Despite all the talk and the change programs, empowerment is still mostly an illusion.

EMPOWERMENT: THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

BY CHRIS ARGYRIS

Considering its much touted potential, it's no wonder that empowerment receives all the attention it does. Who wouldn't want more highly motivated employees to help scale the twenty-first century? As one CEO has said, "No vision, no strategy can be achieved without able and empowered employees."

Top-level executives accept their responsibilities to try to develop empowered employees. Human resource professionals devise impressive theories of internal motivation. Experts teach change management. Executives themselves launch any number of programs from reengineering to continuous improvement to TQM. But little of it works.[1]

Take reengineering for instance. Although the rhetoric of reengineering is consistent with empowerment, in reality it is anything but that. Both research and practice indicate that the best results of reengineering occur when jobs are rigorously specified and not when individuals are left to define them. Even the GE workout sessions had their greatest success when the problems resolved were relatively routine. Reengineering has led to improvements in performance, but it has not produced the number of highly motivated employees needed to ensure consistently high-performing organizations.

Few executives would deny that there has been little growth in empowerment over the last 30 years. But why that is so remains a riddle. The answer is complex. The change programs and practices we employ are full of inner contradictions that cripple innovation, motivation, and drive. At the same time, CEOs subtly undermine empowerment. Managers love empowerment in theory, but the command-and-control model is what they trust and know best. For their part, employees are often ambivalent about empowerment – it is great as long as they are not held personally accountable. Even the change professionals often stifle empowerment. Thus, despite all the best efforts that have gone into fostering empowerment, it remains very

much like the emperor's new clothes: we praise it loudly in public and ask ourselves privately why we can't see it. There has been no transformation in the workforce, and there has been no sweeping metamorphosis.

Two Kinds of Commitment

To understand why there has been no transformation, we need to begin with commitment. Commitment is not simply a human relations concept. It is an idea that is fundamental to our thinking about economics, strategy, financial governance, information technology, and operations. Commitment is about generating human energy and activating the human mind. Without it, the implementation of any new initiative or idea would be seriously compromised. Human beings can commit themselves in two fundamentally different ways: externally and internally. Both are valuable in the workplace, but only internal commitment reinforces

empowerment. (See the exhibit "How Commitment Differs.")

External commitment – think of it as contractual compliance – is what an organization gets when workers have little control over their destinies. It is a fundamental truth of human nature and psychology that the less power people have to shape their lives, the less commitment they will have. When, for example, management single-handedly defines work conditions for employees, the employees will almost certainly be externally committed. That commitment is external because all that is left for employees is to do what is expected of them. The

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HOW COMMITMENT DIFFERS

External Commitment	Internal Commitment
Tasks are defined by others.	Individuals define tasks.
The behavior required to perform tasks is defined by others.	Individuals define the behavior required to perform tasks.
Performance goals are defined by management.	Management and individuals jointly define performance goals that are challenging for the individual.
The importance of the goal is defined by others.	Individuals define the importance of the goal.

employees will not feel responsible for the way the situation itself is defined. How can they? They did not do the defining.

If management wants employees to take more responsibility for their own destiny, it must encourage the development of *internal commitment.* As the name implies, internal commitment comes largely from within. Individuals are committed to a particular project, person, or program based on their own reasons or motivations. By definition, internal commitment is participatory and very closely allied with empowerment. The more that top management wants internal commitment from its employees, the more it must try to involve employees in defining work objectives, specifying how to achieve them, and setting stretch targets.

We might well ask whether everyone must participate in order for empowerment to exist in an organization. In principle, the answer is "yes"; in reality, there is a "but." It is unrealistic to expect management to allow thousands of employees to participate fully in self-governance. The degree to which internal commitment is plausible in any organization is certainly limited. Moreover, the extent of participation in corporate goals and aspirations will vary with each employee's wishes and intentions.

At SmithKline Beecham, in one of the most far-reaching programs for employee participation that I know of, management used a merger as an opportunity to build empowerment. Throughout the entire organization, more than 400 task forces were created. Yet to this day top management does not believe that internal commitment has been generated throughout the entire company. Their realistic assessment is that not even all the employees on the task forces feel empowered.

