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CHALLENGES FOR MANAGERS/HR REGARDING THE PERCEPTION OF EMPOWERMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

Abstract:

The research paper presents the results of a study that examines understanding of empowerment in management and demonstrates practices indicating the presence of empowerment in work teams among Polish students and working professionals.

The paper contains both a theoretical section, which includes a critical analysis of the literature, and an empirical section. The research is based on a survey questionnaire originally designed by the researchers, with questions developed from a literature review. The study was conducted in 2024, and the questionnaire was administered to 213 working professionals and 245 students from Jagiellonian University specialising in discipline of management.

The results of the study explore respondents' understanding of the concept of empowerment in the context of management. They also investigate practices that indicate the presence of empowerment in work teams among Polish students and working professionals. The analysis relies on respondents' subjective declarations. Working professionals and students associated similar terms with the concept of empowerment. However, some differences emerge in understanding empowerment as giving employees the right to autonomy and control over their actions, fostering a workplace climate of trust, and creating an environment where employees feel secure, supported, and able to trust their managers. The survey results indicate that working professionals enjoy a higher level of autonomy in the workplace than students. Additional differences can be observed in the extend to which respondents have control over team activities, as well as in the availability of substantive support in solving problems and resolving issues within their teams.

The paper uncovers new insights, providing a basis for developing a comprehensive tool to support further research in this field. Additionally, the findings offer practical value for managers in organisations and for university personnel responsible for designing and analysing teaching processes. Future research could involve a larger sample from various industries, and further in-depth qualitative research is also recommended.

Keywords:

Empowerment, Teamwork, Human resource management

JEL Classification: J24, M12, M14

Review of literature

Modern organisations, in their pursuit of competitive advantage in the market, require collaboration, flexibility, and appropriate competencies from all employees. Particular attention is given to managers, whose primary task is to achieve the goals set for them by the organisation in an efficient, effective, and successful manner. The managerial role in effective organisational governance involves securing resources such as budget, personnel, and technical equipment; making decisions aimed at optimising organisational processes; and engaging in projects that are of strategic importance to the organisation (Liu, Wang and Chua, 2015). Fulfilling these managerial responsibilities entails establishing effective communication and information channels, which contribute to employment stability and improved financial performance (Frenkel, Sanders and Bednall, 2013). Managerial effectiveness is also shaped by specific traits, including adaptability, responsiveness to change, strategic thinking, and the ability to make swift and accurate decisions. In the context of growing international cooperation, managers are expected to possess intercultural competencies that enable them to lead culturally diverse teams and collaborate with other managers in a global business environment (Stańczyk, 2019). Knowledge and competencies allow managers to better understand their teams, recognise employee expectations and needs, and align individual capabilities with organisational functioning. One of the key insights in this area is the awareness of employees' attitudes toward and level of readiness for empowerment. Empowerment has been a subject of academic interest since the 1950s and 1960s, particularly within the context of organisational behaviour. These early discussions are evident in the work of social scientists such as Likert and Herzberg (Savery and Luks, 2001). Empowerment is understood as the process of granting team members the authority to make decisions related to their daily tasks (Haas, 2010), as well as the freedom to act independently (Arneson and Ekberg, 2006). Such practices enrich employees' group work experience (Dainty et al., 2002), and may also enhance openness within teams, potentially fostering greater creativity and innovation in project-related solutions. As Bugdol (2006) explains, "Empowerment is a method of managing human resources or team members that encompasses both psychological and structural dimensions of delegating power, autonomy, and eliminating fear from decision-making processes." A deeper understanding of the empowerment concept can be gained by analysing its key dimensions and determinants, which are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of empowerment according to Czubasiewicz and Grajewski

Dimensions of empowerment	Explanation
Self-efficacy	The belief in one's own abilities and competencies; empowerment cannot exist without the skills necessary for autonomous, innovative, and accountable goal execution.
Self-determination	The sense of having the ability to make decisions independently; autonomy of action and personal responsibility for the outcomes of one's own behaviour.
Personal consequence	The belief in one's capacity to exert influence; this dimension emphasises the importance of communication and social competencies.

