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## **It Takes Two to Empower: The Communicative Context of Empowerment Change in the Workplace**

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## Abstract

Empowerment efforts at the workplace are typically divided into two analytical categories: social-structural and psychological empowerment. These have been extensively researched in terms of their application and handling as well as their outcome and general usefulness in human resource management. However, less research has dealt with *communicative aspects of empowerment* and the communicative interactions between change agents (managers) and recipients (employees) that frame empowerment efforts. To contribute to a more nuanced empowerment discourse, this paper uses a micro-/individual-oriented perspective on empowerment communication and theorizes why empowerment change efforts sometimes end up being counterproductive – leading to *disempowerment* rather than empowerment. As starting point for theorizing empowerment communication, a “basic communicative structure” is identified and analyzed as comprising a contractual and a communicative context, referring to conditions as outlined in written employment contracts on the one hand, and implicitly shared and understood definitions of the social employment situation on the other. Building on sociological and social-psychological theories of communicative interaction, it is argued that focusing on change agents’ and recipients’ mutual *ascriptions of meanings* to each other’s communicative messages might improve empowerment outcomes: A communicative analysis of common empowerment efforts suggests that recipients’ sensemaking of their roles and situations as defined by written employment and/or psychological contracts is not necessarily in line with the communicative meanings they ascribe to the change agents’ actions, and vice versa.

**Keywords:** empowerment, disempowerment, communicative interaction, employee engagement.

**JEL:** J3, L0, L2, M1, Y4

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## Introduction

Empowerment has a good reputation these days. Numerous reports of positive outcomes for work performance, job satisfaction, innovativeness, creativity, and turnover intention (Bhatnagar 2012; Fernandez and Moldogaziev 2013; Laschinger, Finegan, Shamian, and Wilk, 2004; Seibert, Wang, and Courtright 2011; Si and Feng 2012; Zhang and Bartol 2010) confirm the validity of empowerment as a valuable concept. Considering Maynard, Gilson, and Mathieu's (2012:1273) argument that "[o]rganizational designs that incorporate empowerment (...) have proven to be competitively advantageous," it is not surprising that empowerment has turned into what some researchers describe as a "movement" (Mol and Birkinshaw 2014:1296) rather than "just" a practice.

Despite its favorable reputation, however, empowerment change does come with a set of puzzles: first, empowerment efforts are intended to create more autonomous employees, but balancing the level of control vs. autonomy is a delicate act (Collins 1999; Wall, Cordery, and Clegg 2002). Second, the process will lead, by definition, to a redistribution of power—which may leave the powerful with less than they had before. This shift in power relations provokes the question of whether or not power transfers are realistic scenarios in *all* types of situations (Argyris 1998; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan 1998). Third, once employees become part of empowerment efforts, they are faced with balancing role ambiguities due to shifting responsibilities, tasks, and extended autonomy (Cordery et al. 2010; Humborstad and Kuvaas 2013).

The first two puzzles—balancing control and autonomy, and implementing the right amount of power transfers—are of a structural character. The third puzzle is of a psychological character, questioning how empowerment efforts affect recipients. Clearly, the structural elements of empowerment efforts are indispensable. However, the psychological aspects of empowerment, expressed in terms of meaningfulness, self-determination, competence, and impact, as well as general psychological well-being and positive employee attitudes (Wall et al. 2002), constitute the core of "real" empowerment. Yet research suggests that psychological empowerment can be difficult to achieve. During the last few decades, empowerment change has been seen to have rather paradoxical effects, sometimes creating disempowered and cynical rather than empowered employees (Boje and Rosile 2001; Brown 1992; Ciulla 2004; Collins 1999; Eccles 1993; Gvaramadze 2008; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan 1998; Langfred 2007; Lashley and McGoldrick 1994; O'Connor 2001; Rothstein 1995; Spreitzer 2008; Wendt 2001; Wickisier 1997).

The motivation for this paper comes from recent research that strongly suggests that empowerment is more likely to succeed and result in psychologically empowered employees when certain situational aspects are taken into consideration. So far, studies in line with the leadership contingency approach (House 1996; Vazquez-Bustelo and Avella 2017; Vecchio, Justin, and Pearce

2010; Wong and Giessner 2016; Vroom and Yetton 1973) have predominantly focused on questions such as how much empowerment is necessary, enough, or too much (Humborstad, Nerstad, and Dysvik 2014; Langfred 2004; Lee et al. 2016); cultural values influencing the acceptance of empowering strategies as well as the effects of resistance to empowerment (Kirkman and Shapiro 2001; Maynard et al. 2007); procedural fairness and justice (van Dijke et al. 2012); mutual expectations (Humborstad and Kuvaas 2013); task uncertainty (Cordery et al. 2010); and contextual factors such as factory age and size, trade union power, and institutional context (Humborstad 2012; Vazquez-Bustelo and Avella 2017). The effectiveness of empowerment, it seems, depends on specific situational circumstances (Wong and Giessner 2016:4).

