

LEADERSHIP IN EVOLUTIONARY ORGANISATIONS



Beyond
empowerment

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Empowerment. A search on Harvard Business Review brings you almost two thousand results offering a multitude of ways to empower the workforce, offering up empowerment as one of the key enablers for organisations to become agile, self-managing and fit for the future.

Yes, we need to find better ways to collaborate in order to solve the greatest challenges that we face, and breaking down the bottlenecks of bureaucracy will be critical in doing that. However, our current “how to” on empowerment is built upon a foundation of the “empower-er” underestimating their subordinates, placing boundaries on the potential of others and ultimately ensuring not to give away too much power. **If we are looking to empowerment to distribute power in the organisation, it can only disappoint.**

When reading best practice on how to empower, it becomes clear that our current approach to empowerment

speaks almost entirely to what the empower-er needs to do to the empower-ee. The advice addresses the fears of the empower-er that the empower-ee will not be clever enough, might not be able to think for themselves and that they will go “too wild”. The articles consequentially recommend patronising solutions such as “being available less often” and “teaching people to think for themselves”.

If we want to change the balance of power in our organisations to become self-managed and to give ourselves a better chance to solve the most important challenges we face, then we must turn our attention from the empower-ee to the empower-er,

we must try to understand the root of the fears that drive our behaviour, and we must each begin to change our actions.

Are you an empower-er? Yes, if you work with colleagues, ever have to give away tasks, have been given tasks, have gotten annoyed about someone else getting the credit for something, lead a team or take part in a team. I would say most of us have the power to do better than we have been doing when it comes to empowering others.

My fears are limiting your potential

So, let us turn our attention from the empower-ee to the empower-er. Empowering others means letting go of control, and that, for many of us, can be a pretty scary thing to do. Here is a set of fears listed in a Harvard Business Review article “How to Give Your Team the Right Amount of Autonomy” by Deborah Ancona and Kate Isaacs:

- Fear that people will go off in too many directions – that they won’t be aligned with strategic priorities.
- Fear that throwing out bureaucratic rules will mean that people don’t know how to make decisions.
- Fear that freedom to innovate will result in too many poor-quality initiatives and take resources away from the best ideas.
- Fear that there will be too many risky ventures without multiple levels of oversight.

The article lays out a number of guardrails you can put in place to address these fears, to protect the empower-er, and they are great if you do not actually want to give away power. Just as the picture used in the article shows (below), it is all about making sure that appropriately sized cages are in place. I wonder how big those balloons might grow and where they might fly if they were not caged in.

In a typical hierarchical organisation, these fears make sense. If the people that

I empower go off in too many directions, do not know how to make decisions, take resources away from other ideas or take too many risks, the result is that I, the empower-er, will look bad. The reputation and respect that I have spent time and effort building will be ruined.

Not only is there a risk that the empower-ees get it wrong, but there is also a risk that they get it too right. If it turns out that they do an exceptional job, they might look better than me – and how might that look to my superiors? What if my subordinates’ reputation surpasses my own? Will I still be needed?

A friend of mine works for a large pharmaceutical company where the organisation is currently rolling out an agile way of working. She works as a manager and had succeeded in helping her team to become self-managing. She was terrified to tell her boss of her success because she had literally just succeeded in writing herself out of her previous role. She fears losing her job.

In all hierarchical organisations, empowering – truly giving away power – is a losing game, which is why we need those cages to keep us safe.

Although these fears make sense for the sake of protecting ourselves in our current hierarchical way of working, they also hold us back from what we could achieve if we stopped building cages. From climate change to global pandemics and beyond, the most significant challenges we face require another level of collaboration. If we want to collaborate rather than build cages, we all need to grab hold of those fears, look them in the face and decide to take a different course of action.

How to get started? Let us begin by reconsidering our relationship with power.

A new relationship with power: a relationship with new power

The fears listed above exist in a world where power grows as you ascend the organisational chart, and you do what you can to keep it that way. A world where



there is a finite amount of power, and we must each protect the share of it that we have earned. However, there is an alternative way to think about power; Heimans and Timms, authors of the book **“New Power”**, describe the key differences between “old” and “new” power:



Old power works like a currency. It is held by few. Once gained, it is jealously guarded, and the powerful have a substantial store of it to spend. It is closed, inaccessible, and leader-driven. It downloads, and it captures.”

