

EMPOWERMENT

“The one who says it cannot be done should never interrupt the one who is doing it.”

– Anonymous

Anyone interested in the business field has probably run across an article or two on empowering employees. It seems leaders are truly realizing the benefits of training their subordinates how to handle situations and giving them the authority to do so. It may seem like a commonsense approach to success, so why haven't businesses picked up on this earlier? Well, like so many things in the world, it is not always as cut and dried as it may seem.

Empowering others can take some creative work on the part of the leader. Some people like the idea of seeking approval for every minor step; that way if something goes wrong, they have someone to blame. Some people have not built up enough self-confidence to handle situations. Some leaders fear they will look unqualified, weak or indecisive if they seek input from other members. And sometimes leaders – for their own reasons – just don't feel comfortable relinquishing control to others no matter how much they trust them. If you are one of those leaders who cannot seem to let go – or you want to, but don't really know what this will entail – read on. Following are the various roles a leader can take in empowering others to develop leadership abilities and even some self-confidence along the way.

- Discoverer. It is important to note that there is no single “right way” to empower others. A leader's job consists of continually looking for new opportunities to accomplish the group mission. Are you always chairing the program committees? Do you lead the meetings as well as write up the minutes? Maybe it is time to recommend someone else for these duties. Not only does this empower others, it adds to your free time as well. As a discoverer, it is important to be a visionary and be flexible to change.
- Illustrator. As a leader, it is extremely important to remember – and remind others – about the goals, values and mission of the group. You can set a path towards accomplishing goals so that others may follow suit. As an empowering leader, you can inspire goal commitment – but in a way that doesn't equal demanding compliance. If you are committed to the group goals, let it be known in the way you approach opportunities or deal with obstacles.
- Encourager. In most organizations, the days of the leader's way being the only way are long gone. To empower others to take responsibility, be supportive: offer reassurance, recognize successes, believe in your members and take a vested interest in their achievements. You don't need to look the other way when failures occur, but dwelling on them accomplishes little. Acknowledge them, make improvements or suggestions for the future, highlight the successes and move on!
- Enabler. In some situations, enabling is viewed in a very negative light (i.e., substance

abuse). In empowering leadership, however, enabling others can be very positive. In this sense, enabling involves offering a helping hand to boost chances of success. You might consider yourself to be a coach or team-builder in this position, which would be accurate labels for the roles you are playing here.

- Smoother. Finally, an empowering leader needs to facilitate accomplishments to the extent possible. This means smoothing the way for others by providing them with necessary information to complete a task, networking with outside contacts to build positive relationships and serving as a resource. This is a critical step in the empowerment process; people need to know they have the support and resources they need to help them accomplish goals.

The benefits to empowerment are numerous, not only to those being empowered, but to the leaders and overall organization as well. Aside from building self-confidence and increasing free time as mentioned earlier, take a look at some of the other potential benefits:

To the followers:

- Increased motivation
- Higher degree of learning
- Improved tolerance of stress

To the leaders:

- Increased organizational commitment
- Less role ambiguity
- Increased satisfaction with roles and the organization

To the organization:

- More flexibility
- Better sense of community
- Requests/problems handled with increased speed
- Group coordination and development

Reference:

Howard, A. (1996). The empowering leader: Unrealized opportunities. Leadership Research Institute & Development Dimensions International. Prepared for Kellogg Leadership Project: On-line.

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