Although such critical or postmodern empowerment studies offer valuable insights (see Spreitzer and Doneson 2005), they tend to focus on the situational circumstances of organizations or individuals. More recent research has started to extend the scope to an even larger, macro-oriented sphere (see Humborstad 2012 on institutional contexts). What has been missing from the discussion so far, however, is a micro-oriented, relational point of view that considers the communicative interaction that takes place between change agents and recipients, both prior to and during empowerment efforts, particularly from the recipient's point of view. As Bartunek et al. (2006:203) stress, "Change recipients are not solely passive recipients of change. They play active roles in organizational change processes—making sense of them, having feelings about them, and judging them." These interactive aspects are crucial in any interaction but seem easily forgotten in management contexts, where the focus frequently is put on change recipients' compliance vs. resistance rather than on a comprehension of what makes them react as they do and why, from their perspective (see Oreg et al. 2016).

The theoretical argument put forth in this paper focuses on the communicative interaction taking place during empowerment change efforts. It analyzes the *communicative* point of departure in the change agent–recipient relationship as the lowest common denominator on the basis of which empowering efforts commence. One can think of this common denominator as the "basic communicative structure" of the working relationship. The structure is comprised of both a contractual context and a communicative one. The assumption made here is that, in order to empower, both the change agent and recipient need to ascribe each other's communicative messages with the appropriate, i.e., the same, meanings. A failure to align their sensemaking of communicated empowerment efforts with the basic communicative structure constitutes one mechanism that can explain why empowerment paradoxes occur: empowerment efforts need to make sense to the recipient in order to successfully take hold. The contribution of this paper is to alert scholars to empowerment as a sort of communicative tango: it takes two actors to achieve empowerment, each contributing to the success (or failure) of the relationship through the dance of communication in which they are engaged.

## A Communicative Approach

In many cases, the focus of organizational change agents lies on the outcome (see Bartunek et al. 2006:188). Therefore, it seems rational to approach the topic of organizational change from a structural point of view, asking, for instance, what needs to be done in order to reach a certain goal? How can this goal be achieved more effectively? Which kinds of resources are necessary to reach this goal? Have they been distributed correctly to the designated destinations? These questions are valid and necessary when seen from an economic standpoint. To complement such a purely economic view, psychologists have since long contributed with a more individual-centric approach, which is also reflected in the empowerment strands outlined below. However, what still seems to be missing in empowerment research is a focus on micro-oriented, relational factors, such as interaction and interpersonal communication. Therefore, a *communicative approach* is introduced here to the study of empowerment efforts.

Of central importance to a communicative approach is the way communicative contexts are conceptualized. The term “communication” in itself is not a clear-cut concept. It can be used in a variety of circumstances and may cover a range of different ideas and approaches. Communication includes such obvious aspects as direct speech, written words, gestures, and mimicry. Other features become central when delving into a deeper, more analytic level: as sociological and social-psychological theorists have established, all communication happens in specific communicative and social *contexts* that play a vital role for the course, meaning, and understanding of the communication (Goffman 1959:6). Communication cannot be analyzed without considering *who* the communicating interactants are, what their *social position* in the interaction is, how the interactants *relate* to each other, and how the *circumstances* (also known as the *setting*) look like in the very moment of the interaction. For example, it matters significantly for the communicative context whether the other person in the elevator is the organization’s CEO, a mail carrier, or a co-worker. It matters further whether the interactants are male or female, whether they know each other personally or not, and so on.

The idea of communicative contexts can be traced back to, among others, sociologist Erving Goffman (see his “definition of the situation,” 1959:9f.), who introduced the idea of having and reproducing, that is, *performing*, specific roles in interactions. To be able to behave and communicate in accordance with a role, a person needs to be aware of the relevant role in the given situation, which is usually defined by circumstances outside the individual. Location (e.g., office or home), the presence of active or passive interactants (superior, girlfriend, etc.), and even material items (computer or coffee machine) serve as frameworks for the communicative context and therefore the role an individual is expected to “perform” at any time. In other words, people

will act differently in their roles as parents at a child's football game than when performing their roles as co-workers in a meeting.

