

**Musings on the Past and Future of Employee Empowerment**

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In the most comprehensive, long-term study of empowerment-oriented practices, (Lawler, Mohrman, & Benson, 2001) have empirically demonstrated the positive growth of empowerment practices in the last 15 years. Today, more than 70 percent of organizations surveyed have adopted some kind of empowerment initiative for some portion of their workforce.

Why the tremendous growth in employee empowerment? Faced with competitive demands for lower costs, higher performance, and more flexibility, organizations have increasingly turned to employee empowerment to enhance their performance. Empowerment practices are often implemented with the hopes of overcoming worker dissatisfaction and reducing the costs of absenteeism, turnover, poor quality work, and sabotage (Klein, Ralls, Smith-Major, & Douglas, 1998). Their focus is aimed at overcoming the debilitating psychological effects of traditional bureaucracies through the creation of high-involvement organizations. Empowerment enables employees to participate in decision making, helping them to break out of stagnant mindsets to take a risk and try something new. Empowering practices allow employees to decide on their own how they will recover from a service problem and surprise-and-delight customers by exceeding their expectations rather than waiting for approval from a supervisor (Bowen & Lawler, 1995). And perhaps most importantly, empowerment is viewed as critical in the process of organizational change. Rather than forcing or pushing people to change, empowerment provides a way of attracting them to want to change because they have ownership in the change process.

Yet, in spite of this positive growth, more than 25% of the surveyed companies in Lawler et al.'s (2001) study still report no significant empowerment-oriented practices anywhere in their organizations. And even those that do introduce empowerment practices often find it difficult to build genuine employee empowerment (Spreitzer & Quinn, 2001). Some don't have the courage

to begin. Some get lost along the way. Others stumble and decide to turn around when they are only part of the way there. Many confuse empowerment with a quick fix and give up before it has been successfully implemented. Clearly, there is a great deal more to be learned about how to successfully empower employees.

In this chapter, we begin by reviewing and synthesizing what we know about empowerment in the workplace. We look across several related perspectives on empowerment in the literature. We then integrate key learnings on empowerment with a special eye toward implications for organizational change and development. Finally, we offer an agenda for future work on empowerment. As part of this agenda, we highlight some critical new directions in organizational studies that have implications for empowerment theory.

### **What We Know: Synthesizing the Literature on Empowerment**

In order to understand the aims and implications of empowerment, it is necessary to understand the origins of the concept within the intellectual and political history of the West. While its modern form was derived principally from the civil and women's rights social movements of the 1960s, its philosophical lineage can be traced to the beginnings of modern political philosophy. While often regarded as a revolutionary development in thinking even in contemporary times, empowerment's theoretical roots point to a longer progression than is commonly assumed. In myriad ways, empowerment theory is principally concerned with elucidating and applying the answers to the timeless questions of political philosophy itself -- namely the nature of power, the role of the citizen in the polis, and the achievement of justice in civic life. From this vantage point, empowerment is a continuation of this theoretical search for elusive, but critical, answers to timeless human questions.

Sir Francis Bacon, best known for his work New Atlantis, is intrinsically bound to the study of empowerment due to his crucial contribution to the development of the Western democratic system (White, 1987). According to Bacon, humanity's existence in a world of scarcity will continually result in human deprivation and hostility without the conquest of nature. He argued that only by the 'release of man's estate', namely the rational and scientific generation of greater goods from nature, could this cycle of constant political animosity and privation be ended. Freedom, enfranchisement, and harmony among citizens cannot be achieved without overcoming the aggression that is inherent to scarcity and issues of survival. By uniting people behind the common goal of creating better lives via reason and human invention, the common good is finally able to triumph over sectarian divisions. At the most fundamental level, liberal democracy and the concept of constant progress require the emancipation of workers and their empowerment. Without empowerment, the manual laborer (or serf or slave) is utilized to provide the inputs that political life necessitates, and the stratification of power is perpetuated.

