More than Smiles – Employee Empowerment Facilitating High-Quality, Consistent Services – The Wakaya Club, Fiji

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Abstract

Tourism and Hospitality service organisations are increasingly searching for suitable management strategies that enable the delivery of consistent-quality services, and enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty. An approach that has gained much support in academic discourse is employee empowerment. However, questions have also been raised as to the applicability of Western-designed management concepts to multi-ethnic workforces within such developing countries as Fiji. More realistic implementation of Western management strategies is likely to be more successful if they were adapted to consider cross-cultural management and the different characteristics of national cultures. Organisations in Fiji are constantly plagued with problems related to the delivery of quality-consistent services. This study revealed that employee empowerment evolved at The Wakaya Club as an inherent part of the high-quality, luxury tourism services they offered, and was not specifically implemented. Through careful research and planning, together with a clear guest orientation and understanding of their needs and expectations, consistent, enhanced service quality was maintained at the resort. Within their planning and operational procedures and policies, cultural characteristics of their multi-ethnic employees were considered. The Wakaya Club (TWC) practices have the potential to create significant improvements if transferred to other service organisations in tourism, hospitality, and Fiji generally.

Keywords: cross-cultural management; cultural dimensions; employee empowerment; Fiji; tourism services

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Introduction

Many contemporary service organisations are facing the challenges created by competitive global markets, advances in technology, and the need to provide quality products for consumers with continuously changing needs and expectations. Attracting and retaining these customers has become increasingly difficult, as companies compete to meet or exceed customer expectations. These organisations now recognise the vital role front-line employee (those who have most contact with guests) service delivery plays in differentiating their products from the competition (Lin & Mattila, 2010; Ro & Chen, 2011). Expert opinion and research contend that the delivery of quality service products can result in a "delighted", more loyal customer (Hales & Klidas, 1998; Lashley, 1995, 1999; Yin, Wang & Lu, 2019). Thus it is argued that empowerment in hospitality organisations can increase job satisfaction and performance, and be an effective management strategy for increased profitability and leverage of human resources for competitive advantage (Meng & Han, 2014; Yin et al., 2019). This longitudinal study examined the concept of employee empowerment at The Wakaya Club (TWC), Fiji, and how it was used to deliver high-quality, consistent service.

Literature Review

Past research on employee empowerment has focused on manufacturing industries, with limited research on service industries (Honold, 1999). However, advocates of empowerment claim that, given the interactive nature of service encounters, it has the potential to provide notable benefits for tourism and hospitality (Lashley, 2001). From the organisation's viewpoint, benefits relate to improved customer responsiveness. For the employees, empowerment allows them increased power and control over decision-making during service delivery, and potentially increased employee satisfaction (Lashley, 1995). Since the 1990s, employee empowerment is a strategy frequently mentioned throughout management literature (Honold, 1997), advocating that empowered employees are necessary for achieving competitive advantage (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Lashley, 1999). Prior to this, the concept was discussed in relation to such terms as "participative management, total quality control, individual development, quality circles and strategic planning" (Honold, 1999, p. 19).

Advocates claim that empowerment has many significant benefits to offer tourism and hospitality-related businesses, as employees empowered through participatory decision making and autonomy (Jia, Shaw, Tsui & Park, 2014) are more responsive to customer needs during front-line service encounters (Lashley, 1995). They are able

to respond more effectively to customer complaints, resulting in successful service recovery, and in some cases substantive loyalty (Boshoff & Allen, 2000). However, recent studies show that an employee's impact on service recovery is strongly related to their level of seniority within a hotel/resort, with senior staff exercising more authority in decision making, which is especially found in a high power/distance culture (Hewagama, Boxall, Cheung & Hutchison, 2019; Hofstede, 1995) such as Fiji or Sri Lanka. During this process, employees "develop a sense of ownership taking personal pride in ensuring that service encounters are a success" (Lashley, 1996, p. 333). Organisations can create a serving culture (Nowak, 2019), within which employees are encouraged to take ownership, and be empowered to fulfil different customer needs and improve service quality (Lashley, 1999). Management and employee strategies that encourage empowerment are influential in shaping organisational procedures and policies on recruitment and selection, induction, training, rewards, and employee appraisals (Lashley, 1999; Ro & Chen, 2011).

Research has shown that empowerment can refer to a variety of dimensions, which include "control of one's own work, autonomy on the job, variations of teamwork, and pay systems that link pay with performance" (Honold, 1997 p. 202). These dimensions are dependent on individual employee's abilities and desire for empowerment. Other dimensions consist of management techniques that facilitate empowerment, but where individual employees are able to choose to be empowered or not. Honold (1997, p. 202) claimed that "leaders create an environment where individuals are able to make that choice". Consequently, it is argued that empowerment is a concept that, even when accepted by management, needs to be adopted voluntarily, with employees having "some intrinsic motivation to make a contribution" (Colemen, 1996, p. 35). Furthermore, recent studies of empowerment have considered the role of psychological empowerment, self-improvement, and personal growth (Guerrero, Chenevert, Vandenberghe, Tremblay & Ayed, 2018; Matsuo, 2019). Such psychological empowerment is influenced by individual characteristics, such as causal orientation, aspiration and personal goals, and the social/work environment, such as supportive managerial behaviour and job characteristics (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). As senior managers are responsible for assigning workloads, it is important that they too are trained in job assignment, the creation of workplace developmental tasks, and the promotion of psychological empowerment (Matsuo, 2019).

