with his principles of productivity based on quality. This documentary is

credited as one of the major inspirations of the TQM movement (Bahls, 1992). Faced with a disgruntled workforce and a rapidly growing threat of international competition, American industry began to turn away from automation as a tool to meet world competition, and instead embraced more innovative management practices (Parker, 1993). It was in this climate of experimentation that employee empowerment programs gained popularity as major components of quality improvement (Nohria & Berkley, 1994; Appelbaum, 1993). Empowerment programs were given further credibility with the establishment of the Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award in 1987 (Garvin, 1991). Established by Congress and named for a former Secretary of Commerce, it outlined the principles of quality management and offered a framework for assessing a company's progress in quality efforts. One category of assessment, "Human Resource Utilization," maintains that companies should empower their employees to benefit from the full potential of the entire workforce. The Award provided a compliance test employers could use to evaluate their empowerment efforts. The Award criteria suggest that empowerment is exhibited when contact employees can act in the interest of customers without requesting a supervisor's approval, when employees feel personal initiative is valued by management, when employee teams and suggestions are used, and when companies invest in education and training for employees (Garvin, 1991).

Summary

The history of empowerment can be traced through the history of management practices in American business and industry in this century. These practices were influenced by social conditions having an impact on the workforce, and the development of scholarly research surrounding workplace issues. As workers became increasingly aware of their power to demand improved working conditions, research by management scholars began to reveal improvements in productivity tied to improved treatment of employees. As international competition forced a need to improve U.S. productivity, companies embraced the participative management techniques which had fueled Japanese productivity.

Review of Scholarly Research

As stated in chapter one, there has been little empirical research dealing directly with the concept of empowerment, even within the context of TQM. It is largely anecdotal observations and non-empirical evidence that support the effectiveness of TQM (Barclay, 1993); the same can be said for empowerment. Two conceptual works, however, have emerged as highly influential in the discussions of empowerment. The first is the work of Conger and Kanungo (1988) in which they attempt to define the construct of

empowerment by synthesizing the management and psychology literature addressing empowerment. They also addressed a number of practices hypothesized as empowering interventions. Conger and Kanungo define empowerment as a primarily motivational construct. Elements influencing efforts to empower were hypothesized as falling into four categories: (organization factors, supervisory style, reward systems and job design.) A model was provided (Figure 1), originating from these four categories, which tracked five stages of empowerment. Conger and Kanungo intended their work as a possible framework for researchers, but little empirical research followed.

The other influential empowerment work was produced by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and was influenced by the Conger and Kanungo work again focusing on empowerment as a motivational construct. The work built on Velthouse's 1990 dissertation examining empowerment as an individual's belief in his/her ability to exercise choice. Thomas and Velthouse developed a cognitive model of empowerment (Figure 2) identifying four cognitions--sense of impact, competence, meaningfulness and choice--as the foundation of empowerment. Thomas and Velthouse also added "interpretive styles" as a variable in the empowerment process. Thomas and Velthouse cited two studies as supportive of parts of their model. Lee (1987) measured task assessments in a laboratory experiment examining intrinsic motivation and

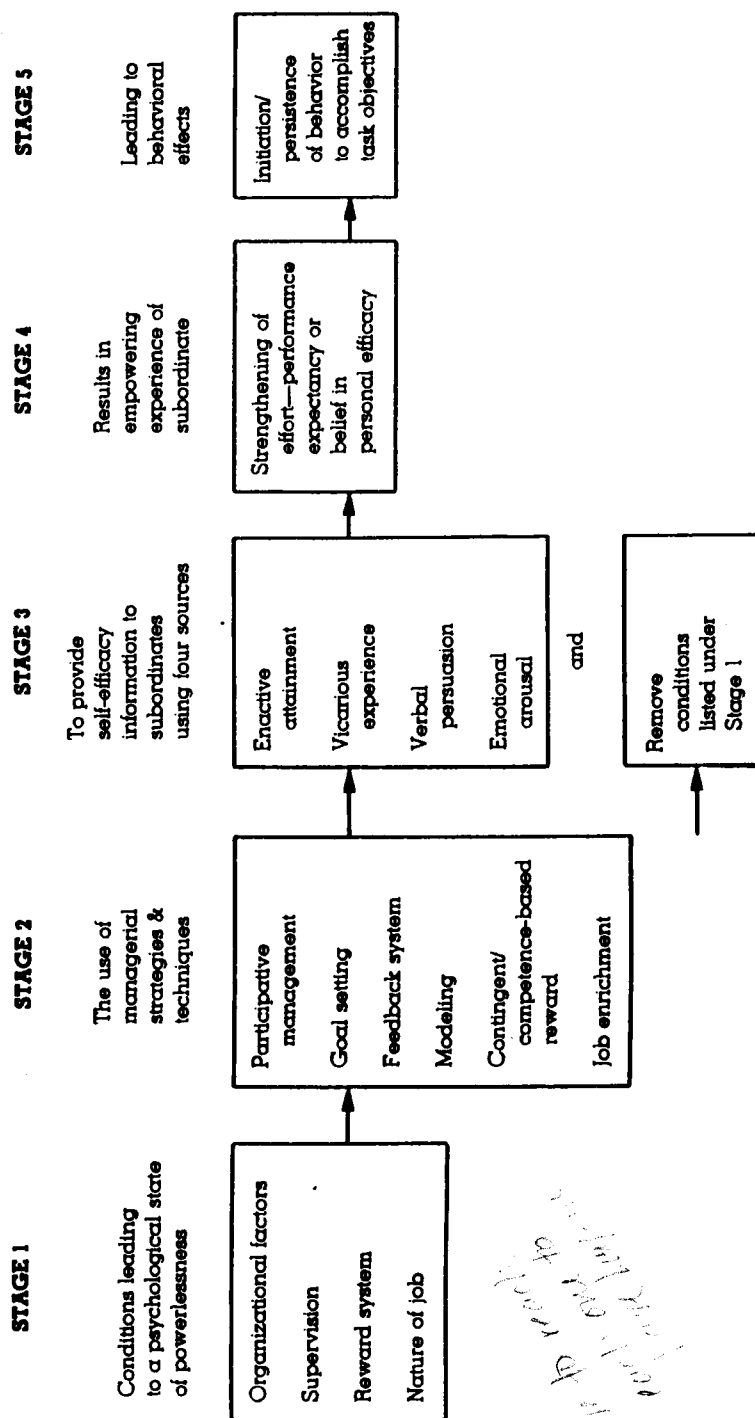


Figure 1: Five stages in the process of empowerment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988)

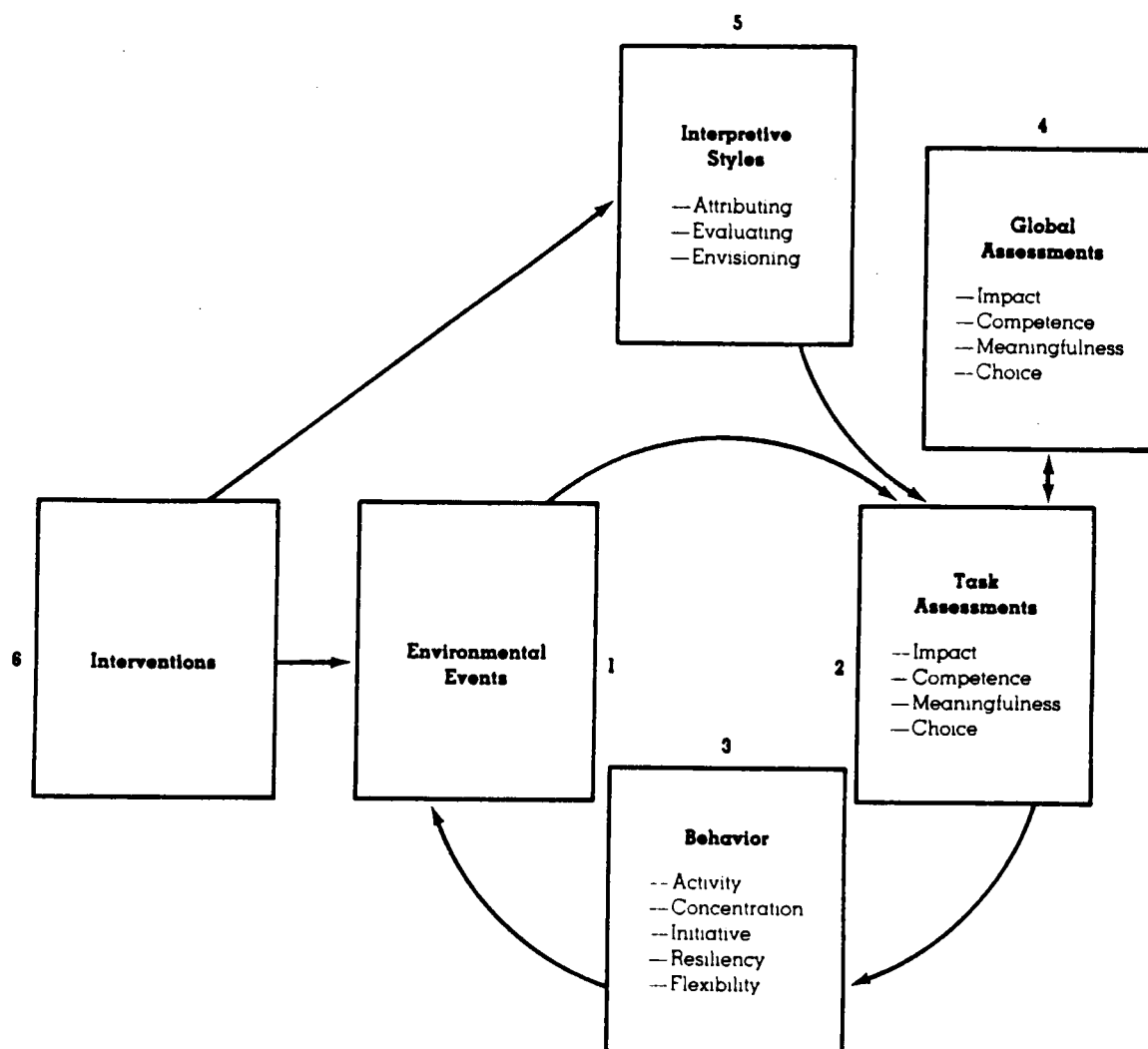


Figure 2: Cognitive model of empowerment (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990)

found a strong correlation. Tymon (1988) used survey design to identify a relationship between interpretive styles and task assessments. Both of these works are unpublished doctoral dissertations.

