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Staff empowerment: creating an empowered work environment in schools

Summary

Recent conceptions of leadership in the school context suggest a shift from authoritarian models of decision-making towards staff empowerment. Staff thus now have decision-making powers which they lacked in the past. Principals appear to be relinquishing overt control in the interests of staff empowerment. Yet, in practice, it is possible for principals to gain more control than they had before. This article examines some of the issues involved in successfully empowering staff in schools. Not all empowerment programmes are successful and therefore the possible pitfalls in and necessary preparation for effective staff empowerment are briefly outlined. The article concludes by suggesting ways of redesigning school management in order to create an empowered school environment.

Personeelbemagtiging: die skepping van 'n bemagtigde werksomgewing in skole

Onlangse beskouinge van leierskap in skole stel voor dat daar beweeg word van outoritêre besluitnemingsmodelle van leierskap na personeelbemagtiging. Personeelbemagtiging beteken dat besluitnemingsbevoegdhede aan personeel gegee word wat voorheen nie die gesag gehad het om besluite te neem nie. Dit mag voorkom of skoolhoofde beheer afstaan in die belang van bemagtiging. In die praktyk is dit egter moontlik dat skoolhoofde meer beheer oor funksies verkry as wat hulle voorheen gehad het. Hierdie artikel beskou 'n aantal kwessies wat betrekking het op suksesvolle bemagtiging van personeel in skole. Omdat nie alle bemagtiginsprogramme suksesvol is nie, word die slaggate van en voorbereiding vir bemagtiging kortliks bespreek. Die artikel sluit af met voorstelle van wyses waarop skole se bestuurstelsels herontwerp kan word om bemagtigde skoolomgewings te skep.

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Traditionally it has been assumed that only top managers have the competence to make decisions and that staff are hired to do what managers tell them to do (Frazier 1997: 21; Ericson & Marlow 1996: 121; Robinson 1998: 4). There has been an emphasis on direction and control, a preference for mechanisation and for the treatment of staff as an extension of the machine (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994: 70; Kalbaugh 1998: 43). Management has tended to divide organisations into separate components thereby preventing people from seeing the important interactions between various components of the system (Frazier 1997: 20). This has eventually led each component to develop tunnel vision in the absence of an overall vision (Frazier 1997: 20). If knowledge is power, staff have been kept as powerless as possible by being given just enough information to do their work (McDonald 1998: 28). This approach reveals a lack of trust in and respect for what staff can actually do (Hitchcock & Willard 1995: 33).

For schools to manage the change that arises from socio-economic, political and technological development, all available resources are required (cf Robinson 1998: 4). In particular it is important to fully utilise human resources and to recognise their crucial contribution (Robinson 1998: 4; Swift *et al* 1998: 80). In this context, recent conceptions of school leadership exemplify a movement away from authoritarian models of decision-making towards more collegial views on role relations between principal and staff (Blase & Blase 1997: 139; Ericson & Marlow 1996: 125). Informed staff are now seen as one of the school and the principal's greatest assets (McDonald 1998: 28).

Empowered organisations are fast becoming the new standard because the all-powerful control of managers is making way for staff members capable of making meaningful decisions (Guaspari 1999: 61; Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 41). This also holds good for schools. This paradigm, however, requires an organisational structure that encourages the "worker" to take "ownership" of the work (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994: 70).

Managers who transform organisations into something more participative always have to undergo a shift in their thinking about their staff members and themselves (Wheatley 1999: 6). This transforma-

tion encourages the sharing of responsibility and a leadership style capable of creating an interactive working environment (Sallis 1997: 78). Where leadership is shared, organisations can be more effective than where they are dominated by a single individual (Swift *et al* 1998: 82). If South African schools wish to follow the world-wide trend of democratising education and to succeed in practising participative management at the most basic level, it is important to acknowledge that efforts to reform and democratise are futile unless teachers are committed, trained, and empowered to participate in school management.

Devolving power to the school level does not necessarily increase the possibility of teacher empowerment if the locus of control and authority remains firmly in the hands of management. Teachers may well find their status and position unchanged. Therefore the leadership style of the education manager and his or her ability and willingness to share power will strongly influence staff empowerment. Education managers who feel threatened are power hungry and often have an autocratic leadership style, which is not reconcilable with empowerment. Empowerment requires leaders with a strong sense of direction, confidence and a willingness to become an equal and a facilitator in the decision-making process.

