

no-one to command & control: a new paradigm for a new reality

In 1999 Bill Harley of the University of Melbourne in Australia examined the employee empowerment thesis, which he defined as the "belief that new forms of work organization (such as Total Quality Management, team-based work and consultative committees) are overturning traditional management structures and returning control to employees".

In [The Myth of Empowerment](#)¹ Harley concluded that "there is no association between 'empowerment' and employee autonomy. There are, however, clear relationships between employees' positions within occupational hierarchies and their levels of control over their work. Therefore, the empowerment thesis is rejected. A provisional explanation for the failure of empowerment to enhance employee autonomy can be found in the fact that organizational power resides primarily in organizational structures."

Rune Olsen, an organizational designer from Norway, here takes the analysis further.

People change their practices only when they must. We are used to thinking that someone must lead and some must be led, someone must decide and some must have decisions imposed upon them. The power to command, control and dominate others is the mechanism of the traditional *outside power* structure (the one where people in superior positions dominate people in subordinate positions). When the outside power structure is changed to an *inside* power structure, people will need to adjust to a change from one structure to another.

Without a change in structure, people will continue their current practices based on their beliefs, habits and the mental patterns that these create. Therefore a different conception of leadership is needed - one that empowers *the person* (inside authority and personal power) and not *the position* (outside authority and positional power).

How to change *leadership*? As I see it, empowerment of people is about creating consciousness (the way we perceive and think about things) through transformation of the power structure in ways that establish personal (rather than positional) authority and identity. A change in the power structure requires a change in the mental patterns that influence how we see each other, from position-based attitudes to individual-based attitudes. The kind of leadership we have will change, not because of the person in a position, but because of a new reality (brought about by a change in consciousness) that will bring about new conditions for power sharing in the organization and in the workplace.

It will be a good thing for all concerned. The following article contains an analysis of the relationship between power and health in the workplace. I hope that this analysis and the concept of a new power structure in the workplace may help start us on the path to developing and implementing a new personalised identity within the organization for the individual human being.

Many years ago I started on a mission to develop a new pedagogical [educational] framework for the implementation of a system of *inside control* and *personal steering* (empowerment from *inside* the individual). Some years after I took on a new mission: to develop a power structure which would

provide for empowerment from *the inside*, in contrast to the traditional power structure which is based on *outside* control and steering by control systems and controlling-persons. The overall mission was to establish a values system based on mutual trust and individual freedom premised on the idea of personal responsibility (freedom) for oneself and others and personal independence (trust).

I want to share my values and ideas with others who see both the necessity and the advantage of a fundamental change and transformation in the formal organizational power structure. Then there will be no-one to command and control simply because there will no longer be the positions to legitimise and legalise an outer power structure.

The following is an analysis of the relationship between power and health in the workplace. This analysis - and the concept of a new power structure in the workplace - is the start to developing and implementing a new personalised identity *within the organization* for the individual human being.

The Power Structure of the Workplace Produces Absenteeism

Absenteeism due to illness (sometimes called "innocent absenteeism") is the result of a certain clinical picture. The progress of this kind of absenteeism can be seen as a chain reaction, where the following stages may occur:

- ✓ Being burned out (your actual performance falls short of the performance that is expected from you)
- ✓ Being harassed (being underrated, overrated or disparaged)
- ✓ Being shut out or kept out of what is going on
- ✓ Being ejected (being transferred or degraded)
- ✓ Being on sick-leave (having to stay at home)
- ✓ Being disabled (experiencing a permanent inability to earn a living)

Innocent absenteeism develops over time through a number of stages, during which health gradually deteriorates. When discussing absence, however, the absence itself seems to be the problem. The clinical picture, on the other hand, is hardly mentioned at all. If we are to discuss the clinical picture, we also have to discuss the circumstances that are causing the absence. When investigating causality, one might come across conditions that one does not want to highlight. It is alright to discuss work ethic, but it is not accepted to question the organizational structure. We might unknowingly reveal facts about the organization's inner structure that would challenge our conception of the distribution and discharge of power at our own place of work and in the organization. This kind of revelation might cause a noticeable change to the organization.