Although it is necessary to be aware of the above-mentioned aspects in order for communication to work, they are only the starting point for successful communicative interactions. After all, the main purpose of communication is to transfer *meaning*. The meanings of communicative interactions can shift depending on the setting and the relevant roles for the current interaction.

Communication should not, however, be regarded as consisting of messages that contain an inherent meaning. Rather, understanding communicative interaction is highly dependent on the appropriate *ascription of meanings*: interactants do not receive a finished product from each other but must add meaning to the actions of their interaction partners in order to make sense of them (Blumer 1969:79; Clark 1996; Goffman 1981; Mead [1934] 1967:71ff.). Suppose person A has the relevant knowledge about the setting and roles; A must still ascribe B's message a meaning that is considered appropriate and correct for the particular situation. If co-workers happen to meet at the shopping mall, it is important for each to understand from their interaction whether the other would rather leave the interaction after a few minutes of small talk or appreciate an invitation to continue their shopping together.

Since the ascription of meaning to communication is the starting point for an appropriate *reaction* of person A to the interaction, failing to ascribe the meaning that B intended to convey will most likely result in misunderstandings and/or conflict (Goffman 1967:17). Accordingly, the analysis presented here will treat the ability to ascribe "correct" communicative meanings as the focal point of communicative interaction.

It can be assumed that two interactants most likely understand each other's communicative messages in the form of transferred meanings if they share a common ground, consisting of knowledge of each other's roles in the given situation as well as the outer circumstances and material "props" (Goffman 1959:72f., 144f.) that define and frame the setting. Thus, as in the case of any other interaction, successful empowerment means the agent and the recipient share relevant methods of ascribing meaning (see Garfinkel 1967) based on their information about the present communicative context. Such acts of sensemaking need to include questions such as these: who defines who is to be empowered, and how is this decided? Who decides with which kind of resources someone will be empowered? Are there any strings attached? If so, who defined them, and are they communicated clearly?

All these aspects have a significant impact on the appropriate ascription of communicative meanings between the change agent and recipient. If the agent's and recipient's knowledge and/or interpretation of the answers to these questions differ, the situation can lead to reciprocal misunderstandings as well as feelings of disempowerment on the part of the recipient.

# Workplace Empowerment and Its Relational Context

## Workplace Empowerment

In its most general sense, empowerment in the workplace “involves giving employees the autonomy to make decisions about how they go about their daily activities” (Humborstad and Perry 2011:326). To do so in an effective manner, employees need to be given resources that enable them to make informed decisions; this, in turn, requires involving employees in information-sharing and decision-making processes, as well as fostering and leaving room for their autonomy (Bowen and Lawler 1995; Carless 2004; Conger and Kanungo 1988; Farr-Wharton, Brunetto, and Shacklock 2011; Guthrie 2001; Kanter 1977). Research on empowerment has established that *structural* practices typically entail aspects such as: (1) pay based on skills, knowledge, or competency; (2) participative decision-making (including self-managing teams); (3) flat, decentralized organizational structures; (4) an open flow of information (upwards and downwards); and (5) training (building skills and extending abilities) (Spreitzer 2008:56).

The structural type of empowerment is complemented by *psychological* empowerment, which aims at improving recipients’ self-image, feelings of motivation, and their experiences and sense of self-efficacy (Bandura 1977; Conger 1989; Thomas and Velthouse 1990). Psychological empowerment typically incorporates the following elements: (1) *meaning*, referring to the value recipients ascribe to their work in relation to their values, beliefs, ideals, behavior, and standards; (2) *competence*, referring to recipients’ sense of self-efficacy and belief in their ability to accomplish certain work goals; (3) *self-determination*, referring to recipients’ feelings that they have a choice and the possibility of acting autonomously in work-related decisions, methods, etc.; and (4) *impact*, referring to recipients’ feelings of making a difference and of having the opportunity to influence work-related outcomes in connection with, for example, strategic or administrative issues (Spreitzer 1995:1443f.; 2008:57).