While the Conger and Kanungo and the Thomas and Velthouse works remain the most influential scholarly approaches to empowerment, there are a few lesser recognized scholarly works. Mainiero (1986) used a critical-incident interviewing method to examine the relationships between gender and the use of empowerment strategy. She found women less likely to use empowering strategy than men. Pacanowsky (1988) provided an ethnographic account of communication patterns in an "empowering organization." He identified W.L. Gore & Associates as a "lattice" organization, one in which communication patterns resemble a lattice with unrestricted flow of communication across lines of authority.

Other lesser known works can be characterized as "case studies." Smith, Anderson and Brooking (1993) provide what is typical of the case studies of empowerment in the work setting. Such authors are often managerial employees of the organization under study, for example, here Smith and Anderson are employed at the public utility that is the subject of the case. There is little or no methodology discussed in these case study reports, leaving the findings to be assessed as primarily anecdotal evidence. This body

of work provided the bulk of material cited in Chapter One examining successes, failures and benefits of empowerment.

The largest body of scholarly empowerment research remains unpublished doctoral dissertations. In addition to the Velthouse, Lee and Tymon dissertations already addressed, there are four others relevant to this study of empowerment; all of which deal with empowering interventions in a corporate setting. All four come from the discipline of business administration, all four use quantitative methodologies, and all four were done in 1992 or 1993.

Britt (1993) found support for six conditions conducive to empowerment: a dyadic system, interaction with intent to empower, reciprocal interdependency, subsystem imbalance, synergy and supportive context. Stewart (1993) found support for employee training as an effective empowerment strategy. Fiedler (1993) found that employees with an internal locus of control were more likely to feel empowered than employees with an external focus. Finally, Spreitzer (1992) identified three structural antecedents of empowerment: socio-political support, access to strategic information and an organic organizational structure.

One other dissertation is of significance in that it examined empowerment from a speech communication perspective in a corporate setting. Examining expressions of alienation by organizational members, Clair (1990) used survey methodology to determine that members perceiving their

organization to be empowering are less likely to express alienation.

Summary

There has been little empirical empowerment research. Conger and Kanungo (1988) provide the most influential work by establishing a view of empowerment as a motivational construct. The Thomas and Velthouse (1990) cognitive model of empowerment provides a foundation for empirical research, again viewing empowerment as a motivational construct. Subsequent empowerment research in corporate settings was undertaken primarily from a business administration perspective using quantitative methodologies. Collectively, the findings derived empirically are summarized in Table 1 identifying conditions which facilitate empowerment.

Table 1: Summary of Empirical Findings--
Conditions Facilitating Empowerment

Individual	Organizational
Sense of impact (Thomas & Velthouse; Lee; Tymon)	Open (latticed) communication/ access to information (Pacanowsky; Spreitzer)
Competence (Thomas & Velthouse; Lee; Tymon)	Dyadic communication (Britt)
Meaningfulness (Thomas & Velthouse; Lee; Tymon)	Intent to empower/supportive context/socio-political support (Britt; Spreitzer)
Choice (Velthouse; Thomas & Velthouse; Lee; Tymon)	Interdependency/synergy (Britt)
Gender-masculine (Mainiero)	Subsystem imbalance/organic structure (Britt; Spreitzer)
Internal locus of control (Fiedler)	Training (Stewart)

Theoretical Perspective

Given the dual nature of empowerment--individual and organizational--an examination of the phenomenon requires a theoretical perspective that embraces both. The symbolic interactionist approach does so:

Symbolic interactionism is a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. Its empirical world is the natural world of such group life and conduct. (Blumer, 1969, p.47)

Drawn primarily from the works of George Herbert Mead (1934, 1938), Blumer (1969) offers a view of symbolic interactionism as an approach to the study of human conduct both individually and in groups.

Blumer offers the core of symbolic interactionism in "three simple premises:"

1. human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them;
2. the meaning of such things arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows;
3. these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters; (p.2).

These three principles embrace both the individual and the group role in guiding action. The individual engages in "self-interaction" (p.5) via an interpretation process. The individual determines what object in his world requires

interpretation prior to action. He then interprets the meaning of that object to determine appropriate action. Objects can be things, people or ideas; that is, "anything that can be indicated or referred to" (p.11). The individual can be an object to himself, acting toward others based on the way he views himself (p.12), or even interacting with himself, as in reminding himself to do something (p.13).

The meanings individuals have for objects arise out of social interaction; the individual is influenced in his attribution of meaning by the meanings others attribute to objects. Symbolic interactionists see the human as profoundly social (p.14). It is in this way that social interaction forms conduct. Blumer explains:

The human individual confronts a world that he must interpret in order to act . . . he has to cope with the situations in which he is called on to act, ascertaining the meaning of the actions of others and mapping out his own line of action in the light of such interpretation (p.15).

Thus the organizational aspect of symbolic interactionism emerges as individuals map out action around others.

While embracing both individual and organizational elements, the symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on interaction and antecedents to that action. In doing so, it provides an ideal perspective from which to view empowerment

in a corporate setting as the findings to date view empowerment as a motivational construct in which an individual is moved to action that benefits the organization.

Summary

The symbolic interactionist perspective holds that individuals assign meaning to objects in their lives based on interaction with others. This assigned meaning guides conduct as one takes action to "fit" the action of others. Symbolic interactionism provides an ideal perspective for examining employee empowerment because it embraces individual and organizational elements with a focus on interaction. Symbolic interactionism will provide the theoretical underpinnings of the research methodology of this study, discussed in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE

31

Methodology

"Respect the nature of the empirical world and organize a methodological stance to reflect that respect"
(Blumer, 1969)

Research Questions

As stated in Chapter One, the purpose of this study is to examine the empowerment process in an attempt to identify the conditions that either facilitate or impede empowered action on the part of an employee. Therefore, the two research questions are:

1. What conditions, both corporate
✓ and personal, serve to facilitate
the empowerment process?
2. What conditions, both corporate
✓ and personal, serve to impede the
empowerment process?

Research Setting

A corporate setting for this research was provided by the regional offices of a multi-state service provider. The officers of this company agreed to allow the researcher on site on the condition that the company not be identified in the reporting of the research results. In keeping with this agreement, the research site will be referred to as "The

Company." The Company was ideally suited to the purposes of this research; it had completed a two-day quality training program attended by every employee sometime within the last two years. The quality training was a part of a TQM program that included a prominent empowerment component.

Consequently, every employee encountered in the course of the research had received the same initial empowerment training and literature.

Pilot Study

The research questions and the resulting methodology put forth here emerged from a pilot study undertaken to examine, inductively, corporate empowerment efforts. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with long-term managers in a regional office of The Company. These interviews were transcribed and examined for patterns and possible coding schemes. The Strauss and Corbin Paradigm Model of axial coding provided the best fit for the pilot data and was subsequently used for the coding of data in this study. From the patterns that emerged in the pilot data, additional methods of gathering data were suggested. The research design that emerged from the pilot study is described in the remainder of this chapter.

Research Design

This research took the form of a qualitative case study comprising observation, brief survey and in-depth interviewing of employees in five customer service departments of The Company.

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

The rationale for qualitative methods arose from the examination of the history and research surrounding empowerment as viewed from the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. The history of the empowerment movement reveals a focus on management practices designed to increase the value added by workers. This focus suggests that empowerment is a function of the interaction of organizational members. Capturing the reality of these interactions would be essential to an examination of empowerment. Lofland (1976) points out that there is a ready availability of data-generating devices, but their use does not require an intimate familiarity with actual social settings making them mere "substitutes for data on ongoing social life-as-it-is-lived" (p.12) creating a research perspective in which familiarity with social setting is assumed. Organizational researchers Albrecht & Ropp (1982) and Faules (1982) suggest the use of qualitative research methods in organizational settings as a way to advance organizational research from the realm of simple description

into the more complex realm of interpretation. The use of qualitative research is further suggested by the dearth of empirical empowerment research. Given the lack of empirically based guidance, an inductive approach would aid in ensuring that the research was not based on assumption. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) write,

Qualitative research is inductive. Researchers develop concepts, insights, and understanding from patterns in the data, rather than collecting data to assess preconceived models, hypotheses or theories (p.5)

Finally, qualitative methods are suggested by the symbolic interactionist perspective. Writes Blumer (1969),

For symbolic interactionism, the nature of the empirical social world is to be discovered, to be dug out by a direct, careful, and probing examination of that world (p.48).

The four central concepts of symbolic interactionism would indicate that to understand interaction--such as that which creates empowerment--one must observe that interaction in its natural context and over time (Blumer, p.50). The first central concept, that people act on the basis of the meanings of their objects, indicates that the researcher must not impose his or her own meaning on the objects, but come to know the meanings organizational members share. The second central concept, that interaction is a process in which organizational members make indications and

interpretations, requires that to be understood, this process must be allowed to unfold without "compressing the process of social interaction into any special form" (p.53). The third concept, that social acts are constructed--both by an individual and collectively--requires the researcher to examine the construction process of social action and not simply the product of that action. Finally, the fourth concept, that the organization comprises dynamic interlinkages of acts, requires the observation of these acts over time to avoid defining acts captured at only one moment.

In summary, Blumer emphasizes the advantages of a qualitative approach to examinations of people in interaction when he writes:

I merely wish to reassert here that current designs of "proper" research procedure do not encourage or provide for the development of firsthand acquaintance with the sphere of life under study. Moreover, the scholar who lacks that firsthand familiarity is highly unlikely to recognize that he is missing anything. Not being aware of the knowledge that would come from firsthand acquaintance, he does not know that he is missing that knowledge (p.38)

Management guru Peter Drucker reaffirmed this approach to contemporary organizational research in a 1993 Harvard Business Review article:

Today, perception is more important than analysis. In the new society of organizations, you need to be able to recognize patterns to see what is there rather than what you expect to see. You need the invaluable listener (p.118)

Rationale for Triangulation

This design allowed for the observation of service-providing behavior and follow-up questioning to illuminate the thought process that guided behavior. Since The Company's Quality Program was focused on delivering better service to customers, observing employees in the delivery of a variety of services made these five departments appropriate research venues.

Because the empowered employee will exhibit decision-making and implementing behaviors (as defined in The Company's Quality Program materials), case study was ideally suited to examining the phenomenon of empowerment. Schramm (1971) writes, "The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result" (in Yin, 1989, p.23). This combination of observation, surveying and interviewing was necessary for a thorough examination of the corporate culture in the five departments under study. Empowerment was defined by The Company in the Value Statement posted prominently throughout

the building in which this research took place:

We provide our people full opportunity to contribute to the success of the business through individual participation and challenging responsibilities . . . we encourage them to use their own initiative to satisfy customers and improve profitability and we respect their opinions and ideas.

