

Short Paper: Empowerment in Multinational Settings: Challenges and Recommendations

Katia Mayumi Kushano  
Beulah Heights University

Abstract

Empowerment involves a strength- based approach, viewing followers as having competencies and the right to function autonomously, yet needing opportunities and resources in the external environment to manifest those. The process of empowerment goes beyond to simply delegating tasks and giving autonomy to individuals, it also provides training and guidance to them. When support is provided, it is done from the perspective of collaboration, not professional expertise. When it comes to empowering people from different nationalities, it is important to address some issues in order to avoid failed empowerment efforts in multinational settings. Some of the challenges refer to the fact that cultures vary along four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism- collectivism, and assertiveness focus. Understanding cultural dimensions, cross-cultural competencies and cultural intelligence helps leaders to empower and motivate followers as leaders will know what the best approaches to implement the empowerment and change cultures are. This paper analyses challenges multinational organizations might face when it comes to empowering followers and suggests future recommendations for teachers, as classroom leaders, to empower their students effectively.

*Keywords:* empowerment, leadership, cultural dimensions, multinational settings

### **Empowerment in Multinational Settings: Challenges and Recommendations**

Hodges and Gill (2015) explain that empowerment entails giving constituents the ability to do something in a particular way. This paper begins by discussing what empowerment is and providing examples of challenges leaders face when it comes to empowering their followers. Next, the paper discusses what challenges multinational companies might face and what the potential recommendations are by examining the importance of understanding cross-cultural settings and developing cross-cultural awareness. Finally, this author discusses her own experience as a multicultural leader and recommends a link between the findings of empowerment in multinational settings with empowerment in multicultural classrooms.

### **What is Empowerment?**

Kouzes and Posner (2010) describe ten truths, or key lessons, that help leaders think, decide, and act more effectively on personal and professional levels. One of the key lessons refers to the ability leaders have to empower other people; the authors argue that leaders cannot do it by themselves. The relationship between a leader and his or her team is essential and must be strengthened through careful human connection. Leaders must understand the needs and perspective of others in order to create the necessary resonance for a dialogue about the future. Kouzes and Posner (2010) state that listening, encouraging and providing support are important characteristics of leadership as leaders can build a better connection with their constituents through those practices. Empowerment leads to commitment and leaders who make others feel strong and capable build high-quality relationships. Northouse (2015) states that empowering refers to allowing followers the freedom to make decisions and to be independent at certain situations. Leaders share power with followers by allowing them to have control. Additionally, the author argues that empowerment builds followers' trust in themselves as they believe in their own capacities to make decisions and handle different situations. Yukl (2013) argues that in times

of change, an organization needs key people to help implement the change; leaders can facilitate the process by empowering a base of people to execute the strategy and implement the innovation. By giving strategic people power, the author explains that motivation and performance increase. Research by Moran, Gibbs and Mernin (2017) states that empowerment involves a strength-based approach, viewing individuals as having competencies and the right to function autonomously, yet needing opportunities and resources in the external environment to manifest those. The process of empowerment goes beyond to simply delegating tasks and giving autonomy to individuals, it also provides training and guidance to them. When support is provided, it is done from the perspective of collaboration, not professional expertise. Northouse (2015) gives the reader an example of how a college professor can empower teaching assistants assigned to him by letting them prepare new materials, grade student papers and by giving them opportunity to teach one of the class lectures. The authors states that assistants become confident in their teaching abilities when they are given the opportunity to handle real life situations of professors. Next, the paper discusses challenges leaders face when it comes to empowering followers.

