A Relational Approach to Empowerment

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Introduction

Empowerment in one form or another has been an increasingly prevalent concern of both academics and practitioners. Many contemporary organizational approaches to empowerment (e.g. Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Sims & Manz, 1996; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996) focus on empowering individual organizational members through leadership tactics, design of their jobs and involvement in decisions about work. In these approaches the primary emphasis tends to be on the work to be accomplished, and the focus is on the dyadic relationship between leader and subordinate. Ways of developing empowering processes by explicitly addressing organizational or group members' relationships with one another in the course of conducting the work are often ignored, even in material dealing explicitly with empowering teams (e.g. Kirkman & Rosen, 1997). Yet these processes are critical. Organizational and group processes, especially those involving joint decisions, are important contexts for individual growth and development.

We believe that empowerment can occur in many different arenas and ways (Bartunek, Bradbury & Boreth, 1997). In this chapter we want to focus on an approach to empowerment that addresses the key role of mutual relationships. A relational approach (Jordan, 1997; Jordan et al., 1991) which is derived from women's experience in relationships, is rooted in the belief that by forming mutual and meaningful connections with others, individuals gain a greater sense of energy, purpose, vision and, ultimately, self-understanding. Individuals carrying out "relational practice" (Fletcher, 1998) reflect together on ways in which their behaviors align with both their intentions and the group's or organization s overall mission. By doing so, they learn ways to gain coherence between action and purpose and, in the process, remove internal and external blocks that have previously prevented them from accomplishing what they intended in the way that they intended (Surrey, 1987). As a result, their experience of empowerment grows. In other words, in a relational approach, individuals experience a sense of empowerment when group or organizational members work together to create mutual, fulfilling connections with each other, and use these connections to facilitate change processes and act in a manner explicitly consistent with their goals.

A primary source for developing understanding of relational practice has been literature about cognitive therapy groups created for women (Jordan et al., 1991; Surrey, 1987). In these groups; therapists work to create a connected environment for women so that they can explore issues important to their growth. The issues discussed usually involve some form of conflictual situation in which participants feel powerless or unable to take action (Jordan et al., 1991). By working on these issues through supportive, mutual exchange in groups, women begin to clarify their values and needs and to experience their own power to change settings which deny these values; they learn how to better align their intentions with their actions (Surrey, 1987).

Rather than look to the therapeutic setting, however, we explore the implementation and sustenance of a relational approach to empowerment in a work group. We do this in a way that bridges academic and practitioner approaches with the hope that we can simultaneously appreciate the relational approach and disclose challenges to its implementation. As Miller, Greenwood and Hinings (1997) note, there is often a schism between practitioner and academic researcher approaches to organizational change, with practitioners often being too optimistic and academics focusing more on difficulties. We respond to the call for researchers and practitioners to better understand each others' perspectives by using an insider-outsider methodology

(Bartunek & Louis, 1996) in which group members and outside researchers work together to describe and analyze events. The first two authors of this paper are outside researchers. The third is one of the founders of an (originally) all-female work group that used a relational approach to empower its members and other teachers in a national network of independent schools.

We first summarize the relational approach we are discussing here, differentiating it from other types of organizational research that addresses relationships and workplace empowerment. We then explore ways in which this approach was enacted in the work group we studied. We include in our exploration both ways in which the group worked to create empowering structures and relationships and some of the complex issues group members faced in the course of doing so. Finally, we discuss the implications of a relational approach to empowerment for practice and research.

A Relational Perspective

Traits commonly associated in our culture with women have provided a means for defining a relational approach. Whether due to early development (Chodorow, 1974) or socialization (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), women tend to value building connections with others over gaining power over others (Gilligan, 1982; Neuse, 1978). In the perception of many women, the self develops and individual power is enhanced in relationship to and with others (Loden, 1985).

A relational perspective, especially as articulated by researchers at the Wellesley College Stone Center for Research, is based on the belief that building connections is central to human growth and mental health. Researchers and psychologists who work within this framework believe that many individuals' psychological problems (low self-esteem or powerlessness, for example) are rooted in the disconnections they experience m non-mutual relationships, whether personal or professional (Surrey, 1987). These non-mutual relationships involve some form of exploited power differential where, for various cultural, family and/or personal reasons, one individual suppresses or negates the feelings and abilities of another. The subordinated individual may eventually question the validity of his/her thoughts, feelings and abilities.

Those who focus on individuals creating mutual, authentic relationships suggest that empowering relationships provide a context for individuals to learn to grow through giving and receiving back from one another in a way that is neither too accommodating nor too egocentric, but balanced and mutual (Miller et al., 1997). A key outcome, of such relationships is that individuals learn to trust in their own intuitive responses as they articulate thoughts and feelings in supportive contexts. Their sense of individual power and ability grows.

