

An Investigation of Factors Influencing Levels of Employee Empowerment in a Government Training Institution The Case of Management Training Bureau: Zimbabwe

EDWARD NEGWAYA

Bindura University of Science Education

Email: enegwaya@gmail.com

TENDAI CHAZUZA

Bindura University of Science Education

Email: tendaichazuza@gmail.com

NYASHA MAPIRA

Bindura University of Science Education

Email: dmapira@gmail.com

HILLARY MUSEMWA

Bindura University of Science Education

Email: hillieb.musemwa@gmail.com

Abstract

The research sought to investigate factors that influence levels of employee empowerment Management Training Bureau (MTB), a government owned training institution in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study employed the use of a case study research design. Initially, the target population was divided into two main strata, managerial and non- managerial employees. From a population of 187 non- managerial members of staff, a sample of 56 was drawn from which data was collected using self- administered questionnaires. From the initially scheduled 12 interviews with members of the management team, 9 were successfully conducted. Data was analyzed through the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The research established a fairly high level of feelings of alienation and disempowerment among members of staff across the various levels of the organizational structure. The main factors that were found to influence levels of employee engagement at Management Training Bureau, included organizational culture, the availability of resources as well as the leadership styles of managers, communication styles, quality of training and development, lack of succession planning and mentorship programmes, as well as high labor turnover of qualified and competent staff. The research recommends that the organization among others, revisits its organizational culture, with a view to encompassing tenets of employee empowerment such as more effective communication, participatory decision making, and coaching and delegation of duties and responsibilities to staff.

Key Words: Positive Psychology; Positive Organizational Behavior; Employee empowerment Performance management; Job performance.

Introduction

The advent of Positive Organisational Behaviour, an offshoot of Positive Psychology, has brought to the fore the strong need to view organisations in a positive light, while at the same time, disabusing ourselves of the notion that organisations are 'sick patience' in need of therapy. To this end , many organizations have ,in the past decade, implemented managerial approaches, based on empowerment (e.g. self-managed

work teams and delegation of authority), with the expectation that these will increase employee productivity as well as innovation (Wellins, Byham and Wilson, 1991). However, such outcomes cannot be automatically realised. For such benefits to materialize, managerial approaches should foster strategies for empowering employees, and ultimately stimulate employee behaviours in the direction of expected outcomes. Although many studies have investigated the relationships between managerial practices and psychological states of empowerment, few have examined the relationship between employee empowerment and its behavioural manifestations/job performance.

Management Training Bureau was established in 1984 under the Zimbabwe Manpower Development Act, and has as its mandate, the offering of short management staff development courses and consultancy services to organisations and individuals, in an effort to bridge the skills gap of various management levels in all sectors of the economy of Zimbabwe and beyond.

Over the years, the organization has provided training and development services to individuals and organizations (both public and private). The organization is a public funded entity. However, since 2009, it has failed to realize its full potential mainly due to highly rigid and centralized decision processes.

MTB is going through a period characterized by highly centralized key decision making processes, a development which has alienated most managers from the organisation, with an attendant high staff turnover of managerial employees. high levels of absenteeism as indicated in the human resources monthly reports for the period 2009-2011, and generally low motivational levels at the workplace. Furthermore, these perceptions of alienation have resulted in very low levels of employee innovation and creativity. This has had the effect of compromising the organisation's service delivery levels ,.

The problems highlighted above have brought to the fore the need to investigate the impact of employee empowerment on job performance.

The research thus sought to address the following questions:

What are the employee empowerment strategies currently being employed at Management Training Bureau?

How do these current employee empowerment strategies impact on job performance?

What factors hinder the effective implementation of employee empowerment strategies?

What improvements can be effected to MTB's employee empowerment strategies in order to enhance their overall effectiveness?

Literature Review

Employee Empowerment

Schessinger and Heskett, (1991) define empowerment as a process which involves giving employees a discretion (or latitude) over certain task related activities. Randolph (1995) furthermore, defines employee empowerment as "a transfer of power" from the employer to the employees. In addition, Blanchard, Carlos and Radolf (1996) argue that empowerment is not only having the freedom to act, but also having higher degrees of responsibility and accountability. This implies that management must empower their employees so that they can be motivated, committed, satisfied and assist the organisation in achieving its objectives.

Theoretical Framework to Employee Empowerment

The use of the term empowerment in management implies industrial democracy and involving personnel in decision making processes, under different titles such as team-making, participation, and Total Quality Management. Organizational science scholars discuss empowerment from four different approaches. (Hardy et al, 1998). A number of theoretical approaches are discussed below.

