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**EMPOWERMENT – MYTHS AND MEANINGS
– ORGANIZATIONAL PANACEA OR POISON?**

1. INTRODUCTION

The article does not give the recipe for a ‘magic spell’, but may offer a guide to appraising existing ‘empowerment initiatives’, and developing future ones. Much of the literature on empowerment offers great promises to employers seeking ‘to empower’ (Bryman 1991; Mitchell Stewart 1994). Other writers are more sceptical (Marchington 1995). This paper offers a pragmatic reappraisal of the term, intended to provide some focus amid the myths.

There is a number of problems with the existing prescriptive literature on empowerment. Firstly, the term is used very loosely and it is not always clear if we are comparing like with like. This elasticity causes problems when we try to analyse empowerment. Second, it is rarely located in an historical context: empowerment is seen as an entirely new phenomenon (Lee, Koh 2001). Thirdly, there is little detailed discussion of the issues likely to arise when implementing empowerment or the conditions which are necessary for such an approach to be successful. It is assumed that employees will simply welcome the new approach seeing it as beneficial to them. The literature also takes a universalistic approach, regarding empowerment as appropriate to all organisations in all circumstances. In addition, the literature underplays the conflict that exists with organisations and ignores the context within which empowerment takes place. In this paper we examine the roots of empowerment, and explain why it comes into prominence in recent years. We discuss modern myths and suggest a classification of empowerment so as to help us understand the term better, and discuss some problems when evaluating the evidence as to its impact.

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The term "empowerment" is generally used to refer to a form of employee involvement initiative which was widespread from the 1980s and focused on task based involvement and attitudinal change. Unlike notions of industrial democracy or citizenship there is no notion of workers having a "right" to a say: it is for employers to decide whether and how to empower employees. While there are a wide range of programmes and initiatives which are titled empowerment and they vary as to the extent of power which employees actually exercise, most are purposefully designed not to give workers a very significant role in decision making but rather to secure an enhanced employee contribution to the organization. "Empowerment" takes place within the context of a strict management agenda. Empowerment schemes tend to be direct and based on individuals or small groups (usually the work group), a clear contrast with industrial democracy and participative schemes such as consultative committees which are collectivist and representative in nature (Wilkinson 1998, 2002).

2. TO WHAT EXTENT IS EMPOWERMENT NEW?

Innovations at work group level can be seen as long standing. Prior to the industrial revolution, goods were made by craftsmen who had responsibility for the entire process. Thus empowerment could be seen as a new name for a much older phenomenon where, given certain industrial conditions, productivity and quality of work are enhanced when workers have control and responsibility over work processes. The idea that workers should have control over work processes has once again resurfaced, as change in technology for many industries has made traditional managerial control mechanisms redundant. The modern "craftsman's" task has again become too complex to measure, or supervise.

In the 1920s the ideas of F. W. Taylor, the father of scientific management, were influential in getting management to break jobs down into small tasks and decide the most appropriate method of carrying out each task using work study. Workers had little discretion with conception separate from execution, and brainpower was to be centred with management. The system was based on worker compliance: the organisation was "designed by geniuses to be carried out by idiots". While scientific management was successful in terms of boosting productivity there was concern over the alienation of workers. Elton Mayo and the Human Relations School suggested that involving workers had strong business (as well as moral benefits).

Thus looking back over the history of management there has been continuing interest in getting workers more involved although the type of initiative fashionable has waxed and waned over time. Notwithstanding oversimplification, a number of distinct phases can be traced to place the role of participation in a contemporary context. The 1960s was often preoccupied with a search for job enrichment and enhanced worker motivation. Managerial objectives tended to focus on employee skill acquisition and work enrichment. In the UK examples at ICI and British Coal included semi-autonomous workgroups to promote skill variety and job autonomy (Trist *et al.* 1963; Roeber 1975). In practice these schemes were more concerned with employee motivation as an outcome rather than the mechanisms that allowed workers to have a say about organisational decisions.