The literature reveals that teachers can become saturated with decisional involvement and that those decisions not related to educational matters are inappropriate for their involvement (Midgley & Wood, 1993: 251). Education managers should be aware of these subtleties and incorporate them into attempts to build a collegial structure. Schools would be ill advised to embrace empowerment if staff members are disinclined to share leadership with education managers or if they are unfamiliar with group processes, problem-solving methods or the particular issue under discussion.

Managers often assume that staff members already have the skills needed to succeed in an empowered environment (Dover 1999: 53). The time, effort and expense required to train staff members are reasons why managers are hesitant to close the skills gap. On the other hand, many managers encourage staff involvement, but few of them adopt specific practices to bring this about, such as reliance on teams of staff to identify and resolve specific operating problems (Lewis

1993: 25). Furthermore, where teams are used, few managers delegate the necessary authority, make sufficient changes or provide successful training (Lewis 1993: 26). Shen's (1998) study on teacher empowerment in the United States indicates that teachers do not perceive an increase in their own empowerment, which remains confined primarily to the classroom. By contrast, principals perceive an increase in teacher empowerment over the years (Shen 1998: 36).

This article attempts to address the following question: How can an empowered school environment be created? Subsidiary questions which emerge are: What is staff empowerment? What are the strategies for and steps towards staff empowerment? What are the pitfalls of staff empowerment? What is the role of empowered teams?

1. Staff empowerment: a paradigm for leadership

Staff empowerment has become a managerial buzzword, evoking images of positive commitment and meaningful participation in the workplace (Lezotte 1992: 67). There would seem to be much wisdom in broadening meaningful participation in an institution's decision-making process (Calabrese *et al* 1996: 556). When empowerment is implemented effectively, it

- serves as an energising tool, motivating staff to be open, creative and innovative in order to achieve the school's goals and objectives (Arcaro 1995: 14; Kalbaugh 1998: 43; Robinson 1998: 4);
- leads to greater control and authority over how work is done, which increases staff satisfaction and morale due to a more positive orientation towards work roles (Sabo *et al* 1996: 581; Blase & Blase 1997: 140; Jones 1997: 80; Kalbaugh 1998: 43; Coppersmith & Grubbs 1998: 11; Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 58; Korukonda *et al* 1999: 30). Staff members have higher levels of performance when they feel a sense of autonomy in the workplace (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan 1998: 463; Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 62);
- has been associated with productivity at both the team and the individual levels (Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 62);
- can increase self-control, which is as important as management control and creates problem-solving skills (Korukonda *et al* 1999: 29);

- has the ability to transform moribund schools into vital ones by creating a shared purpose among staff members, encouraging greater co-operation and delivering enhanced value to learners and parents (Lewis 1993: 12; Guaspari 1999: 64; Dover 1999: 51);
- can lead to the discovery of creative solutions to divergent issues by means of group synergy (Lewis 1993: 51; Goetsch & Davis 1995: 67; Frazier 1997: 24). Since empowerment is an interactive process, the principle of empowerment should be equated with the law of synergy (Lewis 1993: 51). Group synergy is the power of two or more people to attain a goal greater than either is capable of achieving alone;
- has the potential to save management time, develop people, assign responsibilities, build trust and influence, and expand the manager's scope (Sabo *et al* 1996: 581; Matjeka *et al* 1999: 14; Edgeman & Dahlgaard 1998: 78);
- may improve the quality of delivery by providing better information and delegating authority to non-managerial staff so that they can perform their tasks more effectively (Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 43; Korukonda *et al* 1999: 30), and
- may lead to organisational commitment. The restaurant chain Steers (Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 6) found that work-related experiences and perceptions, rather than personal, job or organisational factors, were the most powerful predictors of organisational commitment (Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 63). Therefore, a staff member's experience of empowerment may account for more variances in his or her organisational commitment than more objective organisational characteristics (Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 63).

Helping staff to feel empowered and enabling them to develop a sense of pride and ownership in their work and in the school creates a staff which is optimistic, involved, committed, able to cope with diversity and willing to perform independently and responsibly (Lewis 1993: 12; Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan 1998: 464; Tracy 1998: 13). When the energies and talents of all staff are engaged in pursuit of a school's goals, amazing results can be achieved.

Mobilising staff with a sense of proficiency can be achieved by creating a school environment that avoids behaviours which encou-

rage staff isolation (Downey *et al* 1994: 93). This implies that the creation of truly high-performance staff requires the dismantling of barriers to interdependence.

