

Diagnosing Whether an Organization Is Truly Ready to Empower Work Teams: A Case Study

Thomas J. Bergmann and Kenneth P. De Meuse, Professors of Management,
University of Wisconsin Department of Management and Marketing



This case study examined employee perceptions regarding the level of organizational readiness to move toward team-based management. The sample consisted of 11 managers, 18 team leaders, and 123 team members in a multinational food manufacturing plant. Although all three groups indicated a moderate level of readiness, the plant experienced great difficulty implementing the team concept. One-way analysis of variance indicated that team members scored significantly lower than team leaders and managers on nine of 18 survey items. In-depth interviews with plant managers and team leaders revealed there was widespread confusion regarding what the team approach was, the speed with which it should be implemented, and the impact it would have on jobs. Implications for the introduction and implementation of the team approach in an environment of mixed employee support are provided.



Self-managed work teams, self-directed work teams, high performance/high commitment teams, employee involvement teams, employee participation teams, quality circles, and total quality management teams — all are names given to an organizational approach designed to empower work teams to make more decisions affecting their work units. The introduction of the “team concept” in the work place is one of the leading strategies US corporations are using in the 1990s to gain a competitive advantage. Leading companies such as American Express, Disney, Ford, General Mills, Hewlett-Packard, and Shell Oil are using empowerment techniques to increase organizational effectiveness and employee morale. Recent surveys have reported up to 70 percent of US companies are employing some version of self-managed work teams (SMWT) or high-performance work teams (Dumaine, 1994; McCann & Buckner, 1994; Osterman, 1993). McCann and Buckner found, however, that only about one-third of human resource professionals believed that power and decision making were truly being shifted to lower levels within the organization. They questioned whether empowerment was being directed from the top-down without the corresponding movement of power. They called for additional research to obtain a better understanding of what actually is occurring in organizations empowering their employees.

The purpose of this case analysis is to explore the perceived readiness of an organization to implement the team concept. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are performed to examine the different perceptions of managers, team leaders, and team members with regard to the team concept. Suggestions are made on how to more effectively introduce and implement the team concept.

Transitioning to Team-Based Management

US business has accepted the general concept of empowering employees. However, there is considerable disagreement regarding what empowering employees and teams actually means (Dumaine, 1994). There appears to be a high level of agreement among managers that empowering teams is desirable but a great deal of disagreement on what it is they, as managers, should do to implement it! The most common definition of team-based management is that it is an evolutionary process in which team members eventually are “empowered” to make all decisions relevant to the functioning of their work

unit (Case, 1995). Table 1 highlights the key differences between a traditional management-based company and one employing team-based management.

The movement toward teams is a dramatic change for most organizations and, as with any significant change, organizational members face many impediments and considerable reluctance. A substantial body of literature suggests that executives, managers, and first-level supervisors frequently resist relinquishing their decision-making power and authority (Bruzzese, 1994; De Meuse, 1994; Shipper & Manz, 1992; Stayer, 1990). For example, Harley-Davidson encountered difficulty at the executive level when it began empowering work teams in the 1980s. Not only did the employees and supervisors have difficulty adjusting, but the senior executives resisted as well. Mr. Vaughn Beal, Chairman of the Board, declared “the percentage of senior management that survived the transition was pretty

TABLE I

Transitioning to Team-Based Management

Traditional Organizations	Team-Based Organizations
Management-driven	Customer-driven
Isolated specialists	Multi-skilled work force
Many job descriptions	Few job descriptions
Information limited	Information shared
Many management levels	Few management levels
Departmental focus	Whole business focus
Management-controlled	Team-regulated
Policy/procedure-based	Values/principles-based
Selection-based employment	Training-based employment
Top-down performance appraisal	360-degree feedback
Autocratic leadership	Participative leadership
Change is temporary	Change is ongoing
Seemingly organized	Seemingly chaotic
Incremental improvement	Continuous improvement (“Kaizen”)
High management commitment	High worker commitment

Note: Adapted from Wellins, Byham, & Wilson (1991).

Americans have become accustomed to accepting authority and often question the underlying reason for expansion of the employee's role in the work place.

small.... You just get to the point where you can't tolerate people who are nonbelievers. They have to go" (Bruzzese, 1994, p. 21). Likewise, at Shelby Die Casting, the organization identified supervisors as the barrier to implementation of the team concept and terminated them. The company then trained employees to start managing themselves (Caudron, 1994).