Critics today challenge theoretical analysis of Western-centric human resource management theories that ignore cultural influences (Baum, 2015). Similarly, meanings for leadership differ across cultures (Dickson, Castano, Magomaeva & Den Hartog, 2012). Hence, Cheung, Baum, and Wong (2012) argued the need to examine

management theories in a cultural context and, in an empirical study undertaken in China, questioned the applicability of Western-centric literature and such theories as employee empowerment. Other studies of employee empowerment in the Middle East and Asia supported, "localised interpretation of management theory so that organisations need to explore the transferability" across cultures (Baum, 2015, p. 209), especially when examining the effectiveness of multinational companies' management of global employees. Furthermore, some authors have identified the fragmentation in leadership research and suggested better integration of theories and a more holistic view that combines visionary (providing a future goal and persuading others to contribute to its realisation) and empowering (granting autonomy and shifting power from the leader to followers) leadership (Kearney, Shemla, van Knippenberg & Scholz, 2019).

Both critics and advocates of empowerment agree that the concept is complex and exists in many forms. However, whatever the form, critics of the literature show that successful implementation requires a holistic approach with the support of both management and employees (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997; Siegall et al., 2000). Management support is necessary in the form of training, education, and technical support, together with the existence of employees who fully understand their roles and are willing to adopt the concept and take responsibility for the part they play in service encounters. Successful implementation, therefore, requires significant elements of knowledge and trust on the part of management and employees (Wilkinson, 1998). Lack of commitment to, and ownership of, these elements by management and employees alike invariably results in empowerment failing to deliver its intended benefits (Honold, 1999).

Whilst the value of empowerment may be recognised, it is not an easy option. Empowerment must be aligned to organisational values, and involves a long-term commitment on the part of the organisation and employees. For most organisations, this requires changes in internal culture, and these are only effective when the people concerned "feel a large measure of ownership" (Smith, 1997, p. 122). Organisations choosing to implement empowerment successfully must consider all these factors, adapt and define the concept for themselves (Honold, 1999). This is even more significant in Fiji, where the successful implementation of management strategies are likely to be influenced by cultural diversity, and where the workforce may choose not to be empowered due to the existence of high power distance.

Despite this increased interest, there is little agreement on a specific definition for empowerment. In many instances the words "employee empowerment" are used interchangeably with such terms as job enrichment, employee participation,

employee commitment, job satisfaction, and stock ownership. However, these terms reflect not only the individual aspect, but how organisations provide an environment that facilitated employees who chose to be empowered (Duvall, 1999). Organisations exhibiting a "people" approach to success can elect to "foster interactions among individuals that are directed at intentionally creating successful outcomes" (Duvall, 1999, p. 206). Throughout these encounters, employees are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions. For example, intrinsic motivation can be viewed as a significant characteristic of job satisfaction. Such initiatives encourage the improvement of employee satisfaction through more meaningful work, limited control in decision-making, and feedback on work performance. Empowerment as it exists today is a concept that needs analysis within specific organisational and political contexts in order to understand the different levels of control, commitment and participation that exist (Lashley, 1996).

Leadership approaches that empower employees, as a means of achieving competitive advantage are essential dimensions of empowerment, where management delegates power to employees and provides a serving culture (Nowak, 2019) that is conducive and facilitates empowerment. This exists where organisations have fewer hierarchies and managers play the roles of coaches (Honold, 1999). Management supervises and empowers its employees, who in turn respond by increased performance and satisfaction (Lashley, 2001). How delegation is defined is important, and managerial intentions for empowerment can be represented by the choice of language and words used to refer to employees. For example, such words as "subordinate", and "superior" tend to reflect intentions that are concerned with increasing tasks and responsibility, with little commitment to empowerment by employees (Honold, 1999). In contrast, leadership that promotes employee empowerment through self-efficacy, increased latitude and participation in decision-making, is more likely to be supported by employees.

Leaders can provide supportive environments through the development of boundaries and procedures that outline both managerial and employee responsibilities. These can include, "designing and communicating a shared vision; managerial support; teamwork; continuous environmental scanning; job redesign and enrichment; role modelling; coaching and mentoring, reward schemes, and the recognition and communication of common goals" (Honold, 1999, pp. 26-27). However, providing a supportive environment within which employees can be empowered is insufficient on its own. Successful implementation requires that employees must choose to be empowered, as it is the people within organisations who are empowered, not the actual organisations *per se* (Lashley, 2001).