Approaches to Relationships in Organizations

The idea that supportive work relationships are important for individual growth is not new; a great deal of research addressing relationships has been conducted in organizational settings. However, much of this work, such as work on mentoring (Kram, 1985, 1986), examines superior-subordinate relationships, connections necessarily characterized by their power differential. For example, a subordinate and mentor engage in a relationship so that the subordinate can receive support and advice that will help advance his/her career. Kram's (1996) recent work begins to examine ways in which a subordinate provides support and learnings back to the mentor, and acts as a co-learner (i.e. in a mutual relationship).

Organizational research that examines more peer-like relationships generally focuses on the benefits of these relationships as support mechanisms that help to reduce job stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and increase job effectiveness (Ibarra, 1993). These relationships are not treated as sources of individuals' learning, but as means to remove obstacles that impede productivity.

Relationships are also central to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and social network approaches. Under these lenses, relationships are considered to be the medium for exchanging resources, which are often, but not necessarily, economic. Depending on the nature of their exchange relationships, individuals (representing organizations) incur costs and receive benefits and, over time, their relationship becomes embedded in their exchange structures (Granovetter, 1985) and individuals continually assess the relationship's worth or net value (Goldberg, 1980; i.e. do benefits meet or exceed costs?).

Some macro-organizational researchers focus on relationships primarily as means of obtaining resources that provide an individual (or organization) with influence and advantages

over others (Barney, 1991). For example, Burt (1992) views social capital as an individual's network of affiliations or connections. But he does not view building connected and mutual relationships as a way to develop individual power. On the contrary, he considers a network's structural holes as an individual's real opportunity. According to Burt (1992), those who fill a void by occupying a network position that was once a structural hole act as brokers of information to others in the network and, in doing so, make others dependent on them and ultimately garner power and influence.

A Relational Approach in Organizations: Creating "Relational" Relationships

The relational approach we are discussing is quite different. Miller et al. (1997, p. 30) note:

> *"In the paradigm that recognizes the relational and interdependent nature of our lives, we might replace "autonomy" with the capacity to be clear in our thoughts, feelings and actions; to act with intention; to be creative and effective but always with awareness of the source of our energy in relationships and with the recognition of the impact of our actions on others."*

More traditional ideas of power and action as having "power over" someone else implicitly suggest that one would need to develop control over another and guard in a competitive way against others "taking" something away. Because self-preservation is the goal, openness and self disclosure are limited. In a relational approach, "the object of growth . . . is not individual mastery and independence, but rather interdependence" (Hall, 1996, p. 2).

A focus on interdependence among organizational members has come particularly strongly from researchers addressing women's experiences (e.g. Fletcher, 1994). Some feminist theorists (e.g. Calas & Smircich, 1992; Fletcher, 1998; Mumby & Putnam, 1992) argue that from a cultural framework, men, as members of the dominant group in our society, have sought to maintain their position and in doing so, value and encourage patriarchal, individualistic behaviors. The role of relational caretaking is delegated to women and in many contexts, including work, is ultimately devalued and marginalized. An examination of women's characteristics and a focus on women's processes gives voice to this "silenced" framework (Fletcher, 1998) and helps articulate the important connection between creating meaningful

relationships, growing as an individual, and gaining a sense of personal and group agency (Miller, 1976).

Jacques and Fletcher (1997) describe a relational, or growth-enhancing, relationship as occurring when both parties recognize vulnerability as part of human condition, approach the interaction expecting to grow from it, and feel a responsibility to contribute to the growth of the other. Such relationships are characterized by their mutuality, interdependence and reciprocity (Fletcher, 1998). Mutuality is the respectful commitment by all to work on the self-development of all individuals in the relationship (Jordan et al., 1991; Josselson, 1992). Interdependence refers to the belief that creating relationships with others, rather than stressing autonomous achievement, is a powerful approach to learning and growing. Through receiving and offering insights and ideas, individuals learn more about their own strength and abilities and gain a greater sense of vision, energy and purpose (Surrey, 1987) and ultimately deeper self awareness and understanding (Miller, 1986). Finally, reciprocity refers to the expectation that all parties involved in a relationship will contribute to each other's learning. Contributing means both having the skills to create these relationships and being motivated to use them.

Skills important to creating growth-enhancing relationships include the ability and willingness to communicate empathy, feel and express vulnerability and emotions, and help others develop (Jacques & Fletcher, 1997). Communicating empathy is by no means a simple process of acknowledging another's feelings. It is a process of trying to understand and respond to another's perspective while taking into account one's own thoughts and reactions, whether these are negative and conflictual or full of strength and possibilities (Miller et al., 1997). Individuals who consider their own affective reactions can better discern when the expression of feeling and vulnerability will foster interdependence rather than dependence in relationships.

Finally, helping others to develop involves a willingness to be "present in the moment" with others (Surrey, 1987). This does not suggest that individuals need to have the answers to others' dilemmas. Rather, in an effort to help others grow, individuals try to remain conscious of and willing to share their own perspectives, attentive to the moment. They also try to be aware of and responsive to others' changing needs, as well as the tensions that differing needs can cause.

