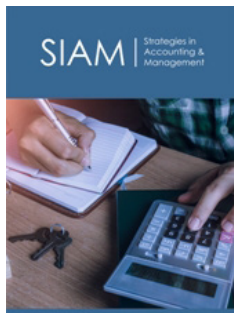


Why Employee Empowerment Programs Fail

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Opinion

There are numerous kinds of jobs all over the world and there can be no doubt that no one knows a job better than the people actually doing it in that they have the job-related knowledge, the techniques, the experience as well as their personal insights for their daily work. They are capable to plan their jobs, make some decisions, and take relevant responsibilities. However, in most organizations, jobs are specified by the company and the employees are under strict control of the managers, which is mainly caused by Frederick Taylor's idea in scientific management [1]. According to Taylor [2], employees are troublesome and unreliable so that they need to be controlled by the managers. He also believed that increasing the labour productivity is the main object for most organizations. At the same time, Henry Ford applied this theory and developed mass production with assembly line. Affected by Taylorism and Fordism, most jobs in the twenty first century, not only in factories, but also in other organizations like fast food restaurants or even hospitals and schools, are specialized [3]. There is no doubt that the specialized work reduced the training time for employees and improved the productivity, which reduced the cost of the organization and ensured high profit [4]. However, some issues began to occur as well, such as high employee turnover, strikes, stifled creativity and low job satisfaction [5]. In order to solve these problems, some researchers suggest empowering employees to share their insights and make some decisions in the workplace. As a motivational construct reflects decentralizing power and authority throughout organizations, employee empowerment has been considered useful in improving organizational performance and become a controversial business subject. According to the meta-analysis conducted by Seibert [6], more than 70% of organizations have at least to some degree implemented employee empowerment practice. Unfortunately, many of them have failed because of all kinds of difficulties, problems and challenges [7]. However, scholars keep providing empirical evidence to show a strong relationship between empowerment practice and several important work-related attitudes Bowen [8]; Pelit [9], especially innovativeness [10]. In addition to the positive effect on innovativeness, empowerment practice itself is also considered as an innovative program. Beirne [11] believed that as an innovative idea, empowerment reflects 'collective influence and share of knowledge, insight and experience to improve organizational performance'. Therefore, empowerment practice is theoretical necessary for enterprises and the crucial task is to help the managers to increase their awareness of challenges and to overcome the difficulties. Based on the literature review, there were four main challenges that might occur during the empowerment practice. The first challenge is considered as Taylorism and Fordism because they have long historic impact

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over employment and management. Ford's assembly line has been known as the defining image of twentieth-century industry because of its high productivity [4]. Although numerous researchers and managers believe that quality and flexibility should have a priority in today's competitive market condition, changing long existing pattern is not easy [11]. Secondly, although some innovators wish to make a change, they might encounter emotional blocks, such as the fear of taking a risk. On the one hand, the managers are concerned that their status might be challenged. On the other, they worry that some deviant employee behaviours might be caused due to the loss of control over the employees, such as mask underhand and illegal activities [1]. Thirdly, many empowerment programmes were suspended under the pressure of unsupportive managers (Beirne, 2006). Highly influenced by Taylorism, numerous top managers hold the assumption that workers were unreliable and troublesome, and they do not value their employees [12]. Another reason for their insufficient commitment is that they are lack of long-term global strategy [13]. They should be aware that change can bring opportunities and the possibility for optimism while it brings stress and anxiety [14]. Finally, Finally, an inappropriate internal culture can be an important constraint as well. Organizational culture is a term used to describe the climate and practices in organizations [15]. It has a direct impact on employees' behaviours as well as their thinking and feeling. For example, a rigid or mechanistic form of organizational culture may block innovations, and stringent rules may keep new ideas to the minimum. Those workers or managers in a culture that is against innovation can be difficult to involve in empowerment processes. To sum up, although an increasing number of managers and researchers have realized the importance of employee empowerment, not many practices have been observed in organizations. What is even worse, a large proportion of the practice have failed or been suspended in that both the managers and employees have encountered some challenges, including the historic impact of Taylorism and Fordism, the emotional blocks, unsupportive top managers, and inappropriate culture. Managers should increase their awareness of these challenges in empowerment practices and provide employees empowered workplace where they are trusted, respected and valued.

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