



# CHANGING BEHAVIOR IN ORGANIZATIONS: THE PRACTICE OF EMPOWERMENT

BY DAVID GERSHON

“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.”

John P. Kotter and Dan S. Cohen  
in *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations*  
(Harvard Business School Press, 2002)

**E**mpowerment is the process of enabling individuals to adopt new behaviors that further their individual aspirations and those of their organizations. This article presents a behavior change model that is based on 25 years of research and practice (see “The Practice of Empowerment.”). It 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 that it focuses on both the individual and the collective enterprise. As individuals grow and achieve outcomes important to them, they also benefit the whole. At the same time, the organization serves as a resource to enable the individual to achieve these

outcomes. This mutual accountability strengthens the commitment level of both the individual and the organization, enabling greater sustainability for the change initiative over the long term.

For a group to adopt new behaviors that can translate into their desired business objectives, they must first establish a learning and growth culture. Many change interventions assume that such an environment is inherent. They neglect to notice whether the cultural ingredients nec-

essary to enable learning and growing are present. All of these conditions rarely exist; this shortcoming limits an organization’s ability to achieve the desired behavior changes.

## Empowering the Space

Using the analogy of nature, for new seeds (*behaviors*) to take root, grow, and thrive, they need fertile soil (*a learning and growth culture*). I call creating this fertile soil “empowering the space.” An empowered space enables individuals to feel safe and trusting

### THE PRACTICE OF EMPOWERMENT

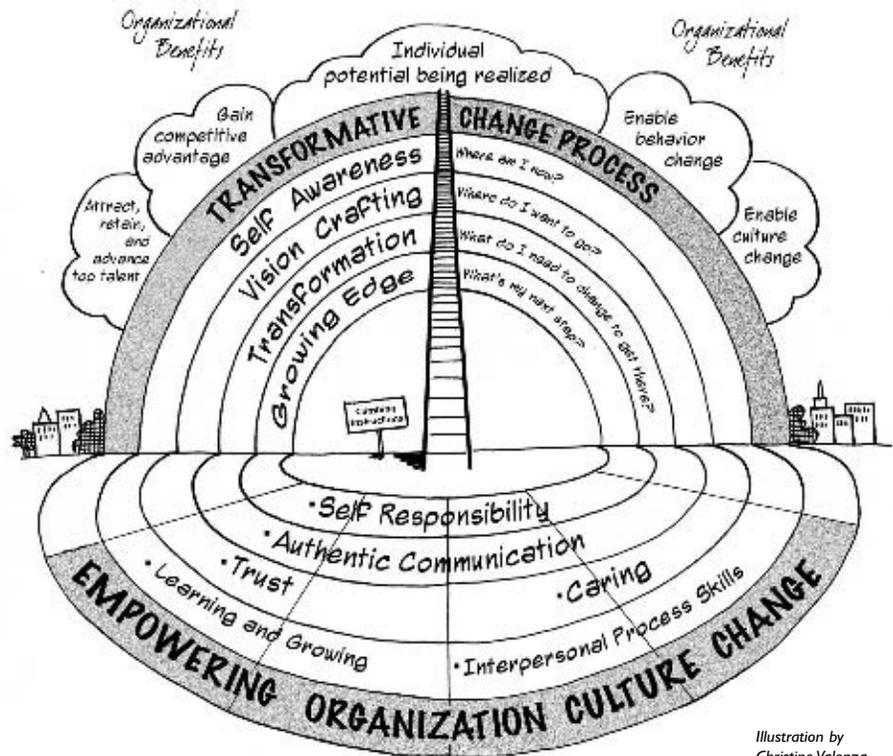


Illustration by  
Christine Valenza

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## TEAM TIP

One of the “shifts” that takes place through the Empowerment Model is from a “pathological to a vision-based approach to growth” (see page 3). This approach is similar to the structural tension model described by Robert Fritz in his classic book, *Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become the Creative Force in Your Own Life* (Ballantine Books, 1989). For an overview of this concept, go to [www.robertfritz.com](http://www.robertfritz.com) and click on “Principles.”

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 move from a cultural-change level to one-on-one relationships.

### **Cultural Practices for Empowering the Space**

- *Self-Responsibility*: At the organizational level, individuals take responsibility to have their job, team, function, and organization the way they wish them 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. A genuine sense of goodwill 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 that they regularly deploy to resolve interpersonal issues and build high-functioning relationships.
- *Caring*: The organizational leadership demonstrates concern for individuals in tangible ways. Individuals feel valued and are inspired to give their best effort on behalf of the organization.

The role of the empowerment practitioner is to create an environment where these practices are first embodied in the group experience. Once the group has personally experienced that growth is possible—in themselves and in their organization—the practitioner then helps them establish the practices to take root over the long term.

The change process originates at the individual level and is reinforced by group members, who recognize that it furthers their own collective development. The process involves three “shifts” and requires a support system to sustain it. These shifts are outlined in the three-part “Empowerment Model” below.

### **Empowerment Model**

#### **Shift from a Pathological to a Vision-Based Approach to Growth**

The first part of the empowerment model looks at where we direct our attention when we attempt to create change. The model’s premise is that where we place our mental attention determines what we create. If we focus on our problems or pathologies, we gain insight into them. If we focus on solutions, or what we want, we gain insight into those. 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 to what *can* work also motivates us to take action. We are inspired by our vision rather than energized by our problems. It’s the difference between planting a garden by concentrating on removing rocks, roots, and weeds rather than by envisioning the flowers and vegetables in full bloom. One seems laborious, the other engaging. You still need to remove the rocks, but you have a vision of a bountiful garden to sustain you. This part of the model can be summarized as a shift from a pathological to a vision-based approach to growth.

