

Empowerment of the Line Managers in HR Activities: HRM Issue in Malaysia

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Abstract

Within the general human resource management (HRM) literature, the central role of line managers in implementing HRM, is widely acknowledged. The responsibility for effectively managing human resources (HR) does not rest with those in the HR department, but, all managers (including line managers) are responsible for leading people. Indeed, line managers have an unquestioned crucial role in implementing HRM, because they are responsible for executing HR practices. However, there are various reasons, constraints, reactions, and problems have been identified to effective line involvement in HR activities. It reviews and discusses the impact of such empowerment practice to the HR managers as well as to the line managers. Since Malaysia emphasis on the value of its human capital, an examination of empowerment of the line issue in Malaysia is undertaken. Specifically, this paper attempts to highlight the needs to study empowerment of line managers in human resources in Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Quinn Mills, and Walton (1984) were the original writers in the area of human resource management (HRM). Organizations had to focus on the value of investments in human resources (HR) as a major source of competitive advantage (Beer et al., 1984, Guest, 1990; Schuler & Jackson, 2005) in the face of increasing international competition. The development of the HRM topic is now well documented in the literature (Guest, 1987, 1990, 2001; Legge, 2005; Schuler & Jackson, 2005). However, the critical debate relating to HRM continues today attempts to make a distinction between 'personnel management (PM)' and 'HRM' (Legge, 2005). The transition from PM to HRM reflects this emerging organization-wide commitment to human capital development (Sheehan, 2005). Other issues are related to incorporating industrial relations into HRM (Legge, 2005) and also HRM as a key indicator in achieving competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The changed has also given significant attention among the academicians pertaining to successful strategic positioning of, and responsibility for, HRM (Guest, 1987).

EMPOWERMENT

Due to the rapid growth of the adoption of modern technological production processes, the emphasis on quality of service particularly on the need of a new breed of skilled workers who are able to absorb and adapt to new changes and work practices can be seen. In other words, this is known as employee empowerment. This employee empowerment aggressively used in the 90s due to an increasingly complex and competitive external environment (Hill & Huq, 2004) which in turn affects organizational effectiveness. Organizational effectiveness was derived from judicious utilization of HR and all organizational members need to be engaged and active for a company to be successful as well as for sustainable competitive advantage (Siegall & Gardner, 2000). Similarly, the demand for flexibility and speed of response from the organizational members has led to decentralization and hence the empowerment of lower-level managers and staff occurred (Kanter, 1984). These notions were further enlightened by Greasley, Bryman, Dainty, Price, and Soetanto (2005) that empowerment in the workforce has given a greater degree of flexibility and more freedom of making decisions among employees in their work.

Empowerment in the workplace has received significant attention among both organizational theorists and practitioners (Bhatnagar, 2005; Bhatnagar & Sharma, 2004; Boudrias, Gaudreau, & Laschinger, 2004; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Honold, 1997; Koberg, Boss, Senjem, & Goodman, 1999; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996). As such, Koberg et al. (1999) believed that empowering appears to be shared by workers as well as managers. Boudrias et al. (2004) claimed that empowerment is used as managerial practices entailing the delegation of decision-making responsibilities down the hierarchy. Arguably, employee empowerment is an evolutionary process that cannot be achieved in the short term and will not happen naturally in organizations (Honold, 1997). It is multi-dimensional approach that involves how leaders lead, how individuals react, how peers interact, and how work related processes are structured.

From the above notions, empowerment explicitly an exciting area to be research as benefited many parties. Klage (1998) categorized the benefits of empowerment into two areas: benefits for the organization and benefits for the individual. He believed that the benefits of empowerment for the organization include the increases in strategic effectiveness, productivity, operations, and cross-functional cooperation. Organizations can also benefits from their empowerment initiatives in different ways such as improving quality and customer service, inculcate a sense of job ownership, commitment, and efficacy among empowered individuals and work teams (Johnson & Thurston, 1997). In fact, undoubtedly the empowered in the organizations have demonstrated a strong improvements in various economic performance areas (Applebaum, Hebert, & Leroux, 1999; Greasley et al., 2005).

Besides organizations, the benefits of empowerment to the individual employee have also been identified (Dewettinck, Singh, & Buyens, 2003; Greasley et al., 2005; Lin, 2002). For instance, Lin (2002) highlighted that empowerment provides opportunities for exposure and advancement that inspired employees to a long-term commitment to the organizations. Dewettinck et al. (2003) revealed that empowerment practices has resulted more satisfied and committed employees. Additionally, Greasley et al. (2005) reported that empowered employees have a greater sense of satisfaction, pride in their works, strong emotional response, higher level of self-esteem, and confidence.

Based on the above arguments, it further worth therefore to study empowerment since rigorous study of empowerment is still in its infancy (Ramaekers, 2005) particularly to the line managers in the area of human resource activities. It is thereby would give HR department as well as organizations as a whole to make major contribution to organizational effectiveness.

