
Empowering teams: what, why, and how

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Abstract

Discusses what are empowering teams, why they are important to employees, customers, and organizations, and how to go about empowering them. Presents a model of empowerment, arguing that empowerment means: authority to make decisions, accountability, alignment of direction, and ableness. Discusses ways to develop each of these, including visual frameworks, tools, and team activities. Also discusses other requirements for lasting successful empowerment, including information, supportive functions and systems, and leadership at four levels.

Everyone is talking about empowerment these days but few understand it. To go deeper, this article focusses on “empowering teams”, with “empowering” used in two different ways. As an adjective, it refers to a kind of team. What is the nature of these teams that empower, what do they do, and what are their benefits? The first gives a few answers. Considering “empowering” as a verb gives us different questions: what does it take to empower teams, how do organizations, how do we, go about empowering teams? The rest of the article presents and describes a model, arguing that empowerment requires four essential As: authority, accountability, alignment of direction, and ableness. Empowering teams to succeed and survive over time also requires information, supportive functions and systems, and leadership at four levels.

What are empowering teams, and why?

Empowering teams are teams that plan, carry out, and improve their value-adding work. To do this they develop the ableness of their members so that they become learning teams and engines of development. Depending on how they are structured and how long they live, product design teams or special project teams can be empowering teams. So can supervisor-led natural work teams, if the supervisor has the will and skills (ableness) to be a team leader and coach. Permanent front-line self-managing or self-directed teams (SDTs) that do all of this without traditional direct supervision are a stage more empowered and empowering of their members. The model presented here is most relevant for SDTs, also called self-regulating teams, autonomous work groups, and semi-autonomous work groups.

What do these teams do? Just about everything. They cross-train their members, making it possible to balance the work load and quickly respond to shifting demand and making the members more valuable. Team members have authority to make decisions on the spot, providing instant responses to customer needs. They take on equipment selection, layout, installa-

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tion, and maintenance and also material handling, work scheduling and inspection. This puts full accountability for creating and delivering high quality products and services right into the team. They manage attendance, flexitime, tardiness and many minor discipline problems. They select their own additional or replacement members, and, having authority to select, they make sure their selections succeed! In fact, they do everything they can to help all their members succeed and grow. A member of our group visiting a high performance team plant asked the team member who was our host “what do you do with a team member who is failing?” The answer surprised him: “We won’t let a team member fail!” They handle, after some initial help, securing their own training and other development needs. They may get involved in the development of new technology, new products, new markets.

What are the benefits? For team members: personal growth, leadership opportunities, responsibility, variety, challenge, contribution, respect, pride, and belonging and community. Plus an opportunity to create and understand the meaning of their own work, which is perhaps one of the deepest of human needs. Because they become very highly productive, team members gain both the opportunity to earn high wages *and* much greater employment security than is possible in a traditional organization. Finally, if, despite all this, their positions are eliminated, they will have greater versatility and value in the job market.

The benefits for customers are equally dramatic: higher (sometimes much higher) quality, faster, more sensitive and more flexible responsiveness, especially in service organizations, and lower costs. The overall organization gains by all of this, plus the savings from reducing at least one and sometimes two levels of supervision. These savings from a flatter hierarchy include reduced payroll and fringes and reducing the delays, errors, and costs, in the old system, from moving information up a hierarchy to a decision level and then moving the decision back down to the action level.

There are major investment costs necessary to gain these benefits. Although there are fewer supervisors to train, the teams require unending training. Although time is saved in not having to go up the hierarchy for many decisions, time is

used by teams in learning how to make, and then in making, decisions by consensus. And although middle and senior management time is eventually freed up by having empowering teams on the front line, for the first year or two there is a need for *increased* management time to launch, develop, and coach these teams and to create the supporting systems changes required for them to be fully successful.

A model of empowerment

Experience in dozens of organizations has led to the conclusion that empowerment of teams requires that they have:

- (1) Authority to make many (but not unlimited) decisions.
- (2) Accountability.
- (3) Alignment of direction, in three dimensions:
 - internally, among their own members;
 - horizontally, with customers, suppliers, and other functions;
 - vertically, with the direction of the parent organization.
- (4) Ability by team members to do all of this plus their basic work. Ability includes:
 - knowledge and skills of many different kinds and depths;
 - a well-developed identity, or state of being;
 - the requisite affirming and receptive will.

