

The Effects of Staff Empowerment on Supervisory Relations, Burnout and Job Satisfaction: A Comparative Case Study of Two American Prisons

J Forbes Farmer, Ph.D.

Franklin Pierce University

40 University Drive

Rindge, New Hampshire 03461

USA

E-mail: Farmerjf@Franklin Pierce.edu, Phone: 603-899-4261

Abstract

This comparative case study assesses the effects of an empowered staff management model on staff perceptions of the delegation of authority, opportunities to participate in decision making, supervisory relations, prison management, job satisfaction and burnout. Indices of staff work environment were created by factor analysis of responses of 149 staff to organizational climate surveys. Bivariate analysis showed that the decentralized model provided a significant difference for only two out of six indices. Staff generally reported more positive relations with management under a flatter organizational structure that is part of an empowered staff management model. When two empowered staff sites were compared, it was found that the delegation of authority and relationship with supervision were significant effects of empowerment. The effects on staff burnout and job satisfaction were not significant.

Keywords: Staff Empowerment, Job Satisfaction, Supervisory Relations, Organizational Theory

1. Introduction

Staff in nonprofit organizations are often frustrated, have negative attitudes towards their supervisors, are burnt out and have little job satisfaction. Research has shown that this sad tale is partially attributable to staff having little control over their work environment. That is, staff are not empowered through decentralized management or the delegation of authority to make timely decisions in the interests of their clients. Instead, untimely decisions are frequently made by managers further up the bureaucratic chain who do not know the particulars of a case. The questions posed by this theoretically driven research is whether the empowerment of staff does, indeed, decrease burnout, increase job satisfaction, improve staff relations with supervisors and with management in general. If staff empowerment does have a positive effect on these issues, under what conditions does it work?

2. Organizational Theory

Staff is said to be empowered when there is a delegation of authority and distribution of opportunities to participate in the decision-making from the top level to the bottom levels of an organization (Hennestad, 2000; Ismail, Sulaiman & Yusuf, 2011; Tjosvold & Sun, 2006). Empowerment is based on the assumption that decisions need not, and should not, always be made at the top of the organization (Galbraith, 1973; Von Simson, 1990). Authority should be given to the managers who are close to the problem area and thus more informed, and kept away from managers who are more isolated (Hennestad, 2002). This delegation of authority allows decisions to be made on a more timely basis than those going through several layers of management.

In general, staff-empowered organizations tend to be characterized by greater communication between upper and lower management and an increased capacity to respond to the environment (Abu-Jarad, Yusof & Nikbin, 2010; Hennestad, 2000). The authority that is delegated often goes to a team, or work group, rather than to an individual. The delegation of authority implies the delegation of decision making, but the amount of delegated authority and the opportunities to participate in decision making can vary. There can be, for example, little delegated authority, but widespread participation in decision making (Lincoln & Zeitz, 1980). Lower level involvement can range from consultation to the manager, to limited input in the decision, to full responsibility for the choice of action to be taken. The benefits of empowered work groups and flatter management structures in organizations have become a major focus of the applied behavioral sciences, although the use of these organizational models is not new. It has been recognized that small groups can better meet the social and psychological needs of their members than can a larger, more impersonal bureaucratic system (Boone & Hendricks, 2009). It has also been found that empowerment, because of the opportunities it offers for participation in decision making, can lead to improved group member satisfaction (Boone & Hendricks, 2009; Hatvany & Gladstein, 1982; Hennestad, 2000).

And empowerment has produced a more positive social climate in foreign countries and companies (Galle & Leahy, 2009; Gill, Mathur, Sharma & Bhutani, 2011; McLaurin, 2009). Mutual trust has been increased between the management and the worker (Akbar, Yousaf, Haq & Hunjra, 2011; Arnetz & Blomkvist, 2007). This is certainly consistent with the human relations school of management as represented by Maslow (1954), McGregor (1960), Likert (1961) and Herzberg (1966), because empowerment provides staff with more responsibilities and autonomy, and thus creates a climate which promotes personal growth for those involved. McGregor's (1960) management theory offers a perspective from which the potential benefits of empowerment can be analyzed. He analyzed organizational approaches toward people by proposing two alternative sets of assumptions that managers make about human nature. Under "Theory X" assumptions, people are believed to be lazy and incapable of self-control and self-discipline. Thus, organizations employ a system of centralized authority and control. Under "Theory Y" assumptions, on the other hand, people are primarily self-motivated and self-controlled. Organizations that operate under "Theory Y" assumptions have greater decentralization of authority, less reliance on coercion and control, and more participation in the decision-making process.