Although Bacon helped to form the foundations of the modern commercial republic, he could not have foreseen many of the developments that this polity engendered. One only has to peruse the works of Dickens, Marx, or Sinclair to be made aware of some of the obstacles of this political order. The sublimation of economic efficiency and science may liberate humankind from the bounds of scarcity, but it also can transform man into a servant of power. Moreover, it often leads to a form of consumerism that seems ill suited for providing citizens with meaning outside the bounds of the acquisition of material possessions, as well as elevates labor itself into the focal point for personal significance. From this perspective, our economic and political order may be required to bear more weight and significance than it can bear. Modern empowerment literature, with its emphases on theory, results, *and* meaning is focused upon improving this state

of affairs through a variety of different approaches and applications. As a discipline, it embraces modern methodologies in order to answer ancient and familiar questions with the intention of elevating both the individual and the organization (political or otherwise) simultaneously.

During recent years, workplace empowerment has increasingly become part and parcel of the lexicon of organizational research and practice. The meaning of the term empowerment has evolved over the years from its more radical beginnings in the civil and women's rights movements to its current manifestations focused on organizational performance (Bartunek & Spreitzer, 1999). In this section of the chapter, we look across the most recent decades of writing on empowerment and highlight three contemporary theoretical perspectives.

### **Three Perspectives on Empowerment in the Workplace**

In broad terms, contemporary management scholars and practitioners have used three different lenses to study and understand empowerment: (1) the social-structural perspective, (2) the psychological perspective, and (3) the critical perspective. We briefly review each in the sections that follow.

**(1) The social-structural perspective.** The social-structural perspective has its roots in the values and ideals of democracy, broadly stated. In this perspective, empowerment is linked to a belief in a democratic polity where power resides in individuals at all levels of a system (Prasad, 2001). The success and legitimacy of empowerment as democracy rests on a system that facilitates and promotes the participation of most, if not all, employees (Prasad & Eylon, 2001). Of course, in contrast to a formal democracy where each person has an equal vote and majority rules, most organizations stop far short of following the principle of voting equality and majority rule of employees (Eylon, 1998.).

Nevertheless, the focus of this social-structural perspective is on sharing power throughout a system, where power is conceptualized as having formal authority or control over organizational resources (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). The emphasis is on employee participation through increased delegation of responsibility down throughout the organizational chain of command. In this perspective, employees aren't empowered because managers tell them they are or because companies issue statements saying that employees are empowered. Instead, the social-structural perspective emphasizes the importance of changing organizational policies, practices, and structures away from top-down control systems toward high involvement practices (Bowen et al., 1995). The focus tends to be on how organizational, institutional, social, economic, political, and cultural forces can root out conditions that foster powerlessness. For example, Walsh et al. (1998) found that the nature of relationships in organizational life create meaningful connections, energize people, and help to remove barriers to empowerment. In addition, Bartunek et al. (1999) in a study of a teacher-led empowerment initiative in a federation of independent schools found that participation in change interventions were critical for the empowerment intervention to work because participation facilitated the individual behavior change that was necessary for empowerment to take hold.

One well-known social-structural model of empowerment is by Bowen and Lawler (1995). They found that employee empowerment is a function of organization practices that distribute power, information, knowledge, and rewards down throughout the organization. The more power, information, knowledge, and rewards given to employees, the more empowered they are. Of course, because the four elements are interdependent, they must be changed together to achieve positive results. In other words, if an organization shares sensitive

information with employees but fails to share power, training, or rewards, empowerment will fail to take root.

Yet, from a structural perspective, empowerment also represents a moral hazard for managers (Pfeffer, Cialdini, Hanna, & Knopoff, 1997). The success or failure of employee empowerment depends on the ability of managers to reconcile the potential loss of control inherent in empowerment practices with the organizational need for goal congruence (Mills & Ungson, 2003). Setting clear limits for empowerment and building trusting relationships have been found to be effective mechanisms for reducing the risk of this kind of moral hazard (Blanchard, Carlos, & Randolph, 2001); (Spreitzer et al., 2001).