These four A’s make up the core definition and requirements of empowerment. Beyond this, for empowering teams to succeed and survive over time they will need three other things:

- (1) information, in more depth and volume and usefulness than is normal;
- (2) support from other functions and from revised or regenerated systems;
- (3) leadership at four levels:
 - leadership *of* the team;
 - leadership *within* the team, or distributed leadership;
 - leadership and coaching, compared with managing, by the manager *above* the team(s); and
 - leadership from the executive and senior management levels.

Authority to make decisions

Authority means decision authority. To be empowered, the team and its members must have the authority to make decisions without getting prior approval from a manager, and without having their decisions overruled. This is the foundation of empowerment, what most people think empowerment means. No authority, no empowerment.

Empowered teams may take on authority to:

- plan and schedule the work to be done;
- schedule which team member will handle which assignments;
- select, layout, install and manage new equipment;
- secure predictive/preventive maintenance for their equipment;
- repair, or secure repair for, their equipment;
- organize their own material supply process;
- contract directly with outside suppliers, or negotiate with purchasing department about their input quality and timing requirements;
- interview customers separately, in focus groups, or on their work sites;
- set up regular feedback and interaction channels with customers;
- learn quality standards and inspect their own work;
- halt production immediately when quality problems are found;
- document, follow, and improve process guidelines for their work;
- cross-train themselves on all or most jobs on their team;
- arrange transfers to other teams to continue their cross-training;
- set their own attendance standards and discipline methods;
- support, and if necessary discipline, team members for excess variation from standards;
- determine frequency, time, and location of needed team meetings;
- manage and improve their own safety and environmental impacts;
- do “whatever it takes” to satisfy a customer;
- discharge a team member (it is rare fully to delegate this to a team);
- determine, secure, and schedule training and other educational opportunities to enable the team to develop whatever ableness it needs.

Teams cannot and should not take on this authority all at once, without any limits, up front. Unfortunately, some companies try to dump unlimited decision authority on teams right from day one. This may not guarantee failure but it makes failure much more likely. A better process is to plan with the teams the phasing in of increasing authority, with some decisions delegated immediately, the scope of others increasing over time, and others perhaps never turned over completely to the teams. For authority that is to be delegated or increased in the future, wise management plans with the teams what prior levels of capability they will demonstrate, and what additional forms of information and training the teams will require first.

The authority handoff matrix is a useful tool for dialoguing with teams about these issues and for reaching agreement with clarity. One version of this matrix is illustrated in Figure 1. This one focusses, for an example, only on the single issue of selection of new team members. The format may be changed as needed, and one or several rows will be filled out for every single authority arena. (The times and requirements shown here are for example only; they may be too conservative for some organizations.) Many organizations have not known about this matrix and instead they have relied on verbal agreements or on unspoken, unclarified assumptions. This often leads to managers and employees being confused, frustrated, and even angry about different perceptions of who has or does not have what degree of decision authority over what.

We know from experience that clarity of delegation by management can make a big difference in willingness of employees to accept authority. In one case, a hotel general manager told employees they were empowered to do whatever was necessary to satisfy guests. She supported this with videos from headquarters and other training. When nothing changed, she asked employee focus groups why. Employees said, in essence, that “we don’t believe you”, and that “without limits of authority we don’t feel we can make any decisions”. As a result, the general manager told employees they could spend up to \$1,000 per guest to correct any service problems. Then change began.

Figure 1 Example of portion of authority handoff matrix

Realm or Arena of authority: Selection of new team members Date: 6/6/95 Rev. No.

Specific degree or limits of authority	Date when team has authority: Now? When?	Information team will need to make these decisions	Team must first demonstrate acceptable capability in:	Training required before taking on this authority	Time line
Selected team members interview candidates, give input to HRD and managers	9/1/95			Interviewing skills	7/15.....8/15
Team as a whole, or elected reps interview candidates, recommend choice to HRD and managers	3/1/96	EEOC requirements; overall plant or company progress and goals in meeting these requirements	Interviewing and giving inputs from 9/1/95 to 3/1/96	EEOC and other legal and policy requirements in hiring. Consensus decision making	10/12-14 6/20
Team interviews and selects from candidates sent by HRD	9/1/96		Interviewing and recommending to managers from 3/1/96 to 9/1/96		

Accountability

The other side of the authority coin is accountability. This term is used here in the sense of "you can count on me/us". Why not use instead the even more common term "responsibility?" Because the roots of responsibility link it to responding (to outside stimuli), and therefore it is too close to being reactive. I am looking for a more proactive concept. Perhaps we should ask our empowering teams to be "prospensive". Will the teams accept accountability? And for what? This is where the rubber meets the road for employees. Managers may have trouble delegating authority, wondering how well employees will make decisions and perform and whether they will leave the manager, responsible for their failures, twisting in the wind. Employees often say they will take authority to make decisions to "get that supervisor off my back" because "we don't need to be micro-managed". On the other hand they may be much less enthusiastic about accepting accountability. But until employees and teams accept accountability, how can management delegate significant amounts of authority?