Approaches to Empowerment in Organizations

As depicted in Table 1, most organizational approaches to empowerment focus primarily on superior-subordinate relationships, and the ways in which superiors may help empower subordinates (e.g. Conger, 1989; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Manz & Sims, 1980; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). They somewhat implicitly treat power as something that is given to the employee, internalized by the employee and given back to the organization in the form of increased performance. These approaches tend to treat empowerment as a psychological, cognitively-based construct and, depending on the specific theorist, refer to developing self-efficacy (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), intrinsic task motivation (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) or self-leadership (Sims &: Manz, 1996). Conger and Kanungo's (1988) model, for example, identifies several leadership and/or supervision practices, such as setting goals, using feedback systems, modeling empowerment behaviors, enriching a job (through increasing the employee's autonomy and decision-making capabilities) and offering competency-based rewards that are designed to foster a greater sense of self-efficacy in employees. Spreitzer (1995, 1996), building somewhat on Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) work, focuses on antecedents to individual empowerment, such as organizational reward systems, employees' access to information, role clarity and sociopolitical support. Spreitzer (1996) also stresses the importance of the work environment, noting that participative climates, where employees' contributions are acknowledged as valid, facilitate empowerment. Finally, Manz and Sims (1980) and Sims and Manz (1996) focus on leader behaviors that encourage subordinates' self-initiative and self-leadership. These include modeling self-management or empowering behaviors, providing reinforcement when empowering behaviors are observed, and helping subordinates learn and understand self-management behaviors such as goal setting.

Developing Empowering Relationships in Organizations

None of the approaches described above negates positive working relationships among peers as important contexts for empowerment. However, none of them focuses on the group dynamics of these relationships. A relational approach, while acknowledging the crucial role of leadership in establishing enabling conditions, attends much more than other empowerment approaches to the quality of relationships among group members. Thus, it focuses on the roles played and initiatives taken by the members themselves, as they work together to establish

relationships with each other that are mutual, interdependent and reciprocal. As with other relational work, it assumes that connections with others are a crucial component of empowerment. If individuals can form mutual and meaningful connections with other group members in which they can communicate empathy, express vulnerability, and help others develop, they will obtain greater self-knowledge, a greater sense of energy and purpose, learn ways to better match their behavior with their intentions, and in so doing feel empowered.

We are not, however, suggesting that the process is relatively straightforward. Such relationships are not easy to develop. A major substantive focus of cognitive therapy groups is often member exploration of inner conflicts (Jordan et al., 1991). Similarly, relational approaches in work groups or organizations need to support members in facing and engaging the difficult dilemmas embedded in any work group—issues of power, disconnection and conflict.

Power is at issue in any group, and most individuals can recall times when they knew power over others and enjoyed exercising it to their own advantage and, perhaps, to the diminishment of others' advantage. At the same time, most individuals have known moments of vulnerability and dependency in the process of building mutuality and connection and, keeping with relational give and take, work hard to balance personal boundaries. Through acknowledging and discussing feelings of "power over" others, members can begin to reconnect and create new shared power.

Individuals also experience times when they feel more disconnected than connected from the group, more absent than present, in the moment. Disconnection is important to track in the empowerment process, especially as members change and grow, and some become more empowered than others (e.g. Fedele, 1994).

Finally, all individuals experience conflict. And given their socialization and the way they can be negatively evaluated when expressing anger or strong emotion (Martin, 1985), women in particular may have difficulty addressing conflict openly. Exploring conflicts they experience as a result of their connections is necessary for individuals to understand themselves better and at the same time, learn how to create empowering conditions with those who are different (e.g. Jordan, 1990, 1993). Thus, conflict is actually a critical component for groups striving to develop a relational approach to empowerment.

The Faculty Development Committee

To understand what a relational approach to empowerment might look like in action, we explore the processes and challenges of one all-women work group, the Faculty Development Committee (FDC). This group was created to empower its members and other teachers and it was explicit in its efforts to do so in a relational manner. We build on a number of prior descriptions of events in the Faculty Development Committee (Bartunek, Lacey & Wood, 1992; Bartunek & Lacey, 1998; Lacey, Wood & Bartunek, 1990; Walsh, Bartunek &: Lacey, 1997; Wood & Lacey, 1991).

The Faculty Development Committee (FDC), a seven-member committee, was created within a national federation of 19 independent college-preparatory elementary and high schools called the Network. The Network is staffed by approximately 1600 teachers, administrators and staff members, the great majority of whom are women, and headed by a Network Coordinator. The FDC was founded in October 1988 and continued as a separate entity for nine years; in this chapter we focus on events that occurred during its first three years. The FDC grew from a grass-roots effort by two founders, Catherine Lacey and Diane Wood, and a group of teachers seeking a structural forum to exercise their voice and authority in the public consideration of educational issues within and beyond the Network.

