The Case for a Three Dimensional Employee Empowerment Model

By Pierre A. Towns

Introduction

This article introduces a new employee empowerment construct that incorporates employee self-efficacy; the belief that employees are capable of performing in a way that will result in a successful outcome in a particular situation, to improve organizations’ employee empowerment initiatives’ effectiveness and efficiency.

Over the past several decades, much has been written about the benefits of empowering employees. Additionally, human resources practitioners and consultants have demonstrated how employee empowerment improves organizational effectiveness and efficiency. The intent of this writing is not to refute empirical data or anecdotal evidence supporting the virtues of employee empowerment. Its purpose is to challenge conventional thinking and reveal new insights relative to the design and implementation of employee empowerment initiatives that will eliminate the inherent disadvantages in the conventional processes and increase the overall outcome’s effectiveness and efficiencies.

The Employee Empowerment Concept

Employee empowerment theory postulates that if employees are informed and free to behave in a less encumbered manner, they are enabled to carry-out their job responsibilities more effectively and efficiently. When employees understand the vision, mission and goals; are trained; are given decision-making authority and are provided an environment relatively free of punitive consequences for making a mistake; they will demonstrate more responsibility, accountability, initiative and risk-taking. Thomas and Velthouse defined the concept of empowerment as increased individual motivation at
work through the delegation of authority to the lowest level in an organization where a competent decision can be made\textsuperscript{ii}.

The empowerment concept has been tested over the last 20 plus years and has been proven to have significant predictive value.

**The Traditional Employee Empowerment Approach**

The traditional employee empowerment approach is shaped by two dimensions; the empowerment climate created by the employer and time. Traditional employee empowerment approaches focus on employers creating an empowerment climate that signals to employees that it is okay to behave in a more empowered way. Over time, an empowerment climate facilitates empowering employees to higher levels of performance by removing the disincentives to employee empowerment behavior.

With the disincentives removed, behavioral scientist theorized employees would ‘feel’ more empowered and began to behave in a more empowered manner. Empirical data proved researchers like Conger and Kanungo, and Liden and Tewksbury were right, and employee empowerment initiatives took flight\textsuperscript{iii}

This is how traditional, two dimensional employee empowerment works. In effect, it is a ‘pull’ strategy where employers create an empowerment climate by implementing the following organizational practices:

- Sharing organization knowledge like;
  - Vision, mission and goals
  - Financials
  - Performance objectives
- Building relationships
- Sharing authority
- Providing feedback and developmental opportunities
- Trusting employees
- Treating employees with respect
Blanchard, Carlos and Randolph boiled down empowerment facilitating, organizational practices to three primary elements;

- Information sharing – Which includes providing information like; vision, mission, goals, financials, performance objectives, quality and productivity to employees throughout the enterprise
- Autonomy through boundaries – Which references organizational structures, policies, procedures and practices that promote autonomous behavior among employees
- Team accountability:iv - which identifies the team as the decision-making unit with required authority

The Seibert, Silver and Randolph study results referenced in this writing defines the empowerment construct using these three primary elements. The empirical research conducted by Seibert, Silver and Randolph, tested seven hypotheses that examined the relationship between, what they called the ‘empowerment climate’, which in our model represents the traditional two-dimensional, employer-driven empowerment approach controlled and executed by the organization; and ‘psychological empowerment’ which the researchers defined as “an individual’s experience of intrinsic motivation that is based on cognitions about him-or herself in relation to his or her work role”v. That is, the employee’s psychological reaction to their work environment which is influenced by their values, beliefs and feelings of self-efficacy.

Seibert, Silver and Randolph’s research conclusions included:

1. The work-unit empowerment climate is positively related to work-unit performance. So, enhancing the empowerment climate will increase work-unit performance.

2. “The empowerment climate must be considered an important aspect of an organization’s effort to foster employees’ experiences of psychological empowerment”, however, it is not the only consideration.
3. Psychological empowerment mediates the effects of the empowerment climate on job satisfaction and is a link in an indirect relationship between the empowerment climate and job performance.

