

## **The implementation of an empowerment programme and appropriate restructuring at Fab Sweets. Discuss.**

*A management experiment.*

*3 ways of doing the washing up after dinner.*

- 1. I tell my flatmates: "I want you to do the washing up. First you wash the glasses, than you wash the dishes and cutlery, than the pots and pans. After that you dry everything and put it in the cupboards." I watch them working.*
- 2. I tell my flatmates: "Do the washing." Then I go and make myself comfortable on the couch.*
- 3. We are all equal. One does the washing, the next dries and the third puts the things away. We decide to rotate on a daily basis.*

*Which of these ways is the empowered way of cleaning up after dinner?*

*Think about it!*

In this essay I want to set the task of implementing an empowerment programme and restructuring Fab Sweets in a postmodern context. Clearly the essay must have the form of a discussion, as postmodernism encourages critical perspectives on management. Many questions will appear, some will be answered some will be not, because sometimes an unanswered question is more awakening than an answered one. It is **not** my purpose to identify all the smaller and bigger problems that Fab Sweets has and offer a consultancy style solution. I want to deal with the shady term of

empowerment when it is used in a context as Fab sweets. As from a postmodern view there is never one single answer to one question I can only deal with these answers that seem to be most important to **my** story about empowerment. The last sentence makes it obvious that postmodern philosophy has a subjective methodology, but as we deal with the soft side of the system in this essay this seems more than appropriate to me. The soft side refers to the humans involved in the case, humans who can do unpredictable things and who are not measurable in terms as machines are. Therefore a non-measurable subjectivist approach fits better than something that is a straight forward theory that looks nice on paper but cannot deal with unpredictable variety. Anyway, postmodernism offers some tools to deal with, I will approach empowerment by deconstructing it.

Deconstructing means putting two things on one level. Our language sees things always in relation to each other. We can define black by defining white. We would have no white without black, but in the way the speaker uses the words the relation of one to each other changes. You subordinate one term by subordinating the other. Honey is better than sugar. Honey is the superior term and sugar the subordinated term. Without wanting to make a judgement for the single words itself (the whole sentence is meant to be a judgement) we did. The word honey is not a better word than sugar or vice versa, but the way we put them makes them better or worse. As we assume empowerment as good, disempowerment must be evil or at least, less good. Empowerment and disempowerment have their origin both in power. For understanding anything about empowerment we must first understand power. Surprisingly in most of the common management books I looked, the term empowerment was explained but there was no word about disempowerment or the

origin of these two: Power. Maybe because managers have good associations with empowerment but not with power itself. You empower your employees and you are a hero of modern style management. Associations with power are bad. You have power over somebody. God has power over us. We could not stand this thought anymore and after Nietzsche killed god, we felt better, God is now dead, all His power came down to us. Hallelujah. "When ancient Greeks had a thought, it occurred to them as a god or goddess giving an order... Now people hear a commercial for sour cream potato chips and call this free will." (Palahniuk, Lullaby p. 20) Do you really still believe you actually **have** power? If we have no power over our own behaviour, how can we have power about anybody or anything else?

"You have too much to lose. I have nothing. You have everything" (Palahniuk, Fight Club p. 114)

In the novel Fight club the protagonist, anti hero, Tyler Durden worked in a cinema, just showing the movies. Nobody knew, that he exchanged in some movies original pictures with very rude ones. One day, he went to the boss and told him what he has done and offered not going to the newspapers for a certain amount of money. Just imagine what would happen when 1000s of mothers read that their children did not only watch Disney but also.... Porn?! The mighty boss was from one second to the other powerless. The author of the postmodern book Fight Club, C. Palahniuk understood power in the way of the classic theory by Foucault (p. 26):

"Power is exercised rather than possessed."

Power is often confused with things we possess or with positions we have. And that makes us victims in “the war everybody against everybody” (Fink-Eitel p. 88). At the moment somebody you perceive as “powerless” (because he or she is an unskilled worker or has no titles, no possessions) and this person notices that power is exercised and not possessed you are the powerless one. A lot of serial killers experience that. Usually they are nice, normal, harm- and powerless neighbours until they exercise power over life and death. Power is a complex, paradox force that is inherent in everything. Everything **is** power.

