Employee empowerment and organizational commitment: A study of the food manufacturing sector in Zimbabwe

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The study was based on the Zimbabwe employee empowerment model that was initiated within the country’s different industries. The study that was in a case study format was carried out in four different companies in the food processing sector of Zimbabwe. The construct of employee empowerment was contextualized to include three areas which are decision-making, information-sharing and power sharing. The argument advanced was that involving employees in decision making, information-sharing and power sharing would result into the employees’ organizational commitment. After experiencing a number of obstacles, data was obtained and analysed. The results indicated a positive relationship between decision-making and organizational commitment; and information sharing and organizational commitment. The relationship between power sharing and organizational commitment was generally negative.

Key words: Employee empowerment, employee involvement, organizational commitment, decision-making, information sharing, power sharing, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

For the past three decades the Zimbabwean economy has gone through a cycle. It changed from being a heavily regulated and inward-looking economy at independence to a liberalised one during the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) where employers had an upper hand in capital ownership and labour relations and back to a controlled economy again by the 21st century. That transition has been characterised by workplace disharmony as workers felt that there was not enough workplace democracy in their organisations. Naturally, the relationship between people in the workplace is characterised by relations of domination and subordination. Bayat (1991) observes that “human beings as history has repeatedly shown tend to develop a strong desire to exercise control over their own lives and by the same token to reject attempts by other humans to restrict their freedom”.

Literature has it that the environment people work in can shape their attitudes and behaviours in either positive or negative ways; and that being the case an understanding of how individuals in organizations are influenced by the organizational context becomes imperative (Robertson, 1994). Empowerment focuses on employees and is part of the labour relations area in organizations.

Research objective

The research objective is to establish the impact of employee empowerment/involvement or lack of it on the employee’s commitment to the organization. The construct of employee empowerment/ involvement is broken down to include decision-making, information sharing and power sharing.

Propositions

Proposition 1: Decision-making is positively associated with the employee’s commitment to the organization.
Proposition 2: Information sharing is positively associated with the employee's commitment to the organization.

Proposition 3: Power sharing is positively associated with the employee's commitment to the organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee empowerment

According to Hellriegel and Slocum (2011) empowerment means giving employees the authority, skills and self-control to perform their tasks. Emerson (2008) argues that employee empowerment is a term that many managers and organizations think they understand, but few actually do, and even fewer really put it into practice. Employee empowerment involves a complex concept; it tends to mean different things to different people. To quote Nielsen and Pedersen (2003), "employee empowerment" as defined by Conger and Kanungo (1988), may be seen as part of the broader concept of "employee involvement" Lawler et al. (1992), Cummings and Worley (1997) which also includes "participative management", "job enrichment" (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), and also "industrial democracy" and "quality of work life". The term "empowerment" is elastic and so it is not always clear what it means in different organizations (Wilkinson, 1998; Dainty et al., 2002).

Contextualization of employee empowerment

In this study employee empowerment was contextualized to mean worker-participation in decision-making, information sharing and power sharing and that was also generally equated to employee involvement. The three aspects of employee involvement addressed how one perceived his/her total work situation to be an important part of his life and central to him/her and his/her identity because of the opportunity it (the work situation) afforded him/her to meet important needs. Central to that definition was the notion of "the opportunity to meet important needs". For someone to feel that opportunity they need to have power to participate in decision-making and information to make informed decisions. However, decision-making, information-sharing and power sharing are very much intricately interlinked. The components are further explained for a better understanding of each construct.

Different attributes of the constructs of employee involvement discussed in this study were decision-making, information sharing and power sharing.

Empowerment may mean sharing of information among individuals who are otherwise hierarchically unequal (Wagner 111, 1994; Hickey and Casner-Lotto, 1998), the involvement of employees in decision-making (Nykodym et al., 1994; Cotton et al., 1988) and sharing of power (Pun et al., 2001). At the same time, Johnson and Thurston (1997) give examples of TRW, Hercules, Whirlpool and McClanahan Book Companies as organizations that have realized organizational benefits from their empowerment initiatives.

Notions of empowerment are derived from theories of participative management and employee involvement (Spreitzer et al., 1997). The theories of participative management advocate that managers share decision-making power with employees to enhance performance and work satisfaction (Wagner 111, 1994). Lawler (1991) on the other hand argues that employee involvement emphasizes cascading power, information, rewards, and training to the lowest level possible in the organizational hierarchy to increase worker discretion. As it turns out employee involvement is a multidimensional concept. However, in this study employee involvement is about decision-making, information sharing and power sharing.