In their model, when properly implemented, the employer-driven empowerment climate explained 22 percent of the variance in work–unit performance and 12.7 percent of the total variance in job satisfaction; consequently, using the traditional two dimensional approach did result in more empowered employees, and greater efficiencies and effectiveness than the arcane method of top down command and control, but this method leaves significant opportunity for improvement.

**The Inherent Problem with the Traditional Two Dimensional Empowerment Approaches**

Through the two dimensions of empowerment climate and time, increased employer empowerment efforts do cause employee work units to begin to behave in a more empowered manner and achieve higher levels of performance, but far from an optimal level. In the Seibert, Silver and Randolph study, empowerment climate only explained 22 percent of the variance in work-unit performance; consequently, these organizations do not empower a high percentage of their employees.
Based on our experience, here’s how the two dimensional approach plays out over time.

The employer facilitates an empowerment climate by...

Changing structures, policies, procedures and practices

1. ‘Early adopters’ change rapidly, these are...

Employees that can change And Want to change

2. Other employees must be convinced that the change is real and here to stay, so they adopt the change more slowly

Employees that can change But Don't want to change

3. Employees require training and other support to develop the knowledge, skills and ability to behave in a more empowered manner; however without employee self-efficacy, employees will not internalize the training because they don’t truly believe they can change.

Employees that believe they cannot change But Want to change

4. In addition to training to increase self-efficacy, employee empowerment behavior must reach critical mass in the organization, creating a new group norm that influences ‘late adopters’

Employees believe they can't change And Don't want to change
As depicted above, once a change catalyst initiates the employer-driven empowerment climate change process; there are four types of employee adoption profiles that influence if and when, the change will be fully implemented and institutionalized.

The employer facilitates an empowerment climate by changing structures, policies, procedures and practices, with hopes of creating a non-threatening environment that signals to their employees that behaving in an empowered manner is encouraged and desired. As a result of the employer’s actions, employees will generally model one of the four adoption profiles, described by Hersey and Blanchard as ‘a follower’s ability and motivation’\(^7\).

1. Organization employees that are ‘early adopters’ i.e., those employees that want to change and can change, quickly began to behave in a more empowered manner. They have the knowledge, skills and abilities to emulate the desired behavior and prefer to behave in an empowered manner. They are also comfortable with leading change and migrating away from the majority culture.

2. Employees that can change but don’t want to change, must be convinced that the new empowerment climate is real and here to stay, before they are motivated to modify their behavior, but will eventually adopt an empowered behavior.

3. Employees that believe they cannot change but want to change, require training and other support to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities to behave in a more empowered manner; however, without employee self-efficacy, employees will not internalize the training because they don’t truly believe they can change; consequently, they will not be motivated to change. The two dimensional approach often does not provide enough support to fully modify this group’s behavior.

4. Employees that believe they cannot change and do not want to change also require training and other support to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities to
behave in a more empowered manner. Those employees must also improve self-efficacy in order to embrace and internalize the training. Additionally, enough employees in the organization must adopt the empowerment behavior in order to create enough peer pressure to force this last group to adopt empowerment behaviors, or be out of step with the new empowerment culture. The two dimensional approach does not provide enough of this support or enough employee adoption to fully modify this group’s behavior.

A graphic portrayal of the maximized, traditional, two dimensional model is depicted below. The green area represents the percent of the organization’s employees that have adopted the new employee empowerment behaviors. This area is defined by an empowerment climate dimension on the vertical axis (y) and the time dimension on the horizontal axis (x); however, this area is only a small percentage of the total organization’s workforce represented by the area of the entire cube. For example, if the cube represented a work force of 50,000 employees, only a relatively small percentage, 25% or so, would behave in an empowered manner as a result of only their employer creating an empowerment climate; consequently, the cube is not saturated with the color green which represents the organization’s percentage of employees that have adopted the new employee empowerment behaviors.
Traditionally, management practices have centered on managing human resources issues utilizing four different functions; company management, human resources, unions and the ombudsperson. In a perfect world, any of these functions can provide the employees in our respective workforces the knowledge, skills and abilities to motivate behavioral change. In reality, each of these functions has struggled to determine the most effective and efficient way to support the workforce. Additionally, they have lost much of the moral authority needed to inspire and motivate employees. More and more, those leading initiatives have ulterior motives that may, or may not, align with the best interest of the employee. WorldCom, Enron, Tyco, Adelphia, Global Crossing, Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities, etc., are recent reminders of how far some executive management teams and their “friendly” Boards are willing to go to achieve personal and business
objectives that are not in the long-term interest of the organization and employees. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that many HR professionals, union members and ombudspersons have fallen victim to this trend. ix