“New power operates differently, like a current. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven. It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it’s most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it.”

These are social constructs: our thoughts and choices about the way we interact with each other (our culture) can influence our reality. If we begin to change our view, then our structures must adapt accordingly.

The definitions above can be used to examine our own behaviours. What does your behaviour say about you? Who do you want to be?

- Do you often feel like a bottleneck in your work and projects? Or do you feel shoulder to shoulder with your colleagues at the front line of the challenge you are tackling?
- Are you fearful that others will get credit for something that you have initiated? Or do you celebrate your colleagues for finding solutions that you were not able to find?

If we want to change our conversations, the way we work together and the way we organise ourselves, each of us must become aware of our “old power” behaviours, evaluate if those actions amount to who we want to be and begin to react differently to the triggers we are faced with on a day-to-day basis.

What makes this difficult is that these

“old power” behaviours, and the fears that motivate them, have become our default setting. It may, therefore, take some effort to recognise what that setting looks like for you.

Get to know your power triggers and behaviours

Before going any further, we need to get a better understanding of fear and how fear is processed by our brains. Our brains are wired to identify dangerous situations, instil a feeling of fear in our bodies and allow us to respond to the situation without us even having to consciously think about it. This is very helpful when encountering a lion in the Serengeti: see the lion, feel fear of death, cortisol is released to heighten senses, fight/flight/freeze response to get out of danger, return to equilibrium when back to safety. Thank you, primitive brain.

This auto-pilot response to fear works less well for the challenges and uncertainties of our working world: I need to empower someone else to do this task, I fear I will no longer be a valued part of the tribe if I do not personally find the solution to this problem and get all the credit, cortisol is released to heighten senses, fight/flight/freeze response, still worried that I will not be valued, cortisol main-

tained, fight/flight/freeze response, still worried ... See where I am going with this? We enter a state of long-term heightened cortisol (stress), and our primitive brain continues to call the shots: it is tiring, it is emotionally draining, and it is neither sustainable nor an effective use of our time.

When experiencing fear-driven behaviour in a non-life-threatening situation, like at work, we need to learn how to switch that auto-pilot fear response off. In neuro-scientific terms, we want to switch from the sympathetic nervous system to the parasympathetic nervous system. The consequence of doing so will allow us to break the fear cycle and decrease cortisol being pumped into our system – and most importantly: it will enable our prefrontal cortex, the most evolved part of our brain,

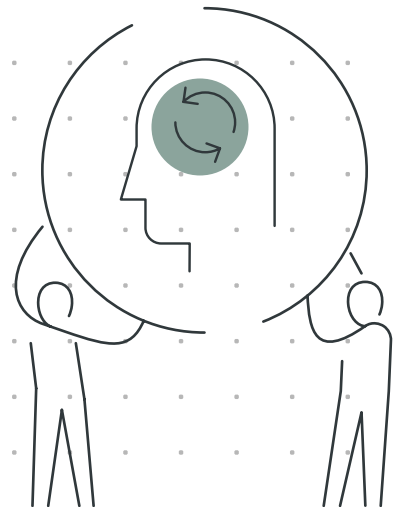
to decide which action would be best to take.

How to intervene?

Discover your patterns

We often do not even realise that we are going into survival mode and that our sympathetic nervous system has taken charge. We need to begin to recognise how it feels to be in that mode if we want to have half a chance of intervening. Think back to last time your actions were being driven by fear:

- How does your body physically feel?
- What feelings do you experience?
- How do your thoughts sound?
- How are other people responding differently to you?



Here is how the pattern looks for me:

Two months before going on maternity leave, I needed to hand over responsibility for a large programme that I had been running and empower a colleague to lead it instead. I knew I had to do it, but I did not want to.

It felt as though there was a ball of energy in the centre of my body, just at the base of my ribs – it was turning and gaining momentum. It felt as though my heart was sinking. And my stomach felt constricted and low.

This is how my body feels when I feel like I am losing control.

I felt defensive, like I wanted to protect my ground. I felt irritable and would snap at my partner for the slightest of comments. And I felt anger at how unfair this situation was. Leading this programme had given me respect from colleagues and clients, and by successfully filling this role, I felt valuable and fulfilled – I had built up power and influence, and I even felt powerful. And now, I am being forced to put all that at risk!

