

Perfect in Power

Phil Hanson suggests that the idea of leadership through care and growth is just as upside-down and counter-cultural as anything in the Sermon on the Mount. Empowerment is about creating a culture in which people understand the vision and willingly take on responsibilities with the freedom to do it their way. Business life is full of behaviours that contradict these ideas. High on the list is micro-management along with the culture of fear and the practice of appearing to give away responsibility but then intervening and dabbling.

These thoughts had their origin at the 2023 Faith in Business Retreat in Cambridge. Geraldine Latty was leading worship, and we were singing Holy, Holy, Holy.

*Only thou art holy;
there is none beside thee,
perfect in power, in love, and purity.*

In that worship moment, I was struck with the idea of a God who is perfect in power. The familiar words of Lord Acton, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" were expressed in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887. Absolute monarchies are those in which all power is given to, or more often taken by, the monarch. For example, the Roman emperors declared themselves gods.

In the Lord's prayer we affirm, "yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory". We are giving thanks to the only King who isn't corrupted by power.

This picture suddenly started to come alive to me and triggered a series of recollections of business experiences that have shaped my understanding of empowerment.

I recall being delighted when I was offered my first management position in the large company I had joined a few years earlier. I was invited to a sort of "rite of passage" moment which involved a meeting with the Divisional Director.

This is what I remember of what he said to me:

I want you to stretch and grow all the people in your team and then move the best ones out at the top. Your job is to get them promoted, not to hold on to them. This company needs the best people in the most important jobs. I especially don't want you to do what some of your colleagues do which is to hold on to the best ones and try to get rid of the others. They seem to think this is a game of pass-the-parcel! You are there to use your position to remove the obstacles that your team members encounter. In other words, you need to work for them. Whatever you do don't let me catch you trying to take the credit for what your team members have achieved. You don't need to worry about your own career. If you make a success of looking after this team, in the way I am asking, then I will trust you with a bigger team.

One of the reasons I remember it so well is because, by the time it was my privilege to appoint new managers, I had become completely convinced of the merits of this approach and I used pretty much the same speech. By then I had worked out that the Divisional Director who first put these thoughts in my head was a Christian. It was while listening to a sermon on Philippians 2 that it later dawned on me, however, that he might not be the real originator of these ideas. They are an echo of St Paul's words on humility which were specifically addressed to a strand of the Philippian church that was inclined to rivalry and vanity:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2: 3-4)

A leader's role is to create an atmosphere of trust and encouragement in which people enthusiastically want to take responsibility. There is a huge difference between delegation (giving people tasks to do and being prescriptive about how they are done) and empowerment (creating a culture in which people understand the vision, willingly take on responsibilities and undertake their role with the freedom to do it their way). When we use the expression "to empower people" it shouldn't be a synonym for delegation; it should mean making it possible for people to grow by trusting them with whole areas of responsibility. A job is motivating when it feels like a complete business with inputs, outputs and opportunities for improvement. In this way of working, leaders take a vicarious satisfaction in the accomplishments of subordinates.

Despite my best attempts to embrace these thoughts, one of my most able team members came to me one day to explain that whilst he was unquestionably very busy, he didn't feel "stretched". My vision of empowerment evidently wasn't working.

Etsko Schuitema offers a robust justification for genuine empowerment.¹ His philosophy was forged in the tough



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Etsko Schuitema: giving away power Photo: Schuitema Group

context of the mining industry in South Africa during the apartheid years. At the heart of his approach is the idea that we work best when we actually want to, not when we are driven by either stick or carrot (i.e. appealing to fear or greed). What we are here calling a culture of empowerment, Etsko describes as leaders giving care to and enabling growth in their people. All the characteristics we might value in a good boss can be embraced in these two attributes. Care and growth, he argues, are the essential criteria of legitimate power in a superior-subordinate relationship. In other words, any relationship of power is legitimate if the aim of that relationship is the empowerment of the subordinate. Put another way, we will willingly work for the boss who genuinely cares and invests in our development. Any other approach invites one or other form of push-back against authority.

Etsko goes on to argue that empowerment is about the incremental suspension of control. In that way it has a strong parallel with parenting which is also about gradual and incremental suspension of control as a child grows and develops.