The Communicative Approach

From this perspective, empowerment is defined as a process through which a leader or a manager tries to divide his or her power among subordinates. (Conger & Kanungo, 1998) For example, Bar de Bick Block and Peters (2002), define empowerment as the process of power-sharing among the personnel in organizations. Furthermore, Harary (1995) explains that empowerment is a tool for giving freedom to employees so that they can do what they think, without fear of being vetoed by the managers.

Motivational Approach

Empowerment is rooted in motivational tendencies of people. Any strategy that increases the right to select business activities (self-decision) and promotes employees' self-sufficiency, will lead to their empowerment. Conversely, any strategy leading to a weakening of the above incentives will strengthen their sense of powerlessness and lack of empowerment. Conger and Kanungo, (1998) believe that empowerment is simply the process of strengthening the competence of organizational staff, through identifying conditions that make them feel powerless, and trying to solve these conditions, using both official actions and informal techniques; as well as providing information that will make employees feel part of the organization.

Cognitive Approach

Cognitive theorists such as Thomas and Velthouse, believe that empowerment is a multidimensional issue and cannot be explained solely on the basis of a specific concept. Therefore they have defined empowerment as a process of internal motivation toward staff's duties which is manifested in one of following cognitive characteristics:

- *Effectiveness*: A task has effectiveness if individuals consider it as a source of goal achievement. In other words, a person must believe that he/she can play an important role to achieve organisational objectives by doing his duties.
- *Competency*: Competency or self-sufficiency is defined as individuals' belief about their ability to perform duties successfully. If it is such a task that individuals can do it using their skills, which will have a positive effect on his sense of self-sufficiency.
- *Meaningfulness*: This feature refers to the value of an objective based on individual's ideals and standards. If an individual considers his job as "worthy", the task will have meaningfulness.
- *Selection right*: It refers to employees' freedom in selecting activities which are necessary to do their work duties.

Enhancing job performance through employee empowerment.

Employee empowerment is critical for the success and survival of organisations, particularly in this era of globalisation. Employee empowerment benefits the organization by creating an environment which encourages proactive approaches to problem-solving, acceptance of challenges, innovation building, continuous improvement, and optimum utilization of employees for productivity and a high degree of employee motivation and enhancement of business performance level.

Furthermore, employee empowerment provides a sense of high self-esteem, high degree of involvement and participation, a learning environment and opportunities for personal growth and development. Replacing the 'fear and greed' hierarchy with network of empowered workers creates benefits like faster responses, loyal customers, high quality-lower costs, greater productivity, and greater customer satisfaction and employee orientation.

Additionally, employee empowerment makes employees feel that they are vital to the success of the organisation, and it also provides a basis for building confidence in the employee's ability to significantly contribute to the organisation's objectives. Empowerment also places people at the centre of organisational programmes, rather than on the fringes. This, in the long run would ensure employees are committed to achieving organisational objectives. Empowered employees feel valued by the organisation, especially when they are involved in decision making processes. Involvement builds commitment and creates a sense of belonging. Acceptance and ownership are basic human needs that can be satisfied through employee empowerment (Ford and Fottler, 1995).

In addition, empowered employees join in creating their own destiny, thereby creating an exciting work environment that is stimulating, enjoyable and meaningful. Employee empowerment builds trust and promotes effective communication.

Moreover, the other benefit of employee empowerment is increased organizational effectiveness and employee wellbeing. For instance, empowering employees has been shown to improve efficiency and reduce costs. Employee empowerment also leads to job satisfaction, job involvement, loyalty, higher performance and faster service delivery to customers (Fulford and Enz, 1995).

Subsequently, empowered employees make quick decisions and suggestions that improve productivity in their sphere of operations and this saves a lot of money and time in organisations (Sitterly, 1998). Moreover, employee empowerment promotes sound relationship between the employee and the customers, and as a result, the image of the organisation will be enhanced.

Other benefits of employee empowerment in organisations include reduced workload of top management, improved training of employees and a boost in employee morale. Employee empowerment thus fosters a competitive climate and facilitates change in organisations. In practice, empowered employees have a high sense of self-efficacy and are given significant responsibility and authority over their jobs (Conger and Kanungo, 1988).

