

Empowerment Part I

The Philosophy Behind Empowerment

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We must become the change we want to see.

—Mahatma Gandhi

The focus of power has moved from “having power over” followers to “sharing power with” followers.

The connection between power and empowerment is tangible—the term “empowerment” includes power in its definition. Most often, power is defined behaviorally—as the ability of one individual or group to affect the actions of another. Power itself has always played a significant role in the practice of leadership, especially when considering resource allocation and community leadership. But why is empowerment so important? And how do we incorporate empowerment into leadership development? To effectively answer these questions and more, we need to lay the foundation, and it begins with understanding empowerment.

The concept of empowerment is significant from a variety of viewpoints. From the leader’s perspective, empowerment is used to encourage and motivate constituents to action. From the follower’s viewpoint, empowerment is sought after in both volunteer and employment situations because it generally leads to greater independence and more opportunities for decision-making and delegation. Both situations are desirable but not easily found. The good news is that more and more leaders today are recognizing the need for empowerment and making it a part of their leadership style.

In this publication, we will describe empowerment and its connection to power, as well as explore essential empowerment theory, social marginalization, empowerment’s role in leadership, and the basic components of empowering volunteers. Understanding empowerment will add volumes to your leadership toolkit.

What does empowerment mean to you? Provide your definition below:

How “Power” Became “Empowerment”

In society today, there are a variety of fields—community development, leadership, organizational behavior, human resources—in which empowerment is considered a buzzword. Numerous resources that look at leadership in communities and organizations cite the importance of empowerment.

Power itself is involved in community decision-making and policy determination, and the choices instilled upon a community by those in power affect the direction that a community will take in the future. In addition, power resources are transferred between one leader and another, such as when new board members assume governance of a nonprofit organization or when one family member transfers land or resources to another.

Power resources possessed by leaders can include elements such as reputation, prestige, status, authority and money. However, just as the definitions and applications of leadership have changed over time, so has the concept of power. Within the last few decades, as the focus of leadership has become more transformational and motivational in nature, the focus of power has moved from “having power over” followers to “sharing power with” followers.

To empower means “to enable or permit”—to give power to an individual or group of people. Empowerment allows the leader to share power with his or her constituents, which in turn allows them to share responsibility for decision making and implementation. Empowerment encourages the personal development of volunteers as well as the development of other relational aspects such as trust, credibility and accountability.

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Empowerment in Theory

Empowerment draws its roots from power theory, but it has developed into a concept all its own. Theoretically, the discussion of empowerment falls into three categories—individual action (self-empowerment), organizational or interpersonal empowerment, and social action. Let’s take a moment to consider empowerment from each of these perspectives.

Self-empowerment

This frame of empowerment stresses the importance of the personal efficacy factor, the feeling of competence that allows one to complete projects. Self-empowerment could also be seen as a type of personal power. Individuals lacking self-efficacy might have limited initiative and commitment, and may illustrate this attitude through wasteful, unproductive or disruptive behaviors. Self-efficacy improves when the individual gains a sense of control over his or her own destiny and develops the knowledge and skills to succeed. Self-empowerment is based on the psychology of power; individuals perceive themselves as either powerless or powerful and act accordingly.

Because of the focus on the individual, empowerment in this context favors a motivational approach rather than simple delegation and sharing of power. Some organizations encourage individual empowerment by:

- ▶ Encouraging information sharing, resource sharing and participative management through formal and informal changes in organizational design
- ▶ Encouraging examination of values and belief systems concerning individual autonomy and behavior
- ▶ Teaching techniques to enhance communication and influencing skills

Leaders must address feelings as well as skill and knowledge development. It is the leader's job to acknowledge feelings and provide opportunities for followers to develop important skills and knowledge.

Organizational (Interpersonal)

The second frame of empowerment focuses on the group rather than the individual. With this interpersonal concentration, the focus is on enabling the team as a whole. This type of empowerment does not dominate or diminish the followers, but rather strengthens and assists them in developing into stronger individuals. This can be done through clearly defined roles and functions designed to encourage the participation of each individual. The bottom-line should be the greater good of the group and organization. Organizational empowerment is a vital function of good leaders.