At an individual level, empowerment does not exist unless the "empowered" assume responsibility for their actions. Interactive empowerment involves working with people, whereas self-empowerment refers to an individual's capacity to control and influence his/her own behaviour (Vogt & Murrell, 1990, cited in Honold, 1999). Another individual aspect of empowerment involves task-level empowerment, where employees have the latitude to make decisions that relate to their own work. At this level, individuals are able to make on-the-spot decisions in front-line service encounters. This discretion leads to increased customer satisfaction, especially in service encounters that produce unexpected outcomes, and where anticipation and standardisation is difficult. However, with this decision-making authority also comes accountability and responsibility (Lashley, 2001).

Similarly, in the case of teams, groups of employees are given increased latitude and discretion in decision-making, with accountability being held collectively by the group. These empowered groups are given a variety of labels, such as autonomous work groups, self-directed teams, and semi-autonomous teams (Lashley, 2001). These "soft" forms of HRM strategies have been influenced by the success of Japanese management techniques, and the competitive advantage to be gained from increased production and quality (Lashley, 2001). Where changes in processes and systems are seen as necessary for successful empowerment, this is often related to the implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM) strategies. These changes are thought necessary in order that organisational goals are achieved through effective systems, and understanding of their delivery by both management and employees (Honold, 1999).

Research into employee empowerment in the Pacific is negligible, with this being the only study to my knowledge of empowerment in tourism and hospitality, findings of which serve to fill the knowledge gap in this area. Furthermore, this study is significant as it also considers cultural implications, implementation, and the willingness of Fijian employees to adopt empowerment.

Research Methods

This study investigated the concept of empowerment, how, and the extent to which, it could be used in tourism and hospitality services in Fiji in order to increase competitive advantage by improved service quality. Employee empowerment was explored as a strategy that local organisations could use to motivate their employees to undertake greater responsibility for service encounters culminating in a more "delighted" guest.

An in-depth case study of TWC resort was conducted to collect primary data for comparison with existing literature and research findings over a five-year period from 2002-2007. Due to the lack of research on this subject in the Fiji context, the researcher decided to publish this study as she considered the data relevant despite its age and the absence of previous studies. Wakaya is an example of a world-renowned, luxury boutique resort that has had success in implementing its own version of empowerment, which considers both their own organisational culture and objectives, together with the challenges of motivating employees within the context of traditional Fijian culture. TWC has recently come under new management, and whilst these findings are still relevant within a Fijian context, resort management styles are reflective of an individual manager's culture and personality, and with new management this could have changed.

TWC was chosen for the study because not only is it a local example of an internationally recognised resort that has won numerous international awards[1], and consistently delivered high-quality service with a 100% local workforce, but the researcher was offered unlimited access to both front and backstage areas of the resort, management and employees, together with any relevant information found within the company records by the then owner and general manager.

A variety of research methods were used, which included historical research (documents from the Wakaya museum, magazine articles, internet resources, summaries of the in-house guest survey and relevant literature); participant observation; in depth and focus group interviews of management personnel, front-line employees and where possible, guests; and, *talanoa*[2] sessions. The first-hand study of the day-to-day management of the resort, together with guest and employee activities and behaviour in different situations, was undertaken using the method of observation, through social interaction with the participants, namely the management

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[1] 2002 - Tatler Travel Award for "Best Island Retreat"
2002 - Elite Traveller "Pure Decadence" Award
2002 - "Fiji Excellence in Tourism Award" for "Boutique Accommodation"
2002 - Island Destinations Travel Agent Choice Award "Most Romantic Destination of the Year"
2000 - Andrew Harper Hideaway Report "Best South Pacific Resort"
1999 - Tatler "The 101 Best Hotels"
1999, 2003 - "Fiji Excellence in Tourism Award" for "Boutique Accommodation"
1999, 2000, 2001, 2002 - Andrew Harper Hideaway Report "Top 20 International Resort Hotels"
1997, 2000, 2004 - Andrew Harper Hideaway Report "Hideaway of the Year Grand Award"
1997, 1998 - Stern's Guide to the Greatest Resorts in the World "Award of Excellence"
1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 - Star Service "Super Star Hotel"
[2] Friendly conversation or story-telling, or, in the context of research, an extended group discussion, often around the kava bowl

and employees.

Data from the guests' perspective were collected through observation and participant observation, as throughout the investigation the researcher was accommodated at the resort and provided with all the benefits of a full-paying guest. This enabled the researcher to experience the TWC's services, and also observe and learn from the experiences of both guest and employee in front line, thus compensating for the limited direct access to guests, as explained below. Focus interviews were conducted with resort employees in the form of *talanoa* sessions (informal social gatherings) in the evening at the staff village. In the Fijian cultural context, *talanoa* refers to the social process where "people converse, share ideas and stories, and where dynamic communication and dialogue are established between two or more parties" (Gibson, Pratt & Movono, 2018, p. 455). Whilst a *talanoa* is similar to an in-depth interview "in context", it is comparable to semi-structured interviews "in practice" (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). These were conducted around the "grog" or *yaqona* bowl in the meeting hall at the staff village, in the expectation that this form of data collection would be more culturally acceptable to the employees who were predominantly indigenous Fijians (Gibson, Pratt & Movono, 2012). It was also assumed that richer more detailed data would be collected from the more relaxed, informal setting, as the interviews would take the form of conversations rather than formal interviews.

