

Employee Empowerment

Introduction

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Employee empowerment is one of those terms that everyone thinks they understand, but few really do. "Employee empowerment" as a term is frequently used in management circles. The common dictionary definition of empowerment is "to give official authority to: delegate legal power to: commission authorize". As an example, Grandz (1990) writes, "Empowerment means that management vests decision making or approval authority in employees where, traditionally such authority was a managerial prerogative". Block (1987) describes empowerment as a "state of mind as well as a result of position, policies & practices".

Defining Employee Empowerment

To feel empowered means several things. Our survival is in our hand...we have an underlying purpose...we commit ourselves to achieving that purpose, now. Caudron (1995) articulates empowerment as, "*When employees 'own' their jobs; when they are able to measure and influence their individual success as well as the success of their departments and their companies.*" Ettore's (1997) definition of empowerment as, "*Employees having autonomous decision-making capabilities and acting as partners in the business, all with an eye to the bottom-line*". Spreitzer (1995) indicates, "*psychological empowerment is defined as a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-*

determination, and impact. Together these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation towards a work role." (p. 1442). Spreitzer notes, "*The four dimensions are argued to combine additively to create an overall construct of psychological empowerment. In other words, the lack of any single dimension will deflate, though not completely eliminate, the overall degree of felt empowerment.*"

Conger and Kanungo (1988) note in their literature review that, "scholars have assumed that empowerment is the process by which a leader or manager shares his or her power with subordinates. Power, in this context, is interpreted as the possession of formal authority or control over organizational resources. This manner of treating the notion of empowerment from a management practice perspective is so common that often employee participation is simply equated with empowerment".

According to Conger and Kanungo "empowerment is a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information."

Employee empowerment is a process whereby: a culture of empowerment is

developed; information in the form of a shared vision, clear goals, boundaries for decision making, and the results of efforts and their impact on the whole is shared; competency in the form of training and experience is developed; resources, or the competency to obtain them when needed to be effective in their jobs, are provided; and support in the form of mentoring, cultural support, and encouragement of risk-taking is provided.

Benefits of Empowerment

That employee empowerment benefits the organizations which implement it effectively is widely noted in the literature. The popular press accepts the belief of benefit almost without question. Thomas Petzinger, in his column "The Front Lines" in the Wall Street Journal, is a big advocate for empowerment. He writes, "As a society we know the best way to organize people is, freeing them to organize themselves. Why should it be any different in business?" (Petzinger, 1997a, p. B1). Also in the Wall Street Journal, Aepfel asks the rhetorical question, "What better way to tap into workers' brains as well as their brawn than to encourage them to think on the job, to bring to it a greater sense of professionalism and self-motivation and to feel committed to the company's success?" (Aepfel, 1997, p. 1). Freeman (1998) writing in Inc. about applying Marine Corps values in the growing corporate workplace advocates a form of empowerment where training is key and, within clear missions, risk-taking is rewarded.

"Organizational power can grow, in part, by being shared; by empowering others a leader does not decrease his power; instead he may increase it-especially if the whole organization performs better." (Kanter, 1979, p. 73). Kanter then uses the logic that, "The productive capacity of nations, like organizations, grows if the skill base is upgraded. People with the tools, information

and support to make more informed decisions and act more quickly can often accomplish more." (Kanter, 1979, p. 73).

Many authors cite, "anecdotal and case evidence...to show that empowerment does produce more satisfied customers and employees." (Bowen & Lawler, 1995, p.75). However Bowen and Lawler go beyond this and provide additional evidence, "considerable research on practices such as gain sharing, communication programs, work teams, job enrichment, skill-based pay, and so on has shown that the results of these practices are consistent and positive." (p.75). They go on to cite survey research conducted by the Center for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California... to determine the degree to which firms are adopting practices that redistribute power, information, knowledge, and rewards, and the effects.... The... data... suggest that empowerment may have a positive impact on a number of performance indicators. Respondents report that empowerment improves worker satisfaction and quality of work life. Quality, service and productivity are reportedly improved as a result of employee involvement efforts in about two-thirds of the companies. Approximately one-half of the companies also report that profitability and competitiveness have improved; this is supported by the finding of a relationship between empowerment and the firms' financial performance. (Bowen & Lawler, 1995, p. 75).

Management Role

In an empowered organization the managers and supervisors take on a different role than they usually would in most organizations. The literature is unanimous on this point. It may be obvious that one aspect of this role change is the sharing of power and authority. Yet, many managers and supervisors

already do this, either actively or passively, through delegation or abdication, neither of which is empowering people. Empowerment implies a great deal more. There is an active role for managers and supervisors rather than the passive one of abdication. There are stages an employee must go through before he or she should have authority delegated to him or her. There should also be a recognition that while the employee may be ready to have one aspect of the job delegated to her or him, she or he may not be ready for delegation in other functional aspects of the job. Managers and supervisors must reframe their perception of their roles because, "The primary task of supervision is to help people." (Block, 1987, p. 63). Block also tells us, "As managers we become more powerful as we nurture the power of those below us." The supervisor must see potential in the employee and work to bring that potential out. The process is best described as mentoring or coaching and it entails:

- Determining the skill level of the employee
- Sharing information about the goal to be achieved and why it is important to the organization as a whole
- Providing for employee training as needed
- Depending upon the employee's skill level, providing appropriate supervisory support
- A directing style for those tasks for which the employee has a low skill level
- Coaching for those tasks with which the employee has some skills but is lacking experience or motivation
- A supporting style for those tasks where the employee knows what to do but is still lacking confidence in their abilities
- A delegating style for those tasks where the employee is motivated and fully

capable. (Blanchard, Zigarmi & Zigarmi, 1985)

- Ensuring that the employee is consistently growing in skill by providing new responsibilities for which a higher level of supervision is needed
- Mentoring the employee such that they absorb both the organizational culture and the value of empowerment
- Removing barriers to empowerment present in the organizational structure
- Ensuring that appropriate resources are available for the employee, or ensuring that the employee has the appropriate skills to obtain needed resources
- Providing support for the continued empowerment of the employee
- Sharing information about the employee's and the organization's effectiveness.