This isn't only about the way business leaders behave. It implies, for example, flatter organisation structures. Whilst all this may sound rather "soft", Etsko makes clear that to work this way requires both generosity and courage. This isn't about managers doing things to make themselves popular with their subordinates. It doesn't take away the tough decisions that leaders need to make. There is an old adage that leaders should be "ruthless in decision but compassionate in execution". This also offers another way of differentiating leadership from management: we lead people while we manage resources. When we call people "human resources" and manage them like processes and assets, we are a very long way from an empowering culture.

An important prerequisite to creating a culture in which people take empowerment is that they all share and buy into a common vision. If people are given degrees of freedom to operate on their own initiative without a clear sense of the big picture, the results will be confused and disconnected. Equally a shared vision without empowerment is likely to be little more than a dream. Shared vision and empowerment go hand-in-hand.

A central plank of Jesus' ministry was the sharing of the vision of the Kingdom of God. Parables start with the words, "The kingdom is like ...". Piecing these explanations and examples together builds a composite picture, enabling followers to understand and embrace the big picture. Like Jesus, business leaders may need to flesh out and reinforce the vision regularly and personally and even then, not everyone may fully understand it in exactly the same way. Interestingly, concerns about their grasp of the vision didn't deter Jesus in sending out the disciples, despite the apparent risk.

In giving away power we are doing exactly what Jesus did, "*And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal*"². Later we read, "*The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!'*"³ Jesus, then full of the Holy Spirit, shares that joy in a prayer of praise and thanks.⁴

Whilst my frame of reference for this is Biblical, Etsko interestingly comes from a Sufi Muslim background. The ideas of servant leadership can be embraced from more than one starting point.



As a young manager I once accompanied my Divisional Director on a visit to one of our regional offices. As we stepped out of the lift, he marched off purposefully in the opposite direction to the meeting room. It took me a moment to realise he was making use of the short time before the meeting to engage with as many people as possible. Each short conversation was contributing to the culture of empowerment.

Jeff Cox and William C Byham describe every encounter we have with another person as an opportunity to “zapp” them, leaving them energised and encouraged or to “sap” them, leaving them drained and discouraged. The authors describe zapp as the “lightening of empowerment”⁵.

Business life is full of behaviours that contradict these ideas. High on the list is micro-management. Often made easier by today’s IT solutions, this is about the centralisation and retention of power and control.

I recall bemoaning my experiences of exaggerated micro-management


with a colleague over lunch one day. He instantly quipped that he would be very happy to change places with me because he was experiencing “pico-management” (his attempt to describe even more intrusive interference). As any salesperson will tell you, people in senior positions in large companies often have surprisingly limited power and authority.

Results from researchers at Harvard and Penn State Universities, recently published in the American Journal of Public Health, showed that people with bosses who micromanage them are at higher risk of heart attacks and strokes. Health indicators improved after only 12 months when workplace freedoms were increased.⁶

Also common is the practice of appearing to give away responsibility but then intervening and dabbling. This amounts to grabbing back the responsibility. As well as being demotivating to employees, it creates ambiguity and uncertainty about where responsibility lies.

I have heard bosses argue that a small element of fear improves individuals’ performance. The more likely outcome is that people who are made to feel personally insecure will be prone to controlling behaviours. A culture of fear that starts at the top will thus cascade down through the organisation.

Many of these contradictory behaviours and inhibitors are perfectly plausible and understandable behaviours in a secular business. The idea of leadership through care and growth is just as upside-down and counter-cultural as anything in the Sermon on the Mount.

It is well understood that God’s blessings are given not for our own edification but to be used in the service of others. We are called to pass on unconditional love, forgiveness, grace and mercy into the lives of others. The more we give away, the more we receive. What is less immediately obvious is that when we are given power, it is to be passed on in much the same way. 

1. *Leadership: The Care and Growth Model*, Etsko Schuitema, Intent Publishing, 2022
2. Luke 9:1-2
3. Luke 10:17
4. Luke 10:17
5. *Zapp! The Lightning Of Empowerment*, Jeff Cox and William C Byham, 1991
6. ‘Employee Cardiometabolic Risk Following a Cluster-Randomized Workplace Intervention’, *Work, Family and Health Network 2009-2013*, Dr Lisa Berkman et al, American Journal of Public Health, November 08, 2023



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