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Autonomous groups between power and empowerment

Irene Sinteur

Autonomous groups between power and empowerment

Recently, the concept of autonomous self-steering teams has regained popularity in management discourse and in the public debate. As an empowering design concept, it is positively associated with performance, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and negatively with strain and turnover. However, consensus is lacking on what empowerment exactly means, and the role of power is rather ignored. This thesis compares three organizations that very strongly claim to be empowering and self-steering, and follows one organization over time. This enables to clarify the concept of 'self-steering' as well as the role of power. We compare organizations in terms of (i) level of delegation of authority and responsibility (structural empowerment), (ii) power use, and (iii) dominant empowerment stories (organizational politics) and analyze how this influences the perception of the power distance and of power use, and the feeling of being in control (psychological empowerment). We show that the organizations differ in terms of structural empowerment, and that radical structural empowerment is possible. Furthermore, the results suggest that organizational politics is never completely concealing, as organization members do see real power distances and power use that exist behind strong empowerment stories. At the same time, real distribution of power is beneficial for psychological empowerment. Finally, we show that without real delegation of authority and responsibility, empowering organizational forms such as self-steering are vulnerable, and easily threatened under conditions of crisis. On the longer term, psychological empowerment may therefore not be sustainable without structural empowerment, as may be the positive effects of psychological empowerment.



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