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Davison, Robert; Martinsons, Maris G.

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Empowerment or Enslavement?

A Case of Process-Based Organisational Change in Hong Kong

Robert Davison

Dept of Information Systems

City University of Hong Kong

Tat Chee Avenue,

Kowloon, Hong Kong

Tel: +852-2788-7534

Fax: +852-2788-8694

Email: isrobert@cityu.edu.hk

Maris G. Martinsons

Dept of Management

City University of Hong Kong

Tat Chee Avenue,

Kowloon, Hong Kong

Tel: +852-2788-7958

Fax: +852-2788-8560

Email: mgmaris@cityu.edu.hk

Author Biographies

Robert Davison is an Assistant Professor of Information Systems at the City University of Hong Kong. He currently serves as an Associate Editor of the Information Systems Journal and as Editor-in-Chief of the Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries. His key research interests involve the application of interpretive research methodologies, in particular action research, to problems involving the application of Information Systems in organisations. He is also engaged in research into Information Systems ethics, Group Support Systems, Global Virtual Teams and IT in Developing Countries. Robert is the author of 18 refereed journal articles and has edited special issues of Communications of the ACM and the IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management.

Maris G. Martinsons is a professor of management at the City University of Hong Kong and research director of the Pacific Rim Institute for Studies of Management. He holds engineering and MBA degrees from the University of Toronto and a Ph.D. from the University of Warwick. Maris has extensive experience as a business consultant and was cited recently as one of the most active and influential management scholars in the Asia-Pacific region. His research and insights have been published in many leading English-language journals, and translated into Chinese, French, Japanese, Latvian and Russian. In addition to his service as an editor of peer-reviewed journals such as IEEE Transactions of Engineering Management, Journal of Applied Management Studies and Journal of Management Systems, Maris helped to establish the Association of Information Systems and to globalise the U.S.-based Academy of Management. His professional interests focus on the strategic and cultural issues arising from the management of information, information technology, and organisational change.

Abstract

Employee empowerment is commonly a fundamental part of the prescriptions offered to improve business performance. However, business process improvement and many other organisational development and change initiatives tend to encapsulate the values of the societies and organisations in which they were developed - and such values are not universal. The case of a business process re-engineering project in Hong Kong illustrates an attempt to empower team members that paradoxically resulted in their psychological enslavement. The roles of cultural differences and reward systems in producing unintended consequences are analysed while the implications of the case for both research and practice are considered.

Keywords: Action Research; Empowerment; Enslavement; Organisational Change; Organisational Culture; Process Improvement; Societal Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Employee empowerment is commonly a fundamental and explicit part of the prescriptions offered to improve business performance. For instance, the empowerment of front-line staff is an essential part of the recipes for business process re-engineering (BPR) and business process improvement (BPI) (cf. Hammer and Champy, 1993). Most forms of action research also mandate client involvement and co-operation with the intervening researchers (Baskerville, 1999). Furthermore, information systems development methods such as Effective Technical and Human Implementation of Computer Based Systems (ETHICS) (Mumford, 1983) and Joint

Application Development (JAD) or e-JAD (Liou and Chen, 1993) highlight the critical role to be played by end-users in systems design.

Some of the aforementioned prescriptions refer explicitly to the encapsulated values that are assumed to be part of the organisation or society where the change is being introduced. For example, it is claimed that re-engineering “capitalizes on the same characteristics that have traditionally made Americans such great business innovators: individualism, self-reliance, a willingness to accept risk, and propensity for change” (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p.3). However, it is not always recognised that such values are far from universal.

Specific prescriptions for organisational development and change may fit one set of encapsulated values better than another, and identical instances of technology can both acquire different meanings and exert different pressures in different implementation contexts (cf. Robey and Azevedo, 1994). Consequently, as with contraindicated medical prescriptions, the mismatching of prescriptions for improving business performance may produce unintended consequences. For instance, an initiative seeking to empower employees can even lead to their enslavement.

The empowerment of individuals is often prescribed and described in conjunction with organisational change and business process improvement efforts. In contrast, enslavement has received little if any attention in the mainstream IS literature. This article reports on a case study where an effort to empower the members of a business process re-engineering team paradoxically led to their psychological enslavement. Our aim is to raise awareness of the potential for cultural factors to produce unintended negative consequences in organisational change efforts. In particular, our case study, which was informed by the canonical approach to action research (cf. Baskerville, 1999), shows how insensitivity to

cultural differences enslaved the members of a BPR project team in a Hong Kong accountancy firm.