For this and the fact that many employees do not believe they are capable of changing their behavior and taking more control of their work-life. That is why we recommend that employee self-efficacy behaviors should be valued and nurtured in organizations as an important element of any employee development initiative. As employees, we need to assume more responsibility and accountability for our work-life and recognize our ability to significantly influence our work experience through increased self-efficacy. As employee self-efficacy relates to employee empowerment, employees should not solely rely on their employers to initiate employee empowerment practices; they should choose to behave in a manner that encourages their employer to remove obstacles to employee empowerment. The fact is, many employers don’t, or aren’t effective when they try to empower employees. It is within each employee’s control to master behaviors that empower themselves. These employee behaviors will result in an increased number of empowered employees, but a self-efficacy approach by itself, generally will not achieve the same level of employee empowerment as an employer-driven approach, or a combination of the two.

**What is the Three Dimensional Empowerment Model?**

The three dimensional empowerment model recognizes the power of employee self-efficacy; what Seibert, Silver and Randolph called psychological empowerment, as a supplement to the ‘employer climate’ approach. For any empowerment initiative, the three dimensional employee empowerment model demonstrates the optimal effect over time, of combining the employer-driven ‘empowerment climate’ and psychological empowerment, which includes self-efficacy.

A graphic representation of the three dimensional empowerment model is depicted below. In this model, the green area representing the percentage of the organization’s employees that have adopted the new employee empowerment behaviors is much larger than the green area of the traditional two dimensional model. This is because the area is now defined by an empowerment climate dimension on the vertical ‘y’ axis, an employee self-efficacy (psychological empowerment)
dimension on the ‘z’ axis, and the time dimension on the horizontal ‘x’ axis. By including a self-efficacy dimension, we are exponentially increasing the effect of the empowerment climate because it effectively mobilizes the previously mentioned ‘can’t change but want to change’ and ‘can’t change and don’t want to change’ employee groups. When these groups’ needs are addressed, the percentage of the organization’s employees that will adopt the new employee empowerment behaviors is a much larger portion of the organization’s overall workforce, as represented by the area of the entire cube.

![Three Dimensional Empowerment Model](image_url)
The Neglected Third Employee Empowerment Dimension

The concept of self-efficacy is the core of social cognitive theory. The theory helps us understand the development of behavior and personality as influenced by observational learning, social experience, and reciprocal determinism. These influential elements are the engine behind the accelerated effects of integrating the third dimension. Bandura’s social cognitive theory also represented the “self-efficacy beliefs function as an important set of proximal determinants of human motivation, affect, and action [which] operate on action through motivational, cognitive, and affective intervening processes.” This serves to explain the motivational power inherent in self-efficacy.

In the three dimensional empowerment model, self-efficacy is defined as the belief that each employee is capable of performing in a way that will result in a successful outcome in a specific situation. Self-efficacy beliefs begin to form in early childhood, but as with most behaviors, can continue to evolve and be shaped and influenced throughout life. As a learned behavior, employees can increase self-efficacy behavior over time with commitment and practice.