Observing employees in routine action allowed the researcher to identify the use of empowered strategy in the delivery of customer service. Lofland (1976) reminds that routine interaction is a valuable venue for research because it overcomes the "limits of participant consciousness" thus revealing activity that might not be reported by subjects in interviews (p.53). Taylor and Bogdan (1984) state "Participant observation provides a yardstick against which to measure data collected through any other method . . . no other method can provide the detailed understanding that comes from directly observing people and listening to what they have to say at the scene" (p.79). While observation examined the action of empowerment, in-depth interviews focused on the process of empowerment. Lofland (1976) addresses this process when he writes:

People devise, gauge, juggle, and construct their actions in situations. Human action in situations does not just happen; it is pieced together and built, thought about and tried out,

formulated and reformulated.
People, in their aspects of
interest here, work at acting in
the sense that attention is
directed to the process of
deciding whether action is needed,
what action is needed, how action
is to be executed, the execution
of action, and the termination
of action (p.40).

Interviewing helped illuminate the thought process that
preceded action in the corporate environment under
observation. Surveying allowed for contact with more
employees than were tapped for in-depth interview and
provided a method of confirming what was noted from
observation and interview.

*background
research
1982*

This triangulation of methods is encouraged in the
organizational research literature. Faules (1982)
encourages the use of survey methods because they are so
quickly recognized and understood by organizational members.
Too, he feels that, given their limited exposure to research
methodologies, organization principals will find a
researcher using a "traditional" research tool to be more
credible, and will therefore be more likely to grant the
researcher access to organizational research venues. Faules
advocates interviewing organizational members in addition to
using questionnaires because interviewing "provides the
potential to get at feelings and images that are typically
sought in the survey questionnaire" (p.51). Albrecht & Ropp
(1982) encourage method triangulation as a way to achieve

both "breadth and depth in examining relational processes" (p.162). They encourage the researcher to come as close as possible to membership in the organization. In the methods designed for examination of empowerment efforts at The Company, the survey would be farthest removed from membership, the interview would move closer, the observation would move closer still. Triangulation is based on the assumption that weaknesses in any single method may be balanced by the strengths of others, in effect maximizing benefits and "neutralizing" drawbacks (Jick, 1979). Table 2, adapted from Albrecht & Ropp, provides a graphic rationale for the use of the three data gathering methods in this study.

Table 2: Triangulation strategy for studying interaction in an organization

Method	Viewpoint	Time Perspective	Amount of Imposed Structure
self report in surveys	respondent	retrospective/static	high
participant-guided interviews	respondent	retrospective/process recall	moderate
observation	researcher	current/process tracking	low

Because each step in the research process required the address of all three data gathering methods, the next major sections of this chapter will each carry three subheads: "observation," "survey" and "in-depth interviews." Thus, the description of the methods used to select participants will deal with participants selected for observation, then participants selected for survey and finally those selected for interview. Next, the description of data gathering methods will deal first with observation, then survey, and finally interview. The chapter concludes with a description of the methods used for analysis of data, again, under the three subheads.

Selection of Participants

Observation

(The five departments in the research venue were phone * queries, two sales divisions, repair, and collections.) This allowed for the observation of a wide spectrum of customer services from contact with potential customers, through sales and follow-up service, and even contact with customers holding delinquent accounts. These five departments comprised 328 employees, each of whom had participated in The Company's two-day quality training program.

Survey

The brief, 10-question survey instrument was provided to all 328 employees in the observation venue.

In-depth Interviews

Individuals in each department were approached by the researcher a few days into the observation period and asked if they would agree to an interview. The researcher selected individuals that reflected the make-up of the workforce in terms of gender, race, age, education, years of service, and staff or first-line supervisor position.

Twenty-two interviews were conducted.

Data Gathering

Observation

The researcher spent six weeks at The Company site; a small office was provided for her use. The first week was devoted to meeting with the managers of the five departments to be observed, explaining the needs of the researcher while in observation and scheduling one-week observation periods in each department. Each subsequent week was devoted to observation in a different department. All customer contact in all departments was conducted via phone by employees equipped with headsets and computers. The researcher was free to roam about each department and request permission from employees to sit beside them and observe work activity.

2nd
under
The researcher was introduced as a local college instructor (the truth) and graduate student researching employee communication and quality programs. Employees were assured that there was no performance evaluation component connected with the research and their cooperation with researcher requests was purely voluntary. In departments in which the researcher was introduced in-person during a departmental meeting, cooperation was nearly unanimous. In the two departments where the researcher was introduced via memo, employees were less willing to allow individual observation, although their reluctance decreased as the week wore on and they became accustomed to the presence of the researcher and had spoken with co-workers who had allowed observation. Once permission to observe an individual was granted, the researcher would sit so as to be as unobtrusive as possible, but still be able to hear the employee and see his or her computer screen. (The observation of an individual would last approximately one to three hours.) If the employee seemed amenable, the researcher would ask questions between customer calls. These questions focused on the nature of the work just observed. The answers to these questions provided valuable insight into the type of work done in each department and allowed the researcher to formulate informed questions for the interview phase of data gathering, and to understand departmental vernacular used by interviewees. No notes were taken in the presence of subjects during the

observations, but field notes were recorded daily by the researcher during breaks and at the end of the business day.

Survey

The survey was developed in the second week on site and after the first full week of observations. This allowed the incorporation of both design and vocabulary that were familiar to respondents. It also allowed for questions that were grounded in actual experiences common in everyday Company interaction. The Company's Quality Program literature was also examined for empowerment themes which would translate into questions that would track the diffusion of those themes throughout the workforce. The resulting 10-item questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

Upon the completion of observations in a department, the survey questionnaire would be placed in the employee mail box of everyone in the department. The questionnaire could be returned by company mail in an attached envelope addressed to the researcher and marked "private." Responses were anonymous; no demographic information was requested and respondents were told that only the researcher would see the questionnaires. 328 questionnaires were distributed; 136 were completed and returned.

In-depth Interviews

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Once an employee agreed to an interview, a time was scheduled. Because this was a particularly busy time for The Company, interviews had to be scheduled during the employee's lunch break. When the employee had only 30 minutes for lunch, the researcher had lunches delivered to ~~her~~ on-site office and the interview was conducted there. Longer interviews were conducted at a nearby restaurant. All interviewees were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix B), and all interviews were audio-tape recorded. While there was a quality program focus to the researcher's broad questions, interviews were largely interviewee guided with as little researcher input as possible.

Figure 3 provides a graphic representation of the interview guide. Boxes represent issues which emerged in the typical interview. Single lines represent the natural flow of conversation and issues are arranged in the order in which they usually emerged in the course of an interview. Two common divergence patterns emerged in the interviews as participants strayed from Company issues; and these are represented by single lines. Instances where a return to company issues was guided by the researcher are indicated by a double line. Double lines also represent the researcher's guidance into four broad areas of inquiry: TQM, problem solving, decision making and Company communication.

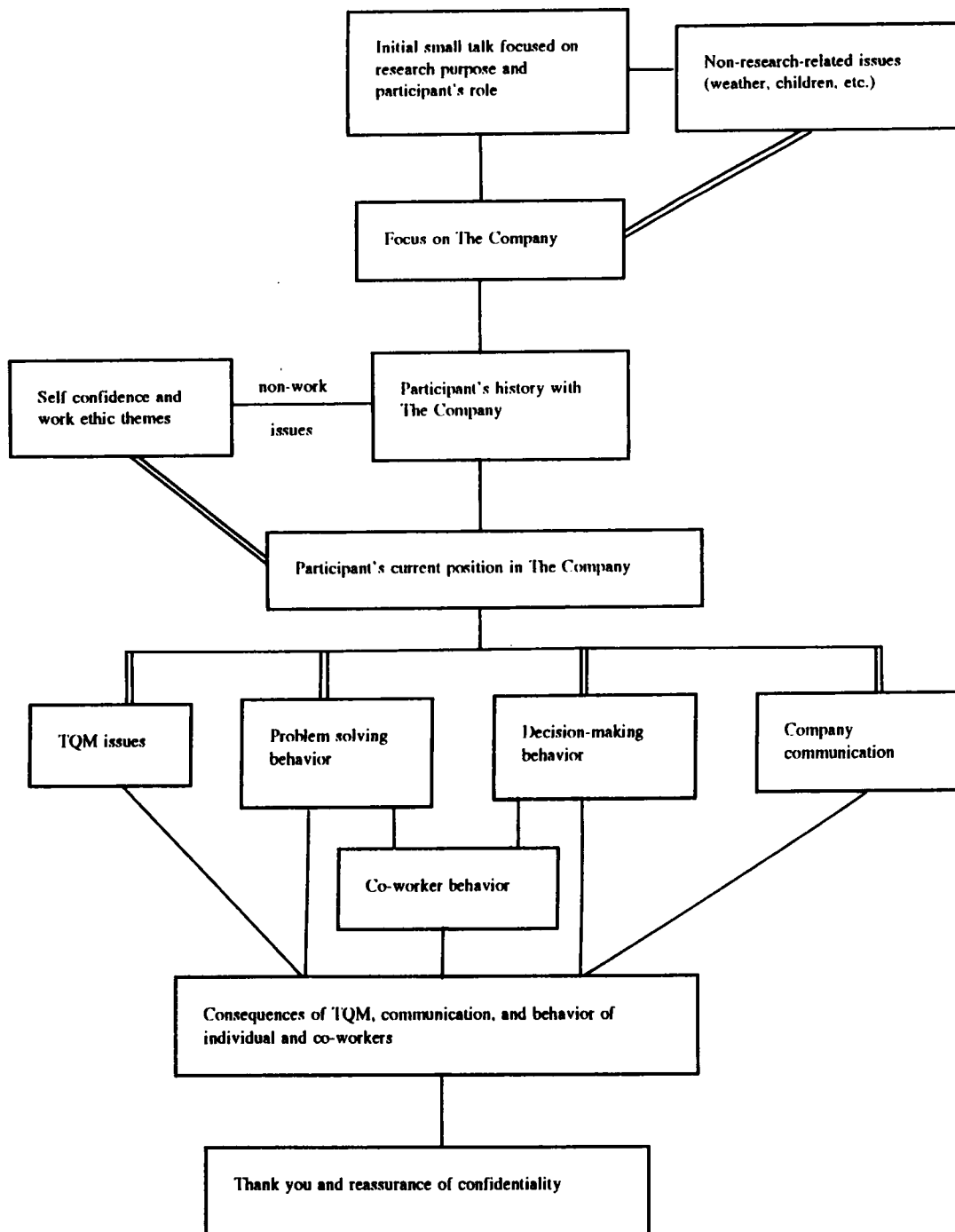


Figure 3: Non-directive interview model for examining empowerment in the context of The Company

Interviews were conducted to the point of redundancy, the point at which no new information was being added to the data with each interview. Twenty-two interviews were conducted and nineteen transcribed verbatim. Two interviews were conducted with quality facilitators for the express purpose of gathering background information on the empowerment training. The third untranscribed interview was one that was interrupted by a friend and co-worker of the interviewee and invited to remain at the luncheon table.

