

Empowering Others for Success

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Abstract

A skill that is critical to the success of supervisors and managers is the ability to empower others. In many organizations line supervisors and other managers have not been adequately prepared for their leadership responsibilities. Their organization assumes that because the person has been a good technician and has the requisite seniority that they are qualified for promotion. They may be the right person for the job, but their technical ability and seniority are not normally sufficient to assure success in the new leadership position.

Empowerment operates in two areas;(1) increasing the effectiveness of the leader and (2) creating an environment that supports committed and engaged team members. For the leader, empowerment frees time for more proactive pursuits. Empowering leaders encourage team members to solve problems at lower levels. For the workforce, being empowered allows them to have control over their activities and increases their sense of ownership of their environment. One study conducted on a sample of 1000 workers showed that 74% of U.S. works are not engaged by their work; this results in an enormous cost due to low productivity. People that have influence over their own work environment are more engaged; their commitment and their sense of responsibility are increased. Empowered team members who perform well become candidates for greater leadership roles.

Empowering leaders create the organizational and social structures that make people comfortable with taking risks and enjoying the rewards of having greater control. While there are natural leaders most of us attain leadership skills by studying techniques, having experiences that increase our knowledge and confidence and by being passionate about building a great team. Empowering leadership is a skill that can be learned. It takes a clear understanding of the big picture objectives. More importantly it takes fortitude to begin and to stay the course.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LEADERSHIP	
Directing and Doing	Developing and Leading
The Answer Man; studying/deciding everything.	Facilitating. Helping others to frame the problem.
“If you want it done right, do it yourself”.	Effectively delegating
Over-directing and micro-managing	Helping others to learn from their mistakes.
Arbitrarily mandating goals.	Facilitating the goal setting process.
“You can’t do it right without me”.	Helping others develop confidence; “You can do it”.
Being the quality judge and jury.	Being a quality coach.
Playing the God role.	Supporting as a helpful resource.
Protecting turf.	Bridging organizational barriers.
Over-dependence on detailed policies.	Firm and consistent about a key policies and principles.

Figure 1 Characteristics of Leaders

Why is Empowerment Important?

As a manager and leader you have two major objectives. The first objective is to achieve your team's performance goals. This means ensuring the day to day activities that your group is responsible for are carried out in a satisfactory or better manner. The second objective is improving the overall performance of the organization over time. A leader needs to identify areas where improvements can be made and they need to be looking out into the future to position their team for anticipated events. Anticipated events may be changing environmental rules, major equipment replacements, preparing for Lean or Six Sigma initiatives or a shift away from a core business function.

In the global economy threats to your business can come fast and relentlessly. In their book "Confronting Reality" (reference 1) Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan state that strategically organizations need the "ability to look around". Your organization needs to have people who can look at external forces facing your industry. They need to anticipate change and act quickly to capitalize. One of the best tools the corporate leadership has for creating time to study external issues is empowerment. Empowerment provides leaders the time to step back and gain perspective.

The same is true within the functional levels of an organization. Line supervisors, middle managers, directors and plant managers need to have time to think of the big picture as well. Empowerment allows these leaders time to focus on improvements and to anticipate upcoming issues.

As team members are empowered their level of commitment increases and they become more engaged in their work. Other benefits include increasing the team's effectiveness and developing a pipeline of potential leaders. The team becomes more effective because you increase the diversity of perspectives applied to problem solving. You have more minds engaged in solving problems. Another often overlooked issue involves the social structures, or informal networks among and between teams that contribute to or resist execution of new tasks. Engaged workers spend more time solving problems than creating them.

A pipeline of potential leaders is needed to replace those who move on and for filling new positions created by growth or churn within the organization. It is typically more beneficial to promote from within than to acclimate outside managers to the organization's culture and policies. The empowerment of team members affords an opportunity to evaluate potential leaders under various conditions.

