

ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

EMPOWERMENT

A blog



Well the fun goes on in lockdown and I am sitting in my garden shed wondering what I can write about the Enabling Environment standard of Empowerment. That does not sound patronising or make me look like I am totally out of touch with the current version of reality, or at least the “new normal”. What a strange phrase that is and indicates that at least there is an admission that the “normal” is not a given and can be changed by our actions: and that in a nutshell is Empowerment.

You take what is “normal” and by an effort of will, a deliberate decision or a serendipitous action change it to something different. Of course this is something that can happen at all levels. COVID 19 means that I no longer wave my partner off to work in the mornings and settle down in the house to do what I want, which is probably head for the village café for a bacon sandwich and a couple of crosswords before I get the rest of my day going. Now my normal is changed, I get up and find my partner has been for her walk, had breakfast and is now sitting in the office with her head set on talking to her staff. I now eat muesli for breakfast, (I am still not sure how that happened) and I head for my shed in the garden to write letters, write odd thoughts and to do Enabling Environment work whilst looking out over my garden. All sounds idyllic till the fan heater conks out and life in the outdoors gets chilly.

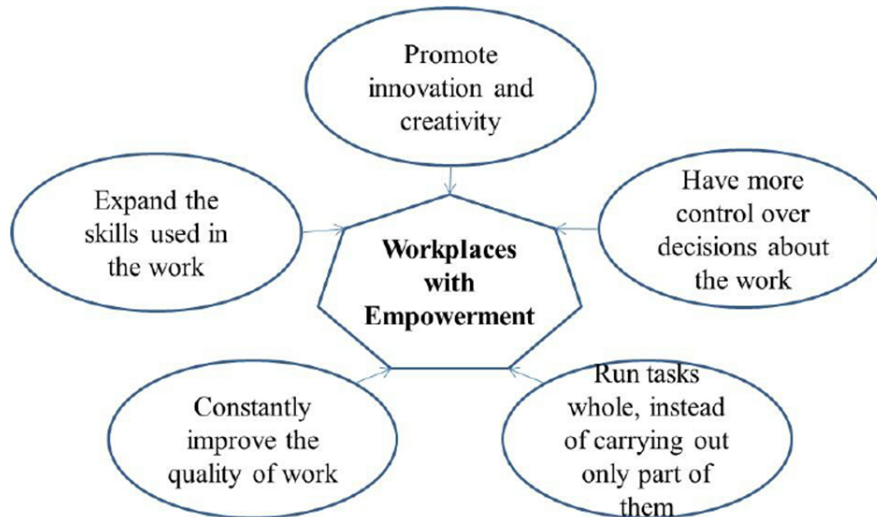
I should add that I am one of the “Shielded” by virtue of the fact that I am over 70 and have metastatic prostate cancer and I am therefore under “house arrest” as the inconveniently stropy silver savvy elder population are calling it. So my life is restricted at the moment and finding ways to empower myself is important. I do not take kindly to incarceration, which is ironic when I think about how many years of my life I worked in prisons and mental hospitals where I carried the keys, physical and psychological, that kept others confined and retrained. So that’s me on a personal level but out there organisations are now locked down and have experienced extreme disempowerment. In extremes people are experiencing such a radical change that their livelihoods have either gone or are rapidly going. In the criminal justice

system that houses people there is no option but to find a way to continue. Everyone has had their options restricted without what feels like any options. Social distancing has made us all prisoners in a way and made prisoners even more constrained and “done to” rather than “worked with”. More than ever being aware of the consequences of being depowered is vital to our work and being able to maximize it for ourselves and those around us is vital to our mutual wellbeing.

I was in a forum the other day when a clinical manager described a situation where the team had worked very hard to provide as many activities as possible for the residents on her unit. After a few days the men asked the staff to stop pushing stuff under their doors as they were feeling overwhelmed. Some of the “stuff” was not understood, or was not the sort of thing the person liked or felt patronising as if others were deciding what their needs were. The staff were a bit taken aback but talked to the men and they came up with a really good solution, they centralised the resources in a shared area and allowed the men to choose what they took back to their rooms. This was very important as in a single move they had empowered the men to control what went into their private space and restored some sense of efficacy. There was at a stroke a “new normal”, in which everyone benefited.

