

MANAGEMENT

Path to empowerment

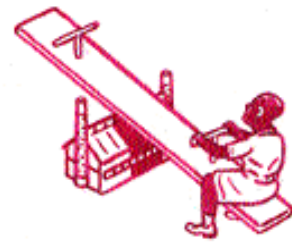
Using the lessons of “deep democracy,” South African workers learned how to manage their company through a non-hierarchical system of self-directed teams

By Myrna Wajsman
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In 1995, a company called Eskom Transmission recognized that it had reached a crisis point and if it were to survive, it would have to become customer-focussed. It decided to restructure its workforce of 2,000 into functional process teams driven by customer needs and accountable for meeting them. The managerial hierarchy would be abolished and the teams would be self-directed.

The challenges Eskom faced were particularly acute because it is in Johannesburg and suffers the legacy of apartheid. How do you empower people who lack formal education or exposure to the business world? How can you expect people, who have been taught to do exactly what they are told, to question and contribute to team decisions? And how can you help people to take responsibility and exercise initiative when they feel worthless? The lessons we learned in working with the Eskom teams may help other organizations who seek the benefits of self-directed teamwork.

Our first step was to get employees to buy into the team concept. There were several obstacles: resentment of managers for past actions; racial tension; concern that the team approach would limit personal career growth; and fear that people would not be able to participate or would be unfairly treated. Although Eskom said that these obstacles would be dealt with, employees were sceptical until they saw that the organization was doing away with hierarchy. As Eskom began to operate solely in teams, people realized that the only way to maintain



their employment was by becoming team members. This was incentive enough, and they became committed to making the teams work.

Eskom implemented a communication program and teams were formed and registered. Each team had to develop a mini business plan, outlining its full responsibilities and proposed outputs. Teams also had to delineate the roles and accountability of each member.

Change did not take place overnight. Things seemed to be disorderly and undisciplined as people initially took advantage of the lack of hierarchy to act in their own selfish interests. However, as Eskom put into place systems of performance management, job opportunity and team bonuses, the anarchy lessened. Teams took responsibility and began to judge the contribution of individual members.

It was important to ensure that the

dynamics of the group supported team goals and did not undermine them. We expected that former managers might have too much to say, or would be deferred to. We also found that many people were so excited at the new experience of actually being listened to that they went too far, dominating discussions simply to be heard. They had to learn not to broadcast their statements but to listen to the answers and enter into a two-way discussion.

One process that we found useful during the training period was “deep democracy,” a concept introduced by Arnold Mindell, a physicist and Jungian analyst. Differing from “majority democracy,” wherein a majority of votes wins, deep democracy emphasizes not only the importance of respecting the majority vote but also the need to hear the minority voice. This is essential because, if the minority voice is not heard, it will become

part of the unconscious “terrorist” processes that will prevent the group from implementing its agreements. There are many varieties of terrorist behaviour: joking, gossiping, working slowly, continuously finding problems that defer implementation. In its most extreme expression, it can mean going on strike or overtly sabotaging the company. All terrorist behaviour, however, has the same result: failure to do that which has been agreed upon.

In deep democracy, the minority voice is also valued because it represents an important piece of wisdom that the majority is not aware of. This wisdom is highly relevant to the successful implementation of the team’s decision.

There are five steps to achieving deep democracy. First, when taking a vote toward a decision, do not settle for the majority view, disregarding the minority. After you have taken the vote, turn to those in the minority and ask them to expand on their views. They will often be angry and defensive at first, because they have not been heard. Listening to the minority opinion is not a tyranny of the majority by the minority, nor is it a gaining of consensus. Rather, by listening beyond the anger or irrationality of the minority voice, you can discover what wisdom that voice embodies. Ask the minority what they need in order to go along with the majority and, nine times out of 10, you end up with a decision that is acceptable to everyone and, by extension, better for everyone.

The second step is to search for the “no,” or dissenting, voice. Do not be fooled by the appearance of total agreement; encourage people to disagree. One method that might make people feel safe in expressing unpopular views is to name other times or situations when the solution supported by the majority did not work. Ensure that all people are part of the discussion, even if they are showing their involvement through such non-verbal communication as nodding. Do not allow decisions to be made without everyone in the room having discussed it — the lack of involvement will lead to terrorist behaviour.

