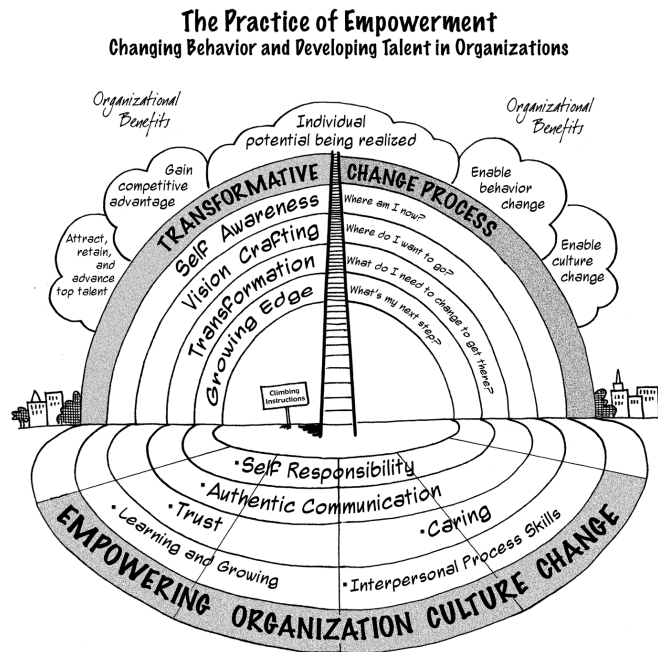


# THE PRACTICE OF EMPOWERMENT: CHANGING BEHAVIOR AND DEVELOPING TALENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

BY DAVID GERSHON



This chapter is from the forthcoming, *Change Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, published by Berrett Koehler.

“The core of the matter is always about changing the behavior of people. In highly successful change efforts the central challenge is not strategy, not systems...but changing people’s behavior – what people do and the need for significant shifts in what people do.” *The Heart of Change*, John Kotter, Professor, Harvard Business School and Dan Cohen, Partner, Deloitte Consulting, Harvard Business School Press

The practice of empowerment is the process of enabling individuals to adopt new behaviors that further their individual aspirations and that of the organization. It is based on 25 years of research and practice and has been applied by hundreds of change practitioners in organizations throughout the world.

One feature of this model that differentiates it from many approaches to organizational change is the focus on both the individual and the collective enterprise. Individuals grow and achieve outcomes important to them, which also benefits the whole. And the group becomes a resource to enable the individual to

achieve these outcomes. This mutual accountability strengthens the commitment level of both the individual and group enabling greater sustainability for the change initiative over the long-term.

A successful organizational application of this behavior change model took place at American Express. Here is what happened as told by Bob Franco, Vice President of the Global Talent Division.

“A key challenge in institutions is how to move individuals to higher levels of performance, specifically when it involves building partnerships within complex organizational systems. This truly requires an empowering transformative experience.

For me at American Express, David Gershon proved he is truly a visionary in these matters. He helped my team – whose mission it is to build and improve talent within the company – through an intense, personalized learning experience using his unique transformational learning approach.

Our team had been working under circumstances that in many ways prevented their ability to achieve our mission – there were barriers such as lack of access to critical information or key partners, limited experience creating results in a politicized environment and extremely poor relationships within the human resources organization that itself was seeking to find a value proposition.

David Gershon and the highly effective set of tools of his Empowerment Institute helped produce significant, measurable and sustainable behavior change within our team. He helped us separate the circumstance around us that is charged with a disempowering "pathology," and helped us focus our own personal accountability toward what we can accomplish and what we are ultimately capable of attaining. After a deep assessment of our organizational culture and challenges, he built our consulting skills and worked us through short and long term implementation plans – helping us build strategies to leverage our collective talent and create business results.

The results of David's work were a clearly defined value proposition and an ability to be successful despite any organizational barriers. He moved us away from the crippling power of "problems" to a new power – one inside us, one focused on what we want to create. Through David's work, this team now has daily practices focusing on their vision. We are empowered!”

To enable this group at American Express to adopt new behaviors which could translate into their desired business objectives, first required the establishment of a learning and growth culture. Many change interventions often assume that an organization's learning and growing capacity is inherent. They neglect to see if the cultural ingredients necessary to enable learning and growing are present. These pre-conditions are rarely present and as a result, this

severely limits the organization's ability to achieve the desired behavior changes.