Likewise, lower-level employees often are reluctant to accept the new responsibility required of team-based management. Team members who have been shaped over the years to make few, if any, decisions may show a strong reluctance to "latch-on" to newfound power when suddenly cast in the role of team member. Employees come to the work place with certain expectations and beliefs that may lead them to question the motives involved here. Americans have become accustomed to accepting authority and often question the underlying reason for expansion of the employee's role in the work place (Caudron, 1994). Employee reluctance may involve more than just a reluctance to assume power; it may involve a questioning of the team concept itself. American individualism is intimately interwoven into the fabric of American life.

The most important consideration when transitioning an organization is the evolutionary nature of the team empowerment process (Francis & Young, 1992). Too often management has the unstated assumption that employee empowerment occurs as quickly and easily as turning on a light switch. All top management has to say is "we are a team-based company" and, presto, darkness turns to light. On the contrary, empowerment needs to be shared with employees gradually. Lois McMurchy, training director at Shelby Die Casting states "... it's like teaching a bird to fly. It takes a while" (Caudron, 1994, p. 43). She believes that it takes well over three years to transform the work group into a *self-managed* work team. The bottom-line is that a partnership between employee and management needs to develop. Time is needed for the team to clarify roles, to build relationships, and to identify an effective process it can use to manage itself (Francis & Young, 1992).

A Question of Readiness

Effectively managing reluctance, clarifying employee roles, providing training, and defining the concept itself — all aspects are part of the evolutionary process of team-based management. But even an evolutionary process has a beginning, and there are points within the process

where revolutionary leaps occur. When is an organization ready to move closer to team-based management?

The focus of the present study is to obtain a better understanding of how different groups within a company perceive the readiness of that organization truly to empower employees. Such an understanding may provide insight into manager, team member, and team member reluctance: Is it a resistance to change itself? A sense of inadequate preparation? A distrust of motives? A lack of confidence in one's abilities? An uncertainty about expectations?

METHOD

The Organization

The data in this study were obtained in a fast-growing manufacturing plant of a large multinational food company located in a midsize midwestern city. The following three major product lines were processed at the plant: (a) infant formula — both powder and liquid, (b) high protein adult drink, and (c) high concentration dietary drink. The nature of the manufacturing process requires a high degree of interdependence between work units. The plant is unionized, but management and labor relations are stable. During data collection, management and the labor union negotiated a new contract without labor disruption.

The plant employed approximately 40 people four years earlier, increasing employment to more than 150 at the time of the study. The basic organizational structure consists of three managerial layers. The "plant manager" has overall responsibility for all facility operations. Ten functional "managers" report directly to the plant manager. Eighteen "team leaders" largely serve in the role of supervisors, reporting to the respective functional managers.

Data Collection

The collection of data occurred in two phases. Phase I was a two-hour personal, structured interview with each manager and team leader in the plant. The participants were asked such questions as: (a) What does the team concept mean to you? (b) What additional training (skills) do your team members need to implement the team concept effectively? (c) What do you personally see as the greatest drawback of the team concept? (d) What do you personally see as the greatest advantage of the team concept? (e) Do you feel the employees here generally understand what

the company means by the team concept? (f) What barriers currently exist that prevent the team concept from being successful? and (g) What can top management do to facilitate the implementation of the team concept? Overall, the purpose of the interview was to solicit general perceptions of how successfully the team concept was being implemented, where there were problems, and how to correct them. At the end of the interview, each respondent was asked to complete a survey which was returned directly to the interviewer. The interviewer knew the identity of the respondent but the respondent was guaranteed anonymity.

Phase II of the data collection occurred during a plant-wide activity day. The plant closed down for the day and all team members anonymously completed the employees' survey as part of the day's activities. The Team Culture Readiness Survey is comprised of 18 common questions designed to measure the perceptions of respondents of the readiness of the organization to move closer to team-based management. Three unique questions were designed for team members only, which measured how they perceived their team leader's management of them as team members. The questions on this survey were developed from review of the literature (e.g., Fisher, 1993; Varney, 1990), as well as preliminary interviews with a small sample of plant employees (see Table 2). In total, 152 employees completed the survey: 11 managers, 18 team leaders, and 123 team members.

