

AIR WAR COLLEGE  
AIR UNIVERSITY

EMPOWERMENT:  
QUALITY AIR FORCE'S  
BIGGEST HURDLE

by

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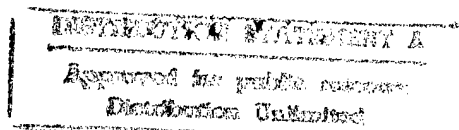
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## ABSTRACT

TITLE: Empowerment: The Quality Air Force's Greatest Hurdle

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The concept of empowerment as envisioned by Dr. W. Edwards Deming and as defined within the Quality Air Force (QAF) is not clearly understood by many of today's Air Force leaders. This misunderstanding has led to a general fear of empowerment. Historically, leaders have freely used the concept but they have usually called it something else. There are limits to the application of empowerment based upon the individuals and situation but, if clearly defined and properly applied, leaders can empower followers without fear.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Gerald C. VonBerge (B.S. University of North Dakota) has instructed classes in various areas of Total Quality since 1991 as part of the cascade training method used by the Air Force Reserve. He served on active duty from 1970 to 1979 and entered the Reserves in 1982. He has been an Air Reserve Technician since 1983 and is currently the Operations Group Commander in the 919th Special Operations Wing. Lt Col VonBerge is a student in the Air War College Class of 1995.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of Dr. W. Edwards Deming's quality approach to management within the Air Force (modified and dubbed "Quality Air Force") we have been bombarded with its new terminology. Words and phrases such as customer, embrace, journey, teams, walking-the-talk, creative tension, tiger teams, process action teams, working groups, metrics, assessment, Total Quality (TQ), Total Quality Management (TQM), and Quality Air Force (QAF) have become part of our daily dialogue. Of course, to turn all of these words and processes into action we need pareto diagrams, histograms, Ishikawa diagrams, and statistical process control. We use metrics to check our progress. To determine if our processes are working we need customer satisfaction surveys and the ultimate test - The Quality Air Force Assessment (QAFA). These are all the result of vision and strategic planning and will ultimately cause cultural change, continuous improvement and buy-in. My personal favorite buzz word is "holistic". But, there is one quality term that seems to strike fear in the hearts of military members from generals to one strippers-- EMPOWERMENT. Few quality concepts inspire the level of emotion, skepticism, and fear as the notion of empowerment.

In spite of the key role which the principle of empowerment plays in implementing quality management and the apparent fear it invokes, very little has been written on the subject. The record of proceedings of the Quality Air Force

Symposium held in October, 1994 and sponsored by the Air Force Quality Council published 78 articles on quality issues. Of those 78 articles, it is interesting to note, only one dealt exclusively with the issue of empowerment. Air University published a text titled Senior Leaders View Quality: Selected Quality Air Force Essays Class of 1994. This text offered 17 articles. Six dealt with the applicability of quality under combat conditions. Of these articles on quality in combat, one of the most frequently discussed issues is the perceived incompatibility between empowerment and leadership direction in combat situations.

During the several weeks of Air War College curriculum devoted to Quality Air Force I had the opportunity to discuss the topic with my classmates, the senior leaders of tomorrow's Air Force. In general, I noted a mixture of enthusiasm, cynicism, and skepticism toward the quality movement. But, there was almost always a dislike, or at least mistrust, for the concept of empowerment. I was not surprised at this since, during my four years of presenting briefings and conducting classes in quality, I had noticed the issue almost always generated heated discussions.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of empowerment which, although often called something else, has long been considered to be a basic attribute of successful leadership. It will show that empowerment it is not something to be feared but should be carefully and frequently used by leaders in everyday

situations as well as in combat. It will examine the concept of empowerment as seen by Dr. W. Edwards Deming, *the* quality guru, and how business has successfully applied it. It will review the meaning of empowerment in the context of Quality Air Force guidance, and examine the common misunderstanding of empowerment as seen by some of today's Air Force leaders and review how this misunderstanding results in fear of the concept. It will review some of the problems these leaders perceive in its implementation. A historical perspective of successful leaders will be used to demonstrate that empowerment is the essence of successful leadership. It will suggest a model for empowerment to be used in the QAF in order to "drive out fear" and finally, it will offer a new definition of empowerment to be used as an aid for leaders and their followers.