Defensive, irritable, angry—this is what I feel when I feel threatened.

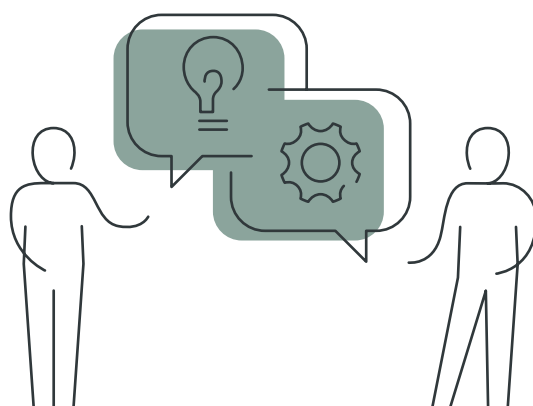
Anxious thoughts ran through my mind: “My colleague won’t do this the way I did it, it won’t be as good ...”; “Maybe he’ll do really well, then they won’t need me anymore”; “This is so unfair” and my inner drama-queen repeating “They will probably all forget about me”.

Self-righteousness leading into down-talking myself followed by painting myself as the helpless victim, this is what my self-talk looks like when I am scared.

To be honest, I cannot remember how others were responding to me – I was too self-absorbed to notice (I am working on that one).

With my primitive brain at the helm, did I want to hoard the power that I had built up? Most definitely. Did I want to empower my colleague to succeed in taking over my tasks (and get the credit for them too)? Absolutely not. My thoughts and actions show that I was operating, and being driven, by fear and old power.

But is that really the person that I want to be? When I begin to recognise these physical responses, feelings and self-talk, I give myself the chance to change what happens next. A point of reflection enables me to switch on the evolved part of my brain and let that part of my brain guide my behaviour.



Get back in the driver’s seat

What to do when you have noticed that you are being taken over by fear? Ask yourself a reframing question and connect with your values.

For me, the reframing question is: “Who do I want to be?” Do I want to be the person who runs around stressed, acting selfishly and not giving our team the best chance for growth? Or do I want to be the person who is calm, focuses on the bigger problem that we hope to solve and considers what is best for the team?

Having outlined a set of personal values gives even more clarity in answering that same question: “Who do I want to be?”

With my maternity leave approaching, I continued to procrastinate on empowering my colleague until I noticed the stress in my body and realised that I was in full-on, red alert fear mode. I paused and I asked myself: “Who do I want to be?” My top values are love, caring and integrity to my purpose. Would a loving person trust their colleague to do their best? Would a caring person put the success of the team above their own struggle? If I connect with my purpose, can I let go of this fear? It became clear what I needed to do.

I was able to reframe the situation so that giving away this task became more of a positive than a negative: “My colleague will do this his way, he’s a really talented person so I trust the outcome will be great”, “If I let go, then other opportunities will arise for me to grow even more” and “The success of this role is not the same as my success as a person.” I was free of the limitations that I had placed on both myself and those around me.

In the moment when we have asked ourselves that reframing question, we have switched the tracks from the sympathetic to the parasympathetic nervous system, and a whole new set of actions can follow. If we want to be a person who operates in a world of “new power”, then we need to take on our fear-driven behaviour, let go of control and trust the intelligence of those around us. A mine-

field of self-interventions awaits us, and it will be tough, but it will be worth it for what we can achieve together.

Taking a moment to connect with your values allows you to choose the direction of your next step. (Photo by Conner Bowe on Unsplash)

Saying that we will empower others is easy (telling someone else to empower others is even easier), but actually doing it is really hard. Choosing to distribute power rather than hoard it is a choice that we each individually have the possibility to make. Following through on that choice will take an honest look in the mirror, getting to know how we feel when we are triggered and intervening with a question to change the sequence of events that follows.

Only then will empowerment become a tool that we can use to break down bureaucracy, allow power to channel and spread and enable a new level of collab-

oration in tackling the most pressing challenges that we face.

Let us discuss! I would love to hear your thoughts and experiences when it comes to empowerment and its role in making our organisations more fit for humans and more fit for the future.



F-E-A-R: HAS TWO MEANINGS: FORGET EVERYTHING AND RUN OR FACE EVERYTHING AND RISE. THE CHOICE IS YOURS.”

— ZIG ZIGLAR

FAST FACTS ABOUT IMPLEMENT

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