In summary, then, the social-structural perspective on empowerment is embedded in theories of social exchange and social power with the emphasis on sharing authority between superior and subordinate. However, empowerment theorists have found this perspective to be limiting because it does not address the nature of empowerment as experienced by employees. In some situations, power, knowledge, information and rewards had been shared with employees yet they still felt disempowered. And in other situations, individuals lacked all the objective features of an empowering work environment yet still felt and acted in empowered ways. These issues spurred the emergence of the psychological perspective on empowerment which we describe next.

**(2) The psychological perspective.** Psychological empowerment refers to a set of psychological conditions necessary for individuals to feel in control of their own destiny. Conger and Kanungo (1988) were among the first to define empowerment from a psychological perspective. In contrast to the social-structural perspective which equated empowerment with

the delegation of authority and resources sharing, Conger and Kanungo (1988) viewed empowerment as enabling or enhancing personal efficacy. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) built on this initial psychological conceptualization by defining empowerment as intrinsic task motivation consisting of four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and choice.

*Meaning* involves a fit between the needs of one's work role and one's beliefs, values and behaviors (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). *Competence* refers to self-efficacy specific to one's work, a belief in one's capability to perform work activities with skill (Gist, 1987; Bandura, 1989). *Self-determination* is a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's actions (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989). Self-determination reflects autonomy over the initiation and continuation of work behavior and processes (*e.g.*, making decisions about work methods, pace, and effort) (Bell & Staw, 1989). Finally, *impact* is the degree to which one can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work (Ashforth, 1989). Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than passive, orientation to one's work role.

Independently, Spreitzer (1997) conducted an intensive review of the literature on empowerment across a variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, social work, and education. Her synthesis of these disparate literatures found support for the same four dimensional conceptualization of psychological empowerment. Using the Thomas and Velthouse (1990) model as a theoretical foundation, Spreitzer (1995) developed a four-dimensional scale in an attempt to measure these four dimensions. This measure was further validated by Kraimer et al (1997). Unlike the social-structural perspective where there are multiple ways of measuring empowerment (including measures of delegation, participation, and decentralization), in the psychological perspective, this single measure has dominated empirical research. As a result, empirical research has flourished on the psychological perspective on

empowerment as research studies have been able to clearly build on one another in the development of a nomological network of empowerment in the workplace.

Empirical research on psychological perspective on empowerment has been conducted in a variety of different contexts: a large service organization (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000), a Fortune 50 manufacturing (Spreitzer, 1995, 1996), lower level employees in the insurance industry (Spreitzer, 1995), diverse employees in the hospitality industry (Corsun & Enz, 1999; Sparrowe, 1994), hospital employees (Koberg, Boss, Senjem, & Goodman, 1999; Kraimer, Seibert, & Liden, 1997), nurses 's (Brancato, 2000), employees of an Israeli bank (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003), rehabilitation employees (Miranda, 1999), a British government agency (Geelmuyden & Silvester, 1999), employees and managers in an aerospace corporation (Mishra, Mishra, & Spreitzer, 1998), and public employees in a state agency (Feldman & Khademian, 2003). Because the empirical evidence is from such a broad swath of contexts, we can conclude that the generalizability of the psychological perspective on empowerment has been clearly established. And recent work has also developed the notion of empowerment at a team level of analysis (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). More empirical evidence on the antecedents and outcomes of psychological empowerment is outlined in the sections below.

**Research on antecedents of psychological empowerment.** A variety of different antecedents have been examined in relation to empowerment. Several features of organization design -- including a wide span of control (Spreitzer, 1996), enriching job characteristics (Liden et al., 2000), and a supportive/affiliative unit climate/culture (Sparrowe, 1994; Spreitzer, 1996) -- have been found to be related to high levels of employee empowerment. Other research has shown that high quality relationships (including LMX (Liden et al., 2000; Sparrowe, 1994), supportive peer and customer relationships (Corsun et al., 1999), sociopolitical support from

one's boss , peers and subordinates (Spreitzer, 1996), and leader approachability (Koberg et al., 1999) are also important in facilitating empowerment. Still other research has examined the specific role of the employee as an enabler of empowerment: (1) having access to information about the mission and performance of the organization (Spreitzer, 1995); (2) rewards based on individual performance (Spreitzer, 1996); and (3) role clarity (Spreitzer, 1996). In addition, other research has found employee characteristics like organizational rank and tenure (Koberg et al., 1999) to be associated with higher levels of empowerment. Finally, Kark et al. (2003) found that transformational leadership by way of social identification enhanced employee empowerment.