### DEMING AND EMPOWERMENT

Surprisingly, Deming has little to say about the term empowerment. Rather he speaks of authority and responsibility and letting the workers make changes to the processes that they use to produce their product or service. More specifically he speaks of removing fear and removing barriers to pride of workmanship. The fear spoken of is the fear employees experience, according to Mary Walton in *The Deming Method*, in suggesting improvements to work processes or even in reporting poorly operating machinery. Barriers to pride in workmanship, Walton suggests, are



changing standards, lack of feedback, and poor training. Slipshod maintenance and defective supplies are also sited. (14:81) Supervision, apparently frequently in American business, does not want to hear about these problems. In short, Deming feels that the workers should be regarded as the experts in their jobs and should be given the freedom to determine the processes they will use to accomplish those tasks. He feels that, all too often, "management does not act upon their (employee's) decisions and recommendations." (14:82)

In the civilian world, Federal Express is one of the leaders in quality management. The overnight air express company won the Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award in 1990. The award "represents the highest distinction for quality an American corporation can win." (2:11) Federal Express CEO, Frank W. Smith describes empowerment as "risk taking." (2:29) The company adopts this philosophy by fostering an environment in which " front-line employees feel secure in suggesting a change in workplace policy, questioning an ill-advised management decision, taking personal responsibility to solve a customer complaint, or making a unilateral service quality decision on improvement." (2:30) Federal Express does more than talk about allowing their employees significant freedom in making the "risky" decisions, however. "Within the company's Billing Center, for example, non-management employees are authorized to resolve customer billing problems (up to a \$2,000 credit or refund) without management approval." (2:30)

Amoco Corporation, the Chicago based petroleum giant, faced with decreasing profit margins and slower than desired corporate growth rates has begun a restructuring program based upon quality principles. (18:2) The Amoco definition of empowerment also fits the Deming philosophy. Amoco clearly defines its version with the following:

#### EMPOWERMENT

##### What it is

- Increasing responsibility, earned over time through delivery of business results
- Variable with employee's background, assignment, performance
- Variable by job holder and business condition
- Framed by job roles and responsibilities
- Accepting the responsibility and accountability for your decisions
- Constantly changing
- Ensuring decisions are made by those closest to the action

##### What it is not

- An employee's right
- Equal degrees of authority and discretion across all jobs at same level
- A static set of guidelines
- A unilateral right to run the business without the involvement of others

(18:4)

In addition, Amoco includes the following as part of its leadership philosophy: "...leaders will encourage individuals and teams to take initiative within the context of their assignments ... encouraging initiative and prudent risk." (18:4)

Removing obstacles, encouraging freedom of action in the job role, risk taking, acting upon employee decisions and recommendations, listening to employee suggestions, improving the resources that employees use in their daily tasks is then the Deming method of empowerment. The Air Force, on the other hand, has adapted these concepts into a slightly different definition of empowerment.

## EMPOWERMENT IN THE QAF

The Air Force's *The Quality Approach* guide to quality defines empowerment in a slightly different tone and adds a few qualifiers. It states: "*Empowerment*: 'Act of placing accountability, authority, and responsibility for processes and products at the lowest possible level. The extent of how much a person is empowered is dependent on their capabilities and the seriousness of the consequences.' (Kaset International)" (11:88) This definition allows a wide variety of interpretations and could raise more questions than it answers: What does "lowest possible level" mean?; What kind of capabilities?; and How serious does a serious consequence have to be before empowerment is withheld? are only a few of the questions which, if unanswered, result in confusion and various attempts to clarify the concept.