### **Challenges Leaders Face When It Comes to Empowering Followers**

Randolph and Sashkin (2002) state that employees think empowerment is a good idea, as long as they do not have to take on personal accountability for results. Additionally, some employees are afraid to take the risk of responsibility because of potential failures that can bring negative consequences. Hodges and Gill (2015) explain the reader important leadership challenges with empowerment. One of the challenges refers to internal and external commitment. The authors explain that there is a potential problem with the inconsistency of asking employees to have autonomy in certain situations and problems and behave like owners, yet expecting them

to behave as employees who have to meet specific requirements. The authors emphasize that “asking people to act like owners when they have not set the objectives is a psychological paradox” (p. 70). Scandura (2016) discusses the importance of psychological empowerment. The author explains that psychological empowerment refers to intrinsic motivation manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. Meaning refers to how well work fits one’s values; mastery refers to one’s belief in his or her capabilities to show excellence; self-determination refers to the degree one feels that his or her choices are carried out according to his or her preferences and impact refers to the degree one believes he or she can have influence on important outcomes. The author explains that lack of one of these four cognitions can lower effectiveness, innovation, and organizational commitment. When it comes to empowering people, it is important for leaders to develop a sense of meaning among their followers to improve motivation. Blanchard (as cited in Randolph & Sashkin, 2002) examines three keys to develop a culture of empowerment: share accurate information with everyone, create autonomy via boundaries, and replace hierarchical thinking with self-managed teams. Next, the paper discusses what challenges multinational companies might have and gives the reader suggestions on how to improve cross-cultural awareness in order to facilitate organizational empowerment in multinational companies.

### **Challenges Leaders Face When It Comes to Empowering Followers in Multinational Settings**

Randolph and Sashkin (2002) state that “employee’s fear of responsibility is especially enhanced in some cultures which perpetuate the idea that it is the manager's job (and not the employee's) to make decisions and be accountable for results” (p. 104). The authors argue that each culture perceives empowerment and changes differently and in order to avoid failed

empowerment efforts in multinational settings, leaders should understand the challenges they might face. Some of the challenges refer to the fact that cultures vary along four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism- collectivism, and assertiveness focus. The authors present the reader several examples of how empowerment in multinational settings is complex and by ignoring its complexity, leaders can compromise organizational effectiveness. One of the examples refers to how different cultures perceive decision- making; the authors cite the differences between individualistic and collectivistic societies to illustrate decision- making. In the United States, for instance, employees are willing to participate in the decision- making process, but in Brazil, employees usually expect their leaders to possess all the information they need to make good business decisions. On the other hand, Brazilian society tends to work in teams with shared responsibility while employees and managers in the United States tend to have a hard time envisioning the utilization of strong teams. Hofstede (as cited in Ferraro & Briody, 2013) conducted a large- scale study of IBM, which employed people from different cultures. Through the use of extensive amounts of questionnaire data, Hofstede was able to rank the cultures along 6 dimensions: individualism- collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity- femininity, long-term vs. short- term orientation. Ferraro and Briody (2013) explain that United States, as an example of individual- oriented culture, value task completion, autonomy and independence, success as an own ability and they perceive individuals as major units of social perception. Collective- oriented cultures, such as Brazil, Argentina, China, value relationships, interdependence, group achievements and strong connections to a few groups. The way individualistic societies perceive changes and empowerment is different from collectivistic societies. Additional aspects to consider when it comes to implementing empowering in multinational companies are power distance and empowerment. Randolph and Sashkin (2002)

tell the reader an example of an American company that tried to empower its Mexican plant employees. The American managers decided to empower teams by allowing them to be engaged in decision-making. What the American managers did not expect is that Mexican culture tends to work with clear boundaries and they expect people to tell them what to do. Ferraro and Briody (2013) explain that high-power distance societies, such as Mexico, do not expect to get all the information and boundaries are easy to create. According to Randolph and Sashkin (2002), one of the keys to empowerment is the utilization of self-managed teams. In societies with lower power distance, such as the United States, replacing the hierarchy with teams is easier than in societies with higher power distance, such as Mexico and Brazil. Ferraro and Briody (2013) explain two additional categories: egalitarian cultures and hierarchical cultures. The authors note that this dimension helps businesspeople understand about power, formality, delegation of authority, among others. The decision-making process, for instance, takes longer in egalitarian cultures where all levels are asked for feedback. Northouse (2015) explains that gender egalitarianism is also an important aspect of cultural dimensions. Sweden, for instance, is considered to be one of the most gender-egalitarian countries where women and men share power and influence equally. A leader who belongs to a gender-egalitarian culture and is leading a cross-cultural setting with the presence of hierarchical cultures should understand how power and influence are perceived differently. With regards to uncertainty avoidance (the degree of tolerance of change and ambiguity), Randolph and Sashkin (2002) explain that if uncertainty avoidance is very low, as it is in Singapore and Hong Kong, for instance, people will tolerate a lack of clarity that might lead to bad decisions. The authors argue that uncertainty avoidance impacts the empowerment process as societies receive and perceive information differently. The assertiveness dimension, the degree to which people focus on achievements, is also an important