#### **Shift from Static to Organic Growth**

The second part of the empowerment model describes an approach to personal growth derived from observing the natural world. Something that is alive, such as a tree, is always growing. The precise place where this growth is just coming into existence is the tree’s *growing edge*. That is where the tree is most active and vital. Similarly, the places where you feel your greatest aliveness and vitality are your growing edges.

The alternative view of growth 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. When I get there, my growth around that issue is over. Such a perspective is a fixed 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).

#### **Shift to 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. These processes concentrate 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, 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 reach our goal, that it wasn’t really what we wanted after all. We did not have enough self-awareness and were acting out someone else’s vision for our lives, not our own. We can summarize this third part of the model as the integration of self-awareness with the ability to achieve behavior change or a desired outcome.

### **Getting from Here to There**

Four steps, each with a corresponding question, make the Empowerment Model’s growth strategy operational:

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, participation in a facilitated peer support group, and coaching. Within the context of an empowered space, this process enables new behaviors to be adopted and sustained over time (see “Transformative Change Intervention Process”).

A group at American Express, led by Bob Franco, Vice President of the Global Talent Division, faced a key challenge: how to move individuals to higher levels of performance, especially when building partnerships within complex organizational systems. Using the Empowerment Model, he and his group went through an intense, personalized learning experience. As a result of a series of guided exercises around each of the four steps listed above, Bob and his team were able to adopt the key behavior of self-responsibility: They moved from being victims within a dysfunctional organi-

zation to being accountable 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, the group participated in 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 roadblocks his team encountered and a highly politicized environment had sapped his enthusiasm.

As Bob went through the visioning exercise, he began to imagine his team developing a skill set that could more effectively serve their internal clients. He also saw that, through building their consulting and transformative change leadership skills, they could develop a value proposition that

enabled them more independence and autonomy. Bob began to realize that, rather than being trapped in a dysfunctional system, he could operate on a higher level by increasing the capability of his current group. This vision was liberating and inspirational. Bob actually saw possible ways to gain control of the situation.

However, he saw that achieving his vision would require a lot of work. Were 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 energy to go through it all?

Bob discovered that his growing edge was believing in his teammates 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 members was going through transformations as well. As they 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 so 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 it in Bob’s words: “This process helped us separate the circumstance around us that is charged with a disempowering ‘pathology’ to 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 moved away from the crippling power of ‘problems’ to a new power—one inside us, one focused on what we want to create. This team now has daily practices focusing on their vision.”

Bob’s intention statement was: “I help my team build 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!” Bob and his team then participated in a

## TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE INTERVENTION PROCESS

**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, the process can be anywhere from six months to several years.

**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 a missing piece in many change strategies.

**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 are possible with this methodology.

**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 on page 3.

**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.

support system of coaching and peer support teams to help sustain the behavior changes (see “Flow and Timing of Activities”).

### Measuring Results

This is a robust and proven methodology for changing behavior in organizations. 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.

Measuring results 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.

The empowerment process also has the added benefit of being able to catalyze deep cultural change. Because it is about the achievement of specific behaviors tied to key business outcomes, it avoids one of the major problems of many cultural change initiatives and trainings: hoping that skills or competencies taught translate into business outcomes. Once leaders view initial results, they can then scale up the effort to eventually include everyone in the organization. ■

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| FLOW AND TIMING OF ACTIVITIES   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Process   | Length of Time  | Participants  |
| 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 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 1 to 3 months for a year. Two-hour peer support groups of 6 to 9 people every 3 months for a year. |
| Pilot program and make adjustments.   | 12 months   | 50 to 100 participants  |
| If desired, scale up program.   | 2 to 3 years, depending on size of organization and desired speed | Hundreds to thousands of participants   |

*This article is adapted from a chapter in The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging*

*Whole Systems, 2nd Edition, published by Berrett-Koehler, 2007.*

### NEXT STEPS

According to Gallup Research, organizations utilize less than 20 percent of their employee's potential. To develop employee potential requires an organizational culture that inspires employees to learn, grow, and give their best. In such a culture, innovations that require employee to adopt new behaviors can take root. Employees choose to go the extra mile, expending their discretionary energy for the sake of the organization. They choose to invest themselves in the organization rather than be available to the highest bidder. For most organizations, developing this untapped potential is their key advantage for competing in the marketplace or retaining top talent.

Symptoms of a disempowering organizational culture often include:

- Blaming and victim mentality
- Lack of participation in decision making
- Leaders versus employees mindset
- Apathy and burnout
- Thoughts or feelings not freely expressed for fear of repercussion
- Gossip and back-biting poisoning work environment
- Fear of making decisions
- New ideas not taken seriously
- Distrust and cynicism
- People feel unappreciated
- Learning and growth opportunities not being actively pursued
- Lack of recognition for contributions
- Top talent leaving for better opportunities or work environment

### Empowering Organization Audit

An empowering organization audit enables an organization to learn about the current capacity of its employees to adopt new behaviors. Employees evaluate their group or department and organization as a whole, based on the six values described on page 3. Each is rated on a scale of 1–10, with 1 being seldom and 10 being consistently. The outcome of this assessment determines the current fertility of the cultural soil for adoption of new behaviors. With this knowledge, the organization can make informed culture change adjustments.

1. Self Responsibility \_\_\_\_\_
2. Authentic Communication \_\_\_\_\_
3. Trust \_\_\_\_\_
4. Learning and Growing \_\_\_\_\_
5. Interpersonal Process Skills \_\_\_\_\_
6. Caring \_\_\_\_\_