Principles of Empowerment

Implementing principles of empowerment can be challenging because it involves a radical shift from our traditional way of operating. The following principles include the most important elements for creating an empowered organization:

1. **People are an organization's most valuable resource.**  
   The founding principle of empowerment is that people are more important than management systems. The essence of this principle is that the manner in which a management system operates is determined by the people who comprise the organization. It assumes that people are not expendable, simply because they bring differences which may force the system of operation to change. Although projects may come and go, the most vital recyclable resource, which is utilized over and over again, is people. For this reason, it is necessary to preserve the mental, physical, emotional, and even the spiritual well-being of employees. In the present progression from the information era to the knowledge-based era to the era of spirituality, the development, utilization, and retention of creative and innovative employees will determine the survival of an organization.
2. **High-involvement is maximized.**  
   High-involvement is based upon the assumption that the more employees are involved in designing and controlling their work functions, the more productively and efficiently the organization will operate. The basis of this assumption is that structured management systems severely limit the performance capacities of employees. For high-involvement to work, employees must assume responsibility and accountability for understanding and ensuring the successful production of a whole aspect of work. Individually and collectively, employees must have a high degree of self-discipline and self-management in order to operate with the least amount of oversight or management. The crucial fact to understand is that in today's hyper-accelerated world, high-involvement is inevitable.
3. **Teamwork is valued and rewarded.**  
   Teamwork has three major advantages:
   1. A whole aspect of a product or service which involves several or many parts (steps) can be performed simultaneously;
   2. teams provide the opportunity for synergism which is not possible for an individual working alone; and
   3. team functioning, over a sustained period, preserves the overall health and well-being of employees.

Empowered teams have two vital elements:

* 1. the full expression of individual excellence; and
  2. the necessity (or preference) for interdependence in order to achieve the team goal.

Teamwork is essential for the success of empowerment since so few products and services can be delivered today by the efforts of a single employee. When this principle is applied to an organization, the organization is viewed as a network of interdependent centers of excellence. The commitment to team projects must be balanced with commit-ment to the overall success of the organization.

1. **Personal and professional growth is continuous.**  
   Personal growth and professional development are a way of life in empowered organizations. Since empowerment is a dynamic process rather than a specific goal to be reached, there is the sequential cycle of self-motivated goal setting and achievement, which continually drives the enhanced capability of employees (page 4). High-involvement necessitates people-oriented skills, hence the corresponding necessity for continual personal growth. The most severe limitation to performance in high-involvement organizations is employees' reluctance to proactively accept the process of personal growth. This principle also makes a job interesting, fun, and creative because of the necessity for continuous improvement.
2. **Responsibility and accountability are maximized.**  
   Empowerment is based upon maximizing individual and collective responsibility and accountability. This means a predisposed mindset of total responsibility for projects or tasks that are delegated. Such a mind-set has the potential for not only meeting but also exceeding customer or client expectations. Without a critical fraction of highly responsible and accountable employees, empowerment is not possible. The more difficult of these two requirements is holding self and others accountable. Accountability is probably the limiting factor in determining the extent to which high-involvement is possible.
3. **Self-determination, self-motivation, and self-management are expected.**  
   An inherent assumption of empowerment is that most, if not all, employees have the talent and capa-bility to perform their jobs and responsibilities with the least amount of oversight and management. The major limitation in fully living up to one’s potential is a mindset that compromises self-determination in difficult situations. Where the talent or capability is lacking, principle (4) above applies. An additional assumption is that the incentive to meet (and possibly exceed) job expectations comes from within an individual. Given principles (4) and (5) above and a clear organizational support system, employees are expected to be self-driven in terms of determination, motivation, and management.
4. **Expanded delegation is a continual process.**  
   It is vitally important to understand that the act of delegation is not empowerment. The procedure for implementing empowerment is delegation of responsibility within clearly defined guidelines. Empowerment ultimately depends most on an individual's ability to perform the expanded responsibility that has been delegated. A requirement of expanded delegation is ensuring that an individual or a team is maximally prepared to accept the expanded responsibility. A central issue to the success of empowerment is giving up control. This act requires trust and the willingness to share information, knowledge, and power. The question a manager constantly asks himself or herself in an empowering environment is, "How do I mentor and coach in others what I do, and give it away?" This means that mentoring and coaching become critical management skills in support of delegation. Teams and learning pairs provide natural opportunities for mentoring and coaching relationships.
5. **Hierarchy is minimized.**  
   A natural consequence of extensive delegation is the systematic reduction of hierarchy. Hierarchical orga-nizational structures discourage empowerment by supporting a line-of-authority system and discouraging cross-functional teams. Cross-functional teams focus on clients or customers, products, goods, or services. This principle, in an indirect way, means that influence and authority are based on demonstrated competence, performance, and an ability to manage oneself, rather than solely on position power. In today's fast-paced business environment, hierarchical structures or systems of operation are simply too cumbersome and slow to respond to market demands.
6. **Organizational leadership and support are necessary to drive and sustain empowerment.**  
   Empowerment cannot exist without a clear commitment from organizational leadership. Leadership must communicate the necessity or desirability for empowerment and link it to the organization's strategy for greater success. A support system for empowerment involves a systematic change in processes, procedures, structures, and a redesign in the way work is done, i.e., greater emphasis on teamwork. The simplest way to express this principle is that leadership and management must live the empowerment vision and model the values by putting into visible practice what is preached. For empowerment to take hold, leaders must be living examples of the principles discussed in this chapter.