Philosophical Framework

For several years the founders, two administrators and former teachers in the Network, had been concerned about the development of women as powerful teachers and agents of change for school systems and programs. This involved at least two dimensions. First, they believed that teachers and their experiences can provide the most crucial and valuable knowledge base for educational inquiry, research and theory. Thus, improvement of education hinges on encouraging teachers to bring their experience to the public realm, in part by learning to trust their own experiences and interpretations. They questioned the adequacy of educational reform efforts, such as school site management, that focus on teachers having a say in administrative decision making, but leave out teachers' own classroom experience as the fundamental basis for contributing to public discussion of education (e.g. Conley & Bacharach, 1990; Taylor & Levine, 1991). Second, they believed that teachers, typically isolated in their work and devalued by the

general public, need opportunities to form a professional community with each other. Consistent with a relational approach, the founders felt that teachers need time and space to build relationships with other teachers so that they might tell their professional stones, hear others' stories, discover commonalities and recurring themes in their work, receive feedback from each other, articulate challenges, collaborate toward innovations and solutions, and celebrate successes. In so doing, teachers become aware of the knowledge they have gleaned from their work, of their capacity to reinterpret their experiences in order to critique and make meaning of them, and of their power to imagine new ways of educating. From this affirmation of the value of their own insight emerges a desire to communicate it to wider audiences, including policy makers (MacDonald, 1988).

Essentially, the founders of this group envisioned the FDC as an attempt to create a setting in which the members of the committee and an ever-widening circle of teachers could bring knowledge born of practice, give it public shape by articulating it, and gain confidence in its value through the sharing of experience and thought. Since they believed that this reflection on the knowledge borne of action empowers, they wanted three things which they termed, however loosely, "feminist" to characterize its processes and projects. First, they would honor, respect and begin with the knowledge base of teachers, who have too often suffered from educational research that asks them to replicate "effective" behaviors as isolated and defined solely by outside "experts", rather than by teachers themselves (Lacey, Wood & Bartunek, 1990). Second, they would seek to articulate, authorize and incorporate the teachers' own stories about their experiences, their own deeply experienced truths in the FDC's work. This involved, for example, using their personal classroom experiences as their basis for the group's learning, rather than more formalized and general educational research. Finally, they would count on the power of mutual, collaborative relationships within the FDC and beyond it to discuss, apply and test the truths released through the teachers' reflections on their own experiences and rethink the meanings of these experiences for the communal work of teacher empowerment and educational reform.

The founders viewed relationships within and beyond the FDC not as instrumental toward the accomplishment of leader-determined agendas, but as empowering by releasing and enabling the agendas of ever more inclusive circles of teachers. Somewhat similar to Sims and Manz's (1996) approach, they did not want to do the work of empowerment for the teachers, but

to ask them and their peers to identify and capitalize on learning opportunities and thus claim their own authority or expertise. In FDC meetings in particular, the founders did not want to fulfill a predetermined agenda of their own. Rather, they developed structures (described below) which they hoped would enable group members to work interdependently, collaboratively and democratically, so that together members could give voice to their own agendas for the group and eventually for their colleagues in the Network. Thus, they focused on building connections among the group members and trying to develop the group members' shared power.

The FDC extended its approach and philosophy to other teachers in the Network through two primary mechanisms. First, they sponsored an annual Journal of teacher writing, the Network Journal of Education, to which all faculty members in the Network could submit articles, subject to review by editorial board members and other teachers. Second, they conducted a series of Faculty Institutes aimed at bringing teachers from each Network school together to develop proposals for faculty development on a national level. Later Faculty Institutes sought to develop and actualize proposals designed by teachers at prior Institutes.

The Research Approach

The first and second authors of this chapter were outside researchers, and the third author an inside researcher, one of the founders of the FDC. The third author, who as a leader in the FDC for its first two years and then in a member role, kept extensive journal notes of events that occurred in the group. The second author was an external observer at FDC meetings from the outset of the group and during and beyond the time period covered by this paper. She took as close to verbatim notes as possible during each meeting and tape-recorded a session near the conclusion of each meeting in which members of the group reflected on its high and low points. She also conducted periodic interviews with the FDC's leaders and other members. The FDC members gave her permission to collect data during and after the meetings, with the understanding that their names would not be used in public reports and that they would receive feedback on their processes based on published studies about the group. The first author joined the research team after the data had been collected, and provided a totally external perspective on all the information gathered.

The FDC's Initial Approach to Creating Empowering Processes

We noted earlier that a relational group can foster individuals' empowerment through creating within the group a sense of mutuality, interdependence and reciprocity, but that the process necessarily involves confronting challenges. One of the challenges an empowering group such as the FDC faced was ensuring that every member had voice as both a giver and receiver of authentic support and encouragement. How does a work group do this? Can leader initiatives help members develop equal voice? The founders were concerned about these issues.

Prior to the beginning of the FDC, the founders worked to flesh out what their leadership style should be if they were to help create a mutually empowering group. At first, they felt that they should stand back somewhat from initiating activities, and serve primarily as facilitators. One of the founders said, several months before the group began: "The question of leadership may come up in the first meeting. What if they ask us to be chair? We have to say no; otherwise we'll break the vision that teachers can be agents of change".