General John M. Loh, Commander of Air Combat Command, summarized the meaning of empowerment, somewhat obtusely, in a 1993 briefing for Vice President Gore, with the statement, "ACC Quality is 'ownership by the membership' in action." (1:17) He sites an example of empowerment as allowing an F-16 squadron commander to decide how many sorties his/her unit flies in a month as long as they generate 22 sorties per month per aircraft assigned for the period of a year. (1:19) Note that there is no mention of "risk taking" as in the Federal Express

philosophy. Federal Express hopes to encourage its employees to satisfy customers even "at the risk of doing so outside of policy, or where no policy exists." (2:29)

The idea of Gen Loh's F-16 squadron commander being empowered to average only 19 sorties per aircraft per month or as many as 25 based upon the training needs and operational tempo in combination with the squadron commander's experience and good judgment regarding the unit's current level of competence would fit the Deming and Federal Express version of empowerment. Equally, Deming and Amoco might suggest that the military travel section NCO's be allowed to make modest financial decisions based upon their "expertise" in the field and being "closest to the action."

These examples lead to the conclusion that the official Air Force concept of empowerment has been something not quite like Deming had in mind and something totally different than is practiced by civilian organizations such as Federal Express and Amoco.

The Air Force version could be summarized as, "The authority to make decisions, on a limited basis, within specified (even arbitrary) guidelines, depending upon the capability (note *capability* not *ability*) of the individual concerned, if the circumstances or consequences are not too important at the time.

Apparently, since Gen Loh's Vice Presidential briefing, he also noticed that the Air Force was not clear on its definition of empowerment. In the December 1994 Secretary of the Air Force *Policy Letter* Gen Loh states,

"What is empowerment? ...First, let me tell you what empowerment is not. Empowerment is not a freewheeling, unstructured, 'let them do their own thing' operating style. It is not. Empowerment is not letting the monkey run the zoo. Empowerment is not having commanders stand back while misdeeds are going on .... empowerment is individuals who are trained to do their job, trained to do their mission, trained to the point where we can trust them to do their mission in an unsupervised way..." (16:2)

Here, he uses an example of Air Combat Commands "Gold Flag" program which allows maintenance experts to decide if they should fix a broken part or throw it away, as a demonstration of empowerment. (16:2-3)

Gen Loh's definition and example fit the common understanding or misunderstanding of empowerment as held by many in today's Air Force.

### COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS

As reflected in Gen Loh's attempt to clarify "what it is not" many leaders in today's Air Force seem to harbor a common fear of the concept of empowerment. (15:95) The fear seems to center on an understanding that full use of empowerment will result in the willy nilly actions of subordinates and that their irresponsible activities will somehow result in unwanted or unsatisfactory results. (Reference Gen

Loh's comment about the monkey running the zoo.) Yet, this fear may be justifiable to a certain extent since leaders and followers apparently share a similar impression of the implications of empowerment.

As I conducted briefings to introduce Quality concepts and a proposed training plan to groups of Air Force members who were unfamiliar with quality I noticed a common reaction when the topic of empowerment was addressed. Generally, a rumble of whispered side conversation would spread across the audience. From the younger people I heard comments such as, "Finally! I'll be able to do it the way *I* want." and "I guess we won't have to bother with those T.O.s anymore since we'll be able to do our jobs *our* way." There was a different view from the more senior people, however. They often made comments such as, "Well I guess I'll be out of a job if they don't need me to supervise. We'll just let the kids do what they want" or "How are we ever going to get anything done if we have to *vote* on everything?" These reactions came from people uneducated in quality concepts and one would expect these simplistic views to change as their level of understanding increased. Unfortunately the initial impressions seems to have stuck with many us.

Dr. David S. Sorenson, an Air War College faculty member wrote, "Get rid of 'empowerment' ... it contradicts military hierarchy, and removes leaders from leading ... the chief on the maintenance line is hardly going to trust the A2C who just joined

the unit to decide how many foot pounds of torque to apply to a critical bolt." (9:147) Lt Col Kocon sees empowerment as infringing upon a commander's power. He writes, "The idea of empowerment appears to be very attractive but I suspect that its full implementation in the military would be neither easy in some fields nor possible in others. It will demand the transfer of some power from the higher to the lower levels. Probably not all commanders are so eager to deprive themselves of any portion of their power and its attributes." (6:95) Lt Col Dormeyer sees empowerment as something to be given where there is not much to lose, and as a legal issue involving the sanctity of command, "It is easy to empower where you want. When and where the commander perceives there is little at stake or it doesn't matter. It's a different story to empower in the sense that Deming implies. There are other factors such as legalities of command and prerogatives of command. (Imposition of disciplinary action and punishment) that have no counter part in civilian business." (4:49)