Some researchers have also equated it to decision-making. For example, Nykodym et al. (1994) posit that employee empowerment or participative decision-making is neither a new or simple management concept; while Bowen and Lawler (1992), point out that empowerment enables employees to make decisions and Pastor (1996) emphasizes the taking of responsibility for decisions made. From a mechanist or top-down approach, employee involvement is about delegation and accountability (Quinn and Spreitzer, 1997). Collins (1996) argues that is a narrow definition of empowerment since it hinges more on accountability than any wider change in the process of work and decision-making which might be implied by a more active modelling of empowerment. He argues that democratic empowerment, represents a much more active, or activist model of empowerment that is representative of a process whereby workers gain or assume power and represent a process in which workers "act with a greater grasp and sense of their own powers". Consequently, empowerment only truly occurs when workers actively take the initiative and attempt to wrest control from managers (Collins, 1995). Conger and Kanungo (1988) define empowerment as a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information. Brewer (1994), lending support to Conger and Kanungos (1988) definition, posits that empowerment entails suggestion involvement that culminates into suggestion schemes, quality circles and job involvement where employees are in control of their jobs by designing job content.

Pun et al. (2001) points out that empowerment is a process whereby employees are taking part or having shares in managerial decision-making. They further point
out that true involvement draws people on the hierarchy up to the levels above them and then shares the power that is available. They however, point out that many conventional managers would see employee involvement as the giving away of control since true involvement draws people lower on the hierarchy up to the levels above them and then shares the power that is available. Most definitions of empowerment refer to some aspect of control over decision making, control over work processes, control over performance goals and measurement, and/or control over other people (Howard and Foster, 1999).

Ford and Fottler (1995) emphasize that the empowerment process necessitates the sharing of information and knowledge necessary to enable employees to contribute to organizational performance. At the same time Bluestone and Bluestone (1997) posits that participation turns out to work best when it is organized jointly between union and management and when workers have a voice independent from management that cannot be unilaterally stifled. Obviously, the transfer of power and decision making authority, are at the centre of the empowerment process. As Gilbert (1991) puts it, empowerment is about trust, and most importantly it is about accountability. On the other hand, Johnson and Thurston (1997) adopted a thematic definition after their study of Multicorp, and decided to define empowerment in the context of authority, control and trust.

As can be derived from the above definitions, empowerment has been glorified as a splendid (Olshtfski and Cunningham, 1998). The linking thread in the employee involvement concept is the encouragement of employees including management to utilize their skills and experience by giving them power to use more judgment and discretion in their work. Simply put it is the involvement of employees in decision-making, information sharing and power sharing.

Decision making

Greasley (2008) found out that one of the key themes associated with empowerment is the ability to make and implement decisions. Getting everyone involved in decision-making not only makes people happier and more productive, but also makes them want to stick around. In this study decision-making is the same as autonomy. The word autonomy is almost as elastic as the word empowerment itself. Kramer and Schmalenberg (2003) identified 6 themes inherent in the concept of autonomy and they are; self-governance, decision-making, competence, critical reflection, freedom and self-control. Autonomy can also be equated to the amount of job-related independence, initiative and freedom either permitted or required in daily work activities. Making decisions closer to the point at which they are actually carried out has advantages and provide economic motivations (Malone, 1995). At the same time people are more energetic and creative if they have autonomy in both how they work and what they do (Malone, 1995).

In the Zimbabwean context, the workers participate in decision-making through the workers’ committees, works’ council and the worker director schemes. In the empowerment models they advanced, Nykodym et al. (1994) and Cotton et al. (1988), emphasized decision-making as a major determinant of participation. Dainty et al. (2002) and Ford and Fottler (1995), posit that genuine empowerment is likely to include decision-making authority over not just job content, but job context as well.

Information sharing

Marketers define information sharing as internal marketing or two-way communication (Davis, 2001). Under such conditions, employees are listened to and encouraged to provide their input and ideas. Ideally, much more information should be shared with employees. The intent is to find out what employees think and want, so programs can be adapted based on the employees’ input (Davis, 2001).