But during the summer prior to the beginning of the group, this founder attended a conference coordinated by Peggy Macintosh, of the Stone Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, and changed her mind about the appropriate role of the leaders of the group. Peggy Macintosh advised her not to hesitate in playing a strong leadership role as the group commenced its work. She said she had seen too many women's groups flounder for lack of a strong understanding on how to operationalize feminist principles. She advised the founders to lead the group collaboratively for the first few years, until empowering processes could be introduced and operationalized. Then everyone's authority could be enhanced. The other founder agreed with this approach. She said that in other committees, "I shy away from leadership, and then get frustrated. If we've conceived this from a feminist theory base, then we want to continue to exercise leadership, ensuring projects are imbued with principles we think important".

Thus, for the FDC's first two years, the founders took the initiative in collaborative leadership of the group's quarterly meetings. They set broad outlines for the agenda, but encouraged member initiative in shaping the specific issues addressed. They also established several processes to enable member sharing. For example, they established that in preparation for each meeting each of the seven members would write narratives about specific dimensions of their experiences as educators (e.g. "a difficult student" or "a powerful mentor"). Members

would share and reflect on these narratives with each other at the beginning of the meeting as a way of incorporating their teaching experiences into their joint work. In addition, the group conducted reflection sessions at the end of meetings in which members talked with each other about what had gone well, what had not gone well and implications for their work. The outside researcher tape recorded these reflections and gave copies of the transcripts to the FDC members. As reported elsewhere (Bartunek & Lacey, in press), the members felt that these initiatives contributed to their creating mutual, reflective, growth enhancing relationships with one another.

However, as is to be expected in settings attempting to accomplish a relational approach to empowerment, the FDC also experienced a number of dilemmas in association with their approach. These dilemmas suggest some of the complexity typically associated with the implementation of mutually empowering initiatives. To indicate the types of ways the group learned from its experiences in the process of creating a mutually relational group, we summarize a few important dilemmas that occurred in conjunction with three events in the early years of the FDC: the first Faculty Institute, which occurred during the second year of the group; a formal intervention that occurred during the third year of the group with a new member the FDC members discovered was an alcoholic; and the first two leadership succession discussions in the group during its second and third years.

Conflict and Empowerment: The First Faculty Institute

One of the FDC's first initiatives was a Network-wide Faculty Institute for experienced teachers in November 1989 (Bartunek, Lacey & Wood, 1992). The Faculty Institute, held in San Francisco, brought one to two experienced teachers from each Network school together to share their stories about teaching, their research on education, their reflections on their practice and their insights about educational directions. Divided into three tracks, they were invited to develop concrete proposals on projects the FDC saw as important entry points for effecting change in the development and practice of teachers, with guidelines for new teachers, faculty mentoring and pedagogical approaches.

On the whole, the Institute was quite successful. However, some dilemmas related to the FDC's empowerment approach arose in conjunction with it. For example, an earthquake in San

Francisco about two weeks before the meeting was scheduled made the planned site unusable. Rather than collaborate with all the members in making a decision about changing the site, one of the founders, seeing this as an emergency and also being unsure of her authority in this type of situation, worked with the Network Coordinator to rearrange the meeting. Other FDC members saw her action as a violation of the participative approach the founders had emphasized and implemented at FDC meetings, but addressed their concerns more to each other than with her (Bartunek, Lacey & Wood, 1992).

During the meeting itself there were dilemmas, as FDC members tried to encourage the intra-group relational approach they had experienced as empowering in the working processes of each of the Institute's three tracks. For example, the facilitators of each of the three tracks were supposed to help set the agendas for the track sessions, but then let group members take the initiative, with the expectation that such initiative would encourage mutually empowering behaviors. In one of the tracks this approach worked well. However, in two of the tracks their attempt to facilitate and then turn leadership over to the group encountered difficulties, as one facilitator (not an FDC member) in one track exercised more control than her FDC colleague thought appropriate, and as a group participant (also not an FDC member) in another track dominated the group in ways the FDC facilitators had difficulty handling. The FDC members experienced these actions as violating FDC norms, and found it far from easy to articulate and deal with problems in their nightly debriefing sessions. Members experienced more frustration than empowerment as they tried to decide how to respond to these developments.

While the FDC members were acutely aware of these dilemmas, the other teachers participating in the Faculty Institute were not. In fact, other teachers almost uniformly rated the Faculty Institute as very positive along all dimensions. For other teachers, the salient aspect of the Institute was that they were being given a chance to have their own public voice in the Network.

The FDC founders reflected with the outside researcher on the dilemmas that occurred and on the misunderstandings and hidden conflict that had been provoked. This reflection made the FDC founders aware that when they began the group, they had been operating from an implicit, naive notion that sustaining a relational, empowering approach in widening circles of women's groups would be relatively "easy" and that the presence of conflict in the FDC would

signal that their empowerment strategy was not being successful (Wood & Lacey, 1991). This articulation led the founders to examine their own modeling to see if their own practices in the group might be encouraging conflict to go underground. Based on their reflection, the founders started discussing in the FDC ways in which the members could make differences and conflicts of opinion explicit, as a way of learning and growing. Making these differences explicit is akin to the idea of developing relational competence (Surrey, 1987), whereby members try to create space for everyone to express herself, both positively and negatively. The FDC entered its next (and third) year of operation intentionally trying to develop and practice relational competence by bringing conflict to their work table. They had gained a more realistic and strategic understanding of the challenges they faced in their own modes of relating and in introducing others to this form of empowerment.