The 1970s witnessed a shift in focus towards democracy which emphasised worker rights to participate. Participation reached its high point in the UK with the 1977 Bullock Report on Industrial Democracy which addressed the question of how workers might be represented at Board level. This report emerged in a period of strong union bargaining power and the Labour Government's "Social Contract", an atmosphere which underpinned the Bullock approach to industrial participation. The Bullock Report was partly union-initiated, through the Labour Party, and based on collectivist principles which saw trade unions playing a key role, although it was not without controversy (Brannen 1983). Experiments with worker directors were initiated in the Post Office and the British Steel Corporation, although along with the Bullock Report itself, soon abandoned with the new neo-liberal agenda of the Thatcher Government in 1979.

By the late 1980s and into the 1990s empowerment emerge in its modern form in Western Europe and the USA. The discourse of empowerment fitted with notions of enterprise culture with individuals seen as entrepreneurs taking destiny into their own hands no longer encumbered by bureaucratic rules (Peters 1989; Schonberger 1990). A plethora of books advocating empowerment began to appear (Byman 1991; Mitchell Stewart 1994; Foy 1994). Business thinking was attracted by the notion of new modes of managing. The emphasis changed from utilising economies of scale to more flexible, innovative and responsive organisations. This shift was variously referred to as post-Fordism, flexible specialisation and lean production. The new management paradigm emphasised by writers such as P. Drucker (1988) and R. M. Kanter (1989) include de-bureaucratisation (end of hierarchy and prescriptive rules), and delayering, de-centralisation and the utilisation of project based teams as part of a movement towards a new knowledge based organisation.

It is also important to note that with downsizing very much the order of the day for many organizations, empowerment became a business necessity as the destaffed and delayed organisation could no longer function as before. In this set of circumstances, empowerment was inevitable as tasks had to be allocated to the survivors in the new organisation. Enrichment and job satisfaction took second place to getting the job done (Redman, Wilkinson 2005). Thus empowerment was not simply driven by progressive changes in the management practice. The effects of recession, and widespread redundancy may have meant that organizational survivors simply have more work to do, and the (cynical) label for this is that they have become empowered. The label of empowerment may hide that fact that there is no real increase in or reconstitution of workers' power, instead empowerment proves to be a more insidious mechanism for control. Traditional control systems (supervisors) may be replaced by more sophisticated measuring systems or management may monitor team performance so that peer pressure acts as a controlling force. In addition, the implicit end result of successful introduction of empowerment is culture change, which can be seen as another form of control. The notion of empowerment may exaggerate the benefits to employees of increased responsibility or "ownership"; increased responsibility which does not bring increased reward, and ownership which applies to the process but not the profits. Instead empowerment becomes a slick piece of re-labelling designed to get more for less (Morrill, Wilkinson 2002).

More recently the economy knowledge also provided impetus for greater involvement in decision making. Involvement is viewed as a positive development for employers and employees. As M. Poole *et al.* note:

increased economic competition and a concern over economic performance among industrialized economies appear to have resulted in developments that make the realization of "rights based" employee participation in management more difficult to achieve. However, there has been a shift toward employee participation on the assumption that it will result in better "market performance" (Poole *et al.* 2000, p. 497).

Compliance, hierarchy and following rules are no longer seen as relevant for employees who are expected to work beyond contract, exercise their initiative and embrace teamworking. Worker may respond best when they are tightly controlled by management, placed in narrowly defined, and treated like an unwelcome necessity, but, instead when they are given broader responsibilities, encouraged to contribute, and helped to take satisfaction from their work' (Walton 1985). Thus, innovative work practices could increase motivation by providing more interesting work, including flexibility and improving individual and organisational performance.

3. GETTING AWAY FROM MYTHS: THE ROOTS OF EMPOWERMENT

It is easy to assume empowerment is simply a new phenomenon in that standard texts on involvement and participation make little mention of the term (see e.g. Brannen 1983; Marchington 1992; Poole 1986; Heller *et al.*, 1998). Much writing implies empowerment is entirely a product of the new times and fails to locate it in an historical context. However, as mentioned earlier the basis and underlying ideas of empowerment are familiar ones. Empowerment can be seen in many respects an attempt to deal with the problems associated with the ideas of F. W. Taylor and A. Ford where standardised products were made through economies of scale and the division of labour, and workers carried out fragmented and repetitive jobs.