Sharing of information is at the very core of what makes a group of people an organization (Lawler, 1991). Apparently, information has been identified as a source of power and effectiveness in organizational co-ordination and cooperation; and without it, employee participation and involvement become impractical and dangerous (ibid). Moreover, decision-makers frequently have access to information that helps them make good decisions (Malone, 1995). According to Emerson (2008) for an organization to practice and foster employee empowerment, the management must trust and communicate with employees.

The empowerment process necessitates the sharing of information and knowledge to enable employees to contribute to organizational performance (Ford and Fottler, 1995). They also argue that part of the empowerment program is to provide the necessary information for employees to enable them to perform their jobs autonomously and effectively. Consequently, sharing of information is important as it enables individuals to make informed decisions. Employee communication is one of the strongest signs of employee empowerment in an organization (Emerson, 2008).

Power sharing

Forrester (2000) argues that to understand empowerment requires understanding what power is. Power according to Forrester is the capacity to obtain the results one wants. Arthur (1994) also argues that, although there is growing evidence that managers’ involvement in lower
Echelon employees is necessary in today’s business environment, many managers are hesitant to involve lower echelon employees because of the fear of losing control (ibid). That then calls for an element of trust on the part of management.

The workers in the Zimbabwe firms are empowered by having a say in the running of the organization through the workers’ committees, works’ council, employee ownership and profit sharing schemes. The schemes are also in tandem with Conger and Kanungo’s (1988) assertion that the empowerment process enhances feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information.

Pun et al. (2001) argue that true involvement draws people on the hierarchy up to the level above them and then share the power that is available. Olshfski and Cunningham (1998) also point out that empowerment involves the sharing of power, authority or responsibility by those in the organizational structure to those lower levels of the organization. Changes in ownership, such as employee stock ownership plans, and changes in reward systems, such as profit sharing and gain sharing are attempts to involve employees in organizational decision-making (Paul et al., 2000).

Employee ownership tends to increase workers’ desire for control and the ownership rights may include the rights to information, decision-making and in general, increased participation (Bartkus, 1997).

Outcomes of empowerment

According to the research question, it was hypothetically stated that the outcome of employee involvement in decision-making, information sharing and power sharing is organizational commitment on the part of the employee. Highly committed employees identify with the organization’s goals and values, expend extra effort at work, and are proud of their membership in the organization (Chen and Chen, 2008; Somers and Birnbaum, 2000).

Organisational commitment

Commitment in this study is operationalized generally, to mean the “psychological bond” that ties the employee to the organization based on Meyer and Allen (1991), O’Reilly et al. (1991), Caldwell et al. (1990) and O’Reilly and Chatman’s (1986) definition, or the employees’ attachment to the organization (Porter et al., 1974).

The word commitment is derived from the Latin root meaning “to connect”. Webster’s Dictionary defines commitment as the state or an instance of being obligated or emotionally impelled. Therefore people who are committed feel connected, and they are motivated to maintain that connection (O’Malley, 2000). According to Hellriegel and Slodum (2011), organizational commitment is the strength of an employee’s involvement in the organization and identification with it and it is characterized by a support of and acceptance of the organization’s goals and values, a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization and a desire to remain with the organization. Liu and Chiu (2007) argue that commitment reflects the relative strength of a person’s identification with the involvement in that organization.

Organizational commitment is the degree to which employees are willing to take internal and external actions on behalf of the organization (Borycki et al., 1998). Mowday et al. (1979) state that organizational commitment is an attachment the employee makes to the organization and the integration of the organization’s goals and value systems into the worker’s own life. Organizational commitment is the degree to which an employee feels loyalty to a particular organization (Mueller et al., 1992; Price, 1997). On the other hand, Wu and Short (1996) have argued that commitment is a linkage between individual employee and the organization; and that such a linkage leads to strong belief and acceptance of the organization’s goals.

While several definitions of organizational commitment abound, a common theme in most of them is that committed individuals believe in and accept organizational goals and values, are willing to remain with that organization and are willing to provide considerable effort on their behalf (Mowday et al., 1979). Organizational commitment acts as a “psychological bond” to the organization that influences individuals to act in ways that are consistent with the interests of the organization (Porter et al., 1974).

METHODOLOGY

The research that is exploratory in nature is meant to find out if employee involvement in decision – making, information sharing and power sharing is positively related to organizational commitment. Remenyi et al. (1998) argue that there are at least three major philosophical questions that should be addressed at the outset of the research. The questions are: why research, what to research and how to research? In order to address the questions, propositions that show the relationships between the empowerment and the construct of organizational commitment were formulated.