Top Ten Principles For Employee Empowerment

These are the ten most important principles for managing people in a way that reinforces employee empowerment.

1. *Demonstrate That You Value People:* Your regard for people shines through all of your actions and words. Your facial expression, your body language, and your words express what you are thinking about the people who report to you. Your goal is to demonstrate your appreciation for each person's unique value. No matter how an employee is performing on his or her current task, your value for the employee as a human being should never falter and always be visible.
2. *Share Leadership Vision:* Help people feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves and their individual job. Do this by making sure they know and have access to the organization's overall mission, vision and strategic plans.

3. *Share Goals and Direction:* Share the most important goals and direction for your group. Where possible, either make progress on goals measurable and observable, or ascertain that you have shared your picture of a positive outcome with the people responsible for accomplishing the results. If you share a picture and share meaning, you have agreed upon what constitutes a successful and acceptable deliverable. Empowered employees can then chart their course without close supervision.
4. *Trust People:* Trust the intentions of people to do the right thing, make the right decision, and make choices that, while maybe not exactly what you would decide, still work. When employees receive clear expectations from their manager, they relax and trust you. They focus their energy on accomplishing, not on wondering, worrying and second-guessing.
5. *Provide Information for Decision Making:* Make certain that you have given people, or made sure that they have access to, all of the information they need to make
6. *Delegate Authority and Impact Opportunities, Not Just More Work:* Don't just delegate the drudge work; delegate some of the fun stuff, too. You know, the important meetings, the committee memberships that influence product development and decision making, and the projects that people and customers notice. The employee will grow and develop new skills. Your plate will be less full so you can concentrate on contribution. Your reporting staff will gratefully shine - and so will you.
7. *Provide Frequent Feedback:* Provide frequent feedback so that people know how they are doing. Sometimes, the purpose of feedback is reward and recognition as well as improvement coaching. People deserve your constructive feedback, too, so they can continue to develop their knowledge and skills.
8. *Solve Problems: Don't Pinpoint Problem People:* When a problem occurs, ask what is wrong with the work system that caused the people to fail, not what is wrong with the people. Worst case response to problems? Seek to identify and punish the guilty. (Thank you, Dr. Deming).
9. *Listen to Learn and Ask Questions to Provide Guidance:* Provide a space in which people will communicate by listening to them and asking them questions. Guide by asking questions, not by telling grown up people what to do. People generally know the right answers if they have the opportunity to produce them. When an employee brings you a problem to solve, ask, "what do you think you should do to solve this problem?" Or, ask, "what action steps do you recommend?" Employees can demonstrate what they know and grow in the process. Eventually, you will feel comfortable telling the employee that he or she need not ask you about similar situations. You trust their judgment.
10. *Help Employees Feel Rewarded and Recognized for Empowered Behavior:* When employees feel under-compensated, under-titled for the responsibilities they take on, under-noticed, under-praised, and under-appreciated, don't expect results from employee empowerment. The basic needs of employees must feel met for employees to give you their discretionary energy, that extra effort that people voluntarily invest in work. For successful

employee empowerment, recognition plays a significant role. Employee involvement is creating an environment in which people have an impact on decisions and actions that affect their jobs. Employee involvement is not the goal nor is it a tool, as practiced in many organizations. Rather, it is a management and leadership philosophy about how people are most enabled to contribute to continuous improvement and the ongoing success of their work organization.

Employee Involvement Model

For people and organizations that desire a model to apply, the best discovered way was developed from work by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) and Sadler (1970). They provide a continuum for leadership and involvement that includes an increasing role for employees and a decreasing role for supervisors in the decision process. The continuum includes this progression.

Tell: the supervisor makes the decision and announces it to staff. The supervisor provides complete direction. Tell is useful when communicating about safety issues, government regulations and for decisions that neither require nor ask for employee input.

Sell: the supervisor makes the decision and then attempts to gain commitment from staff by “selling” the positive aspects of the decision. Sell is useful when employee commitment is needed, but the decision is not open to employee influence.

Consult: the supervisor invites input into a decision while retaining authority to make the final decision herself. The key to a successful consultation is to inform employees, on the front end of the discussion, that their input is needed, but that the supervisor is retaining the authority to make the final decision. This is the level of involvement that can create employee

dissatisfaction most readily when this is not clear to the people providing input.

Join: the supervisor invites employees to make the decision with the supervisor. The supervisor considers his voice equal in the decision process. The key to a successful joint decision is when the supervisor truly builds consensus around a decision and is willing to keep her influence equal to that of the others providing input.

Conclusion

To make an organization successful it is very important to keep the employees happy. Empowering the employees means to give power to. By giving the employees power the employees tend to participate better in the organisation. Power, however, has several meaning : so that empowerment can mean authorization capacity. However, power also means energy. Thus to empower also can mean to energize. By empowering the employees, the motivation of the employee goes high & he feels like making active participation in the process of leading the organisation to the expected level.

References

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