Leaders devolve appropriate power and authority -
enablement; empowerment; engagement; humility

Agile Leaders recognise that people work best when they are enabled, engaged and energised. Empowering individuals is a necessary skill of the Agile Leader as they balance the emerging needs and tensions of the organisation. Agile Leaders recognise that empowerment is not an "all or nothing" concept. Instead, it is a continuum of leadership behaviour that responds to the current context for change.

Empowerment

Employee empowerment is a philosophy and a set of leadership practices that deliver real benefits for an organisation. The underlying principle gives employees the freedom, flexibility and power to make decisions and solve problems. It also holds them responsible and accountable for the outcomes of their actions, leaving colleagues feeling energised, capable, and determined to make the organisation successful.

HCL Technologies' empowerment philosophy has enabled the company to provide innovative, high-quality service to their customers, resulting in revenues tripling and customer satisfaction increasing by 73% in the last 5 years. HCL's empowered employees take personal pride in their work and responsibility for doing a good job.

The Benefits of Empowerment

Research has shown that empowerment has a positive impact on an organisation's quality of work, employee satisfaction, collaboration, productivity, and costs.

- Employees with the freedom and flexibility to make a difference deliver higher quality work
- Higher job satisfaction levels are found in empowered organisations

- Empowered employees have increased self-confidence and ability to collaborate with others
- Empowerment gives a sense of increased responsibility, accountability, and ownership, resulting in increased productivity
- Empowering employees reduces organisational costs, for example employee turnover and retention costs
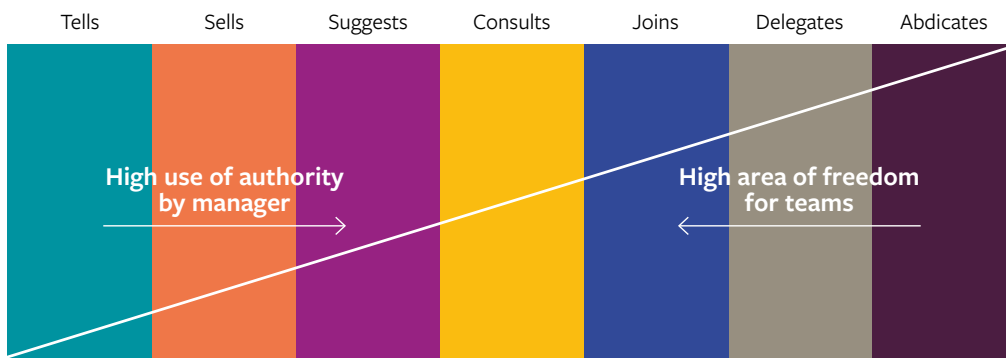
| Tells | Sells | Suggests | Consults | Joins | Delegates | Abdicates |

High use of authority by manager →

High area of freedom for teams ←

FIGURE 1: "Tannenbaum and Schmidt continuum of empowerment"

All of these benefits help organisations achieve an extra edge, to outperform their competitors and to gain market share.[1]

As employee satisfaction increases for empowered employees, their sense of loyalty and dedication to their job and the organisation also increases. Empowerment results in more engagement, longer-term employees and improved retention rates; this keeps experience and reduces employee turnover costs.[2]

Empowering Colleagues Effectively

Empowerment is not an "all or nothing" concept. The diagram shows the Continuum of Empowerment[3] which is a good place for Agile Leaders to start when considering the degree to which they can empower their colleagues (though the term "Empowers" is preferable to "Abdicates" at the top tier!).

The diagram shows a pragmatic way of empowering individuals and teams that requires an understanding of the context, to allow the appropriate level of empowerment to be applied.

The Agile Leader knows that empowerment has to be applied carefully and not be seen as an opportunity to devolve responsibilities to people who do not have the authority, capability or knowledge to deliver. Unless individuals have a clear idea of their responsibilities and accountabilities empowerment causes more confusion and ends up demotivating individuals rather than motivating or inspiring them.