Although these two types of empowerment are treated as separate analytical categories, in many cases there will be a significant interdependence between the two. Structural empowerment efforts might not be successful if recipients do not *feel* empowered (see Spreitzer and Doneson 2005:316). In turn, feelings of initial motivation to do a good job and a high sense of self-efficacy might be stifled by a lack of autonomy, information, or involvement. In fact, to create a more empowered workforce, structural empowerment efforts might help to convince recipients of the organization’s commitment to empowerment (counteracting criticism of being “all talk, no action”) before taking the next step toward psychological empowerment. In the following, the focus will be how the relational context can influence structural empowerment efforts,



leading them to risk having unintended, even negative, impacts on psychological empowerment.

### The “Basic Communicative Structure” of the Workplace

No matter which kind of resources are provided as part of an empowerment effort, their distribution is always part of interactions and takes place within a certain communicative structure. Therefore, empowerment cannot be self-supporting. The success of empowerment efforts depends significantly on the communicative structure in which empowerment efforts are embedded.

In every interaction, the communicative structure plays a significant role; understanding how this structure affects empowering efforts can contribute to improving their success. Therefore, the preceding as well as accompanying communicative processes should be taken into account when analyzing the implementation or outcomes of empowerment efforts. It is useful to distinguish two elements as the basis of the communicative structure of workplaces: the contractual context, referring to employment and psychological contracts; and the communicative context, referring to assumptions about workplace relations.

#### **The Contractual Context**

The first element, the contractual context, is a ubiquitous part of employer-employee relations, yet its fundamental importance for *communicative interaction* between the change agent and recipient is often overlooked. Formal employment contracts ordinarily include specifics about payment, work hours, holidays, and sick leave (Brown et al. 2000). In some cases, they may comprise details about the employee’s position within the organization, the types of job assignments associated with the position, the existence of training opportunities, and possibly the fact that the employee is responsible for the correct execution of assignments (but see Fehr and Gächter 1998:848, who argue that “[t]he obligations of both employer and employee are left unspecified in many states of the world”). The fact that both employer and employee sign a formal employment contract makes this instrument a significant and official part of their shared contractual context.

Despite their undoubtedly significant function, however, formal contracts are primarily treated as documented agreements about obligations that can be enforced by law. Historically, aspects entailed in contractual relationships *other* than those formally prosecutable have been overlooked and neglected. It could be argued that Durkheim, in *The Division of Labour in Society* ([1893] 1997:149–175), presented an outline of what would later be called “psychological contracts” when he argued that, alongside formal contracts, there follow *implicit* obligations and expectations that also need to be taken into consideration in contractual contexts: “(...) [T]he contract is not sufficient by itself, but is only possible because of the regulation of contracts, which is of

*social origin*. [The contract] has not, and cannot have, any power to bind save under certain conditions that need to be defined” ([1893] 1997:162, emphasis added). These conditions “of social origin” refer to aspects such as situations, circumstances, and consequences that “go beyond the limits of the contract itself” (ibid.:161): for instance, formal employment contracts do not include passages declaring the employee’s acceptance of hierarchies in the organization or of the obligation to readily answer to the superior’s demands. Nor do such contracts focus on establishing common ground regarding the employee’s competence—its existence is seen as self-evident once it comes to signing a formal employment contract. These conditions are taken for granted as generally known and accepted elements accompanying work relations and are, at best, addressed in job interviews and face-to-face interactions. Yet the fact that they are not included in formal employment contracts should not lead to the conclusion that they are external to the employer’s and employee’s contractual context. They can, in fact, be considered valid and essential parts of the employer-employee relationship that are usually incorporated in *psychological* contracts.

Robinson and Rousseau describe psychological contracts as “[an individual’s] belief that some form of a promise has been made and that the terms and conditions of the contract have been accepted by both parties” (1994:246). Psychological contracts contain, first, transactional elements such as a common understanding of pay and performance. Second, they also include relational elements which are more “dynamic and socioemotional rather than economic in nature” (Isaksson et al. 2010:698). A crucial communicative aspect entailed in the relational part of psychological contracts is the mutual “psychological” understanding of what it means to sign a formal employment contract. A signed formal employment contract indicates that both parties accept and respect the conditions laid out in it. Both types of contracts are based on a belief in the function and meaning of employment contracts; however, the psychological contract predominates insofar as a violation of the formal employment contract could have consequences for the employee’s belief in an intact psychological contract (Dabos and Rousseau 2004:55), but this might not apply vice versa.

In situations where formal employment contracts are entirely absent, the significance of psychological contracts becomes even more prominent: in such cases, the psychological contract involves all verbally agreed-upon as well as silently assumed details in relation to the employment. However, for present purposes, this analysis assumes the existence of both formal employment contracts and psychological ones, since both are usually present in large organizations, and the risks involved in empowerment are higher the larger the organization is.