Contradiction and Empowerment: Carrying out an Intervention

In the fall of 1990, the FDC's third year, the group experienced a crisis that tested members' ability to be authentic in their relationships with one another and to openly confront a potential problem. During the first meeting that fall, the FDC members noticed that one of their new members was drinking excessively and sometimes acting incoherently. At the second meeting of the year, the two new co-leaders decided that this was a situation the group could not afford to push underground; they needed to confront this member with the possibility that she might be an alcoholic (Bartunek & Lacey, 1998). One of the new co-leaders was a guidance counsellor at a high school and had extensive experience in conducting formal "interventions" (Johnson, 1980) with people who were alcoholics. Consistent with Johnson's model for interventions, the leaders involved several other members of the group on a "need to know" basis in secretly planning for the intervention. They also contacted this new member's family and school, and arranged for two group members to accompany her home to enter treatment.

Throughout the planning of this intervention, the FDC members involved felt "scared to death". They were unsure if they were violating the privacy of this member. However, when they called her family and school, they received confirmation that she had a drinking problem; they also learned that previous efforts to intervene had failed. When they actually carried out the intervention the member who was its focus accepted their plan for treatment.

The FDC members involved in planning the intervention initially experienced it as heroic and as a sign of how empowering the FDC was. They had worked together and found the courage to confront and support this teacher in going into treatment when others had failed to do so. Four months later the teacher who had been the focus of the intervention, now out of treatment and back teaching, spoke with them about the intervention:

> *"The honesty came crashing into my life and it destroyed me, as you all know. But at the same time I was torn apart and shredded, it was oddly affirming. I was so struck by that over the next week or two, that even though I was brutally forced to face something I didn't want to, I didn't walk away from the group feeling of no value. You carried off a most delicate conflict and still affirmed me as a person. That's an awesome thing."*

FDC members continued to reflect on the meaning of the intervention for them. In doing this, they began to realize that the dynamics surrounding the intervention were more complex than they had seemed at first. In particular, the secret planning that is an integral component of formal interventions led to some members of the group—especially the person who had been the focus of the attention—being excluded. The norms of privacy surrounding the traditional forms of intervention contradicted the group's desire to deal with conflict, and with one another, openly and collaboratively in order to learn from it and each other. Over time, members of the FDC developed much more mixed feelings about the intervention than they originally held. Although they still felt they had acted courageously, powerfully and even successfully according to accepted terms, they grew more aware of the contradictions inherent in their approach; they had violated some of their group's principles.

Collaboration and Empowerment: Breaking Free from Hierarchical Structures

One of the key issues the FDC founders thought about from the beginning of the FDC was how to transfer the leadership role to other group members. They raised this issue at the very first meeting of the FDC. The group decided that the founders would lead the group for two years, and then remain as group members in non-leadership roles. In addition, all the original members agreed to remain on the committee for the first two years, and then begin to rotate off. Two members would rotate off after two years, three members would leave after three years and the remaining two original members would stay on the committee for four years. Subsequent

members would join the committee for a three-year term. However, the form the succession process would take and the decision about which members would rotate off the committee after the second year was deliberately not decided in advance, since the group wanted to test its ability to conduct "business" differently—specifically, the exercise and transfer of leadership in the group. They hoped that a relational approach would result in more mutual arrangements and a flattening of the hierarchical arrangements characteristic of most work groups.

The First Leadership Succession

The FDC planned to decide about leadership succession during its January 1990 meeting, the session that followed the first Faculty Institute. During this meeting, one of the founders decided for personal reasons to leave the FDC, rather than simply to rotate off its leadership. When the group addressed the issue of who would take leadership and whether there would be co-leaders or a single leader, the discussion became very awkward, with no-one taking the initiative to assume the role. This distressed the retiring founder. She wondered if the founders had failed in their empowering mission.

When two of the members eventually volunteered to be co-leaders, they strongly affirmed the founders' work. One said her hesitation had been based on wondering if she could "measure up" to the founders. The other talked about being the child "who needs the parents to [demonstrate leadership]". The founders had been strong and charismatic, and other members spoke of being in awe of them. This, too, caused the founders to question whether group members saw themselves as agents.

In April 1990, the two new co-leaders met with the founders to plan their leadership transition. The founders and their successors talked about the underlying philosophy of the FDC and the successors planned the first meeting they would lead. In the course of their joint meeting, the successors realized that they had internalized the empowering values instilled by the founders; they came to sense that they could lead the group forward with creativity.