The questionnaire consisted of 24 statements based on the Cycle of Capability by Heskett, Sasser & Schlesinger (1997). The underlying assumption of the Cycle of Capability was that front-line employees should be given the support and latitude to perform their jobs in a manner consistent with organisational policies. These statements were used to measure employee's perceptions on different dimensions of empowerment. The results of the review of employee empowerment literature provided the data for the main dimensions of empowerment covered in previous research (Heskett et al., 1997; Hewagama et al., 2019; Honold, 1997; Lashley, 1995). The respondents were asked to rate these statements from one through five, using both an Importance and an Agreement Likert scale. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions on decision-making, feedback, training and skill provision, supportive work environment, and latitude to make on-the-spot decisions regarding customer satisfaction.

Case Study and Sample

The Wakaya Club is a luxury boutique resort located on the 2,200 acre private island of Wakaya, in the Lomaiviti group, Fiji. The sample was drawn from the entire population of the resort, and included the owners, managers, and employees of the Wakaya Club Resort.

At that time, TWC had 60 full-time employees, of whom 34 were front-line employees who provide tangible services to guests through direct interaction, and are fundamental elements of service quality and customer satisfaction (Kim, Lee, & Jang, 2017; Yeh, 2013). A convenience sampling method was used where the middle management, supervisors, and front-line employees at the Wakaya Club were handed questionnaires over a period of five visits. There were a total of 60 employees, but this study focused on the 34 front-line employees from whom 28 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of over 82%.

Results

Overall, results from the case study and survey ($n = 28$) showed that TWC practised a multi-dimensional form of empowerment through strong leadership (Honold, 1997), supportive work environment (Lashley, 1999), selective recruitment policies based on personality and interpersonal skills training and skill provision (Lashley, 1999; Ro & Chen, 2011), clear operating policies and procedures, clear limits and boundaries on and expectations of employees (Magnini, Hyun, Kim, & Uysal et al., 2013), a commitment to enhanced customer service (Patiar & Mia, 2009), rewards and recognition systems based on both traditional management and local cultural practices (Hofstede, 1984; Nabalarua, 1999; Klidas, 2002), teamwork (Honold, 1997, p. 202), internal and external communication (Garavan, 1997), and the frequent monitoring of guest satisfaction. These are discussed below.

Employee Questionnaire Results

Results from the employee questionnaire established that employees agreed and felt it very important that teams were productive based on clear plans (76%), employees knew what was expected of them (90%), operating policies and procedures were clearly understood (62%), and good work was recognised and praised (62%). 52% felt confident expressing their feelings and opinions in the workplace. Although 70% claimed they were provided with the training and skills to perform their job well, only 55% agreed TWC had a formal training and development plan for employees; this was not expected in an empowered work environment, but is likely to be evidence of the high power distance that exists in a Fijian workplace, and displayed evidence of the need for improved communication between supervisors and junior employees. Furthermore, service quality and guest satisfaction are highly valued at TWC, and employees were encouraged to go beyond expectations, with 97% stating in-house findings from guest feedback surveys revealed guests were very satisfied with employee services. However, only 58% felt they had the freedom to make decisions in front-line service encounters. Such uncertainty is likely to be cultural, and a reflection of high power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1995), which contradicts statements from management confirming employees were able to do this. However, employees were well aware of the need for accountability, with 90% agreeing that front-line decisions regarding guests were reported to the relevant supervisor or manager. Employees also perceived other dimensions equally important. These included having in

place clear plans (86%), knowledge of responsibilities and priorities (97%), team expectations (94%), understanding of operating procedures and policies (85%), recognition and praise for good work (90%), and a system of constructive feedback (79%). Furthermore, they agreed that the following dimensions were important: value and respect of colleagues (83%), feeling comfortable to express feelings and opinions (87%), free flow of ideas between team members (76%), decision making is delegated to the right employee (76%), work goals are challenging (86%), employees strive to do their best work (100%), supportive work environment (90%), provision of suitable training and skills (86%), and TWC has a training and development plan (77%). Finally, the employees highlighted the importance of a customer service training programme (83%), customer service goals (93%), the need to value service quality and customer satisfaction (100%), and showing a genuine care about guest needs and the willingness to fulfil them (97%). The employees agreed that all these factors cultivated an empowering workplace environment. In terms of accountability, the majority of employees (86%) stated they were accountable to report their actions and decisions to their relevant supervisors or managers.