Nevertheless, if we do decide to take a closer look at the clinical picture, the first thing we have to do is to separate the cause of the absence from the effect. Absenteeism as an effect of the cause (illness) cannot be reduced unless the basic circumstances that produce illness are removed. Today we know that many causes of absence due to illness are based in the work environment. Personal factors such as a leader's abilities (good or bad), our own sense of worth and our influence on our own working conditions are crucial when it comes to number of days absent due to illness. But even though we seem to know what causes the increase in the number of sick days, we seem unable to do anything about the problem.

The reason for this is that we are both unwilling and unable to realise that our health in the workplace is affected by how we treat each other as human beings and colleagues. Are we treated according to what we know and what we want to contribute or are we merely treated according to our position? Today organizations are managed by hierarchic structures, meaning that the people occupying superior positions manage people in subordinate positions. In other words, employees are treated according to their positions and not according to their competence, which makes absences caused by structural - and not personal - factors. The structural factors and their mechanisms cause sickness and produce illness.

It is the power structure of the organization that produces incompetence and ineffectiveness. People in superior positions, who have the means and freedom to decide, become responsible for their own and each other's decisions. Their power to decide also makes them independent. People in subordinate positions, on the other hand, who lack both the freedom and the power to make decisions, feel incapacitated.

We do know that in organizations today, competence is apportioned independent of positions (people in superior positions are presumed to be more competent than their subordinates). Based on this, the number of misjudgments made within the organization will clearly be considerable. Incompetence and the ineffectiveness are by-products of a structure that supports this kind of hierarchic discharge of power.

To further clarify this picture, I have made the following model:

Competence and incompetence

- ✓ We are competent to make decisions for ourselves and for our own situations in the workplace, because we possess the most detailed knowledge of our tasks.
- ✓ We are incompetent to make decisions on behalf of our colleagues because they can master their tasks better than we do.
- ✓ The hierarchic structure presupposes that the leaders, i.e. the people occupying the superior positions, should make decisions on behalf of their subordinate workers.
- ✓ The hierarchic structure produces incompetence based on its administrative mechanisms.
- ✓ Lack of competence and effectiveness are bad for organizational health and employee well being.

How do Norwegian organizations treat problems related to the hierarchic structure? The following chain reaction is likely to occur:

- ✓ Organizational problems, such as receding profitability, increased costs or conflicts in the workplace, are identified.
- ✓ Predictable attempts are made to solve these problems. These attempts usually include *management development*. Subordinate staff are left at the work-place, whereas the managers receive management training - and are then entrusted to solve the problems on behalf of the entire staff.
- ✓ The consequences of the efforts are rarely subject to analysis or evaluations. On the rare occasion where analyses are carried out, the following outcomes are produced:
- ✓ - The superior employees become more independent, more responsible, and increasingly empowered.
- ✓ - The subordinate employees become less independent, less responsible and have less power.
- ✓ - The organization shows signs of ineffectiveness, incompetence, decreased profitability, increased costs and other signs of organizational dis-ease, including a high rate of absenteeism.
- ✓ Management development enhances the effects of the hierarchic structure by introducing a more thorough level of protection of management and by increasing the number of leaders in the management group.
- ✓ After a while, new organizational problems are detected. New attempts are made to solve these problems - in the form of management development.

The results are predictable.

Research carried out on management training during the last 30 years supports the argument above. In his book "Does It Work?" (Original title: "*Virker det?*", 1970), the late Norwegian professor Svein M. Kile of the University of Bergen presented his conclusions of the effects of management training, based on years of research. The book reveals that management training had no effect on conditions concerning the organization, although the training might lead to personal development for the leader. Arne Ebeltoft at the Institute for work-related research in Oslo drew the same conclusions in the 1970's and 1980's. Bjorn Gustavsen at the Institute for work-related research in Stockholm presented identical

results based on research carried out during the 1990s. There are also research results that show that management training can prove to be negative for the organization. These results suggest that the profitability of the firm is reduced in proportion to the investments made in management training. It seems that the worse the performance of the business, the more likely it is to send its leaders off to management training.