Empowerment has to be a negotiable dialogue where the Agile Leader gives enough power to colleagues, not only to achieve their goals in a more timely fashion but also to consider their development needs. This is where

Principle 2 (Improved quality of thinking leads to improved outcomes) applies; taking time to think through how much empowerment is necessary and appropriate for each team as it delivers its goals. The intended outcomes might not always be achieved, and it may not be possible to foresee the pitfalls that these new behaviours may bring about; however, this will provide the team members – and the Agile Leader - with new opportunities to learn and grow.

Empowerment versus Delegation

It is important to distinguish between the concepts of "Empowerment" and "Delegation" as they are two very different things. Delegation entails passing along relatively simple tasks that follow a prescribed process for completion. Empowerment means trusting the employees' ability to determine the optimal way to solve a problem.

As the diagram below shows, delegated responsibility is still controlled and may not provide the necessary authority to decide and to act. Empowerment, on the other hand, assigns degrees of freedom and autonomy to make and act upon decisions.
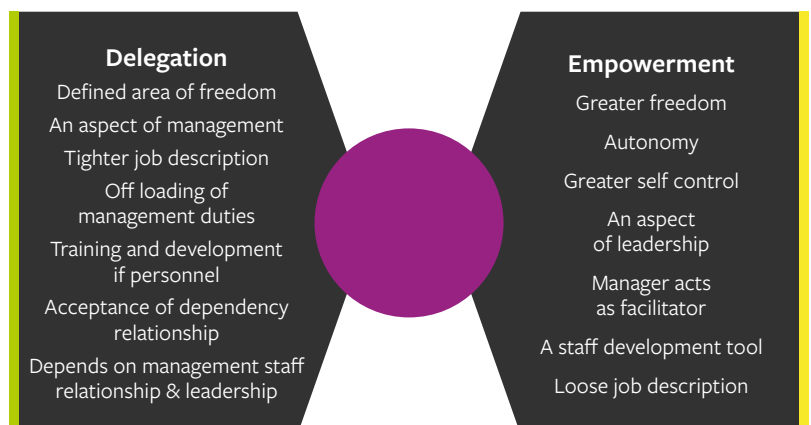

Delegation
Defined area of freedom
An aspect of management
Tighter job description
Off loading of management duties
Training and development if personnel
Acceptance of dependency relationship
Depends on management staff relationship & leadership

Empowerment
Greater freedom
Autonomy
Greater self control
An aspect of leadership
Manager acts as facilitator
A staff development tool
Loose job description

FIGURE 2: "Comparisons of delegation and empowerment"

Embracing Change

Empowered employees feel free to challenge the status quo, which is critical for organisations in today's fast-changing environment. Employees and the organisations they work for can become too complacent, doing things the way they have always done them. Unless employees feel comfortable in questioning the status quo they, and their organisation, are likely to stagnate as competitors move swiftly past them. The Agile Leader will establish an environment where employees feel free to question, to challenge, to offer new ideas – and, crucially, to make their own decisions. This keeps the organisation competitive and benefits the employees' own development as a result of the empowerment continuum.

A call for Humble Leadership

Empowerment is a key tool in achieving higher degrees of agility in organisations and in their change initiatives. However, effective empowerment relies on the robust psychology of the Agile Leader. Traditional leaders believe power, status and authority are a natural part of their role; for these types of leaders it is difficult to delegate authority. In some highly political organisations it may be to the individual's advantage to gain more power. In the Manifesto for Agile Business one of the core values asks leaders to put the needs of the customer above those of their own self-interest. This requires humility and a higher degree of ethics and morals than has been evident in some traditional management approaches.

In summary, organisations with empowered employees reap real economic benefits by delivering high quality products and services that translate to lower costs and higher revenues. The Agile Leader will devolve power and authority to those best placed to make decisions and, in turn, will see the benefits at both the organisation and individual levels.

SOURCES
1. The Benefits of Empowering Employees - *saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/BUS208-5.2-The-Benefits-of-Empowering-Employees FINAL.pdf*
2. J.K.: The Elements of Great Managing - *Wagner, R. & Harter, New York, 2006*
3. How to choose a leadership pattern - *Tannenbaum, R. & Schmidt, W., Harvard Business Review May-June 1973*