

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA? EMPOWERMENT

Is it the last resort of the overworked boss, under mounting pressure with a widening remit and heightened risk, to shuffle off the worst bits to subordinates while dignifying it with a modern management soubriquet?

Certainly it is the default outcome of the de-layered organisation, where levels of expensive management have been stripped out. Little wonder that mention of empowerment may bring a wry grimace to the face of many workers who find themselves landed with responsibilities they are neither trained nor compensated for.

Yet the concept is a noble one. It has efficiency benefits. In what used to be called sociotechnical systems analysis, workers were

expected to 'control variances as close to source as possible', that is, maintain and repair the bits of the machines they operated.

It has customer and reputational benefits, especially when sales staff can handle complaints and returns – the US department store Nordstrom acquired boundless PR benefit from the sales assistant who refunded a customer for tyre chains it neither stocked nor sold! And it has motivational benefits, where bosses stop acting like parents and employees can be grown-ups. Nothing energises more than feeling you make a difference.

To see Nigel Nicholson's book, *The 'r' of Leadership: Strategies for seeing, being and doing* (Jossey-Bass, £18.99), go to www.iofleadership.com



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