There is considerable agreement in the behavioral science literature that staff empowerment can benefit the participants as well as the organization that adopts this policy. Being a valued group member not only results in a sense of power, but job satisfaction (Stanley, 2011; Vasugi & Manicka, 2011; Yao & Cui, 2010), security and friendship (Raquib, Anantharaman, Eze & Murad, 2010). The organization benefits from the resultant increase in group member motivation and individual and group productivity, as well as from increased problem-solving ability and commitment to the organization (Tjosvold & Sun, 2006). The benefits of empowerment have been widely extolled (e.g., Chacar & Surysekan, 2009; Kauffeld, 2006; Vasugi & Manicka, 2011), and the management model has become widespread in many human service organizations and corporations to rectify low productivity from people formerly without access to the power to get things done (e.g., Chaleff 1998; Siddique, Khan & Fatima, 2011). Cannon and Edmondson (2001) found that people who felt powerless became excessively controlling, rules-minded and territorial.

Benefits of staff empowerment include the enhancing of organization responsiveness to client needs, reducing some of the alienating processes of bureaucracy, increased life satisfaction and sense of well-being among employees, the facilitating of meaningful and viable relationships among workers at different levels, increased worker satisfaction with various aspects of the work place, and enhancement of commitment and morale (Vasugi & Manicka, 2011). Chacar and Suryekar (2009) found that while empowerment in human service organizations was associated with lower rates of productivity, it increased morale. It has also been cited as a way of breaking down barriers between departments (Ismail et al, 2011; Kanter, 1987; Siddique et al., 2011). Staff empowerment is by no means a panacea for all management problems. In fact, empowerment can create new problems. It has been found that failures with staff empowerment frequently occur because of the way it is implemented. If employees are pressured into participating when they have not interest in doing so, they can become resentful towards their supervisor (Galle & Leahy, 2009; Sashkin, 1984). In addition, participants in the joint decision-making process often flounder when there is no clear direction (Chacar & Suryekar, 2009), or become discouraged if the group leader dominates the decision-making process (Siddique et al., 2011).

Staff adjustment to empowerment can also be fraught with problems. Siddique et al. (2011) found tension between new participative systems and traditional organizational hierarchies if extra funds did not follow the new empowerment model. Researchers (Chacar & Suryekar, 2009; Stevenson & Gumpert, 1985) have cited the difficulty of accommodating staff empowerment within an organization used to stability and control. Another study (Muczyk & Reimann, 1987) suggests that the model has been oversold at the expense of the follow-up. It was found that employees in small organizations, who were given increased opportunities to participate in decision making, often lacked the initiative and experience necessary to execute the decisions. Managers who supervised the decision-making group often had to step in and follow up to ensure that decisions were carried out. Staff morale went down when the managers did this (Yao & Cui, 2010). Sashkin (1984), while calling staff empowerment an "ethical imperative" and fully supportive of it, warns that there are psychological, organizational and environmental contingencies that must be considered in evaluating the effects of the model. These include the attitudes, values, and expectations of organization members, the degree to which the design of the work makes employees depend on one another, and governmental regulations. The idea that staff empowerment is effective only under certain conditions has support in traditional organizational research (Chacar & Suryekar, 2009).

In addressing psychological contingencies, Vroom (1973) found that efforts to generate participative involvement failed if the organization members resisted participation. Chacar and Suryekar (2009) show clearly that production and morale can benefit from “less close” supervision, but that efforts to increase participative involvement will not likely succeed if employees have low trust in managers who are seen as autocratic. Nor is success likely if supervisors resist employee involvement (Klein, 1984). Staff empowerment can also fail if people in control of the organization have an insincere commitment to the philosophy (Siddique et al., 2011). McGregor (1960) noted, “The not infrequent failure of such ideas as these to work as well as expected is often attributable to the fact that a management has ‘bought the idea’ but applied it within the framework of Theory X and its assumptions” (p. 277).

3. Research Methodology

Prior to the collection of data for this comparative study of the staff in two American state prisons, it was reasonable to expect that (1) the staff designated as “empowered” would perceive more delegation of authority and more opportunities to participate in decision making than “non-empowered” staff, and “empowered” staff would evaluate more highly their work environment (relations with supervision, prison management, job satisfaction, burnout, and working with inmates) than “nonempowered” staff. To test these theories a questionnaire was adapted, with permission, from a survey that has recently been used to assess prison organization climates in the Federal prison system.