This introduction is followed by a review of the relevant literatures of empowerment, culture, and process improvement. We then summarise the action research methodology, before describing how it was employed in our case study. The context of the case is outlined before the key actors are profiled and their various behaviours and interactions are described. Special attention is paid to the actions aimed at empowering the re-engineering team members. Subsequently, we discuss our findings, link them back to the existing literature, and consider the implications for future research and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment

Although the term has only become popular in recent decades, the literature on empowerment can be traced back to Lewin (1946) and other early proponents of action research. In the 1980s, closely related concepts were referred to as employee involvement, high involvement management, participative decision-making, and self-governance (cf. Klein, 1984; Lawler, 1986; Peters and Waterman, 1984). In the 1990s, empowerment was reconsidered in the context of BPR and advocated as a means to liberate workers, encourage them to be more innovative, and thereby make them both happier and more productive (cf. Peters, 1992).

Fundamentally, "to empower means to give power to" (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990), which Forrester (2000) observes "requires understanding what power is", suggesting that it involves "the capacity to obtain the result *you* want" [emphasis added](cf. Lukes, 1974). Bowen and Lawler (1992) contend more

practically that empowerment involves ensuring that: information is shared with workers; rewards are based on organizational performance; employees are trained to contribute more to organizational performance; and employees are involved in management decision making. Hammer and Champy (1993, p.70) go further in suggesting that empowered workers need to have the "authority to make the decisions needed to get [a task] done".

The empowerment literature has tended to adopt a universalistic perspective, regarding the concept "as appropriate to all organisations in all circumstances" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 40). However, it seems naïve to assume that employee empowerment will automatically improve business performance. An empowered worker will not necessarily be intrinsically motivated or even experience increased satisfaction on the job (cf. Collins, 1999). Buchanan (1979) was among the first to suggest that various psychological factors should be considered in designing an empowerment initiative. At a fundamental level, the motivation literature (cf. Bandura, 1977; Cavanagh, 1984) asserts that employees will respond differently to specific incentives. Some people are motivated by money; others by status and the prospects for promotion; and still others by self-actualisation or altruism.

Remarkably, many proponents of employee empowerment seem to assume that employees will eagerly accept the responsibility for managing their own work (cf. Hammer and Champy, 1993; Peters, 1992). Motivation apart, empowered employees need to develop the skills and knowledge that will enable them to make decisions efficiently and effectively. This development is a natural consequence of experience on the job, but it can be accelerated through formal training or mentoring. Forrester (2000, p.70) cautions that "employees who are uncomfortable with tasks they lack the skills for (will) hesitate to accept responsibility and accountability".

Even if employees do have the appropriate skills, an effort to empower them may still encounter resistance unless they find their new roles and responsibilities to be inherently worthwhile - for themselves, not only for management or other, more remote stakeholders. These caveats cannot be ignored since Wilkinson (1998) points out that “unlike industrial democracy there is no notion of workers having a right to a say; it is employers who decide whether and how to empower their employees ... Empowerment takes place within the context of a strict management agenda”. This is illustrated by a recent case in the banking sector, where managers expressed their belief in participatory decision-making and asked their employees to decide on an important issue, but ultimately adopted a course of action that seemed to ignore completely the decision that the employees had made (Yeung, 1997).

Complementing the literature on empowerment is an emerging literature on the nature of power relations, and the consequent distribution of knowledge, within the organisational context. Of particular interest is the consideration of these power relations during the process of planning and developing an information system. Coombs et al. (1992) have argued that information and communication technologies are intimately linked to power-knowledge relations in organisational contexts, and to organisational behaviour in general. They have suggested that as a result of the various attempts to assert greater power and control, competition between different stakeholders will be inevitable during the planning, development and implementation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The example of ICT in the (British) National Health Service is used to illustrate this phenomenon. They found that while “(t)he exercise of power and processes of control are inescapably embedded in organisational procedures and practices ... individuals may react in a variety of different ways to their effects - some may willingly identify with and

subjugate themselves to the control effects of power relations whereas others may wilfully resist them" (Coombs et al., 1992, p.52).

It is useful to recall the quasi-prophetic warnings that Braverman (1974) made with respect to the potential for information technology to be used as an enabler of greater managerial control of work activity. More recently, Leflaive (1996) and Rusaw (2000) have suggested that the very nature of the modern organisation, with its growing dependence on technology and technology-supported activities, provides a fertile setting for the domination, subjugation and even the enslavement of individuals.

The OED (1991) defines enslavement as the process of rendering a person a "helpless victim of some dominating influence". In an organisational context, enslavement suggests the enforced and unwanted imposition of working values or practices on individuals. This provides a useful juxtaposition to the concept of empowerment: while empowering involves giving power to individuals, enslaving suggests not removing power (which is disempowerment), but rather removing the choice of how to behave.

