

Empowerment: emancipation or delegation

56- 01/12/2022 “Empowerment”! This curious buzzword refers indifferently to opposite dynamics. It equally applies to citizen emancipation movements, resistance and power conquest, as well as motivational governances empowering employees or beneficiaries ?

In the first case, the process starts from the bottom, from vulnerable people who refuse an injustice or from citizens opposing the status quo. Their subversive impulse spreads to their peers, their individual commitments come together in an emancipatory and liberating movement. United, they overcome obstacles, devise alternatives and bring forward meaningful reforms.

In the second case, initiative comes from the top. The operator want to motivate collaborators or beneficiaries by delegating a capacity, by granting him a license in exchange for his accountability. This power is transmitted from top to bottom, from those with the most authority to those who have less and whom they want assimilate or even discipline – but gently.

How can we differentiate these approaches? First of all, the context should be analyzed, which generally enlightens the emancipatory or delegative nature of empowerment. It would be also useful to refer to the synthesis below. Result of nearly ten years of research, this table illustrates the concept astonishing plasticity, which sums up the eternal struggle between antagonistic forces of power and counter-power. Antagonistic forces but nevertheless complementary, because they serve as guarantors of democracy’s vitality !

TOP-DOWN	BOTTOM-UP
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The empowerment top-down approach characterizes a limited power granting, a supervised delegation, or an gain in autonomy circumscribed by superior authority to subordinate. This attribution comes with a transfer of responsibility, supported by knowledge transmission, skills, operational information and access to technical and technological resources. In return, the authority expects the individual to perform, to take initiatives and responsibilities that serve the chosen strategy, to adhere to its objectives and finally to adopt a behavior adapted to its constraints or recommendations with a view to greater assimilation. Top-down empowerment is an individual-centered motivational lever serving predetermined objectives.

The bottom-up approach refers to the struggle for emancipation led by individual or group refusing its subjugation condition or vulnerability. This same will to “not suffer” inspires also mobilizations against a status quo or an injustice. People free themselves from the limits or frameworks imposed. They create their own knowledge and develop a counter-power through resistance, critical awareness, innovative solutions and persuasive advocacy.

This liberating approach is based on cooperation, creation and learning, collective identity and project. These citizens requires greater control over issues of concern, asserting their own choices as well as increased efficiency and social justice. Drawing their energy from the strength of their community, they increase their power to act and to influence society.

EMPOWERMENT MEASURE

INDIVIDUAL

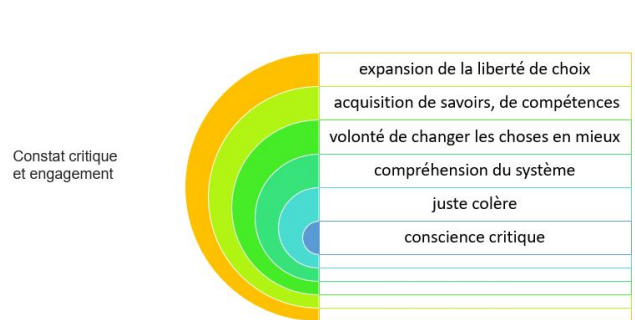
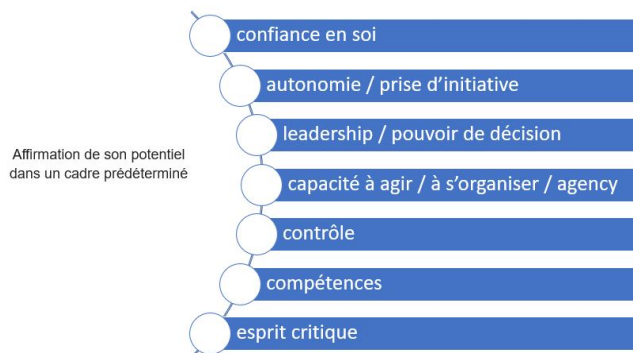
TOP-DOWN BOTTOM-UP

>Shaping of the person according to structure issues and norms
Dual relationship between company/employee - institution/beneficiary

> Resistance and opposition face with adverse circumstances
Individual confrontation with the dominant norms

Empowerment as a motivation lever
This approach is mainly individual. The criteria refer to a self-assessment scale which measures operational efficiency. Power remains internalized. Psychological empowerment focuses on the power to act based on predetermined pattern. No reference is made to situations of domination. The subject is depoliticized? even instrumentalized.