What should empowering teams accept accountability for? One answer is the team should take accountability for handling well all the aspects of decision authority they have been delegated, as clarified in the authority handoff matrix. While this is necessary, it is not sufficient.

Fully empowering teams accept accountability for performance to customers, which is the only thing that will insure the survival of the whole organization, and for managing all of their processes which allow them to provide outstanding service to customers. This kind of accountability is much more fundamental, understandable, and powerful, and it brings the potential for dramatically changing the organization, its performance, and its survivability.

To do this teams will have to:

- flow chart their processes and determine who are their customers;
- determine with each customer group what they require now and what would go beyond requirements and lead to delight;
- set up effective channels for regularly learning how well the team is doing in serving the customers against present and potential

- future requirements and against present and potential competition; and
- find ways to learn what is changing with their customers, the customers of their customers, the technology and environment, that will or may lead to changes in customer requirements.

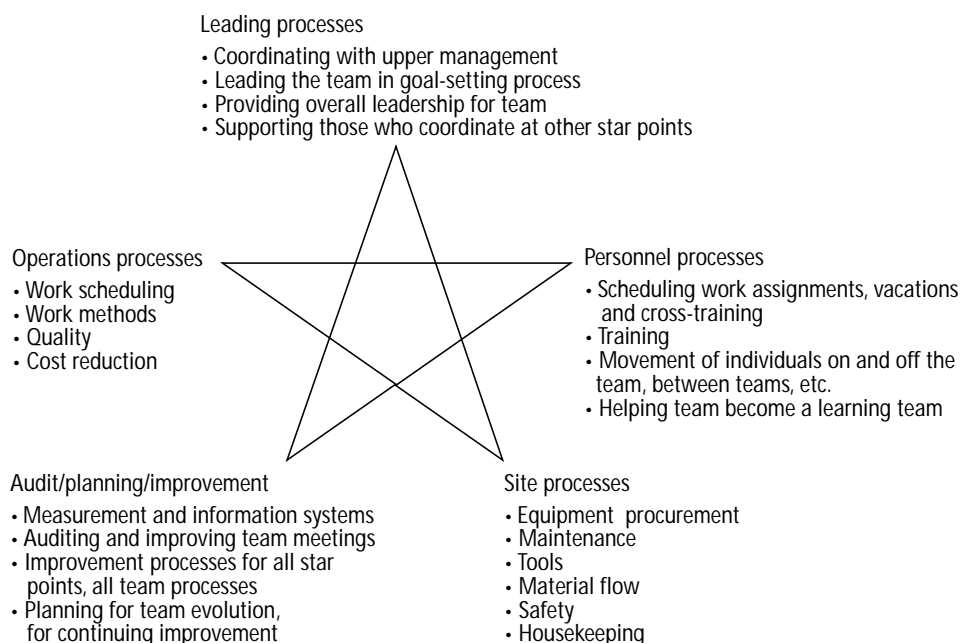
This last of course involves issues of environmental scanning and strategic planning for the whole organization, which must be done by top management. However, empowering teams also learn to do their share of strategic thinking and to build the appropriate strategic inputs into their own planning, learning and decision processes. Empowering teams are microcosms of the whole system; each carries within it images of the whole, as in a hologram.

To provide exceptional customer service, and to manage themselves, empowering teams will also have to take accountability for managing their own ongoing and repetitive processes. The model which has proven most helpful to teams in understanding and organizing this accountability is the five-pointed star, or pentad (see Figure 2). Systems thinker and consultant, Charles Krone adapted this framework from general systems thinking and applied it to operational level team processes in P&G, ICI, and Du Pont. It has since been borrowed and modified

by dozens of other companies. One way to use this star with a single team moving towards empowerment is:

- (1) Draw the star and put the generic headings on each point. Have the team list under each point the important recurring processes which the team depends on to perform and improve its work in a way that satisfies and delights customers. Each team will come up with its own unique answers. Office and service teams may have site processes quite different from these.
- (2) Ask team members who have managed these processes in the past, under a traditional management system. Most will answer "the supervisor" or "nobody". Ask the team who they expect will take accountability in the future for these processes. Two probable answers are "the team leader", or "all of us". Each has drawbacks. If we let team leaders manage all of these processes they will have to become full-time, despite good reasons for preferring them to work also, and they will be driven to become supervisors under new labels. On the other hand, if everybody on the team shares general accountability for all of these processes, several or all of them may not be well-managed. A better answer is to get

Figure 2 The pentad of operational processes



individual team members to take accountability for the most important processes or groups of processes, on behalf of the team. This can be termed “distributed leadership” and is discussed in more detail later in the article.

