3 Does Empowerment Empower?
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INTRODUCTION

With ‘empowerment’ we have an example of a well-established though little used word which has been taken up and given new currency by writers on management. Exactly what it means within that context is difficult to say. As with other management buzz-words, the concept associated with it has become a commodity: something sold to management practitioners via bullet-pointed paperbacks telling them ‘how to do it’. As with any other commodity, these buzz-word concepts have to be constantly re-packaged to keep demand buoyant. Usually this takes the form of intensification. Thus, ‘quality’ becomes ‘total quality’, and ‘customer satisfaction’ becomes ‘customer delight’. (The first books on ‘absolute total quality’ and ‘customer ecstasy’ cannot be far off.) The ultimate intensifier is to append ‘beyond’ to the buzz-word, resulting in, for example, *Beyond Total Quality Management* (Bound, 1994; McHugh et al., 1993). Alternatively, the re-packaging takes the form of qualificatory disclaimers and we are told what, contrary to popular misconceptions, the thing is not. (We are told, for example, that ‘participative management’ is not ‘organisational democracy’ (Plunkett and Fournier, 1991, p. 18). Such can be the scale and contradictoriness of the disclaimers that we might sometimes be left wondering what exactly the thing is, or even whether it has been qualified out of existence. (The notion of a degenerating problem shift springs to some minds (Lakatos, 1970).) This, it could be suggested, is the fate of empowerment. For we can be told that contrary to what might seem like a reasonable expectation, ‘empowerment is not about increasing the power of employees’ (Randolph, 1995, p. 30). This confounds reasonable expectations, because how then can we make sense of the fact that as a term of managerial art, empowerment is virtually synonymous with ‘employee empowerment’? (So much so that the former is little more than an abbreviation for the latter.) For surely if any set of people are empowered, be they employees or whatever, then, by definition, their power is increased? How could it be otherwise given the very meaning of the words ‘empowered’ and ‘empowerment’?

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What will be argued here is that it does make significant if highly qualified sense to talk of empowerment not increasing the power of employees, but that it requires a good deal of explication of the nature of organisational power before that sense can be made clear. Hence, despite its apparently self-contradictory nature, the question ‘Does empowerment empower?’ is not one which we can rule out a priori. Note though, that it is a question which is only being asked of empowerment as a term of managerial art. This is not just because this is the context which is of concern here (although that is reason enough), but also because it is the only one in which there is any sort of case to answer. Outside the managerial context, the question of whether empowerment empowers probably is a contradiction in terms. It certainly is for empowerment in that generalised, everyday sense from which the specialised managerial use derives. It is also, though less obviously, the case for empowerment in a third specifically democratic sense, against which the managerial usage is both compared and contrasted (Kinlaw, 1995, pp. 13–16). In fact, as we shall see, it is in the contrast with democratic empowerment that it becomes possible to talk of empowerment not increasing the power of employees in the case of the managerial variety. So although the question of whether or not empowerment empowers is only being asked of the managerial variety, it follows that an answer requires an explication of the democratic variety as well. Moreover, to properly understand both these specialised usages, the undifferentiated everyday usage from which they both derive must also be analysed.

EMPOWERMENT IN GENERAL

As an everyday lexical item, the word ‘empowerment’ is no more than the sum of its semantically significantly parts. To ‘empower’ is simply to bring about the possession of power. In so far as the word has much currency, it is used to denote a situation in which that bringing about is effected through legal or at least vaguely official means. For example, police officers not only ‘proceed in a westerly direction’, they are also ‘empowered by law’. Less usually, ‘empower’ is used of situations in which the possession of power is brought about by any means at all, be it official or unofficial, mental or physical, natural, supernatural, or whatever. Thus, in its usual and more restricted usage, ‘empower’ is mostly a somewhat fancy synonym for ‘authorize’; while in its less usual and broader usage it is mostly a decidedly fancy synonym for ‘enable’. In either case, the noun form ‘empowerment’ can be used for both the