Everything I have written up to now leads to the question is, how can you give somebody something that cannot be possessed?

In organisation studies the term empowerment is often used as a synonym for participation. In that case you implement a strategy to give the workers the opportunity to take part in decisions. This participation can have different stages as it is shown in Operations Management by N. Stack (p. 289). The lowest stage would be suggestion involvement, id est the workers contribute their proposals for how operations might be improved, but at least they do not have the autonomy to implement the suggested changes to their jobs themselves. The next stage is job involvement where the workers are allowed to redesign their jobs. The final stage is high involvement, “including all staff in the strategic direction and performance of the whole organisation” (ibid.), which is called the most radical type of empowerment. Management literature offers a lot of benefits of a possible empowerment programme, implemented in Fab Sweets. (Who do you think really benefits if a company in a capitalist society implements new strategies?)

In the group work concerning Fab Sweets we discovered that all problems go back to one main issue. Communication. In some parts of Fab there is too much of it, in other parts too less. In the too much category you can clearly put the struggle between the supervisors as well as the one between the engineers and the managers. Instead of looking for a creative solution to the problem of old machinery they go on and on accusing each other. The major part is the too less communication, where you can put all interpersonal problems, low job satisfaction of everybody (high level of labour turnover, instead of saying anything, people go or are fired) as well as the problem of the whole organisation to adapt to environmental changes in an adequate way. As communication does not only consist of telling but also of listening and feedback we can put some problems here.

Why does nobody listen to the workers feeling underpaid? Why does nobody listen to complains of workers that they loosing a lot of their skills when staying on one workplace? Fab Sweets wanted to avoid or help these problems in the past with one thing: control. Workers were treated like parts of the machines (cyborgs!) and monitored like these. If somebody complains, or in terms of hard systems, does not full fill his task properly, get rid of him! They fire trouble makers like you dump an old car that does not work smoothly anymore. You use your workers (and the managers) like spare parts, if you do not need them, you put them away in the stock (or let the clean the floor), if you need to fix the “machine” they must work, albeit all costs. And how can an empowerment programme help now dealing with all these problems? Remember the experiment on washing up after dinner. Obviously, everybody will notice that in the first part the employees (in this case my flatmates)

are absolutely not empowered. They have to do as the supervisor (that is me) says and furthermore they are controlled during the whole process. The second part you would call empowered. Here the employees know the goal and they can design the work processes themselves. To the third part I will refer later.....

If you want to employ an empowerment programme in Fab Sweets you must change the structure of it. Or, in more postmodern terms, the reality, as “reality is created by those who have power” (Hurd). “So many businesses are already an alternative reality” (Law p. 116), think about dress codes, rituals, created by those who have power. And now, where to start to change reality? Start at an easy point, offer a “suggestion box” to the workers. In this box they can post all the wishes and complaints they have. As they are not used to express their wishes and complaints by speech (danger of being fired) conversations or town halls would be in vain at this first stage. And **after** you have collected a lot of wishes and complaints you have a quite better view on the real problems. Do not start with something that is called “empowerment programme” and that is forced upon the workers! You give them only the imagination to be empowered and “feeling empowered is not the same as being empowered” (Boje et al). We worked out in the group work that the structure of Fab Sweets is a strict top – bottom structure, that repeats itself in every department and brings a lot of problems. The supervisors, managers and directors are all afraid of loosing power to those who are below them, so they fight for every little piece of it. You can see this in the strict relying on schedules (so, if something goes wrong, the workers are to blame) and in the communication problem. Everybody avoids speaking about anything, is scared of loosing power. This company is a very good example for Foucault: “ [Power is] the overall context of confrontations of events and moments