- (3) Help the team group the many processes into five to ten that team members are ready to take accountability for. This may be by simply having five team members take accountability for the five overall star points. Or it may mean combining and then picking the top half dozen or dozen processes under the five star points. For example a team might have a single “site coordinator”, or instead be separate coordinators for equipment and tools, for safety, for material supply, and for housekeeping.
- (4) Help the team members decide who will take accountability, for how long, for each of the agreed-key processes. It seems to work best to rotate these roles every six to 12 months, so that team members learn for several months about the role they are filling, but do not become too attached to it. They should not “own” it to the exclusion of other members.
- (5) Help the newly designated coordinators understand and succeed in their new roles. This can include:
 - Role definition in dialogue with the team. If I have agreed to be the housekeeping, safety, or quality coordinator for my team, what does the team expect of me? And what do I expect of the team?
 - Regular time in team meetings to discuss each of the processes and how well each coordinator, and the team, are doing with each, and what improvements will be made.
 - Setting up and leading cross-team coordinating teams. The classic example of these are plant-wide safety committees. Other obvious candidates are quality committees (or teams), training teams, and team leaders’ teams.

Taking accountability for learning and providing what customers need and what would delight them, and for managing all the key processes which determine their ability to do this, is a lot of accountability. As with decision authority, we cannot expect most teams to accept it all sud-

denly, overnight. They should phase into it, as they grow in ableness to handle it. If this still seems to ask a lot of “ordinary” front-line employees, I would agree, but point out that many thousands of ordinary people are doing this already. Furthermore, it is one of the key elements both of team success and of individual empowerment and growth in our identity. Think about it: if we don’t take accountability, are we really empowered? How do we grow our own ableness, our identity, except through taking accountability, and then testing ourselves against that accountability?

A true example: a hotel bellman in New England took a call from a distraught woman. Her elderly aunt was in the hotel on a fall foliage bus tour. A close relative was dying in a Chicago hospital. It was urgent she return, but she had never flown, had no credit cards, and only pocket money. The bellman reassured her he would handle it. He woke the guest, broke the bad news, made a plane reservation with his own credit card, helped her pack, checked her out, got a team-mate to drive them to the airport, alerted team members to cover for both of them, escorted the lady on to the plane, enlisted a stewardess to help her off the plane, and phoned the niece in Chicago with flight information, stewardess’s name, and amount owed him for the flight. This was extraordinary accountability from an ordinary person: accountability to do whatever it takes to serve the customer. It is not accountability to any specific duty or job description. In empowered teams, you will never, ever, hear an employee say “that’s not my job”.

A word of warning to managers. When empowering teams do take accountability for their performance to customers, and for managing their processes, they may begin to put enormous pressure on supplier departments and functions to improve *their* performance. For example, the purchasing department may be stuck in the past using multiple suppliers for a given material or part, buying on immediate price alone (instead of total long-term cost), and accepting poor quality supplier performance because “that’s the best we can expect or get”. Supervisors of other departments may accept this kind of traditional thinking and behavior from purchasing, or maintenance, accounting, payroll, engineering, MIS, or any

other function. They think: “we couldn’t do any better if we were transferred there”, or “we don’t want to rock the boat”, or “those guys are our peers and friends”, etc., etc. But empowered teams taking full accountability for performance are not bound by old boy networks, or outdated sloppy standards, or old paradigms about what is right or possible. They will first ask for, then insist on, and then finally demand higher and higher levels of performance from every single function and department that they depend on. They may even ultimately take over other functions if that is the only or best way to get the superior inputs and service they need. This is one reason why performance-oriented managers should empower their teams and why traditional managers fear them.

Alignment of direction

For teams to be empowered, they must have alignment of direction. By direction I mean both the everyday sense of “what direction are we heading?” and, in the organizational world, the mission, vision, values and goals which can align every level, every function, every team and ultimately every individual in the organization. Empowering teams are aligned along three dimensions: internally within the team; horizontally with customers, suppliers and other teams in their own organization; and vertically with the levels of hierarchy above and the overall direction of the organization.

