

# WHEN IS EMPOWERMENT NOT EMPOWERMENT? WHEN IT'S CONTROL

When is empowerment not empowerment? When empowerment has to be continually given (or broadened) from a position of power or control.

As with the word leadership, I believe the word empowerment has been much abused since the seventies when it came into vogue. Empowerment programmes appear to be a reaction to the fact that we have actively disempowered people. True sustainable power comes from within - a person, a team, an organisation - not from outside and 'above'.

In many ways like the false view of leadership\*, empowerment usually means a narrow band of control often given for a specific brief period for example "I have control and I am 'empowering' you to do x, as I still have control".

\*[False leadership = invested in a position – based on competence rather than invested in a person in true leadership - based on character where someone serves another so well, that that employee can feel they have full control and responsibility for their actions and words].

## So for me, the next and final step from useful empowerment, is emancipation.

Emancipation means - 'the act of freeing or state of being freed' or 'informal freedom from inhibition and convention'

Here it is character which holds people true to align with their colleagues, not constantly sent emails to continually correct mistakes by more and more rules and regulations, to attempt to enforce that failing, 'outside in' approach. (see Enron, Parmalat, WorldCom, Arthur Andersons, banking crisis 2008 et al)

In the companies listed in the Sunday Times best Companies to Work For Top 100 List - these organisations are far further along the empowerment to emancipation continuum than most others - and it is a sliding scale, depending on your organisation.

**Where emancipation is strongest it also results, on average, over a five year period, four times greater profit (15,1% c.f. 3.5%) to similar companies listed on the FTSE 100.**

**Empowerment** is 'to give power or authority to; authorise, especially by legal or official means: I empowered my agent to make the deal for me and 'to enable or permit'

Empowering is usually a necessary step in all three business sectors, as the IQ management world is generally about disempowering and asking people to follow a specific process to ensure standardisation, often without any involvement in the decision. There are of course instances where this is absolutely necessary e.g. orchestras, surgical teams, manufacturing and the key here for me, is that the leadership of those teams has created an aligned 'end in mind' and all are happy and importantly engaged to play their structured part - they agree and support the leader. They are not simply 'instructed' or 'empowered' to play their part, they 'want to' play their part - there is personal internal desire and not an external command.

Empowerment is thus constantly needed (as we evolve) to undo all those top-down, do what you are told, be a team player' messages that 'fall' from those narrow hierarchical command and control management models. Models, which time and again after the industrial age and mass factories, have proven to be incomplete - as they frustrate any creativity, in a world where the only constant is change and innovation is king.

It must be about (for me of course) people before process / character before competence / sustainability before short termism / engagement before control / morals before money / being proactive before reactive - and as always, both will be required - the key is in which comes first.

The way they recruit people is more likely to be based on their character, their employees are more engaged and as a result they have less absenteeism, sickness and far less turnover of staff resulting in less lost experience and in relation to their values they are both internally espoused and externally demonstrated, on a daily basis.

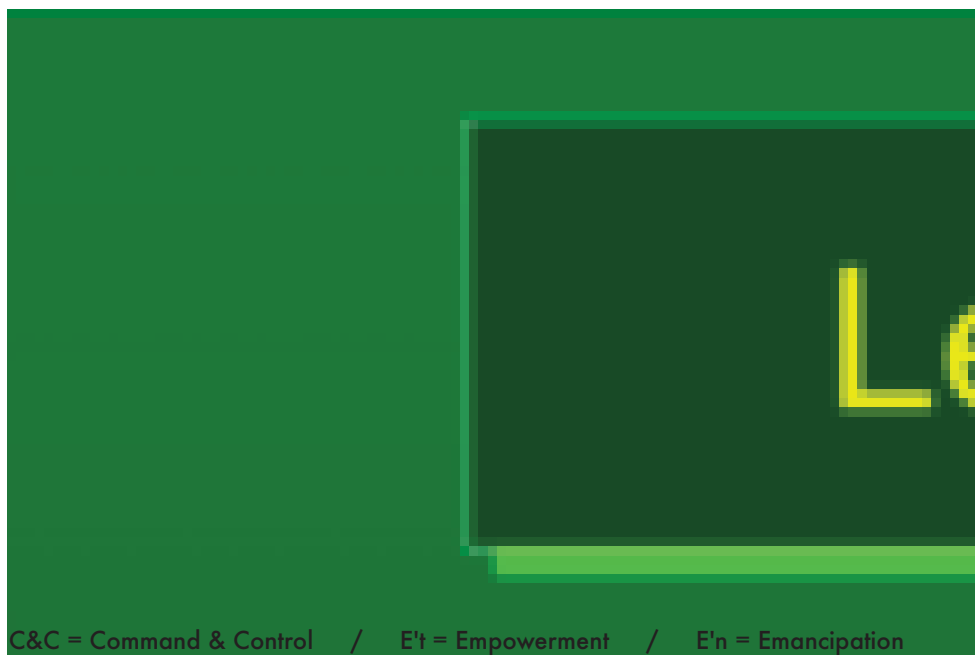
# Emancipation truly recognises the inherent character, creativity, energy and genius in people, allowing their full talents to emerge.

