Impediments to empowerment and learning within organizations

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Abstract

Looks at the concepts of "empowerment" and "learning", and examines the difficulties in making "empowered learning" a reality. Drawing on a series of case studies in the Australian manufacturing industry, shows that empowerment and learning present challenges for both managers and employees. For managers, empowerment and learning raise the prospect of loss of control. To ensure that they do not surrender control, managers sometimes act in ways that disempower employees and undermine opportunities for learning. Like managers, employees may be wary of empowerment and learning, partly because of the potential for hostility and blame. Employees may feel that the risks of empowered learning are high while the potential benefits are low. As with managers, personal security seems to be the basic, underlying issue. Also argues that technoculture (the organization's human and technical systems and associated assumptions) can perpetuate control-oriented ways of operating even if management has made a genuine effort to foster empowerment and learning.

Introduction

The last decade in Australia has been a period of considerable workplace reform. When employees talk about how things were prior to these reforms, they sometimes sum up the old approach with the expression: "You were expected to leave your brains at the gate when you came to work". This description echoes Taylor's division between the shopfloor (doers) and the office (thinkers). From this perspective, managers need to use their brains because they are the ones in control; employees, on the other hand, have little need for thinking.

In many companies, workplace reform has greatly modified this view. Employees in today's organizations are expected to contribute their ideas and knowledge, to be empowered to act if doing so will help achieve the organization's goals, and to have the capacity to learn. This paper looks at the concepts of "empowerment" and "learning", and examines some of the dilemmas that arise when organizations attempt to translate the rhetoric of "empowered learner" into reality.

Empowerment

In the workplace, the term "empowerment" carries two different meanings which are often confused: the process by which management delivers power to employees, and the process by which an employee assumes power. Much of the management literature emphasizes the first of these meanings. For example, Pearn *et al.* (1995, p. 170) discuss the need to both empower employees (that is, supply power) and equip them to behave in new ways (supply the right skills and attitudes); Plunkett and Fournier (1991, p. 93) describe empowerment as a mechanism for investing responsibility in individuals and teams; Quigley (1994, p. 40) depicts empowerment as a process in which power flows down from the enterprise's vision to leaders and on to those below.

However, as Miller (1993) points out, a view of empowerment that relies on management patronage is actually inherently disempowering. Like Miller, the author's view is that the capacity to exercise power cannot be imposed. All managers can do is to create an environment which encourages employees to exercise power, and show a willingness to work through difficulties as they arise.

There are a variety of sources of power in organizations. One source is hierarchy. Power is the capacity to translate intentions into sustainable reality (Bennis and Nanus, 1985), and through the power they derive from their position in the hierarchy, managers are able to get things done. While important, however, authorized power is only one type. Power is also derived from a number of other sources, including previous events, technical expertise, external regulatory agencies, and other individuals and groups (Brooks, 1994; Collins, 1995; Pfeffer, 1992).

Consistent with the literatures of industrial relations and work sociology, the view taken in this paper is that organizations are political entities comprising networks of individuals and common-interest groups with different levels of power (Clegg, 1989a; 1989b; Giddens, 1979). Organizational outcomes and activities "…result from bargaining and compromise, where those individuals or groups with access to the greatest power will receive greatest rewards…" (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 28). Power is an aspect of many relationships within the organization – not only from managers downwards to employees, but also upwards, horizontally (between managers; within and between work groups, sections, divisions), and between the organization and outside groups (supplies, consultants, technical divisions and agencies, government and industry authorities).

Learning

The term "learning" is increasingly used in the management and organizational change literatures (see, for example, Garvin, 1993; McGill et al., 1992). The assumption in these literatures is often that learning is beneficial to the enterprise. However, this is not necessarily so. For one thing, learning is not necessarily positive. In some organizations, employees learn a great deal about avoiding responsibility and minimizing effort, but little that enriches their own (or their organization's) knowledge base. Similarly, learning may not be contributive. Even if learning results in employees acquiring new knowledge and insights, the results do not necessarily benefit the enterprise. Finally, individuals can learn, but keep what they learn to themselves. In contrast, in its emphasis on team learning and knowledge sharing, the organizational learning literature emphasizes collaborative learning that extends beyond the individual employee.