Alignment of direction internally, within the team

Consultants have used for many decades the pair of rectangular boxes shown in Figure 3 to

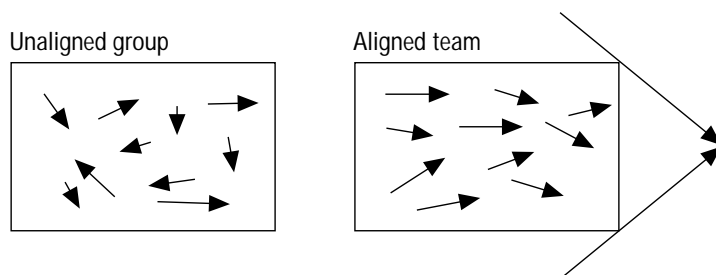
illustrate the difference between unaligned and aligned teams. The unaligned team (group would be a more accurate term) has members going off in all different directions, each according to his own light and whim, so on the whole their efforts cancel one another out. In the aligned team, members share a common mission, vision, values and goals. Their perceptions of the situation are not identical and they do not all go in exactly the same direction. But, overall, they are putting aligned energy in one general direction, and the team is able to develop significant thrust in that direction. This is one requirement for empowerment. No alignment, no power.

There are many ways that teams develop this alignment, and that we as managers, leaders and consultants can help them. For example, we can lead teams through any or all of the following discussions and activities.

On mission:

- What is the overall mission of our company, division, organization?
- What is our team’s role in that mission, our contribution to it?
- Flow chart our work and where it goes downstream from us. Show where our team is in a full value-adding stream from original sources to end users.
- Using this flow chart and improving it, identify who are our immediate customers? Who are their customers? And their customers? The end users?
- What does each stage expect, require, need, and desire from the ones upstream of them, and therefore of our team?
- Therefore, how would we best measure our own performance?
- Why choose these measures?
- What are our customers paying us to perform and provide? Why?
- Send out team members in pairs to interview representatives of all-important customer groups and bring back their answers to these questions.
- Given this new information, how do we need to enlarge or modify our own original answers?
- Therefore, what is our promise to our customers?

Figure 3 Internal alignment



- How are we going to do all of this better than all competition, real and potential?
- Therefore, what is our mission, our core purpose, our promise?

On vision:

- Discuss some of the worst and some of the best and most successful team experiences you have had. What made them different?
- How do we want to work together in our team?
- How will we make decisions in our team? By seniority? By power? By accident? By voting? By domination? By consensus? What does consensus mean, and not mean? What kind of processes does it require?
- Working in pairs or trios, draw a picture of the ideal team, of how you would like to have this team, our team, become.
- Add some words to your picture to capture the key ideas, and then share the picture and words with the full team.

On values:

- What are the values that we want to bring to, build into, and experience in our team?
- Why is each of these important to us?
- Of these values, which are the most important and fundamental?

This discussion of values can be held separately, or combined with the development of the vision of what the team will be like. In either case, it should be followed with having the team develop some core principles, embodying the values, that each member agrees with and commits to (attempt to) live by.

Alignment of direction horizontally

To develop its internal alignment the team has already done some work on external horizontal alignment. It has flow-charted its work, identified chains or streams of customers, interviewed customer representatives, and determined their needs. Horizontal alignment requires that we do this not just once, but repeatedly, and that we develop channels for regular and frequent feedback from our customers, and dialogues with them, about their changing needs and our performance in meeting or exceeding those needs.

Teams also develop similar alignment processes with their own suppliers, those teams

and organizations upstream that provide them with the raw materials, semi-finished goods and information that they use up and add value to in their work.

Finally, alignment will be required across functions horizontally within the organization. A production team requires prompt, understanding, high-quality service from many other teams, functions and departments to succeed, including engineering, maintenance, payroll, information systems, purchasing, quality, production scheduling, and HRD. To gain control over their own performance, an empowering team will take accountability for some parts of many of these functions (assuming that upper management approves), but will usually still rely to some extent on centrally-provided expertise and service. Much of the work of developing cross-functional alignment is that of senior management. But each individual team, to be empowered, will have to do it as well at its own level. This is some of their hardest work, since there is so much potential conflict involved.

Vertical alignment

Empowered teams must also be aligned vertically with the overall mission, vision, values and priorities of the organization as a whole. To attempt to empower teams without aligning them this way is to create chaos. Put more briefly: empowerment without alignment = chaos. The two boxes we used to show aligned teams with thrust versus unaligned groups going nowhere also apply to whole organizations. No alignment = no power.