We can finally realise that as 'bosses' or managers, we do not have the power to 'give' these talents to others or 'empower' them to use them, only the power to prevent them coming out. Leadership or even Servant Leadership (see Greenleaf) is exactly this - spending time on the people and ensuring they take full responsibility for their actions in both character and competence, and in that order. This is true HR - human relations - NOT human resources.

Unless we can create teams who are given the decision making control and thus personal and collective responsibility for their actions, along with the additional characteristics of competence and clarity about the 'end in mind' - we will continually limit any organisations' sustainability and even its very existence, by quite simply limiting the people.

You know you have an emancipated team when you no longer need to 'empower' them. Indeed you no longer have the ability to empower them, because they are not relying on your source of power - they are relying on the core corporate values that have been agreed and are owned. They may, as I said above, in the orchestra etc be happily following your lead and using their 'inner power' to ensure the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

The best example of this I know at present is W L Gore and Associates, (50 locations worldwide and 9,000 Associates) where no one can tell anyone else what to do - there are also no titles - no hierarchy and each person is responsible for their actions and they continually, most of the time, outperform their competitors in creativity and profitability. If they are not sure what to do - they ask and thus



continually learn, as the team jointly moves constantly into alignment. Just imagine a tug of war team even fractionally pulling in different directions - I believe this is what most teams and organisations do in a command and control hierarchy. In a Command and control culture the team are together, in the same 'colours', know the task and yet are not aligned and constantly underperform and morale becomes weaker and weaker until collapse.

So - where are you on the continuum from empowerment (control) to emancipation (self control) line and where is your team or organisation? Are people free to offer their whole self without recrimination or feel free to ask if they do not know something - as long as you are aware of why you do not know it (you or your training/development)?

Some organisations will of course require more command and control and others will require more emancipation. There will be all three in most, yet sustainability will come from the upper cultures.

Engagement is about alignment and understanding, or communication of the situation. With involvement and alignment you get problem ownership and problem ownership only works if there is true emancipation for any team to go fix!

This needs leaders to let go of the solutions and let the team find the way forward with leadership, encouragement and support, not controlling any decision making which would immediately show that you have not given up control! Everyone at all levels is required to and needs to want to become a problem 'owner' i.e. they find their own solutions, if necessary with guidance. Their real learning is in the owning and solving.

The leader's role as this emancipation grows, changes from one of telling the team what to do, to seeing and expressing the problem. They need to have the sight of what's coming and vocalise the potential problems, feeding the subconscious of the team so solutions can get build proactively, which is challenging to do.

All in all, we need the right values-driven people, making decisions based on the intersection of the right technical knowledge, with a

thorough understanding of the organisations' end in mind, to make the decisions, with responsibility for the consequences of the decisions made.

- Poor organisations = continual mistakes and are generally not trusted - filled with clones.
- Good organisations do not make many mistakes (and thus do not change) and are reliable - like managers - filled with career clones
- Great organisations continually change (and sometimes make mistakes which they admit) and are both trusted and challenging - like leaders - filled with passionate people.

In its truly pure form, empowerment is a step before emancipation for the organisation, and with that emancipation comes benefits and responsibilities. The benefits are clear: higher productivity; more engaged employees; less absenteeism, lower sickness levels and lower turnover. Also the responsibilities often dictate a change in organisational culture where the organisation provides clarity of purpose and trust in the individual's character and competence to deliver. In short it is where the balance finally shifts from IQ to EQ...maybe even SQ.

**"The true leader is not the one who sees, but the one who, seeing the furthest, has the deepest desire for growth for their people and thus their organisation."**

**Les Morgan** Inspired by David Marquet's book - 'Turn the Ship Around'