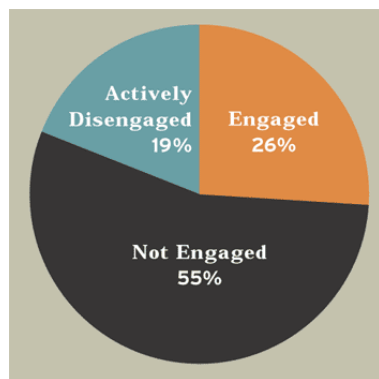


Figure 2 Gallup Management Journal Survey Results on Employee Attitudes, 2000.

Contributing team members have higher self-esteem, confidence and commitment. Team members who are not engaged have been shown to have a negative impact on profitability. A national survey published in 2000 by the Gallup Management Journal (reference 2, www.gmj.gallup.com), an online journal based on Gallup's research, reported that of all U.S. workers 18 years old or above, 19% or 24.7 million are "actively disengaged." They're less loyal, more stressed and feel

less secure in their work. They miss 86.5 million more days of work than average workers. Figures 1 and 2 are from reference 2 and they categorize the characteristics of workers between “engaged”, “not-engaged” and “actively-disengaged”. According to the Gallup Management Journal research transitioning 5% of actively-disengaged workers to engaged workers would create a productivity increase in the U.S. economy equivalent to 79 billion dollars per year.

While the case of the actively-disengaged workforce provides compelling reasons to address their level of engagement, we should focus a large measure of or attention on the not-engaged group. From experience we know that many actively-disengaged people are difficult to manage no matter what we do. When we have done our best with them it may be time to “get them off the bus”, as author James Collins suggests in his book “Good to Great” (reference 3).

Because the not-engaged group is not as disenchanted as the actively-disengaged group, there is an opportunity to make greater strides in transitioning not-engaged workers to engaged status. We can assume that the productivity of not-engaged workers is greater than the actively-disengaged workers so the gain per transitioned worker is likely to be somewhat less. However, the good news is that the pool of not-engaged workers is more than two and a half times larger than actively-disengaged workers. So, if we can improve the job satisfaction of the not-engaged group we can make a significant impact on our organization’s bottom line. Besides, if 74% of your workforce is not-engaged or actively-disengaged as the study suggests, how much better would your work place climate be if you could impact these numbers?

Many not-engaged workers can be transitioned to engaged status by empowerment. It has been my experience that the majority of people