Culture

Employee attitudes and reactions to an organisational development and change initiative will be influenced by contextual factors. Among the most salient contextual factors is the prevailing culture. Culture is germane to the empowerment-enslavement debate since it is intimately connected with the values that are encapsulated in organisational development and change practices. Culture is a phenomenon that is both pervasive and elusive. Hofstede (1980) describes it as "a collective programming of the mind", involving patterned ways of thinking, feeling and behaving in different situations. Culture can also be seen as a lens through

which we view the world - and each of us may have several such lenses, depending on the circumstances. Culture can be described at different levels, for example national or societal, organisational and professional. At each of these levels, different values, attitudes and behavioural norms may prevail.

Hofstede and Bond (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede and Bond, 1988) have developed a useful conceptualisation of national or societal culture by eliciting the following five dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation (also known as Confucian dynamism). While Hofstede's work has been criticised by some, his findings have been largely confirmed by subsequent studies (see House et al., 1997, for an incisive review) and widely applied in a variety of research contexts.

Power distance (PDI) is the dimension of societal culture that is most relevant to the empowerment-enslavement issue. Power distance reflects the degree to which a society accepts a hierarchical system and unequal distributions of power. A high PDI score implies that less powerful members of organisations and societies accept large status differences between superiors and subordinates. Managers tend to be autocratic and paternalistic while employees are comparatively comfortable doing as they are told, submitting to the control of a superior and obeying directives without question (Hofstede, 1991).

Power distance is particularly important in the reported case study because Hong Kong Chinese social groups have been found to have much higher PDI scores than their Anglo-American counterparts (Hofstede, 1980, Lowe, 1996). This is significant because the egalitarianism implicit with empowerment is consistent with the low PDI scores found in Anglo-American cultures. In stark contrast to the expressed beliefs of those founding the United States, the Chinese consider it self-

evident that “all men are born unequal” (Bond, 1986). Consistent with these differences in societal beliefs, Meade (1970) found that groups of Chinese students functioned much better under a controlling leadership style rather than a democratic leadership style whereas the reverse was true for groups of American students.

The implications of power distance for an IT-enabled BPI effort are numerous. For instance, Martinsons and Davison (2000) suggest that high power distance cultures will:

- "be comparatively more likely to maintain the status quo and will be less likely to incorporate clean-slate thinking into their IT-enabled business process change efforts than low power distance cultures";
- "find it comparatively easier to initiate IT-enabled process changes than low power distance cultures"; and
- "will find it comparatively more difficult to adopt the participative management approach that is at the core of many IT-enabled process changes than low power distance cultures".

Cultural factors are also widely acknowledged to have a significant influence on organisational behaviour. A widely-accepted definition of organisational or corporate culture perceives it to be "a pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration - that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 1985, p. 9). Other descriptions of organisational culture focus on the assumptions, beliefs and values that are shared by the members of an organisation (Sathe, 1985; Williams et al.,

1990). An organisational culture tends to serve as a "social or normative glue" that provides cohesiveness to the organisation (Smircich, 1983) and will be fairly stable over time, evolving slowly as environmental conditions change (Brown, 1995).

The normative glue of Chinese organisations tends to include a natural hierarchy that enables highly centralised decision making authority while discouraging formalisation (Martinsons and Hempel, 1995; Redding and Wong, 1986). These characteristics together with restricted organisational sizes make them remarkably flexible and adaptable to environmental changes. The relationships in Chinese organisations are modelled on those in a family and are distinctive in terms of the reciprocal obligations that exist between superiors and subordinates. Owners and managers have a paternalistic responsibility for the welfare of their employees, who in return are expected to obey the directions they are given and remain obedient to their boss (Redding and Wong, 1986). Appropriate behaviours, with everyone conducting themselves in a manner that is consistent with their hierarchical status, help to save and enhance 'face' (cf. Ho, 1976) and encourage the development and maintenance of strong personal relations.

