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For a few years now, many academics, as well as business leaders, consultants and management gurus, have supported the idea that the source of employee satisfaction can be found in management innovations. One of the ways to achieve this seems to be nothing short of obvious: let employees be their own managers!

Recently, Professor Gary Hamel of London Business School argued that 'managers' as a category will soon cease to be. His view is that, in the near future, management tasks will be shared more equally among all employees. As a result, companies could make drastic cuts in middle management and employees would be happier. Or maybe not?

The problem is that, so far, no research has been able to prove that there is a real correlation between decentralised decision-making and workforce satisfaction. Putting in place a decentralised system would require a high level of personal investment from employees, who would have to adjust to new ways of working on a daily basis. Consequently, the move could actually reduce their satisfaction. Then, of course, the organisation has to consider the financial cost of this approach.

By promoting a horizontal structure rather than a vertical hierarchy, such management innovations would transform the nature of the interaction between staff on the same team. Managers often have the mission of defining the framework within which tasks should be performed, and play the role of facilitator when problems arise. Yet if employees who may have similar levels of responsibility practise self-management instead, there is a risk that some team members will feel isolated, and team cohesion may be harmed.

Happiness or tears?

A world without managers would be dystopia rather than utopia

By

Nicolas Arnaud

'LIBERATION'
REQUIRES EMPLOYEES
TO BREAK THEIR
ROUTINE

This goes against the notion of happiness at work.

The new manager-less organisation would be built on the premise that each person agrees to share information with others. It is widely recognised, however, that holding on to information and knowledge is an important source of in-company power. As a result, such a radical change in culture could strengthen the 'political' aspect of internal relations that leads to alliances and compromises being formed. This, in turn, could have a direct negative impact on employee wellbeing and economic performance.

Freed from organisational constraints, employees are supposed to reach a new level of contentment within a horizontal structure. Yet this 'liberation' requires them to break their routine and invest in analysing company processes with the aim of boosting agility and reactivity. The amount of time and effort needed for such an exercise should not be underestimated, especially when it involves employees who have never used this sort of approach before. Their workload and responsibilities increase and they tend to feel that they are doing managers' jobs, but without any rise in salary or status. How can this situation be motivating?

Giving employees more influence on the way an organisation is run affects how each person relates to his or her job. If the nature of the work evolves, then the nature of the firm's commitments, such as pay, bonuses, career development and job security, also has to change. The big risk is that instead of creating happiness, this evolution actually creates frustration, then a withdrawal of commitment. ■

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