One can identify two sets of arguments being used to justify the utilisation of empowerment. Firstly, democratic humanism which is usually seen as a response to the excesses of scientific management and problems of alienation. The socio-technical systems school stressed the need to design technical and social components alongside each other to optimise the two and their influential study of coalmining in Britain showed how work could be re-designed within the existing technical basis so as to retain traditional features such as skill variety and a degree of autonomy (Trist *et al.* 1963). In the 1970s the Quality of Working Life (QWL) movement developed these ideas and put them into practice, most famously in the Swedish car plants such as Volvo at Kalmar. More recently it has been argued that developments in the broader political and social environment including more educated workers has led to a higher level of expectation concerning quality of working life (Marchington *et al.* 2001).

Secondly, there is an economic case for empowerment. It is assumed firstly that workers have the opportunity to contribute to organisational success and as they are closer to the work situation they may be able to suggest improvements which management would be unable to by virtue of their position in the hierarchy.

As T. D. Wall (2002) notes there are three main ways in which empowerment could be seen as contributing to effectiveness. Firstly, by motivating employees although effort can be encouraged in other ways, and in some jobs the scope to work harder is limited. The second way is by reducing costs. Where empowerment involves direct staff taking on additional responsibilities that others would otherwise have to perform (e.g. record-keeping, inspection, task allocation), costs for indirect staff is reduced. Furthermore, where the extra cost of training or augmented rates of pay for additional responsibility is less than the costs of such indirect staff, productivity gains can be achieved. The third and most important potential

benefit of empowerment, results from its being able to improve employees' knowledge, competence and initiative, making them more effective workers. Empowerment in theory provides employees with greater scope for engagement and thus the opportunity to learn (Wall 2002).

Generally speaking all these theories share a common assumption that workers are an untapped resource with knowledge and an interest in becoming involved. This needs to be appropriated by employers providing opportunities and structures for their involvement.

4. MEANINGS OF EMPOWERMENT

Much of the writing on empowerment does not look at the term in any context or offer an adequate definition. Instead what empowerment actually means is left rather vague, and the term is used very loosely. Empowerment at its simplest would commensensically be associated with the redistribution of power. In business terms however, it is often taken to mean some form of employee involvement, designed by management to generate commitment and enhance employee contribution, in contrast to its wider meaning in other literatures. Indeed when examining the term empowerment across non-management disciplines, it appears that empowerment has radical connotations, that it is a process by which the oppressed may become free. Indeed, it is telling that much of the "evangelical" work in recent management literature deploys left-wing, radical terms such as "liberation management" and empowerment to describe right-wing management practices associated with neo-liberal business thinking. This level of ambiguity may be of use to academics seeking to explore the concept of empowerment but the lack of clarity makes its practical implementation by management highly problematic (Denham Lincoln *et al.* 2002, p. 281).

The rhetoric of empowerment is associated with a dynamic and progressive view of management and the vague but positive associations make the appeal immediate. But one needs to question who is empowering whom and why, as well as examining to whom do the benefits (if any) belong? As noted earlier empowerment movement appropriates language from wider political movements – feminism, and the ecology movement where empowerment is seen as a positive force, but a key difference is that these movements are rooted in the oppressed i.e. helping people to help themselves whereas the empowerment movement is driven by those in power, i.e. helping managers to manage the organisation (Hennestad 1998).

It is worth remember that because employers decide whether and how to empower employees, it may be less of a redistribution of power, and

more like a reconstitution of it (Geary 2003). While some forms of employee involvement may provide employees new channels through which their influence is enhanced, employee involvement does not involve any *de jure* sharing of authority or power. With employee involvement, the onus is on employers to involve employees or give employees the opportunity to be involved. Empowerment in the context of its usage in recent years can be seen as reflecting this approach.

Empowerment is also often portrayed as an universal solution, appropriate to all sectors, all organizations and all employees. Consequently, its advocates may gloss over or ignore conflict within organizations, assuming employees will universally welcome the chance to “release their trapped potential”. Instead, it is likely that in any organization, whether initiatives gain the commitment of employees will be contingent. In fact, it would be rather ironic if there were one way of achieving empowerment, given that any coherent empowerment philosophy should allow some choice for all. Presumably, this choice should extend to how empowerment is introduced (Morrell, Wilkinson 2002).