Meaning	The perception that one's work is valuable and purposeful; this factor is strongly linked to internal communication and a value-oriented organisational culture.
Trust	A sense of psychological safety; a critical determinant of empowerment and a key factor for its successful implementation.

Source: (Czubasiewicz and Grajewski, 2018)

Other selected definitions of empowerment conceptualize it as follows (Syrytczyk, 2009): a process through which members of an organisation enhance their sense of self-efficacy (Conger and Kanungo, 1988); an increased level of intrinsic task motivation, referring to the positive experiences derived directly from performing a task, which bring motivation and satisfaction (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995); encouraging individuals to make decisions and take action, while simultaneously reducing hierarchical control and directive supervision; also, eliminating fear: fear of ridicule, humiliation, blame, or criticism (Hand, 1994); supporting the creation of a culture of collaboration, not only within the organisation, but also with business partners, clients, and among customers themselves (Hochman, 2005); the ongoing elicitation of enthusiasm and commitment from employees by granting them autonomy and control over their work (Zeffane and Al Zarooni, 2012); a humanistic tool aimed at improving the quality of life of ordinary employees; a concept rooted in noble goals and more far-reaching than other management approaches (Lincoln, Travers, Ackers and Wilkinson, 2002).

The third area addressed in this article concerns the need to highlight the role of HR specialists in supporting managers, as well as in designing training sessions and workshops that demonstrate the significance and essence of empowerment among employees. Organisational support within the HR function is primarily aimed at identifying managerial needs and responding promptly with ready-to-implement solutions that assist managers in leading effectively and efficiently. The shape and scope of the HR function in a given organisation is influenced by multiple factors, including the organisation's strategy, structure, and culture, as well as by its internal and external stakeholder relationships (Król, 2006). The role assigned to HR professionals primarily involves advising, consulting, and delivering services that support managers in solving team-related challenges. HR also plays a critical role in shaping an environment that enables managers to optimise the professional potential of their employees, which in turn leads to increased work engagement and job satisfaction.

Methodology

To conduct the research study, two structurally similar survey questionnaires were developed: one tailored to students and the other to working professionals. The survey items were formulated based on an extensive review of the relevant literature (Syrytczyk and Stańczyk, 2024). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they associated selected terms with the concept of empowerment. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represented the weakest association and 5 the strongest. The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase focused on working professionals and was conducted in the second half of January 2024. The second phase targeted students and took place in October 2024. In the first phase, the questionnaire was administered to 213 working professionals. The respondents worked in organisations owned by Polish nationals (45%) and companies with foreign owners (42%). The remaining 13% were employees working for public administration

institutions. In terms of the size of the organisations, respondents worked in micro-organisations (14%), small enterprises (25%), medium-sized enterprises (18%) and large organisations (43%, large means a headcount of more than 250). The business sectors represented by the largest numbers of respondents were: IT, HR, banking, finance, accounting, e-commerce, automotive, pharmaceuticals, hotels, trade, real estate, insurance, the military, the police, and publishing. During the second stage, conducted in October 2024, the questionnaire was administered to a sample of 245 students of the Jagiellonian University specialising in management-related disciplines.

Survey results

The results concerning the level of association between empowerment and the definitions derived from the literature review are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents' answers to the question: What associations (words or expressions) do you have with empowerment? 1 = the weakest association, 5 = the strongest association; S – students, W – working professionals

No.	Empowerment means / is:		1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1	an aspect of organisational culture.	S	5	15	35	29	16
		W	5	13	35	27	20
2	an organisational climate that unlocks the knowledge, experience and motivation of employees.	S	4	8	21	40	27
		W	1	8	20	43	28
3	a method of HR management.	S	7	15	31	28	19
		W	7	18	23	32	20
4	a management philosophy covering structural and psychological aspects of the delegation of power by managers.	S	8	18	29	30	15
		W	6	22	30	30	12
5	giving employees the right to autonomy and control over their actions.	S	7	8	24	32	29
		W	4	11	23	32	30
6	eradicating fear and bureaucracy in decision-making.	S	8	22	25	27	18
		W	11	19	24	31	15
7	a workplace with a climate of trust.	S	4	9	26	32	29
		W	6	10	22	32	30
8	a motivational framework in an organisation.	S	4	10	20	37	29
		W	5	14	26	29	26
9		S	3	13	22	38	24

	an expression of employees' proactive mindsets.	W	5	14	26	29	26
10	keeping communication between management and staff open and transparent.	S	4	13	22	41	20
		W	6	7	31	37	19
11	promoting a culture of teamwork, where employees support each other and work together to achieve the organisation's goals.	S	4	15	20	33	28
		W	1	16	20	33	30
12	creating a work environment where employees feel secure, supported and where they can trust their managers.	S	3	11	22	33	31
		W	3	8	26	34	29