4. Participants

The participants were 149 staff from East and West, two medium-security American prisons in New England (pseudonyms are used). These staff had been designated by upper management at each prison as being either “empowered” or “non-empowered.” Respondent participation was determined by saturation sampling. The median respondent age was 34.2. There were 112 (75 percent) males and 37 (25 percent) females. The staff had worked at their respective prisons for an average of almost six years. Their median education was two years of college, and only two percent of them had not completed high school. Almost 60 percent of the staff respondents were security personnel, and 40 percent were treatment personnel.

5. Research Sites

There are three empowered groups in the decentralized model at West. Each of these groups included a group manager, a sergeant, a correctional counselor, at least two correctional officers, and several relief personnel. At West, there was an average of 10 empowered staff and 246 inmates assigned to each empowered group. The ratio of work-group staff to inmates under their supervision is 1 to 25. At the time of this study, West housed about 737 inmates and employed about 310 staff. At East, the single empowered group consisted of 20 staff, including a group manager, one sergeant, five correctional officers, four correctional counselors, and several relief personnel. They were all assigned to the west side of the facility, which included four separate housing units with a total of 150 inmates. The East group staff to inmate ratio was 1 to 7.5, one-third the average West work group staff to inmate ratio. East housed about 644 inmates and employs about 350 staff. The two prisons are generally comparable. Both are overcrowded medium security facilities. Both prisons have a formal decentralized management organization and written policies that resemble Federal Bureau of Prisons standard specifications. Table 1 shows that both institutions have flatter organizational hierarchies for decentralized work groups than for the traditional hierarchical management model at East which has four more layers of bureaucracy. These two facilities were chosen to minimize the confounding effects of such factors as security level and type of inmate on measures of social climate.

6. Dimensions of the Study

6.1 Research Objective

The purpose of the present research is to determine how empowering staffs relates to the staffs’ perceptions of their work environment in two American prisons. To this end, several indices of staff work environment were created by factor analysis of responses of 149 staff to an organizational climate survey adapted from Saylor, Gaes, & Vanyur (1987). The following hypotheses were tested by bivariate analysis.

6.2 Hypotheses

H1: Empowered staff at West will report significantly more delegation of authority than will non-empowered staff at West.

H2: Empowered staff at East will report significantly more delegation of authority than will non-empowered staff at East.

H3: Empowered staff at West will report significantly more opportunities to participate in decision making than will non-empowered staff at West.

- H4: Empowered staff at East will report significantly more opportunities to participate in decision making than will non-empowered staff at East.
- H5: Empowered staff at West will report significantly better relations with supervision than will non-empowered staff at West.
- H6: Empowered staff at East will report significantly better relations with supervision than will non-empowered staff at West.
- H7: Empowered staff at West will report significantly more favorable attitudes towards prison management than will non-empowered staff at West.
- H8: Empowered staff at East will report significantly more favorable attitudes towards prison management than will non-empowered staff at West.
- H9: Empowered staff at West will report significantly more job satisfaction than will non-empowered staff at West.
- H10: Empowered staff at East will report significantly more job satisfaction than will non-empowered staff at East.
- H11: Empowered staff at West will report significantly less burnout than will non-empowered staff at West.
- H12: Empowered staff at East will report significantly less burnout than will non-empowered staff at East.

6.3 Methods of Index Development

Empowerment includes the delegation of authority and opportunities to participate in decision making. These two concepts were measured separately to distinguish authority from participation. The items comprising the two indices (Table 2) were chosen on face validity to determine the extent to which these two elements existed. A questionnaire was adapted with permission from the Saylor et al. (1987) "Prison Social Climate Survey - - Staff Version." This questionnaire has been used by the Federal Bureau of Prisons as part of a long-term tracking of climate changes in the Federal system. The survey used for this study is retrospective and is limited to Staff Work Environment items. One addition made to the questionnaire instructions was to limit the respondents to a six-month time reference. This limitation of the period of reflection was to maximize reference to the "same" climate while providing a time span large enough to collect sufficient data for comparison. The four indices that were produced to measure the work environment are also in Table 2. The first index, **Relationship with Supervision**, measures elements of supervisory relations like encouragement, evaluation, and communications. **Prison Management**, the second index, combines items that measure satisfaction with the more general running of the prison. The third index deals specifically with **Job Satisfaction**. Index 4, **Burnout**, includes items on stress, fatigue, and emotional hardening.