Business Process Improvement

Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) has been a major component of organisational development and change initiatives since 1990. The first and foremost advocate of BPR, Michael Hammer, has defined it as "the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business processes to achieve dramatic improvement in critical, contemporary measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service and speed" (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p. 32). Much of the subsequent literature on BPR and related forms of business process improvement (BPI) has reiterated the importance of radical changes to existing processes in order to enhance productivity

and/or quality in the long term. The prescriptions for BPI commonly include a fundamental notion that front-line employees and end-users should be empowered to make decisions and introduce changes. "With the elimination of many extraneous or duplicate processes and the automation of routine processes, employee responsibilities are likely to change and their behaviours may have to be transformed ... most are likely to be given responsibility for larger parts of core processes" (Martinsons, 1995, p. 260). As a result of re-engineering, employees end up by taking over specific responsibilities (and accountabilities) from line managers who are reassigned or laid off as the organisational structure is flattened. This will require a wider range of skills, but could potentially lead to greater job challenge and motivation (King, 1993).

Alongside these plaudits is growing awareness that BPR initiatives are not only risky - often failing to achieve expected results - but that they also tend to neglect the human issues that pervade organisations and organisational change (Martinsons, 1995; Wilmott, 1995; Wilmott and Wray-Bliss, 1996). It has been suggested that the emancipatory rhetoric of BPR is little more than a veneer that conceals a political agenda involving heightened managerial control (Grint et al., 1996; Wilcocks and Smith, 1995), thus confirming Braverman's (1974) prophecies.

Furthermore, Boudreau and Robey (1996) point to the parallel hypocrisy of employee empowerment and irony of employee commitment: employees are encouraged to be empowered, yet in practice they have only the power that management gives them; meanwhile, since BPR aims to flatten organisational structures, and remove redundant people/positions, so active participation in a BPR project may lead to the loss of one's own job, or contribute to the loss of others' jobs.

The principles of business process re-engineering have been applied in different ways by different organisations in different parts of the world. In the case study reported here¹, an accountancy firm in Hong Kong undertook a BPR effort using an action research approach.

THE ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Canonical action research (CAR) combines "theory and practice (and researchers and practitioners) through change and reflection in an immediate problematic situation within a mutually acceptable ethical framework" (Avison et al. 1999, p.94). CAR incorporates a dual intention of improving practice and contributing to theory and knowledge. The role of the action researcher is to intervene in an organisational situation both in order to apply (or develop) a theory and subsequently to evaluate that theory (Baskerville and Wood-Harper, 1998). At the same time, CAR must have implications "beyond those ... in the domain of the project. It must be possible to envisage talking about the theories developed in relation to other situations" (Eden and Huxham, 1996, p.84). Indeed, the theoretical insights and practical results generated in one AR project may be tested and refined in subsequent projects.

CAR projects may take a considerable period of time (months or even years) to complete (Clark, 1972). Action researchers need both to develop a relationship with the client (the organisation; a specific organisational unit; the problem owner, or all of these), and to plan, execute, observe and reflect upon the actions. Moreover, the action researcher can rarely exert complete control over his/her interventions given the organisational politics and dynamics that will permeate problem situations (cf. Mumford, 2001). Therefore, it may be impractical to make detailed plans and precise directions

¹ The case itself is described in greater detail in Davison and Vogel (2000).

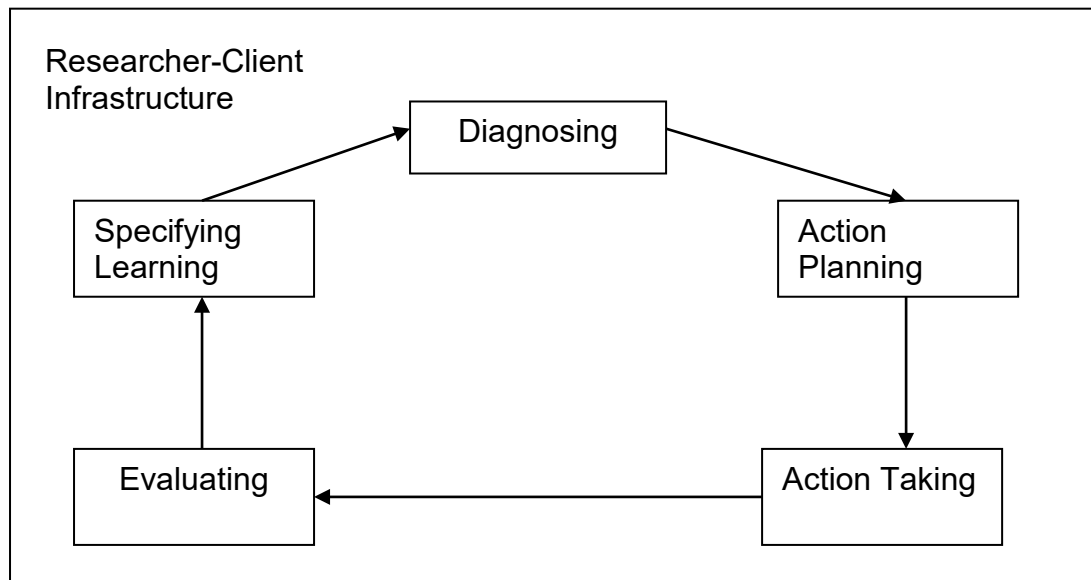
for an intervention (Checkland, 1981). Instead, the intervention must be adaptable to the infinite variety of circumstances (cf. Descola, 1996). Nevertheless, a successful CAR project should obtain an intimate view of a specific problem situation, track the development of organisational change processes, and therefore produce highly relevant findings and conclusions (Elden and Chisholm, 1993).