Factors that hinder the effective implementation of employee empowerment

EE essentially involves delegation of authority to an empowered individual or team of individuals. In an organization, there may be many factors which militate against proper employee empowerment. Kaplan (1991), identified seven factors which are explained below. One of the factors identified by Kaplan (ibid) which is organizational culture. If the organizational culture is premised on authoritarianism, it works as an impediment for effective employee empowerment. In such a culture, often, authority tends to be centralized at the top, and consequently, there is lack of meaningful delegation of authority.. The other factors identified by Kaplan (ibid) is the need by managers to maintain tight control of developments in the business. Managers may become habituated to the constant contact of subordinates bringing matters to them for approval.

A manager may not delegate adequate authority because of fears of subordinates. The fear of a subordinates may be real. It can take two forms. Firstly, the subordinate might show that he can perform the superior's work so well that he becomes entitled to his position, status, title, or prestige. Secondly, the subordinate's increasing ability might earn him a promotion to some other part of the organization, and the superior may lose the best subordinate. In this case, the superior may thus adopt defensive behaviour.

A superior manager, especially a weak one, may not like to delegate, simply because adequate delegation may reveal managerial shortcomings being practiced. This may happen especially when the superior has poor operating procedures, methods, and practices.

Another factor may be managers' attitudes towards subordinates. Delegation of authority is a particular kind of trust between superior and his subordinates. Therefore, the managers' attitudes towards subordinates, and their (subordinates') attitudes towards him, become important in the process of delegation. Negative attitudes work against delegation of authority in several ways. Firstly, if a superior has lack of confidence in his subordinate's capacity, he will not like to delegate them authority. Secondly, the superior may feel that his subordinates just do not require more authority than they have been delegated.

Such a feeling may result into inadequate delegation of authority. Thirdly, the superior may not have good interpersonal relationships with subordinates which may result into less delegation of authority.

The other factor identified by Kaplan (ibid), as contributing towards the failure of employee empowerment strategies is lack of proper communication. Management might decentralise resources in objective reality, but if employees are not informed about the lack of resources that are available for their use (a perpetual reality), then access to resources will have little influence on feelings of empowerment, nor will employees utilize these resources to effect desired organisational outcomes.

Employee empowerment strategies are however, criticised for increasing the scope of employee's jobs (Mohammed and Pervaiz 1998). Empowerment requires that employees must be properly trained to gain skills, knowledge and attitudinal characteristics to cope up with wider range of tasks so as to enhance organisational performance.

Research Methodology

A case study was adopted because it attempts to describe the relationship that exists in reality between the variables under consideration and very often in single organization set up as well as provides in-depth elucidation of the research. Both qualitative and quantitative data was used.

The research was confined to employee empowerment strategies that impact on job performance at MTB (*Conceptual Delimitation*) The inquiry was confined to Management Training Bureau, a subsidiary organization of ZIMDEF whose headquarters is in Harare. The study thus excluded other branches of ZIMDEF such as Mutare, Gweru and others (*Geographical delimitation*) The research focuses on management and permanent employees only, while excluding all the casual workers (*Population delimitation*) Employee empowerment strategies employed by MTB between the period of 2009-2011 form the basis of the study. (*Time delimitation*)

Population and Sample

In this research, the target population comprised of 187 permanent members of staff at MTB, 175 non managerial employees and 12 managers. From the population of non-managerial members of staff, the researchers employed stratified random sampling method, that ensured each category of employees was represented in the sample. Random sampling technique was used at each stratum of employees from the population. The researcher used 30% of the population to get a sample size which was representative of the population.

Data Collection Methods/Instruments

Given that the research was both explanatory and exploratory, semi-structured interviews were used for the collection of primary data. Self administered questionnaires were also used as was the analysis of human resources records.

The researcher carried out interviews with top management. The advantages obtained using the interviews were that the researcher had the flexibility in presenting the questions to the respondents in a formally structured manner. The researcher enhanced data validity by employing triangulation with entailed the use of multiple data sources. To ensure data reliability, the same interview questions were used during all sessions. Measures were taken to control weaknesses identified in the self administered questionnaires, by conducting a pilot study to assess whether respondents would have problems in answering the questions, and also to assess if there would be any problem recording the data. In this research, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity of respondents and the participant's right to privacy were some of the measures used to enhance ethical considerations.

Data Presentation and Analysis Procedures

A deductive form of analysis was employed which provided for the general descriptive statistics making use of tables, graphs, pie charts and qualitative form for easy interpretation. As it is a case study, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis was used to identify the factors influencing levels of employee empowerment in the organisation. Figures were constructed to show relationships between variables for better interpretation.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Data gathered from MTB based on an investigation of the factors that influence levels of employee empowerment in the organisation is presented below. The presentation, analysis and discussion was done in two sections namely analysis of interview data and self-administered questionnaires.