It might appear that principals are relinquishing a good degree of overt formal control through staff empowerment. Indeed, many of them approach empowerment with the assumption that when power is shared, power is lost (Lewis 1993: 51; Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 60). Such principals are too accustomed to wielding authority and tend to measure their value in terms of the authority they exercise, which explains why they view empowerment as a threat (Avery 1999: 36; Covey 1999: 3; Dover 1999: 51). What actually happens when they empower staff is that they might regain even more effective, authentic control over their functions than they had before (Foegan 1998: 5).

Perceptions of loss of authority in organisations and in schools in particular can lead to a "tug-of-war" between principals and staff, unless a new basis for educational authority is found and justified (Calabrese *et al* 1996: 558; Ericson & Marlow 1996: 125). According to Ericson & Marlow (1996: 126), educational authority has to be rooted in the ideals and commitments of the activities of educators themselves. In this regard they refer to the professional obligation of staff and principals to care for and be concerned about the learning of students, and to the commitment to the ideals and standards of excellence. Such a perspective on authority in education does not separate the roles of staff and principals in the manner of traditional bureaucratic understanding (Ericson & Marlow 1996: 127). Demands in schools, however, require a different focus on the understanding of educational authority at different levels and different times by various individuals. Someone has to be concerned about the "bigger picture" in schools while someone else must be entrusted with the educational growth of students in classrooms (Ericson & Marlow 1996: 127; Coppersmith & Grubbs 1998: 10). However, the excellent teacher, like the excellent principal, is necessarily in a position to take an expansive view of the school's vision, its organisation, its curriculum and its broader community understanding (Ericson & Marlow 1996: 137).

In order to understand this leadership paradigm it is necessary to analyse the concept of "staff empowerment".

2. What is staff empowerment?

Staff empowerment is based on the assumption that people want to feel good about and proud of what they are doing (Frazier 1997: 20). Empowerment also assumes that a school's leadership recognises the contribution made by staff, and honours the power required to ensure both viability and full participation by everyone in the school (Downey *et al* 1994: 94; Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 41; Porter-O'Grady 1998: 5). Since empowerment can be seen from several perspectives, no single definition can do justice to its meaning. To explain the concept, certain authoritative views of organisational and school theorists will be presented.

- Empowerment is the fundamental, voluntary "transfer" of authority and ownership of a task within an enabling environment. It includes the process whereby staff are entrusted with the power (authority) to make decisions and take actions regarding assigned tasks, as well as the staff's involvement in creating the means of maintaining a productive and satisfying work environment and their involvement in daily problem-solving and decision-making (Herman & Herman 1993: 263; Frazier 1997: 22; Moon & Swaffin-Smith 1998: 302; Matjeka *et al* 1999: 15). In other words, empowerment means that traditional and non-traditional decision-making opportunities are given to people or groups who in the past did not have the authority to make such decisions. Empowerment also implies the understanding that decision-making involves responsibility for one's actions and decisions (Frazier 1997: 20; Smialek 1998: 70).
- Empowerment of staff is not an interaction whereby A gets power from B,

  > but a transaction in which A provides opportunities for B to use power, while B takes it upon himself or herself to take power; however, power resides in neither A nor B, but in the complexity of actions involved in power itself (Maxcy 1991: 148).

- Empowerment is not complete freedom to behave just as an individual or team likes (Heaton 1998: 80). Rather, it implies a tough-minded respect for individual staff members and the willingness to train them, to set reasonable and clear expectations for

them and to grant them the autonomy contribute meaningfully and directly to their work.

- Empowerment means recognising the power that already exists in a role and allowing or expecting a person to express it (Porter-O'Grady 1998: 5).

Burdett (Moon & Swaffin-Smith 1998: 302) acknowledges that the empowered staff member must have authority, responsibility, accountability, skills, experience, understanding of task requirements, motivation, confidence and a willing attitude. The environment must also enhance the transfer of ownership.

The above views make it clear that empowerment is the expression of trust between partners who are committed to a process (Sabo *et al* 1996: 596; Goetsch & Davis 1995: 78; Porter-O'Grady 1998: 5). Managers who do not trust staff members will be less likely to empower them (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994: 68; Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 60). Trust is usually accomplished in giving praise and approval and avoiding threat and punishment (Blase & Blase 1997: 140; Timperley & Robinson 1998: 615; Tracy 1998: 13).