For this type of empowerment to work, leaders need to create a situation in which each worker can control his/her own work, work with others to accomplish tasks, and respond to significant external issues in productive ways. Leadership must share responsibility and power so that team members can contribute using their own initiative and skills.

Social Action and Empowerment

The third frame for empowerment is rooted in social institutions and social action. In this perspective, empowerment has a nonpersonal dimension and stems from the feeling of powerlessness regarding war, voting rights, and civil rights we saw in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, federal regulations were devel-

oped to assist certain groups (minorities, disabled) in gaining some measure of control over their lives. This view of empowerment involves the process of removing structural barriers in political or social systems so that disadvantaged populations can have greater control over their own futures. Community development encourages empowerment through advocating and actions that build collective strength as well as improving connections to alternatives.

Social Marginalization

By definition, social marginalization is on the opposite end of the spectrum from empowerment. Social marginalization denotes powerlessness; by definition, it means to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group. Social marginalization makes individuals feel like "second-class citizens" and, historically, examples in society have been plentiful—minorities, indigenous people in many developing countries, African Americans and Native Americans in the United States. The consequences of social marginalization are many: dependence on charity and welfare, helplessness, inability to be self-supporting, and alcohol abuse, to name a few. Obviously, the first step toward combating social marginalization is recognizing that it exists and taking steps to minimize it. Any empowerment strategies that leaders successfully undertake will help move individuals away from the powerlessness social marginalization represents.

The Role Empowerment Plays in Leadership

With the rise of transformational leadership in the last few decades, transforming volunteers and followers through the leader-follower relationship has been emphasized. Empowerment has been seen as one of the best ways to encourage growth. Through sharing power with their constituents, leaders encourage individuals to develop themselves, their knowledge and their skill base. Ideally, transformation occurs as a product of empowerment; in other words, empowerment is the process through which one is transformed.

Operationally, empowerment is used as a motivational tool. It not only gives individuals a sense of control

over their own environment but also provides a sense of accomplishment. Often, the more freedom given to individuals, the more motivation they have to achieve great things. What's more, often these "great things" far exceed anything that may be produced by someone who is micro-managed. Empowering individuals also works well for volunteers with particularly high goal-internalization (internal drive); as the leader shows trust and respect, most individuals will then work hard to prove the decision to empower them was worthy. Ultimately, empowerment is one of the most effective motivational tools a leader can use.

So How Do I Empower My Volunteers?

The value of empowerment lies in effectively applying the principle within your own situation. Every leader has a slightly different situation, so each leader must tailor empowerment to fit the needs of that situation. Some basics can be found below. It should be noted, however, that when misused, empowerment can be a dangerous thing. Make sure the individuals you empower are ready to take the responsibility and accountability associated with the act; misused empowerment can set a risky precedent and may result in unfinished projects, power struggles and hurt feelings.

All empowerment should begin with developing a good relationship with your followers. A good relationship sets the foundation for future interactions and can set the stage for empowerment when the time is right. General empowerment techniques include (but are not limited to): delegating, encouraging leadership or participation in decision-making processes, asking for personal opinions, and giving the freedom to control how one works. Effective empowerment can encourage self-efficacy (I think I can!), improve self-motivation, and develop a wide range of additional leadership skills.

For more specific suggestions on how to empower individuals, teams, youth and adult volunteers, please refer to extension publication *Empowerment Part II: Empowering the Leaders of Today* (ELK2-105).

The Rewards

One of the greatest myths about power is that by giving power away a leader decreases his own power. Actually, the opposite has been found to be true. When a leader shares power with her constituents, it allows for the potential of developing synergy (cooperative action between individuals or groups that creates an enhanced combined effect), which can lead to a variety of positive outcomes—a higher quality product, more satisfied volunteer base, stronger leadership skills, and even a more robust organization. By giving power away you manage to improve the final product along with the leader-follower relationship. Doesn't that sound like a principle you'd like to have as the foundation of your organization?

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STEP OUT & APPLY

Consider yourself in your current position. What experiences or interactions have left you feeling empowered? How about un-empowered? Provide specific examples. (You aren't obligated to share your answers.)

Empowered:

Un-empowered:

Now think about your daily life. How do you feel empowered in your daily life? Again, provide specific examples. If you can't think of any, what are some situations where you could use empowerment strategies? Name two:

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