The best methodology for developing vertical alignment is the Japanese system of *Hoshin Kanri*, now spreading rapidly in US organizations under such titles as *Hoshin* planning, management by planning, breakthrough planning, or policy deployment. This process includes four major stages or phases. First, the organization's senior leaders create a draft strategic plan and a very few top priority objectives that will require effort throughout the organization. Second, the leadership deploys this plan and its priorities downward through the organization in the form of a draft matrix. Each level studies the draft matrices, develops the work and assignments it will take on, and deploys them on downward to the next level(s)

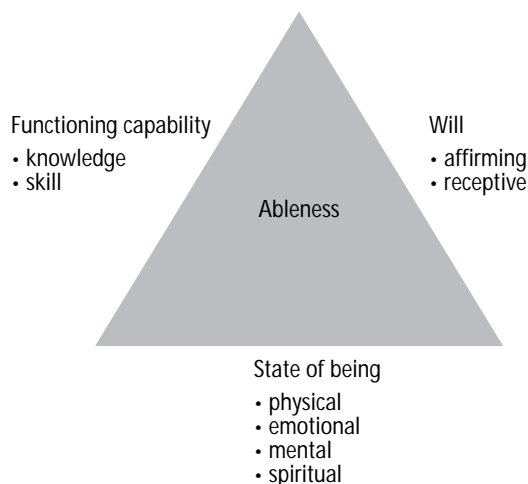
down, including ultimately to the front-line teams, for them to do the same.

Now it gets interesting. Each level sends back up its requirements to carry out its part of the plan, and recommendations for revisions. Each level must listen respectfully to input from below, integrate it, and send it up. When the top has listened to all of this input from below, it makes necessary modifications and sends the revised plan back down as the official plan. Phase three is implementation and phase four is frequent auditing at and by each level of its own actions and progress. So every level gives input into the final plan, has its own required actions, has more ownership over the plan, and has its own audit processes and timetables. This movement of the plan down, up and down, which the Japanese call “catch-ball”, is a very important part of the process. Vertical alignment should be a two-way street: aligning the bottom with the top and also aligning the top with the bottom.

Ableness

The fourth “A” of the requirements for empowerment is ableness. The team and its members must be able to perform all of the tasks of the team’s work, to understand customers and their requirements, and to manage for themselves all of the processes they are going to take accountability for. All of this requires loads of capability, plus a high state of being and steady will. We can illustrate this richness and depth with a simple ableness triangle (Figure 4), which also stems from work of Charles Krone.

Figure 4 The ableness triangle



Functioning capability

The left side of the triangle is the easiest to define. We are all familiar with the concept of capability to function in some job or role, and its components of knowledge and skill. Most high-school, college, and night-school education and most technical and corporate training are attempting to transfer, implant or develop some mixture of knowledge and skills to do something. Whether it is solving algebra equations, welding, or using a computer, we will need to gain some knowledge and develop some skills.

For the empowering teams, there is an enormous amount of capability to be developed.

Consider the following incomplete list:

- work skills in one and perhaps another team;
- the basics of business economics including profit and loss (or surplus and loss in the government and non-profit arenas) and the roles of profit and how profits are created in our specific business;
- simple cost accounting;
- cost-benefit analysis;
- reading and tracking expenditures against a budget;
- planning and leading effective meetings;
- team decision-making processes;
- listening and other communications skills;
- flow charting, run charting, and other basic TQM tools;
- a simple disciplined problem-solving model and/or process improvement model;
- the importance of managing with information and how to do this;
- the advantages of diversity and how to benefit from it; corporate policies and principles on diversity and everything else;
- planning change;
- anticipating and reconciling conflict;
- understanding whole systems and systems thinking; and
- some leadership fundamentals.

As usual, there is good news and bad news. The bad news is that this is an enormous list and it is very incomplete. Vast as it is, every reader will immediately think of other things that it is useful or vital for empowering teams to know and be capable of.

The good news is, it does not need to be learned all at once, up front. In fact it cannot all be learned up front and this should not be

attempted. This is the work, overall, of many years, and it will never be completed. Other good news is that a great deal of this training will take place on-the-job, in the form of cross-training and in brief interactions, and a great deal will take place in small batches of just-in-time training in team meetings. More good news is that empowering teams support their members in this never-ending learning.

State of being

So far we have been talking only about the capability side of the triangle. The state of being of the team members, and of the team as a whole, is at least as important. We describe our state in positive or negative terms about one or more of our centers or components. For example, of our emotional state, we can say we are sad, angry, hurt, depressed, fearful, hateful, worried, or excessively cautious. Or we may be happy, joyful, calm, optimistic, caring, self-confident, etc.