There are other opinions of the concept of empowerment, expressed by fellow classmates (I cannot attribute them by name due to the Rules of Engagement here at Air War College) which show similar fears. One said, "Soldiers are supposed to obey orders, period, not sit in judgment over whether each order is in agreement with their sense of what should or should not be done to fight the battle." Another

said, "I don't want my wingman going off to fight the war on his own because he feels empowered to do whatever he wants."

Even Gen Ronald W. Yates, commander of Air Force Materiel Command, acknowledged this fear when he said, "I know some may be skeptical that a military organization could embrace TQ - after all, isn't TQ antithetical to the autocratic leadership style required in the military?" (17:3)

The theme of "war versus peace" frequently arises when the issue of empowerment is addressed. Col Donald E. Waddell III uses the Air War College leadership model to describe the situational leadership styles which transition from "democratic" and "flexible" in peace time to "authoritarian" and "imperative" in war time. (13:38) (see figure 1) He views the idea of empowerment as a "potential pitfall(s) for us when engaged in combat operations." (13:39) He summarizes his views by posing the following scenario:

"In place of the civilian mind-set, we substitute military discipline during basic training, a reflexive obedience to an authoritarian leadership style. The intent of QAF is just the opposite. It seeks to transfer power to subordinates and to solicit ideas and insights from followers in a very friendly, benign environment. How will the thoroughly indoctrinated and empowered QAF follower respond if the unit's leadership takes on a more autocratic style during combat? This is an issue that future leaders, particularly at the unit level, need to address." (13:39)

These expressions of concern reflect the perceived problem with empowerment. Leaders in today's Air Force see empowerment resulting in a loss of



power or control, a reduction in authority, and contradictory to basic military order. This leads to a different definition of empowerment. It is the definition which is held as valid by many typical Air Force leaders in spite of the assuring words from the Air Force's Quality advocates such as Gen Loh or Gen Yates. Empowerment is seen as: *Abdication of control over any activity, for which a superior is responsible, to a subordinate without regard to the subordinate's qualification, skill, or motivation, and without regard to the situation.* This definition appears foolish when seen in print, but I feel confident that it is, indeed, the meaning most frequently associated with empowerment in the QAF and is the reason many Air Force leaders today are so skeptical of its applicability and workability. Gen Loh and Gen Yates must also fear a misinterpretation of the concept since both have made efforts to put it in perspective.

Successful military leaders of the past have been familiar and more comfortable with the concept of empowerment although the terms they used were different.

### A HISTORICAL VIEW OF EMPOWERMENT

Perhaps Admiral Thomas Moore had the clearest view of what, today, we would call empowerment when he said, "Delegation of authority is one of the most important functions of a leader and he should delegate authority to the maximum

degree possible with regard to the capabilities of his people. Once he has established policy goals and priorities the leader accomplishes his objectives by pushing authority right down to the bottom. Doing so trains people to use their initiative, not doing so stifles creativity and lowers morale." (5:21) Moore's view incorporates the concepts of vision (policy goals) and delegation of authority used in the QAF version of empowerment and includes the ideas of "ownership" as cited by Gen Loh in his views of quality in Air Combat Command. But, today's leaders fear some loss of power.

Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale in *Military Ethics* said, "Strange as it sounds, great leaders gain authority by giving it away." (5:22) Even one of America's greatest leaders, who would never be accused of having suffered from a lack of power, Gen George S. Patton said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity." (5:127)

Another fear often associated with empowerment is the fear that subordinates, empowered to act on their own, will make mistakes for which the leader will be held accountable. This is not a new concern, but it is, rather, a part of the process which involves training as General Bruce C. Clark, USA, says:

"Once he has set his goals and started his training program in motion a commander must rely on the initiative of his subordinates. By properly delegating responsibility and the related authority a commander will foster this initiative and will enhance the development of all his subordinates--officers and non-commissioned officers alike ... this principle cannot be restricted merely to the training program,

but must extend to all unit activities ... we speak of enhancing the prestige of our non-commissioned officers, but the best possible way of doing this is by giving them responsibility to do their jobs themselves, while also insisting they accomplish them properly." (3:47)