In an increasingly democratising global environment, staff members are no longer willing to work in authoritarian schools and want to be involved and/or consulted (Jones 1997: 80; Herman & Gioia 1998: 25). When one considers the amount of time staff spend in schools, it is small wonder they want opportunities to contribute to the school and to be valued as individuals with goals and aspirations (Herman & Gioia 1998: 25). However, Lezotte (1992: 67) and Coppersmith & Grubbs (1998: 11) hold an opposing view, believing that many staff members do not want to be empowered and that they may even resist the invitation to empowerment. They fear that if they take responsibility for their own actions, they will be sanctioned; that management is not serious about power-sharing, and that empowering staff is simply a way to trick them into doing more work for the same salary (Lezotte 1992: 67; Hitchcock & Willard 1995: 27). This indicates that staff empowerment is a complex issue and not to be haphazardly implemented.

2.1 The empowerment matrix

Staff empowerment is unfortunately often confused with task allocation and distribution allocation (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 14). It therefore needs careful application, clear goals and accountable standards as well as training and coaching to make it successful (Kalbaugh 1998: 43 Hellinghausen & Myers 1998: 23; Matjeka *et al* 1999: 14, 15).

The empowerment matrix can assist school managers to understand the various ways of allocating work (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 14). In Figure 1 "empowerment" carries the full understanding and effect of thinking and acting on one's own within set boundaries (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 15). The other quadrants — developing, dumping and double-dumping — should not be thought of as "empowerment" but rather as the distribution of tasks (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 15). The empowerment matrix uses two key factors to create four different strategies:

- the importance of the activity
- the completeness of authority/responsibility.

Figure 1: The empowerment matrix (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 15)

Authority/Responsibility	Four basic strategies to assign activities	
You take care of it	Empowerment	Dumping
Look into it and report back to me	Development	Double-dumping
	Important	Unimportant
	Importance of activity	

The four strategies for allocating tasks in the empowerment process are briefly outlined as follows.

2.1.1 The empowerment quadrant

Empowerment means entrusting staff members with the necessary power (authority) to decide and act upon a task that is considered to be important to the situation by both the school manager and the staff member (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 15).

Matjeka *et al* (1999: 15) identify a number of purposes of the empowerment process:

- to approach real problems with realistic solutions. It is often assumed that the people nearest to the problem will have the best solution (Lewis 1993: 12; Coppersmith & Grubbs 1998: 10);
- to provide development and challenges for staff members (Herman & Gioia 1998: 26);
- to devolve decision-making within well-understood and defined limits.

2.1.2 The dumping quadrant

Dumping means giving staff members meaningless tasks to do and allowing them to make decisions while managers still retain the meaningful activities (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 15). Managers often call this empowerment because empowerment sounds noble and they think that staff will not know the difference. Although it is necessary for principals to be relieved of some of their activities, staff may be insulted if principals give them insignificant tasks and then claim that they are empowering them.

2.1.3 The double-dumping quadrant

Double-dumping is the strategy that staff members dislike most (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 15). In this case school managers also assign insignificant tasks but still require staff members to report back for final approval.

2.1.4 The development strategy

In this strategy managers assign important tasks to staff members but require staff members to bring the information and the decision back to them for review or approval (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16). This strategy can be useful as long as school managers allow staff latitude for further development once they have acquired new competence.

Development is viewed as a middle ground between empowerment and dumping (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16). It is a safe zone for staff members to undergo new experiences and test their competence. It is important to remember, however. that once staff members have learnt, developed and become competent, they will desire additional challenges. If management will not allow this, development can become dumping.

Trust needs to be built into the empowerment process (Blase & Blase 1997: 140; Sabo *et al* 1996: 596; Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16). It binds people together, especially in uncertain times and environments (Herman & Gioia 1998: 25; Harari 1999: 29). Without trust there is no honest communication and the stated goals of empowering people and devolving authority will not be achieved (Smialek 1998: 70; Harari 1999: 29).

In summary, the way in which tasks are assigned and the perceived importance of empowerment will determine whether the manager is dumping, double-dumping, developing or empowering staff (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16). In addition to the various strategies, there are certain stages in the process of full empowerment.

