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MANAGEMENT
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Empowerment

From the Editor

There is a ritual that happens in every family most weekdays usually at supper, sometimes earlier, sometimes later. It goes, "how was your day today?"

If there are school-age children in the family, the question is slightly different, "What did you learn at school today?" The ritual answer is, "Nothing." Sometimes the answer is challenged; often another question is asked. There is an interesting assumption underlying the question: Everyday, everybody should be learning something. Not a bad assumption, if individuals want to keep pace.

Change the setting for a moment from family to work. Try this question with your colleagues at the end of the day, "What did we learn as an organization today?" The same underlying assumption prevails: Organizations must learn to keep pace and lead.

A learning organization can read the environment, assess problems, create new solutions, train, guide, and communicate.

Helping individuals and organizations learn is what we do at LIVE Consultants. The end result is adaptability and strength for the future.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Crack the spine of any management book from 1990 on and you will find a new word — empowerment. In fact, the person who may have recommended the book to you might have told you that the book would empower you! Whatever that means.

In this article, Stephen Baetz takes the mystery out of empowerment and defines the moment of truth at which empowerment happens. As well, he defines when empowerment doesn't happen.

"There is a simple truth, however," Stephen writes. "The moment of empowerment can't happen if there is no development time in front." He then describes several key questions a manager can use to help people make sound decisions. After all, initiative and decision making are the heart of empowerment.



Stephen Baetz is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.

Stephen Baetz

We Have Power, We Have Lift Off

I know where it was now. It was in a Developmental Psych class where we were talking about the maturation process. The lecture was titled, *Leaving the Fairy Tale in the Nursery*. Her point was that life was a series of endings and beginnings and that at each stage of our life we were challenged to leave the symbols of that age and stage behind so that we could pick up new behaviours, new attitudes.

It seemed logical at the time. Probably didn't give it a second thought — except to pass the exam. I tumbled into the real world, started to work, and only then discovered that the prof was wrong. People never leave the fairy tales, they live them.

There are real-life Cinderellas who wait for the charming Prince to save them. There are Dorotheas who trip down the Yellow Brick Road, still thinking that there is a Wizard who will rescue them. And there are Jacks who trade their cows to buy lottery tickets like beans so their families can be rich everafter.

But the real-life tale that amuses me the most is the Emperor's clothes. Here, everybody pretends that the Emperor is wearing more than a smile and a birthday suit. They carry on and deny their own doubts and perceptions. For some people and for some organizations, this is a way of life. They pretend to know.

That tale is so real these days with empowerment. Everybody pretends that they know what it means. The more knowledgeable weave it skilfully into a conversation. Those who have less time to read, nod.

Now, the word means anything a person needs it to mean. I have heard the word mean anything from encouraging to granting freedom to act, from backing someone's decision to good, old fashioned delegation. Perhaps you've heard many of the same things. "I'm empowering you to ..." sounds like special powers are being granted or bestowed. "I have been empowered to ..." feels like somebody has been knighted and brought to the special round table with extraordinary authority. "Everyone should be empowered to ..." suggests that empowerment isn't very

special at all ... everybody gets it! Whatever *it* is.

Now, empowerment even comes in flavours. We have *controlled* empowerment, *reasoned* empowerment, *wilful* empowerment, *developing* empowerment, and, this month's favourite, *inspired* empowerment.

The language of empowerment is confused and maybe, just maybe, that is why we sometimes feel compelled to play Emperor's clothes. We want to believe that empowerment is possible ... that people within organizations can feel compelled to take initiative and make decisions. But maybe there's the rub. We want to believe that so badly that we accept anything that looks like, talks like, or even feels like empowerment.

The Moment of Truth

How do you know empowerment when it happens?

In very simple terms, there is a moment of truth. Empowerment happens when this question is asked of either an individual or a team: **What is your decision?**

Everything prior to that moment is build up. Everything after is effect.

An organization that empowers has leaders and managers asking that question, creating that moment, hundreds of times a day ... from the top of the house to the front-line level. At the moment of empowerment, people are asked to take control and decide what ought to be done.

As much as it is important to know when empowerment does occur, it is important to know when it does not.

Empowerment **doesn't** happen when a leader asks questions like, "What is your recommendation?", "What do you think?", or "What do you feel is best?" With those questions, the person being asked can register, "I do the recommending, others do the deciding ... I do the thinking, others do the deciding ... I do the feeling, others do the deciding." Empowerment **doesn't** happen when management makes speeches about decision

making and control but doesn't ask the moment of truth question. Empowerment can't be wished into reality with inspired rhetoric and hollow action. Empowerment **doesn't** exist if authority to invest resources to support the decisions is not there.

The Moments Before the Moment

There is a simple truth, however. The moment of empowerment can't happen if there is no development time in front.

A few simple examples will illustrate. A child can't be expected to make an appropriate decision about whom to have as a friend if the parent hasn't spent time beforehand helping the child with decision making. Coaches can't expect the defence to make the right decision at the blue line during a game if coaching and practice hasn't happened in front. Likewise, managers can't expect employees to make and own good decisions if they haven't spent time teaching problem-solving and decision-making techniques.

Here are some questions you might find useful in helping people become empowered decision makers.

Question #1: What is the goal?

Initiators and decision makers need to be clear about what they are trying to achieve. If they know what the goal is, they can make decisions which move them in that direction. Without a purpose, there will be little or no empowerment.

Question #2: What is the problem?

This question pushes for the problem to be defined in a complete and accurate way. It rests on the premise that a well-defined problem is a problem half solved.

A problem — or for that matter an opportunity — is the difference between what was expected to happen and what is happening. As much as the problem or opportunity is defined, its cause should be identified by asking why the gap exists.

Question #3: What has been tried?

Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes. This question ensures that inappropriate decisions won't be repeated.

Question #4: What are possible solutions?

Given the goal, the definition of the problem and its cause, and what has been tried, this question searches for solutions. The task is to find as many as possible without stopping to evaluate their merits.

Question #5: What are the advantages and disadvantages of each solution?

This is the question of assessment. A good solution moves toward the goal and either solves the problem or takes advantage of an opportunity.

And Now ...

The moment of truth: What is your decision? All the prior questions only develop problem-solving expertise so the moment of truth can happen.

If leaders and managers ask this question, hundreds of times a day, everyone in the organization will feel compelled to take initiative and decide.

To encourage empowerment even further make sure that

- ✓ decision makers are backed,
- ✓ failure is tolerated as learning occurs,
- ✓ mission, vision, and values are clear so that decisions can complement corporate direction, and
- ✓ decision makers and initiators are rewarded.

When this is done, you will have ignition, you will have power, and you will have lift off.

The Final Check

Your focus is back in perspective. You have started to develop a plan for making those growth and development opportunities available to the people within the organization. You have a myriad of questions.

When developing an education plan, think about the following. In combination, the points listed below will lead to success. The more “yes” options you can check, the greater the chance for plan effectiveness.

Read over the points carefully.

Does my education plan ...	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
1. consider current and emerging goals, values, and strategies?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. mesh with the attitudes, skills, and knowledge the organization wants to develop?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. identify all the populations that can benefit from development opportunities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. meet the needs of the target groups as they have been assessed and detailed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. include a variety of learning strategies?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. have a set of standards for all the growth and development opportunities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. have a practical focus to decrease the gap between information and application?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. have an overall theme that will link the ideas and build continuity?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. contain content and delivery techniques geared to the level of each target group?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. have a built-in evaluation process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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