from body to body.” (as explained in Fink-Eitel p. 88) To change this rigid structure means a lot of work and cannot be achieved by sending people for a weekend to management seminars. A structure that is set in your mind is not easily changed. It is not as easy as to remove the barrier (if necessary) between the two parts of HB department. Per definition this is a change of structure as well, you change the structure of the room, but is it really the same as changing the structure in your head? As I said, start with little things. Start with suggestion empowerment, we have already done the first step, the suggestion box. But not only let them suggesting, you have to read the suggestions. After everybody is convinced for not getting fired while expressing his or hers opinion, you can offer a next step, job involvement. Perhaps your workers do not want to have the division between men and women, let them mix. Your workers want a rotation schedule for the production, let them do so. If the workers in charge of packaging want to listen to the radio, why not. If the managers, directors, supervisors are annoyed by being measured in a hard system way, stop measuring their performances. And – by the way – how can you measure a decision a manager takes? It is only a good or a bad one, nothing that is measurable in terms like efficiency and effectivity. You can gain a lot of benefits from participation, e. g. employees feeling better about their jobs, employees working more enthusiastic, “empowered” employees are a useful source of service, faster responses to customer needs and to dissatisfied customers.

But is it real empowerment if you give your employees a certain amount of “power”? In postmodern terms it is not. As A. Law states it in his book “Open Minds”, “empowerment is a cynical management tool designed to maximise the output of your human resources, without being an honest quid pro quo.” (p. 116) Quid pro quo does

mean something like real ownership of the company or participation in the company's direction. Going back to the dish washing experiment. Up to now we considered the second stage as empowerment. But what about the third stage? Clearly this is real empowerment, between equals. Everybody has the same amount of power and contributes to the goal equally. Imagine such a way of work in a company of 50 people. Do you still think real empowerment would work? Or do you think that soon there will be some more equal than others? How can you measure if everybody has the same amount of power and responsibility? "Empowerment flourishes in an organisation with no secrets. The empowering boss will have to open up all lines of information to the empowered troupes, otherwise rumour and gossip will come flying in through the window." (Stack et al p. 289) It is obvious that in a larger group of people there will always be some team leaders, those humans with the strongest personalities. How could it be the other way round? To discuss in a group of 50 or even less, start at 10, a task and it will always result in some having more responsibility and others less. This is not obligatory bad; some people like to have less responsibility but what about those who feel completely misunderstood, over- or under-qualified? Would it not be better for them, to have a manager (concerned with the human side, trained and skilled) than somebody who is in charge of a management position only due to his strong personality? G. DeLillo says in *White Noise* (p. 171): "People need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way." Why is this presumed as so bad? Why does anybody start talking about empowerment and is lying to his people? Why cannot we just use the term ownership, which is quite more honest and straight forward? Is it necessary to use a special term for making people feeling better about their work? We use our language to create a new powerful term. "Innovation is

always associated with domination: the relative empowerment of some agents vis a vis the relative disempowerment of some other agents.” (Clegg p. 238) If we restructure Fab Sweets can you clearly define who are the empowered and who are the disempowered agents? If we regard the workers as empowered, the supervisors and managers must be regarded as disempowered. You do not read this in management books, according to them empowerment empowers the whole organisation, not only the workers. If this is so, than nothing has changed, because the teeter-totter equals on the former standard. Then, why for God’s sake pretend in changing? Let us stay with the old way then! That means the managers control the workers. If the managers make the workers only feel empowered it is the same, they still rule them. If the managers would give up their control to “real” empowerment, equals work with equals, the company would go down and after some short time of happiness some new leaders will appear. Do you think the Americans empowered Iraqi people by chasing Saddam out of his palace? Look at the news. They changed bad for evil, everything is going upside down there at the moment.

