

Introduction

Empowering... or enabling?

The theme of this Briefing began to take shape, following conversations with a consultant investment banker about Nick Leeson's role in the Barings affair, and with my wife, a former teacher, about pupil freedom in the classroom.

Further crystallisation of the notion of *realistic* empowerment being '**freedom within a framework**' evolved, when researching accounts of the ill-conceived attack on the Redan fort, Near Sevastopol, reported in the June and July editions of *The Illustrated London News* of 1855.

'Misadventure has preceded each of the successful assaults of the Allies upon Sevastopol, and the cases of the Redan and of the Malakof Tower were no exception... such repulses have been occasioned by the want of aught which precaution and calculation should have supplied...'

The reason behind this seemingly improbable investigation into a not so major battle was quite simply that my great-grandfather, fighting with the 23 Foot, the Royal Welch Fusiliers, was wounded in the assault and subsequently invalided out of his regiment, whilst still in his 'teens'. He was initially presumed missing, killed in action, until discovered, wounded, in a military hospital, near Balaclava, several months later!

Probably the most incompetently administered and disastrously managed of all of Britain's military campaigns, the Crimean War was fraught with so many examples of arrogant, irresponsible misadventure and miscalculation - the charge of the Light Brigade being undoubtedly the most notorious. One major exception was Sir Colin Campbell commanding the Highland Brigade, an outstanding soldier and a competent leader. Unique among British officers of his day, Sir Colin took both a genuine, humane interest in his men, and showed a keenly professional concern for their effective deployment and use.

The above, and other - principally business - examples of empowerment going awry, with costly failure or frustration, as the end results, inevitably led to the identification of instances where it was successful and, hence exploration of why it worked. The title chosen to convey the book's core theme, 'Enabling- beyond Empowering', pinpoints a key issue, especially in today's world, that empowering itself needs to be effectively managed and professionally handled if it is going to reap the benefits so often claimed on its behalf.

In an 'information' age characterised by revolutionary change, uncertainty, paradox and seemingly limitless opportunity, it makes both managerial and psychological sense to empower

people, in order to release – and use necessary contributive experience and talent. Increased autonomy and the use of greater initiative – albeit with commensurate personal accountability – is congruent with the changing social and work ethics of the times.

Adaptive competence and the readiness to cut, responsibly, through unnecessary red tape and bureaucratic stricture, arguably, are more than ever essential to competitive advantage. Where we see success – especially today – usually somebody acted with courage, as well as with competence and conviction.

Business, like Von Clausewitz's classical description of war, is an '*option of risks*' and, therefore, requires of those involved, decisiveness and boldness at crucial moments, but also an intelligent, informed and well-judged appreciation of the situation – which is where '*enabling*' enters the arenas of diagnosis and prescription, in both making decisions and taking requisite action.

In all organisations, but especially in the world of business, a major issue is that of identifying and effectively deploying appropriate talents, such as entrepreneurial flair, the readiness to take risks, and educated, speculative opportunism. Such skills, particularly, need to be managed in ways whereby they can be exercised without unnecessary constraint, on the one hand, but also without letting them run unchecked, through ignorance, inadequate monitoring and feedback, and – ultimately – lack of necessary informed control, as appears to have been the case with Nick Leeson.

Interestingly, as this Briefing is being written, so another bank has collapsed, through inadequately managed and controlled 'over-entrepreneurial activity'. This time it was the European Union Bank (the EUB) which claimed to be the first bank to trade via the Internet. Totally different from the demise of Barings, the EUB collapsed because the two Russian founders absconded with the funds – and hence depositors' savings. Registered off-shore, in Antigua, EUB's Branch Manager based there had to speak to the founders through interpreters and did not even know where they were based! Whereas it would seem that Leeson largely behaved irresponsibly, the two Russians appear to have been downright dishonest. The common ground, however, is that in neither case were the key players adequately monitored, managed, nor their activities controlled, by the obvious imperatives of organisational behaviour.

Enabling – like empowering – is about providing people with the authority, autonomy and the means to do what needs to be done. In a managerial context, however, enabling includes such key manager and leader functions as – **coaching, mentoring and sponsorship**, *as well as* empowerment. It is these three crucial functions – together with the appropriate managerial behaviours involved, in effectively discharging them – that invest enabling with a much wider significance than simply empowerment, per se.

The findings and conclusions in this book represent a distillation of:

- Experiences working with over 7000 leaders and managers, over a period approaching half a century
- Progression from shop-floor production to senior management in a variety of businesses
- Eighteen years of management consultancy, operating throughout Western Europe, the US and Canada
- The academic disciplines and fields of study of a MSc degree by research, in organisation behaviour
- Close, collegial working with faculties of leading business schools in the UK and abroad
- Experience of naval and military service in both conventional and special armed forces.

The aim of the book, overall, is to emphasise and reinforce the added value that can accrue from empowered people using and building on their many talents, free from unnecessary fetters and restrictions. Specifically, however, it seeks to underline the case for effectively managed and led empowered people whose learning, development and contributive competence are continually enhanced and intelligently used, via the tools, techniques and practices that are essentially *enabling*. In other words - *professional freedom, within an equally professional framework*.

Michael Williams