This growing body of research suggests that leaders have a wide variety of levers for enabling psychological empowerment in their employees. Interestingly, many of these antecedents could be enveloped within the social-structural perspective on empowerment above. Yet what is different in the psychological perspective is that rather than assuming that the social-structural antecedents are an indication of empowerment themselves, they are viewed as enabling mechanisms that can facilitate the individual experience of empowerment. For example, a system may provide employees with access to important information (one of (Bowen et al., 1995) four elements, but unless they realize they have value having this information and know how to use it, it will not contribute to them experiencing empowerment. So the two perspectives on empowerment are linked but have different viewpoints on what empowerment means.

**Research on consequences of psychological empowerment.** The empirical literature on empowerment suggests that empowerment matters for both employees and for their organizations. When employees feel empowered, they have more positive attitudes in terms of work/job satisfaction (Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997) and organizational commitment (Liden

et al., 2000). In addition, Sparrowe (1994) found that when lower level hospitality employees felt empowered, they had more pay satisfaction, more promotion satisfaction, and less propensity to turn over. Similarly, Koberg et al. (1999) found that empowerment perceptions were associated with increased work satisfaction and reduced propensity to leave the organization. Empowered employees also reported less job strain (Spreitzer et al., 1997). But empowerment does not only affect attitudes, it also affects performance – more specifically, managerial effectiveness and innovative behavior (Spreitzer, 1995), employee effectiveness (Spreitzer et al., 1997), employee productivity (Koberg, et al., 1999), and work unit performance (Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004). Spreitzer, DeJanasz, and Quinn (1999) found that supervisors who reported higher levels of empowerment were seen by their subordinates as more innovative, upward influencing, and inspirational. And Kirkman et al. (2004) found that virtual teams are higher performing when empowered. All in all, the findings suggest a great deal of positive potential for psychological empowerment in a work context.

Yet, within in the literature on psychological empowerment, there still remains the issue of where is the power in empowerment. This is where the critical perspective comes to the table.

**(3) The critical perspective.** Critical and postmodern empowerment theorists contend that without the formal power structures of direct worker ownership and representation, typical empowerment interventions are in fact disempowering (Wendt, 2001) because real power still resides at the top of the organization (Boje & Rosalie, 2001). These theorists argue that feeling empowered is not the same as being empowered (Jacques, 1996). They note how discussions of power are conspicuously absent in the literature on empowerment (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). Moreover, these theorists recognize how empowerment interventions sometimes create

more controls over employees through less obvious means. For example, Barker (1993) found that an intervention focused on empowering employees by putting them into work teams, resulted in extensive peer pressure that left employees feeling ever more controlled and disempowered. So unless power is granted to employees through real ownership and control in the firm (through industrial democracy interventions like worker councils and cooperatives), critical theorists question the extent to which empowerment interventions ever can be truly empowering (O'Connor, 2001). In an effort to reconcile the debate between mainstream empowerment theorists and critical theorists, Boje and Rosalie (2001) draw on Mary Parker Follett's theory of co-power and Clegg's circuits of power theory to bridge the gap between these disparate perspectives in the empowerment literature. They describe how thinking about power as "power to" rather than "power over" reconciles the notion of where power is in empowerment theory. So, while the critical perspective helps bring the notion power back to the dialogue on empowerment, it is still at an early stage of development and needs further attention.

Looking across these three perspectives, we see that while each one views empowerment a bit differently, they are complementary to one another. Each provides a different lens for understanding empowerment in the workplace (see Table 1 for a summary). The social-structural perspective focuses in on the organization. The psychological perspective drills down to the individual and their experience. And the critical perspective focuses on the political nature of empowerment and the potential for domination. The challenge is to provide a more integrative perspective on empowerment that blends the three perspectives and that links empowerment theory more explicitly to organizational change and development. In this vein, we now turn toward future directions for empowerment work that might cut across these different perspectives, particularly in the context of organizational change.