At the conclusion of the data gathering phase, amassed were 50 pages of field notes, 136 completed questionnaires, and 286 pages of interview transcript.

Analysis of Data

Observation

Field notes were gathered primarily for the purpose of guiding interviews. Reference to these notes in the data analysis phase aided in the understanding of Company vernacular and aided researcher recall when vague and/or complex references were found in the transcripts. More importantly, observation allowed for an examination of how the self-reports in interview and survey data translated into behavior.

Survey

The questionnaire contained 10 questions each accompanied by a 5 point scale calibrated as 1 = never, 3 = sometimes, 5 = always. Results are reported as mean and modal responses for each question (see Appendix C). Because the respondents were not randomly selected, results could not be generalized to the Company population. Results were used in guiding interpretation of the interview and observation data.

In-depth Interviewing

The interview transcripts were coded in an attempt to track the empowerment process in the individual from the point of training through the decision to either take or avoid empowered action and the consequence of action or avoidance. Strauss and Corbin's Paradigm Model of axial coding (1990) offered a coding scheme designed to track such a process. They describe it as follows:

In axial coding our focus is on specifying a category (phenomenon) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the context (its specific set of properties) in which it is embedded; the action/interactional strategies by which it is handled, managed, carried out; and the consequences of those strategies (p.97).

Highly simplified, their model looks like this:

(A) CAUSAL CONDITIONS --> (B) PHENOMENON -->
(C) CONTEXT --> (D) INTERVENING CONDITIONS -->
(E) ACTION/INTERACTION STRATEGIES -->
(F) CONSEQUENCES. (p.99)

The Paradigm Model tracks progress from causal conditions to phenomenon to context to intervening conditions that result in action/interaction and their consequences. This model was well-suited to the coding demands of this research in that the phenomenon of study was empowerment and the research questions were largely answered with patterns that emerged in the "intervening conditions" coding category.

The process of empowerment was tracked first by identifying "causal conditions." Strauss and Corbin define this first segment of the model as "events, incidents, happenings that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon" (p.100). For the purposes of this study, data that referred to corporate conditions that indicated a need for The Company's Quality Program were coded in this category.

The second model segment, "phenomenon," refers to "the central idea, event, happening, about which a set of actions or interactions are directed at managing, handling, or to which the set of actions is related" (p.100). Data referring to The Company's Quality Program's empowerment component were coded in this category.

The third model segment, "context," identifies "the specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon; that is, the locations of events or incidents pertaining to a phenomenon along a dimensional range. Context represents the particular set of conditions within which the action/interactional strategies are taken" (p.101). Data referring to the environment of the department under study were coded in this category. Since all departments were customer service oriented, data referencing customer service were coded as "context."

Conditions that preceded employee action, both empowered and unempowered action, emerged in the coding of "intervening conditions." Strauss and Corbin define this segment of the model as "the structural conditions bearing on action/interactional strategies that pertain to a phenomenon. They facilitate or constrain the strategies taken within a specific context" (p.103). Data referring to conditions facilitating or constraining empowered behavior, the focus of this study, were coded in this category.

The action phase of the empowerment process was coded with the fifth segment of the model "actions/interactions" defined as "strategies devised to manage, handle, carryout, respond to a phenomenon under a specific set of perceived conditions" (p.104). Data revealing problem-solving actions or avoidance of action (empowered or unempowered) were coded in this category.

It is important to note here that most employees in both observation and interview revealed a tendency to behave as either predominantly empowered or as predominantly unempowered yet displayed in observation or revealed in interview both types of behaviors. Quite often both an empowered action and an unempowered action on the part of an individual appear in the transcript data and/or observation field notes. Transcript actions were coded in this fifth category and simply identified as either empowered or unempowered. As indicated in Chapter 1, empowered action is taken when employees use their own resources in making decisions about their work while unempowered action is revealed in employees' reluctance to rely on their own resources.

For example, if an employee handled a variety of customer service tasks without hesitation in observation, then this employee displayed a tendency to be empowered. A follow-up interview, then, would often reveal a customer service problem that the employee solved without the intervention of a supervisor. The Company's empowerment training literature described this type of behavior as "taking appropriate risks." Behavior of this sort was coded as "empowered."

An employee that was reluctant to make decisions in the course of providing customer services in observation was displaying a tendency to be unempowered. Follow up

interview would often reveal an incident in which the employee requested assistance from a supervisor in dealing with a customer service, or avoided taking any action altogether. Behavior of this sort was coded as unempowered.

Finally, the process was tracked to an end point with the coding of the final segment of the model "consequences," defined as the "outcomes or results of action and interaction" (p.106). Data referring to the effect of action or avoidance on The Company, employee, customer or service were coded in this category.

Upon the completion of the coding of three transcripts, a committee member, experienced in qualitative methodology, followed the coding trail and agreed with the logic of that trail. The remaining sixteen transcripts were then coded by the researcher using the confirmed coding scheme.

Once all nineteen transcripts were coded in this manner, analysis took the form of tracking empowered action, as identified in the coding category "action/interaction," back through the conditions that preceded the action. These conditions were identified in the coding category of "intervening conditions." The same was done for actions identified as unempowered. In this way, conditions that facilitated and those that impeded empowered behavior were identified. It is the recurring patterns that emerged, the conditions that appeared repeatedly in the transcripts, that are reported in the next chapter, "Results."

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

"Empowerment is in the eyes of the empowered"
(Garvin, 1991)

Summary

The goal of this research was to identify conditions that facilitated and those that impeded attempts to empower employees within the framework of the case under study. Table 3 offers a general summary of the findings. This table represents the findings largely from the coding of elements in the fourth phase of axial coding "intervening conditions" as these conditions served to answer the research question. A brief explanation of elements in the other five phases of the model is provided to illuminate the process from which the identification of facilitators and impediments to empowerment emerged.

Conditions facilitating or impeding empowerment efforts fell into five categories: conditions pertaining to the employee as an individual personality; conditions of task design; conditions of training; conditions of management; and conditions of the work environment. Within each of these categories, the coding of the data revealed patterns in circumstances that would lead to empowered behavior and

Table 3: Conditions That Influence Efforts to Empower Employees

Facilitate	Impede
<u>1. Employees who exhibit</u>	
- self confidence	- low self esteem
- work ethic	- little personal initiative
<u>2. Task Design which</u>	
- allows for decision	- is routinized
<u>3. Training which</u>	
- is job specific	- is generalized
- offers opportunity to utilize skills learned	- offers no follow-up utilization of skills
<u>4. Management which provides</u>	
- positive feedback for empowered action	- negative feedback for empowered action
- adequate information for employee decision making	- an overload of, or inadequate information for, employee decision making
- tools/technology to support individual efforts	- inadequate tools/technology to support individual efforts
- policy supportive of individual initiative	- policy that discourages individual initiative
<u>5. Environment that</u>	
- addresses employee health/stress levels	- is unhealthy/stressful

patterns in circumstances that would lead to unempowered behavior. Those circumstances are outlined in Table 3 under the appropriate condition headings.

The remainder of this chapter will examine each of the five conditions in detail and provide excerpts from transcripts and field notes as well as questionnaire results that support the findings. Respondents were identified by a letter and a number; excerpts from the respondents' interview transcripts will use this code to identify the source of the excerpts. The letters were randomly assigned to the five departments, therefore all excerpts identified by the same letter are from respondents working together in the same department. Field note excerpts will be identified simply by date.

Coding of the Complete Model

As described in Chapter Three, The Paradigm Model of axial coding comprises six elements:

- (A) CAUSAL CONDITIONS --> (B) PHENOMENON -->
- (C) CONTEXT --> (D) INTERVENING CONDITIONS -->
- (E) ACTION/INTERACTION STRATEGIES -->
- (F) CONSEQUENCES

Data that referred to corporate conditions which created a need for The Company's Quality Program were coded in the first category "causal conditions." Patterns in the data revealed three major perceptions of the impetus for The Company's embrace of TQM. First, there emerged a perception

that it was driven by increases in competition for The Company's customers.

Competition is out there strongly.
We need to keep the customers we
have and the ones we've lost we need
to try to get them back. (Z4)

Another, related perception was that the move to TQM, and empowerment in general, was driven by economic downturns, often attributed to increased competition, which forced The Company to reduce costs via downsizing:

A lot of it is where the economy
and business today is forcing our
corporation to be . . . I understand
that if the corporation is going to
survive it has to do some things and
downsizing is one. (Z1)

The resulting reduction in the workforce resulted in fewer supervisory positions:

With less supervisors there are
less people to ask . . . that's why
we had to be empowered, because we
couldn't depend on someone else. (Z2)

We've cut back and reduced forces so
now you have supervisors who used to
have 6 or 7 people located in the
same work center; they have 13 or
14 or 15 people literally spread all
over the countryside. There's no
way they can watch them. But if we
empower them they shouldn't need to
be watched anyway. (V8)

Finally, patterns in the data suggested a perception that The Company's Quality Program and its empowerment component were trend driven:

I think that quality is the buzzword of the industry right now; everybody's got a quality program. We're a Fortune 500 company, so we've got to get on board with quality. (Z1)

Sometimes I think it's trendy . . . the Japanese have done it; it must be right. Let's try it here. (V8)

The history of the empowerment movement laid out in Chapter Two suggests that these are the typical forces behind a company's quality movement: increased competition, economic downturn and eventual downsizing. These patterns in the data suggests that employees of The Company had an awareness of forces affecting company action.

Data directly referring to The Company's Quality Program's empowerment component were coded in the second category of the model "phenomenon."

They tell us we're empowered. (X2)

In the central office I noticed pictures of the construction group there that's been empowered. (V8)

These findings established a pattern suggesting that the empowerment message had diffused through the workforce.

Data referencing customer service were coded in the model's third category, "context," as all departments in which data were gathered functioned to serve customers:

I was told one time to think about it this way: that person calling in is somebody's mother or somebody's sister, somebody's brother, and you

do for them what they can't do for themselves. (Z5)

I like the company's policies, I like what they offer . . . to the customers themselves. They truly care. (Z9)

She is a good supervisor as far as wanting you to take care of your customer, going the extra mile if that's what it takes. (W3)

These findings provided a context in which to place empowered behaviors, those in which an employee provided a variety of customer services without needing supervisory intervention.

Conditions that preceded employee action were coded in the fourth category of the model. These conditions were identified upon completion of the entire coding scheme as facilitating empowered action when empowered action followed, or inhibiting empowered action when empowered action did not follow. These findings answered the research questions and are discussed at length in the next section of this chapter.