2.2 Stages in the process of full empowerment

Hitchcock & Willard (1995: 41), Lezotte (1992: 67) and Coppersmith & Grubbs (1998: 11) believe that the mere fact that everyone in an organisation is capable of doing more does not mean that they are ready to do so. Managers and staff may be at different stages of readiness: their development involves five stages. Hitchcock & Willard (1995: 42-3) explain these stages as follows:

- The denial stage

  Managers who do things for staff or who keep information from their staff are in this stage of development, as are staff who do not confront managers on inappropriate behaviour (McDonald 1998: 28). If staff are to develop from this stage, they need to become more involved in the educational process by having managers share relevant information with them (Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 43; Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16).

- The testing stage

  Clear boundaries with specific guidelines have to be set and negotiated between school managers and staff (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 15).

- The participation stage

  In this stage staff are ready to participate in decision-making, but may lack the necessary skills or the confidence to make difficult decisions on their own (Coppersmith & Grubbs 1998: 10; Timperley & Robinson 1998: 627). Without the necessary skills, abi-

lities and knowledge staff can remain restricted and unable to attain higher levels of performance (Smialek 1998: 65).

- The responsible stage

  Staff in this stage may function well but may not be pro-active about influencing matters outside their control. They still need visionary direction from school managers.

- The empowered stage

  Staff feel so in control of their environment that they adapt it to suit them. In the empowered stage staff need more information about the school as well as the training required to function effectively (Kalbaugh 1998: 43; Hellinghausen & Myers 1998: 23; Matjeka *et al* 1999: 14, 15).

Despite the positive potential for the empowerment of staff in schools, many empowerment efforts fail due to structural flaws or problems with implementation.

3. Pitfalls of and preparation for staff empowerment

Empowerment works best when managers clearly understand the four distinctions in the empowerment matrix, and the stages towards in the process of staff empowerment, and honestly share information with staff members (Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 43; Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16). Mere understanding is unfortunately not enough. There are certain variables which need careful consideration when moving towards staff empowerment, including the following (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16; Robinson 1998: 4):

- the people concerned
- the school climate
- the resources, and
- leadership.

When applying empowerment strategies to various people and in different situations, one requires not only an understanding of the strategies, but also an awareness of people's competence, maturity, desire for responsibility, and authority (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16). As we already know, some staff members enjoy empowerment, some do

not want it, and yet others are burnt-out from previous empowerment. Staff expertise is another condition that may limit the effectiveness of empowerment in schools (Timperley & Robinson 1998: 615). Failing to recognise ignorance in dealing with certain problems can lead to ineffective problem-solving. In such cases it is necessary for staff to recognise the limitations of their own knowledge and to seek alternative expertise (Timperley & Robinson 1998: 615).

The school climate also needs to be carefully considered before any attempt to empower people (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16). If it is not conducive to empowerment, resistance will increase and hamper implementation. Moreover, resources are relevant: staff members might have all the skills, motivation and abilities required, but if the necessary tools and equipment are not available or up to standard, the expectations for success must be adjusted (Matjeka *et al* 1999: 16). This also implies providing the training necessary to equip people to handle empowerment effectively (Robinson 1998: 4; Heaton 1998: 79; Coppersmith & Grubbs 1998: 11; Oakland & Oakland 1998: 186; Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 43). According to Heaton (1998: 79), organisations cannot overtrain staff members. Training can, however, take place in such a way that it prevents staff members from effectively applying their knowledge and skills to the school. For example, empowering staff members to draw up timetables is futile if they are not given an understanding of the other systems which impact on timetables.

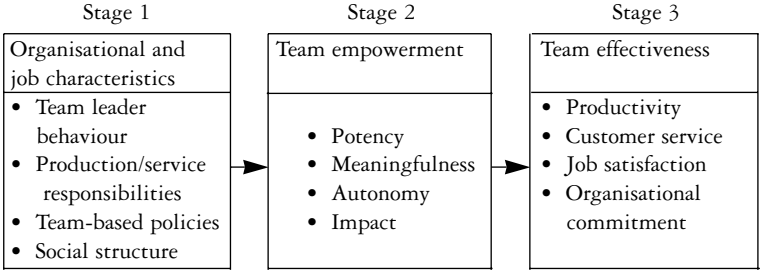
Empowerment without leadership would be chaotic (Robinson 1998: 4). Empowered staff need to have a clear view of the school's mission, its priorities and its values, and these have to be communicated effectively by its leaders (Lewis 1993: 138; Covey 1999: 4; Edgeman & Dahlgaard 1998: 76; Robinson 1998: 4). Avery (1999: 36) elaborates on this view by stating that successful leadership demands one ability above all others, that is, to be able to energise and organise staff members. Heaton (1998: 80) warns that the decision to empower staff members should not be taken lightly and that it must be implemented and sustained over a lengthy period of time. Staff empowerment in effect also includes team empowerment since the movement towards empowerment requires the dismantling of any barriers to interdependence (Downey *et al* 1994: 93).