## **An Agenda for the Future:**

### **New Directions for Empowerment Theory and Research**

While research on empowerment has gained increasing momentum in the last decade, the linkages to organizational change and development have been implicit at best. Yet empowerment has several important implications for understanding change processes. Rather than forcing or pushing people to change, empowerment provides a mechanism for attracting people to want to change because they have ownership of the change process. This logic of attracting people to change through empowerment is thus an important direction for future research (Weick & Quinn, 1999). In the next section of the paper, we elaborate on two particular streams of research that seem particularly ripe for future theoretical and empirical work on empowerment as an attractor for personal and organizational change.

### **Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)**

POS is a new movement in organizational studies that focuses on the dynamics in organizations that lead to developing human strength, producing resilience and restoration, fostering vitality, and cultivating extraordinary individuals (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). POS is based on the premise that understanding how to enable human excellence in organizations will unlock potential, reveal possibilities, and facilitate a more positive course of human and organizational welfare. POS does not adopt one particular theory or framework, but it draws from the full spectrum of organizational theories to understand, explain, and predict the occurrence, causes, and consequences of positivism. Research findings to date indicate that enabling positive qualities in individuals leads to exceptional organizational performance. This

positive approach does not ignore, deny, or denigrate the negative phenomena and problems found in organizations. It seeks, instead, to study organizations and organizational contexts typified by appreciation, collaboration, vitality, and fulfillment, where creating abundance and human well-being are key indicators of success. It seeks to understand what represents the best of the human condition.

At its core, POS is about “positive deviance,” or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in extraordinary ways. Positive deviance is behavior at the right end of the normal curve (Cameron, 2003). What does it take for people to be positively deviant? Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) argue that an empowered mindset is critical. We know that social systems are designed to preserve the status quo. The pervasive influence of norms provides a means of control over what people say and do. Positive deviance requires real risk. It requires departing from norms in a positive way – often making others uncomfortable. For example, when employees perform in ways that are truly great, co-workers often express professional jealousy and try to recalibrate the greatness so that it seems less impressive (Quinn & Quinn, 2002). Sometimes they even desecrate the exemplar. Given that exceeding norms is difficult and requires risk-taking behavior, it is important to understand the conditions that enable individuals to be positively deviant. In this way, it is clear that psychological empowerment is likely to be a key enabler of positive deviance.

Consider the case of Merck Pharmaceuticals as retold by (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003).

In 1978, Merck & Co., one of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies, inadvertently discovered a potential cure for river blindness, a disease that inflicts tremendous pain, disfigurement, and blindness on the 85 million people who are at risk. The medication was first discovered as an animal antibiotic, but it quickly

created a major dilemma when Merck scientists realized it could be adapted to become a cure for river blindness. Because river blindness was indigenous to the developing world, Merck would never recover the millions of dollars it would have to invest to develop the right formulation for humans and conduct field trials in the most remote parts of the world. Additionally, the company risked bad publicity for any unexpected side effects of the drug, which in turn could damage the drug's lucrative reputation as an animal antibiotic (Business Enterprise Trust, 1991).

Empowerment was key enabler for Dr. Roy Vagelos and his team of scientists to take on the risk of developing this new drug. Creating a cure for river blindness would provide deep meaning to the scientists. Drawing on their expertise, they were confident that a reformulation would be an effective treatment for river blindness and that they would encounter few serious side effects. They were confident their actions would have an extraordinarily positive impact on the developing world. And they were hungry for new knowledge as well—they wanted to learn as much as possible about a fledging class of compounds, avermectins. Departing from norms in the pharmaceutical industry, Merck decided to manufacture and distribute the drug for free to the developing world, costing the company millions of dollars. Consequently, Merck helped eradicate river blindness, at its own expense.

The empowerment of employees is believed to be a key enabler for the kind of positive deviance we see at Merck (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Empowerment infuses individuals with the deep sense of meaning or purpose necessary to risk greatness. The feelings of

competence that empowerment affords gives people the confidence to take on difficult task. The self-determination helps people to feel in control of their own destiny, facilitating the potential for risk taking. And the potential to have real impact gives people a reason to take the risk in the first place.