Empowered learners

Within the literature of organizational learning, there is a close link between the concepts of "empowerment" and "learning". For example, according to Watkins and Marsick (1993, p. 195), "a learning organization has a culture of empowerment"; and later, quoting a consultant associated with US company Johnsonville Foods "the learning organization is the result of empowerment" (Watkins and Marsick, 1993, p. 208). Pearn et al. (1995, p. 198) echo these views: "it is not possible to become a learning organization without a high commitment to empowerment".

It is easy enough to understand how the literature of organizational learning is able to link empowerment and learning. In any working day, employees find themselves in many situations where they can either act to improve the status quo, or do nothing. If they feel empowered to act, they are likely to learn in the process. This learning provides what Shapiro (1995, p. 95) calls a "judgement reservoir" that serves as a reference point for subsequent action and learning.

The result is a self-reinforcing cycle – empowerment results in learning which further empowers. In the role of empowered learner, employees can act autonomously and flexibly to interpret, absorb and apply knowledge (Nonaka, 1993; 1994).

The idea of fully engaging the thinking of employees in the business of the enterprise is an appealing one for managers, and no doubt helps to explain the growing popularity of the concept of learning organization among this group. Similarly, for employees, opportunities to have more say and to learn new skills are often viewed positively.

Given the attractiveness of the concept, why is it so difficult to implement? In particular, in organizations where employees are encouraged to exercise power and to learn, how does management stay in control? After all, genuinely empowered workers may not want to apply themselves to management's goals. As investigators such as Schwartz (1987), Analoui and Kakabadse (1989) and Thomas (1993) have illustrated, there are many ways in which employees can apply their knowledge and learning to harm the enterprise – for example, they can undermine

management wishes, deliberately underutilize company technology or avoid work and pressure.

This is an issue that the literature of organizational learning tends to gloss over. Instead, it usually adopts what Fox (1966) refers to as a "unitary" perspective, which visualizes enterprises as partnerships between managers and employees who share the common goal of efficient and productive organizational functioning. A unitary view does not acknowledge conflicts of interest between those who provide their labour and those who control capital. Instead, it sees employees as joint shareholders in "the pursuit of shared goals, in a climate of collaborative high trust and a rational approach to the resolution of differences" (Coopey, 1996, p. 253)

A description by US investigator Dorothy Leonard-Barton (1992, p. 26) of the work climate at Chaparral Steel is typical of the unitary approach:

> Learning starts with empowered individuals who can identify and solve problems independently because they have a clear sense of operating objectives…the goal for every hour, the criterion for every person's activity, is crystal clear: make ever more steel – increasingly better than anyone else.

Descriptions like this of employees who are empowered but nevertheless committed unequivocally to organizational goals are repeated throughout the literature of organizational learning. For example, Pedler *et al.* (1991, p. 29) speak of the way in which employees in learning organizations "give up their energies to the collective purpose of the company". Similarly, Nayak *et al.* (1995, p. 15) explain that "the concept of learning organization… engages employees' hearts and minds in continuous, harmonious, productive change designed to achieve results that they genuinely care about and that the organization's stakeholders want". They go on to describe the importance in learning organizations of "creating *shared* awareness…; developing *common* understanding…; [and] taking *aligned* action" (1995, p. 19, italics in original text). Even where the tension between empowerment and control is acknowledged, it tends to be represented as a sign of immaturity (Lessem, 1991, p. 37) that can be dealt with by creating "shared mental models" (Kreutzer, 1995, p. 240) and a "shared vision" (Senge, 1990, p. 235).

Data sources

During the last three years, the author conducted a series of eight detailed case studies that looked at organizational learning issues in medium-to-large sized manufacturing and processing companies in Sydney. In most cases, these enterprises were at the forefront of workplace reform in Australia. A considerable number had made public commitments to "becoming a learning organization", and as part of this thrust, most had invested heavily in learning infrastructure.

Typically, each case study consisted of in-depth interviews with a cross-section of employees, team-leaders, managers and HRD personnel. Generally, interviews were fairly unstructured, with interviewees encouraged to talk freely about issues related to learning, knowledge and skills. These interviews were supplemented in a variety of ways – for example, by observing team meetings, consultative committees and other activities, and by reviewing company documentation.

While the managers and employees who were interviewed acknowledged the progress that they had made, most also spoke in detail about the difficulties they faced, and about the gap between potential and actuality. A common response by those interviewed was: "we are part way there, but we still have a considerable way to go".