## The Communicative Context

The contractual context is often taken for granted to such an extent that it is easy to lose sight of the communicative understanding necessary for keeping the basic functionality of such contractual interactions intact. Seen from a communicative point of view, a considerable amount of shared knowledge has to exist between the employer and the employee in order to be able to ascribe the social interaction of “employment” the appropriate communicative meaning. The analysis proposed here suggests that the communicative context of the workplace entails five general conditions that are applicable to most workplaces and employer-employee relations and which need to be ascribed the appropriate communicative meaning by both employer and employee to make a work relation possible. As will be shown further on, these five general conditions are also mirrored in the five structural empowerment practices as mentioned above.

The most basic assumption of employer-employee relations concerns the understanding and appropriate interpretation of the idea of “work” in general: both the employer and the employee share the common ground of knowing that most people need to work in order to support themselves. In turn, employers are in need of people who are willing to work for them. The cultural knowledge of these facts (see Swidler 1986) enables individuals to ascribe certain terms and activities, such as “job-hunting,” “job ads,” “job interviews,” and so on, the same and “correct” communicative meaning. They know, for instance, that job ads provide opportunities for people to get employed and for employers to hire new employees; that they need to respond to job ads in an appropriate manner to get the application process going; and that a certain behavior will be expected of both employer and applicant during an interview. Based on these initial shared assumptions, it is suggested that five general conditions follow, of which both employer and employee can be assumed to be aware.

The first general condition is the fact that employer and employee enter an *exchange relationship*: the employer has to attend to the role as the one who needs to have work done and who, in exchange, compensates the employee for performing the work. In turn, the employee needs to know that he or she will be expected to fulfill the duties included in the role of being an employee in this particular organization (see Fehr and Gächter 1998). It is necessary for both parties to have shared knowledge about the possibility of negotiating conditions such as salary or hours, as well as how to negotiate (which includes the comprehension of different compensation systems), and for both employer and employee to accept the most basic condition, that is, an exchange agreement of work for payment.

Second, both employer and employee have to interpret correctly what it means to agree on a certain *position* for the employee within the organization. No matter if it is as a manager or an assembly-line worker, the employee needs

to know what it means to accept the assignment of one particular job position, its relevant responsibilities, and the specific role and expectations that come with it.

Accepting the fact that one is assigned a position within the greater whole of the organization implies a third general condition on which employer and employee have to agree and to which they must ascribe the appropriate communicative meaning: the acceptance of *hierarchies* in the organization and the fact that the employee most likely will have to answer to one or several superiors. This includes the employee's shared knowledge that the superior has, within certain limits, the right to tell the employee what to do and how to do it.

With the employee being assigned a certain position within the hierarchy of the organization, a fourth general condition arises, accepting *responsibility for productivity*. The employer and the employee share the knowledge that it is the employee's role to fulfill whatever work tasks accompany the position in question. In other words, the employee is aware of the responsibility he or she has for the successful execution of relevant work-related processes within a given time frame.

Finally, a fifth general condition is the assumption that both the employer and the employee ascribe the same meaning to the notion of *competence* in the given situation. That is, they agree that a certain kind of competence is needed for the job at hand, that the employee in fact has that very competence, and that he or she is thus capable of taking on responsibility for productivity and relevant work assignments.

For an employment relation to make sense, employer and employee must be able to assume mutual knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of these five general conditions. They create a communicative context that includes roles and corresponding role expectations, which can either be *implied* in the employer-employee relationship, for example, in the form of psychological contracts, or else *expressed explicitly* in formal employment contracts.

Understanding the contractual context is only possible in combination with the appropriate communicative context: in line with Blumer (1969), Garfinkel (1967), Goffman (1959) and Mead ([1934] 1967), it is only through the shared foundational knowledge about the communicative meaning behind otherwise seemingly random actions that employer and employee can establish a working relationship. Together, the contractual and the communicative context, along with their five general conditions, constitute the "basic communicative structure" of the workplace.

Table 1 summarizes which aspects of the mutual understanding between employer and employee are usually captured in psychological and/or formal employment contracts.