Response rate			
	Questionnaires for non-managerial staff	Interviews for managerial staff	Total responses
Sample size	56	12	68
Usable returns	45	9	54
Percentage response rate (%)	80%	75%	79%

n=54

Source: Primary Data

The response rate for questionnaires was 80% whilst 75% of the managerial staff participated in the interviews. A total of fifty six (56) questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and 45(80%) were returned. In addition, a total of twelve (12) interviews were initially scheduled with managerial members of staff. However, nine (9) interviews were conducted. An overall response rate of 79% was achieved, a rate that was reasonably high enough to enable the researcher to make valid conclusions regarding the population.

Percentage distribution of respondents by gender

Gender	Number	Number as a percentage
Male	19	31.1%
Female	35	68.9%

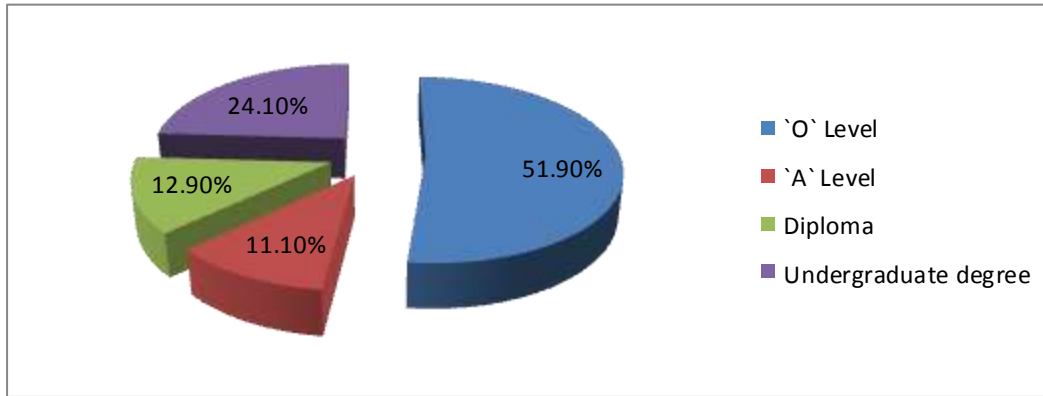
n=54

Source: Primary data

From the table above, the majority of the respondents (68.9%) were female. This is also a reflection of the female gender bias that is inherent in the organisation's demographic profile. The organisation, on account of the nature of its operations, employs more women than males mostly because the nature of the business which dominates more (catering) requires more services of women than of men, hence this gender bias in the sample. Such bias is likely to influence responses.

Non- Managerial Respondents' Qualifications

Percentage distribution of respondents by qualification



n=54

Source: Primary data

The findings above show that most of the employees (62.22%) had 'O' Level qualification. This is because the major operations of MTB require low levels of educational qualifications. The inclusion of higher grade staff ,such as catering supervisor, maintenance officer, training officer and the bookings officer who occupy supervisory and clerical positions in the population could possibly contributed to the significant number of respondents with undergraduate degrees as reflected by the 8.89% of the respondents who possess such qualifications.

Semi Structured Interview Analysis And Discussion

Most of the information elicited from managerial members of staff was mainly of a qualitative nature. The analysis provided thereof is based on the themes/critical issues emanating from the discussions between the reseacher and respondents. Managerial narratives provide the main basis of analysis of the respondents.

The factors that influence EE

Seventy seven percent of the respondents indicated that EE is situational, depending on the behaviour of employees towards work, teamwork and the availability of resources as well as the leadership styles being used all influence employee empowerment. This is in agreement to Greasley et.al (2005), who found out that one of the key variables that impacts/influences empowerment is the type of leadership styles exhibited by supervisors. In addition, Baird and Wang (2010) also agrees that teamwork, organisational factors, training and development linked to rewards all influence empowerment positively.

Moreover, Ayupp and Chung (2010) support this position by maintaining that in order to ensure that the employees feel empowered, factors such as communication, coaching, participation, training and rewards should be given due attention by management in order to empower employees.

The challenges being faced in respect to EE

The fourth question elicited for management views regarding the challenges faced by the organisation in its efforts to enhance levels of employee empowerment. The main themes emanating from them were identified as the lack of policies to support EE, lack of succession planing and mentorship, poor communication, high labour turnover of qualified and competent staff as well as poor managerial

leadership styles are some of the major challenges being faced by MTB in respect to employee empowerment.