As one of the most studied topics in psychology, self-efficacy has been proven to significantly influence psychological states, behavior and motivation. Therefore, when implementing empowerment initiatives, it is not clear why management consultants and employers have focused so much on principally changing the employer’s structures, policies, procedures and practices at the expense of effectively providing employees with the tools to increase their self-efficacy. As the three dimensional model indicates, when appropriate attention is paid to simultaneously increasing the empowerment climate and the employee’s self-efficacy, the desired behaviors are increased significantly. This is because employees, in part, learn by observing others. Their development is influenced by what they observe in their environment, in the behavior of others and their cognitive reaction to those observances; consequently, these three factors are not static or independent; rather, they are all reciprocal. For example, 1) the employer creates an empowerment climate, 2) employees then observe the new management behaviors which changes the employee’s way of thinking (cognition), 3) which increases their self-efficacy and encourages them to behave in a more empowered manner.
Social cognitive theory and the power of self-efficacy does not just apply to empowerment concepts. The theory recognizes the significant difference between an individual’s capacity to perform competently and actually performing competently. Let’s examine a different, but related familiar example. We have all attended training programs taught by conscientious and highly qualified instructors that left us far from qualified in the subject matter covered. Our grandfathers were right when they told us ‘you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink’! If we are not motivated to learn the subject matter, we won’t, and a large part, but not the only part of that motivation comes from our level of self-efficacy. The most effective training programs include a module that increases the participants’ self-efficacy relative to the training subject matter.

**Why a Three Dimensional Approach?**

For a number of reasons, when properly implemented, a three dimensional approach results in a more efficient and effective implementation by:

- Eliminating the inherent ineffectiveness of the traditional two dimensional approach – The traditional approach is anchored in a ‘pull strategy’ where employers create an empowerment climate by changing structures, policies, procedures and practices in hopes of creating an environment that will motivate employees to change their behavior. Continuing with the training analogy; employers hiring a trainer, providing facilities, and providing the time for employees to attend, do not result in a large percentage of the employees learning the subject matter. This is not a very effective approach, nor is it very efficient if you have to retrain or suffer the consequences when the employee cannot apply the learning on-the-job. (Improved quality)

- Increasing the number of employees that behave in an empowered manner – The three dimensional model employs both a pull and push strategy simultaneously. In addition to the benefits derived from the employer-driven empowerment strategy, individual employees will take the initiative to modify their own behavior without prompting from management. (More empowerment)

- Accelerating employee empowerment organization-wide – Because empowerment behavior is occurring from the top down and from the bottom up, not only will there be more
employees that behave in an empowered manner, but that higher number will be reached much sooner in the process. (Shorter cycle times)

- Lowering costs – Since the benefits of implementing an empowerment strategy will be realized sooner, the shorter cycle times will result in lower costs

How do we Implement the Three Dimensional Employee Empowerment Model?

By simultaneously implementing the traditional employer-driven empowerment approach and the employee-driven employee approach

Elements of Kotter’s eight step plan for implementing change and Tichy’s change management theory are effective ways to implement the employer-driven empowerment component.xv

1. Create the vision for change organization-wide
2. Ensure strategic alignment among the organization’s technical, political and cultural systemsxvi
3. Implement technical, political and cultural strategies by;
   - Modifying the technical resources to produce the empowerment outcome. Some examples are;
     a. Strategy
     b. Goals
     c. Organization design
     d. Process improvements
   - Modifying the political systems to allocate resources and power within the organization to promote employee empowerment. Political systems include;
     a. Compensation programs
     b. Budgets
     c. Career decisions
     d. Power structure
   - Modifying the cultural systems which address what values are desired in the organization and what beliefs are valued. For example;
a. Basic assumptions (beliefs)
b. Values
c. Norms
d. Artifacts

4. Communicate the vision and strategies
5. Empower and encourage others
6. Identify, create and reward ‘quick wins’
7. Consolidate improvements, reassess changes and make adjustments
8. Reinforce, reinforce, reinforce

Implementing the Third Dimension – the Employee-Driven Self-efficacy Component

The power behind the three dimensional model is supplementing the traditional employer-driven process with the employee-driven process. So, as employees, how do we modify our behavior to become more empowered? How do we increase our self-efficacy as it relates to behaving in an empowered manner? The typical behavior modification model consists of five steps and is based in cognitive and behavioral theory.