Creating Empowering Structures

During their first year, however, tire new co-leaders came to question whether the form of leadership they were seeking to emulate was separating them from other members of the group. Like the founders, they "stood back" from the group before and after each meeting to reflect and plan. One of the co-leaders commented via letter to the other co-leader that this approach might not be consistent with the empowerment goals of the group:

> *"The way leadership is set up now, collaborative leaders means, in reality, the two leaders collaborating, not really a sharing of leadership among all the members of the group ... I wonder if we haven't created a mystique of leadership on the committee, which we might examine, to see if there are ways of lessening it."*

In April 1991, during the group's second leadership succession discussion, the co-leaders distributed this letter and invited the rest of the members to consider the appropriateness of the model as it had developed, and its consistency with the group's relational approach. Group members, indeed, mentioned the discomfort and even the fear they felt in taking on leadership because they were not sure if they had the ability to carry on the vision of the founders. The co-leaders asked if there was a way to design a new structure that would engage all members in the more mutual exercise of leadership.

After much discussion, the group generated a new structure, building on the experience of one of the teachers in the group who had worked with student groups in which leadership responsibilities rotated. They decided to shift the role of group leader(s). Instead of co-leaders, one member would be named coordinator for one year with the primary responsibility of liaison with the Network office. Instead of the coordinator assuming primary responsibility for designing and facilitating meetings as the co-leaders had done to date, leadership responsibilities would rotate among the members, with different members planning different aspects of each meeting (agenda, hospitality, etc.). The group decided that one of the current co-leaders would remain on the FDC for a fourth year and serve as coordinator the next year.

The impressive aspect of this discussion was that the co-leaders had enjoyed their leadership role and the power imbalance associated with it. Yet, they also knew that the structure was misaligned with the group's sense of itself, and trusted their fellow members enough that they could raise the issue with the other members. One of the co-leaders commented at the end of the discussion:

"When I think of it, the co-leadership is we'll have a very special collaboration between the two of us and the others are less special. . (co-leadership) is an image of our separateness from the others . . . And I enjoy it. I like being queen of the universe. I'm pretty responsible and I like doing this. That's the painful part for me . . . There's something that doesn't have integrity in terms of what we're supposed to be about."

This meeting was critical for the group in terms of designing what its members felt to be an effective group structure. The FDC members believed they had confronted and changed a process in a manner that had more integrity, and that would ultimately increase members' ownership and empowerment and would enhance their work with other teachers. The leadership structure the group created at this meeting endured over several years (Walsh, Bartunek & Lacey, 1997).

Implications for Implementing a Relational Approach

We have described some of the basic processes and purposes of the FDC and have presented three examples of dilemmas the group encountered. This description enables us to tease apart some of dynamics likely to be associated with implementation of a relational approach to empowerment in a work group. One point the group's experience made evident was the importance of operationalizing concepts of mutuality, interdependence and reciprocity. This was done in multiple ways: in the philosophy of the group, in the ways the founders designed its initial leadership, and in the ways they designed the group processes, such as beginning with sharing narratives and concluding with group reflection. All of these encouraged mutuality, interdependence and reciprocity among the members. These characteristics helped enable the group to learn from its experience of avoiding conflict, to confront and assist an alcoholic member and then to continue to learn from that experience, and to address the important connection between leadership and structure. FDC members' reflections on their experiences helped members to better align their intentions (creating empowering conditions) with their actions (such as creating an innovative leadership structure) and gain increased confidence in their own power as a result. If a relational approach is to be implemented, leaders and/or group members must design structures that will foster mutuality, interdependence and reciprocity. The methods used in the FDC represent some of several ways this might be done.

A second point made evident is that empowering groups that adopt a relational approach need to press mutuality, interdependence and reciprocity all the way through to the center of conflict and struggle. The development of a relational approach to empowerment will almost certainly lead to dilemmas regarding power and conflict, since such an approach interrupts "business as usual". Unless members learn to confront these dilemmas openly, the members are unlikely to grow from them. Non-routine events, such as the experience of a violation of group principles and norms, evoke reflection on the purpose of the group and are particularly likely to give evidence to these dilemmas. When tension and disagreement occurs, members may fail to ensure that their needs are expressed and their voices heard. This happened during the first Faculty Institute, when events did not go as planned. By learning to express their varied perspectives within the group, however, as was evident especially during the second leadership succession discussion, members deepened their connections with one another and enhanced authenticity in their relationships. Surfacing and addressing differences as part of a group's natural processes is critical to a relational empowerment agenda. If members of empowering groups can create an honest, safe and accepting environment, they are more likely to find their own power and to bring this power into other aspects of their lives, such as in the ability to respond proactively in other difficult situations in their organizations (e.g. Mishra & Spreitzer, in press).