**Table 1.** Basic communicative structure of the workplace.

Basic Communicative Structure of the workplace	
Communicative Context	Contractual Context
exchange agreement	formal employment contract and/or psychological contract
working position	formal employment contract and/or psychological contract
hierarchies	psychological contract
responsibility for productivity	formal employment contract and/or psychological contract
competence	psychological contract

## A Communicative Analysis of Workplace Empowerment

If the basic communicative structure (BCS) is the foundation on which empowerment efforts rest, then the intersection of empowerment initiatives and the BCS is the realm where the communication of empowerment runs the risk of initiating negative experiences. To explicate how the BCS helps identify critical communicative situations, it is useful to analyze the five structural empowerment practices, discussed earlier, in relation to the BCS. The analysis outlines major pitfalls that may be entailed in the communication of empowerment efforts, rendering them counterproductive, and highlights possible negative effects of structural empowerment efforts on psychological empowerment outcomes.

**(1) Pay based on skills, knowledge, or competency.** The idea of skill-based pay (SBP), also known as knowledge- or competency-based pay, is often summarized by the phrase, “pay the person, not the job.” SBP is defined as setting “pay rates based on how many skills and competencies employees have, or jobs they potentially can do, not on the job they hold” (Giancola 2011:220). Approaching SBP as a change effort from a communicative point of view identifies the ascription of meaning as a key problem. One of the vital issues for an employer and employee to agree on is the definition, measurement, and evaluation of relevant “skills” (Hofrichter and Spencer 1996; Lawler 1996; 2000). If congruence in this respect fails, there is a heightened risk that SBP efforts will be considered to be inconsistent in the evaluation of

skills; this, in turn, might lead recipients to experience feelings of injustice, unfairness, and dissatisfaction (see Lee, Law, and Bobko 1999).

Furthermore, SBP change efforts also entail new roles and role expectations insofar as the new system is supposed to motivate recipients to learn and develop new skills, thus contributing to better performance (Lawler and Ledford 1986:57). Since the acquisition of skills might lead to improved ways of doing one's job and thus to a better salary, recipients' roles might now include responsibilities such as developing one's competencies and skills, being flexible about working positions, accepting changes in the hierarchy, or taking on different work tasks. For recipients' ascriptions of meaning to concur with those intended by the empowering agents' in this context, recipients must be able to recognize these possible changes in their roles and to accompany new role expectations (see Goffman 1959). Moreover, ascribing the appropriate meaning to such empowerment efforts also entails anticipating possible consequences in case recipients are unwilling or incapable of acquiring new skills. They may wonder if a rejection of new roles and attached expectations will lead to a loss in job security or future pay.

Given such circumstances, the premises on which recipients chose to accept a job offer and which were negotiated communicatively through a formal employment and/or psychological contract have clearly changed. Such changes may also lead to an experienced breach of the exchange relation that was agreed on initially. On the level of psychological empowerment, recipients might feel that the seemingly voluntary decision to acquire new skills is turning into an implicit obligation. Obligations leave little room for self-determination except in terms of *which kinds* of skills to acquire, not *whether* to acquire any at all.

**(2) Participative decision-making.** From a communicative point of view, empowerment efforts that are intended to provide recipients with autonomy regarding decision-making, resources, handling of information, and so on risk being ascribed differing communicative meanings by change agents and recipients. While change agents hope to increase recipients' engagement, motivation, and, ultimately, performance (Markos and Sridevi 2010), recipients might interpret the inclusion in new and greater decision-making processes as an unwelcome change of their contractual and communicative contexts: greater autonomy could imply direct or indirect changes in terms of work tasks, hierarchical structures, and areas of responsibility. Often it is the change agent, not the recipient, who decides in which areas the recipient will be granted autonomy. This might lead to the change agent choosing areas of increased responsibility and influence for the recipient with which the latter might not necessarily feel comfortable. Failing to make sense to the recipient, such changes could possibly lead to increased stress due to greater role ambiguity and role overload (Shultz, Wang, and Olson 2009) as well as alterations in cooperation, coordination, and communication (Dahl 2011:253). In terms of psychological empowerment, contradictory ascriptions of meaning to the

communicative messages entailed in participative decision-making efforts can have negative consequences on cognitive aspects, such as the feeling of competence, and thus be experienced as disempowerment. Experiencing the demands of new and extended roles as stressful and overwhelming could lead to a diminished sense of security, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (see Cast and Burke 2002:1048ff.).

