



The Business of Employee Empowerment: Democracy and Ideology in the Workplace

Thomas Potterfield

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The popular and influential concept of employee empowerment may have the emancipatory potential its supporters claim, but it also is subject to constraints and inhibitions. Potterfield calls for actions to cut through the ideological inhibitors at the corporate level and also for ways to alter the prevailing socioeconomic structure, ways to enhance the relative strength of employees in various types of organizations. His book provides a synthesis of major empowerment theories and viewpoints, a discussion of its historical and intellectual roots, an inquiry into empowerment practices at a *Fortune* 100 company, and a discussion of both the emancipatory potential and ideological constraints in empowerment theories and practices. With specific recommendations for corporate and societal action, Dr. Potterfield's book will be important for professionals, teachers, and students in management, organizational studies, human resources, and organizational change.

Potterfield begins by situating empowerment in the larger historical context of long-standing effort to provide more participatory work environments. He reviews the social and intellectual roots of the empowerment concept, including basic contours of modernity such as the rise of capitalism, and examines the development of the concept within the realm of social action movements during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. He provides a detailed explication of the essential dimensions and core elements of empowerment as it is espoused by leading organizational theorists and management experts, then looks at the actual practice of empowerment in a *Fortune* 100 company that has a major, ongoing commitment to the empowered workplace. With this as a foundation he discusses ways in which these theories and practices either advance the cause of democracy and freedom in the workplace or reinforce corporate organizational power and worker dominations. He concludes with concrete suggestions for overcoming ideological influences and facilitating the emancipatory potential of empowerment.



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