Source: own study (Syrytczyk and Stańczyk, 2024; Gémár, Stańczyk and Syrytczyk, 2025)

Analysis

The results of the study, as shown in Table 2, indicate that the majority of responses demonstrate a consistent level of association with empowerment, most frequently at level four. Both groups of respondents showed the same share (35%) at level three for the first statement. Notably, both groups indicated exactly 35% at this level, which is considered relatively neutral. Regardless of respondent status – whether student or working professional – the understanding of empowerment appears consistent and is primarily associated with organisational culture. On the one hand, this reflects a positive perception of empowerment among students; on the other, it confirms the experience of empowerment in practice among working professionals. Further responses to this item show similarly high and convergent percentage levels. Empowerment as an organisational climate that enables the expression of employees' knowledge, experience, and motivation was rated at level four by 40% of students and 43% of working professionals. Responses at level five reached approximately 30% for all participants. These findings suggest that there is roughly 70% awareness of the positive influence of empowerment, especially in terms of enhancing motivation at work. This effect is primarily attributed to the knowledge and experience of employees and is perceived by students as an important factor in their future professional lives. The third definition of empowerment clearly reflects its perception as a method used in human resource management. Students generally maintained a neutral stance, whereas working professionals more frequently associated this concept with positive organisational experience. The fourth definition, which framed empowerment as a management philosophy, was received more neutrally by both groups, as evidenced by relatively low scores at level five. The next association, referring to employee autonomy and independence in decision-making, also received moderately positive responses – mostly up to level four. Around 30% chose level five, which is somewhat surprising given that empowerment is commonly associated with high levels of autonomy and decision-making authority. In the sixth definition, empowerment was not associated with fear or bureaucracy. Most responses fell between levels two and four, which may indicate a high degree of uncertainty among participants. Fear and bureaucracy are not yet familiar experiences to students in the organisational context, making it difficult for them to relate to these associations. Generally, empowerment is built on a climate of mutual trust within teams where tasks are carried out collaboratively. Collective goal orientation, constructive dialogue, and joint decision-making contribute to higher work efficiency,

a sense of safety, and group loyalty. Results for this item showed strong positive associations in both groups. The eighth item confirmed a direct association of empowerment with motivation – both for students and employees. High levels of positive association were observed. Empowerment as a proactive attitude among employees was also viewed positively; however, approximately 14% of both groups responded at level two, considered low. Additionally, there was a noticeable divergence: 38% of students versus 29% of working professionals indicated level four. This may suggest that students' understanding of work in organisations is based on assumptions of highly active engagement, whereas working professionals show a more measured outlook. In the tenth definition, the importance of open and transparent communication between employees and management was strongly affirmed by both groups, with a majority selecting levels 4-5 (61% of students; 56% of working professionals). Respondents identified this factor as crucial for joint decision-making and collaborative problem-solving alongside managers. For such collaboration to be effective, a high level of mutual understanding must be present. Finally, the promotion of a team-based work culture, in which employees support one another and work towards shared organisational goals, was rated very highly, at approximately 63%. It is notable that this awareness exists both among students (as future employees) and working professionals, who carry this cultural knowledge into their organisations and, as shown, continue to uphold it. Increasing attention is now being paid to building a positive work environment, which was clearly recognised by respondents, as indicated by high scores skewed toward the positive end of the scale. Students, on the one hand, are likely to expect a supportive work environment where they feel cared for by both the organisation and their supervisors. On the other hand, for working professionals, retention within the organisation is often conditioned on such a positive environment, including good relationships with both colleagues and management.