To be fair, it is important to remember that empowerment is a goal that organizations approximate but never quite reach. The fact is that it is possible to have various levels of commitment in an organization and still get the job done. Curiously, employees have no trouble understanding the need to keep within bounds. In all my work, I have yet to find employees who make unrealistic demands about empowerment. For top management, then, the essential thing to know is that there are limits to internal commitment. Employees do not understand – in fact, they usually resent – executives preaching internal commitment while continuing to demand external commitment from the rank and file. Indeed, a great source of discontent in organizations is that top-level managers continually risk their credibility by espousing empowerment too glibly.

Clearly, if it is internal commitment that provides the kind of outcomes that CEOs say they want, then they must be realistic and judicious in their demands for it. But the problem goes deeper because the framework that most organizations are

now using to transform themselves discourages employees from actually taking responsibility in their jobs.

Change Programs Increase Inner Contradictions

Major change programs are rife with inner contradictions. By this, I mean that even when these programs and policies are implemented correctly, they do not – and cannot – foster the behavior they are meant to inspire. If the inner contradictions are brought to the surface and addressed, they can be dealt with successfully; that is, they will not inhibit the kind of personal commitment that management says it wants. But if the contradictions remain buried and unacknowledged, as they usually do, they become a destructive force. Not only do they stifle the development of empowerment, they also sap the organization's efficiency by breeding frustration and mistrust.

To illustrate, consider the advice that currently represents best practice for implementing and promoting organizational change. That advice breaks the process down into four basic steps:

- Define a *vision.*
- Define a competitive *strategy* consistent with the vision.
- Define organizational *work processes* that, when executed, will implement the strategy.
- Define individual *job requirements* so that employees can carry out the processes effectively.

The underlying pattern of these instructions is consistent with what change researchers and practitioners have learned about effective implementation over the years. Start with a clear framework – a vision – and progressively make it operational so that it will come alive. So that no one will have any doubts about how to align the four parts of the process, management is advised to speak with one voice. This process makes sense. It is rational.

Yet the process is so riddled with inner contradictions that change programs that follow it will only end up creating confusion, particularly at the implementation stage. Given that all the steps have been so precisely described through a set of instructions, the advice actually encourages more external than internal commitment. Clearly, when employees' actions are defined almost exclusively from the outside (as they are in most change programs), the resulting behavior cannot be empowering and liberating. One immediate conse-

quence is that employees react to the change program by quietly distancing themselves from it. Thus the change program is successful in terms of improving performance because it helps reduce mistakes, as in the case of TQM, or because it helps employees embrace best practices. But at the same time, it undermines internal commitment. In short, the advice for implementing change simply does not provide the new source of energy that many executives want.

But the real danger is that change programs end up poisoning the entire corporation with long-lasting mixed messages. Internally committed employees interpret these messages as "do your own thing – the way we tell you." They reluctantly toe the line. Employees who prefer external commitment will also pick up the mixed messages; however, these people will be relieved because they feel protected from having to take any personal responsibility. In this way, the very working habits that executives do not want to see continued in their organizations are strengthened and reinforced. The result is invariably more inner contradictions and more inefficiency and cynicism, all of which get in the way of real change.

CEOs Undermine Empowerment

CEOs work against empowerment both consciously and unconsciously. Surprisingly – at least to outsiders – executives do not always seem to want what they say they need. Consider a few typical remarks that I came across during my research. These remarks – excerpted from a roundtable discussion

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of executives from world-class companies – indicate very clearly the ambivalence of CEOs toward internal commitment and empowerment. The first CEO noted that with "well-defined processes where the variances are small and the operating limits are well defined," you no longer need the old command-and-control approach. Workers are now empowered, "provided they respect the process," he said. The second CEO agreed that these "processes are liberating," while the third observed

that many employees have a tough time understanding what it means for processes to be "reliable, respectable, and in control."