Unfortunately, most education and training does nothing to raise our state of being. Much of it may have negative impacts as we begin to think ourselves slow, stupid or incompetent and end up hating or fearing the teacher, the training or the whole institution. Yet our state, our emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual condition, is tremendously important not only to us as individuals, but also to our ableness to handle our daily work and to grow. It is so important and powerful a part of us that a negative state can undermine our capabilities. We may have a great deal of knowledge and skill about how to do an industrial job safely, listen tactfully to an angry customer, accurately handle bookkeeping, or program a computer creatively. But if our state is one of fatigue, or anger, or fear, or impacted on by alcohol or drugs, we may not work safely, tactfully, accurately, or creatively. In fact, we may hardly work at all! The state of being of team members also dramatically affects their ableness to take on and handle well new authorities and accountabilities for the team and therefore how empowered the team can become.

The team as a whole also has a state of being, which we talk about in terms of how much spirit the team has, or what the team culture is like. The interactions between team and members' state of being and their degree of empowerment

is circular in both a negative (a vicious circle) and positive direction. Empowering a team requires a high and rising state of being of the team and its members. In turn an empowering team is a team that over time brings improvements, sometimes miracles, in the state of its members. The strongest, most successful teams over the years are those that respect, build on, and enhance the individual identities of the team members.

Affirming and receptive will

The third, and equally important, component of ableness is will, or what values we are choosing to commit to and serve. The operational word here is choose. Affirming will is oriented outward to mission, purpose, and some mixture of power and service. The reason for working hard to create an inspiring mission and vision for an organization and a team is so there will be something attractive, even compelling, for team members to choose to align their wills toward and thereby create a collective will and effort. Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the famed father of modern quality efforts, did not by accident list "constancy of purpose" as his first principle for management.

Receptive will, on the other hand, sounds at first like an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, as though receptivity were natural or passive, the lack of will. Nothing could be further from the truth. Receptive will shows up in our listening, our receptivity to others' needs, our openness to new ideas, our eagerness to keep on learning. If you doubt that each of these requires an active act of will, notice please how fast our willingness to listen disappears when we discover that our teenager has taken the car for the third time without permission and smashed it up. And notice how unreceptive we are to hearing bad news from a person we dislike, or to problem solving in a team using the idea of a rival that is opposite to the idea we put forward. Finally, if you doubt the importance of receptive will to an empowering team, please try to imagine a successful team of people all lacking in receptive will!

Although it is difficult to measure such attributes as state of being and affirming and receptive will, they are crucial to the success of empowering teams. If educators and trainers are to be helpful in the work of empowering teams

they will need to think beyond transferring knowledge and enhancing skills. They need to begin to understand the ableness of the whole person, and to intend consciously, and to design their training, to have positive effects on team members' state of being and will. Managers, in their new roles as leaders and coaches will need to make major efforts to create a climate and culture, and personal behavior, that support development of all aspects of ableness, and not just skills or knowledge alone. Attendance, information, performance review, and pay systems will need to be reviewed and revised to insure they support being and will enhancement in team members.

Other requirements for successful empowerment

Information

There are other requirements for successful team empowerment. One of the most important is information, including information about:

- the financial trends, current situation and projections for the organization – yes, this means P&L, timely and disaggregated!;
- present and potential changes in markets, customers, and competition;
- trends in technology of production and products;
- the cost per unit, day-by-day, hour-by-hour if possible, of the team's product(s);
- strategic direction of the organization, about its vision and its priorities for the coming year;
- how well our team is doing this month, this week, this day, (this minute?) on the key measures of our performance – it is best if the team itself determines or participates in determining what these measures are.

Many organizations still live by myths of secrecy: “Any information we give our employees will get out to the competition”, “it's nobody's business what salaries we pay the top executives”, “we don't trust our employees to know how much profit the whole company or this division makes, or what the unit cost of the x gizmo is”. “We will provide information to employees only on a need-to-know basis” was the WWII slogan, still alive and in vogue 50 years later.

Let's not mince words about this. Empowering teams are learning teams; teams learn from information. Limited information = limited learning = limited empowerment. The same is true for organizations. Secrecy is the enemy. Some secrecy about market, technology, and product strategies is sometimes justified, although probably much less than is usually believed. Empowerment requires flooding the floor and front-line teams with more information, better organized, and of a more sensitive nature, than most organizations are willing to provide even to middle managers, let alone workers.