Discussion

Based on the results presented above, it is evident that TWC practises the elements of empowerment and empowering leadership stated in the literature review. This suggested that employees at TWC experience a high level of satisfaction, which is reflected in the quality of service they provide and guest satisfaction. Data also suggested that employees received support from TWC in the form of training and skill provision, and in many cases multi-skilling, promotion from within, monetary and non-monetary rewards, recognition, and empowerment. Further evidence of employee satisfaction was supported by the low turnover rate (> 2%), and length of employment, with the longest term being 17 years. The high return rate of guests over the years (40%) influences employee satisfaction, as not only is this evidence that they are providing a high-quality, consistent service, but friendships have developed over time, and this more personal relationship with guests is important to many of the employees and guests. Furthermore, employees receive monetary rewards in the form of a six-monthly bonus of around FJD$1,000, and incentives that include rent-free accommodation and amenities, a return flight to the island for them and their families, and free education from primary to tertiary level for all their children.

The Influence of Culture on Managerial Approaches – The Fiji Context

Saffu (2003) has suggested that for organisations in developing countries problems with service quality and customer satisfaction are likely to be more complex than with their Western counterparts, given the need to motivate a multi-ethnic workforce, whose behaviour is influenced by cultural traditions and expectations. In international tourism, the influence of national cultures (See Hofstede, 1995) on employee behaviour and motivation is an important consideration, especially in developing countries, given the dominance of expatriate management of tourism (Page, Brunt, Busby & Connell, 2014), and the existence

of mainly expatriate management who may lack the skills to manage cultural differences. In the context of Fiji, management approaches are predominantly "top-down", and senior management make decisions with little or no consultation with employees, i.e. bosses "tell", and employees "do" (Nabalarua, 1999; Reddy, 2001), thus limiting opportunities for empowerment as a solution to delivering consistent, high-quality services.

Despite the influence of globalisation on businesses, "the vast majority of published literature on empowerment maintains an Anglo-Saxon cultural perspective" (Klidas, 2002, p. 2), with limited literature on the implications of applying empowerment within a cross-cultural or international context. Consequently, Western management criteria for success may be "inappropriate in an international setting and may indeed be determinants of failure rather than the key to success" (Harris & Kumra, 2000, p. 602). Thus, the successful implementation of this concept may require that empowerment strategies be redesigned with an understanding of traditional indigenous and Indo-Fijian cultures, and how best to use this management technique to motivate a local Fiji workforce (Gibson, 2013).

In Fiji, the two main ethnic cultures mostly reflect a large power distance (Hofstede, 1995), which is characterised by the recognition and acceptance of different levels of power in society. For example, employees at TWC, in a high power distance culture such as Fiji, accepted that power was unequally distributed and exhibited lower levels of desire for empowerment (Saffu, 2003). These levels of difference between the powerful and powerless are noticeable when addressing such factors as social class, education, and occupation (Hofstede, 1984). The employment of empowerment as a management strategy can be more complicated in formal organisational cultures where the power distance between management and employees is greater, as in the case of TWC (Baum, 2006).

Teams

Managers and members of culturally diverse teams often face the challenge of identifying and maximising individual team members' strengths, and minimising conflicts that arise from communication problems, language differences, different work styles, and other misunderstandings (Behfar, Kern & Brett, 2006). Research, and knowledge of effectively managing culturally diverse workplaces is limited (Behfar et al., 2006). Those from individualistic, and low-context cultures prefer direct confrontation, while those from collectivist and high-context cultures, such as indigenous Fijians, prefer indirect confrontation. Kirkman and Shapiro (2001) argued that multicultural team members who had stronger collectivist values were likely to be more cooperative, productive, and empowered, with teams who valued hierarchy preferring a strong leader, whilst those with more egalitarian values preferring participatory team leadership. This was not necessarily the case at TWC, where indigenous Fijians preferred to speak to management through a leader.

Empowering Leadership

Managers with empowering leadership styles allow their employees the power and freedom

to make decisions within a supportive environment devoid of bureaucratic constraints (Huertas-Valdivia, Gallego-Burinb & Llorens-Montes, 2019; Kundu, Kumar & Gahlawat, 2019). Such management with leadership, motivated by a shared vision and focused on the success of the organisation, is needed for the successful implementation of high-quality service (Campos, Mendes, Silva & Oom do Valle, 2014). As with TWC, strategies for the implementation of empowerment must be carefully developed in order that employees fully understand the concept and the level of support that they will receive from management (Lashley, 1996). Employees agreed they understood the importance and were committed to TWC's vision:

- To provide our guests with the most complete resort experience imaginable, fulfilling their every desire.
- To be known for our friendly, unobtrusive service in every way.
- To be renowned as a bastion of ecological sanity.
- To make a difference in Fiji through responsible world class tourism and building better lives for Fiji's children.

(The Wakaya Club, 2007).

Many differences arise when comparisons are made of management approaches in societies, with these due to the existence of diverse cultural values (Cheung et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017; Saffu, 2003). Some of the main differences that exist between Western and South Pacific management approaches, "can be explained in terms of the paternalistic value of orientation" (Evans, Hau & Sculli, 1995, p. 130) in the South Pacific. Respect and obedience accorded Chiefs, elders, and parents are transferred to the workplace in the form of employee obedience to superiors (Gibson, 2013; Nabalarua, 1999). Control and communication between managers and employees, in many South Pacific companies, are similar to those within the family. Furthermore, characteristics such as independence, self-confidence, and the ability to take responsibility for decision-making, are "determined by the values of the society" (Saffu, 2003, p. 63) to which an individual belongs. In many organisations in the South Pacific, including TWC, the manager plays the role of the benevolent autocrat/benefactor, similar to the "father" figure within traditional families (Evans et al., 1995; Gibson, 2013; Hofstede, 1995; Nabalarua, 1999; Reddy, 2001), thus generating feelings of trust and loyalty within the workplace.