- Awareness and acceptance that we need to change
- Determine effective self-motivation techniques
- Identifying the behaviors you want to change
- Substitute new behaviors for old
- Reinforce new behaviors

1. Awareness and acceptance that we need to change

Before we can increase our self-efficacy relative to our feelings of empowerment, or any other behavior, we must become aware that an undesirable behavior exists and accept that we need to change that behavior. This personal awareness can result from the feedback of trusted family members, work colleagues and friends, self-assessment instrument results or other trusted objective sources.
2. Determine effective self-motivation techniques

Once we realize we want to change, we must identify and employ the motivational techniques that are most effective for us. They will vary from person-to-person and may include; recognition, the challenge itself, financial reward, determination not to fail or a myriad of other factors.

Bandura identified four sources of self-efficacy that are also sources of motivation. xvii

Social Modeling
When we observe others who are similar to ourselves succeed at a task we previously felt was unattainable, we are also motivated to succeed. For example, until the first sub-four minute mile was run, conventional wisdom among the athletic and scientific communities said it could not be done. After Roger Bannister completed the task in 1954, several runners followed suit. Bandura’s social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of observational learning and social experience. When employees observe others behaving in an empowered fashion and the benefits derived thereof, they are more motivated to behave in a similar manner.

Social Persuasion
Social persuasion as a source of self-efficacy and motivation asserts employees can be persuaded to believe that they have the ability to succeed in a specific situation. A big part of the Marines’ training and motivation is to persuade, some would say brainwash, recruits to believe they are ultimate fighting machine! Supervisors, mentors, trainers, coaches and employees are well positioned to persuade employees of their self-empowerment abilities.

Psychological Responses
An employee’s emotional response to situations can significantly influence their feelings of self-efficacy in that situation. If an employee wants to behave in a more empowered manner and one of their psychological responses to taking risks (a key empowerment behavior) is avoidance, their empowerment self-efficacy will be low because empowerment behavior requires taking risks.
Mastery Experiences
Once we substitute new behaviors that are consistent with empowerment for old behaviors that are not, those behaviors should be practiced until they become second nature. "The most effective way of developing a strong sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences." Each time we perform a behavior successfully, our sense of self-efficacy related to that behavior increases. If we choose to understand and practice specific empowerment behaviors, we will become more confident in our ability to act in an empowered manner and others will see us in the same light.

3. Identifying the behaviors you want to change
It is not enough to affirm that we want to behave in a more empowered way, we need to identify specifically what those behaviors look like? Through our self-awareness process we have identified our behaviors. In this step we need to determine which of our specific behaviors are reinforcing and undermining of our empowerment behavior.

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<tr>
<th>Empowerment Undermining Behaviors</th>
<th>Empowerment Reinforcing Behaviors</th>
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<td>Lack of initiative</td>
<td>Initiative</td>
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<td>Risk adverse</td>
<td>Risk orientation</td>
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<td>Insecure</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<td>Indecisiveness</td>
<td>Decisiveness</td>
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<td>Independent</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
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<td>Untrustworthy</td>
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<td>Apathy</td>
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<td>Irresponsible</td>
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<td>Uninformed</td>
<td>Knowledge of laws, policies, procedures and practices</td>
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<td>Uncommitted</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
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4. Substitute New Behaviors for Old

We can choose to empower ourselves by substituting our behaviors that undermine others’ perceptions of us as empowered individuals, with empowerment reinforcing behaviors. Initially, it will feel awkward and unnatural but the more we practice the reinforcing behaviors, the more the behaviors will become second-nature.

5. Reinforce new behaviors

Practicing the new empowerment behaviors are an important component of becoming a more empowered person. Other reinforcing techniques include:

- Making others aware that you are modifying specific behaviors and ask for their help by providing feedback and other constructive criticism
- Fully considering the feedback you receive without discounting or rationalizing
- Utilize systems and processes that reinforce new behaviors

Over the past several decades, behavioral scientists and psychologists have conducted research that validates the increased efficiency and effectiveness that empowered employees bring to organizations. Human Resources practitioners and management consultants have assisted organizations to implement employee empowerment initiatives with varying results. The purpose of this article is to introduce and justify a new approach to employee empowerment, when appropriately implemented, will help organizations realize the full potential of their employee empowerment programs.

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