To facilitate the assessment of the effects of empowered staff management, the investigator conducted a factor analysis of the inmate responses to all questions in the Saylor et al. (1987) survey relating to the staff work environment. Principal components analysis (to explain the observed variables' variance) with orthogonal varimax rotation produced four factor indices that accounted for 46.3 percent of the total variance in the 32 items entered (see Table 3). As can be seen, the number of items (questions) varied from six to 10. Prior to analysis, the differently scaled items were independently recoded into a uniform seven point range because the statistical program could not handle different ranges. The researcher wanted to include an optimum number of items in each statistical procedure. In keeping with acceptable standards (Johnson & Wichern, 1982; Nunnally, 1967), only factor items with loadings of .40 or higher were used to create factor scores. A reliability estimate on the items remaining in each factor was done using Cronbach's alpha test of internal consistency. Following Bohrnstedt's (1988) recommendation, items with alpha scores of .70 or higher were considered reliable. Scores for all indices were determined by summing the standardized scores on the items defining the indices.

7. Findings

As can be seen in Table 2, the empowered staff respondents at East reported significantly more delegation of authority than the East non-empowered staff. While not significantly different, the East empowered staff also reported more opportunities to participate in decision making. Thus, the first expected outcome was, in fact, found at East. This supports previous empowerment evaluation findings. The expected results were not found at West, however. The staff at West who were said to have been "empowered" reported significantly less delegation of authority and fewer opportunities to participate in decision making than did the non-empowered staff, although West empowered staff had a flatter organizational structure than did the West non-empowered staff. Follow-up interviews at West revealed that the managers of empowered teams held few team-decision meetings and often made the decisions themselves.

Although their subordinate staff acknowledged being empowered by top management, they did not feel they were members of a team and they felt they had no actual power. It was also expected that empowered staff would evaluate more highly their work environment than non-empowered staff. This did not turn out to be the case at West. The “empowered” staff scored significantly lower (worse) than non-empowered staff on the **Relations with supervision, Prison Management** and **Job Satisfaction** indices. Not only was the “empowered” staff at West not being given **Opportunities to Participate in Decision Making**, as their team managers were making the decisions, they were increasingly burdened with the extra paper work required to document “team” decisions. There was no significant difference between the empowered and non-empowered staff at West on the issue of **Burnout**. The results at East clearly support the work environment expectations. On the work environment indices, East empowered staff scores on **Relations with Supervision** was significantly more positive than those of non-empowered staff, and the scores on all but one of the other indices were at least more positive, even if not significantly so. As was true at West, the scores on **Burnout** at East were not significantly different between the empowered and non-empowered staff.

8. Summary and Conclusions

If boards of directors or managers of companies and organizations wish to improve the personal well-being and the supervisory relations of their staff, and the way staff works with clients, the empowerment of these staff seems to be a successful way to bring this about. The lower scores on empowerment reported by the West empowered staff, as compared to West non-empowered staff and the East empowered staff, also provides evidence that empowerment was not properly managed at West. The “empowered” staffs were under a shortened bureaucratic hierarchy, but they were not reporting the decision-making opportunities and delegated authority that was to accompany the structural change. This might follow from some of the research that has reported too little direction and follow through by management to be a major factor in failed staff empowerment efforts.

It is evident that for more of the desired results of staff empowerment to be obtained the empowered staff should have good relations with, and support from, upper management. Researchers have predicted the failure of staff empowerment effort if this were not the case. Work teams should be given the delegation of authority, and the necessary resources, time and training. This should help improve the team member’s relationship with supervision, which was identified to be the most immediate predictor of positive attitudes towards prison management, and job satisfaction. The findings presented in this study lend support to the organizational theories that predict a higher level of job satisfaction when authority is delegated. Both staff groups that reported significantly greater delegation of authority (non-empowered staff at West and empowered staff at East) also reported higher job satisfaction (significant at West, but not significant at East). Consequently, it is concluded that if staff empowerment is implemented properly (as it apparently was to some degree at East), it can positively affect the supervisory relations component of staff work environments and the staffs’ perception of their work with clients.