Let us stop a moment and ask ourselves how there can be empowerment when there is neither guesswork nor challenges – when the job requirements are predetermined and the processes are controlled. For employees operating in such a world, the environment is not empowering; it is foolproof.
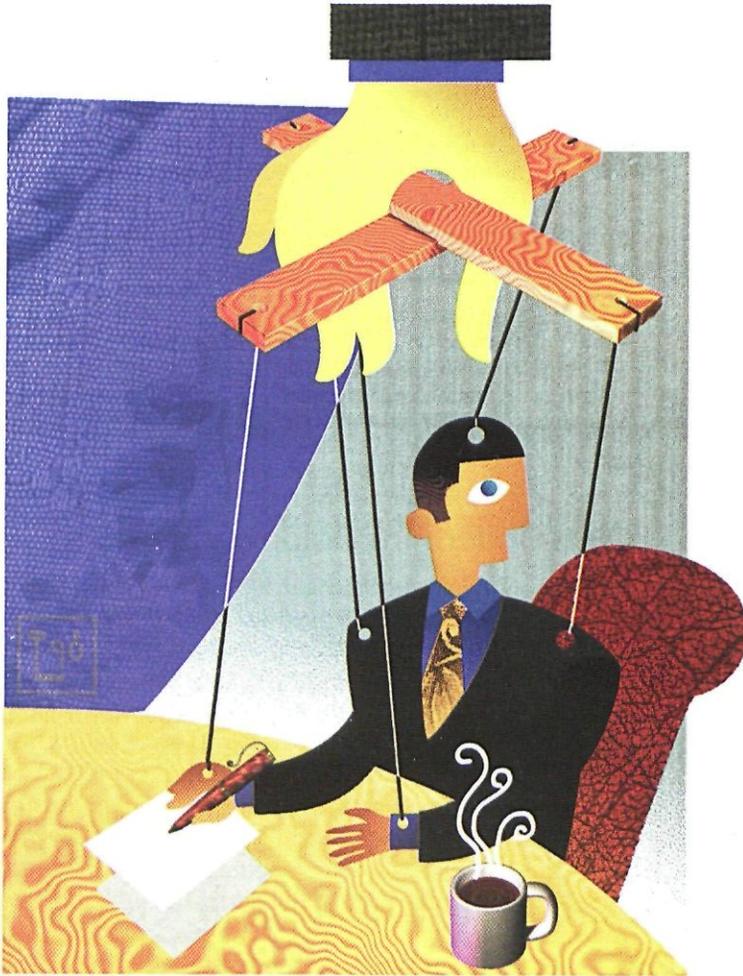
Employees won't feel internally committed if someone is always controlling them from the top down.

This is not a milieu in which individuals can aspire to self-governance. On the contrary, as long as they buy in and follow the dictates of the processes, the employees in the companies just described will only become more externally motivated.

The enthusiastic use of champions in virtually all contemporary change programs sends a similar mixed message from CEOs to employees. Top management is well aware of the dangers of piecemeal implementation and eventual fade-out in major change programs. They strive to overcome those

problems by anointing champions. The champions pursue performance objectives with tenacity, managing by decree. They have generous resources available to ensure compliance, and they monitor employees' progress frequently. Altogether, these behaviors reinforce the top-down control features of the external commitment model. The single voice of fervent champions leads employees to feel that management is in control, and it drives out the sense of internal responsibility and personal empowerment. How can employees feel empowered if someone is always "selling" them or controlling them from the top down? Indeed, such champions would not be necessary if employees were internally committed.

The result of all these interventions is disarray. Managers and the change programs they use undermine the empowerment they so desperately want to achieve. Why does this occur? Could it be that today's top-level managers don't truly want empowered employees? In truth, they are probably unsure. At the same time, employees do not hold executives to task for their behavior. Employees have their own mixed feelings about empowerment.

Employees Have Their Doubts

External commitment is a psychological survival mechanism for many employees – it is a form of adaptive behavior that allows individuals to get by in most work environments. How that survival mechanism works is illustrated quite dramatically today in the former East Germany.

When the Berlin Wall came down, a routine way of life for East German workers came to an end. Most workers had learned to survive by complying. For 40 years, most plants were run in accordance with the dictates of central planners. If many East Germans had pushed for greater control over their destinies, their lives might have been endangered. As a result, East German workers over the years learned to define performance as doing the minimum of what was required of them.

After the fall of communism, I participated in many discussions with West German executives who were surprised and baffled by the lack of initiative and aspiration displayed by the East Germans. What those executives failed to understand is how

bewildering – indeed, how threatening – it can be for people to take internal commitment seriously, especially those who have lived their entire lives by the rules of external commitment. As I listened to the West German executives who wanted to make East German employees more internally committed, I thought of several cases in the United States and elsewhere where similar problems exist. Again and again in my experience, prolonged external commitment made internal commitment extremely unlikely, because a sense of empowerment is not innate. It is something that must be learned, developed, and honed.

The question, then, is, How do you produce internal commitment? One thing for sure is that the incentive programs executives have used – for instance, higher compensation, better career paths, "employee of the month" recognition awards – simply do not work. On the contrary, in all my years as a change consultant, I have repeatedly witnessed how offering employees the "right" rewards creates dependency rather than empowerment. Inevitably, the power of such methods wears off with use, and all that has been created is more external commitment.