Findings

Based on the analysis of the results of the study, several recommendations and proposed actions can be formulated, in Table 3, for managers and HR professionals with the aim of increasing awareness of empowerment within employee teams. Additionally, the findings suggest initiatives that could be implemented at the university level to raise students' understanding of the significance of empowerment in professional work settings. Focusing on these two target groups, students and working professionals, is of particular importance to employers. The responses provided by students reflect their awareness of collaborative work environments built on shared responsibility and a certain degree of autonomy. For managers and HR specialists, such insights offer a valuable foundation for designing appropriate work environments and conducting effective recruitment processes. Conversely, the responses from working professionals reveal areas in which improvements, changes, or process optimisations are needed in order to retain employees and strengthen organisational commitment.

Table 3. Recommended actions to enhance empowerment awareness; S – students, W – working professionals

No.	Empowerment means / is:		Actions
1	an aspect of organisational culture.	S	At the university level – increasing knowledge about the essence of empowerment and its importance as a component of organisational culture.

		W	Organising meetings and workshops to raise awareness of empowerment's role in team functioning within organisations.
2	an organisational climate that unlocks the knowledge, experience and motivation of employees.	S	Continuously developing students' knowledge and practical experience through empowerment-oriented teaching.
		W	Designing motivation programmes that reward employee co-management and task responsibility.
3	a method of HR management.	S	Placing greater emphasis in university curricula on using empowerment as a means of improving teamwork.
		W	Promoting empowerment among employees as a way of working collectively and achieving shared goals.
4	a management philosophy covering structural and psychological aspects of the delegation of power by managers.	S	When discussing HRM philosophy, more attention should be given to empowerment as a method for shaping employee behaviours.
		W	HR policy should place greater emphasis on cultivating empowerment as a foundation for shared responsibility, both at the team level and higher management levels.
5	giving employees the right to autonomy and control over their actions.	S	Fostering greater student independence, autonomy in project execution, and opportunities to express their views, while also encouraging creativity in proposing solutions.
		W	Managers should delegate tasks more extensively, allowing employees to propose solutions individually or through group decision-making.
6	eradicating fear and bureaucracy in decision-making.	S	Building students' sense of self-worth and preparing them for the labour market through career counselling and professional support.
		W	Raising employee awareness of their competencies and value to the organisation, and fostering teamwork built on mutual respect.
7	a workplace with a climate of trust.	S	Strengthening trust among students through group-based project assignments.
		W	Implementing teamwork practices based on mutual trust, encouraging collaborative problem-solving through group consensus.
8		S	Assigning group tasks supported by a suitable motivational system.

	a motivational framework in an organisation.	W	Integrating empowerment principles into organisational motivation systems.
9	an expression of employees' proactive mindsets.	S	Supporting students in creative and collaborative activities, with shared responsibility for group outcomes.
		W	Implementing group projects based on employee proactivity and promoting autonomous initiative.
10	keeping communication between management and staff open and transparent.	S	Ensuring open, transparent communication between lecturers and students, using clear and understandable messaging.
		W	Managers should communicate clearly and transparently, as only such communication supports high levels of team empowerment.
11	promoting a culture of teamwork, where employees support each other and work together to achieve the organisation's goals.	S	Reinforcing awareness that teamwork and striving toward shared goals are key to performance and collaborative decision-making.
		W	Structuring tasks to rely on effective teamwork.
12	creating a work environment where employees feel secure, supported and where they can trust their managers.	S	Developing positive relationships already within university-based teamwork.
		W	Creating a positive and safe work environment and maintaining strong interpersonal relations within the team, led by supervisors.

Source: own study

The proposed actions may serve as practical tools for managing human teams – both by managers (with methodological support from HR specialists) and by academic institutions, which can use these insights to shape university curricula that incorporate the concept of empowerment.

The present study was based on a survey questionnaire, and as such, the results reflect the subjective perceptions of the respondents. It is therefore advisable to conduct further research involving larger and more diverse samples, including segmentation by age and professional status. An important variable worth considering may be the industry in which employed respondents work, as well as the field of study of participating students. These distinctions could then serve as a basis for a more detailed comparative analysis between the two groups.

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