That single example is such a good example of the enabling environment standard of empowerment on many levels, but the major thing is that it was co-produced by the residents and the staff, which felt empowered to raise their concerns, to have them listened to and to find a solution that staff felt empowered to put in place within their organisation. As a result the environment became more enabling than it was, that’s the power of empowerment.

Back in my shed I write my empowering daily to do list, schedule my fitness time for me and plan a night out with a friend over a drink, which of course will happen over the phone, or zoom, or Skype, or Houseparty. I shall write letters and cards to friends, cook a meal for my family and write my cancer blog and edit my YouTube channel. If I want anything, I go to the internet, not something everyone can do but the question I asked myself at the start of my “House arrest” was, (I get out on June the 14th at the earliest), “How do I make the world come to me?” So far its working for me, there is always something I can do that changes “the new normal” to “a new normal that works for me”. I will not have it any other way; that too is empowerment. My shed is my empowerment in the working organisation that is my family and collectively we are doing the following:



While writing this blog I came across a model of empowerment that is used for children and adolescents which appears to be well thought through. It comes with a paper attached which those of you working with adolescents might find interesting and I think it is adaptable for adults as well, with a little thought. It's there if you want something to read in those long nights of crap TV and old films or not, it's up to you.

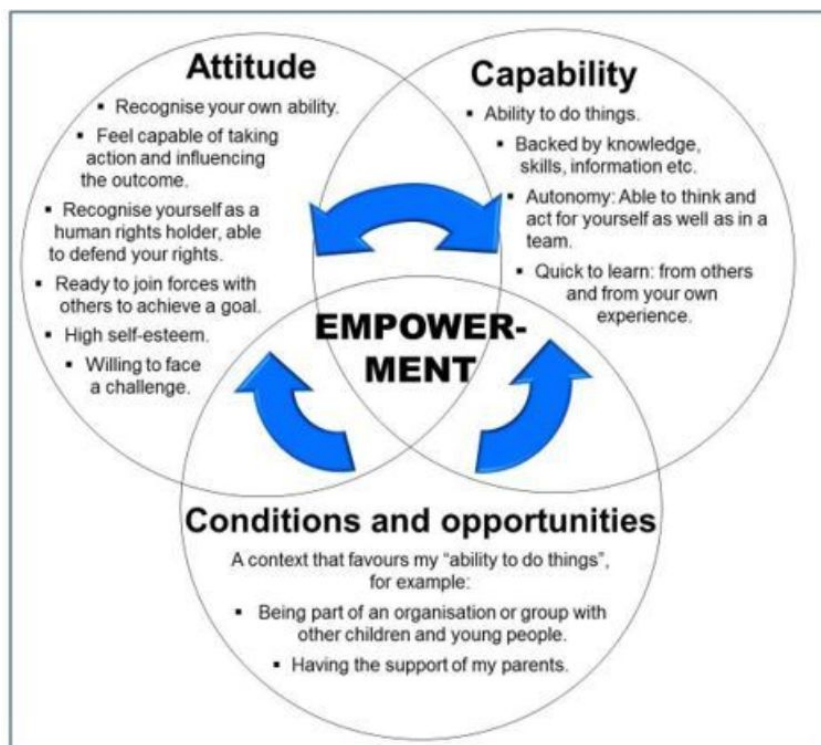


Figure 1: The CESESMA model of Empowerment

(CESESMA/UNN, 2010: p. 44; translated from Spanish in Shier, 2015: p. 213)

“Empowerment” of Children and Adolescents: What is it, how does it occur, and what is the adult supporter’s role? Finding answers in the experience of young people organising with CESESMA in Nicaragua

Harry Shier, CESESMA, Nicaragua

Happy reading, or not.

Roland Woodward: Enabling Environment Lead