Consider one company with substantial financial woes. In that case, the CEO decided at considerable personal sacrifice to raise his employees' salaries. But his own research later showed that the employees merely considered their raises to be in keeping with their equity in the labor market. Internal commitment had not increased. Employees continued to do only what was asked of them as long as the rewards were increased. They followed the rules, but they did not take any initiative. They did not take risks, nor did they show the sense of personal responsibility that management sought. The CEO was surprised, but I thought that these results were entirely predictable for two reasons. First, pay, like other popular incentive schemes, often advances external commitment while creating a bias against internal commitment. Second, and more fundamental, many employees do not embrace the idea of empowerment with any more gusto than management does. For a lot of people, empowerment is just too much work. Like the workers in East Germany, almost all employees have learned to survive by depending on external commitment.

When it comes to empowerment, executives and employees are engaged in shadowboxing. Management says it wants employees who participate more; employees say they want to be more involved. But it is difficult to know who means what. Is it just a charade? Employees push for greater autonomy; management says the right thing but tries to keep control through information systems, processes, and tools. Employees see vestiges of the old command-and-control model as confirming their worse suspicions – that superiors want unchallenged power. Management just wants to see better numbers. Thus the battle between autonomy and control rages on, and meanwhile, as companies make the transition into the next century, the potential for real empowerment is squandered.

Change Professionals Inhibit Empowerment

During the past decade, I have had the opportunity to work with more than 300 change experts in different organizations. Such individuals differ in their practices and their effectiveness, of course, but more striking than the differences are the patterns that recur.

Caught in the middle of the battle between autonomy and control, the change professional has a tough assignment. The role of the change professional, whether internal or external, is ostensibly to facilitate organizational change and continuous learning. In their own way, however, the vast majority of change professionals actually inhibit empowerment in organizations.

To understand how that occurs, consider what happens as Tom, a change agent, tries to work with Jack, a line manager. (Both are composite figures typical of those I encountered in my research.) Jack is told by his boss to work with Tom, who is there to "help" Jack empower his organization. The change program begins with a series of meetings and discussions. Tom talks passionately about openness, honesty, and trust as the foundations of empowerment. Many employees leave these meetings feeling hopeful about the direction that the company is taking toward more open communication. A month into the program, however, Tom observes that Jack has fallen back into his old style of management. He decides that he had better confront Jack:

Tom's unspoken thoughts:	What Tom and Jack say:
TOM: *Things aren't going well.*	TOM: So how's everything going?
	JACK: Things are going pretty well. There's a lot of pressure from above, but we're meeting the numbers.

TOM: *Oh great. All Jack cares about is the numbers. Empowerment isn't even on his agenda.*

TOM: *Just what I feared. Jack's not "walking the talk." He just doesn't get it at all.*

TOM: *This is hopeless! There's got to be an easier way to make a living. I'll never get through to him. I wish I could tell Jack what I think, but I don't want to put him on the defensive. I've got to stay cool.*

TOM: Great. Super. But I was also wondering how well we're doing at getting people more committed to their jobs. How empowered do you think people feel?

JACK: Well, I think we're doing okay. If there are problems, people come to me and we work it out. Sure, some people are never satisfied. But that's just a few people, and we can handle them.

TOM: Look, Jack, if you solve all their problems, how are we going to empower our employees?

JACK: Well, to be honest with you, Tom, the signal I'm getting from above is that my job is to produce the numbers without, you know, upsetting people. To be fair, I think I'm doing that.

What's happening here? The change program that began with great enthusiasm is clearly in deep trouble. It's a pattern I've observed over and over again. After the initial excitement passes, reality inevitably settles in. Put aside the nice rhetoric of empowerment, employees *will* have problems. They *will* ask their managers for help, and their managers *will* tell them what to do. That is how most work gets done and how organizations meet their numbers. And in many cases, there's absolutely nothing wrong with this, except that it goes against the theory of empowerment.

What does Tom do when he observes Jack telling his employees what to do? Instead of figuring out whether Jack is doing the right thing in this situation, change experts like Tom will almost always be dismayed, because the managers aren't walking the talk of empowerment. Rarely have I seen a change professional help a manager deal effectively with being caught between a rock and a hard place. Even more uncommon is a change agent who offers practical advice to the manager about what to do.