The qualitative research method employed was two-pronged. It embraced the case study and survey strategies. The combination of survey and case studies (both institutional and individual) provides useful complementary information giving valuable insights into the issue (Robson, 2001).

Case study approach

The case study approach was used to identify the objects of study in the manufacturing industry. Although the case study approach should not be equated to qualitative study per se, the majority of
case studies build on qualitative data since that makes it possible to examine complex and ‘rich’ phenomena (Huemer, 1998). At the same time the use of cases is advocated from a positivistic, realist and naturalistic point of view (Easton, 1995; Eisenhardt, 1989; Bryman, 1995). According to Yin (1994) case studies are the preferred strategy when “how and why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon with some real-life context. Stake (2000) emphasizes the case study approach as an early step in theory building. When using that method, research is conducted through an intense and/or prolonged contact with a “field” or life situation (Amaratunga et al., 2002). The research problem that addresses the influence of empowerment on the constructs of, organizational commitment is more of a social nature since it encroaches on issues of work life.

Survey approach

The use of the survey method became imperative when access was denied to interviewing the generality of the employees. At that stage a questionnaire had to be designed targeted at the other employees besides the key informants.

Sampling

Mwanje and Gotu (2001) argue that sampling rather than complete enumeration becomes useful in terms of time, cost and available resources and practicability. The choice of the industry was influenced by the size of the sector. The manufacturing industry is the 3rd largest contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) after agriculture and the distribution, hotels and restaurant industry (Central Statistics Office, 2002). Besides, it was the sector that employed the largest number of blue-collar employees. At the time of the research there were forty-eight (48) registered companies which employed about eighteen thousand (18 000) employees. The four companies that formed the sample employed a total of two thousand four hundred and sixty-two (2, 462) employees amongst themselves, and that were about fifteen percent (15%) of the work force in the entire industry. They have been operating in the country for at least 30 years. These companies understood the political/economic situation better especially after going through the era of the liberation struggle, and the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) era.

Sampling design

Stratified random sampling was used in all four organizations. The employees were stratified according to their hierarchical levels, which are top, middle and low level, but questionnaires were only given to low level employees, since that was more in line with the research.

RESULTS

The researcher used the information from the lower level workers (Table 1). The data was all lumped together since the same questionnaire was administered to all the respondents in all four companies.

Table 1. Sample size of low level participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CO #1</th>
<th>CO #2</th>
<th>CO #3</th>
<th>CO #4</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Decision-making and organizational commitment

The proposition being advanced is that involvement of employees in decision-making results into organizational commitment. The commitment to the organization can be displayed in a variety of ways as depicted in Table 2. On the whole the results show a positive link between autonomy and organizational commitment. Commitment is shown as employees are willing to put extra effort in their work, as they feel that there is some congruence between personal and organizational goals and as they feel a sense of indebtedness to the organization among other things. Employees who are able to exercise authority and influence have been shown to feel more responsible and also have more favourable attitudes toward the employing organization (Tannenbaum and Rozgonyi, 1986; Robbins et al., 2002).

Information-sharing and organizational commitment

It is hypothesized that empowerment in the form of information sharing, results in organizational commitment. The sources of information sharing include teamwork, suggestion boxes, and reciprocal feedback between management and subordinates (Table 3). As depicted in Table 3, most of the respondents felt committed to their organizations as a result of information-sharing. Trust is built on information sharing and commitment ensues from the trust built. Gilbert (1991) argued that empowerment is about trust and most importantly it is about accountability; while Emerson (2008) says that employee communication is one of the strongest signs of employee empowerment in an organization.

Power sharing and organizational commitment

The proposition advanced here is that power sharing results into organizational commitment. Table 4 shows that just 51% of the workers were satisfied with power sharing in general. However, when it came to the specifics of that power sharing the majority (67%) on average, of the employees were not satisfied with the rest of the power sharing that was going on. According to a key informant, ownership and profit sharing programs were reserved for very senior personnel such as the general managers, the chief executives and human resource directors. In some organizations the ownership and profit sharing programs exist only on paper.
Table 2. Decision-making and organizational commitment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Committed (%)</th>
<th>Not committed (%)</th>
<th>No of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to work hard</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking passionately to friends about job</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting almost any type of job</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruence of personal and org. values</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling like part of the organization</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling like part of the organizational family</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel like this is the best organization</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel a sense of indebtedness</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Information sharing and organisational commitment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
<th>No of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of suggestion boxes</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback from management</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management consulting with subordinate</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Power sharing and organizational commitment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Satisfied (%)</th>
<th>Dissatisfied (%)</th>
<th>No of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power sharing in general</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee ownership programs</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour management partnership</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit sharing</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Decision-making