Results

The mean scores on the *Team Culture Readiness Survey* for the managers, team leaders, and team members are presented in Table 2. A one-way analysis of variance was used to determine if there was a significant difference in perceptions among managers, team leaders, and team members. Results show the team members have significantly lower scores on nine of the 18 common survey items ($p < .05$). For those nine items, managers had the highest scores on five, and team leaders had the highest scores on the remaining four items. On only one survey item (Question 16) did team members have the highest mean score (albeit it was not statistically significant). Overall, the grand means for the 18 items indicated that managers ($M = 4.3$), team leaders ($M = 4.4$), and team members ($M = 3.9$)

all expressed a moderate level of team readiness. However, the results suggested that team members were significantly less ready than were managers or team leaders.

The data revealed little consistency in perceptions across the three groups of respondents in terms of highest and lowest ratings. Managers gave their highest readiness rating to Question 3: "The nature of work in the plant lends itself to a team-based approach." They gave the lowest rating to Question 2: "Front-line employees can suggest improvements without going through several levels of approval." In contrast, team leaders rated "management's willingness to invest money in training employees" the highest (Question 17), and "the adequacy of the plant's team support functions" the lowest (Question 13). And finally, team members gave their highest rating to Question 16: "Front-line employees have the skills needed to take greater control of their jobs." They rated "team leaders' willingness to adjust responsibility downward and radically change their own roles and behaviors" the lowest (Question 20).

The results from the qualitative analysis of the data obtained during the interviews with the managers and team leaders revealed the following points. First, all interviewees declared that they preferred the team concept over the traditional managerial approach. Interviewees anticipated that the team concept ultimately would lead to a positive work climate with improved communication. Second, they believed that the team concept meant all employees are working toward a common goal. However, beyond that meaning of "working toward a common goal," there was much confusion regarding a useful definition of the team concept. In addition, there was little agreement regarding the speed and tactics that should be used to implement the concept. Because of this lack of vision, nearly all interviewees expressed frustration with how the team concept was functioning at the plant. Third, the amount of time needed to incorporate the team concept, the rapid plant growth, and the inability of individuals to change their past behaviors were common concerns expressed by the interviewees. Fourth, both managers and team leaders believed the 24-hour shift schedule had a negative effect on application of the team concept. Finally, and surprisingly, neither the presence of the union nor inter-team competition

All interviewees declared that they preferred the team concept over the traditional managerial approach.



TABLE 2

Comparing Manager, Team Leader, and Team Member Responses to the *Team Culture Readiness Survey*

Note: Figures represent means computed from a six-point rating scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The managers and team leaders were not asked to respond to Questions 19 to 21.

Statement	Manager	Leader	Member
1. Management believes that front-line employees can and should make the majority of decisions that affect how they do their work.	3.8	3.9	3.4
2. Front-line employees can suggest and implement improvements to their work without going through several levels of approval.	3.5	4.3	3.3*
3. The nature of the work in your plant lends itself to a team-based approach rather than to individual effort.	5.2	4.9	3.9*
4. The technology and physical design of your plant are flexible enough to permit restructuring based on the needs of the team concept.	3.9	4.4	3.9
5. It is possible to organize your work, so that teams of employees can take responsibility for entire jobs.	4.1	4.1	4.1
6. There is enough complexity in jobs to allow for initiative and decision making.	4.7	4.8	4.2*
7. The union is likely to agree to renegotiate traditional work rules and job classifications to permit greater flexibility and autonomy.	3.8	3.9	3.7
8. Overall, employees are interested and willing to organize into teams.	5.0	4.9	4.5*
9. Your company has a history of following through on initiatives such as employee empowerment.	4.0	3.9	3.3*
10. Your overall company culture, vision, and values support team-work and empowerment.	4.7	4.5	3.8*
11. Plant management is willing to adjust responsibility downward and radically change its own roles and behaviors.	4.2	3.9	3.2*
12. Your company is secure enough to guarantee a period of relative stability during which teams can develop.	4.5	4.2	4.1
13. Your plant has adequate support functions, such as human resources, engineering, and maintenance, that can help teams by providing information, coaching, and training.	4.4	3.7	3.9
14. Plant management understands that developing teams is a lengthy, time-consuming, and labor-intensive process, and is willing and able to make the investment.	5.1	4.7	4.4
15. Your plant has systems in place to provide timely information to front-line employees.	3.6	4.2	3.7