On the basis of these case studies, plus a number of consultancies over the same period with companies trying to improve organizational learning, it is clear that few employees resemble the "empowered learner" favoured in the literature. Translating the rhetoric of empowered learning into reality within an enterprise has major implications for both managers and employees. The remainder of the paper looks at both groups, in an attempt to understand the role of each in fostering or impeding empowerment and learning.

Managers and empowered learners

What happens when a chief executive decrees that his or her enterprise is to "become a learning organization"? It is one thing to make such a commitment, but quite another for the enterprise to make the transition. The detailed work of following through on implementation will largely fall to middle managers (section heads, team leaders, supervisors, area

managers, project team managers and branch managers).

Despite company rhetoric about learning and empowerment (evident in what senior company representatives say in public forums such as meetings and at conferences, and in what is written in vision statements, in-house newsletters, and enterprise agreements), empowered learning is not usually the norm at the case study sites. The following vignettes illustrate more typical situations:

Vignette 1

At one company, a team-building exercise was observed being facilitated by external consultants. The exercise brought together several teams and a manager. To complete the exercise, this combined group had to pool information in order to find their way through a maze. Almost as soon as the exercise had begun, the sole manger present took charge. He moved around the room, assigning people to different roles, praising those who he felt had contributed and chastising those who didn't. As the game progressed, the effect of this on participants was very evident. Gradually, many either drew back to the perimeter of the room, or left altogether.

Vignette 2

On several consultative committees and team meetings that were observed, managers often dominated proceedings, despite the espoused goal of participation. As the following description illustrates, it is quite common for managers to chair meetings and do most of the talking.

> There was only one manager present, the site managing director. The other committee members were all shop-floor employees. The managing director was sitting at the head of a long table, and all of the employees were sitting along it. The managing director acted in a fatherly, but somewhat condescending, way towards those present. Most of the meeting consisted of an extended monologue by him. He discussed the weather and joked with employees; he gave a long account of the need to rid the place of the influences of Taylorism and the old ways of doing things; he referred to a recent wage claim, and acted hurt and displeased that they had supported it. There was no agenda to follow, and no issues were raised that the committee could react to. Despite the superficially friendly atmosphere, there appeared to be very little scope for employees to participate or learn at all.

Vignette 3

During interviews, a number of employees commented on the gap between the rhetoric of workplace reform, and the reality. The following account by an operator is typical of this type of discussion:

> I had been thinking for a while about how to improve the way we use the equipment. Finally, I talked to my manager about my ideas. Well, you could see from the start that he wasn't interested. Straight away, his eyes glazed over. I quickly shut up. But as soon as I stopped talking, he started to rave on about how we had to follow world's best practice and all that bullshit! So I did the same as him – my eyes glazed over!

One could easily supplement these vignettes with many others, and with other data as well. For example, following their wide-ranging review of schemes designed to diminish tensions and suspicions between managers and employees, British researchers Kelly and Kelly (1991) concluded that such techniques often bring little or no improvement. Saul (1992) shows how little importance a large sample of Australian supervisors attach to getting employees to question the status quo and to make ongoing improvements. In contrast, they generally considered control-related techniques like planning and goal-setting to be very important. Miller (1993) describes examples where workplace reforms began to give employees more power, with the result that management anxiety increased and the reform process was curtailed. Other authors (Field and Ford, 1990; Hirschhorn, 1990; Kets de Vries, 1991; Menzies-Lyth, 1988; Zuboff, 1988) describe a variety of situations in which managers' behaviour is very inconsistent with employee empowerment and learning.

There is a common theme running through all of this data – despite initiatives designed to foster empowerment and learning (the team-building exercise; opportunities to consult) and despite management espousing organizational learning and associated ideas, the reality often observed is that managers act in ways that disempower employees and undermine opportunities for positive, contributive learning. Why should this be so?

Before attempting to address this issue, it needs to be acknowledged that managers are not a homogeneous group – like any group faced with the prospect of change, it is likely that some will react positively, others negatively, and still others with a wait-and-see

attitude (Collins, 1995). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify common trends in managers' responses.

Hirschhorn (1991) and Mccaffrey *et al.* (1995) have demonstrated that enterprises engage in a continual balancing act between participation and control. Their analysis can be readily adapted to describe what happens when an organization tries to foster empowerment and learning (Figure 1). As employees begin to move into the role of empowered learner, managers begin to experience the workplace as unstable and unpredictable. As a result, management becomes increasingly insecure. It responds by tightening controls, and by undermining activities likely to facilitate learning. However, when controls become too tight, employees hold back, and creative input is inhibited. In order to encourage employees to invest more of themselves in work, controls are loosened and empowered learning begins to be encouraged again.