The results showed that participation in decision-making was positively linked to organizational commitment. Decision-making is a very important aspect of empowerment. It embraces a number of areas such as self-governance, freedom and self-control. Employees felt committed to the organization in variety of ways as depicted by their responses. Decision-making enhances self-actualization, which is the highest need on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. That feeling culminates in meaningfulness of the job and brings about a sense of responsibility on the part of the individual. The latitude given to employees to make decisions is a positive reinforcement (Skinner, 1953).

On the whole, employees need to be committed to a common purpose, and Coleman (1996) argues that commitment comes from genuine employee involvement in creating the shared values of corporate culture. Mueller et al. (1992) and Price (1997) observed that people that feel loyal have some commitment to the organization; at the same time people who feel committed, feel connected and have an attachment to the organization (O'Malley, 2000). The “psychological bond” ties the employee to the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991; O'Reilly et al., 1991). Kreitner and Kinicki (1998) propose that committed people have a sense of purpose and do not give up under pressure because they tend to invest themselves to the organization. Commitment comes from genuine employee involvement in creating the shared values of corporate culture (Coleman, 1996).

Information sharing

The study showed a positive link between information sharing and organizational commitment. Information sharing facilitates the whole empowerment exercise in a number of ways. For example it is of paramount importance in overcoming resistance to change. In this study the Labour Act played a pivotal role in the provision of information and the establishment of workplace demo-
cricy. Management taking cognizance of the importance of information sharing promoted teamwork in their firms.

Information sharing is the epitome of teamwork and it encompasses feedback. The importance of feedback is to find out what employees think and want so programs can be adapted based on the employee's input. Suggestion boxes may sound trivial as an information sharing tool, but to the workers that was something within their reach; something that provided a vehicle of communication between management and lower level employees. The employees felt committed to their organizations as they shared information through the suggestion boxes and as they got some feedback from management through the workers' committees and team briefing. Trust was built on information sharing and commitment ensues from the trust built.

Power sharing

A close look at the organizations revealed the fact that the companies with the highest number of employees who were dissatisfied with the ownership programs were multinationals whose policies and procedures are dictated by the parent companies that are overseas and could be paying not much attention to staff ownership or empowerment programs. Wisman (1998) points out that separation of workers and capital results in critical conflict of interest that reduces competitiveness of companies. However, if effectively implemented ownership programs could be one way of reducing labour unrest (Pfeffer and Trowley, 1995). On the other hand critiques of employee ownership programs argue that they tend to increase workers' desire for control (Bartkus, 1997). On the whole power should not be seen as a zero-sum situation where one's gain is another's loss (Kreitner and Kinicki, 1998).

Conclusion

The general conclusion in this research was that employee involvement in decision making and information sharing results in organizational commitment. Employee involvement brings about a sense of belonging and that psychological bond ties the employee to the organization.

However, no association was established between power sharing and organizational commitment. The major bone of contention was the ownership programs and the profit sharing schemes. Organizations seemed not to be aware of the strength of empowerment to those at the lower levels of the hierarchy. Power sharing is supposed to empower workers and enhance feelings of self-efficacy. Identification and removal of conditions that render organizational members powerless is an essential part of the process and that was found to be lacking in this study.

The Zimbabwean situation is worsened by the fact that the majority of the business enterprises are multinationals which symbolizes classic capitalism, where workers are separated from ownership and control of the means of production. However, separation of workers and capital results in critical conflict of interests and that must be addressed if the firms are to remain dynamically competitive. The aspect of employee share ownership is still a new thing in the Zimbabwean economy whose inception dates back to 1997. The exercise sounds a bit involving, as it requires reserving shares for employees, usually to be held in an Equity Share Ownership Trust (International Capital Corporation, 1999). However, if properly implemented share ownership programs would create a vibrant private sector, with the participation of the indigenous people. Naturally, power is difficult to share with subordinates and it becomes more problematic when it involves the owners of capital and the workers.

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