Empowered and unempowered actions were so labeled and coded in the model's fifth category "action/interaction." Empowered action was reflected in quotes like:

I'm serving on a team to improve the database for [our department]. (Y2)

I like the "Quality Blueprint;" I recently did a paper on some rework issues and I put it in there. (Z1)

Unempowered action was reflected in quotes like:

Some of us won't speak out and say that, but we did feel that way. (Z4)

Some ask questions that they should know; they know; they were trained; it's just that they don't use what they were trained. They ask [supervisors] a hundred different questions. (W3)

These findings allowed for tracking conditions that preceded empowered action and those conditions that preceded unempowered action to look for patterns in those conditions.

Finally, consequences of action were coded in the model's sixth category "consequences." Consequences formed a two-part pattern with items addressing issues of policy:

For the last several years we work with coaching to improve [poor performance]. (Z3)

and items addressing issues of management feedback:

There's some other things we kept on complaining about that they finally changed. (Y3)

Patterns that emerged in these findings that appeared to have an impact on subsequent empowered or unempowered actions are discussed more fully in the remainder of this chapter.

Conditions that Influence Efforts to Empower Employees

Employee Characteristics

Employees who, in observation, took predominantly empowered actions, or, in interview, related incidents of predominantly empowered action, expressed having a sense of self confidence. This pattern of confidence emerged in the transcripts with quotes such as these:

Most of the times, I don't go to anyone; I just make my decisions. I usually feel pretty good about whatever decision I make. (Z2)

The company trusts me to make good decisions for customers, for use of its money . . . maybe it's from doing it for a lot of years, I just have a feel for whether or not I need to check something out or not. Now, I guess I just know what I can do, legally and rightfully. (Z1)

Very seldom will I feel like "I can't handle this;" most of the time I can handle it myself, 99-98% of the time I can do it myself and I'm proud of that because I feel like I can trust my own judgment. (Z4)

Most of the time, I know exactly what I need. (W3)

Several respondents mentioned that their confidence increased with the length of time spent on the job. It is important to note, however, that 17 of the 19 interviewees had over 15 years of service with many exceeding 25 years of employment with The Company. It is quite possible that

"length of time on the job" would not be mentioned as a factor by these long-timers as the initial learning curve is long forgotten. Other confidence boosters mentioned were a helpful mentor, a supervisor's encouragement, quick promotion and high job-application test scores. None of these was mentioned often enough to be considered a pattern in the data; they are offered here merely for consideration.

A lack of self confidence was expressed in interviews with employees who had engaged in predominantly unempowered behavior:

I doubt myself quite a bit simply because I do know even though we have rules and regulations, they are bendable . . . there's no right, there's no wrong, do what you feel will help the customer and I believe in any corporation there is just so much that they will allow before someone finally come down to you and says, "okay, it's not that you're doing it wrong, but . . . " (Z9)

My confidence [in my judgment] may not be there but as long as [my work] is not scrutinized then I don't have any problem with it. (Z6)

Most respondents identified themselves as having confidence in their judgment on questionnaire item 5. The modal response was 5, meaning "always" and the mean response was 4.4. This could be due to the phenomenon of response bias; subjects are likely to report that they are "confident" just as they are likely to report that they are "honest,"

regardless of their actual behavior. This high number of "always confident" responses could also be a result of the long service records of most respondents. Downsizing had eliminated most employees with fewer than 15 years of service. It is also possible that confident employees were more likely to complete and return the questionnaire. In any case, interviewees were likely to identify themselves as confident but were willing to point to a lack of confidence in fellow employees with unempowered tendencies. This pattern emerged in quotes such as this one from a supervisor:

I do find that it's the same employees each time that will come with customers that they're not able to take care of or questions they're not sure about. The ones that I know, that I've seen come to me time and time again, have low self-esteem, lack of confidence. (Z7)

A relief supervisor in another department said simply of the unempowered employees, "they just don't have any self confidence" (W3).

Another characteristic of employees taking predominantly empowered action was an indication of a strong work ethic. This pattern was revealed in quotes such as:

I did come up with the company; I really love this company. From the day I was born she's provided my food and my clothes through my father and afterwards through me . . .

If I feel I've put my heart into it
and done all I could to do whatever
the job is well . . . I like to think
I've done well. (V8)

I started work when I was seventeen
and I liked it; I worked hard and
did a good job. (Z1)

But if you do your job right, no one
is going to bother you. I've never
been bothered because, by God, I'm
going to do it right . . . we get paid
a lot of money to do it. (Y2)

Those employees with unempowered tendencies often revealed a lack of work ethic in observation when they spent much time avoiding customer contact. This could be done by leaving their station for frequent restroom or snack breaks, although in most departments this behavior was closely monitored. Most often these employees would engage other workers in conversation while ignoring equipment that indicated incoming calls. For example, field notes dated 6/16 carry this entry: Constant consultation among employees in this corner, not often work related. Transcripts of interviews with these employees revealed a pattern of quotes such as:

Well, to be honest, I hate this
job; I really do. There are days
I wake up and say, "Do I have
to?" (X2)

I try to let everything roll off;
I'm the office clown; I get along
easy. (Z6)

To summarize the finding reported to this point, the data suggest that there are certain personal characteristics that distinguish employees who tend to engage in empowered behavior from those who tend to engage in unempowered behavior. Empowered employees tend to exhibit self confidence and a strong work ethic, while employees with a tendency to engage in unempowered behavior exhibit a lack of self confidence and lack of initiative.

Task Design

Often beyond the control of the manager, the actual tasks to be performed by the employee may be so uncomplicated as to provide no latitude for decision making, no opportunity for solving problems. Employees performing these tasks have few, if any, opportunities to engage in empowered action. Field notes made after observations in the phone queries department revealed this pattern of employees in routine tasks that require no decision-making or problem-solving behavior. Here employees merely answered phones and transferred customers to the correct number; the average exchange took under 20 seconds. Field notes described a typical observation:

Not many decision points . . . just extracting brief information from the customer. Rarely do they pass a customer on to a supervisor.. I checked with a supervisor who, when I described my observation, said I

had seen most of the anomalies in regular operations. (5/24)

This pattern suggests that task design itself may impede empowered action when employees are presented with few opportunities to take empowered action in the course of performing their routine duties.

In the remaining four departments observed, tasks performed were of sufficient complexity to provide ample observation of empowered behaviors. Still, some employees pointed out that some tasks were strictly regimented in an effort to create uniform employee performance. This regimentation quashed any opportunity for the employee to apply creative problem-solving techniques in the delivery of customer service.

There are certain people that have a knack for selling and they don't have to even try; it just comes naturally. Yet, there's a procedure now we're having to go by and it's fake. The people that are doing it excellent on their own are having to change to conform to this new way. (W3)

We have to ask it directly as it is on screen. If we don't, if [management] is observing us, then they take scores off for that. (X2)

If the company would cut us a little slack and go "okay, we recognize that maybe this situation's not good, this [performance requirement] is not good . . . " we might be more apt to want to do it. (V2)

This pattern suggests that attempts to routinize procedure in performing a task may undermine the attempts of employees to engage in empowered behavior even in complex and broadly defined tasks.

To summarize the task design findings, employees must be given room in which to exercise empowered action in job performance. Empowerment efforts are impeded when that room is restricted either by a task so simple it requires no individualized action or by attempts to routinize more complex tasks.

Training

All employees of The Company were required to attend a two-day quality training workshop. Not all employees attended on the same dates; all employees had, however, been through training within the last two years. This training included an empowerment component in which employees were introduced to "Quality Tools" designed to encourage empowered behavior.

Some employees were also involved in follow-up training some time after the original workshop. In these instances employees used tools presented in the workshop and were guided in their use by a quality facilitator. The employees involved in this follow-up training were more likely to exhibit empowered behavior using the quality training tools

designed to solve problems in their work. This pattern emerged in interview data with quotes such as:

Right now I'm serving on a team to improve the database for our department. We're using the quality process to determine what is really causing the problems with the database. We have an input/output chart to see where the worked goes. We did a flowchart to see where the database problems start and we worked through the Quality Blueprint. (Y1)

If you bring in a Quality Lead Team and you take a problem and you say "this is what we're doing and this is what we want to do," sometimes you can come up with a valuable solution. (Z1)

More employees however, expressed the feeling that there had been no follow-up training after the initial workshop.

A lot of times you are taught things in class and then you touch on things lightly and you're told you're going to have follow-up training . . . that never happens. (W3)

This lack of follow-up training appeared to have created two conditions that would impede empowered action using the quality tools taught in the workshops: in some instances employees could not discern how the tools presented in general training could be applied to the specifics of their job tasks, and in some cases employees had simply forgotten

most of the training they had received nearly two years before. The pattern revealing an inadequate understanding of the application of quality tools emerged in quotes like these:

What we did in the workshops, there hasn't been any follow through on it. We haven't seen any hands-on programs implemented to find out what changes need to be made at the customer contact level. (Z5)

Total quality as used in our industry doesn't apply here. I think I could buy into it at General Motors, but here where we give service for a customer? (Z1)

It's nice to get off [the phone] and do things, but it was a waste of my time because it does not pertain to our department. (Y2)

Item number 2 on the questionnaire addressed the use of one of the major quality tools by asking if respondents requested help from a "work group or team." The modal response was 3 ("sometimes") with a mean response of 3.15. This would suggest that these teams, often aided by a quality facilitator, are not being widely used in all departments. Indeed, one transcript revealed this perspective:

I mean, we have our little quality people [facilitators] we just don't let them in the offices. (Z1)

The other condition impeding empowered action using the quality tools was the tendency of employees to forget the tools introduced in training and reinforced in a pamphlet supplied to all employees. The survey questionnaire item 9 asked respondents if they felt free to start the "escalation process," a quality tool designed to bring work-related improvement opportunities to the attention of upper management. Eleven respondents did not complete item 9 (3 other questionnaire items received 1 nonresponse each). Several employees indicated that they did not understand the term "escalation process" by writing in "huh?" and "what?" or simply "don't understand." In interviews, this tendency to forget training was revealed when, in response to the request "tell me about the quality workshop all employees went to about two years ago," interviewees said,

Gee . . . there have been so many
of these two-day programs . . . what
everybody here refers to as
brainwashing. (V1)

We had a speaker, but I really don't
remember . . . (Z2)

The inability to see how the tools introduced in training could be used on the job or simply forgetting the tools altogether were certainly two conditions that impeded empowered behavior using those tools, yet the training did seem to be effective in communicating the concept of empowerment. The term was used by nearly every interviewee

in a context that suggested they understood the concept.