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Comparing Manager, Team Leader, and Team Member Responses to the *Team Culture Readiness Survey*

Statement	Manager	Leader	Member
16. Front-line employees have the skills needed to take greater control of their jobs.	3.8	4.4	4.6
17. Management is willing to invest the money in training all employees to be able to move toward a team-oriented company.	5.0	5.2	4.3*
18. Team leaders are willing to share control and authority as the plant moves toward team decision making.	4.1	4.7	3.2*
19. Team leaders believe that front-line employees can and should make the majority of decisions that affect how they do their work.	—	—	3.3
20. Team leaders are willing to adjust responsibility downward and radically change their own roles and behaviors.	—	—	3.1
21. Team leaders understand that developing teams is a lengthy, time-consuming, and labor-intensive process, and are willing and able to make the investment.	—	—	3.6

*Denotes mean score is significantly lower than other(s); $p < .05$.

were cited as barriers to implementation.

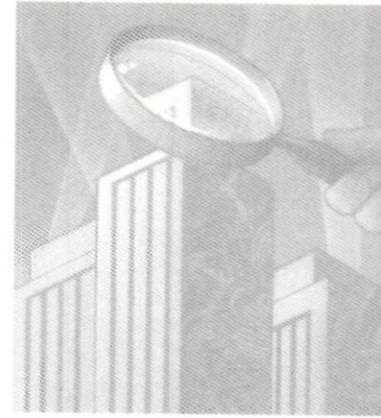
In addition, the interviews revealed that the skills required by the team members in a company needed to change as the organization empowers work teams. For example, the role of the team leader (supervisor) now becomes one of a coordinator, facilitator, negotiator, communicator, and listener. Consequently, the skills the team leader needs are different than those of the traditional manager. The team leader should have basic job knowledge but does not have to be the technical expert all members rely on to deal with issues as they develop. In contrast, interpersonal communication and coaching activities become the dominant skill-set required of the effective team leader.

Likewise, the skills required to be an effective employee are quite different from those needed to be an effective team member. Organizations in the past have provided employees with the technical training required to perform their jobs. However, the team approach mandates an additional set of skills. Skills such as solving problems, conducting meetings, communicating non-defensively, listening, performing statistical and

mathematical analysis, and resolving conflict now are needed. In organizations that empower teams, management has to allocate both the money and time to adequately train employees in areas beyond the technical. Further, management has to be prepared to view such training as an ongoing activity, not a one-time expense.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of team-based management has been widely embraced by the academic literature as a useful strategy for improving organizational performance and employee morale (Easton, 1991; McGourty, Reilly, & De Meuse, 1994; Overman, 1994). In most cases, little attention has been given to how it should be implemented, how fast it should be implemented, or what barriers might make implementation difficult. This study attempted to assess a plant's readiness to incorporate higher degrees of team empowerment. The findings suggest that managers, team leaders, and team members may express a readiness to increase empowerment but may simultaneously lack the understanding to effectively implement it.



Although managers offered their verbal support of the team concept, their unwillingness to provide the necessary meeting time, adjust production schedules, manage rapid growth, be available during second and third shifts, and control excessive mandatory overtime spoke louder than their words.

Managers, team leaders, and team members all expressed a favorable view of the team concept in this study. A surprising result was that managers did *not* generally view the organization more ready for the team concept than team leaders did. It appeared that the managers did not possess a shared vision of what team empowerment entails. Managers showed a lack of confidence in team leaders and team members. Specifically, managers expressed concerns with the plant's information systems (Question 15), as well as with team member skills needed to take greater control of their work (Question 16). Although managers offered their verbal support of the team concept, their unwillingness to provide the necessary meeting time, adjust production schedules, manage rapid growth, be available during second and third shifts, and control excessive mandatory overtime spoke louder than their words. Consequently, team members questioned management's underlying commitment to team-based management. That may, in part, account for the fact that team members had consistently lower scores on the *Team Culture Readiness Survey* than managers and team leaders.

During the past year, the plant appears to have made little progress in implementing the team concept. Based on conversations with several team leaders, production quotas continue to take precedence, meeting times remain problematic, managers are unwilling to share responsibility, and training in skills needed for team development lags. The plant manager has put on hold any further movement toward team-based management. Although the ratings on the survey generally were favorable, the team concept has stagnated. The presence of favorable attitudes toward the team concept did not ensure that the organization achieved team empowerment.

