

Empowered Employees are More Productive

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In the high-octane world of modern business, you hear a lot of theories about what it takes to increase employee productivity. Empowerment is one of the philosophies discussed most often, especially as it relates to the corporate team environment. The idea is simple enough—by implementing practices that help employees feel confident, capable, and in control of the outcome of their work, they feel empowered to do that work effectively and without excessive oversight or micromanagement. Ideally, this ensures commitment to the company's core mission and vision, which results in greater productivity over the long term.

The best employees are those who "own" their work; that is, those who feel they have a say in how they do their work and are fully engaged in the outcome. Empowered employees are not just proud of their work; they are more productive than their disempowered colleagues. In general, they are also more satisfied, so they bring in more business by making customers happier, which translates into greater profits. This holds true in both the individual and collective senses. From a financial perspective, employee empowerment is good business.

Before we discuss what you can do to implement employee empowerment in your organization, let us look at what empowerment is *not*. Even when they are willing to consider the strategy, managers often develop a false idea of what empowerment actually is and end up shooting themselves in the metaphorical foot when they try to implement it. For starters:

- ◆ Empowerment is not a right—it is a privilege. Individuals should be fully empowered by management only when they prove that they can do the job and display the proper initiative. On the other hand, the opportunity to become empowered should always be a right.
- ◆ Empowerment is not always assumed by the employees, no matter what management may think. If your employees are not taking the initiative to own their jobs, then they do not feel empowered to do so.
- ◆ Empowerment is not a bunch of motivational posters or empty slogans to which management pays lip service but does not really follow.
- ◆ Empowerment is not a blank check to do anything the employee wants. Management must set explicit boundaries within a strategic framework, so that employees know and understand which decisions they can make without management approval.
- ◆ Nor is empowerment management by consensus. A business is not a democracy. When properly implemented, empowerment gives workers the authority to do their jobs—not the management's.

What "employee empowerment" boils down to is a philosophy that allows people to make decisions about their work, within certain broad guidelines. Simply put, it lets employees think for themselves. Now, some observers claim that empowerment comes from the employee, and to a certain extent that is true. However, I believe that true workplace empowerment comes from the employees and management working in tandem. The employee has to be willing to show initiative and take control of their work, but the management team has to be in a position to encourage and allow employee empowerment—or it will never occur.

Which brings me to a critical point: management can have a regrettable tendency to express a commitment to the concept of empowerment, without actually making it an effective part of

corporate culture. Many of us have seen productivity initiatives fizzle, because management is somehow under the impression that a few catchy slogans (or worse, some atrocity like an "empowerment rock") is enough to actually empower employees to buy into the company's mission and take ownership of their work. Worse, some companies send their employees to productivity training as a matter of course and then just as routinely ignore the employee attempts at self-empowerment that productivity teaches. That is like pouring money down the drain. It is hard to say why companies would waste resources this way, though it may stem from an unwillingness to give up control to the employees, or a fear of losing certain privileges. More likely, it is due to a deep-seated belief that the employees cannot actually do their work properly without constant oversight. Whatever the case, if you are wishy-washy about empowerment, you are unlikely to see a significant productivity increase when you try to implement it.

So how do you empower employees? First of all, you have to make your employees understand what you are trying to achieve. You cannot do that by just ordering them to do this or that, without providing an explanation...well, you can, but that is the military way (as my father the Colonel would say)...and employees are not soldiers. They have not been through the intensive training that the military uses to break down the individual and rebuild into the type of soldier they need. So help your employees understand what you are trying to do.

Explain the company's mission in a simple, straightforward way. It can be as simple as, "We're trying to make the best tires in the world," or "We're world leaders in software technology, and we want to stay that way." You do not have to ramble on about "leveraging our core business" and "optimizing quality-driven geo-targeted bandwidth," or "gap analysis," even though all that may be integral to your business strategy. Just give it to them straight. They will appreciate that.

Managers also have to be willing to give of themselves, in the sense that they have to a) provide assistance that is appropriate to the problems faced by the employees, b) carry out any requested assistance competently and completely, c) encourage employees, and d) provide feedback or correction on results.

When properly handled employee empowerment is a win-win situation all around—because by making employees more productive, it also makes you more productive. By tapping into the knowledge and energy of your employees, you not only take advantage of the "many heads are better than one" thesis, you get to focus on your own most profitable tasks—the reason you are getting paid the big bucks in the first place.

At your level, tasks like marketing, inventing, and hiring are a whole lot more profitable than running around putting out brushfires or doing menial tasks. What is more productive for you: planning a marketing blitz that could bring in a million dollars, or helping your intern photocopy a report, because you do not think it can be done correctly? The choice is obvious—or it should be. After all, what would you rather do: minimum wage work, or something that is worth hundreds and potentially thousands of dollars an hour for the company?

If your employees seem unwilling to take initiative to empower themselves, find out why. If it is obvious that they do not have the training they need to do their work with confidence, you need to get them trained. They need to be confident not only that they are allowed to do the job, but also that they can do the job. That is another foundation of workplace empowerment.

Uncertainty hampers both empowerment and the productivity that comes with it. Basic education is not enough; it is crucial, but it just prepares a person for their career. New

employees need hands-on training, so that they can gain experience in handling the specialized aspects of particular tasks. Your only other option is to toss them out there to sink or swim as best they can. This approach to "empowerment" is inherently wasteful, not just because it limits the development of their personal competency at particular tasks (and thus their productivity), but also because it blows a hole in your team's productivity levels. Even if the individual learns to swim, it will take a while—and if they sink, you are back to square one.

Once trained, start delegating tasks to them and make them aware that it is up to them to get the job done. You cannot do everything and you should not try or you will end up with that lack of initiative that so many managers complain about. Never let your employees think they have to consult you before they do even the smallest tasks. Just put stuff on their plates and let them get it done. Large projects require discussion and the setting of deadlines, as well as steady monitoring, but do not hover. Size up your team and learn their skill levels and natural talents.

For example, I recently expressed frustration to my office manager, Becca, about the inefficiency of correcting simple typos we found on our website: send an email to our IT guy, provide the link with the correction, and wait. She was taking college courses in IT and had created some simple websites in class. So I asked her if I purchased a web editing software package for her, would she feel comfortable making the changes. She spent time learning the package, and we specifically discussed her taking the initiative to make changes whenever she saw errors or needed corrections. I am now happily freed of this time-sucking task, and she is enjoying her newfound skills.

Making people responsible for their tasks will stimulate them to succeed, so be sure to set goals and deadlines for your employees. The goals should be reasonable, though they might be a bit difficult to achieve; as a result, the employee will have to stretch, which will result in increased confidence and, ideally, a heightened sense of empowerment. Do not make the goals excessive that can lead to frustration, poor productivity, and an erosion of the sense of empowerment. The intelligent manager takes a person's abilities into account and does not overburden them. On the other hand, a little encouragement can result in a significant increase in productivity; and to some extent, increased productivity and empowerment feed off each other.

Finally, if you want your employees to continue to feel empowered, reward them for their productivity. Otherwise you are telling them you do not appreciate their contributions and down goes productivity, because what is the point of working hard? For some, a verbal "pat on the back" will do, and such recognition is the least that you should offer. For most people though, money's a prime motivator. A nice bonus or a gift card is always appreciated.

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