

## Chapter 5

### Power

Creating a climate of teamwork and openness is a common goal nowadays, but it is the rare company that figures out how cultural assumptions about individualism, about managerial prerogatives, and about respect for authority based on past success may make teamwork...virtually impossible ... . Recall how quality circles failed in the United States – not because workers don't care about quality, but because workers did not want to sit around in groups to talk about it.

*Source:* Schein (2000, pp. xxiii/xxiv).

Diversity in teams ... is a subjective experience of social categories to which members “feel” they belong. These categories, or social identities, may become more or less salient in different contexts and at different times ... . This dynamic view of diversity provides us with a better understanding of ... the cognitive and affective processes that may help to explain behavior and subsequently team performance.

*Source:* Garcia-Prieto, Bellard & Schneider (2003, p. 413).

Power is often supposed to be about empowerment, either through individualization or through teamwork. Having discussed individualization in previous chapters, this chapter focuses on teams. Toward these, Schein adopts a relatively localized attitude. He is reacting to the globalistic rhetoric of teamlife, or “one size fits all,” with some cultural contingencies. Groups vary in their inherent receptivity to teamwork. Garcia-Prieto et al.'s perspective is more glocalized. Receptivity to teamwork, and the cultural positions it presupposes, constantly changes. That variability in receptivity stems from plural forms of identity – individualistic or collectivistic, egalitarian or power distant, and societal, occupational or organisational – that become by turns salient through changing work situations. This chapter surveys the evidence for each perspective - one more local the other more glocal - and to that extent the glocality of power, and empowerment, at work.

### 1. The Concept of Empowerment

One of the clearest definitions of empowerment is to be found articulated in Spreitzer (1995). According to Spreitzer, empowerment is behaviorally constituted from four core elements: caring about the job being done (meaning); feeling confident in the job itself (competence); having autonomy at work (self-determination); and perceiving that one can make a difference in the workplace (impact). Autonomy at work, for instance, includes having self-determination in choosing work methods, in scheduling of tasks, and in setting performance evaluation criteria (Sadler-Smith, El-Kot & Leat, 2003). Taken together at face value, these elements of empowerment imply the individualization of work already discussed throughout Chapters 1 to 4 (this volume). It is therefore ironic, and even

perhaps a little ominous, that empowerment has become almost synonymous, in much work behavior literature, with self-managed teams (Randolph, 2000; Robbins & Fredenhall, 1995).

## **2. Defining Teamwork**

A first step in any conceptual analysis is often the development of a descriptive taxonomy (Gould, 1994). According to Devine (2002), teams can be categorized on the basis of their context (e.g., temporal duration) and their balance of thinking versus doing (e.g., executive planning versus sports performance). Teams can also be conceptualized in terms of demographic features, such as their level of diversity, or their optimal numerical size (e.g., Orpen, 1986; to Karotkin & Paroush, 2003). More fundamentally than this however, teams can be analyzed, as we do now, from a perspective that is historical (West, 2001).

### **2.1. Historical steps toward teams**

People have been working in self-managing teams for eons of human history and pre-history (West, 2001). During the twentieth century, the industrialized nations began a “re-discovery” of this ancient form of organizing work (Tubbs, 2002). Landmark steps in this process of re-discovery, at work, include the Hawthorne Studies (Mayo, 1933), Channel Theory (Lewin, 1947), Socio-Technical Systems Theory (Trist & Bamforth, 1951), Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), and – a penultimate development prior to self-managed teams themselves – Quality Circles (Argyle, 1989). Today, empowerment in self-managed teams has for example been linked to benefits in task performance and quality of working life (Cohen, Ledford & Spreitzer, 1996). Thus teams and teamwork theoretically have the potential to knit together both halves of the “motivation factor” – task and relations – discussed in the previous chapter (4, this volume).

### **2.2. A trend in empowerment**

At each of the above overlapping phases of thought, various barriers to sustainability have been identified. These have ranged, respectively, from external economic conditions (Snodgrass, Levy-Berger & Haydon, 1985), and occupational culture (Marrow, 1964), to political resistance (Trist, Susman & Brown, 1977), individual differences (Fried & Ferris, 1987), and cultural values (Schein, 2000). Through a lens of their history, therefore, it is possible to view the advent of teams as a progressive “cranking up” in levels of participation, in the possibly vain hope that once empowerment was enhanced to a high enough level, these would be followed by sustainable increments in production (Hallier & Butts, 1999).

### **2.3. Do self-managed teams work?**

Clearly, there are cases where team implementation works. In purely “doing” terms for instance, cooperation often has the edge, in performance terms, over competition (Stanne, Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Similarly, even in relatively individualist organizational settings, the implementation of self-managing teams can be successful (Wageman, 1997). Across a range of different team types, self-managed teams have shown that they can be more effective than more traditionally managed work groups (Cohen & Ledford, 1994). Key structural features of