Management security appears to underlie this see-sawing dynamic. In many Australian companies during the last decade, the number of managers has reduced significantly, while at the same time, pressures have increased. There can be few managers who are unconcerned about the possibility of being sidelined or losing their jobs because of structural or other changes. An added factor in Australia is that a considerable proportion of managers lack adequate "people skills" (Karpin, 1995), and as a consequence, are likely to find it difficult to maintain the delicate balance between empowerment and control. Deeper fears – for example, fears of being unable to cope, being unneeded, being perceived as incompetent, being displaced – must only add to the significance of security in the dynamic shown in Figure 1 (Diamond, 1993; Gabriel, 1995; Kets de Vries and Miller, 1985).

Figure 1 Managers and empowered learners

Of course, managers are not free agents able to determine the climate for empowerment and learning independent of the context in which they work. As Figure 1 shows, organizational culture, processes and technical systems (or, to use Berg's (1985) term "technoculture") typically reflect the needs of owners and managers to stay in control.

Technoculture in an organization is analogous to memory in an individual. Like memory, it ensures continuity, stores lessons of the past and provides a basis for ongoing, gradual learning. Unfortunately, a negative consequence of technoculture (again, like memory) is that it retains old experiences and assumptions long after it is desirable to do so (Pichault, 1995). The result can be that an organization's technoculture – reflected, for example, in remuneration and recognition systems, approaches to dispute resolution, work organization, work processes, the design of the physical work space, the role of supervisors, the availability of learning opportunities, hardware and software design, and the way information is managed – can perpetuate control-oriented ways of operating long after management has made a genuine effort to support empowerment and learning (Field and Ford, 1995).

Employees as empowered learners

Managers are not the only ones who may be ambivalent about empowerment and learning. In contrast with the enthusiasm of much of the organizational learning literature, employees may feel very cautious about the role of empowered learner. As one supervisor in a manufacturing plant commented:

> People don't necessarily grab power that is made available! You can show people information, but some of them don't find it very exciting. This is not about lack of skill to understand information that is displayed, it is about not wanting to get involved.

The conclusion that people do not necessarily grab power has been found time and time again in workplace reform initiatives. In summarizing a variety of reform efforts that he had been involved in across a range of countries, Trist (1989, p. 52) comments that as soon as people begin to realize the scope of what is envisaged, they draw back, preferring the familiar (however bad) to the risk of something new. Miller (1993) describes the ways in which opportunities to reflect and innovate
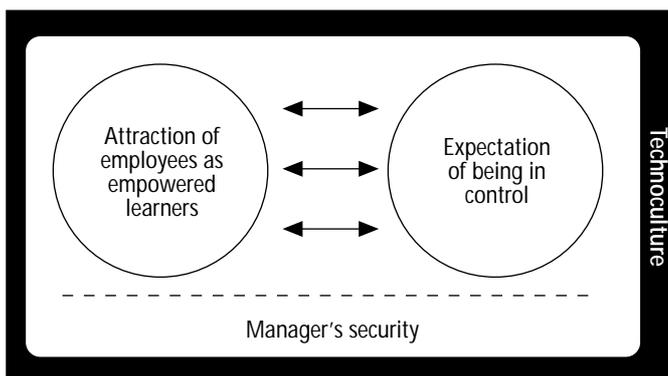
can threaten primitive needs for security and dependency. According to Miller (1993, p. 17), in cases where management try to improve work culture but then do not go ahead, employees often feel considerable relief.

There are a number of possible reasons for employee reluctance about workplace reform aimed at fostering more empowered, learning-oriented employees. Many of these reasons relate to a wish to avoid the possibility of hostility or blame from managers and co-workers (Figure 2). As with managers, the underlying issue seems to be about avoiding painful feelings of insecurity. Once again, technoculture is important, because it carries assumptions and lessons from the past about power and control, hostility, blame and security.

Let us consider reasons why empowerment and learning might be connected with fears of hostility, blame and insecurity. First, employees may be able to sense managers' reluctance to share power. As one employee in a food processing plant observed:

> Teams are told: "you're self-directed", but then when you do something, you get "who said you could do that?" Managers want you to be self-directed, but they also want to stick their beak in.