Much of the literature is polarized. For some empowerment is a panacea, offering a way out of classical management problems. “Working smarter” offers benefits to all (Bymam 1991; Foy 1994) and is part of the re-enchantment of work and the gradual democratisation of the workplace. For others employees assume higher levels of accountability and responsibility, and can be more easily blamed when things go wrong. From this perspective, the “empowerment era” (Hardy, Leiebo-O’Sullivan 1998) is more significant as rhetoric rather than practice. The table summarises these contrasting views using a dichotomy between bouquets and brickbats (tab. 1).

Table 1

Contrasting Meanings of Participation

Bouquets	Brickbats
Education	indoctrination
Empowerment	emasculatation
Liberating	controlling
Delaying	intensification
Teamwork	peer group pressure
Responsibility	surveillance
Post-Fordism	neo-Fordism
Blame-free culture	identification of errors
Commitment	compliance

Source: Wilkinson *et al.* 1997.

However, as with those who celebrate participation, the critics have also been too eager to accept its rhetoric at face value (Edwards *et al.* 1998; Wilkinson *et al.* 1997; Collinson *et al.* 1998). The pictures presented are not so much wrong as partial. It is important to recognise the diversity of experience with direct participation, and not seek an all encompassing explanation. Many of the critical accounts can be seen as a mirror image of the prescriptive management literature, assuming also that workers are malleable and passive recipients of whatever management desires.

5. CLASSIFYING EMPOWERMENT

No categorisation scheme for empowerment is entirely satisfactory as the boundaries between different types are not clear and much depends on the definition adopted (Lashley 1997). With empowerment not existing as a single unified entity, it can cover a very wide range of schemes which in turn may involve a variety of diverse management motivations. However they are united by sharing a common assumption that employees and employers' interests are inextricably connected. One could argue that what you call something is less important than the results you get by doing it, but the established sense of a term can act as a barrier to change and / or learning. It is worth reflecting on how we might usefully distinguish between "empowerment initiatives" (in name only) and initiatives which empower ("the real deal") (Morrell, Wilkinson 2002). It is helpful if the terms can be deconstructed according to degree, form, level and range of subject matter (Marchington, Wilkinson 2005). Taking the first of these, the degree of empowerment indicates the extent to which employees are able to influence decisions about various aspects of management – whether they are simply informed of changes, consulted or actually make decisions. The escalator of participation (see Diagram 1) illustrates this; it implies a progression upwards rather than simply a move from zero participation to workers control. Secondly, there is the level at which empowerment takes place; task, departmental, establishment, or corporate. Thirdly, the range of subject matter is another dimension, ranging from the relatively trivial – such as canteen food – to more strategic concerns relating, for example, to investment strategies. Fourthly, there is the form of empowerment takes. In making sense of empowerment we can identify five main types, namely information sharing, upward problem solving, task autonomy, attitudinal shaping, and self management. One hoped for advantage of

this classification is that it makes it easier to identify when and in what way something can be seen as empowering. It can also help the design of context-sensitive initiatives, as well as aid tracking of these initiatives, as well as aid tracking of these initiatives via specific, measurable goals (Morrell, Wilkinson 2002).

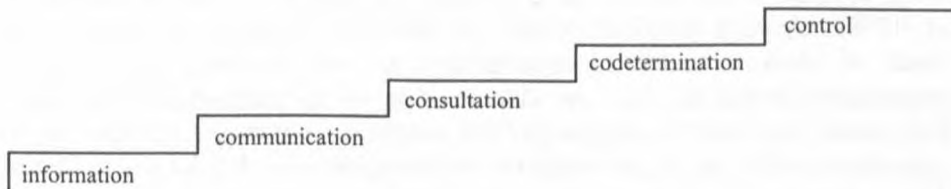


Diagram 1. The escalator of participation

Source: Marchington, Wilkinson 2005.