factor to understand how different cultures perceive goals and results. Ferraro and Briody (2013) state that in countries with low assertiveness focus, people will desire a nurturing and relationship- oriented environment; while in countries with high assertiveness focus, people will focus on results. Randolph and Sashkin (2002) state that employees with low assertiveness desire to make a connection between the power they will receive with the relationships they will nurture. Next, the paper recommends strategies to deal with challenges when it comes to empowering followers in multinational settings.

### **Recommendations to Deal with Challenges When It Comes to Empowering Followers in Multinational Settings**

According to Randolph and Sashkin (2002), leaders who work in multinational settings must demonstrate willingness to understand cultural differences in order to implement changes and empower people. There are three important ways to develop cross- cultural awareness: through the study of different dimensions (as discussed previously), the development of cross-cultural competencies and cultural intelligence. Northouse (2015) discusses that culture can be learned. Adler and Bartholomew (as cited in Northouse, 2015) affirm that there are five essential cross-cultural competencies: 1) leaders need to understand business, political, and cultural environments globally; 2) leaders need to learn different aspects of different cultures- from gastronomy to technologies; 3) leaders need to learn how to work with people from different countries concurrently; 4) leaders need to learn how to communicate with other cultures; 5) leaders need to learn how to live with people from different cultures from a position of equality. Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) discuss that cross-cultural learning is possible. The authors conducted a study on competencies for a successful expatriate adaptation and separated competencies in a learning skill dimension: 1) interpersonal; 2) information; 3) analytic; 4)

action and 5) adaptive. The interpersonal dimension, for instance, has two competencies: building relationships and valuing people from different cultures. Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) explain that it is possible to gain strength in those competencies by establishing contact with people from different cultures and engaging in open conversations. The authors also explain that the communication ability is an exercise that needs to be practiced frequently in order to achieve the full potential of learning skill dimension. Understanding own and other's mood and emotions helps one to learn how to manage stress which is a very important factor in adaptive dimension. Knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communications of other cultures is also an important skill to develop cross-cultural awareness.

Livermore (2010) argues that many approaches to cross-cultural leadership are either too simplistic or far too extreme. One does not cover the aspects of cross-cultural leadership by simply being nice or avoiding certain taboos but one does not have to become a cross-cultural expert to become a cross-cultural leader. The author emphasizes the importance of linking cross-cultural competencies with cultural intelligence and defines cultural intelligence as "the capability to function effectively across national, ethnic, and organizational cultures" (p. 4). Cultural intelligence is needed in different situations; it helps leaders, for instance, to address the challenge of recruiting and retaining cross-cultural talent. Livermore (2010) also states that other intercultural approaches are significant to address the theme cross-cultural leadership but cultural intelligence presents several advantages over them, such as: 1) CQ (cultural intelligence) is a meta-framework rooted in strong research and it has been tested across multiple cultures, samples and times; 2) the concept is aligned to the study of multiple intelligences research; 3) the approach also considers a leader's personal interests, strategic thinking that aligned with sociological differences in cultural behaviors and values from other approaches can successfully

address cultural interactions; 4) the approach emphasizes that any leader can enhance his or her cultural dimensions through training and experience and 5) the approach focuses on developing an overall repertoire of cultural understanding. Cultural intelligence can be learned; when leaders activate their CQ, they are able to better understand their own culture and other cultures. Leaders become more adaptive as they use different strategies in different cultural situations.