Relevance of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions to Fiji

Fiji is a multi-racial society with the two main ethnic groups being indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians. Both these racial groups display different degrees of Hofstede's (1980; 1984; 1995) cultural dimensions, thus making the management and motivation of a multi-racial workforce extremely challenging. Indigenous Fijians, like many South Pacific Island cultures, belong to a predominantly masculine, collectivist, hierarchical culture (Niukula, 1995) that accepts high power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Saffu, 2003). Indo-Fijians, in contrast, belong to a predominantly masculine, individualistic culture (Niukula,

1995), but display characteristics of lower power distance and uncertainty avoidance. The extent to which these different groups respond to similar management practices, or such strategies as employee empowerment, must be adapted to motivate these groups as was analysed using Hofstede's (1995) five dimensions and relevant literature.

Implementing employee empowerment within a Pacific Island context could present challenges based on employees' traditional cultural behavioural norms relating to power distance, respect for authority, and ultimately their willingness to be accountable and take responsibility for their actions (Reddy, 2001). The extent to which a local workforce has adopted psychological empowerment is arguable even within a supportive environment as TWC (Deci et al., 2017). Human relationships that involve trust, commitment, and teamwork are complex. For Pacific Islanders, these are further compounded by cultural backgrounds, and traditional communal obligations, thus requiring assumptions of differing motivational factors (Reddy, 2001). Apart from using established management literature to analyse this study, the Fiji context needs to examine potential cultural differences that may exist due to differences in national cultures from Western-dominated management theory.

Empowering Work Environment

A Western management style does not create an environment that is conducive to the implementation of employee empowerment in the Fijian context, and requires managers to act as leaders and coaches. Given the high levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance that exist within traditional indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian, male-dominated societies that accept disparate degrees of power both within organisations and society (Saffu, 2003), local employees are unlikely to choose to be empowered without a supportive environment. Empowering management, such as at TWC, promoted autonomy and encouraged employees to take responsibility for, and actively participate in, decision-making within front-line service encounters, thus developing previously untapped human resources, and supposedly enabling increased service quality and consistency (Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019; Lashley, 2001).

Individualistic cultures, such as Indo-Fijians, are predominantly self-interested and concerned with their nuclear family, whereas collectivist cultures, such as indigenous Fijians, are related by birth to one or more in-groups that include extended families, clans/tribes or an organisation (Qalo, 1997). These in-groups provide security and protection for their members, in exchange for everlasting loyalty and commitment (Hofstede, 1984). The collectivist nature of many South Pacific Island societies means that individual behaviour is influenced by deep-rooted, traditional, customary obligations and relationships. These influences have resulted in the need for organisations to recognise and develop motivational strategies and rewards that are more culture specific. Traditional rewards and recognition that are based on salaries and monetary incentives may be insufficient. HRM initiatives, and management principles that are currently applied universally need to be adapted to suit individual local contexts, as successful HRM strategies and practices are culture specific

(Hofstede, 1984; Klidas, 2002; Nabalarua, 1999).

For example, data from in-depth interviews with the General Manager (GM) revealed that monetary rewards and incentives, similar to those of their Western counterparts, were more successful at motivating Indo-Fijian employees, whereas non-monetary, culture-specific rewards, such as a deer or wild boar, which because of their rarity and influence on personal status within traditional societies could be used in traditional presentations (*sevu sevu*), or a combination of both, were more successful at motivating indigenous Fijian, Rotuman or *kailoma* (mixed race) employees. Employees were disciplined using the removal of cultural rewards, which brought them shame within their local communities and families within a cultural context - e.g. no traditional presentation of deer or boar at a family celebration or funeral. Such incentives motivated employees to raise their performance levels and conform to company policies and expectations.

For management in Fiji, empowerment requires a paradigm shift in both management and leadership style, and removal of the existing autocratic directive management in favour of leadership that is more participatory and democratic (Kundu et al., 2019; Lashley, 2001).

The data suggested the GM of TWC at the time practised the characteristics of empowering leadership discussed earlier in this paper, and provided the supportive work environment for employees to adopt empowerment (Kundu et al., 2019; Lashley, 2001; Patiar & Mia, 2009). This is consistent with Patiar and Mia's (2009) findings that suggested employees who felt their roles involved decision-making and organisational matters were more likely to deliver high-quality customer services than those who did not. Furthermore, empowering leadership was an important factor in motivating subordinates to deliver high levels of job commitment.