Once the proper training has been accomplished subordinates can and should be allowed to exercise initiative. This will pose the possibility of them making mistakes. But it is a risk which leaders must accept in order to develop their subordinates' initiative and experience. (5:126)

There is another important aspect of empowerment which has been recognized as vital to the success of leaders in combat -- Understanding of the commander's intent. General Gerald T. Bartlet said, "We must develop commanders who trust their subordinates, delegate responsibility and authority to them, and who encourage them to exercise initiative within the framework of their intent." (5:180) The principle of "the commander's intent" is well known throughout the US Army where every soldier must have a clear understanding of the principle goals and objectives of the commander so that, in the event the soldier is separated or loses communications he/she may act independently and yet contribute to the final outcome as seen by the commander. It is so important, in fact, that Field Marshall Sir William Slimm said, "This acting without orders, in anticipation of orders or without waiting for approval, yet always within the overall intention must become second nature..." (10:45)

Successful leaders have seen empowerment as a source of power. It unleashes the initiative and creativity of their followers and keeps them all moving toward the goal of accomplishing the commander's intent. Martin Van Creveld put it most succinctly when he stated, "...the fact that, historically speaking, those armies have been most successful which did not turn their troops into automatons, did not attempt to control everything from the top, and allowed subordinate commanders considerable latitude has been abundantly demonstrated." (12:270) Past leaders have also recognized the importance of proper training to prepare people to accept the responsibilities which will be given to them. Yet, today's Air Force leadership has a tendency to shy away from the concept. Perhaps empowerment as intended in QAF needs to be reexamined.

#### EMPOWERMENT: A LEADERSHIP MODEL

There are some obvious disconnects in the basic understanding and perception of the meaning of empowerment. Deming encourages leaders to allow workers maximum flexibility in the way they produce their products by removing barriers and providing training and equipment. Civilian businesses have empowered their employees to take risks when working to ensure the customers are properly serviced. The Quality Air Force would have leaders place authority, responsibility

and accountability for products and processes at the lowest level possible. Great leaders have seen initiative (read empowerment) as essential to success but current Air Force leaders fear that they will lose power and control of the situation, especially in combat.

The fearful view of empowerment, which seems to dominate the thought of current Air Force leaders, is easy to understand. After all, the mission of the Air Force is not to make widgets or pump oil, it is, in varying degrees, to "kill people and break things." We do this in a potentially life threatening environment where the future of whole nations can be determined by our individual or collective success or failure.

So, is empowerment "out" and authoritarianism "in" for the Air Force? The answer is "it depends." This is a characteristic of empowerment which is most critical to successful implementation and essential part of the definition which needs to be clarified.

Col Waddell illustrates a summary of leadership theory over the past century using a leadership style model. (see figure 2) Although this figure represents a "generalized chronology" of popular leadership theories, his illustration can easily be adapted to represent the manner in which a leader determines levels of empowerment appropriate to particular situations. (13:32) Thus, to explain the "it depends" element of empowerment we can refer to a simple leadership model

modified from Col Waddell's article. (see figure 3) The model depicts the range of empowerment which a leader may give to a subordinate for a particular activity and objective. Point 1 represents total control of the activity by the leader (total authoritarian - no freedom of action for the follower). Point 2 (total democratic) represents unlimited freedom of action for the subordinate. In reality neither case is very likely to occur. Point 3 is the maximum or upper limit of empowerment which a leader can practically allow. Normally point 3 will be less than total freedom of action because of limiting factors over which the leader has little or no control. These limiting factors may include: local, state, federal, or international laws; , national, military, service or unit policy; morals; safety considerations; technical order procedures; and time or resource limitations. Point 4 is the actual upper limit of empowerment. This, additionally, will normally be more restrictive than point 3 and is the limit imposed by the leader upon the subordinate's action due to subjective opinions and judgments of the leader. The leader's view of subordinate training, experience, skill, judgment, and knowledge may limit the freedom which the leader is willing to allow. The self-confidence of the leader may well be a significant player also. The two dotted lines show the effect of empowerment on responsibility or accountability. They illustrate that leadership responsibility remains constant but follower responsibility/accountability increases with the level of empowerment.