The impact of EE on job performance.

All the twelve respondents interviewed could not articulate the relationship between empowerment and performance, as they noted the absence or lack of employee empowerment strategies at the moment at MTB. The absence of EE strategies could possibly have been attributed to management, who over the years, have been centralising the decision making processes to the extent of alienating employees.

However, the respondents noted that if employee empowerment is implemented, job performance could be enhanced, since the employees will feel part and parcel of the organisation, due to their involvement in participatory decision making processes. These findings are also consistent with Ayupp and Chung (2010) who found out that in order to enhance performance, there should be effective communication, coaching, participation in decision making, and training and development opportunities within the organisation.

EE strategies that are currently being employed by MTB.

All of the interviewees highlighted that there are no EE strategies currently in place at MTB. However, they stated that if employee empowerment strategies are implemented in the organisation, this could result in enhanced employee job performance. Centralisation in decision making processes, on the part of management is largely attributable to the absence of EE strategies. The high labour turnover, among managerial members of staff, could also be attributable to the prevailing conditions at MTB with its rigid leadership styles. Greasley, et. l's. (2004) findings are consistent with this position as they found out that a large gap between the employees and management is a major barrier to empowerment. The strict regulations under which employees operate limit their freedom to influence the work they undertake and role of immediate supervisor influence the effective implementation of empowerment.

Suggestions on the improvement of the current EE strategies at MTB.

The managerial interviewees suggested the introduction of EE strategies through decentralisation of decision making processes, rewarding employees for recognised achievement, employee involvement in decision making, effective communication as well as delegation of power and authority to subordinates. These strategies will have an impact of enhancing job performance through empowering employees.

Furthermore, the Human Resources Officer was of the opinion that a strategic way of achieving job satisfaction is to establish a corporate culture that encourages more open forms of communication, as a means of enhancing employee empowerment. He also emphasised the role that tolerance of mistakes plays in nurturing a climate of trust, which is critical to fostering employee empowerment.

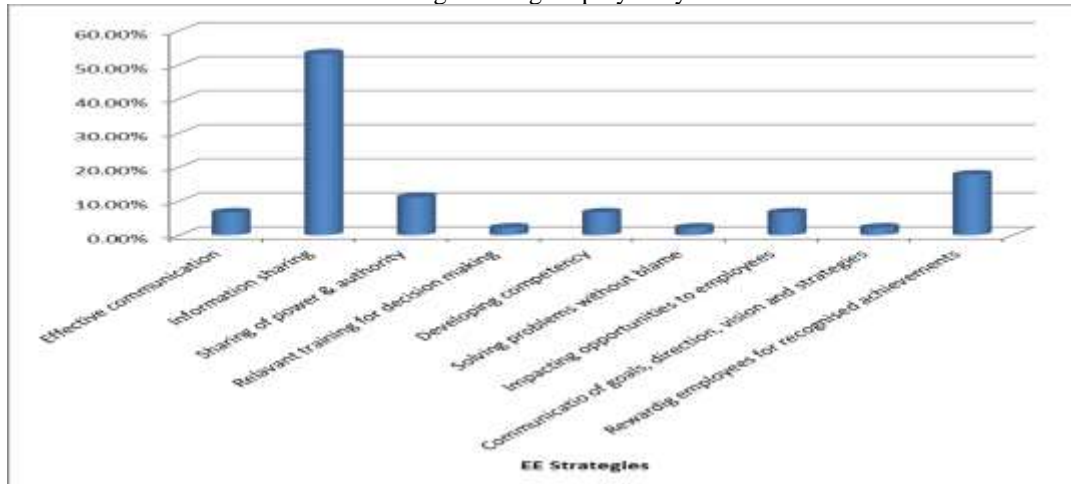
In addition, the Business Development Manager suggested that MTB should create opportunities for employee training so that they feel empowered to do their job. By doing so, employee skills will be enhanced, a situation likely to improve the productivity of the organisation. In support of this idea, the Accountant, Training Officer as well as the Human Resources Officer, all supported the view that training constitutes a missing link in the organisation's empowerment efforts.

Humborstad and Perry's. (2011) views are consistent with the findings of managerial staff as they proffer the idea that in order to ensure employee empowerment, factors such as communication, coaching, participation, training and rewards should be given due attention by management.

The majority of the respondents (94%) did not comment on any other issues pertaining to EE strategies. This could be mainly attributable to a manifest deficiency in this area, coupled with perceptions of managerial helplessness in their quest for empowerment.