Second, the limits to empowerment are always contentious, but instead of being dealt with openly, this issue may be downplayed by managers. For example, one manager commented that he always told the workers under him that the limits of authority could be reduced to a simple rule – as long as what they did was "fair, safe and honest", they should feel empowered to act. A statement like this sounds reasonable and rational enough, until one attempts to apply it. Many of the issues

raised by interviewees during the case studies could not be reduced to such uni-dimensional considerations as "safe" versus "unsafe". Instead, they related to ambiguous, multi-faceted, interlinked issues where considerations like safety, fairness and honesty were neither clearcut nor objective.

Third, in many organizations, managers personify authority. When managers are present, employees tend to hold back and expect managers to take charge. When they are absent, employees experience an authority vacuum which no-one feels empowered to fill. According to one operator:

> A crew are like children whose parents have gone out of the house and left them there on their own. They leave things in a big mess. We need someone like the parents, with power to say "fix it up".

When same-status employees try to exercise this kind of power, they can come into conflict with other individuals and common-interest groups, and can unleash fears of considerable aggression. For example, one employee at a case study site explained why it was so difficult to sort out inter-group issues:
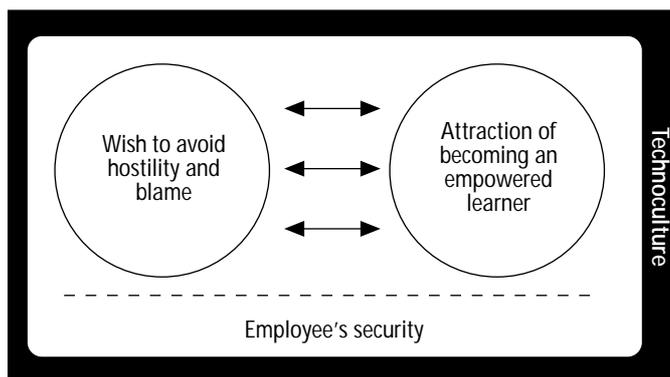
> You can't get other groups to do what you want. If you try to, you're likely to get a scratch down the side of your car, or get attacked after work.

Tensions like these can arise between same-status groups (particularly consecutive shift groups sharing a work area) and different-status groups (for example, operators and trades; factory workers and office workers) where power differences are entrenched and very difficult to change (Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1992; Parker, 1994).

Fourth, as the psychoanalytic literature has demonstrated in detail, people vary in their capacity to experiment, to take risks, to be assertive and engage with higher authority figures (Diamond, 1993; Hirschhorn, 1990). These capacities relate in part to one's internal world and object relations, as well as to one's experiences of past learning going back to a very early age. Although such a view leaves the way open for individuals to enhance these capacities through psychotherapy or other means, it does not underestimate the difficulty in doing so. While the external work environment provides certain scope for each employee to be potent and to learn, whether this potential is realized depends greatly on one's intrapsychic environment.

Fifth, as Field and Mawer (1996) have shown in their research into high-performance

Figure 2 Employees and and empowered learning

Wish to avoid hostility and blame

Attraction of becoming an empowered learner

Technoculture

Employee's security

Australian enterprises, the expectation that employees are proactive and oriented towards learning puts considerable pressure on skills. Employees with well-developed skills in areas like problem-solving, communication and learning are likely to gain from the change, but other employees may lose out. In particular, many employees in the manufacturing and processing sectors in Australia are from non-English speaking backgrounds, and they may lack the language and cultural skills necessary to exercise power or to engage in contributive learning (Mawer and Field, 1995). Similarly, employees may fear saying the wrong thing because of ignorance about Australian cultural norms. In some cases, these difficulties can be compounded among some ethnic groups which have sanctions against airing one's views in public when authority figures are present.

Sixth, there are limits to empowerment and learning that are beyond the scope of either employees or managers to modify. The requirements of areas like quality, occupational health and safety and technical licensing place many restrictions on who is authorized to do what. In addition, despite a sustained effort to reform Australia's highly fragmented industrial relations system, skill demarcations still severely restrict employees' freedom to apply their knowledge and learn in the process.

Seventh, employees can feel that if they suggest new and better ways of working, their manager is likely to get the credit. Employees at a number of the case study sites commented on how inadequately their suggestions and contributions were recognized. Inadequate remuneration is one aspect of the wider issue of how empowered, learning-oriented employees are best rewarded. As one employee commented when asked about taking up opportunities to learn computer skills:

> Why the hell should I learn to use the computer for a lousy twenty cents extra an hour? I'd rather work overtime and get paid more money for doing an easy job.