In the central office, I noticed a picture of the construction group there that's been empowered; they don't have a supervisor, they have a coach. (V8)

A few years ago, along with the quality process, we empowered our [employees] to be able to respond more freely to the customers. (Y1)

In response to the interviewer's observation that the departmental employees used a lot of their own judgment on the job,

We do. They have a term for that. They call it "empowered; you're empowered. (Z4)

To summarize the finding concerning training for empowered behavior, the data suggest that training for these employees is effective in introducing the concept of empowerment and follow-up work with a facilitator encourages the use of tools introduced in training to guide empowered behavior. Without follow-up work with a facilitator, employees are often unaware of how to apply specific tools or simply forget the tools.

This is not to say that employees who did not receive follow-up training were reluctant to take empowered action. They did so, however, without using the tools introduced in training. Many employees, once introduced to the concept of

empowerment in training, responded that they had always felt empowered in their work.

We have always been empowered in our position. (V2)

I always felt empowered, so I didn't have any change after that [quality training]. (V1)

We already did that in our office before the quality process. (Z3)

This pattern suggests that employees may be empowered without formal training. Many of the interviewees cited managers that had long encouraged empowered behavior. This condition will be addressed in the next section of this chapter.

Management

Employees who were observed in empowered action or reported empowered action in interview often mentioned managers who had encouraged empowered behavior. The following quotes are from employees in a department with this type of management:

I feel comfortable making decisions about things that we used to take to supervisors. Just because--and they have told us repeatedly, time and time again--"you have the power to make the decision; use your good judgment; make the decision." That part of it they have really worked on. (Z5)

Once your supervisor feels that you make good decisions, she just lets you make your own decisions. (Z2)

There's been so much talk about [empowerment] within my section. My supervisor is real good about that. I mean, if you have something that you cannot handle, I believe she has a keen sense of knowing whether you can or can't. Some things that are brought to her, she will say, "you can handle that; you don't need me for that." (Z4)

Responses to item number 8 on the questionnaire supported this pattern of management support for empowered action. It asked if respondents were encouraged to use their own judgment in their work. The modal response was 5 ("always") with a mean of 4.25.

Some employees reported being discouraged from taking empowered action by managers. These two quotes come from employees in a department with management that was forced by circumstance to discourage some initiatives:

They tell us that we are empowered, but it has its limitations. I think that's kind of contradictory because when they give us these opportunities-- and everyone has a customer at least once a day, I know, that is really in need of service [that day] some type of emergency situation--and [the supervisors] tell us we can't do this. (X2)

I had heard that "we want an employee who's knocking [the customer's] socks off . . . to get the customer what she wants." So, I called the person in charge and told her "we're talking about knocking their socks off and this woman wants

somebody out there today and we're showing Saturday; can I knock her socks off?"
She said, "no." (X1)

This pattern suggests that managers can provide feedback encouraging empowered action by affirming employee's judgment and allowing action on the part of employees without supervisory intervention, or employees can be discouraged by managers who provide negative feedback for empowered action by second guessing employee decisions and requiring that supervisory permission be granted before action is taken.

Managers, in addition to providing feedback that encourages empowered behavior, can also provide the information that employees need to make sound job-related decisions. Employees in four of the five departments observed had large desk reference racks of information designed to help them render customer service. Entries appear throughout the field notes concerning employees using the desk references to solve job-related problems. Indeed, managers designed these materials to aid employees in taking empowered action:

I'll show you our red handbook; most people have it in a red binder so we call it our red handbook. Just about everything you need to know is in that red book as far as decision making and as far as what we call online computer treatment, making the decisions [about] customer service. Everything you need to know is in

that book, or I tried to put it in
that book. (Z2)

Item number 6 on the questionnaire asked respondents if they felt they had "enough" information upon which to base decisions. Both the mean and the modal responses were 4 (midpoint between "sometimes and always"), which suggests that employees, for the most part, perceive a nearly adequate supply of information.

Yet some employees demonstrated a reluctance to use these materials and often turned to supervisors, or interrupted other workers, to seek information. Their reasons were expressed as follows:

Have you seen the paper that
hangs out in [the department]?
You're constantly getting stacks
to pull out these and put these
in. Mine aren't filled; I don't
have time. Or the ones that get
filled don't get read. (V1)

Most of our communications are in the
form of written memos and newsletters
and we don't have time to read them. (Z5)

We have newsletters, all kinds of
newsletters, memos that constantly
come through. But it's real hard
to decipher some of the things.
Really, they're high-tech information,
you're wondering "well, how does
this affect me?" (X1)

This pattern in the data suggests that information overload, in terms of sheer volume or technicality, can impede empowered behavior by preventing the diffusion of

information employees need to make decisions and solve problems.

Another management condition appearing to have an impact on empowered behavior was the provision of tools and/or technology with which to perform job duties. Employees in observation often expressed frustration with the equipment they were using. Frequently, the field notes reported employee complaints about the "computers being slow today," and indeed, this message was often related to the customer. Field notes from June 6 carry this entry:

Recurring theme, technology doesn't support the employee . . . "computers are slow today . . . " new system in sales, very complex! Some complaints about the number of screens you must go through to get something done.

This pattern was supported in interview data.

These computers we have now, I think, I think they're terrible. I don't like them. You're moving your hands all over the place . . . My hands never left the keyboard on the old one, but it was so outdated (Y2)

[with the old system] you could get up from your desk and move across the room if you needed to get supplies or if you needed to use another machine in the office. That changed when we got the new terminals . . . I'm tied to this desk; I have very little freedom to make decisions about when I will do the work that needs to be done. (Z5)

This pattern in the data suggests that employees may be attempting to use empowered strategies to deliver customer service, but these attempts can be frustrated by inadequate technical support.

The final management condition that appeared to have an impact on empowerment efforts was one of policy. In several of the departments under study the policy that guided employee performance evaluation actually impeded empowered behavior. In one office, employees were given an "AWT," or "average work time" per call which they had to meet or beat in order to receive top evaluations. This policy encouraged the handling of customers as quickly as possible. Aware of this, employees in this department were unlikely to make an extended effort to achieve optimum customer service. Two employees described a ploy in which "AWT" was raised by disconnecting customer callers as soon as they came on the line (field notes, 6/25). Another employee explained the reluctance to deal with complex customer services:

It's best just to send it on to the
supervisor and let them deal with it . . .
because you have this always in the
back of your mind when you're on a call
that takes a long, long time: your AWT
is going down. (Y3)

In another department with a wider variety of evaluative measures, there was still an emphasis on the quick handling

of customer services. Complained one employee of the policy,

I guess it's a paradox because we have this performance level . . . there's a certain amount of time that we're supposed to have a customer on and off the line, yet we're supposed to be attentive and give good customer service and deal with them on a one-on-one basis, but we're also not supposed to hold them on the line long. (Z6)

This pattern of evaluative policy suggests that management can actually impede empowered behavior by designing performance evaluations that undermine employee efforts to provide optimum customer service.

One department was fortunate to have a manager who had instituted a feedback policy that encouraged employees in the empowered action of making suggestions for improving the quality of the department's work as encouraged in The Company's Values Statement. Employees had responded to this policy enthusiastically.

We let [employees] know that we were going to have the committee-- form a committee--to work on the database and asked them what things they would like to be changed or added. So we had a whole list when we got together . . . and we're still getting some of that. (Y1).

You can tell [the manager]; because that's why they changed some of the [computer] keys on top . . . so you know, she listens to us; she listens to our input. (Y2)

There were some things that we complained about that they finally changed. (Y3)

In other departments, employees complained of growing discouraged after suggestions for quality improvements went unrewarded, not just at the departmental level, but also at a higher management level.

The last time that I sent them a suggestion, it was a major thing. They said at the time the company is not going into this, blah, blah, blah Two years later it was implemented and I didn't get the credit for it. That's okay; I just didn't send any more in. (Z3)

I've submitted an idea and then the answer back was "we don't understand what you're saying." I guess that kind of discouraged me. You need to not let a "no" stop you; sometimes it does though. (V1)

They have this little thing where you can submit [a suggestion] to [The Company] and sometimes that does work, but as far as making things easier in our office, no. You just gripe and get frustrated and nothing ever changes. (W3)

This pattern of mixed outcomes for the suggestion system was confirmed in the survey data with the responses to questionnaire items 3 and 4. Item 3 asked respondents if they had been asked for suggestions to improve the quality of their work; the modal response was 3 ("sometimes") and the mean was a slightly higher 3.09. Item 4 asked if

suggestions for improvement were taken seriously. Again, the modal response was 3 and the mean 3.02.

The pattern that emerged in this data suggests that a system which encourages input from employees and then shows them the positive result of that input can encourage employees to engage in the empowered behavior of identifying quality improvement opportunities. That behavior is impeded, however, when suggestion systems show the employee no positive result of his or her efforts.

To summarize findings in this section, conditions of management can affect attempts to empower employees. Where managers provide positive feedback for employees' empowered behavior, that behavior is encouraged. Where managers discourage empowered behavior, for example by requiring supervisor approval for employee decisions, empowered behavior is impeded. And while providing information that employees need to make decisions in their work can facilitate empowered action, providing an overload of information or highly technical information, and little employee time for processing that information, can impede empowered action. Inadequate tools and/or technology can also impede empowered behavior by frustrating individual initiative. Finally, empowered behavior can be impeded by policy that evaluates performance without clear criteria for rewarding empowered action and by policy that discourages employee input. Providing input can be encouraged, however,

when policies are in place to solicit employee suggestions and to offer evidence of their use and credit to the enterprising employee.

Environment

Empowered employees are, by definition, using their own "powers" of knowledge and judgment to solve problems on the job and offer suggestions for improving quality. Conditions in the corporate environment can, however, deplete the employee's personal resources. Many employees reported feelings of stress associated with their working environment. Two employees revealing a pattern of unempowered behavior in observation and interview reported:

The thing that really--and this is why I take the attitude I have--the thing that really impresses me about the company is in the stress-type job that we have; nobody even addresses stress like that. It's a stressful environment. (Z6)

I have been so nervous, stressed; I've had ulcers since I've been here, going back and forth to the doctor. There's so much you can take, but you can't dish it back out. (X2)

Other employees, displaying a mixed pattern of empowered and unempowered behaviors, cited specific reasons for the stress that sometimes affected their performance.

People who are being monitored [by supervisors evaluating performance] it creates a whole lot of stress . . . you get really nervous and you're afraid. I'm afraid. I tend not to perform as well when they're listening. (Z5)

It's a scary place to work now. It really is, not because the work's hard, but you're always looking over your shoulder, afraid they might do away with [this] office and send it to [another state]. (V2)

We're having to work so many days and so many overtime hours that it's becoming that you feel really stressed out. (Y3)

Several employees mentioned a pattern of tranquilizing drug use in their departments.

