



Empowerment: Help or Hype?

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Introduction

Empowerment. It's one of corporate America's hottest buzzwords. But, misunderstandings about the concept are quickly creating skepticism about a process which is vital to the success of American business.

Understanding empowerment is relatively simple. Putting it to work is not. While books and seminars provide roadmaps to empowerment, managers are often stranded without the skills they need to navigate the terrain. As a result, managers and employees quickly become disillusioned with what sounds like another feel good campaign.

On the other hand, there are the success stories of organizations that have gone through the painstaking process of empowering individuals and teams: Westinghouse Furniture Systems increased its productivity by 74% in three years. Federal Express Corporation cut service errors by 13% in a year. General Electric's Salisbury, North Carolina plant increased productivity by 250% compared with other GE plants producing the same products. The question is, "How did they translate the idea of empowerment into a reality?"

What is empowerment?

Today's highly competitive global economy carries with it a host of paradoxical demands: increase quality and encourage risk-taking, foster innovation and keep overhead low, avoid mistakes and take the week-ends off. We are being asked to do more with less. To survive in this economy, and live sanely, managers need to begin leveraging their power and authority by involving the people under them. This is the crux of empowerment.

The word "empower" means to enable, to allow, to permit. Empowerment is giving people the means to live up to their potential. The leader's task is to provide his/her followers with the authority and the resources to get the job done; the follower's task is to manifest the kind of risk-taking and initiative that drives the organization to excellence.

Power comes in many forms, and includes things such as money, materials, space, time, expertise, political intelligence, endorsement and/or approval. One underlying premise of empowerment is that power is generative, not distributive. Traditionally, power was seen as a fixed quantity and managers were taught to hold on to it unless they wanted to risk losing control. The reality is that the more we hang on to power, the more resistance we encounter, and the less we ultimately have.

It is a fact of human nature that when people participate in decisions affecting them, they feel the sense of influence and ownership, which breeds commitment to organizational goals. On top of that, people closest to the problem often have the most accurate solutions. An empowered workforce can create the quality improvements, technological advances and quality of service which equal success.

This is what synergy is all about. The more you drive decision making, problem solving and goal setting own through the organization, the more intelligent the organization becomes. Power shared generates more power.

What are the qualities of an empowering manager?

- A basic trust and respect for the diverse talents of one's followers and the ability to communicate expectations clearly and consistently.
- The capacity to see the value in different approaches to defining and solving problems. Creativity and innovation are the desired by-products of an empowered workforce, but cannot flourish where there is only one right way. Successful managers look for perspectives closer to the problem source (i.e., lower down in the organization) and do not stop at the first right answer, but rather, look for the second and third right answers.
- The wisdom to teach his/her people to ask questions, and to raise concerns. In an empowered organization, the manager hears about service/product problems from internal sources before hearing about it from the customer.



- The courage to identify those elements of their leadership style, which may disempower their followers. Managers can ask themselves "Do I have time to listen to my employees?" "Do I reward or punish people for rocking the boat?" "How much do I trust my people to do the right things right?" "Do I answer suggestions with "Yes, but...?" "Am I allowing individuals to control the priorities of their work unit?" "Am I allowing them access to the resources they need without undue red tape?" "How much information about the organization do they have?"
- The savvy to recognize that people are motivated by their own needs. If followers resist empowerment, their needs in one of the following areas are being ignored: security, economic well-being, recognition, a sense of belonging and/or a sense of control over one's life.

What are the potential pitfalls of the empowerment process?

When empowerment takes hold, the demands for effective leadership are increased considerably.

Empowered leadership is less about control than it is about getting the right talents to the right place. Coordination, integration and facilitation are the watchwords of today's leadership, and many managers are grossly unprepared for these changes.

Empowerment is not an overnight wonder. Change is stressful and breeds a climate of uncertainty; nonconformity is critical to the empowerment process. When managers don't have the skills to deal effectively with diversity, conflict and the dynamics of delegation, their initial reaction to change is to clamp down on it.

Moreover, powerlessness has been fostered in the American workforce for over a hundred years. Employees are often scared of taking the risks involved in making decisions. Rather than fixing blame, the empowered culture publicly acknowledges mistakes and seeks to learn from them.

Effective leadership in an empowered organization reinforces new cultural values. It also models the skills of collaboration, risk-taking and information sharing. These processes take time: "Habit is habit," said Mark Twain, "and not to be flung out of the window by any man but coaxed downstairs a step at a time."

How to promote empowerment in the organization?

Driving fear out of the organization is tantamount to empowerment. The next step is holding people accountable for promoting the values of empowerment. Jack Welch, Jr., former CEO of General Electric Company, says his company uses two criteria in evaluating managers: whether they deliver on commitments- financial or otherwise - and whether or not they uphold the values of the company. Managers who meet financial goals, but do not uphold the corporate values of empowerment, are penalized.

New ideas will be ignored unless tangible rewards and repetitive actions support them. Ideally, as with General Electric, empowerment is reinforced from the top. But, the process can start anywhere, and, in the end, happens on a personal level. Each of us can ask ourselves today:

- "If I had the power to change a few things on the job, what would they be?"
- "What keeps me from moving ahead on those?"
- "How can I begin to make a difference?"

Biographical information: Elisabeth von Clemm, M.A. is founder and President of von Clemm Leadership Solutions, a Greensboro-based leadership training and consulting firm.

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