5.1. Information sharing

For employers to be empowered, information is a central component. There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in management increasing downward communication to employees typically via newsletters, the management chain or team briefing, which communicates organisational goals and the business position of the organisation to “win hearts and minds”. The logic here is that employees will be more understanding of the reasons for business decisions and as a result more committed to the organisation’s action. Moreover, communication is direct to the workforce rather than being mediated by employee representation or trade unions. Thus critics have argued that such schemes “incorporate” workers and/or by-pass trade unions and is designed not to provide “better” information to empower workers but convince them of the logic of management action and hence reduce the scope for genuine empowerment i.e. the opportunity to influence or change decisions. In short, it may be a form of pseudo participation (Pateman 1970) with a move away from “you will do this” to “this is why you will do this” (Wilkinson *et al.* 1993, p. 28).

Of course communication practices vary in frequency and intensity. Some companies rely on their own internal newsletter to report a range of matters, from profits, new products to in-house welfare and employee development topics. More sophisticated techniques found by M. Marchington *et al.* (2001) included the use of electronic media, such as emails, company intranets and on-line discussion forums.

5.2. Upward problem solving

These techniques seek to go one step further than communications by tapping into employee ideas for improvements. As with communications, problem solving practices have increased, in part, inspired by Japanese work systems which encourage employees to offer ideas (Wilkinson *et al.* 1998). Upward problem solving practices are designed to increase the stock of ideas available to management as well as encourage a more cooperative industrial relations climate. Specific techniques can be either individual or collective, and range from employee suggestion schemes, focus groups or quality circles to workforce attitude surveys (Wilkinson 2002). The fundamental difference between these practices and communication methods is they are upward (from employees to managers) rather than downward (managers disseminating information to workers).

5.3. Task autonomy

These practices have a longer pedigree in seeking to counter the degradation of work and associated employee alienation (Procter, Mueller 2000), of which many schemes formed part of a series of work psychology experiments in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Tavistock Institute, Quality of Work Life Programs in the USA and Sweden). More recently, task-based participation is celebrated as a root to sustained organisational performance via employee commitment and motivation (Wood, De Menezes 1998). The types of practices include job enlargement and job enrichment whereby employees perform a greater range of task with a greater degree of job autonomy. The criticisms levelled as task-participation are that outcomes often result in work intensification rather than job enrichment.

5.4. Attitudinal shaping

This sees empowerment as a psychological process. J. Conger and R. Kanungo (1988, p. 474) define empowerment as “a process of enhancing feelings of self efficacy among organisational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal of both formal organisational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information”. The implication is that empowerment is an end product and that the “process” they describe is essentially a mixture of

employee involvement techniques. Self efficacy is a psychological term used to describe a person's belief in their own effectiveness. There may be no change in work or organisational structure but employees are trained/educated to "feel" empowered (a state of mind).

5.5. Self management

This tends to be fairly rare in any real sense. Clearly self managing work groups are a limited form of this approach, but are constrained by working within certain limits set by senior management (e.g. self managing in relation to a set of work tasks). Ideally self-management should involve divisions between managers and workers being eroded and decisions, rules and executive authority no longer set by the few for the many (Semler 1989).

Clearly these types may overlap as many initiatives incorporate several of these dimensions. For example, information is important to empowerment in general and not just as a separate form. Similarly, a change in attitude and self-efficacy is seen by some writers as at the core of any form of empowerment (Conger, Kanungo 1988).

6. DISCUSSION

The rosy picture of an "everyone wins empowerment" scenario is a myth, hard to reconcile with much of what is reported to have been happening in the real world where downsizing, work intensification and career truncation appear to have been prevalent (Morrell, Wilkinson 2002).

Effectiveness of course can be examined from several perspectives. While there has been much discussion of empowerment from a humanist perspective management have regarded business considerations as the primary force behind empowerment. Thus the empowerment agenda of recent years is much more business oriented than the QWL movement of the 1970s. Furthermore, management have defined the redistribution of power in narrow terms. The degree of participation offered by empowerment is strictly within an agenda set by management and it tends not to extend to significant power sharing or participation in higher level strategic decisions such as product and investment plans. In terms of whether it leads to greater worker influence the answer appears to be yes but within heavily constrained terms (Edwards *et al.* 1997; Geary 2003; Wilkinson *et al.* 1998).