I would say, I'd venture to say, there's been 25 to 30 people out on nervous breakdowns just in my office . . . Do you know, there's probably that same amount right now--25 to 30 people--on nerve medication. (W3)

Field notes from observation in another department carry this entry:

observed with a woman who focused on stress as part of the job. Said 16 people had taken stress-related leave in the last few years and she estimates that 50% of workers in the department are on some kind of tranquilizer. (6/7)

This pattern suggests that conditions common to the corporate environment--demanding work, supervisor scrutiny, long hours, job insecurity--can create conditions of stress

that may discourage empowered behavior by sapping the employee's personal resources. In extreme conditions employees may be forced to leave work temporarily or work under the influence of tranquilizing medication.

To summarize the data surrounding environmental issues, empowered action may be impeded by stressful conditions that are frequently elements of the corporate environment.

Conclusions

Identified in this case study are five conditions that affected attempts to empower employees, and the employees' subsequent attempts at empowered action. Those conditions are:

1. characteristics of the employee
2. tasks designed with parameters for empowered behavior
3. training for empowerment
4. management of the empowered employee
5. work environment of the employee.

Within each of these conditions emerged situations that could facilitate empowerment, or impede empowerment. It appears from the data that empowerment is facilitated in employees experiencing some or all of the following:

1. self confidence and a strong work ethic
2. tasks that allow for decision making and problem solving
3. training with adequate opportunity to apply the skills learned in training

4. positive feedback for empowered action,
sufficient information to guide that
action within a framework of tools and
policy supportive of the action
5. a work environment supportive of individual
resources

The data also suggest that empowerment can be impeded within each of those conditions by employees experiencing some or all of the following:

1. low self esteem and/or minimal work ethic
2. simple tasks or tasks so routinized that
they allow for no individualization
3. generalized training allowing no opportunity
for application in the employee's job
tasks of the skills learned in training
4. negative feedback for empowered action
and/or insufficient information to
guide action within a framework of
policy and tools unsupportive of
empowered action
5. a stressful work environment

The limitations of this research and the implications of these findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

"If the eighties were the time for the flowering of new perspectives on managerial practice, the remainder of the nineties may be the time for a sober re-evaluation of managerial responsibility" (Nohria & Berkley, 1994)

This chapter will offer discussion of the limitations of this study and provide a summary of the findings and their alignment with previous empowerment work, reported in scholarly journals and the business press. The individual and organizational components of empowerment will be discussed as will indications of the need for management training. A brief overview of empowerment at The Company will be provided before the chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings, recommendations for implementing and maintaining a successful empowerment program and, finally, recommendations for future research.

Limitations of the Study

While it is true that the findings derived from qualitative research cannot be generalized to a larger population, the findings derived from this examination of empowerment efforts at The Company may be of great value to human resource development planners within The Company, and

perhaps of some use to others designing empowerment programs in similar corporate environments. The Company and its workforce do not comprise an atypical corporate environment. The variables surrounding the issue of empowerment in this case could be found in other corporate settings where a large workforce performs duties driven by customer service. Chapter four reported employees complaining of long hours and heavy workloads. The field notes are peppered with stories of demanding customers. The Company is downsizing in response to changes in the nature of competition. None of these conditions makes the subject of this case unique.

Summary of the Findings

This case revealed both personal and corporate influences on efforts to empower employees.

The personal influences on empowerment were confidence level and work ethic:

- empowerment efforts were facilitated when employees were self confident and/or had a work ethic;
- empowerment efforts were impeded when employees lacked self confidence and/or a work ethic.

Corporate conditions influencing efforts to empower employees that emerged in this study were task design; training; management provision of feedback, information, tools/technology, and policy; and the stress level of the working environment.

Task design influences empowerment efforts in that:

- empowerment efforts were facilitated when task design allowed for employee decision making;
- empowerment efforts were impeded when tasks were highly routinized.

Training emerged as an influence on empowerment efforts in that:

- empowerment efforts were facilitated when employees received job-specific training and opportunities to utilize empowerment skills learned in training;
- empowerment efforts were impeded when employees received generalized training with no follow-up utilization of skills learned in training.

Management emerged in this study as the overwhelming condition influencing empowerment efforts. Management practices affecting empowerment efforts were feedback, information, tools/technology, and/or policy making:

- empowerment efforts were facilitated when managers provided one or more of the following: positive feedback for empowered action, adequate information for employee decision making, adequate tools/technology, and/or policy supportive of individual initiative;

- empowerment efforts were impeded when managers provided one or more of the following: negative feedback for empowered action, inadequate information or an overload in volume or technicality of information, inadequate tools/technology, and/or policy unsupportive of individual initiative.

Finally, the stress level of the work environment emerged as an influence on empowerment efforts:

- empowerment efforts were facilitated when employees were working in environments where stress creators had been minimized;
- empowerment efforts were impeded when employees were working in stressful environments.

Alignment of the Findings with Previous Work

Many of the findings in this study are consonant with the limited scholarly research and the abundant perspectives in the business press. If, as Babbie (1990) maintains, the purpose of social science research is to confirm common knowledge (p.21-22) then that may well be a significant contribution of this research. Table 4 summarizes the points of agreement in the findings of this study, the scholarly research and the business press.

Table 4: Points of Agreement in This Study, Previous Scholarly Research, and the Business Press

This Study	Scholarly Research	Business Press
Self confidence/ work ethic	Internal locus of control (Fiedler, 1993) Competence (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Tymon, 1988; Lee, 1987)	Self reliance (Atchison, 1991)
Job-specific training		Job-specific training (Johnson, 1993; Beer, Eisenstat & Spector, 1990)
Resource provision	Supportive context (Britt, 1993; Spreitzer, 1992)	Resource provision (Adler, 1993; Kanter, 1979) Technical support-E Mail (McCune, 1992)
Information provision	Access to information (Pacanowsky, 1988) "Licensed information" (Martin & Vogt, 1992)	Access to information (Turney, 1993; Currid, 1992; Stewart, T., 1992; Whittle, 1992; Eubanks, 1991; Kanter, 1979)
Positive feedback	Perception of intent to empower (Britt, 1993) Environment of socio- political support (Spreitzer, 1992)	Positive feedback (Adler, 1993; McAdams, 1993; Nelson & Taylor, 1990)
Empowering policy	Interdependency of organizational members (Britt, 1993) Organic organizational structure (Spreitzer, 1992)	Systems encouraging employee input (Adler, 1993; Matthes, 1992)

One area of the literature that findings here did not wholly support suggests a need for training employees for empowered action (Landes, 1994; Niven, 1993; Stewart, 1993; Bernstein, 1992; Doyle, 1992; Manz, 1992; Thier, 1989). A pattern emerged in the data from this study in which employees maintained that they were "always empowered" or at least empowered before the Quality Program designed to train them to be empowered. While follow-up training that was job-specific seemed to facilitate the use of specific "Quality Tools" designed to encourage empowered action, training in general did not seem to be a major facilitator. The greatest number of facilitators fell into the category of "management." Indeed, employees claiming to have been empowered prior to training often cited their manager as having encouraged empowered action prior to The Company's empowerment training.

The Dual Nature of Empowerment:
Individual and Organizational

The finding that management conditions are the primary facilitators of empowerment, given self-confident employees with a work ethic, meshes with both the scholarly research findings and the theoretical perspective of Symbolic Interactionism. The scholarly findings collectively suggest that empowerment has both an individual and an organizational component. The individual component is

addressed in these findings by the identification of employee personality characteristics that facilitate empowerment efforts. The organizational component is captured in the management conditions that facilitate empowerment. Kanter (1979) maintains that "an employee's most important work relationship is with his or her supervisor; when many of them talk about 'the company' they mean their immediate boss" (p.67). Also, the scholarly research defines empowerment as a motivational construct. The research findings here suggest that ~~that~~ motivation is primarily a result of interaction, first within the individual, and then between the individual and his or her manager.

The Need for Management Training

The Symbolic Interactionist perspective provides a guide for tracking the interaction that influences motivation. To return to Blumer's (1969) "three simple premises": first, human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them; second, the meaning of such things arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; third, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (p.2). Tracking employee action from this perspective, then, employee action is based on meaning derived from

interaction and modified through an interpretive process. The Symbolic Interactionist perspective would hold that the employee engages first in "self-interaction" to determine appropriate action; the findings here suggest that an empowered individual's interpretive process is influenced by self confidence and a work ethic. Next, the employee would look to others in the organizational setting to "map out" an action that fits a shared interpretation of that setting and the actors in it. The findings here suggest that the most important "other" to an employee in the organizational setting is the manager. It would follow, then, that perhaps empowerment training should be focused on supervisory personnel whose actions largely guide the actions of others. The anecdotal literature cites a primary reason for the failure of empowerment efforts to be a lack of understanding and/or commitment on the part of managers (Nohria & Berkley, 1994; Adler, 1993; Duck, 1993; Bahls, 1992; Bernstein, 1992; Brown, 1992; Garvin, 1991; Beer, Eisenstat & Spector, 1990; Letize & Donovan, 1990; Nelson & Taylor, 1990). Focusing training on managers, then, might alleviate the problems of lack of understanding and commitment to empowering efforts. Again, far from being dispensable in an empowered organization, the manager would appear to be essential. Training managers to take on the role of an empowering leader might well be the best application of empowerment training.

Empowerment at The Company

The benefits accruing to an empowering organization as addressed in Chapter One are supported largely by anecdotal observation, and too, were beyond the scope of this research design. Offered here for consideration are some indications from this study supportive of some benefits. The researcher here was not privy to larger organizational issues information such as cost savings or competitive advantage; nor was the research longitudinal, tracking for improvements in productivity, quality and/or service. However, the advantages of empowerment that accrue to individual employees primarily and then secondarily to The Company, were in evidence. The advantages of a marketplace of ideas contributed by employees to improve work processes (Smith, Anderson & Brooking, 1993; Kanter 1983; Hunt 1979) and hence improving morale via a shared sense of responsibility (e.g. Ambrosia, 1994; Kuttner, 1985; Kanter, 1979) were evident in departments where employee suggestions were solicited and used. Enthusiastic participation (Vogt & Murrell, 1990) was reported by supervisors recounting the volume of suggestions received in a recent upgrade of the database. Too, the over 40% return rate of questionnaires and the level of cooperation afforded to the researcher by employees of The Company suggest a willingness to participate. Finally, conflict resolution satisfactory to all parties (Vogt &

Murrell, 1990) was evident in problem-solving departmental meetings. Field notes following meetings recorded a pattern of open discussion across lines of authority and clear attempts to reach consensus.