Why is it also necessary to lie to your workers? Be honest. Explain them that you want to have some changes in the company, that you want them to participate in one or another way and that is it. Do not disempower them and yourself while lying. If you need to do the lie “empowerment” it will disempower your workers and you. You just invent another form of control and you have to hide it behind a nice sounding word. It does not give power to your people. It takes power from you because you are not able to exercise “your” power in a way that the company works without inventing new control. You just modify the behaviour of your people in a way that is for modern terms easy to control and easier to protect against your own conscience,

against society, against to worker's unions. "People came to believe that knowledge is power, that humanity is capable of progressing, that poverty is a great evil, and that the life of the average person is as meaningful as any other...." Neil Postman made this cynical statement in his book Technopoly (p.38). It is exactly the thing every authority wants to believe us. They "empower" us with certain truths, which are lies in the same way, because they are made up to control us. Is it not nice, that we believe that poverty (or if you want to widen this: powerless people, not only those sitting hungry in Africa waiting for food) is a great evil that must be fought?

Everybody knows the fight was fixed

The poor stay poor, the rich get rich

That's how it goes

Everybody knows

At least Leonard Cohen sings in his song "Everybody knows" about the everyday ridicule, everybody knows and knowledge is power and we are already "empowered" to such an amount that we are so afraid of "loosing" power when we change anything. And therefore it is better to invent new words, create new realities. Just empower the workers and fire them afterwards. Not to forget "to empower is a transitive verb. Empowerment is a modern concoction suggesting the state or action of being empowered. Someone gives you the power of empowerment. Who? Your boss, of course." (Law p. 115)

Now, what about an "appropriate restructuring" in Fab Sweets? I cannot and will not give any recommendations as long as the managers of Fab Sweets are not willing to

think about empowerment. Only if they are capable of rethinking the situation, something can change. Just sending your managers on a weekend trip in a forest and implementing the nice word “empowerment” that is in the end a punishment for your workers, because you did not ask them if they wanted to be empowered, is no way of improving anything. You cannot turn the whole company upside down or try to apply a quick fix. If you apply major changes and do not change the way of thinking of the people you do no good. Are you waiting for a schedule of a restructuring programme? There is none. Start with one step, the suggestion box and wait until it is time to do the next step, whatever it will be. Put your managers (especially the fighting maintenance engineers and HB manager and supervisors) in a paintball arena and let them fight, so they can get rid of their aggressions, when they have done this (just some hours afterwards all of them are tired glad to sit together and chat) you can ask them in front of each other, what pisses them off, because arguing the whole day does not change the old machines, ask for constructive and extraordinary solutions to deal with the situation! Encourage your workers and your managers to say their opinions and then you can slowly move towards an organisation, where HB is not regarded as the worst department, or where fight and rumour go through the whole company. Do not let yourself be ruled by a programme, an MBA, or a consultancy agency posed upon you: start thinking alone first! If you are not able to think for yourself critically about anything nice-sounding new, you should not try to make these thoughts reality. If you do not want to think critically about empowerment, do not try to implement it in your company. “In social and professional relationships, the attitude is the same as that of the warrior, even when there is no discord. The mindfulness to observe the dynamic of situations, even in a group, is the art of war.” (Musashi) This is possibly the best statement I read about system thinking and

(organisational) behaviour. Watch the dynamic of situations, independently if there a war (remember power is war. Everybody against everybody) is going on or not. When there is a war clearly visible to everybody, it is too late. And in Fab Sweets there is war, because nobody observed the situation. Start observing and thinking, and than thinking about changing things, things you have forgot to think about in past, rethink the errors you have done that they do not occur again, and at least: "Empowerment is a paradox. It liberates openly and ties secretly in equal measure. Ownership is much more honest." (Law, p. 117) Your workers should trust you, they should trust your managers, they should trust each other, and trust does not start with lying and cheating at them! A structure that is not solid build will collapse. Any relationship (and an organisation is a network of relationships) that is not built on trust will collapse. Even if the truth does not sound as good as the lie, be honest. If they can expect honesty from you, you can expect honesty and openness from them. Everybody in the company must learn that it is nothing to fear if one is honest. I totally agree that there is no universal truth or lie in postmodernism; the underlying meaning is the important thing. But our language deals within these terms and I think I made my point clear. And anyway the underlying meaning of lying at your staff you can figure out yourself.

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*"Good morning and welcome to our first employee empowerment seminar."*

