PARTICIPATION, EMPOWERMENT, AND MOTIVATION

Participative management and empowerment are two more important methods managers can use to enhance employee motivation. In a sense, participation and empowerment are extensions of job design, because each fundamentally alters how employees in an organization perform their jobs. Participation occurs when employees have a voice in decisions about their own work. Empowerment is the process of enabling workers to set their own work goals, make decisions, and solve problems within their spheres of responsibility and authority. Thus, empowerment is a somewhat broader concept that
promotes participation in a wide variety of areas, including but not limited to work itself, work context, and work environment.¹⁸

**Early Perspectives on Participation and Empowerment**

The human relations movement in vogue from the 1930s through the 1950s assumed that employees who are happy and satisfied will work harder. This view stimulated management interest in having workers participate in a variety of organizational activities. Managers hoped that if employees had a chance to participate in decision-making concerning their work environment, they would be satisfied, and this satisfaction would supposedly result in improved performance. But managers tended to see employee participation merely as a way to increase satisfaction, not as a source of potentially valuable input. Eventually, managers began to recognize that employee input was useful in itself, apart from its presumed effect on satisfaction. In other words, they came to see employees as valued human resources who can contribute to organizational effectiveness.

The role of participation and empowerment in motivation can be expressed in terms of both the content-based perspectives and the expectancy theory. Employees who participate in decision-making may be more committed to executing decisions properly. Furthermore, successfully making a decision, executing it, and then seeing the positive consequences can help satisfy one’s need for achievement, provide recognition and responsibility, and enhance self-esteem. Simply being asked to participate in organizational decision-making may also enhance an employee’s self-esteem. In addition, participation should help clarify expectancies; that is, by participating in decision-making, employees may better understand the linkage between their performance and the rewards they want most.

**Areas of Participation**

At one level, employees can participate in addressing questions and making decisions about their own jobs. Instead of just telling them how to do their jobs, for example, managers can ask employees to make their own decisions about how to do them. Based on their own expertise and experience with their tasks, workers might be able to improve their own productivity. In many situations, they might also be well qualified to make decisions about what materials to use, what tools to use, and so forth.

It might also help to let workers make decisions about administrative matters, such as work schedules. If jobs are relatively independent of one another, employees might decide when to change shifts, take breaks, go to lunch, and so forth. A work group or team might also be able to schedule vacations and days off for all of its members. Furthermore, employees are getting increasing opportunities to participate in broader

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issues of product quality. Participation of this type has become a hallmark of successful Japanese and other international firms, and many US companies have followed suit.

**Techniques and Issues in Empowerment**

In recent years many organizations have actively sought ways to extend participation beyond the traditional areas. Simple techniques such as suggestion boxes and question-and-answer meetings allow a certain degree of participation, for example. The basic motive has been to better capitalize on the assets and capabilities inherent in all employees. Thus, many managers today prefer the term “empowerment” to “participation” because it implies a more comprehensive involvement.

One method some firms use to empower their workers is the use of work teams. This method grew out of early attempts to use what Japanese firms call “quality circles.” A quality circle is a group of volunteer employees who voluntarily meet regularly to identify and propose solutions to problems related to quality. This use of quality circles quickly grew to encompass a wider array of work groups, now generally called “work teams.” These teams are collections of employees empowered to plan, organize, direct, and control their own work. Their supervisor, rather than being a traditional “boss,” plays more the role of a coach.

The other method some organizations use to facilitate empowerment is to change their overall method of organizing. The basic pattern is for an organization to eliminate layers from its hierarchy, thereby becoming much more decentralized. Power, responsibility, and authority are delegated as far down the organization as possible, so control of work is squarely in the hands of those who actually do it.

Regardless of the specific technique used, however, empowerment only enhances organizational effectiveness if certain conditions exist. First, the organization must be sincere in its efforts to spread power and autonomy to lower levels of the organization. Token efforts to promote participation in just a few areas are unlikely to succeed. Second, the organization must be committed to maintaining participation and empowerment. Workers will be resentful if they are given more control, only to later have it reduced or taken away altogether. Third, the organization must be systematic and patient in its efforts to empower workers. Turning over too much control too quickly can spell disaster. Finally, the organization must be prepared to increase its commitment to training. Employees being given more freedom concerning how they work are likely to need additional training to help them exercise that freedom most effectively.