Executive Implications for Implementing Team-Based Management

1. Establish a clear vision and role definition.

The importance of concretely communicating what management intends (desires) to implement cannot be overemphasized. Unless organizational members develop a common definition of the team concept and agree on how to initiate team-based management, there is a high likelihood that the effort will fail. Because of the ambiguity of the concept, employees and managers alike may envision teams differently, resulting in individuals placing different priorities on goals, behaviors, time frames, and uses of resources.

Steven Gross, vice-president and managing director for Hay Management Consultants, observed that the lack of clearly communicating what is expected of employees is a key reason many team programs fail (Barton, 1995).

Survey research has an implicit assumption that favorable employee attitudes will result in an effective implementation of the change program (Dunham & Smith, 1979). Clearly, the results of this case analysis do not support this contention. A key missing ingredient in the present change effort was a strong internal leader. Several authors have reported the necessity of a strong internal proponent (e.g., Peters, 1991). In the early stages of the intervention, a "champion" must occupy a high level within the management hierarchy. As the team concept evolves, champions must be sprinkled throughout the organization.

A meaningful change in the way the organization utilizes its human resources can be accomplished only if a cross-sectional team approach is used to establish the team concept. This approach demonstrates clearly to all employees what is operationally meant by the team concept, and develops the suitable mental image among workers. In addition, it symbolically reinforces the value of employee empowerment.

2. *Allocate sufficient resources.* Organizations must provide adequate money to fund training but likewise must be willing to commit sufficient time to make the change effective. The dollars needed to fund training are easy to quantify and include in future budgets. However, a larger cost associated with team-based management is the time needed to (a) hold staff meetings, (b) communicate schedules across shifts, (c) engage in problem solving, (d) coordinate inter-unit activities, and (e) free employees to obtain the process training needed. These time requirements often are overlooked and underestimated. Top management must recognize that the team approach to management will require additional time resources and must budget accordingly. This may initially require hiring additional staff to provide existing employees time to devote to the team concept. In the long-run, the organization's overall efficiency and effectiveness will increase to make the move cost-effective.

It has been our experience that top management does not hesitate to commit the resources to *launch* the company's movement toward the team concept. In one instance, a manufacturing plant closed for the entire day to kick-off self-managed work teams and engage in some team



building activities. In another organization, top executives were flown in from around the world to announce the company's efforts to initiate team-based management. For executives at corporate headquarters, a motor coach was rented to transport them to a remote site to attend a "secret meeting." At the meeting, 14 consultants were used to announce the company's new direction toward teams. In both of the above examples, top management committed hundreds of thousands of dollars for these initial ceremonies. Ironically, top management in both organizations was reluctant to commit future resources to *sustain* the team approach.

3. *Communicate across teams and shifts.*

Ongoing, effective communication is an *essential* ingredient in the development of teams.

Organizational and interpersonal communication needs to occur within work teams, across work teams, and across shifts. Organizations should develop training programs to improve interpersonal communication, managing conflict, conducting meetings, and facilitating problem solving. In addition, the organization must review its formal communication network to ensure that it is accurate and that information reaches all units in a timely manner. One large international corporation displays the minutes for all team meetings on a plant-wide bulletin board located in the hallway leading to the employee cafeteria. This approach has proven to be a very effective means of communicating what teams are doing and planning on doing. It also has enhanced trust and cooperation among teams.

4. *Walk the talk.* Senior management cannot simply pronounce its workforce as empowered. They must provide a widely shared and robust process for supporting empowerment. Employees look at the actions of management to determine if top management truly means what it says. On one hand, if top management says staff meetings are a critical element of the communication process but does not allow time for team members to meet, it is not supporting their oral commitment. If top management declares a commitment to implement the team concept but continues to let production schedules dictate all work place decisions or refuses to hire the additional staff needed to make the team concept a reality, employees soon discover what actions management truly

values. This lack of management credibility will undermine any movement toward the team approach. Greg Semler, president and CEO of Instrumedix, believes that one of the essential ingredients to successful implementation of teams at his Oregon medical equipment manufacturing firm was having senior management champion the new program (Barton, 1995).

