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Organizational Dynamics

Volume 20, Issue 3, Winter 1992, Pages 48-61

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616\(92\)90024-H](https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(92)90024-H)

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Management practices at W. L. Gore & Associates give a new dimension to employee empowerment. Other organizations can learn from the experience.

Employee Self-Management Without Formally Designated Teams: An Alternative Road to Empowerment

FRANK SHIPPER

CHARLES C. MANZ

*To make money and have fun.
-W. L. Gore*

Words like "self-management" and employee "empowerment" are quickly becoming the contemporary battle cry of American industry. The emphasis has shifted from a focus on management control of employees to a decentralization of power and the provision of opportunity for workers, at all levels, to exercise increasing influence over themselves.

The idea behind employee self-management, as the term implies, is for workers to become, to a large degree, their own managers. In attempting to use their human resources more fully, many organizations have moved beyond the mentality that managers make decisions and employees are simply expected to do what they're told. Self-management involves an increasing reliance on workers' creative and intellectual capabilities, not just their physical labor.

Although questions may linger about how to put this once-radical idea into practice, self-management is clearly becoming a

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respected competitive advantage. In many

companies, organizing work around small groups of workers empowered to perform many traditional management functions (assigning tasks, solving quality problems, and selecting, training, and counseling fellow team members) has become a way of life. Applications of the team approach have spanned industries and taken root in a variety of manufacturing and service organizations. These include some of the best-known companies in the world—Procter and Gamble, General Motors, Ford, Digital Equipment, IDS, Honeywell, Cummins Engine, Tektronix, General Electric, Caterpillar, Boeing, and LTV Steel, to name just a few. Reports from the field credit this work design innovation with many positive benefits, including higher productivity, better attendance, less turnover, and improvements in both product quality and the quality of working life for employees.

In many ways, empowered worker teams seem to be emerging as *the* major new American industrial weapon to fend off international competitive threats from such countries as Japan. The team approach has become highly visible: Conferences center on the con-

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Employee self-management without formally designated teams: An alternative road to empowerment, the dye, in the first approximation, is theoretically possible.