While managerial respondents are often adamant that empowerment have positive impacts on performance, e.g. there are a number of reasons to be cautious. As A. Psoninos and S. Smithson (2002, p. 145) note "that people see the adoption of empowerment as rather successful. Although clearly the measurement of such schemes is difficult". First, there is the problem of benchmarking, of assessing the date at which to start making "before and after" comparisons. For example, should this be the date at which the new mechanism is actually introduced into the organisation, or should it be some earlier or later date? Another issue relates to the extent to which issues are simply re-channelled rather than created anew. For example, the claim that a suggestion scheme saves more may not take into account the fact that some of these ideas previously have been channelled through a different route. Second, it is virtually impossible to isolate the impact of just one aspect of management practice from other factors that can influence behaviour at work. For example, labour turnover is likely to be influenced by relative pay levels and the availability of other jobs as much as the presence or absence of empowerment. Even if it were possible to find a significant association between empowerment and performance, it is very difficult to determine the direction of causality. It is just as likely that superior organisational performance leads to more positive employee attitudes as it is that the process of empowerment causes employees to work harder and more effectively. In short, the view that empowerment is connected with high levels of commitment and organisational performance is predicted upon a series of assumptions, none of which can be taken for granted. Finally there is the issue of evaluation and on whose terms. Should assessments be made in terms of merely having a form of empowerment (i.e. the process) or in terms of how things may be changed due to empowerment (i.e. the outcomes?) If it is the latter, then who gains? In one study managers claimed that they evaluated the impact of empowerment initiative as a whole, but when it did take place it was for commercial reasons rather than a result of wanting to give democratic voice (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004).

It is now accepted that we need to move away from any simplistic or unilinear conceptions of empowerment (Lashley 1997; Wilkinson 2002). We can see that varying types of empowerment carry different meanings, but also techniques with the same name, structure and processes may be experienced in very different fashions by different workforces. As a result empowerment initiatives can not be analysed in isolation from the other organisation policies that impact on the employment relationship.

Is it obvious that employees will welcome and be committed to the new approach? While there is evidence that workers welcome the removal of irritants (e.g. close supervision) and welcome the opportunity to address

problems at source as well as the ability to decide work allocation, there is also evidence that employees are not sufficiently trained for empowerment especially where empowerment is a result of downsizing. Empowerment is not free but carries costs both in terms of establishing a new approach to management (involving training costs, costs of new reward and information systems) and in its operation (involving issues of integration, consistency and unintended consequences) (Lawler 1996). From a business perspective a concern is the implication in terms of a loss of management control. An individual acting alone brought down a British Bank, Barings, and in other organisations such as Sears Roebuck, embarrassing headlines resulted from employees using their initiative and subverting control mechanisms (Simons 1995) and it is likely there will always be tension between empowerment and control.

Employees are not “cultural dopes” or “docile bodies” and do not simply buy into empowerment rhetoric in an unconditional way (Guest 1999). Their support is dependent upon trust in management and the perceived benefits to themselves. Employees interpret, evaluate and (re)act towards managerial initiatives. Thus it could be argued that even when management try to limit “empowerment”, employees themselves may see the discourse as a resource in their struggles with management to bring managers into line with workforce expectations (Rosenthal *et al.* 1997) and indeed may question the extent to which they are treated and rewarded in the organisation as a whole, and the extent to which they participate in key business decisions and hence construct their own agenda (Wilkinson *et al.* 1997).

The prescriptive empowerment literature suggests that the role of middle managers and supervisors changes from holders of expert power (cops) to facilitators (or coaches). However, removal of expert power is often perceived as a significant threat and participative management is seen as burden to many middle managers and it is not surprising that they do not universally welcome it (Marchington, Wilkinson 2005; Marchington *et al.* 2001). Their sense of anxiety is exacerbated by fears of job loss as levels in the hierarchy may be reduced as part of wider changes, as well as possible reduction in status and increasing workload. Moreover some see moves towards employee empowerment as “soft” management removing their authority over subordinates. However, research suggests that opposition may owe more to the fact that they were not provided with the resources required, were not sufficiently trained or were not evaluated on this in terms of performance appraisal and therefore did not see it as of much importance (Marchington *et al.* 2001) and that the problem relates to systems and structures rather than the personnel of middle management (Edwards *et al.* 1997). In other cases middle managers may feel that they

themselves gain influence over decisions taken elsewhere in the organisation that affect their work. Some may also feel that it gives them a chance to show their initiative and so increase their career prospects despite losing a degree of functional expert power.