Also reported in Chapter One were problems encountered by some organizations attempting to empower employees. Although this research was not designed to evaluate The Company's efforts, offered here for consideration are some indications from this study of problems encountered in the process of empowerment attempts. The Company appeared to have largely avoided the major problems reported in the business press, such as self-directed anarchy (Levinson, 1993) or aimlessly empowered employees (Frohman, 1992) and the use of a ready-made empowerment package (e.g. Nohria & Berkley, 1994; Garvin, 1991). Only two problems appeared to emerge, uneven participation from employees ("People," 1991) and uneven management support (Bahls, 1992; Brown, 1992; Letize & Donovan, 1990). In-depth interviews revealed differences in levels of acceptance of empowered perspectives among employees and differences in the level of support for empowered action among supervisors. Questionnaire data revealed this pattern of mixed support with the modal response 3 ("sometimes") to questions asking if empowered behavior had been encouraged (item #3) and rewarded (item #4). Rewards for good work in general (item

#10) were not perceived by respondents, as indicated by the modal response 2.

Implications of the Findings

At the core of the findings reported here is the character of the empowered worker. If indeed the employee most likely to establish a pattern of empowered behavior is an employee with self confidence and a strong work ethic, then the empowerment process may well begin with character development and thus begin beyond the purview of corporate control. Yet it is not beyond the scope of corporate control to identify these characteristics in job applicants for tasks that would benefit from an empowered perspective. These findings also suggest that not all tasks require that perspective. Therefore, these findings in combination suggest a preliminary step in attempting an empowerment program would be one of job-matching; employees displaying self confidence and a work ethic are probably best matched with jobs that require decision-making and problem-solving behaviors. If there are highly routinized tasks to be performed, attempting to empower employees in these jobs may well be a waste of resources; these employees would have few opportunities to engage in empowered behavior and benefit to the company would be minimal.

Given conditions in which the tasks are complex and the employees performing them have self confidence and a strong

work ethic, the findings suggest that empowerment efforts are likely to be successful in a management environment dedicated not to supervision, but to the provision of resources needed to do the best possible work. In this study those resources emerged as specialized training, feedback, information, tools and policy.

While generalized quality training encompassing an empowerment concept did not seem essential in empowering employees, devoting time for more specialized on-the-job training guided by empowerment facilitators does seem to encourage the use of empowerment tools. While this may temporarily interrupt the trainees' work flow, the quality of that work may improve after training. One quality facilitator drew this analogy: One must stop work to sharpen a saw, but the work proceeds much more quickly afterwards.

Positive feedback appears to be another resource that encourages empowered action. Of all the resources found to influence empowerment efforts, this one may be easiest to provide. It would appear in this case to require respect for employee judgment and the sending of that message by a management that encourages the relinquishing of supervisory control.

Information, however, may be the most difficult resource to provide. Findings here indicated that information overload, both in volume and technicality, can

*too much
info share*

result in employees ignoring the information provided because they don't have time to absorb it or they don't understand it. If, as the history indicates, companies tend to engage in empowerment efforts during times of budgetary cutbacks and increased work demands, time devoted to departmental meetings and out-of-town management visits may be restricted thus decreasing the information flow in the meeting format when time is set aside for information exchange. Attempting to replace these meetings with written information may contribute to information overload. Too, it reduces the opportunities for employees to engage in the "escalation process," the empowered action of bringing to the attention of management opportunities for work improvements.

Providing the tools/technical support for individual initiative would seem to be best done in consultation with employees who will be using the tools. Doing so may not only result in better design, but also provide employees opportunities to see their ideas used. This type of reinforcing feedback was shown to encourage empowered action in this case.

Finally, policy designed to encourage empowered action in the customer-service context should not evaluate employee performance solely on the quantity of customer contacts in which he or she engages. Policy that focuses some attention on the quality of that contact, though harder to design and

administer, should encourage employees to take the extra time required to use their own knowledge and judgment to best serve the customer.

Need for manager
The conditions found to influence empowerment efforts in this case should be good news for middle managers often threatened by efforts to empower employees. These managers fear that, once employees can make their own decisions, there will be no need for a manager to "control" this empowered workforce. Indeed, there should be no more need for managerial control. The empowered workforce however, needs resources the manager, now free from supervisory duties, can attempt to provide. The findings of this study suggest that these managers are essential to the empowered workforce when they turn their attention to providing feedback and information, when they create empowering policy and when they provide the best tools.

Finally, all too often, as the history of empowerment efforts in Chapter Two revealed, companies embrace empowerment in response to competitive threat and economic decline. The findings reported here suggest that empowerment efforts require human, material and time resources, often limited in an environment of downsizing. Too, these conditions can also create an environment of stress for employees working longer hours with fewer resources and threatened job security. Ironically, a company is likely to begin an empowerment effort just when

conditions for its success, as identified in this study, are at their worst.

Yet, the oft-documented stories of successful empowerment efforts described in Chapter One suggest it may well be worth the investment in human, material and time resources--even in a climate of increased competition and economic decline--to give hard working, self confident employees, well matched to their tasks, managers devoted to securing the resources necessary to do the best job possible.

Recommendations for Successful Empowerment Efforts

The following list summarizes recommendations for implementing and maintaining a successful empowerment program based on the findings reported in this study.

1. Hire self-confident employees who display indications of a strong work ethic
2. Match them to jobs that provide latitude for decision-making and problem solving
3. Provide them with managers who demonstrate skill in:
 - obtaining resources (tools, materials)
 - gathering, organizing, and distributing essential information effectively
 - providing positive feedback for empowered action

- creating empowering policy
 - .continued training
 - .quick response to employee suggestions
 - .reward systems for empowered action
- 4. Maximize the employee's personal resources by minimizing stress creators in the work environment

Recommendations for Further Research

As stated in Chapter One, there has been a great deal of talk about empowerment, but little scholarly research. One of the reasons for this may well be the reluctance of companies to allow researcher access (Lofland, 1976). Yet it would seem a necessity to examine the phenomenon of empowerment "at work" as it were. More case study, like the one presented here, could only shed light on these findings, suggesting which might be enduring pattern and which might be anomaly. Further, more conditions could emerge and thus better guide future empowerment efforts. While beyond the scope of this study, a consideration of corporate culture and corporate history preceding an empowerment effort might be of value in revealing long-standing conditions that influence the efforts. A much more narrow focus, but of equal value, would be an in-depth examination of the character and personality traits of the empowered employee, and/or the employee who refuses to be empowered.

While most examinations of empowerment have been driven by a management science perspective, further examination from a communication perspective might provide fresh

insight. If, as the findings to date suggest, empowerment is indeed a motivational construct, then further application of the Symbolic Interactionist perspective might well illuminate the sources of motivation. Communication, meaning and motivation are seemingly inextricably intertwined antecedents to action; examining the antecedents might well aid in predicting action.

The possibilities are only limited by the researcher's intellectual curiosity. The stories of amazing success attributed to the empowered workforce are matched by equally amazing stories of aimless, or worse, anarchical workforces. This only feeds intellectual curiosity by revealing the powerful--if you will--nature of the concept. Empowerment is deserving of more study by those willing to serve--in the words of Drucker--as the invaluable listener.

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LIST OF REFERENCES

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

COMMUNICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

You have been invited to participate in a study of employee communications. Your involvement will take the form of completing this brief questionnaire and returning it via company mail in the attached envelope. Your response will remain completely anonymous as no name or identifier will appear on the questionnaire and it will be returned directly to the researcher, Linda Martin. Only she will see the responses. Your response will be very important to the research project even if you had no other contact with Ms. Martin. The results will be reported in a dissertation submitted to University of Tennessee. No company, division, or individual names will appear in the dissertation. Your participation is completely voluntary and greatly appreciated.

Please circle the numbered response that best applies:

	Never		Sometimes		Always
1. My work is driven by customer expectations	1	2	3	4	5
2. I ask my work group/team for suggestions to improve the quality of our work	1	2	3	4	5
3. I have been asked for suggestions to improve the quality of our work	1	2	3	4	5
4. Suggestions for improvement are taken seriously	1	2	3	4	5
5. I trust my judgment when making decisions about my work	1	2	3	4	5
6. I have enough information on which to base my decisions	1	2	3	4	5
7. I feel my immediate supervisor trusts my judgment	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am encouraged to use my own judgment in my work	1	2	3	4	5
9. I feel free to start the escalation process	1	2	3	4	5
10. Good work is recognized/rewarded	1	2	3	4	5

COMMENTS: (Please feel free to address any area you think might aid the researcher; use the back of this sheet.)

APPENDIX B

Statement of Research and Consent Form

You have been invited to participate in a study of employee communication programs. Your participation will take the form of one open-ended, face-to-face, audio recorded interview with Linda Martin. Only Ms. Martin will have access to the tape-recording and your identity will remain confidential. Tapes will be stored in the home office of Ms. Martin with only a code number to identify the tape. They will be destroyed 5 years after completion and acceptance of the final research report. This final report will take the form of a dissertation submitted to the College of Communication, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and only excerpts of the interview will appear in this report. Neither you nor the company you work for will be identified.

Your participation is voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time. Refusal to participate will result in absolutely no consequence to you. Ms. Martin will be happy to provide answers to any question you may have about the project.

I have read and understood this explanation of the dissertation project and have had my questions about it answered satisfactorily. I voluntarily agree to participate.

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

Results From Questionnaire

Response scale: 1 through 5; 1 = never, 3 = sometimes,
5 = always

Results:	Mean	Mode
1. My work is driven by customer expectations	4.11	5 (69)
2. I ask my work group/team for suggestions to improve the quality of our work	3.15	3 (60)
3. I have been asked for suggestions to improve the quality of our work	3.09	3 (63)
4. Suggestions for improvement are taken seriously	3.02	3 (61)
5. I trust my judgment when making decisions about my work	4.40	5 (78)
6. I have enough information on which to base my decisions	4.00	4 (57)
7. I feel my immediate supervisor trusts my judgment	3.98	4 (57) 5 (54)
8. I am encouraged to use my own judgment in my work	4.25	5 (73)
9. I feel free to start the escalation process	3.50	3 (44) 4 (36)
10. Good work is recognized and rewarded	2.79	2 (42) 3 (41)

VITA

Linda Ann-Compton Martin graduated from Louisiana State University, Shreveport, in 1982 receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Speech Communication. Ms. Martin worked as a journalist for one year before entering University of Denver where she earned a Master of Public Communication in 1984. Ms. Martin worked in a variety of public relations positions for both Corporate and not-for-profit organizations before accepting an instructor's position at Louisiana State University, Shreveport, in 1988. She continued graduate work and in December, 1994, received a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Communications from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.