Lack of a supportive work environment could negatively impact service delivery and quality, as Fijian employees may be reluctant to accept the responsibility and accountability that comes with empowerment, due to high levels of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1995).

The manager at TWC operated an open-door system where all employees have access to each other and relevant supervisors and management via mobile phone and internal telephone connections. However, the extent to which employees felt comfortable approaching him directly with their problems, even during staff meetings, is questionable given the high level of power distance that exists within Fijian cultures (Hofstede, 1984). For example, the Food and Beverage Department was run by self-managing teams divided into Kitchen, Waitressing, and Bartending with no formal supervisor. Focus interviews indicated that employees expressed a preference for a supervisor to assume the formal managerial role and responsibility for the department. This they felt would make them more comfortable with reporting problems and incidents that occurred at work. They preferred to have some form of authority to report to between them and top level management. A possible explanation for

this could be that, culturally, indigenous Fijians have a *matanivanua*[3] or intermediary who speaks for them when dealing with higher levels of authority or chiefs. Since our cultural backgrounds are an innate part of our work behaviour, this may be a desire for the continuation of an existing cultural practice to exist in the workplace. Another dimension could be uncertainty avoidance, the desire to please, and a tendency that Fijian employees have to say what they think others want to hear rather than the truth, which prevents them from conveying unfavourable information or problems.

Culture and Employee Empowerment in Fiji

In Fiji, the two major ethnic cultures in the main display a large power distance (Hofstede 1984), and the existence of "unequal distribution of power within [South Pacific] institutions and society is generally accepted" (Saffu, 2003, p. 64). Therefore, it might be assumed that the existence of employee empowerment within local organisations in Fiji is negligible, given the nature of existing organisational cultures. Reddy (2001) confirmed that senior management in many developing world countries such as Fiji "make decisions on their own and do not expect to be questioned on the method used [as consultation with employees of lower rank was] below their status" (2001, p. 77). Additionally, unlike Western management practices that encourage precision, efficiency, punctuality, and documentation, Fijians lack of attention to detail within a business framework is a reflection of a subsistence mindset, which still exists within indigenous Fijian lifestyles (Qalo, 1997) (See Hofstede's Time dimension, 1995).

Lack of understanding of empowerment, given the cultural context of Fijian employees, could lead to their reluctance towards acceptance of the concept, thus posing further challenges to maintaining competitive advantage through high quality, consistent service. Magnini et al. (2013) stated that, despite the existing research on culture, individualism and collectivism, there is little empirical evidence that states that collectivism influences the comfort level of workers to be empowered decision makers. However, since luxury resorts require high levels of customer service, something associated with empowered employees, collectivist workers should be encouraged to take responsibility and authority for decision-making within culturally negotiated limits and boundaries agreed on with management.

Although Fiji is classified as being part of Melanesia, in many instances cultural norms are more akin to Polynesia. Melanesian societies are relatively egalitarian in structure with status being attributed to individual success, and respect shown to the "big man" (Sahlins, 1963). However, in Polynesia, as with Fiji, "social class and hierarchical systems of chieftainships, are still central to social organisation, and many societies are characterised by ascribed status" (Berno & Douglas, 1998, p. 67). Contemporary Fijian culture has three main influences: the church, the *iTaukei* community or *vanua*, and the government (Niukula, 1995). Fijian culture is hierarchical and led by a hereditary chiefly system. Chiefs and elders

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[3] *Matanivanua* - Chief's spokesman and official herald of the village who is in charge of ceremonial functions

are respected, recognised community leaders who possess ultimate authority and power (Niukula, 1995). Where there is strong leadership, respect is mutual between chiefs and their people. Within the chiefly system, the people have responsibilities and are also "served and given leadership" by their chiefs (Niukula, 1995, p. 24). This benevolent autocratic or paternal relationship is accepted within Fijian culture, and found within many organisations in Fiji (Nabalarua, 1999).The Fijian language has special words that are used to show respect and deference to different community members and chiefs and these are also used in the business context when addressing managers and supervisors, as is the case at TWC.

Challenges/Problems of Services in Fiji

The results of the case study on TWC indicated that top management at the resort have close relationships with their employees that are reminiscent of the benevolent/benefactor managerial style of a bygone colonial era (Nabalarua, 1999), an approach that is culturally acceptable within the context of Fiji (see Hofstede, 1995, power distance dimension). In an interview with the GM's wife, who was in charge of landscaping and employees' health and well-being, she stated that "when you help one of the Wakaya family give birth and hand her their child, you have their loyalty and trust for life". The GM at that time was a firm believer in management by example and "walking the talk". His leadership, strong work ethic, and passion and vision for Wakaya made him an excellent role model for his employees who respected and followed his example. His leadership style was empowering, but he maintained a comfortable distance between himself and employees and granted autonomy to employees whilst retaining control over important decisions (Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019) and inspiring his team to put TWC first and deliver exceptional service.