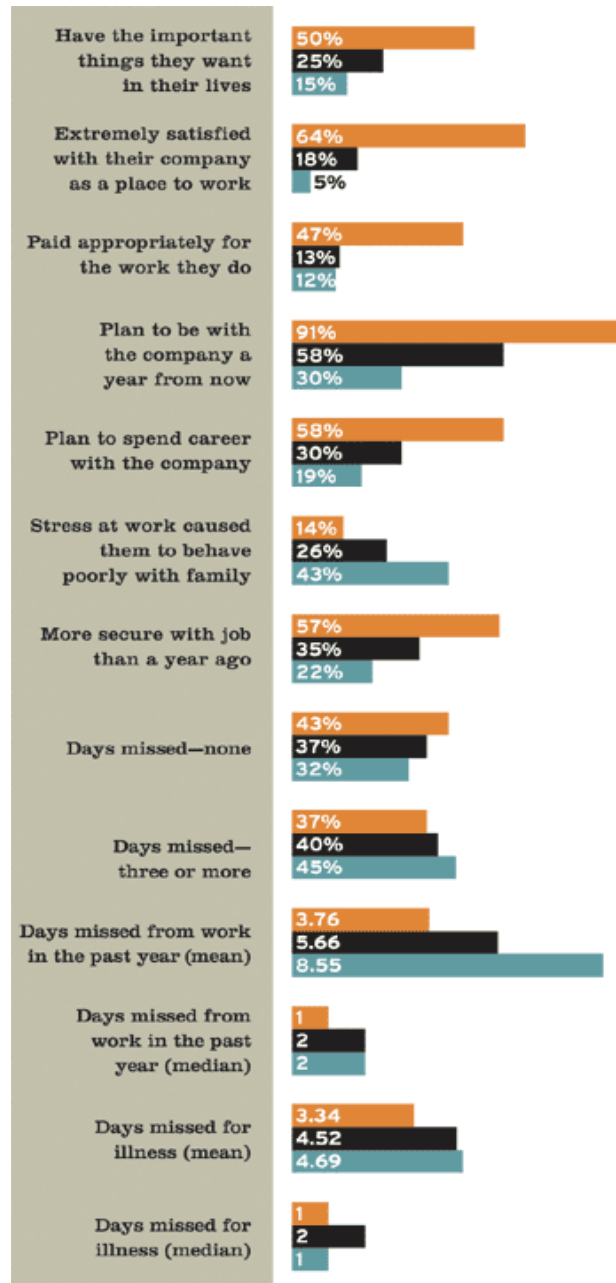


Figure 3 Breakdown of Gallup Management Journal Survey Results on Employee Attitudes, 2000.

want to have greater control over a larger portion of their work place activities. So here then we have a match between the challenges of having enough time for leaders to focus on performance and forward-looking activities and a pool of likely candidates to take on more responsibility. What is needed is the knowledge and fortitude to make this happen.

Understanding Empowerment from the Leaders Perspective

There are of course differences between a manager a small work crew and a manager running a large organization. Differences are found in type of skills required, time applications and work values. Skills are the tasks that you must master in order to execute responsibilities associated with the technical or functional aspects of your job. For a line supervisor this may mean being able to use a computerized maintenance management system (CMMS) while a plant maintenance manager has to become proficient with budgeting and accounting software. A plant manager needs to have working knowledge of each of the company's functional areas; operations, maintenance, finance, inventory, logistics, marketing, sales, etc.; while the line supervisor needs to fully understand the systems and performance of the equipment their team manages.

Time application is the amount of time that is dedicated to various activities. These are activities such as directly supporting your team members, anticipating future events and time spent handling administrative issues (the necessary activities most of us dislike). As a manager your responsibility is to allocate your time to ensure the team has what they need to get their job done; the effective management of day to day functions. You must also allocate time for those upcoming events and to position the team to successfully meet those challenges. Depending on your managerial level the amount of time allocated to anticipating events is related to the distance into the future you need to look. A line supervisor may only need to look ahead a one to four weeks while a plant manager may be looking ahead five years or more. Therefore, the line supervisor may only need to allocate 20% of their time to forward looking issues while the plant manager may need to allocate 50% or more of their time to forward looking issues.

Work values are the basis for how a manager decides what the most important use of their skills and time should be. An empowering person will look at what can be done by team members. Empowering leaders understand that quantity of work accomplished with good quality coupled with the benefits of developing team members is a worthy accomplishment. A person that is not an empowering leader will be thinking predominantly of the quality of what gets done; they have insufficient regard for quantity and only cursory regard for the development and job satisfaction of their team members. Most people, particularly functional managers, believe they are more effective at solving problems than their team members. This may even be true, but it does nothing for building the team's level of engagement. In fact it reduces the amount of time for the leader to anticipate events and takes away opportunities to evaluate potential leaders.

In the big picture the manager is reducing the effectiveness of the overall team. This is the most common area where technicians fail to make the transition to effective supervisors or managers. In reality, non-empowering managers are taking away an opportunity for their team member to demonstrate important capabilities. Team members

get fulfillment from demonstrating their ability, responsiveness and potential for greater responsibility. This is a fundamental reason for team members to be not-engaged.

No matter what your level of responsibility as a leader you can always get more accomplished in the long run by empowering your team. Benefits for the leader include gaining perspective, increasing proactive endeavors and not working until seven thirty every night. Team members gain in the empowerment process as well. Empowered team members have an increased sense of ownership and improved morale.

Empowering Leadership

The principles of empowering leadership are simple to learn. The difficult part is to break away from old habits and to have the fortitude and patience to watch from the balcony as team member's struggle with issues. It's particularly difficult when you're your boss is pressing for immediate corrective actions. There are a couple of things you should do to prepare before instituting an "empowered zone" at your work place.