A brief example of the application of this model in routine/peace time and crisis/war time situations will illustrate how empowerment varies with the situations involved.

Example 1: Routine - Peace time. Using a fictitious example of Gen Loh's Gold Flag program in which maintenance personnel are empowered to make decisions on repairing expendable parts we can identify the various factors which determine the level of empowerment. In this case the leader could be the shop chief who is responsible for the section's performance in general and for the economy of his operation in particular. His level of responsibility will not change regardless of the amount of empowerment given to his subordinates. Assuming that a technician is just out of technical school and completely inexperienced in his field the supervisor will maintain tight control and allow little freedom of action for the new airman (point 4 close to left side). As the airman gains experience the supervisor will allow more and more freedom of action and be more receptive to ideas concerning in-house repair of expendable items. Point 3 (the practical upper limit of empowerment) will be something less than total freedom because certain components may be available only to the manufacturer due to patents or proprietary laws. Non-availability of certain test equipment or special procedures required may not make local repair possible. Even the local ops tempo or manning may limit local repairs. Point 4 ( the actual limit of empowerment) may be further limited by the

supervisor because he is, himself, unfamiliar with the procedures required and is therefore simply uncomfortable with the process. The experience level of the technician may prevent the supervisor from allowing local repair of a critical item until more experience is gained. As the technician gains experience and the supervisor becomes more confident in the ability of the technician to perform the critical tasks point 4 will move more and more to the right. As this is accomplished the technician will assume more and more responsibility for the successful repair. At the same time the supervisor will exercise less and less control over the actions of the technician.

Example 2: Critical - War time. Here the AWC student's reference to his wingman "going off to fight the war on his own" can be applied. In this case the wingman's immediate supervisor could be assumed to be the flight leader. The flight leader will maintain a continuous level of responsibility for the success of the mission. The practical limit of empowerment (point 3) will be moved to the right by rules of engagement (ROE) which restrict options of the entire flight. Time limits imposed by mission requirements may further restrict options, and the mission objective, itself, will set limits on freedom of action. Point 4, the actual amount of empowerment allowed by the flight leader may be very far to the left if it is the flight leader's first combat mission. Yet even a highly experienced leader will be more restrictive in allowing freedom of action (or reluctant to accept proposals for action)



from a wingman with little or no experience. Finally, if the mission is extremely critical and/or time constrained the leader may allow no freedom of action by the wingman regardless of their experience or skill.

These examples illustrate how the leaders, followers, and situation affect levels of empowerment. But there are aspects of the concept of empowerment which require further discussion. These are the inherent obligations of the leader and follower required for empowerment to be most beneficial and successful.

First, the leader must ensure that he/she provides the follower with the ability to accept more than minimal empowerment. This is accomplished by providing the best possible training for the tasks involved, the best equipment and facilities available within unavoidable restraints of time and finances, and by allowing the follower frequent opportunity to gain realistic experience in performing the tasks under a variety of potential operating environments.

Second, the followers must fully apply themselves to gain the knowledge necessary through the training and experience made available to them. Once trained, they should actively seek opportunities to expand their experience base and then, use the knowledge, skill, and experience to suggest and implement improvements in the processes for which they are responsible. They should aggressively pursue greater levels of freedom of action.

Finally, the leader and follower have three mutual obligations. The first is the obligation to ensure that the limits of action are clearly defined and clearly understood. Misstating or misunderstanding the limits of empowerment can result in unwanted actions and reactions which may destroy the trust and respect necessary for success. The second obligation is for leaders to allow and followers to accept the highest level of empowerment possible. Increasing empowerment levels will lead to greater efficiency and greater mission accomplishment. Third, the leader and follower must ensure that the goals and objectives are understood by all. Both can thus focus every effort in accomplishing these goals and the leader need not fear misguided actions by the follower.