Empowerment as agency, self-assertion and affirmation of one's difference
The main criteria are based on refusal of oppressive conditions and on the will of taking control of one's destiny. In doing so, the person steps back, questions social norms and relations of domination. She or he looks for innovating and pragmatic solutions and call for deep reforms.

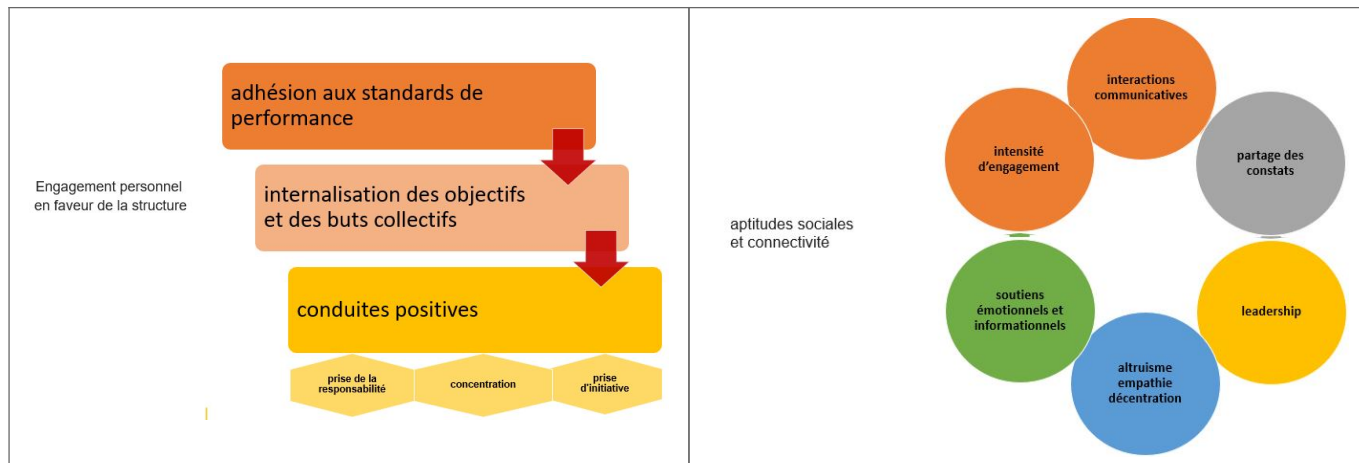


COMMITMENT DYNAMICS

TOP-DOWN BOTTOM-UP

Internalization and verticality
The objective is to encourage employees or beneficiaries to adopt positive behaviors in order to perform their assigned duties... without overflowing their competence and influence areas.

Externalization and horizontality
The individual commitment is externalized. Her or his story is heard by people facing the same difficulties. A inclusive group is formed, a space for socialization and dialogue between members sharing experiences and testimonies and same values.