The continued use of staff empowerment should be supported, but great care should be taken in its implementation. What were the differences in empowerment as it was implemented at East and West that might lead empowered staff at East to have more favorable opinions of their supervisors? First, there were the managers of the “empowered” teams at West who were making the decisions themselves and not allowing their team members to exercise the power that top management had given the other team members. The empowerment of staff teams can only work if the immediate supervisors of those teams, who are newly empowered themselves, do not usurp the power of the team member subservient to them, but, instead, see to it that their team members are empowered and that the team makes decisions by consensus. Does empowering nonprofit staff positively affect their burnout? Probably not. Does it positively affect their supervisory relations and job satisfaction? Apparently so, but only if the empowerment of staffs is implemented properly. This may necessitate the hiring of additional staff and the revamping of traditional staff training programs to include staff training in interpersonal relations.

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Table 1 Decision Making Structure at East and West

Staff Empowered Model at East and West	Non-empowered Model at West
1. Superintendent	1. Superintendent
2. Deputy Superintendent of Operations or Deputy Superintendent of Classification and Treatment	2. Deputy Superintendent of Operations or Deputy Superintendent of Classification and Treatment
3. Staff Empowered Group (Manager, Sergeant, Correctional Officers, Correctional Counselors and Relief Personnel)	3. Director of Security
	4. Captain
	5. Lieutenant
	6. Sergeant
	7. Correctional Officer

Table 2 Mean (rounded) Standardized Scores for Delegation of Authority and Staff Work Environment

Indices	West Staff Empowered/ Non-empowered t***			East Staff Empowered/ Non-empowered t***		
Empowerment						
1. Delegation of Authority	-1.2	1.0	-	0.9	-0.2	+ 1.0 -
2. Opportunities to Participate in Decision Making	-1.1	1.1	-	0.2	NS	
Staff Work Environment						
1. Relations with Supervision	-5.4	5.9**	-	6.8*	-2.0	+
2. Prison Management	-3.7	4.5**	-	2.2	-1.5	NS
3. Job Satisfaction	-1.1	2.2	-	0.4	-0.6	NS
4. Burnout	-1.3	0.4	NS	3.8	5.1	NS
Notes: Larger scores are better. Ns on each index varied from 24-26 (West Empowered), 31 (West Non-empowered), 15-16 (East Empowered), 72-76 (East Non-empowered).						
*** All were two-tailed. If $p < .05$ and supports hypothesis, then +. If $p < .05$ and fails to support hypothesis, then -.						
** West Non-empowered staff reported a significantly higher score on this index than East Non-empowered staff. $P < .05$ using oneway ANOVA with harmonic mean and Scheffe range test.						
* East Empowered staff reported significantly higher score on this index than West Empowered staff. $P < .05$ using oneway ANOVA with harmonic mean and Scheffe test.						

Table 3 Loadings of Staff Work Environment Items on Varimax Rotated Factors with Kaiser Normalization

Factor Items	Loadings	% of Total Variance
1. Relationship with Supervision (Alpha = .94)		
My supervisor gives me adequate information on work performance.	.816	
My supervisor encourages me to develop work procedures.	.776	
I know exactly what my supervisor expects of me.	.757	
My supervisor asks my opinion on work-related problems.	.739	
I feel comfortable going to my supervisor with suggestions.	.711	
I often get feedback from my supervisor for good work.	.698	
My supervisor gets me the job training I need.	.672	
The standards used to evaluate my performance are fair.	.627	
I have a great deal of say over what I do.	.562	
I have the authority I need to accomplish my work.	.486	31.4
2. Prison Management (Alpha = .91)		
Generally this prison is run very well.	.652	
Management is flexible to make changes.	.647	
Employees have little opportunity to influence policy changes.	.616	
I'm usually dissatisfied with this prison.	.598	
It is often unclear who has formal authority.	.595	
People get promoted here on ability.	.551	
People in my job are treated well by management.	.521	
I'm kept informed about goings on here.	.456	5.7
3. Job Satisfaction (Alpha = .86)		
My prison job suits me well.	.787	
My prison job is usually worthwhile.	.778	
My prison job is usually interesting to me.	.765	
I'd like to keep working at this prison.	.590	
I'm considering a job outside this prison.	.555	
I've accomplished worthwhile things doing this job.	.552	
I'd rather be working here than at a different prison.	.529	
I'd be more satisfied with another job at this prison.	.451	4.8
4. Burnout (Alpha = .79)		
I'm frequently emotionally drained at the end of the work day.	.753	
I feel working all day with people is a strain for me.	.709	
I frequently feel fatigued when I get up to face work.	.615	
I frequently worry that my job hardens me emotionally.	.606	
I frequently worry that I'm harsher towards people.	.569	
Verbal confrontation with inmates is stressful.	.538	4.4