Using the analogy of nature, for new seeds (behaviors) to take root, grow and thrive, they need fertile soil. Creating this fertile soil (a learning and growth culture) I call "empowering the space". An empowered space enables individuals to feel safe and trusting enough to risk true growth. It has five characteristics: affirmation, choice, trust, courage and aspiration. What follows are the practices that enable a space to be empowered. These practices become more refined as they devolve from a cultural change level to one-on-one relationships.

#### EMPOWERING THE SPACE CULTURAL PRACTICES

- *Self Responsibility*: At the organizational level individuals take responsibility to have their job, team, function, organization, the way they wish it to be. This is the counterpoint to being a victim within the organization.
- *Authentic Communication*: Individual communication is open, honest, transparent, and vulnerable. Individuals are talking about the real issues going on in the organization.
- *Trust*: Individuals feel safe enough to try out new behaviors and take risks without fear of reprimand or put down by superiors or colleagues if they make mistakes. There is a genuine sense of good will that pervades the organization.
- *Learning and Growing*: Within the framework of the organization, individuals are encouraged to work on the real behaviors they need to change. Individuals are encouraged to challenge themselves and support each other to both learn and grow.
- *Interpersonal Process Skills*: Individuals within the organization have established protocols and developed skills which are regularly deployed to resolve interpersonal issues and build high functioning relationships.
- *Caring*: The organizational leadership demonstrates in tangible ways concern for individuals. Individuals feel valued and are inspired to give their very best effort on behalf of the organization.

The role of the empowerment practitioner is to create an environment where these practices are embodied in the group experience. Once the group has personally experienced that growth is possible, it wants to bring this back to their work environment. The practitioner then helps the group establish the empowering the space practices that allow the learning and growth culture to take root.

The change process originates from the inside out and is reinforced by the group because it furthers their own growth and development. It works because it is driven by the self-interest of the individuals who once they experience the personal growth benefits want to maintain them. It does require empowerment practices and a support system to sustain it. These empowerment practices are contained in the 3-part “empowerment model.”

### A SHIFT FROM A PATHOLOGICAL TO A VISION-BASED APPROACH TO GROWTH

The first part of the empowerment model looks at where we focus our attention when we attempt to create change. The empowerment model’s premise is that where we place our mental attention is what we create. If we focus on our problems we gain insight into them. If we focus on solutions, or what we want, we gain insight into this. It is a more efficient use of our time and enables more dynamic growth to focus on solutions or a vision of what we want. Otherwise we can get trapped in the paralysis of analysis.

Shifting our focus from what doesn’t work in what we are doing, to what can work also motivates us to take action. We are inspired by our vision rather than enervated by our problems. It’s the difference in planting a garden from focusing on removing rocks, roots and weeds to envisioning the flowers or vegetables in full bloom. One seems laborious, the other engaging. You still need to remove the rocks but you are focused on a bountiful garden. This part of the model can be summarized as a shift from a pathological to a vision-based approach to growth.

### A SHIFT FROM STATIC TO ORGANIC GROWTH (GROWING EDGE)

The second part of the empowerment model describes an approach to personal growth derived from observing the natural world. If a tree is alive it is always growing. There is always the next place of growth. The precise place where this growth is just coming into existence in a tree is it’s growing edge. That is the place of its greatest aliveness and vitality. Similarly the place where you will feel your greatest aliveness and vitality are your growing edges.

The alternative to this, which is how many of us view the growth process, is static. There is a place to get to, and I’m either there or not. Until I get there I’m frustrated or discontent, and when I get there my growth around that issue is over. It is a fixed or static approach to the process of growth. This part of the model can be summarized as a shift from static to organic growth (the growing edge).

## INTEGRATION OF SELF-AWARENESS AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE

The third part of the empowerment model looks at the mechanism for enabling us to actually adopt the desired behavior change. Many growth processes assume that if we are aware of something we should do, we will do it. The focus of the processes is on increasing our self-awareness. While awareness increases our self-knowledge, by itself, it rarely leads to a change in behavior. If you need proof of this, think of all the things you know you should do, but don't.

On the other hand we can set a goal for something we want, harness our wills to achieve it, and then discover to our chagrin after we achieve it, that it wasn't really what we wanted. We did not have enough self-awareness and were acting out someone else's vision for our lives, not our own. This third part of the model can be summarized as the integration of self-awareness with the ability to achieve behavior change or a desired outcome.

To make the empowerment model's growth strategy operational, the transformational change architecture is designed around four-steps. I call this the empowerment methodology. Each step is associated with a corresponding question.