First, I would recommend you have a conversation with the person you report to. Make sure they understand what you will be doing and what your objectives are in doing so. By keeping your boss informed of your empowerment efforts he/she will understand if your involvement in troubleshooting has changed. It's a way to manage expectations. This step may actually be more for your own peace of mind than for your boss'. There will be times when a team member is stuck and will require some of your advice and guidance; your judgment of knowing when to interject is critical. You will need to allow the team member time to wrestle with the problem that they can solve. This is not a time for you to jump in and revert to the problem solver role. This is the time when you need the fortitude to stick with empowerment. Having briefed the boss on your empowerment plan he/she will be better prepared to support your efforts.

The second thing to keep in mind is that for empowerment to work there has to be trust between the empowering leader and the team members. Your job as a leader is to develop your team members' capabilities by providing a safe place for them to try and to succeed and sometimes for them to try, and to fail. Trust is an extremely important and fragile aspect of empowerment. For team members to voluntarily accept risk- taking on new roles and responsibilities is definitely risky- the team members will first weigh the pros and cons of

INFORMATION SHARING

The information employees may need to become committed partners in the business.

1. What are the company's annual sales?
2. What are the company's business objectives?
3. Who are the company's customers?
4. What are the major external factors influencing the company's growth?
5. Who are the major competitors?
6. What percentage of the market do you have and what percentage do your competitors have?
7. What are the next products or services you plan to offer?
8. What are the two most serious quality problems?
9. What is your highest cost product or service (in terms of internal costs)?
10. Why is it the highest cost item?
11. What is included in overhead expenses?
12. What are the trends for the department or division; over-budget or under-budget?
13. What are the business unit goals?
14. How is performance measured?
15. What information do you need that you are not getting?

Figure 4 Types of Information to Share

the situation. If the team member can not trust you to support them, especially when difficulties are encountered, they will not accept, or not continue to accept the risks. Empowerment is a contract with deliverables and expectations on both sides. One episode of a perceived lapse in trust will ruin an existing level of trust that may have taken months or years to establish.

You build trust through a series of actions not by one or two events. The military services are expert at developing leaders. One reason is the golden rule of leadership taught in all branches of service: “Praise in public, and correct in private”. As a leader, you are always responsible for your team’s actions, good or bad, and upper management knows that. In the context of empowerment we need to publicly recognize the person or team that is responsible for successful projects; give them credit. We also need to take the heat for our team, shield them from criticism when they fail. Take the attitude that if your team failed it is because you failed to put them in a position to succeed.

When a team member takes a risk, they are climbing out on a tree limb. Your job is to make sure the branch does not break and does not get sawed off behind them. Be consistent and practice the golden rule of leadership and trust will grow.

The Principles of Empowerment

1. Share information widely so people know what is going on.
2. Let people solve problems when and where they occur; at the lowest level.
3. Let those who have to implement a decision participate in making that decision.
4. Expand the scope of what people do; document those roles and responsibilities.

Determine how to share without divulging confidential or sensitive information.	
Non-Sensitive	Actual Data
Somewhat Sensitive	Need to Know Explain Sensitivity Use Judgment
Sensitive	Use Proxy (Associate to a scale – red, yellow, green)

Figure 5 Sharing Information Types

People can’t act like partners if they are in the dark. The most important change that leaders can make to help people feel and act like partners is to share information. Sharing information can seem threatening to a lot of managers. Important information, particularly regarding company finances, is often confidential. When we talk about sharing important information it is not suggested that critical or sensitive information be made open to any and all employees. Think of information sharing along a continuum from totally closed to completely open. You must decide for yourself how much information and what type of information is appropriate. It’s a

balancing exercise. You need to protect the organizations sensitive information but give team members what they need to feed their commitment.

Second, as much as possible, create a trusting atmosphere where team members are encouraged to solve problems at the lowest level. Have a mechanism where the solutions are made known after the fact so avoidance strategies can be developed and recognition can be provided. As emphasized earlier, you will occasionally meet with some difficult moments. Something will occur that you didn't know about or something didn't occur that you should have known about. These moments are opportunities to build trust. You will of course need to address shortcomings. The golden rule of leadership applies here (praise in public, correct in private). Providing corrective feedback is fundamental to improving overall performance over time. If you trend the success/failure ratio or empowered problem solving over time you will undoubtedly see increasing successes and decreasing failures.