Based upon the model (figure 3) and the above explanation we can now offer a new, yet lengthy, definition of empowerment.

*EMPOWERMENT: A mutual obligation of leaders and their subordinates in the Quality Air Force as they work toward clearly stated and mutually understood goals and objectives. Leaders are obligated to provide the best possible equipment, training, and experience available to prepare subordinates for the increasing responsibilities and must strive to allow the greatest levels of freedom of action in accomplishing their assigned tasks. Subordinates are obligated to take full advantage of their equipment, training, and experience opportunities to become skillful in their duties. They must use the full range of freedom of action to improve*

*the processes over which they have control. Leaders and subordinates establish open communications to ensure clear understanding of the range of freedom, limiting factors, and changing goals and objectives.*

Understanding this model will allow a clearer understanding of the concept of empowerment and should relieve today's Air Force leader's fears of loss of control.

### CONCLUSION

Empowerment is a basic tenet of quality management but interpretations of the concept have varied greatly. Within the Air Force, leaders frequently express fear and skepticism of the concept of empowerment. Dr. W. Edwards Deming envisions empowerment as allowing workers freedom to determine the methods and processes they will use in accomplishing their assigned tasks. He sees management's responsibility as acting upon the decisions and recommendations of the employees. Civilian companies have adapted this concept and applied their own definitions. These definitions do, however, share many features and in general, agree with the Deming concept.

The Quality Air Force definition of empowerment is not precise and thus, has led to a general misunderstanding of the concept. The QAF version of empowerment is defined as pushing accountability, authority, and responsibility to the lowest level possible. Senior leaders in today's Air Force have interpreted the

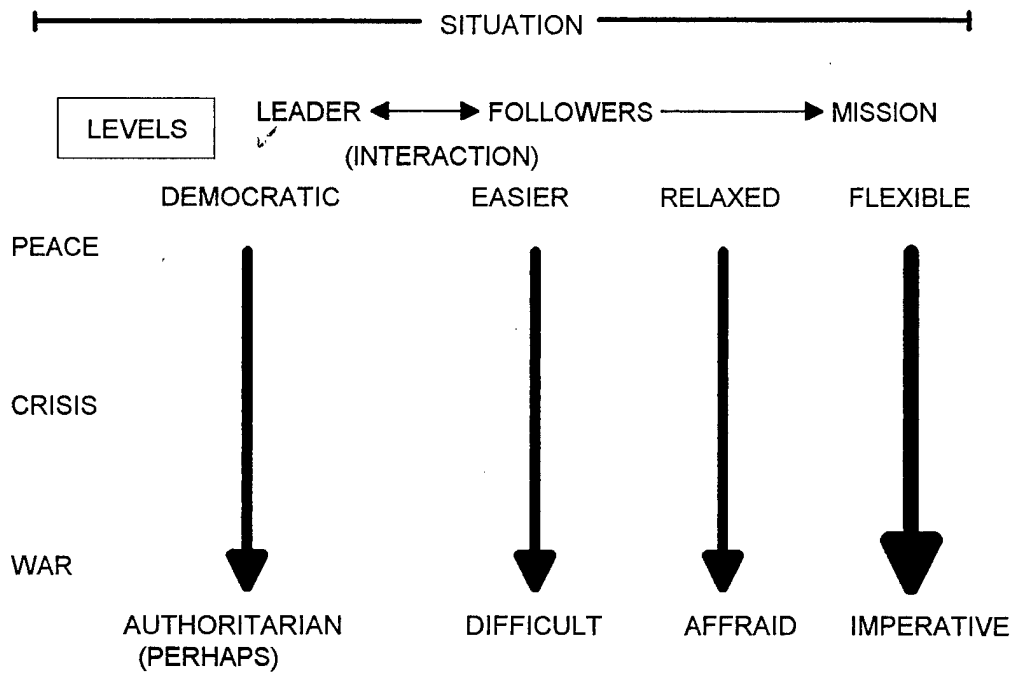
concept as giving away power and, as a result, they fear losing control over enormously critical activities. Attempts by current Air Force leadership to clarify the meaning of empowerment have been narrowly focused. These explanations combined with the poor definition lead Air Force members to believe that implementing empowerment will somehow result in "the monkeys running the zoo." There is a particular belief among many in the Air Force that, although the concept of empowerment is not necessarily bad, it cannot work in a war time environment/combat situation.