1. Self-Awareness: Where am I now?
2. Vision Crafting: Where do I want to go?
3. Transformation: What do I need to change to get there?
4. Growing Edge: What's my next step?

The process of changing behavior is a result of the individual moving through these four steps. It culminates in an individual intention statement and image that represent the next place of growth around the desired behavior or outcome. These intention statements evolve and deepen through daily attention and a facilitated peer support group. With the pre-conditions to enable growth in place through an empowered space, this process enables new behaviors to be adopted and sustained over time.

Let's go back to our American Express story and follow Bob through this process. As a result of a series of guided exercises around each of these four steps he and his team were able to adopt the key behavior of self-responsibility. Moving from being a victim within a dysfunctional organization to being at cause for how they wished it to be and making things happen.

In Bob's words: "This process moved us away from the crippling power of 'problems' to a new power – one inside us, one focused on what we want to create." Here is how this behavior change process transpired.

First I led the group through a self-awareness exercise. Bob discovered that he was going through the motions and had lost a lot of passion for his consulting

and leadership. The road-blocks and highly politicized environment had sapped his enthusiasm.

As he went through the visioning exercise he began seeing he and his team developing a skill-set that could more effectively serve his internal clients. He also saw that it was possible through building his team's consulting and transformative change leadership skills, that they could develop a value proposition that enabled them more independence and autonomy. He began to realize rather than being trapped in a dysfunctional system he could rise above it if he could increase the capability of his current talent. This vision was quite liberating and re-inspired Bob as a leader. He saw himself actually having the possibility to gain control of his situation.

However, when Bob came down from the mountaintop he saw that to achieve this would require a lot of work. Was he and his team up to it? Would his clients be willing to participate in a transformative process? Would the rest of his division be threatened and try to sabotage this new initiative? Did he have the fight in him to go through all this?

He discovered that his growing edge was believing in his team mates and being willing to engage in this transformation process. He knew it wouldn't be easy, but he was willing to give it his best effort. Meanwhile each of his team mates were going through their transformations as well. As each revealed their growing edges it became clear that unlike in the past when Bob needed to lift everyone by the force of his vision and will, they were developing the capacity to do this on their own. Not only did he not need to lead in his usual way of making it all happen, he was being inspired by the collective sense of empowerment.

To put in Bob's words: "This process helped us separate the circumstance around us that is charged with a disempowering 'pathology', and helped us focus our own personal accountability toward what we can accomplish and what we are ultimately capable of attaining. The results were a clearly defined value proposition and an ability to be successful despite any organizational barriers. We are empowered!"

His intention statement was: "I help my team built our consulting skills and leverage our collective talent to create business results. I lead and am led by an empowering team who knows what it wants and gets it!"

We then established a support system of coaching and peer support teams to help sustain the behavior changes for Bob and his team.

## TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE INTERVENTION PROCESS

Step 1: This intervention begins with a rigorous interview process with senior leadership to determine the business outcomes they desire, the specific behaviors and talent development strategy to produce them, and the appropriate scale to create sustainable change.

Step 2: An empowering organization assessment is then done to help the organization or department understand the current ability of its culture to enable behavior change. The assessment evaluates the culture on the six practices described previously.

Step 3: Once these cultural and behavior change metrics are established a customized empowerment training and behavior change program is designed.

Step 4: The behavior change program is piloted and adjustments are made based on the measurable behavior changes and personal growth outcomes achieved.

Step 5: This learning process usually goes through a couple of iterations before it stabilizes and can be scaled up.

### FLOW AND TIMING OF ACTIVITIES

Typical Need	Process	Length of time	Participants
Organization that needs to change behavior and develop the talent of individuals.	Meet with leaders to determine business outcomes, behavior changes, talent development strategy and scale of initiative.	1 to 3 months depending on the number of leaders involved.	1 to 10
	Design empowerment training and behavior change program.	1 to 3 months	1 to 10 people to review
	Deliver training and behavior change program.	2.5 to 3.5 days	15 to 40 people per training
	Provide coaching focused on growing edge issues and facilitate peer support groups focused on best practices.	6 to 12 months to establish the new practices and behaviors	One hour coaching session per individual every one to three months for a year. Two-hour peer support groups of six to nine people every three months for a year.
	Pilot program and make adjustments.	12 months	Fifty to hundred participants
	If desired, scale up program.	Two to three years depending on size of organization and desired speed.	Hundreds to thousands of participants

### SUMMARY

This is a robust and proven methodology for changing behavior in organizations. It also has the added benefit of being able to catalyze deep cultural change. Because this process is about the achievement of specific behaviors tied to key business outcomes it avoids one of the major problems of many change initiatives and trainings, which is hoping that skills or competencies taught translate into business outcomes. To learn more about Empowerment Institute and its practitioner certification program visit [www.empowermentinstitute.net](http://www.empowermentinstitute.net).