As M. Fenton O'Crevy (2001, p. 37) notes

Managers in the middle levels should not be made scapegoats for failure to achieve benefits from employee involvement practices. Their attitudes are as positive as those help by senior managers. Rather senior managers should pay attention to the constraints that might be acting on managers required to implement practices. Are performance management systems working against the goals of employee involvement? Are middle managers' roles structured so that they have no time to develop and involve subordinates?

7. CONCLUSION

It is clearly too simplistic either to celebrate direct participation as a panacea for organisational ills or equally to dismiss it as a poison or simply pointless because it has failed to transform the employment relationship. Indeed, as argued elsewhere (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1997) management initiatives are probably more limited than the enthusiasts claim, but more constructive than the critics admit. So much depends on the context in which empowerment is introduced – the competitive situation, management style, employee expectations, and other human resource practices – as well as on the types of schemes themselves. C. Ichniowski *et al.* (1996, p. 299) conclude that a “collage of evidence suggests that innovative workplace practices can increase performance, primarily through the use of systems of related practices that enhance worker participation, make work design less rigid and decentralise managerial tasks”. Individual work practices may have little effect on their own but the utilisation of a coherent and integrated system of EI can lead to improvements in performance and worker outcomes.

A paradox of new management techniques such as empowerment is that whilst they require employee commitment and high trust relations to make them work effectively, simultaneously they may erode any basis for such relations. This takes us back to the critical issue of context: individuals empowered to make decisions may be unwilling to use their discretion if they feel continually under the watchful eye of “Big Brother”. Not only might such approaches fail to deliver what is expected, they may also lead to dysfunctional and unintended consequences as workers subvert the system and undermine management. At Enron for example, the rank or yank policy with 20% promoted and 20% fired produced a climate of fear not a climate where speaking up was valued.

Previous work suggested that in the UK for example most British employers have implemented participation in a half hearted and partial way, adopting techniques in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner, thus falling short of the holistic, integrated approach which research suggests is required to make it work effectively. Faddism and fashion in management approaches has been noted by a number of writers (e.g. Collins 2000; Hilmer, Donaldson 1996; Micklethwait, Woolridge 1996). Work by B. Staw and S. Epstein (2000) shows why fashion takes hold. Their study found no evidence of economic or efficiency benefits, but they did report “reputational effects” from participation as organisations were seen as more innovative and having better management.

To conclude, it needs to be recognised that empowerment has different forms and should be analysed in the context of broader organisational practice. The importance of these initiatives is in the context of the translation of their supposedly formal properties within the real terrain of the workplace. Empowerment may not in practice dilute overall management control: rather it can reconstitute the nature of such control. This does not mean that empowerment is without benefits to employees. Nor while these benefits may be limited should they be dismissed as simply small beer.

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**EMPOWERMENT – MITY I ZNACZENIE
– PANACEUM NA PROBLEMY ORGANIZACYJNE CZY TRUCIZNA?**

W ciągu ostatnich 20 lat termin *empowerment* wszedł na stałe do terminologii języka biznesu. Łączy się z popularnymi obszarami zarządzania, takimi jak: zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi, zarządzanie wiedzą, zarządzanie jakością, wiedzą z zakresu *reengineeringu* i „odchudzonej” organizacji. *Empowerment* jest często uważany za rozwiązanie problemów biurokratyzowanej, taylorowskiej organizacji pracy, w której na kreatywność pracownika nie ma miejsca, a jego wyalienowanie jest codziennością. Jednakże nawet w literaturze przedmiotu nie ma dość konstruktywnej dyskusji na temat problemów, z jakimi muszą się borykać zarządzający przy wprowadzaniu zasad *empowermentu*. Niewiele jest także o warunkach, w jakich ta technika zarządzania może być z powodzeniem zastosowana. Zakłada się również, że pracownicy z chęcią podążą nową, liberalną drogą kształtowania ich pracy, a jest to – jak dalej próbuje się udowodnić – mit. Autor podejmuje także próby obalenia mitu wszechstronności zastosowania *empowermentu*, bowiem powszechnie zakłada się, że jest on odpowiedni dla każdej organizacji, niezależnie od okoliczności.