**(3) Flat organizational structures.** Frequently, hierarchical changes are accomplished by the introduction of self-managed teams, an empowerment effort that might lead to a variety of differing, even conflicting sensemaking alternatives, if change agents fail to communicate clearly. On the one hand, self-managed teams imply more freedom and less dependence on superiors. On the other, each recipient no longer has sole responsibility—and therefore control—over his or her own work, since other team members have the right to intervene. Recipients can now be held responsible for the activities of other team members. This increases the responsibility of recipients while at the same time reducing the individual recipient's impact on the overall outcome.

A communicative point of view reveals that recipients might not primarily regard the idea of flattened structures as the most important impact of empowerment change; instead, they may focus on different questions, such as their agreed-upon responsibility for their own productivity, type of work tasks and assignments, scope of individual action, as well as the basis of the exchange agreement itself, in case recipients fear work intensification due to changed structures (on negative effects of self-managing teams, see, for example, Barker 1993).

In terms of psychological empowerment, an unwanted increase of responsibility could lead to questioning the meaningfulness of one's job as well as to feelings of a lack of self-determination, impact, and control (see Sewell 2001 on the myth of teamwork's empowering effects). The promise of more freedom in decision-making may easily be made; however, the reality of flat hierarchies is not equal to *no* hierarchies (see Kühl 2001). Recipients might be disappointed once they realize that they are still working under the premise of hierarchical structures.

**(4) Open flow of information.** Spreitzer describes an open flow of information as creating transparency through a downward and an upward flow of information. The downward flow includes information such as “clear goals and responsibilities, strategic direction, competitive intelligence, and financial performance in terms of costs, productivity, and quality” (Spreitzer 2008:56); the upward flow informs the management about employee attitudes and ideas (ibid.). She argues, “Those with better information can work smarter and thus make better decisions” (ibid.).

Ensuring a *downward* flow of accurate information is tightly interwoven with the idea of participative decision-making as well as self-managed teams and flat organizational structures. To be part of efficient decision-making pro-

cesses and self-managed teams, employees require correct and adequate information from the top. For an *upward* flow of information to have a positive effect on employees, managers' wish for it needs to be carefully and clearly communicated in order to achieve an adequate communicative process: employees need to trust their managers and, especially, to feel that conveying information on problematic issues is truly appreciated and "safe to voice" (Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin 2003:1473). Furthermore, information must reach managers unobstructed, who must react to it in a respectful, serious manner.

Failing to communicate downward or to take upward communication seriously may challenge the organization's credibility, commitment, and seriousness concerning their change efforts. Recipients might feel disrespected in their agential options and hindered in the execution of their tasks; they might also feel afraid of sanctions or disrespected in that their opinions do not seem to matter (Schirmer, Weidenstedt, and Reich 2012). Ascribing these kinds of meaning to the change agents' communicative messages could lead to questioning the validity of the contractual and communicative agreements—and possibly the risk of alienating recipients. Disempowerment on a psychological level might be the result: recipients may experience a loss of self-determination and impact when they are afraid to speak up, not feeling considered or taken seriously, which in turn may lead to questioning the meaningfulness of their jobs.

**(5) Training.** Advanced vocational trainings or workshops are popular efforts to improve aspects such as motivation, a sense of self-efficacy, and doing a meaningful job—or simply to have the necessary competence to execute one's work assignments. Although recipients might not generally have negative attitudes toward acquiring new knowledge, they may find it difficult to make "positive" sense of these kinds of change efforts for two reasons: first, in cases where the type of education or training is chosen by the change agents rather than the recipients, the latter may experience the communicative messages entailed in "not getting to have a say" as paternalistic and as questioning their capability to know themselves which competencies they have or not (see Weidenstedt 2016). In the eyes of recipients, managers seem to communicate that they know better how to empower and motivate recipients than recipients know themselves (on paternalism, see Archard 1990; Dworkin 1983; Sartorius 1983). Recipients may thus experience a lack of self-determination and trust in their competencies—counteracting a feeling of psychological empowerment.