Third, allow those that will live with policies participate in the forming or modifying of the policy. Nothing increases understanding more than wrestling with a problem first hand. When your team truly understands the constraints and realities of developing the policy they will become more engaged. This makes their independent actions better aligned with the organizations goals.

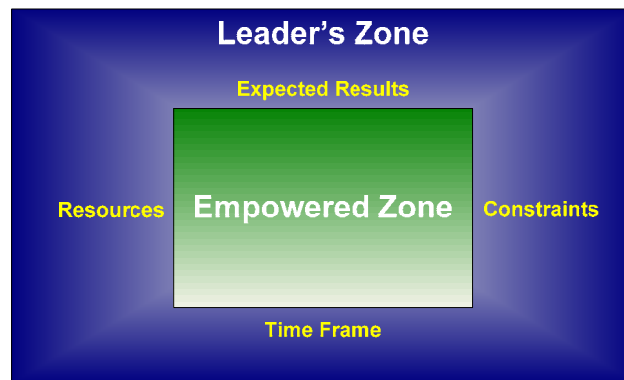


Figure 6 Empowerment Boundary Model

A recent client related a situation where he delegated the development of an unpopular policy to a vocal group that was overtly against the new policy. After this group reviewed the issues their policy draft was more restrictive, yet had greater acceptance. The power of ownership! As depicted in figure 6, the leader's responsibility is to provide performance expectations, resources, constraints and deadlines. The empowered person or group has the responsibility to use their knowledge and expertise to perform within the boundaries provided by the leader. The leaders challenge is to make the empowered zone large enough so that team members can truly own the issue.

The fourth principle is expanding the scope of what people are responsible for. This increases their sense of engagement. Responsibility is very tightly linked with trust. When you encourage team members to increase their level of responsibility you are overtly telling your team members that you trust them; you have confidence in their ability and you see them as valuable to the organization. When a leader expands the scope of their team's responsibilities, the leader has a responsibility to be clear on the new limits. It's recommended that you use a template or other written outline that lets the team member(s) know what issues are non-negotiable and where boundaries are. A sample document called the Empowerment Matrix (which is also based on the Boundary Model) and has been included at the end of this article. It can be used as a guide when discussing changes in roles and responsibilities.

Conclusion

Major companies have been ruined because their leadership was distracted and didn't stay informed of external factors that made their products non-competitive or obsolete. The same distractions can happen at lower levels of organizations. Processes deteriorate and become less efficient and potential improvements are by-passed because leaders don't take the time focus on what's coming. Leaders can use empowerment to create the time they need to anticipate change and improve their teams' effectiveness.

Developing empowerment within an organization will benefit individuals, leaders and the organization as a whole. There is a significant cost associated with lost time attributable to actively-disengaged and not-engaged workers. When individuals have a sense of involvement and ownership their engagement level improves. When the workforce is engaged they are more productive. Empowering managers and leaders increase the discretionary time they have for gaining perspective and for proactive endeavors. The organization gains in productivity of their leadership team who become focused on proactive solutions. Additionally the organization gains from increased development of the next generation of supervisors and leaders. A leadership pipeline is established which allows current leaders to observe the potential of a new generation of leaders.

Creating the environment for empowerment includes preparing persons you report to by discussing the objectives. You should express the long term benefits of empowering leadership and manage expectations. Take the time to manage expectations as there will be some failures along the way.

The golden rule of leadership is to praise in public and correct in private. This is an important tool for developing trust. You must be committed to establishing and maintaining a trusting environment. Becoming an empowering leader will require fortitude, patience and tolerance. When empowerment has taken hold you will see team members performing at a much higher level. Your discretionary time will increase and can be applied to proactive solutions. You will also have the satisfaction of knowing you had a significant role in transitioning your team to higher levels of engagement.

Learn the four principles of empowerment, commit yourself to developing your team, put the principles into affect and help others to grow the culture of empowerment.

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