4. Team empowerment

Effective teams play an essential role in quality management (Arcaro 1995: 111; Frazier 1997: 25). This is based on McGregor's Theory Y assumption that the ability to make decisions is widely distributed among staff members regardless of their position in the hierarchy (Korukonda *et al* 1999: 29). It is also assumed that working in teams provides a mechanism for satisfying the needs of staff members and for providing synergy and loyalty in organisations (Edgeman & Dahlgaard 1998: s76; Korukonda *et al* 1999: 29).

It is well documented that empowered teams can improve quality, efficiency, creativity, motivation and job satisfaction in all organisations, including schools (Lewis 1993: 12; Kalbaugh 1998: 43; Coppersmith & Grubbs 1998: 10; Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 41; Swift *et al* 1998: 82). Organisations traditionally used hierarchical communication channels to disseminate decisions. This usually took some time and could cause some distortion of the message along the chain (Coppersmith & Grubbs 1998: 10). Figure 2 explains Kirkman & Rosen (1999: 63)'s alternative model of team empowerment. This model includes a three-stage process in which managers take action in stage one (inputs), their actions influence staff members' experiences in stage two (process), and important outcomes result from positive staff orientation towards work in stage three (outputs).

Figure 2: Model of team empowerment (Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 63)



In theory it is quite easy to use the concept of a "team" to describe groups in the workplace, but creating truly empowered teams is more complex and requires management to have the insight and confidence that staff can run the organisation (Edgeman & Dahlgaard 1998: 75;

Hellinghausen & Myers 1998: 21). The goal of team empowerment is to enable team members to work towards a common objective, complementing each other with their knowledge, skills and experience (Goetsch & Davis 1995: 67).

To keep abreast with development and changes in the environment, efficient teamwork is indispensable (Mortgage Banking 1998: 102). For teams to be effective, the following criteria have to be borne in mind (Goetsch & Davis 1995: 78; Sallis 1997: 84; Mortgage Banking 1998: 102; Avery 1999: 40):

- the roles of team members need to be clearly defined;
- teams need clear, common objectives which have to be communicated to participants. This helps staff not to have unrealistic expectations and it attunes them to learning opportunities;
- trust and honesty are critical values in team-building;
- teams require a shared commitment to achieving their agreed outcomes;
- teams need to know their accountability and the limits of their authority, and
- teams require beneficial team behaviour.

Kirkman & Rosen (1999: 59) have developed a theoretical model of empowered teams. According to this model (Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 59), team empowerment has four related but independent dimensions: potency, meaningfulness, autonomy and impact.

- Potency, which resembles the individual-level empowerment construct of competence or self-efficacy, is the collective assumption of the effectiveness of a team. Potency differs from competence in the following ways: competence refers to an individual's performance and potency to a team's performance; competence experiences are private whereas potency experiences develop collectively, and competence relates to specific task performance while potency refers to generalised effectiveness.
- Meaningfulness, which parallels meaningfulness at the individual level, refers to the team members' experience of their task as important, valuable and worthwhile. Since team members collectively develop and share the meaningfulness of tasks, they have a

direct impact on each other's experiences of meaningfulness.

- Autonomy corresponds to empowerment at the individual level of analysis and refers to the degree to which team members experience significant freedom, independence and discretion in their work. Teams make and execute important decisions. This implies that high levels of team autonomy may actually decrease individual autonomy because important decision-making is shared rather than carried out alone while responsibility is shared rather than granted to an individual (Timperley & Robinson 1998: 615; Dover 1999: 53).
- Impact, corresponding to impact at the individual level, refers to the team's production of work that is significant and important for the organisation. Both self-managing teams and empowered teams are autonomous, but members of empowered teams share a sense of doing meaningful work that advances organisational objectives (Dover 1999: 53).