## ABOUT DAVID GERSHON

David Gershon, founder and CEO of Empowerment Institute, is a world-renowned expert on empowerment and behavior change. He is the author of eight books including the best selling, *Empowerment* which has become a classic on the subject. He is currently writing *The Practice of Empowerment: Changing Behavior in Organizations and Society*. He co-directs the Empowerment Institute Certification Program, which specializes in transformative coaching, training and design. He has lectured on his behavior change and empowerment methodology at Harvard, MIT and Duke and served as an advisor to the Clinton White House. He can be reached at [dgershon@empowermentinstitute.net](mailto:dgershon@empowermentinstitute.net).

## QUICK SUMMARY

PURPOSE AND OUTCOMES: Behavior change and talent development in organizations.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Can work with groups of 20 to 40 who learn the replicable empowerment process and scale it by diffusing through small groups and one-on-one coaching.

TYPE OF PARTICIPANTS: Can be any group within the organization from senior leaders to members of a team that need to change behavior and develop talent to accomplish their business objectives.

TYPICAL DURATION: Depending on the organizational ambition level can be anywhere from six months to several years.

BRIEF EXAMPLE OF RESULTS: Empowerment Institute's behavior change programs have been delivered to many thousands of people. Hundreds of practitioners representing organizations large and small have been trained in this process. A major research study indicated that this method is "unsurpassed in changing behavior."

WHEN TO USE: This methodology is designed to serve as the centerpiece of any change initiative that involves changing behavior and developing people. It is the missing piece in most change strategies. To quote the *Heart of Change* by John Kotter and Dan Cohen, "The core of the matter is always about changing the behavior of people. In highly successful change efforts the central challenge is changing people's behavior."

WHEN NOT TO USE: When there is not a trained practitioner and expectations are built that can't be met causing organizational credibility to be eroded.

IMPACT ON CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE ORGANIZATION: If an organization is willing to invest the time and resources, changing behavior and developing the full potential of an organization's talent is possible with this methodology.

CREATOR: David Gershon, founder and CEO, Empowerment Institute

CREATION DATE: A work in progress that began in 1981.

### **REFERENCES AND RESOURCES**

- *Empowerment: The Art of Creating Your Life As You Want It:* Written by David Gershon and Gail Straub, this book has become a classic on the subject of personal empowerment. It provides the underlying approach used in the organizational behavior change work. Over 60,000 copies have been sold in five languages and it used as a textbook in several universities.
- *Empowerment Institute Certification Program:* A certification program for organizational, community and personal empowerment practitioners. To learn more visit [www.empowermentinstitute.net](http://www.empowermentinstitute.net)
- *Art of Empowerment:* An introductory workshop for practitioners who wish to learn the basic empowerment model and some of its applications. To learn more visit [www.empowermenttraining.com](http://www.empowermenttraining.com)

### **QUESTIONS ON RESULTS AND SUSTAINABILITY**

1. *How do you discern the impact of this change intervention?*

Discerning results is quite straight-forward because the client and practitioner determine the behaviors that need to change and desired growth outcomes. They then create metrics to measure if they have changed. They follow through by analyzing the behaviors against the business results to which the behaviors are tied. In work with communities (not discussed in this chapter) the citizen behaviors are keyed into measurable social outcomes that are also closely tracked by the public sector agency or non-profit organization.

2. *How do you measure results?*

This is a key component of the empowerment process. Visions are always translated into measurable outcomes, albeit sometimes they are changes in attitude. To effectively achieve empowerment outcomes, one needs to translate awareness into behavior change that can be measured. Part of this process is also about learning from feedback. People need to see the manifestation of their efforts to determine how they did/are doing and then make adjustments accordingly. Another way to describe this is iterative learning or the growing edge.

3. *How does the client determine their return on investment?*

Because this process is about the achievement of specific behaviors tied to key business outcomes it avoids one of the major problems of many change initiatives and trainings, which is hoping that skills or competencies taught translate into business outcomes. This is a very direct and transparent process.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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