A caveat is in order. We purposefully examined a relational approach at work in a group that was all-female, aware that "relational" qualities are genderized in favor of women in our culture (Martin, 1985). Moreover, we chose to look at a group of women purposefully implementing a relational approach, which, in their view, was designed to empower by incorporating "feminist" principles in its modus operandi. By so doing we hoped to foreground the challenges such a relational approach might be likely to encounter, and to disclose the manner in which one group sought to respond to them with agency and integrity. We do not mean to suggest that men are not relational or that women are relational at the expense of their own individuality and men are individual at the expense of their own relationality. Rather, we suggest that a philosophy and leadership style consistent with a relational approach can help members of work groups grow from struggles related to the dilemmas of conflict, contradiction, and power imbalance dealt with in this paper. We hope that our description provides understanding about how one group surfaced conflicting individual/relational tensions and dealt

with them, however partially, and how members directed attention to group processes that did not support a relational mission, gaining a sense of agency for the next challenge.

Implications for Organizational Research

A relational approach to empowerment has useful implications for organizational research. As we showed above and in Table 6.1, most organizational models of relationships in general, and empowerment in particular, do not focus on mutually relational components, or, if they do acknowledge them, they ignore processes involved in creating them. A relational approach makes such processes salient, and in doing so acknowledges the complexities of human interaction and the possibilities of learning from these complexities. A relational approach can inform and be informed by other areas of organizational research as well. Three we note here are: organizational culture; second-order organizational change; and research on community building.

Research on culture seeks to explain how shared meaning systems are created and sustained in organizational settings, among the membership as a whole or subgroups (e.g. Martin, 1992; Sackmann, 1992; Schein, 1992). It addresses both processes of forming particular cultural agreements and different types of cultural agreements. As we have shown, a "mutually empowering" shared meaning within a group represents a particular type of culture or subculture that is likely to differ from predominant ones in organizational settings. We have suggested some of the processes involved in enacting such a cultural agreement in one group. Research on mutually empowering groups may benefit from cultural research that addresses the dynamics of forming shared cultural agreements (e.g. Stevenson & Bartunek, 1996), while cultural research can be informed by attention to the particular set of shared meanings we have explored here. A number of questions might be addressed. For example, what are the ways empowering shared meaning systems are formed? What are the joint roles of leaders and other members in their formation? What is involved in sustaining these types of shared meanings (or not)?

Similarly, a relational approach to empowerment can inform and be informed by research on second-order organizational change (e.g. Bartunek, 1984; Bartunek & Moch, 1987). Second-order organizational change refers to attempts to change the "schemata", or frameworks, out of which organizational members understand important aspects of their workplace. As we

suggested above, a mutually empowering organizational workgroup represents a very different type of operating framework than is present in most work settings. Thus, accomplishing this type of operating framework will almost always involve some type of second-order change. Research on second-order change (e.g. Bartunek, 1993) indicates that it is almost always accompanied by conflict, which is sometimes hidden. Perhaps part of the reason why conflict occurs in mutually relational settings is that relational approaches represent such a different type of organizational framework. Thus, research on second-order change can increase awareness of possible reasons why conflict occurs in such settings. But a relational approach can also contribute to research on second-order change and can help increase awareness of these normal conflicts' potentials, and, if they are handled well, help members view them as opportunities for growth. In addition, a relational approach can suggest some ways to handle them well. Conflict accompanying second-order change is not typically experienced in a potentially positive light.

Finally, a relational approach is somewhat consistent with newly emerging discussions of community in organizations. Fiske (1991, 1992) notes that communal sharing, which by definition involves reciprocal exchange, is one of the four fundamental types of social life. Most organizational research has devoted little attention to community, focusing more on authority relationships. Recently, however, due in part to a growing attention to spirituality at work and to the influence of Scott Peck's writings (e.g., Peck, 1987), organizational researchers and practitioners have started to become aware of potentials for community building in work settings. Mirvis (1997), in particular, discusses the importance of consciousness both of the self and of the group in forming community, and of the necessity for self-reflection processes in forming community successfully. A relational approach suggests some of the underlying dynamics likely to be present in the formation of community at work, components that may need to be present for workplace communities to be formed successfully, as well as dilemmas those wishing to form them must grapple with.

Conclusion

As both a method of intervention and a research lens, a relational approach in organizations holds much potential, especially in terms of empowering organizational members. A relational approach focuses attention on mutual processes that provide frameworks for learning and growth, at the individual, group and, potentially, organizational levels. A relational

approach such as that implemented in the FDC can help foster individuals' senses of purpose and clarity as people who can create, maintain and learn from healthy and effective work relationships. Perhaps most importantly, a relational approach offers one way in which members of a work group can learn new manners of interacting, work through difficulties, and ultimately discover individual and group power in the context of and from their connections with one another.

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Table 1. Relational empowerment compared with other approaches.

	Hierarchical approaches			Relational approaches
Representative theorists	Conger & Kanungo (1988)	Thomson & Velthouse (1990) Spreitzer (1995, 1996)	Manz & Sims (1980) Sims & Manz (1996)	Jordan et al. (1991) Fletcher (1996)
Focus of empowerment	Self-efficacy	Intrinsic task motivation	Self-leadership	Self- knowledge; self-confidence
Ways to create or develop empowerment	Use leadership practices, set goals, enrich a job, model appropriate behaviors	Use reward systems, increase employees' access to information, ensure role clarity, set participative climate	Use encouraging leadership practices, model self-management, provide reinforcement	