CAR's underlying tenets involve the introduction of changes with positive social values, so as to improve the circumstances for all stakeholders (Elden and Chisholm, 1993). Ideally, the action researcher should be "actively involved, with expected benefit for both researcher and organisation; the knowledge obtained can be immediately applied; the research is a cyclical process linking theory and practice" (Baskerville and Wood-Harper, 1996, p.239). Thus, the underlying spirit (cf. DeSanctis and Poole, 1994) of action research is one of change through intervention and reflection. Since, action researchers expect not only to solve organisational problems but also to report back on their progress to the academic community, they become the servants of two demanding masters (Sommer, 1994; Kock et al., 1999).

Action Research is operationalised through a cyclical sequence of five steps (cf. Susman and Evered, 1978)(see Figure 1), involving diagnosis of the organisational problem, planning of actions to take, taking of actions, evaluation of the outcomes of the action and specification of lessons learned as a result of the action and its evaluation. These five stages are at the same time informed by the researcher-client infrastructure (RCI) which guides and supports both the researchers and the clients. It includes explicit agreements between the two parties with mutual guarantees as to their behaviour, with specification of data gathering techniques, allocation of responsibilities, and management of expectations. A

carefully developed RCI should help a spirit of shared enquiry to permeate project activities.

Figure 1: Action Research Process Model (after Susman and Evered, 1978).



ZETA

Zeta² is a medium-sized, international accounting firm that employs about two hundred people in its Hong Kong office. Shortly before this project commenced, it appointed a Chief Information Officer (CIO) who was given the remit of bringing the firm into the information age. I³, met the CIO at a seminar jointly organised by the Hong Kong Management Association and an Australian school of management. I subsequently worked as an action researcher in Zeta, intervening in the re-engineering of the firm's customer billing process.

My role involved technical facilitation of a Group Support System (GSS)⁴ that was used to encourage team member participation, and content facilitation in face-

² Zeta is a pseudonym, at the firm's request.

³ The action researcher is referred to in the first person in this narrative.

⁴ GSS are networked, computer-based systems designed to facilitate structured discussion in a group of individuals, who may be communicating face to face or remotely, synchronously or asynchronously (Nunamaker et al., 1991). Group members type their contributions into the GSS, which automatically distributes those contributions to all other group members. If the group considers it appropriate, the

to-face meetings, where I structured meeting activities around the GSS tools. I was interested in this project because it afforded the opportunity of analysing how a GSS, designed to empower group members to freely and actively participate in meaningful discussions, could be applied in an organisational context. Given the expected need for intervention into the problem context, the CIO and I agreed that action research, supported by a GSS, would be the most appropriate method. The detailed instantiation of this GSS and Action Research approach is described in Davison and Vogel (2000).

The BPR project team included six members (3 male and 3 female) who were nominal representatives of their units (tax, insolvency, audit, etc.) in addition to the CIO. Team members were predominantly local or overseas Chinese, though the CIO was a UK expatriate. Over the six months of the project, eleven Canonical Action Research (CAR) cycles were undertaken. Each cycle corresponded to a meeting and the activities associated with that meeting. These activities included brainstorming and discussion of ideas, suggestions about process redesign, and votes on issues in attempts to build consensus. The GSS was used extensively for idea generation and organisation - for example so as to identify the faults of the current billing process and the ideal features of the new billing process - as well as for voting. Often the GSS was used outside the formal confines of the meeting, with team members participating remotely between meetings.

The GSS functioned as a prime source of rich data as it enabled the capturing of many discussions. However, the data captured using the GSS was supplemented by my own notes taken during conversations and unstructured interviews conducted

interactions may be anonymous. In this way, not only do all members of the group have an equal opportunity to participate (not needing to wait their turn to speak), but also they should not feel apprehensive about the reactions of others to their ideas.

by myself with the CIO and the other team members, either in person or via email. These interviews were undertaken in order to tease out specific details that did not fully or clearly emerge during GSS sessions.

