VENTURING MAGAZINE

Empowerment

For those of us who work in a corporate environment, you may be familiar with the concept of "empowerment", which was almost a fad a couple of decades ago. But is it still relevant, and what does it matter for our Venturers. Read on.

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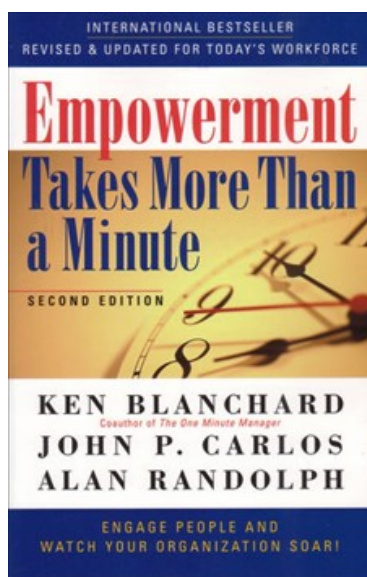
Within companies, "empowerment" was a new way of dealing with employees. The idea basically was that employees would be "empowered" with the ability to make certain decisions on their own, rather than needing to go to a supervisor or manager. There are several works on the topic, but some I feel are useful are by Ken Blanchard. With co-authors, he wrote two books on the topic: "Empowerment takes More than a Minute" (1996, 2001) and "3 Keys to Empowerment" (1999). His recent work, "Leading at a Higher Level" (2006, 2009), which has been mentioned in previous Thoughts, also devoted a chapter to the topic. The first book is probably
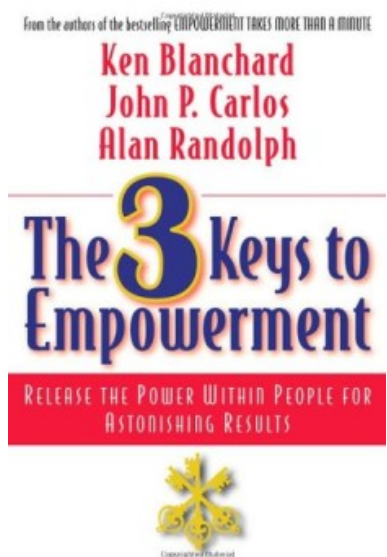
most important, as it introduces the concept and three key elements that make it work. It does so in the style of his "One Minute Management" series, with a fictionalized story. The second was a follow on giving further information on implementation.

The important thing to keep in mind is that empowerment is not "giving power to people." This is (and was) a frequent misunderstanding. Empowerment was always about fully engaging people, allowing them to make use of their own knowledge, experience and motivation to get things done. To allow them to be more than just automatons.

So, what then are the 3 keys. They are: **share information with everyone, create autonomy through boundaries and replace the old hierarchy with self-managed teams.**

And frankly, these should not be radical concepts. I would even say that if you understand the concept of servant leadership, this works within that philosophy. And in membership organizations (and I would include the BSA and our individual units), this is how we should be working already.

"Sharing information with everyone". By and large, why should any information be kept from members. Now, there may be some information that does need to be kept for reasons of privacy (information about BSA employees, for instance) or legality (contracts, court cases and the like). But most information should not be kept hidden. Members should know what is going on in the organization. How it is doing. What are the finances. When information is kept from members, this should be a sign that something is wrong.

"Create autonomy thru boundaries". Well, what are these boundaries. These boundaries are things like purpose, values, goals, roles and the like. Many topics we've covered in past Thoughts. Organizations benefit by defining these things and making sure everyone knows these. These are done thru items like bylaws, rules & regulations, standing rules, goals & objectives, organizational plans and the like. Again, organizations suffer when they fail to define even basic things OR they define them but then either keep them secret from the members or fail to inform their members of them.

"Replace the old hierarchy with self-managed teams". In most companies, you have a top-down "command & control" hierarchy. Many companies have found that by replacing them with self-managed teams and empowered individuals, they are much more successful. Within organizations, the same is true. Having a top-down, command & control structure, where the members have little or no power (other than maybe selecting their leaders), there are problems. When members understand and recognize that it's the members are the ones who have the power and should be the ones involved in decisions that things are better. (you can see this in action in crews were an inexperienced President assumes they make all the decisions, when they just facilitate the decision making of the crew as a whole). Also, most organizations have things being done by committees made up of these members, allowing for more people to be involved and help make things happen, and not leaving it all to the officers. It has the added value of getting more people engaged and allows the organization to benefit from the diverse talent of its membership.

Self-managed team
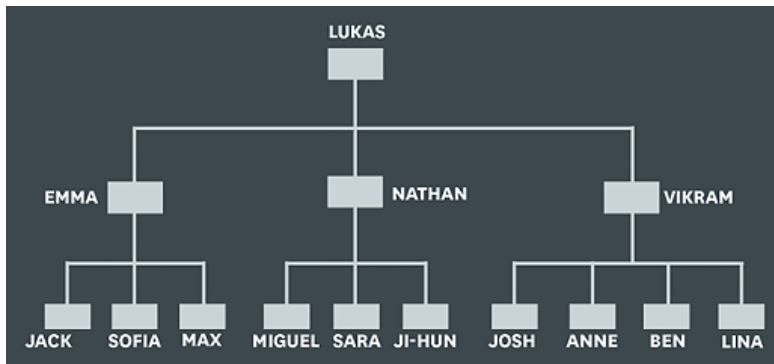
So, while in general the concept of "empowerment" may seem to apply mainly to a business environment, I think that many of them can also be applied to member organizations, which I tried to illustrate above. As noted, the issue is that in member organizations, the members are the ones who should hold the power, but too often organizations do not operate that way (sometimes this is due to the members not understanding that this is how it should be done). Thus the power is often times taken by those who lead or run the organizations.

Taking a different view of all this, empowerment can also be applied to what is known as **"youth empowerment"**. Youth empowerment is about enabling youth to have a say in their development as individuals, to give them a voice in the process, and provide them opportunities to grow and develop as individuals. And is that NOT what we should be doing in Venturing. Youth empowerment takes on several forms as well.

There is the concept of **"student-centered learning-approach"** within education, where the focus is on the needs of the students, rather than what those running the education (teachers and administrators) think it should be. To a degree, the open-ended approach of Venturing, with crews of different specialty, kind of fits in. This allows for the youth to focus on what it is that interests them, and enable them to become more knowledgeable in that area.

There is the concept of **"service learning"**, which is a method that links learning with service. Instead of just doing service (say a service project), you then link that service to an element of learning and reflecting. So doing a Kodiak Challenge that links in service could fall into it. I've heard the term "service learning" more and more of late, but not within the scouting world.

There is the concept of **"youth leadership development"**, which we should all be familiar with within scouting, as this is seen in our courses such as ILSC, NYLT, NAYLE, Kodiak Challenge and the like. Actually helping youth develop as leaders. We both teach them leadership, and we give them the chance to be leaders, not just within the crew, but with opportunities at higher levels (thru VOAs). To use a phase that was briefly used in Wood Badge: **"Teach Them, Trust Them, Let Them Lead."**

So hopefully one can see that there is much more to empowerment. Let's see how we can apply this in our units.