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Empowering or enslaving? The effects of culture on process improvement in Hong Kong

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The literature on empowerment has a rich tradition, early forbears including Lewin's Action Research and McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y. In the last decade or so, the popularity of BPR/BPI has refocused attention on empowerment, this time of front-line employees in flattened organisations. The enslavement of individuals is not a topic that has received attention, at least in the IS or management research literatures. However, if we take it to mean the enforced and unwanted imposition of working values or practices on individuals, then it provides a useful juxtaposition to the concept of empowerment.

In this abstract, I discuss the case of an accounting firm (Zeta) in Hong Kong which undertook to redesign its customer billing process (see Davison and Vogel, 2000, for a detailed account of the case). As an action researcher, I intervened in the project to introduce changes to the process structure and to facilitate discussion on the topic with a group support system - a tool that is often described in the literature as enabling/empowering all participants to contribute equally.

The project leader, who was also Zeta's CIO, made it clear early on that the team members should constructively critique the current billing process and then contribute to the redesign of the process. Although he explicitly referred to empowerment, he failed to provide the team members with any training or guidance that would help them to act in an empowered manner. As far as I was aware, he did not attempt to understand the critical motivating factors for the team members. Forrester (2000) notes the importance of such intrinsic motivators, e.g. financial rewards, self-actualisation, promotion, altruism, etc. However, under the system of 'chargeable time' that Zeta employs, time spent on the project was not chargeable to any account, and so was seen by team members as time wasted.

Zeta's team members lacked both interest and incentive to participate in the redesign process. Most of the team members grew up in Hong Kong, a society where power distance is relatively large, and so where the unequal distribution of power is taken for granted. The team members did not expect to wield power, nor did they ask for it. Given this cultural context, the process redesign was more properly the responsibility of the CIO.

Whilst the 'spirit' of the process improvement project involved empowering the team members, in reality they were not so much empowered as enslaved. Once co-opted into the project group, they could not realistically escape it (though absenteeism was high) or their new responsibilities. Ultimately, the project moved forwards as I intervened in a manner calculated to disrupt the group dynamics, persuading the CIO to relinquish his control over project content discussion and general facilitation, then by *disempowering* the team members and instead *directing* them to perform certain explicit activities. While they still resisted doing any more than the minimum, the project was completed and a pilot version of the new billing process was subsequently implemented.

Davison, R.M. and Vogel, D.R. (2000) Group Support Systems in Hong Kong: An Action Research Project, *Information Systems Journal*, **10**, 1, 3-20.

Forrester, R. (2000) Empowerment: Rejuvenating a Potent Idea, *Academy of Management Executive*, **14**, 3, 67-80.