In addition to the influence of empowerment on positive deviance, there are several other potential linkages for empowerment in the growing POS movement. First, the POS movement emphasizes holistic excellence – psychological, physiological, societal, and spiritual as well as instrumental. From our literature review of empowerment, we know that empowerment is related to traditional outcomes like commitment and effectiveness in the workplace, but we know little about other relevant outcomes like individual health (Heaphy & Dutton, 2004) and virtuousness (Cameron, 2003). Prior research has looked at stress as an outcome of empowerment, but future research should examine other critical health indicators that capture notions of positive health, like flourishing and thriving (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2004).

Second, POS has focused on how to enable individuals to be resilient in the face of difficulty or threat (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). There is a broad interest in how to buffer individuals and help them bounce back from extraordinary physical and financial devastation and loss of human life (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). We believe that empowerment may provide the resources of human capability and psychological strengths for helping people to get through difficult times. Feelings of empowerment may moderate the threat and stress inherent in difficult times. Through empowerment, individuals experience the purpose and efficacy to allow them to persevere. Empowerment can facilitate a sense of real hope in the future that things will get better (Spreitzer & Mishra, 2000) and buffer survivors from the debilitating effects of downsizing (Brockner et al., in press). For these reasons we believe that

the links between empowerment and resilience may also provide fertile ground for future research.

Third, one element of POS particularly relevant to issues of organization change is called appreciative inquiry (AI). AI refers to a composite of change practices that are based on the assumption that organizations have a positive core which, if revealed and tapped, unleashes positive energy and positive improvement (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). The change process proceeds by identifying past examples of peak performance, spectacular successes, or positive aspirations for the future. Key explanatory elements are identified which account for these past successes, and a vision of the future is crafted based on what was extraordinarily successful and what can be perpetuated in the future. We suspect that empowerment is a key part of successful AI interventions. When individuals feel empowered, they are more likely to break out of normal mindset to think in new ways about possibilities for the future because they have a deep sense of meaning and purpose. Moreover, because of their strong sense of efficacy or competence, empowered individuals are more likely to have a clear idea of their special strengths that can release positive energy for change. Again, for these reasons, we believe that a productive area for future research will be on the linkages between empowerment and AI.

Of course, these are only some initial forays into how empowerment may play a role in the POS movement. Our hunch is that empowerment may be a foundational theoretical mechanism for explaining other POS-relevant outcomes (examples might include courage (Worline & Quinn, 2003), forgiveness (Cameron, 2003), and compassion (Frost et al., 2004)). By focusing future empowerment research on POS, we can learn more about how to attract people to positive deviance. We can learn about the systems, structures, and processes that

attract people to be empowered for greatness. In this way, we can begin to build a stronger bridge between the social-structural and psychological perspectives on empowerment.

### **Advanced Change Theory**

Several years ago, Quinn, Spreitzer and Brown (2000) introduced the notion of Advanced Change Theory (ACT). The focus of ACT is on adaptive change where leaders must bring change that is personally painful and transformative. The authors derive their theory from a synthesis of how exemplary leaders in history (Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.) effectively led adaptive change. The theory challenges conventional wisdom on how leaders can change others. Traditional approaches to change include: (1) the empirical rational approach (making logical arguments for change), (2) the power-coercive approach (using forms of leverage like incentives to force change), and (3) the normative-reeducative approach (using participation and pursuing win-win strategies). In contrast, the ACT approach focuses on the need for the leader to fundamentally change him or herself first in order to attract others to change. The foundation of ACT is that leaders must look inside first and make painful adjustments in their own behavior to overcome hypocrisy between what they say and what they do (Quinn, 2000). ACT involves attracting others to change rather than coercing or forcing them to change.

To help to bring ACT alive to the reader, consider this short story offered in (Quinn, 1996; Quinn, Spreitzer, & Brown, 2000).