**Table 2.** Communicative analysis of workplace empowerment.

Communicative	Structural		Negative outcome on:
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context	empowerment efforts	Discrepancies in the ascription of meaning	psychological empowerment dimensions	contractual context perception
exchange agreement	skill-, knowledge-, or competency-based pay (SBP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· definition and measurement of skill</li> <li>· increased responsibility for personal development</li> <li>· job insecurity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· self-determination</li> </ul>	breach of formal and/or psychological contract
working position	participative decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· extending boundaries</li> <li>· increased responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· competence</li> </ul>	
hierarchies	flat organizational structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· increased responsibility</li> <li>· more vs. less freedom</li> <li>· more vs. less control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· meaning</li> <li>· self-determination</li> <li>· competence</li> <li>· impact</li> </ul>	
responsibility for productivity	open flow of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· increased responsibility</li> <li>· decreased influence or impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· meaning</li> <li>· self-determination</li> <li>· impact</li> </ul>	
competence	training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· relevance</li> <li>· paternalism</li> <li>· workload</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· self-determination</li> <li>· impact</li> </ul>	

Studies have shown that trainings aiming at improving competence are most effective when the training is more relevant for the recipient (Burke and Hutchins 2007). They have further shown that trainees who experienced the training as relevant had a higher level of transfer in terms of their newly acquired skills (Axtell, Maitlis, and Yearta 1997). Therefore, to avoid unfavorable communicative discrepancies, it may be best to include recipients in the choice of trainings and to ensure “clear communication between supervisors and employees about the benefits derived through training” (Guthrie and Schwoerer 1994:416).

Second, sending recipients to trainings and educational courses can cause differences in terms of interpreting the conditions and scope of such efforts: will the necessary expenditure of time for educational trainings be incorporated as part of the usual workload in its designated timeframe, or will it be an activity on top of the usual workload, possibly extending normal working hours? Not communicating this clearly could lead recipients to assume that they are expected to work harder and/or longer for the same compensation. This might contradict previously discussed aspects of the basic communica-

tive structure, such as the exchange agreement and responsibilities, and consequently lead to feelings of disempowerment that diminish the recipients' self-determination and impact.

Table 2 summarizes how the implementation of structural empowerment efforts in the context of the basic communicative structure can lead to discrepancies in the ascription of meaning and what kind of negative impact such discrepancies can have on aspects of psychological empowerment.

## Discussion and Implications

The aim of this paper has been to provide a theoretical analysis of the relationship between change agents and recipients by using a *communicative* point of departure for empowerment efforts. As discussed, the lowest common denominator of this relationship consists of a contractual context and a communicative context. Taken together, this basic communicative structure can be regarded to be the foundation on which empowerment efforts rest. For such efforts to be fruitful, the change agents' as well as the recipients' ascription of communicative meanings need to align with each other.

However, as the analysis shows, empowerment change efforts entail several communicative challenges. First, agents and recipients might focus on different interests. While agents' natural focus lies on future outcomes (e.g., motivated staff, better performances, and greater profit), recipients' focus may be on the past and present (e.g., original agreements, assumed status, and present work conditions) and on the extent to which empowerment efforts might change their current situation (see Bartunek et al. 2006:188). Second, although members of an organization's management level might be convinced to use suitable tools in order to empower its staff, recipients might not assign the intended positive meaning to the agents' communicative messages. Such differences can, in turn, have negative consequences on the relationship between agents and recipients, especially if recipients experience these differences as a violation of the psychological contract (Morrison and Robinson 1997; Robinson 1996; Turnley and Feldman 2000). Third, such perceived contractual breaches can be experienced as psychologically disempowering: recipients might feel distressed and disrespected in their role as a relevant and active part of the work relationship.

There are several implications of this analysis for further research on organizational change, empowerment in particular, as well as for steps organizations might take to improve their empowerment outcomes and prevent them from being counterproductive. The analysis presented in this paper brings to light the relevance of a micro-oriented perspective on empowerment and organizational change, focusing on the relational aspects of the ascription of meaning in communication and interaction. It also shows the importance of

considering the recipients' points of view *prior* to empowerment efforts rather than focusing solely on their reactions to already implemented efforts. Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates that change agents can benefit from avoiding the assumption that all recipients will prefer the same changes that many others do. This insight, in turn, asks for empirical research, for instance, by investigating differences in empowerment preferences for different groups of employees, whether in terms of hierarchy or tasks in the workplace or in terms of their private life or socio-economic situations (family vs. single, young vs. old, low vs. high income, level of education, etc.).

Since this paper is built on general assumptions regarding working conditions and employment contracts, the analysis might not be applicable to all workplace environments, let alone all industries, businesses, or locations. Here, too, research could gain insights from empirical studies, exploring whether there are differences and, if so, what their implications are for empowerment efforts. It is hoped that this paper can serve as a starting point for future research by broadening perspectives on the concept of empowerment beyond discussions that have mostly been concerned with structural and psychological aspects to also include a *relational* viewpoint. After all, it takes two to tango—and it also takes two to successfully empower.

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