Historically, military leaders have found empowerment an essential element in their success. Although called initiative, creativity, delegation of authority, and acting within the commander's intent, empowerment has been around for a long time and is recognized by many as a source of power and success.

A simple leadership/empowerment model can be used to show the interrelationships between the leader /follower and levels of empowerment responsibility and freedom of action. The model demonstrates how various combinations of individuals and situations affect levels of empowerment. A variety of examples can easily be applied to the model to show the changing nature of empowerment.

A new definition of empowerment explains responsibilities of leaders and followers and helps relieve fear.

The business of the Air Force is infinitely more serious than making frying pans or TVs and, therefore, the concerns our leaders express deserve serious consideration. The fear of empowerment can be relieved with a more thorough understanding of the factors which affect the levels of empowerment. The empowerment model will help in this understanding. Above all, clear and open communication is essential to making it work.

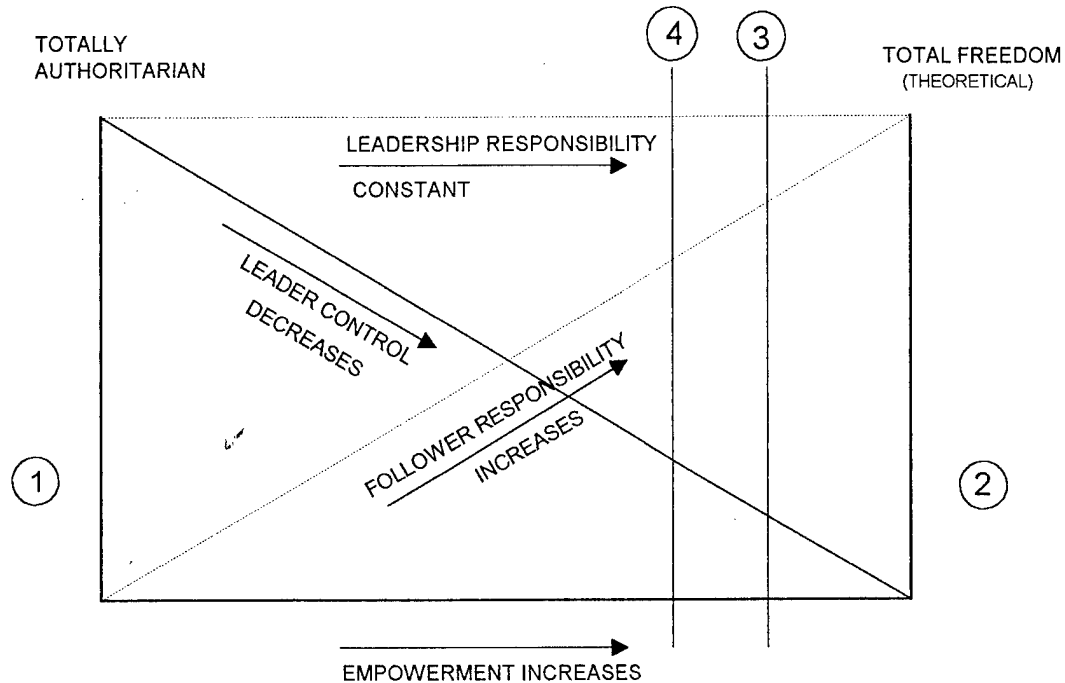


THE SITUATION: PEACE OR WAR?

FIGURE 1



## EMPOWERMENT MODEL



- Pt 1 - Leader allows no freedom of action
- Pt 2 - Leader allows complete freedom of action
  - (follower equally responsible for result/outcome)
- Pt 3 - Upper limit of empowerment (practical)
  - set by laws, regs, safety, national/service/unit policy
- Pt 4 - Actual limit of empowerment (subjective)
  - set by level of subordinate skill, knowledge, training, leader self-confidence, trust

Note: Pts 3 and 4 can shift radically in crisis situation

FIGURE 3



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