Questionnaire Responses Analysis And Discussion

EE Strategies being employed by MTB.



n=45

Source: Primary data

The results in above revealed that contrary to the views of the managerial members of staff, most of the respondents (53.33%) in this category, perceived information sharing as the major EE strategy being employed. This implies that the better the flow of information concerning the organisation (effective communication) between managers and employees, the more positive would be their perception of feelings of empowerment. Bowen and Lawler (1995) posit that true empowerment can only exist when companies implement practice that distribute power, information, knowledge and rewards through out the organisation. They further note that the absence of power, rewards, information sharing and availability of knowledge leads to acute feelings of alienation (Bowen and Lawler, 1995). By having an open communication channel and access to organisational information, employees will be able to see the big picture and have a better understanding of their roles in the organisation's operations, (Bowen and Lawler, 1992).

Quinn and Spreitzer, (1997) posit that top down or relational perspective relating to the sharing of information with the employee is an important management responsibility to ensure effective empowerment. This is because open communication increases an employee's positive perception and skills in empowerment since it aligns employees objectives with the organisation's, thus gives them a sense of ownership towards the company's activities and strategies, (Zollers and Callahan, 2003).

Percentaged distribution of respondent's perception of the effectiveness of EE strategies at MTB.

STATEMENT	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Total
EE strategies currently employed by MTB promote your job performance.	0	11.1	8.89	64.4	15.56	100
The performance management system in place at MTB is an objective assessment of your actual performance.	4.4	6.67	13.3	60	15.56	100

n=45

Source: Primary data

Key

SA - Strongly Agree
SDA - Strongly disagree
N - Neutral

DA - Disagree
A - Agree

EE strategies that promote job performance

The findings indicated that 80% of the employees dispute the notion that information sharing promotes job performance in their organisation. This is contrary to Bowen et.al (1995) whose findings showed that true empowerment can only exist when companies share information, distribute power, knowledge and rewards through out the organisation. This may have been attributed by the fact that MTB employees do not understand the concept of empowerment.

Factors hinder the effective implementation of employee empowerment strategies at MTB.

The main issue identified by the majority of the respondents (89%) as hindering the effective implementation of employee empowerment strategies include the existence of a corporate culture that does not foster or engender participatory leadership styles and consequently lead to situations of centralised decision making at MTB, lack of delegation of tasks to subordinates, and rigid hierarchical structures. Hanold (1997) posits that structures that are decentralised have controls based on checks and balances, and are flexible to allow for the development of the organisation as well as career development of individual employees.

Recommendations on the EE strategies to enhance job performance at MTB

The majority of respondents, (80%) recommended that employee empowerment strategies should be revisited at MTB. Erstad (1997) emphasised the implementation of employee empowerment in the organisation enhances sound corporate governance as well as organisational performance, as employees will be involved in decision making processes. As result, this suggests that employees require support and trust from executives and management teams for more TQM practices. Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that it is important for management to empower and trust their employees' capabilities so that they can have control over their working lives. The results are consistent with Noorliza and Zainal, (2000) who found out that employees with high reciprocal trust had better opinions of their managers have a greater potential to experience higher satisfaction, involvement, well-being and commitment. Furthermore, Niehoff, Moorman, Bilkely and Fuller (2001) found that employee empowerment and job enrichment have a direct and positive effect on loyalty.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

The researcher concludes that the bulk of the problems being faced at MTB are due to the lack of employee empowerment since employees feel a sense of alienation from the organisation. From the findings of the research, it can be concluded that the failure to implement empowerment at MTB is mainly as a result of the centralised decision making system attributable to management. The findings revealed that lack of an enabling policy framework on EE implementation is hindering the effective implementation of EE strategies.

The researcher concludes that for effective EE to be implemented at MTB, there should be decentralization, delegation of power and authority, effective communication systems and the establishment and promotion of a corporate culture that enhances EE.

Recommendations

- In the light of the above conclusions, it is recommended that MTB should implement strategies to empower their employees so as to enhance job performance with a focus on leadership styles which are highly centralised so that they become more participatory flexible in their leadership.

- Management should strive to establish a corporate culture that encourages effective communication at MTB.
- Management should make EE strategies implementation a policy issue and a performance management system should be put in place at MTB in order to establish a framework for performance improvements.

Recommendations for further study

This study recommends that further research be conducted on the impact of employee empowerment on staff retention and employee morale in order to establish a culture that enhances innovativeness and creativity in employees.

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