Another condition that strikes me is that today it seems to be of no importance whether the leader is seen as "good" or "bad". Actually, it appears that the power structure controls human characteristics and has hierarchic consequences, whether the leader contributes to or counteracts results incompetence and inefficiency. Absenteeism due to illness is about the same, whether the leader is seen as "good" or "bad". Recent research on the work environment concludes that two out of three leaders ignore laws and rules concerning the work environment. When taking into account that at least 80 per cent of the leaders have had management training, it helps us understand that the core of the Norwegian professional life is undermined by a structure that allows decision-making to be carried out based on position and not on competence. In the long run, no business can afford to support a structure that leads to loss of profit as well as loss of work places.

A research project on work-related burn out carried out by SINTEF reveals that 64% of the people asked, considered themselves as being in a work situation which might burn them out, whereas 54 per cent report having colleagues that are in risk of being burned out. Further, the research reports that 80 per cent of the participants find that the work burden far exceeds their capacity, and 80% feel pressured to go to work, even when they are not feeling well. 40% of the participants have no influence when it comes to their own work situation. Given these numbers, the potential of sick-leaves is immense and it will increase, based on the previously mentioned factors that produce illness.

If we take a closer look at the evolutionary traits of the hierarchic structure, the superior positions prove increasingly valuable in terms of wages, pensions, benefits and other privileged arrangements. The leaders have a lot to gain by protecting and defending their positions against internal and external threats - and they have a lot to lose if they don't. These mechanisms are the basis of the voracious culture that has developed over the last few years. As a result of this development, the hierarchic structure is reinforced and the results, in the form of incompetence and inefficiency, keep growing. Considering this perspective, we need to promote the concept of *anti-authoritarian organizational development* as something that may produce a considerable increase in profitability, even in the first year of operation. Indirect costs, such as absence due to illness, could be immensely reduced during the same period of time.

A logical argument, supported by documentation, can be made to support the proposition that an organization applying this new concept can derive considerable competitive advantage. The documentation can be found in my own projects, for instance in my book "The competence belongs to you" (original title: *Kompetansen er Din*, Cappelen, 1991). There is also a very successful project carried out in a Brazilian organization, which has produced exceptional results after introducing and practising freedom and trust in the workplace.

Ricardo Semler, who owns and runs the Brazilian company SEMCO, describes his organizational model in his book "The world's most unusual workplace". This model promotes sharing power between the employees, allowing each person to take on responsibility and authority based on his or her competence. The superior positions are removed and the hierarchic pyramid is abandoned. There are leaders, but they only offer guidance and assistance. The company's productivity has increased by seven times and profit is five times as high as it used to be. The number of employees leaving the firm is almost down to zero, whereas the recruiting among the best-qualified employees is largely expanded. The employees employ their own leaders.

SEMCO is one of many examples of businesses throughout the world that have developed and implemented "projects" that have reduced hierarchy and developed democracy to a certain extent. But still these businesses continue to be "institutions" based on an outer/outside authority and personalised leadership, in spite of their efforts to optimise their organizations through many sorts of individual and collective processes.

These projects lack a concept - a new structure for power sharing in addition to the processes. A "project" consists of "informal processes". A concept, however, consists of both informal processes and formal structures. For example, to change the organizational pattern in a business, it is necessary to implement processes for individual and collective activities and also to implement the right power structure that will govern human and inter-human processes. Without a new formalised structure, the power will operate the same way as before in spite of efforts to move in a more humanised direction. After a time, the new informal processes will lose their effectiveness and credibility and organizational practices will revert back to what they were before. This is particularly likely when enthusiastic and committed leaders are no longer present to keep the processes going.

This will consistently be the case if these processes are not supported by an accompanying concept, independent of the persons involved. A new reality can then evolve based on workplace relations mediated by personal inside power and authority, individual independence and personal responsibility. When people in the workplace are 100% independent and responsible, the outside systems and persons with the power to control and command others will no longer be needed. The reign of their laws and institutionalised order will end.

Rune Olsen with Wanda Marie Pasz, November 2005

This article first appeared on the Members for Democracy Archive at <http://www.m-f-d.org/>
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Endnotes

¹ Harley, W., *The Myth of Empowerment: Work Organisation, Hierarchy and Employee Autonomy in Contemporary Australian Society* in *Work, Employment & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 41-66 (1999) BSA Publications