Not only is Tom unwilling to acknowledge the real problem Jack is having, but he papers over his own thoughts. He tries to act as if he still believes the program can be successful when, in fact, he has given up hope. Tom himself is guilty of not walking the talk of openness, honesty, and trust.

In my experience, line managers are far more willing to acknowledge the inner contradictions of change programs – at least, in private. They will admit to distancing themselves from the soft stuff – two-way participation, internal commitment, and discontinuous thinking – to focus instead on the numbers. Managers like Jack often conclude – rightly, I'm afraid – that the change agent does not know how to help them. So Jack listens politely as Tom warns him about the dangers of backsliding and exhorts him to be more persistent. And then Jack goes on about his business.

In the end, everyone is frustrated. In theory, empowerment should make it easier for organizations to meet their numbers. But when change programs are imposed without recognizing the limitations of empowerment and when managers and employees are not helped to deal effectively and openly with them, the organization ends up worse off than it was to begin with. Empowerment too often enters the realm of political correctness, which means that no one can say what he or she is thinking: this is just nonsense. In this scenario, if you challenge the change agent, you become an enemy of change.

So instead of feeling more empowered, people throughout the organization feel more trapped and less able to talk openly about what's really going on. Is it any wonder that change programs don't succeed and that they actually undermine the credibility of top management?

What Is to Be Done?

Despite all the rhetoric surrounding transformation and major change programs, the reality is that today's managers have not yet encountered change programs that work. As we have seen, the reasons

for that are complex. Although managers share some of the responsibility for undermining internal motivation in their organizations, the change programs that could create high levels of internal commitment and empowerment in corporations do not yet exist. That is why I believe it is time to begin the research and experimentation that is required to find some viable answers. But for now, let me begin with some recommendations that may help executives think more sensibly about empowerment.

■ Recognize that every company has both top-down controls and programs that empower people, and that some inconsistencies are inevitable and must simply be managed. When these inner contradictions become apparent, encourage individuals to bring them to the surface; otherwise, a credibility gap will be created that can pollute the organization for many years to come.

■ Don't undertake blatantly contradictory programs. For instance, stop creating change programs that are intended to expand internal commitment but are designed in ways that produce external commitment. Make sure that what is being espoused will not contradict what actually happens.

■ Understand that empowerment has its limits. Know how much can be created and what can be accomplished. Know that empowerment is not a cure-all. Do not evoke it needlessly. Once it has been created, do not misuse it. Be clear about who has the right to change things. Specify the likely limits of permissible change.

■ Realize that external and internal commitment can coexist in organizations but that how they do so is crucial to the ultimate success or failure of empowerment in the organization. For instance, external commitment is all it takes for performance in most routine jobs. Unnecessary attempts to increase empowerment only end up creating downward spirals of cynicism, disillusionment, and inefficiencies. As a first precaution, distinguish between jobs that require internal commitment and those that do not.

■ Establish working conditions to increase empowerment in the organization. If you want to help individuals move away from external commitment, encourage them to examine their own behavior. It

has been my experience that many employees are willing to become more personally committed if management is really sincere, if the work allows it, and if the rewards reinforce it.

■ Calculate factors such as morale, satisfaction, and even commitment into your human relations policies, but do not make them the ultimate criteria. They are penultimate. The ultimate goal is performance. Individuals can be excellent performers and report low morale, yet it is performance and not morale that is paramount. When morale, satisfaction, and sense of empowerment are used as the ultimate criteria for success in organizations, they cover up many of the problems that organizations must overcome in the twenty-first century.

■ Help employees understand the choices they make about their own level of commitment. One of the most helpful things we can do in organizations – indeed, in life – is to require that human beings not knowingly kid themselves about their effectiveness.

Finally, remember that empowerment can run contrary to human nature, and be realistic about how to achieve and use it. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln: You can empower all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but you can't empower all of the people all of the time. In the last analysis, nobody should expect more than that.

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1. For a description of the similarities and differences in employee-involvement, reengineering, and TQM programs, see Susan Alberts Mohrman, J.R. Galbraith, and Edward E. Alwair, *Tomorrow's Organization* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); J. Hendry, "Processing Reengineering and the Dynamic Balance of the Organization," *European Management Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 52–57; T. Eccles, "The Deceptive Allure of Empowerment," *Long Range Planning*, vol. 26, no. 6, pp. 13–21; and B.G. Jackson, "Reengineering the Sense of Self: The Managers and the Management Gurus," *Journal of Management Studies*, 1996, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 571–590.

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