EMPOWERMENT OF THE LINE MANAGERS IN THE HUMAN RESOURCE ACTIVITIES

In the last decades, the need of a strong involvement among the line managers in HRM activities was one of the most critical debates and widely discussed in the literature (Brewster & Holt-Larsen, 1992; Gennard & Kelly, 1997; Hall & Torrington, 1998). This topic has again rekindled interest among researchers (Budhwar, 2000; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006; Hazman, 2002; Holt-Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Renwick, 2003; Sheehan, 2005; Watson, Maxwell, & Farquharson, 2007). Holt-Larsen and Brewster (2003) mentioned that the extent of line managers' involvement in HRM still received significant attention by both academicians and practitioners. In fact, the areas that still need to be focused are including restructuring, downsizing (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Gibb, 2003; Renwick, 2000) and encouraging employee input for improving companies competitive edge due to the pressures in today's business (MacNeil, 2003). Cunningham and Hyman (1999) argued the role of line managers in promoting an "integrative culture of employee management through line management" positively influenced employee commitment and, ultimately, business performances. Kulik and Bainbridge (2006) found that HR managers are more optimistic about the benefits of line managers' involvement for the organization in terms of higher employee satisfaction and organizational performance.

The importance of line manager's involvement in HRM is also due to the new role of HR's as a strategic partner (Lawler & Mohrman, 2000; Ulrich, 1997). According to Ulrich (1997), strategy partners are referring to the contribution of the HR managers to the management of strategic human resources. In addition, they help the organization by aligning HR practices with business strategy. Kulik and Bainbridge (2006) posits that HR primarily responsible for activities that require long-term projections such as HR planning. They contended, if HR is to become a strategic partner in today's organization, many HR

operational activities such as employee disciplinary action, coaching, performance management, and promotion decisions need to be empowered to the line managers. Strategic activities are time-consuming for HR managers and consequently will face work overload if still handling the operational tasks (Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006).

The above notions clearly demonstrate the importance of the empowerment to be given to the line managers in the HR activities. Lashley (1999) noted that empowerment has been hailed as a management technique in any organization and can be applied universally across all industrial sectors. Reviewed of past studies shows that empowerment mostly were conducted in construction sector (Dainty, Bryman, & Price, 2002; Greasley et al., 2005; Hammuda & Dulaimi, 1997), health sector (Hochwalder & Brucefors, 2005; Joiner & Bartram, 2004; Laschinger & Finegan, 2004; Tu, Wang, & Yeh, 2006), public sector (Pitts, 2005), education sector (Moye, Henkin, & Egley, 2005; Ramaekers, 2005; Somech, 2005), as well as service (Bowen & Lawler, 1995; Lin, 2002; Melhem, 2004; Nielsen & Pedersen, 2003; Wat & Shaffer, 2005), and manufacturing sector (Chu, 2003; Moye & Henkin, 2006; Psoinos & Smithson, 2002). Nevertheless, all those studies were focused on empowerment issue in general with little attention given to the line managers in HR activities. In fact, there is still dearth of such study being undertaken in Malaysia.

THE REASONS, CONSTRAINTS, REACTIONS, AND PROBLEMS OF LINE INVOLVEMENT IN HR ACTIVITIES

There are various *reasons* on the different roles that line managers should play in organizations. Ulrich (1998) noted that the line managers “should lead the way in fully integrating HR into the company’s real work” (p. 125-126). In addition, line managers adopt “partnership” approach between HR, line and employees to manage HR issues—“an HR triad” (Jackson & Schuler, 2000, p. 25). The reason is also mentioned by Legge (2005) who believes that there is an enhanced role for line managers in the organizations that hold them responsible for bottom-line results. Legge’s further believed that line managers have frequent contact with the customers, which enables them to present themselves as the “voice of customer”. Other reasons for this devolution have been cited including restructuring, downsizing, and an increased need to focus on encouraging employee inputs for improving their competitive edge (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Renwick, 2000).

At the same time, a number of *constraints* have also been identified to effective line involvement in HR. In this regard, Wanless (2003) identified inconsistencies in implementation by managers, increasing managerial workloads and time constraints and other performance pressures which can lead managerial short-termism. McGovern, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles, and Truss (1997) identified three groups of organizational constraints. First, institutional that reinforces the HR practices which covers the line manager’s performance measures and training. Secondly, it is related to dynamics of managerial short-termism, which refers to little incentive to develop employees. Third, impact of restructuring on management practice which means where there have been redundancies at the managerial level, can lead to larger workloads for the managers who remain with the organization.

There are mixed *reactions* among line managers with the decentralization of operational HR activities. Researchers found first-line managers find implementing HR practices at the operational level difficult and show reluctance to accept HR responsibilities being pushed to them (Nehles, Riemsdijk, Kok, & Looise, 2006; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Kulik and Bainbridge (2006) argued that line managers are reluctant to assume responsibility for activities that are seen as “no win” situations. Despite these, Nehles et al. (2006) showed that first-line managers perceived lack of capacity, lack of competencies, lack of support, and lack of policy and procedures lead to HRM implementation difficulties.

Other studies, on the other hand, show that line managers gave positive messages. For instance, Teo and Rodwell (2003) reported that line managers were satisfied with the performance of their HR departments. Similarly, Whittaker and Marchington (2003) found that the line managers claimed to be satisfied with the HR responsibilities that have been devolved to them and keen to take on activities that relate explicitly to the development of their team.