It is not enough for top management to only champion the initial launching of the team concept; executives must remain actively involved in demonstrating the company's shift toward team empowerment. Employees will look for specific signs to indicate management is seriously committed to teams (e.g., promotions, merit increases, job assignments that are consistent with team-based management). It is our experience that employees quickly become disenchanted and frustrated with the lack of follow-through after the initial announcement and introductory session(s). Even employees in upper-organizational levels tend to view such team-based activities in the same light as earlier efforts their company made when introducing quality circles, management by objectives, TQM, process reengineering, etc.

5. *Managers and supervisors "letting go" and employees "latching on."* One of the most difficult actions taken by an organization that is moving toward team-based management is to change the way it does business. Managers and supervisors traditionally have been trained to retain control over operations and to be held accountable for

the unit's performance. Employees have been indoctrinated to accept management's control and to operate under the belief that they are paid to "work not think." At Shelby Die Casting, employees resisted accepting authority even when they knew it was the only way the company could survive. The major barrier was employees feared supervisors who had never listened to them before. Top management decided to terminate the supervisors and train the employees in group dynamics, communication, and problem solving, so they could manage themselves (Caudron, 1994). In the organization under study, the inability to "let go" was more of a problem at the managerial level than at the team leader level. Managers did not have confidence in the skill levels of team members to allow them to take greater control of their work (see question 16).

Employees look at the actions of management to determine if top management truly means what it says.

To change the culture of an organization, it is essential to obtain commitment by the top management team; they must be willing to push decisions down the organization. This requires the management team to engage in a very pointed discussion regarding the breadth and scope of decisions to decentralize. The lead taken by the plant manager in charge will determine the real sharing of power that will occur. In addition, all organizational levels must be involved in identifying the content of the training required by managers, team leaders, and team members, so they will be prepared to effectively carry out problem-solving activities.

Some team members will be reluctant to engage in the training being made available. In the past, team leaders and members have heard managers promise a variety of changes, only to find that they never came to fruition. All employees will need to see examples of real changes occurring before they will fully commit to an extensive series of training sessions. An excellent way of demonstrating the new management approach is to truly empower the employees in the design and execution of the training program. In addition, the first real issues the newly empowered teams tackle will be a key test of the new management approach. If employees have input into the training program and have early positive experiences with the new decision making process, they will more likely embrace the notion of team-based management.

CONCLUSION

Many organizations view the movement toward the team concept as a method to deal with the changing business environment facing US industry. The team concept requires organizations to alter the basic way they approach business. The barriers to implementation range from the design of the workflow to the willingness of managers, team leaders, and team members to fully accept new levels of power and accountability. A key element to the success of the team approach is the ability of *all* organizational members to adapt to a new employee-management relationship.

Managers, team leaders, and team members often are at different levels of readiness for change. It is critical that top management wholeheartedly commit to implementing the team concept throughout the whole organization. In order to have a successful implementation of the team concept, managers must focus on the following: (a) establishing a clear definition of the team approach, (b) allocating sufficient monetary and time resources, (c) improving communication across teams and shifts, (d) demonstrating (through managerial behaviors) support for their verbal commitment, and (e) encouraging willingness (on the part of managers and team leaders) to let go of decision making and (on the part of team members) to accept increased responsibility. Training is a key element and employee involvement in decisions relating to the training program is essential. The first real issues the newly empowered teams tackle will be the litmus test of the new way of doing business. All employees will more fully embrace the movement toward team-based management if they have meaningful input and have early positive experiences with the new decision making process.

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Biographical Sketches

Thomas J. Bergmann is a Professor of Management at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He holds a Ph.D. from the Industrial Relations Center of the University of Minnesota. His primary interests include the human resource areas of compensation, interpersonal conflict, and employee satisfaction. He has published over 30 articles in such journals as *Personal Psychology*, *Compensation and Benefit Review*, *HRMagazine*, *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Business Research*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and *Human Resource Management Journal*

Kenneth P. De Meuse is a Professor of Management at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Previously, he was on the faculty of Iowa State University and the University of Nebraska. For the past decade, Dr. DeMeuse has been investigating the "human side" of corporate restructuring and downsizing. More than 100 universities and 150 corporations have contacted him regarding his research work in this area. He has appeared on Cable News Network, Associated Press Radio, and National Public Radio and has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Industry Week*, *Across the Board*, *Business Week*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *USA Today* for his expertise on the impact corporate transitions have on employees. He has numerous articles on employee attitudes and organizational behavior in several leading professional journals. Dr. De Meuse received his doctorate in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the College of Business at The University of Tennessee.



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