Organisational Work Culture

Through the development and communication of a clear vision, careful planning, role playing, training and skill provision, anticipation of critical incidents, attention to detail, a profound understanding of the tourism and hospitality industry and their specific elite travel market, and a deep understanding of the traditional cultural backgrounds of their predominantly indigenous Fijian and their smaller Indo-Fijian workforce, TWC has developed an organisational work culture that covered all dimensions required by the different empowerment models. The GM stated that the creation of an environment that was conducive to employee empowerment was inadvertent. The intention was always to develop ways that TWC could deliver consistent, high-quality, luxury services to their guests, whilst maintaining a commitment to employing a 100% local workforce. Empowerment, to him, was a necessary element of delivering the levels of service quality that they expected of their employees, and that their guests expected of the resort. It was highly unlikely that they could maintain as high a level of customer satisfaction and service quality, as evidenced by guest survey results, especially in such departments as Activities and Food and Beverage, if employees did not accept empowerment as a strategy to meet guest expectations.

One participant in a key human resources role with TWC believed that, whilst the systems and procedures at the resort could provide a quality service without his leadership, the ability of TWC to consistently exceed guest expectations and maintain its place as one of the top boutique resorts in the world is a reflection of the GM's leadership and management approach. She stated that for both expatriate and local managers to be successful in leading and coaching their employees to provide consistent quality services in Fiji, extensive local cultural knowledge was needed. Expatriate managers, without the knowledge or consideration of the local cultural contexts that exist in Fiji, were less likely to inspire their employees to perform the consistent quality services necessary.

Indigenous Fijian culture has all the prerequisites for providing their people with the ability to work well within an empowered organisation. Its collectivist nature, and complex social relationships give employees a deep, innate understanding of working in groups, which could potentially translate positively to teamwork in the workplace. Their peoples possess excellent interpersonal skills and have the friendly personalities that are easily transferable to tourism and hospitality-related work. Moreover, employee selection approaches are emphasising interpersonal skills, personality, and empathy over more traditional management skills that can be trained. As the GM of TWC stated, "we hire personalities, the technical skills we need can be provided by in-house training". TWC is a prime example that empowering employees to deliver quality, consistent service with a 100% local workforce is possible, so if similar, culturally appropriate policies and procedures were implemented in local service organisations, this may go a long way to solving the problem of consistent quality service. However, this may not be so for local employees where empowerment is not promoted and employees may choose not to be empowered.

Conclusions and Implications

This study of employee empowerment at TWC discovered that management used cultural incentives to motivate staff whilst providing them with the training and supportive environment where they felt able to adopt empowerment as a tool that delivered consistent quality service, high levels of guest satisfaction, and provided a competitive advantage over similar luxury boutique resorts. Furthermore, strong empowering leadership by example (Bass, 1985) motivated an engaged workforce that was empowered to make front-line decisions and enabled the delivery of exceptional service experiences at TWC (Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019).

Results from the study indicated that employees knew what was expected of them and teams had clear plans, operating policies, and procedures that were clearly understood. Recognition of their work was important, as was the free-flow of communication and a supportive work environment that provided them with the relevant customer service training and skills to perform their jobs well. Better communication between supervisors and junior employees was needed to convey instructions from the GM, and is representative of high levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1995). Results showed TWC had developed

a high serving culture, where employees were expected to deliver exceptional services to guests, had a clear understanding of the value and importance of TWC vision of service quality and guest satisfaction, and to this end endeavoured to produce their best work. Whilst management stated that employees were empowered, some employees expressed feelings of uncertainty (42%). However, these were mainly employed in such backstage areas as landscaping, housekeeping, kitchens and engineering, where their tasks were specifically defined, scripted and monitored by checklists. Empowerment as it exists at TWC has been adapted to suit a local workforce, with clearly defined limits and boundaries, where employees are provided a supportive environment, suitable training and skills, and are accountable for their actions.

The ultimate success of tourism and hospitality organisations, due to the prominent role that front-line employees play in service delivery and ultimate guest satisfaction, is predicated on its people or employees (Kim et al., 2016; Yeh, 2013). Service providers in Fiji must recognise that, for their customers to be satisfied, they need satisfied employees (Baum, 2015; Heskett et al., 1997), and satisfied employees, empowered or otherwise, are more likely to exist, if the dimensions for providing a supportive environment for empowering organisations were applied to throughout Fijian organisations (See Heskett et al., 1997; Hewagama et al., 2019; Honold, 1997; Lashley, 1995). Cultural considerations, within the local context, are very important; however, if local organisations do not develop the knowledge-based cultural environments of many of their international competitors, they will not have the basic service management foundation on which to build a sustainable culture of cross-cultural management, empowerment and quality consistent service. Furthermore, without a strong customer-oriented serving culture (Nowak, 2019; Ro & Chen, 2011), creating an environment that would foster employee empowerment, is highly unlikely. Employee empowerment in the Pacific is an area that warrants further research, as there is little evidence of previous studies even within the context of HRM. Furthermore, studies could consider comparisons across different types and scales of hospitality organisations, e.g. hotels, restaurants, resorts, bars, lodges, and geographic locations, as well as comparing CEO opinions of empowerment with those of employees.

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