The specific interest here lies in the empowerment that the CIO attempted to engender in the team members, and in the psychological enslavement that actually occurred. In the following paragraphs, we first describe the CIO's behaviour in this respect, then describe the reactions of the team members. Material from my notes and interviews, as well as the GSS log, is used to illustrate the positions of the various stakeholders.

The CIO led the project in an assertive fashion, directing discussions but also encouraging team members to instigate new ideas, critique the existing billing process and suggest how it could be improved. In his conversations with me, the CIO repeatedly asserted that he was seeking to empower the members of the BPR project team. He explicitly stated that he favoured open, forthright discussion, believing that problems needed to be surfaced and discussed by the team as a whole. He informed the team members that they “should feel empowered to be as radical as they liked” in re-engineering the billing process. The CIO circulated copies of BPR textbooks to the team members, but he did not provide them with any guidance or training on how to exercise their ‘power’. Furthermore, neither the CIO nor Zeta's rewards system provided any incentive for the team members to participate in the BPR project.

The team members indicated little interest in the project as a whole, privately expressing the view that the re-engineering was the CIO's responsibility, not theirs. Another factor that emerged as a major obstacle to participation in the BPR project was the system of chargeable time at Zeta. As with many similar firms, Zeta

requires its front-line employees to charge the time they spend working to a particular client account. However, the time spent on the BPR project could not be charged to any account, making it "wasted time" in terms of remuneration. This was a significant demotivating factor, as team members tended to minimise the time they spent on project activities, refusing to comment on project reports and occasionally missing meetings altogether. The CIO, however, appeared largely oblivious of the importance of the system of chargeable time, subsequently commenting: "For me personally, chargeable hours are not of importance as I do not do client work. Although I knew that chargeability is used as a measure of performance for client service providers, I did not fully appreciate the influence that it has".

Furthermore, while the CIO was comfortable to engage in a critical evaluation of the billing process, the other team members expressed strong reservations. In general, they were not comfortable airing their opinions in public (even when nominally protected by the anonymity provided by the GSS). One male team member privately observed that the female team members in particular would seldom offer any opinion unless they could be sure that it was 100% true - i.e. an irrefutable fact. Most of their contributions were therefore expressed as questions and clarifications rather than constructive suggestions. This reluctance to contribute clashed with the CIO's stated aim of getting all team members to participate.

In a private conversation with me after the fourth meeting, the CIO expressed his growing frustration with the lack of participation by the project team. Considerable tension developed as the CIO vented his frustration and became more assertive. The team members were clearly uncomfortable with the increasingly confrontational approach taken by the CIO and they reacted by becoming more defensive. On one occasion, I intervened in a heated discussion to suggest that

some cultural confusion might underlie the differences of opinion. This interjection was not appreciated by the CIO; he perceived that his prerogative to lead the group was under threat. After the meeting, he requested that I not intervene in such a fashion again. Given these various clashes of personality and culture which were paralysing the project's progress, I persuaded the CIO to relinquish his control over content discussions in meetings in the last five CAR cycles.

In order to refocus the project on its original process improvement objective, I took several actions that directly contradicted those previously initiated by the CIO. First of all, I intentionally requested individual team members to perform specific activities, rather than waiting for volunteers. I also redesigned the face-to-face meetings to ensure that they were rich in opportunities for GSS-supported idea generation and discussion that could contribute directly to the task. This had the effect of disempowering team members, as they were no longer required to make individual choices about what to do. However, progress on the project accelerated and it was completed successfully.

DISCUSSION

The CIO of Zeta designed the project to re-engineer the customer billing process as an opportunity for team members to work creatively in an atmosphere characterised by free thinking, brainstorming and the generation of mutual consensus. The atmosphere for the project and the nature of the team activities that he envisioned were consistent with his set of cultural values. Significantly, his values were highly consistent with those explicitly mentioned or implicitly assumed in the prescriptive literature on business process improvement (cf. Hammer and Champy, 1993).

The CIO believed that the team members needed to be empowered in order to work effectively and to be able to introduce radical redesigns to the billing process. Unfortunately, he failed to consider adequately what empowerment entailed in the prevailing organisational and societal cultures. Of particular importance was the fact that none of the team members had been given similar authority or responsibility previously. They had been conditioned to follow directives given by their bosses or other senior managers in the organisation. At the very least, the Hong Kong Chinese team members would need some concrete guidance in how to exercise their newly bestowed powers. Bowen and Lawler (1992) prescribe more formal training with the aim of ensuring that the employees have the skills and confidence needed to make substantial contributions to the re-engineering effort, and thereby meet the project leader's expectations.