The third step is to spread the role of the naysayer. We tend to distance ourselves from people who hold a different point of view, turning them into scapegoats. The reality is that if there is a naysayer in the room whose views are aired before the group, others will also

contain part of that “no” within them, even if it is not conscious. It is important, therefore, not to make the naysayer a scapegoat but, rather, to encourage others to take on part of that viewpoint. Their views may not be quite the same but they will have the same texture.

The fourth step is to go beyond the excuses. Become aware of issues that begin to repeat themselves. If they occur more than three times, the issue that is being discussed is not the real issue but an excuse. At this stage you need to elicit the deeper unconscious difficulties that, by nature, are emotional and irrational. Those with such difficulties do not respond to the typical rational facilitation tools but require advanced facilitation skills and “metaskills,” including reflective listening, amplification, polarization

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of the divergent views and conflict resolution tools. (Metaskills are the attitudes that the user brings to the skill. For example, a knife can be used by a surgeon or a butcher. The attitude toward the knife and the manner in which it is used is the metaskill.) When facilitating deeper issues, the metaskills of neutrality, compassion and patience are more important than the skills.

Once the wisdom of the minority has been gained, the final step in deep democracy is to add this piece of information to the majority decision.

The practice of deep democracy ensures that all team members participate in the discussion. For those who were previously disempowered, this is important. Silence is not necessarily consent; it may be a signal of feeling worthless or stupid. In Eskom, silence concealed strong feelings of shame. Team members sat in the meetings not understanding what was being said but feeling too ashamed or embarrassed to admit it.

The teams had to acknowledge these feelings and try to lessen the pain by accommodating these team members. Part of the accommodation process was the attention given to language diversity. The team invariably included people from various language groups and it was important to address their linguistic needs. If one common language was not possible, other team members would translate. Usage and style were also important. Since the team included educated as well as uneducated people, language and context had to be simplified to a level where all members could partake in discussions.

Since deep democracy encourages each person to voice an opinion, the example set by the chairperson is important. The chairperson creates a climate of respect and value for each team member through an attitude of acceptance, understanding and neutrality. At Eskom, there was a strong tendency for team leaders and chairpersons to revert to managerial tendencies. To counteract this, team members were encouraged to move into the chairperson’s or facilitator’s role — at first, only during training, and later, while working in actual teams so that they shared the roles of facilitator and chairperson.

The facilitator has to consciously strive to remain neutral, even when the issues under discussion have personal implications and he or she has strong views about them. The struggle to retain neutrality requires an awareness of one’s own view and then a conscious “letting go” of the view in favour of helping other team members to reach a resolution. As a result, the facilitator gains understanding and insight into both sides of the argument, and a greater self-awareness. Through self-awareness, team members themselves are able to harness their own personal power.

Becoming a member of a self-directed team is not merely a shifting of tasks; rather, it is a process that enables growth within one’s own awareness — a deep psychological change in attitude and an acceptance of self.

In summary, there are three stages to empowering individuals. The first requirement is a personal commitment to change. This may sound strange, but a person does not seek out empowerment. In fact, in order to go through the necessary phase of growth, an individual needs to see clearly the personal benefits; the

perception of benefits is not enough. People find it hard to change. Freud described human behaviour in terms of our need to be *in* balance, or “homeostasis.” In order for people to change, they must move *out* of balance, which is uncomfortable for them. For many, survival will have to be at stake before change occurs — “I need to change in order to survive.”

Second, the organizational structure needs to support the empowerment process, and that support needs to be real and congruent. If the organization states that it wishes to empower people, yet the behaviour of management, staff and the organizational structure is not supportive of this statement, the individual will be caught in a double bind and the motivation to develop will be weakened.

Once the individual is involved and the organization has made the commitment to change, an educational process is necessary. There needs to be a transfer of technical skills. It is also vital that attention be given to interpersonal skills since, without the right training and support, the legacy of past interpersonal dynamics will be revisited in the present, sabotaging the empowerment process.

As with any psychological growth path, the individual growth path of empowerment is not easy. For some, it will take years. At Eskom, many people have begun to grow and to claim their rightful places in the work environment. Their surprisingly quick and sustained development is encouraging, and can serve as an inspiration to others.

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