Supportive functions and systems

In many organizations (except hospitals and universities) empowering teams begins in the core work of the organization, on the front line of production workers or service-delivery workers. These teams will need a great deal of support and cooperation in their early years from support functions, such as engineering, maintenance, management information systems, purchasing, material handling, scheduling, quality, HRD, accounting, payroll, and finance. Employees and managers in these departments may or may not be enthusiastic supporters of the move towards empowering teams. Either way they may be already loaded with work and not eager to take on additional urgent assignments. For example, production teams often decide to change the layout of their equipment, the carts or belts or bins used to hold and convey their material/parts, and the location of lights, power outlets, computer connection points, meters and gauges, and/or control switches. In each case this requires help from maintenance people and perhaps from engineers. Will they have the time, the money, the capability, the will to help?

Cutting across functional departments are the systems: attendance, payroll, planning, production control, performance review, promotion, pay, training, tuition reimbursement, discipline, etc. Most of these systems were invented in separate times for separate reasons and based on separate, often outdated, sometimes conflicting values and principles. Some will by good foresight or good luck support team learning and empowering; many will not. Each

will need to be carefully examined and revised as necessary.

Leadership

Empowering teams requires leadership, at four separate levels:

- (1) Leader *of* the team. Although some disagree, I believe that each team should have its own leader, who is a working member of the team. This leader can be elected by the team, or appointed by management. If the leader is appointed from above, this is one component of empowerment that is being withheld from the team. The leader can be permanent, or rotating every few months or year. If the leader is permanent, it will be very difficult to keep him or her from becoming over time another supervisor with a different title. I recommend rotating the leader every six to 12 months, and forbidding second terms for a couple of years.
- (2) Distributed leadership *within* the team. The role of coordinator of one of the important team processes, such as safety, quality, scheduling, and training, was discussed earlier. When several or all team members take on such roles (which should also be rotated every six to 12 months) this is distributed leadership within the team. There are three solid reasons to use distributed leadership:
 - It avoids overloading the single team leader and pushing him/her to become full-time and a supervisor in all but name.
 - It pinpoints accountability for process coordination in a single person.
 - It allows not just one but several persons or even every member of the team to get simultaneous experience in taking accountability and being a leader. I call these teams “schools for leadership”.
- (3) Middle managers as leaders. The middle managers of the organization, those who used to have half-a-dozen supervisors reporting to them and now, with self-directed teams, have half-a-dozen or a dozen teams in their department instead, have a whole new and difficult role to master. It is variously called leadership, coaching, facilitating, delegating, encouraging, and empowering. Traditional managers make

decisions and direct and control subordinates. Participative managers get lots of input before they make these decisions. Empowering managers develop others' ableness to make decisions. This often requires refusing to make decisions, or even to answer questions, and instead asking questions, listening hard, and then asking more questions. It means demonstrating a lot of receptive will. It can be time-consuming and frustrating, especially in the beginning. The payoff, as people become able to make more and better decisions on their own, and trust that management really does want this, can be enormous.

- (4) Executive leadership. Top managers and executives need to support empowering teams in several important ways, including:
 - finding important new value-adding roles for the former supervisors;
 - leading the process of setting overall organizational direction and of developing vertical alignment involving every level;
 - leading the process of building horizontal alignment with customers, suppliers, and across internal functional departments;
 - leading the process of enlisting support for empowering teams in the leaders and staff of support functions;
 - leading the process of examining and, where appropriate, modernizing systems so they will support empowerment;
 - delegating significant authority to the middle managers, and being a positive role model for them as an empowering leader and coach, not a traditional direct and control manager;
 - providing resources for significant, ongoing team and team leader training.

Concluding observations

To create and support truly empowering teams requires a thorough transformation of our organizational, managerial and informational beliefs, paradigms and practices. This is a very radical shift for most organizations, although some on this path have not yet realized it.

On the other hand, the structures, models, tools and proposals presented here are really quite conservative, compared with some alter-

natives available. Here I have proposed a planned, phased, judicious – and perhaps too slow – passing of authority to the teams. Others recommend, and sometimes succeed with, having teams define their own authority and take it on as fast as they want. I have proposed that every team have a single designated overall leader, and that important processes be identified and one team member take accountability for each for a given period of time. Others believe that leadership can “float” and that the natural leader will emerge from within the team for any given situation or need. I have proposed that every team be aligned horizontally with customers and other functions, and vertically with the overall direction of the orga-

nization. And I have suggested an overall process that is planned and led by senior and middle management.

In contrast with all of this planning, structuring, delegating, phasing and training for self-directed teams, there is a small but growing body of thinking that says that teams, and in fact whole organizations, learning from the latest paradigms of physics, can be self-organizing, that new structures can emerge, flow, reshape themselves, and keep evolving in a more fluid fashion. Compared with that thinking, what is proposed here, based on learning from almost 50 years of experience, could be seen as quite conservative, even though it does require radical changes over a very few years.