A large corporation engaged in three downsizings over a short period. On senior executive (we'll call Paul) graphically described his fears of losing his job and not being able to maintain his standard of living, send his children to college, or keep

his home. After months of agony, Paul began to confront his fears and clarify his values. In doing so, he concluded that he had an identity separate from the organization and that he could survive on a much smaller salary if necessary. This change in perspective had an empowering effect. Paul stopped worrying about the dangers of change and how he was seen by the organization. He began to ask himself what was needed in the present. Paul saw his immobilized colleagues and realized he needed to do something to empower them. He designed a new role for himself. Paul carefully selected people and invited them into meetings and asked them what they wanted the division to look like in 10 years. Initially, they were startled by his question, but gradually, they joined the process of designing the company's future. Paul's empowerment began to spread to others. Gradually, things began to change.

In many ways, ACT leaders are type of positive deviants. They engage risk and “build the bridge as they walk on it” (Quinn, 2000). But importantly, rather than forcing or coercing others to change, they ask nothing more of others than they ask of themselves. Leaders who practice ACT are in fact empowering themselves to take responsibility, risk new behaviors, and evolve meaning (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). Organizations cannot empower people. People empower themselves. However, systems can be created that enable the empowerment process (Spreitzer, 1996).

In this way, we can understand more clearly how empowerment can facilitate the change process through attracting others to empower themselves to change. By bringing empowerment research together with ACT theory, we can interpenetrate the psychological perspective with the critical perspective. The foundational ideas of ACT

are consistent with recent work in the critical perspective on empowerment (Boje et al., 2001)– more specifically, Mary Parker Follett’s theory of co-power and Clegg’s circuits of power theory.

### **Some Concluding Thoughts**

We believe that the three perspectives on empowerment have important things to contribute to the growing POS movement and to contemporary change theory. The variety of theoretical approaches taken within empowerment literature also point to a number of additional issues for consideration. Because of the close relationship and tension between technology, consumerism, and personal significance in modern life, empowerment theorists can also concentrate on understanding the mechanisms of their interaction in formulating the theoretical foundations of empowerment initiatives. Through emphasis on these central conceptual issues, empowerment theory can demarcate the limits and unintended consequences that reoccur during practical implementation of their theoretical models. By synthesizing practice and theory, with greater insight into the individual and organizational factors that influence empowerment realization, the discipline can concomitantly increase efficacy in practice and broaden empowerment’s relevance in emergent social and political arenas. Because of the insistent pressures faced by modern organizations, and consequently upon the workers that comprise them, the cultivation of empowerment theory is poised to have a lasting effect on the evolution of organizations and the role of the individual in the workplace.

We close this chapter with some practical advice to OD practitioners considering empowerment interventions. Many organizations have a fundamental misunderstanding of how people can be empowered. There is an implicit assumption in many empowerment interventions

that managers or organizations can empower employees. In reality, it is clear from the growing research on empowerment that no one can truly empower anyone else. Telling people they are empowerment or forcing empowerment on people only demonstrates that they don't have any power – that the authority figure is still in control (Spreitzer & Quinn, 2001). In short, most empowerment programs have been implemented in a way that is likely to disempower, rather than empower, employees.

Instead, what managers and organizations can do is create environments where people are more likely to empower themselves. It's not so much about "empowering" the workforce, but instead to release the power in the workforce so they can take initiative, feel trusted, be flexible, and do the right thing. Linking to the POS approach, organizations and managers want to attract people to notions of empowerment by creating conditions that unleash, rather than squelch, the power, ideas, and creativity that are embedded in every person. Clearly empowerment is neither easy nor a quick fix. Sustained, genuine empowerment involves practices that cut across all three empowerment perspectives.

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**Table 1**  
**Three Perspectives on Empowerment**

	<b>Roots</b>	<b>Essence</b>	<b>Level of Development</b>
<b>Social/Structural</b>	Democratic principles and sociology	Sharing power and decision making	Extensive theoretical development and practitioner writing. Focus. Some empirical research.
<b>Psychological</b>	Social psychology and intrinsic motivation	Experiencing meaning, efficacy, self-determination and impact	Extensive theoretical development and empirical research. Rigorous measurement.
<b>Critical</b>	Postmodern theory and deconstructionism	Understanding who controls formal power structures	Initial conceptual ideas