Understanding one's own culture, cross- culture dimensions, cross-culture competencies and activating culture intelligence through different aspects (reading, planning, engaging, learning, experiencing) can help leaders to effectively empower their followers. According to Ersoy (2014), "cultural awareness is the foundation of communication and it involves the ability of becoming aware of cultural values, beliefs and perceptions" (p. 6105). Randolph and Sashkin (2002) explain that leaders can take benefit from learning how different cultures behave. The authors argue that empowerment can address challenges that compromise the effectiveness of traditional management when leaders understand issues and differences among cultures. A high power- distance culture, for instance, will share information when leaders explain to employees how their hold of more information can reduce work uncertainty which is an aspect expected in high- power distance cultures. Randolph and Sashkin (2002) argue that creating a culture of empowerment is possible in a multinational scenario. One of the best advices the authors give the reader refers to carefully learn about different cultures before attempting to introduce empowerment. Through education, teaching, training and other opportunities for learning and the understanding of cross- cultural differences and dimensions, leaders can effectively empower their followers in multinational settings. Next, the paper presents final considerations and future recommendations on empowerment in multicultural classrooms.

### **Final Considerations**

The author of this paper works at a multicultural setting and recognizes the importance of understanding her own culture to understand others. This author also recognizes the importance of learning and addressing similarities and differences from a position of equality. The author of this paper agrees with Warren (2016) who perceives teachers as classroom leaders as they share a vision and guide students to achieve their goals. As a teacher, this author believes students should be able to take responsibility, make choices, develop self-motivation in order to produce a more effective learning. Li (2013) states that there is a general agreement in research that culture plays a critical role in culturally and linguistically diverse students' learning and social integration. Additionally, the author argues that there are different strategies that teachers can develop in order to help students. One of the strategies refers to the ability and willingness a teacher can develop in order to become aware of cultural differences. The author of this paper agrees with the findings of Li (2013) who explains that teachers can become cultural workers by enhancing their cultural awareness: "teachers also need to have the skills to incorporate the multiple cultural perspectives into their curriculum, anticipate and adjust for students' different communication and learning styles and abilities, and accept and value cultural differences in their classroom" (p. 140). Finally, this author recommends future studies on how teachers, as classroom leaders, can create a culture of empowerment in multicultural classrooms. This author recommends a study that links the findings of Randolph and Sashkin (2002) with the findings of Li (2003) who states that teachers can empower and motivate culturally and linguistically diverse students by promoting an understanding of cultural learning for themselves and for the students. Additionally, this author agrees with Livermore (2010) who states that cultural awareness can give important contributions to the world such as economic sustainability and world peace.

This paper aimed to discuss what empowerment is and what the challenges leaders face when it comes to empowering their followers in multinational organizations. This paper also

presented recommendations for leaders to develop cross-cultural awareness in order to implement empowerment in multinational organizations. Empowerment involves a strength-based approach, viewing individuals as having competencies and the right to function autonomously, yet needing opportunities and resources in the external environment to manifest those. The process of empowerment goes beyond to simply delegating tasks and giving autonomy to individuals, it also provides training and guidance to them. When support is provided, it is done from the perspective of collaboration, not professional expertise. When it comes to empowering multinational settings, leaders need to recognize potential inhibitors and drivers of different cultures in order to create a culture of empowerment. Developing cross-cultural awareness is important for leaders to understand the potential inhibitors and drivers. One can develop cross-cultural awareness by understanding cross-cultural competencies and activating cultural intelligence. There are, however, some important considerations to make when learning other cultures: leaders should avoid overreliance on cultural generalizations, leaders should learn about other cultures and live with them from a position of equality, leaders should be aware of different possible behaviors within the same culture (Ferraro & Briody, 2013). Cultural intelligence can be learned; when leaders activate their CQ, they are able to better understand their own culture and other cultures. Leaders become more adaptive as they use different strategies in different cultural situations. Understanding one's own culture, cross-culture dimensions, cross-culture competencies and activating culture intelligence through different aspects (reading, planning, engaging, learning, experiencing) can help leaders to develop cross-cultural awareness to better implement empowerment and changes: both in business and educational settings.

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