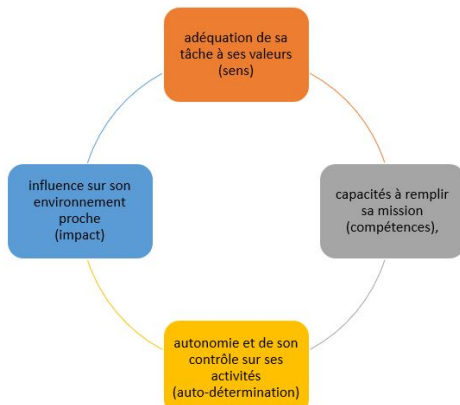
EMPOWERMENT ISSUES

TOP-DOWN BOTTOM-UP

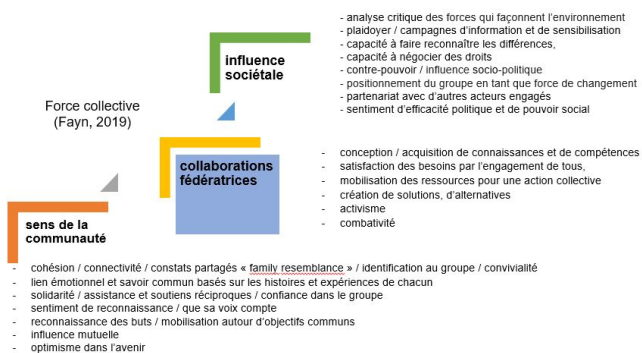
Governance determines operational efficiency and performance criteria. Employee is invited to assess his or her impact in relation to standards and strategic objectives.

Collective empowerment process as a three-phase sequence : 1) building a network around a shared identity (community); 2) develop skills supported by actions (collaborative) ; 3) investing in social advocacy (societal empowerment) .

Auto-évaluation
(Spreitzer, 1995)



Force collective
(Fayn, 2019)

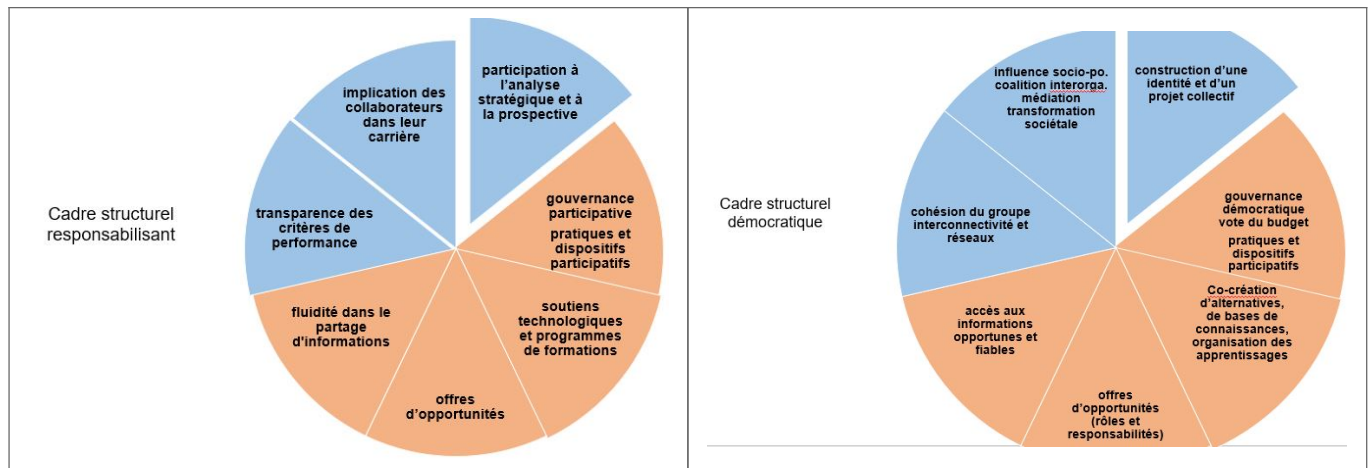


ORGANIZATION'S ROLE

TOP-DOWN BOTTOM-UP

In both top-down and bottom-up organizations, there is the same concern for increasing learning, knowledge and skills and for providing opportunities for roles.

Differences are found on the breadth of the consultative process, more or less extensive, regarding governance and future perspectives. In top-down approaches, priority is given to the involvement of employees in their careers and in defining performance criteria. These indicators are not included in bottom-up approaches that focus on pro-social activities, cohesion, influence and societal transformation.



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[Link to bibliography](#)

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