In addition, the CIO's assertive and confrontational style alienated the project team members who favoured a more subtle, indirect and harmonious approach. The Chinese tend to believe that conflicts should be handled backstage or behind the scenes (Bond, 1986). Indeed, several of the team members privately criticised the CIO. They criticised his arrogance in presuming that he knew best how they should participate in the project as well as his public airing of divisive issues that sparked conflict and made them uneasy. More generally, the CIO failed to reciprocate the 'face enhancing' efforts of the team members. While they adopted tactics of ingratiation, he was unable to demonstrate leadership capabilities or social connections consistent with his high status in the organisation. As a result, the Chinese team members considered the CIO to be insensitive in his relationships with them. In terms of the British case reported by Coombs et al. (1992), the BPR team members were willing but unable to subjugate themselves to the project leader.

Notwithstanding the above, the team members found it impossible to 'resign' their positions. Despite their mental disengagement from the re-engineering effort, they were enslaved by a combination of their deeply embedded values, the respect they had for their bosses who had nominated them to participate, and the positional power of the CIO. Essentially, they were helpless victims of several dominant influences. Given their status in the organisational hierarchy, they had no choice but to accept their new roles and the accompanying responsibilities. A lifelong socialisation to "respect the boss" precluded them from questioning the assignment they had been given while the fear of their boss losing 'face' prevented them from shirking their responsibilities (cf. Ho, 1976). Finally, a collective belief that exposing the mistake of a superior would create disharmony discouraged them from disobeying or even questioning the directives of the CIO directly.

The prevailing cultural values had effectively dictated their behaviour, removing their choice of how to react. They were left with little or no choice and thus put in a position where they became helpless victims of a dominating influence - in this case their socialisation. Social expectations commonly constrain individual actions in hierarchical and collectivistic Chinese societies (Bond, 1986). Chinese superiors tend to be automatically respected because of their positions in the organisation while interpersonal behaviour is shaped by a need to 'save and enhance face' (cf. Martinsons and Westwood, 1997; Redding and Ng, 1982).

The evidence in this case indicates that the organisational culture of Zeta was informed largely by the traditional Chinese values of caution towards innovation and incremental change (cf. Bond, 1986) rather than by the Anglo-American values of assertiveness and radical change (cf. Hammer and Champy, 1993). Consistent with the theory developed by Martinsons and Hempel (1998), this Hong Kong Chinese

organisation found it comparatively difficult to successfully complete a BPR project. Although the CIO had a mandate to improve the business performance of Zeta by revamping its core processes, the ingrained values and practices in the local culture mitigated against radical changes. Moreover, his cultural insensitivity had significant negative yet unintended consequences for his team members.

The CIO's latent assumption that the team members would work effectively, once they were 'empowered', proved to be erroneous. In addition to the cultural dissonance, the team members lacked both vested interest in the task and any compelling motivation to exert themselves beyond the minimum. The CIO approached the executive sponsor of the project team, a senior partner at Zeta, to point out that the company's chargeable time system failed to reward participation in the re-engineering project. This executive responded that Zeta recognised and appreciated the time invested in this initiative. However, the intangible nature of this recognition gave team members little confidence that they were spending their time usefully. Indeed, after the project had been completed, the CIO acknowledged that, changes to reward and motivational structures would be necessary in future re-engineering efforts.

This focus on the more prosaic issues of time (not chargeable) and money (not earned) is significant, in that it augments the notions promulgated by Wilmott (1994, 1995) that employees resist participating in re-engineering teams due to a fear of losing their jobs. The issue of vested interest is also important, since neither the empowerment nor the process improvement literatures seem to have paid much attention to the issue of whether employees actually want to be empowered.

Empowerment is commonly encapsulated as an intrinsically positive characteristic. However, this case study highlights some of the cultural pressures

that may well mitigate against such a position. As it turned out, project success was only achieved when the action researcher intervened. He stripped the team members of their nominal power, acted in a manner calculated to disrupt the group dynamics (cf. Gersick, 1991), and persuaded the CIO to relinquish his control over project content discussion and general facilitation.

The application and effectiveness of specific information technologies can also be influenced by cultural factors. In this case, the GSS was used successfully for idea generation and organisation, activities where the participants did not have to respond to the CIO directly. It was much less successfully used for consensus building, since the Hong Kong Chinese team members preferred to forge consensus through private discussions, rather than engage in potentially divisive debates in public. Although the GSS facilitated more communication than might have occurred had it not been deployed, team members resisted its use in activities where it was incompatible with their cultural norms.