From the HR manager's perspectives, they are not always eager to relinquish responsibility for people management activities to line managers (Harris, Doughty, & Kirk, 2002; Torrington & Hall, 1996). In contrast, Kulik and Bainbridge (2006) found that HR managers are more optimistic than line managers about the benefits of line manager involvement for the organization (in terms of higher employee satisfaction and organizational performance). Furthermore, HR managers in Kulik and Bainbridge's study are more likely than line managers to suggest that HR will involve the line in more people management activities in the future.

Many researchers suggested that line involvement in HR responsibilities can create *problems* for a number of reasons. For example, Holt-Larsen and Brewster (2003) question whether line managers have the time, the ability and the competencies that are required, or if they even have the wish to take on responsibility for HR. McGovern et al. (1997, p. 26) argue that line managers have limited incentives to get involved in HR activities and that this often leads to a short-term focus of managerial activity where people issue get low priority. More recently, Watson et al. (2007) identified high majority of first-line managers of Hilton (UK) hotels see heavy workloads and short-term job pressures as hindrances to involvement. In a more positive review of the area, Gennard and Kelly (1997) have suggested that extensive participation between HR and line managers can create mutual benefits for both as they jointly contribute to solve business problems.

THE NEED FOR THE STUDY OF EMPOWERMENT OF THE LINE MANAGERS IN HR ACTIVITIES IN MALAYSIA

From the preceding discussion, there was an evidence that empowerment has become a central focus in all sectors of industries (Bowen & Lawler, 1995; Greasley et al., 2005; Hochwalder & Brucefors, 2005; Pitts, 2005; Psinos & Smithson, 2002). Specifically, Greasley et al. (2005) investigated on how empowerment is perceived by individuals employed on construction projects. Pitts (2005) builds on research on empowerment by creating a model that explains why some managers empower their employees and others do not in the public organizations. Therefore, this present paper proposed on the need of study in empowerment area particularly in HR activities to the line managers at two major sectors in Malaysia namely manufacturing and service sector. These two sectors were chosen because of several reasons.

As reported in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010, Malaysian economy has grown up at 6.2 per cent per annum during the 1991-2005 periods and the service and manufacturing sector were the major contributors to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The GDP of the services sector growth at an average annual rate of 6.1 per cent from 53.9 per cent in 2000 to 58.1 per cent in 2005 whilst the manufacturing sector has achieved a growth rate of 4.1 per cent in that period (Government Malaysia, 2006). Indeed, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stressed that these are the crucial sectors that requires more strategic human resource practices in the future (Government Malaysia, 2006). Nevertheless, despite the increases of GDP, both sectors are still reported of facing problems relating to human resources practices particularly empowerment. The level of empowerment in Malaysia manufacturing companies was at moderate level (Ramayah, Muhammad, & Mohd Mustapha, 2002) and it is assumed to be the same in the service companies, although the concept of empowerment has met with great acceptance in the scientific community and proven to be successful in the Western countries (Wageman, 2001).

In a similar vein, the issues of the role of HR managers and the influence of line managers in HR activities have continued to plague organizations in Malaysia. Empirical study by Hazman (1998) reported that HR managers in manufacturing and service sector tend to have little influence in the strategic decision making. A study of manufacturing firms provides evidence that HR managers rated on the HR have line influence in HR activities was one of the ten capabilities as least importance of the HR managers (Rozhan, Rohayu, & Rasidah, 2001). Chew (2005) recently reported that although the role of the HR department and its importance are gradually expanding to broader perspective in many Malaysian firms, the general notion is that the HR department still plays merely an administrative role. In effect, HR people devote so much time on day-to-day administrative works with little attention given to the strategic HR activities. Notwithstanding, HR managers have to minimize their time on operational aspects of activities and need to reduce their workload and allow them to spend more time on strategic activities.

Empowerment is one of the solutions to the above issues. In other words, the line managers should be given power in handling HR activities. By doing this, the workload of the HR managers will be reduced. As the line managers are the front line representatives of the organization (McGuire, Garavan, Saha, & O'Donnell, 2006) HR activities has always been part of their job (Papalexandris & Panayotopoulou, 2005). They are in fact the closest person to the employees (Mayrhofer et al., 2004) and therefore play a key role in contributing to strategic HRM outcomes (MacNeil, 2003) such as setting the agenda, dealing with workplace issues, and providing direction to employees (McGuire et al., 2006). In turn, their responsibility on the HR activities can be more effective, immediate and appropriate.

CONCLUSION

This paper explicitly indicates that empowerment has become a central focus in all sectors of the industries. Many scholars in fact argued that once empowerment becomes a culture to the organization or in place, extraordinary things will happen. Organizations in turn will be able to beat competitors and continue to become more competitive. Scholars on the other hand agreed that insufficient delegation of authority as being among the primary causes of business failure (Miller & Freisen, 1980). In line with these notions, there is a need for empirical investigation on empowerment of the line managers in HR activities in Malaysia particularly in the service and manufacturing sector as both sectors significantly contribute to the country Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

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