Finally, moves in the direction of a learning organization can have very different impacts on employees' security and power. While some employees will gain, others, like Tony in the following vignette, will lose out:

Vignette 4

For many years, Tony, an operator with considerable technical knowledge and an assertive personality, had dominated his shift group, and had encouraged them to oppose any workplace reforms. Despite his influence, however, changes were gradually introduced, including the introduction of a powerful, computerized control system. Training was provided for everyone on the shopfloor; employees were closely involved in the commissioning process; and the new system had in-built mechanisms such as help screens to facilitate learning. All of these changes eroded the monopoly Tony had previously had on technical knowledge. Thus, the changes which management had introduced to encourage empowerment and learning actually lessened Tony's power base. Moreover, during the change period, something was discovered which previously was not known – Tony had serious literacy problems. He had always been able to hide these difficulties by getting other workers to write for him, but with the new emphasis on learning, literacy had become a basic requirement for all employees. Although the company invested heavily in literacy help for workers, Tony could not make the transition from gang leader to learner.

In this vignette, the moves towards empowerment, learning and knowledge sharing gradually erode Tony's power base. Understandably, he continued to be negative and to oppose all opportunities for learning and change, and finally accepted voluntary redundancy.

In summary, for a variety of reasons – including management reluctance to share power, and a tendency to deny this as an issue, employees' fears of retribution by other groups, intrapsychic prohibitions on learning and potency, limited skills (including language and cultural skills) and the possibilities of power loss – employees may be reluctant or unable to move towards the role of empowered learner.

Conclusion

Figure 3 summarizes the issues examined in this paper. Becoming an empowered learner has attractions both for management and employees, but there are negatives as well.

For management, empowerment and learning raise the prospect of loss of control

Figure 3 Areas that influence empowerment and learning
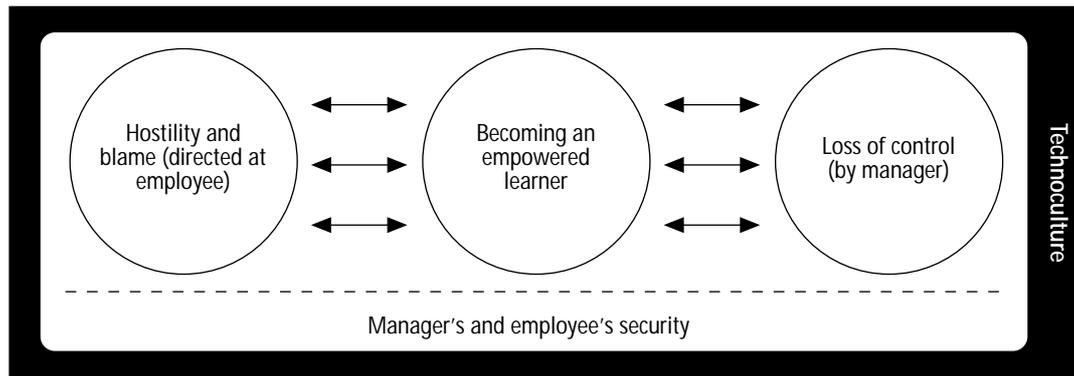
(including control of one's own status and power). Despite espousing organizational learning and associated ideas, the reality is that managers often act in ways that preserve their power and maximize their security, even if, in doing so, they disempower employees and undermine opportunities for beneficial learning.

Employees may also be very cautious about moving into the role of empowered learner. Empowerment and learning may result in considerable hostility or blame from co-workers or managers. Moreover, employees may feel that the risks of empowered learning are high while the potential benefits are low. As with managers, personal security seems to be the basic, underlying issue. Even if managers are willing to share power with employees, the organization's technoculture, which reflects the assumptions and lessons of the past, is likely to impede this power shift and hinder learning.

The analysis presented here has direct implications for the management of organizational learning. It suggests that there may be personal, cultural and technical impediments to empowerment and learning present in many organizations. It also implies that there is little point in encouraging employees to move into the role of empowered learner unless the other issues discussed here are also addressed. If empowerment and learning are on an organization's agenda, then there will need to be frank and open discussions between managers and employees that encompass management's need to maintain control; employees' rights to minimize blame and hostility and to have a reasonable degree of security; and the details of technocultural change likely to foster empowerment and learning.

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