In retrospect, the attempt by the CIO to empower the team members resulted in their psychological enslavement. They were implicitly expected to ignore their cultural preference for hierarchical relationships and asked to take on novel and culturally-inappropriate roles and responsibilities. It was naïve of the expatriate project leader to assume that he could simply allocate power to his Chinese subordinates. More generally, it may be arrogant to assume that the employees would even want to be empowered: empowered people must be willing to accept and use their power appropriately and accountably. Deeply-embedded values in many social and organisational contexts are at odds with employee empowerment.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It has been suggested that instead of diluting management control, empowerment has the potential to reconstitute the nature of this control to the disadvantage of employees (cf. Wilkinson, 1998; Wilmott, 1994; 1995; Wilmott and Wray-Bliss, 1996). The nature of this disadvantage may range from relatively mild inconvenience through much more serious implications, with loss of employment altogether. The case of Zeta reveals additional contradictions and complications by illustrating an attempt to empower employees that paradoxically resulted in their psychological enslavement.

Limitations

The situation reported here was observed in a single organisation. This case study serves our aim to highlight the negative and unintended consequences that can arise as part of business process improvement project. By collecting data from various participants and making personal observations, we were able to cross check information for internal consistency and validity. This enabled a rich and nuanced description of the situation experienced at Zeta. However, this type of intensive case-based research has its limitations. Generalisation beyond similar organisations in similar cultural contexts must be treated with caution. In consequence, replication - both literal and theoretical (cf. Yin, 1984) is necessary.

Implications for Research

This case study does not provide support for the critical literature that suggests business process improvement-type initiatives conceal management's intention to control employees even more than they already do (cf. Wilmott and Wray-Bliss, 1996). However, it does indicate that organisational change initiatives can have unexpected and unintended consequences for reasons that are rooted in societal

and organisational values and norms. Paradoxically, employees may find that they are psychologically enslaved by such initiatives. These findings reconfirm the importance of taking cultural factors at both the societal and organisational level into account when investigating IT-related phenomena, drawing conclusions from such research, and making recommendations based upon those conclusions.

The previously mentioned limitation of case-based research also exposes a key direction for future research. We would recommend larger-scale studies to examine the role of cultural factors (at both the societal and organisational level) on empowerment effects (intended or unintended) in the context of organisational development and change initiatives, and particularly those that use IT with the aim of improving business processes.

Implications for Practice

Tools and methods to empower employees may appear tantalising to the uninitiated, with promises of near magical solutions to organisational problems. The integration of tools such as GSS with popular business process improvement methods, such as BPR, may promise dramatic improvements on key measures of business performance. Such improvements will be very attractive to poorly performing, state owned enterprises in countries like the People's Republic of China and to newly privatised firms all over the world. However, the potential benefits of these tools and methods will depend on the fit between their inherent values and those of the prevailing culture.

Our case study has challenged the universally positive view of employee empowerment and exposed it as overly simplistic. The importance of being sensitive to the cultural context is also evident from studies that found it inappropriate to adopt: anonymous communications using GSS in Singapore (Watson et al., 1994);

decision support technologies in Chinese businesses (Martinsons and Westwood, 1997); and McGregor's theories of work in South East Asia (Hofstede, 1987).

Notwithstanding the potential difficulties, various tools such as GSS and methods such as Action Research can and should be employed in organisational contexts outside the culture where they were developed. Such use may reveal unexpected problems and solutions - advantageous both to the organisation and to researchers investigating the issues. For example, with an Action Research project, the sensitive development and application of a protocol within the researcher-client infrastructure will help to ensure that the rights and responsibilities of key participants are identified from the outset and defined in sufficient detail. Such a protocol may include overt modifications to the 'spirit' of each tool or method to be used so that it does not exert an inappropriate influence over the organisational context. Although action research may deliver solutions unpalatable to the organisational status quo, it is unacceptable to assume from the outset that a given tool or method to be used is inviolable. As in anthropological investigation, one needs to "follow the lie of the land" rather than rigidly adhering to pre-determined techniques and styles of enquiry (cf. Lévi-Strauss, cited in Descola, 1996, p.40).

Even widely-advocated concepts such as employee empowerment have to be considered in terms of their suitability to a specific cultural context. The diversity of employee thoughts and actions arising from their empowerment may be particularly problematic in organisations that have strong corporate cultures, e.g. where things are done the IBM way, and those that operate in societal cultures where traditional hierarchies are highly respected. As illustrated by this case study, inadequate awareness of and attention to cultural considerations can lead to serious negative consequences that are both unexpected and unintended.

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