Publication: HRD Online
Date: 21 May 2025
Headline: Employee empowerment a top priority for Singapore, says MOM

Employee empowerment a top priority for Singapore, says MOM

As Singapore makes empowerment a national focus, lecturer Dr. Kevin Cheong explains what it really means, and how HR leaders can put it into action

With the Ministry of Manpower identifying employee empowerment as a national priority, Singapore employers are being called to act, not just speak, on building more autonomous and accountable workplaces.

But for many, the term is still more buzzword than blueprint: an abstract idea that rarely translates into measurable, daily behaviours.

Done right, empowerment can lead to stronger performance, cross-functional collaboration, and a workplace where employees take ownership of outcomes. Done poorly, it can create confusion and even fear.

According to Dr. Kevin Cheong, an adjunct lecturer at Singapore Management University, the University of Newcastle, and Coventry University, organisations need to start defining what empowerment looks like, not just saying it's important.

A working definition of empowerment

Cheong, whose doctoral research focused on the impact of psychological empowerment on employee and customer satisfaction, explains that real empowerment stems from four foundations: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact.

"Meaning" is the belief that one's work matters and aligns with the organisation's purpose. "Competence" reflects an employee's confidence and capability to make decisions and solve problems.

Publication: HRD Online
Date: 21 May 2025
Headline: Employee empowerment a top priority for Singapore, says MOM

"Self-determination" is about autonomy, or the trust to act without being micromanaged. Lastly, "impact" is knowing your actions contribute to broader success.

He notes that in empowered workplaces, employees don't just perform tasks: they care about outcomes.

"An empowered staff would rarely say, 'I don't know.' Even if they don't have the answer, they take ownership: 'Give me two minutes. Let me check with my colleague.'"

This shift in mindset challenges outdated ideas that link empowerment to blame. "Thirty years ago, empowerment meant: 'If something goes wrong, you're on the hook.' That history makes some people avoid taking initiative. But true empowerment is taking action and asking: What if it turns out right?"

Early signs empowerment is taking hold

What does empowerment look like in practice? Cheong points to subtle workplace cues or what he calls the "pantry talk." It's the energy and informal sharing of ideas that happen when people feel ownership over what they do.

"You can almost see a spring in their step," he says. "They come to work earlier. Teams begin talking about improvements. The silos start breaking down."

This shift is not just about individual confidence but also about team dynamics. When people feel empowered, they collaborate across departments and support each other more. The environment begins to change, not through mandates, but through mindset.

Common missteps during change or restructuring

During times of transition, organisations often declare empowerment as a goal but fail to set the stage for it. One of the most frequent mistakes, says Cheong, is using the word "empowerment" without context or structure.

"There's no one formula. It depends on leadership, industry, and culture," he explains. Rather than rolling out a company-wide program overnight, he suggests starting small.

"Begin with project teams. Let them make decisions, learn from mistakes, and then showcase their progress. Use positive examples to define empowerment within the company."

Critically, empowerment also means not punishing failure. "We shouldn't crucify teams for trying. Highlight the turnaround, the resilience. Make it safe to learn."

He adds, "We don't crucify them in public. We turn it around and say, this team made mistakes, learned from them, and improved."

The hidden habits that undermine empowerment

Even well-meaning leaders can sabotage empowerment without realising it. A key example is expecting employees to take on new tasks without first equipping them.

"We talk about multitasking, but do we provide the resources?" asks Cheong. "If someone doesn't have the time, skills, or support, we can't expect them to succeed on their own. That's not empowerment… That's abandonment."

Publication: HRD Online
Date: 21 May 2025
Headline: Employee empowerment a top priority for Singapore, says MOM

When support is absent, employees begin to withdraw. They become cautious, waiting for orders instead of acting independently. Over time, the gap between leaders and rank-and-file staff deepens, creating frustration and disengagement.

One action that builds trust quickly

Asked what managers can do to signal immediate trust, Cheong points to a simple but powerful concept: "allowable mistakes."

"If something isn't mission critical, let them try their way… Even if it takes longer," he says. "When we stop people from trying, we also stop them from caring."

He recalls learning from both good and bad role models over the years. One lesson that stuck came from a former Japanese boss who told him: "It's your call, but I want to be the first to know if something goes wrong. Then, we'll fix it together."

This kind of relationship builds not just accountability, but ownership. It encourages employees to think carefully before taking action, to treat decisions as if the consequences affected them personally.

"I also understood through negative role models what empowerment is not," he adds. "That helped shape my own understanding of what good leadership should look like."

The risk of unstructured autonomy

Giving employees too much freedom without clear guidelines can backfire. Empowerment without boundaries leads to stress, especially for new or lower-level employees who may feel lost without support.

"We need to define what empowerment means in our organisation," says Cheong. "What are the parameters? What are the examples? What decisions can be made at which level?"

He also stresses the importance of strong HR policies and clear codes of conduct. Without these, empowerment can become performative or even unsafe. "If everyone defines 'right' and 'wrong' differently, things fall apart. It becomes a free-for-all."

Empowerment isn't one-size-fits-all

Not every employee wants, or thrives with, the same level of autonomy. HR must account for different work functions, personalities, and cultural contexts.

"Frontline roles like retail or service delivery require a different kind of empowerment compared to back-end roles like HR or finance," he explains. "In both cases, the goal is the same… Better service, and better support, but the path is different."

He refers to this as a version of Disney's "on-stage" and "backstage" model: "Everyone's part of delivering the promise, whether they're customer-facing or not. So, empowerment should reflect the nature of the role, and the outcome expected."

Cheong puts it simply: "I look at every company having only two departments. One is the people making the promise to the customer. The other is the people delivering that promise."

Where HR leaders should begin

Publication: HRD Online
Date: 21 May 2025
Headline: Employee empowerment a top priority for Singapore, says MOM

To make empowerment meaningful, not performative, HR leaders must begin with outcome clarity. What does success look like? How will roles contribute to that success?

Cheong advises mapping out two things: the decision rights needed at the front end, and the support needed at the back end.

"Start by observing the frontline. Ask: What do they face daily? What blocks better outcomes?" he says.

Importantly, he urges HR to stay sensitive to cultural differences, especially in global or diverse teams. "In some cultures, employees may prefer clear instructions rather than independence. That doesn't mean they're unmotivated. It means empowerment must be interpreted through a local lens."

Ultimately, empowerment isn't about slogans or shortcuts. It's about daily choices, systems that support risk-taking, and the discipline to listen before acting.

As Cheong concludes, "You can't define the rules without knowing the goals. And you can't define the goals without understanding the people doing the work."

For HR leaders, this means defining not only what success looks like, but also what support looks like on the way there.