When principals delegate responsibility, ask for staff input and enhance team's sense of control, team members are more likely to experience meaning, impact and autonomy in their work (Blase & Blase 1997: 140; Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 60). High expectations from school managers may help teams to complete challenging assignments and to strengthen their potency experiences (Lewis 1993: 54; Tracy 1998: 13; Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 60). Participative goal setting leads to better understanding of a task, which in turn enhances meaningfulness and the autonomy of team members (Kirkman & Rosen 1999: 60).

The establishment of an empowered team environment is not an easy task (Downey *et al* 1994: 92). It is often necessary to transform the management style and the school culture before the barriers to teamwork can be overcome. It may take years to develop high-performance teams (Coppersmith & Grubbs 1998: 10). In order to establish empowered teams, schools need to provide staff at all levels with training in group dynamics, such as how to work actively in a group, cope with personality differences, develop interpersonal relationships, communication skills and respect for differences in perspective, and to reach decisions through consensus (Lewis 1993: 268). The necessary teamwork skills include constructive, open, positive discussion, a desire to work

together, full participation, professional behaviour, a willingness to listen to all contributors, a systematic approach to problem identification and solution, and co-operation and consensus rather than conflict and competition (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994: 75; Goetsch & Davis 1995: 70).

With the necessary background concerning staff empowerment and team empowerment, it becomes possible to apply this knowledge and see how an empowered environment can be designed through the creation of meaningful work.

5. Creating meaningful work in schools

If the work of schools is to be made meaningful it needs to be redesigned (Herman & Gioia 1998: 25) in the following ways:

5.1 A valued part of the whole

Routine, repetitive work can destroy motivation and productivity (Herman & Gioia 1998: 26). Staff members want to know that their work is important as well as how it fits into the school's strategy. This implies that schools must share more information with staff (Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 43). Staff want to be responsible for results and they require information to enable them to live up to this responsibility (Tracy 1998: 13; Herman & Gioia 1998: 25). An increased sense of responsibility stimulates initiative and effort on the part of everybody involved (Pfeffer & Veiga 1999: 41). Every staff member's contribution to performance improvement also needs to be valued and encouraged (Robinson 1998: 4).

5.2 Making an impact

Staff members do not only have to know how their work influences other staff and the school as a whole, but how they as individuals can make an impact (Herman & Gioia 1998: 25). They are the people actively involved in processes and activities on a daily basis and will best know how to improve them. Staff members who are valued as individuals will contribute their knowledge enthusiastically (Herman & Gioia 1998: 25; Covey 1999: 3). There is much to be gained

by expecting staff members to contribute to the full within set boundaries (Robinson 1998: 4).

5.3 Responsibility for outcomes

Giving staff members the authority to make decisions will increase the meaningfulness of their work (Herman & Gioia 1998: 25). If they are allowed to recommend and implement decisions, they will be able to appreciate their influence on the school. Mutual trust and open communication are indispensable if such an exchange is to be successful (Oakland & Oakland 1998: 187; Spitzer 1999: 13; Wheatley 1999: 6). Schools have to trust staff members' ability to make the right decisions, while staff members must know that it is safe to risk decisions which might be wrong (Blase & Blase 1997: 140; Robinson 1998: 4). This process clearly acknowledges accountability (Herman & Gioia 1998: 25).

5.4 Team effort

Teams connect the individuals within groups and the entire school. Although individual staff members play a crucial role, every staff member is expected to support everyone else in their teams (Herman & Gioia 1998: 26). They are interdependent and rely on each other's skills (Kalbaugh 1998: 43). They also need to understand how their behaviour and their work influence those of other staff members.

5.5 Personal and professional growth

Staff members want to develop meaningful career paths. This requires opportunities to learn as well as an increase in their responsibility and implementation of solutions (Herman & Gioia 1998: 26). They would like to attempt new and challenging kinds of work, to grow and to expand their abilities (Herman & Gioia 1998: 26). If such opportunities are not offered, they may leave the school or even the profession.

6. Conclusion

School principals who transform schools into more participative and empowering organisations undergo a profound shift in their roles and their relationships with staff. This transformation implies the implementation of staff empowerment in schools. Staff empowerment is viewed as the effective application of understanding, enabling and encouraging staff members with a view to constant improvement in all processes aimed at attaining quality in schools. When empowered staff members are grouped into empowered teams, they can use their diverse experiences, knowledge, skills and perspectives to accomplish large and important goals for the school. For staff empowerment to succeed, it must be developed with the specific goal of creating a professional work environment for staff.

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