Empowerment In The Workplace

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To be successful in today's business environment, companies need the knowledge, ideas, energy, and creativity of every employee, from front line workers to the top-level managers in the executive suite. An empowering organization emphasizes autonomy, proper information sharing, and individual participation for organizational excellence (Ashkanasy 2002). Empowerment thus helps to create autonomy for employees, allows the sharing of responsibility and builds employee self-esteem, and energizes the workforce for better performance (Lawler, Mohrman & Benson 2001).

Employee empowerment is giving an employee a certain degree of autonomy and responsibility for deciding on their specific organizational goals. When employees are empowered, their confidence and self-reliance will increase. This extra confidence is a good thing because it creates job satisfaction and high levels of productivity. Today, more than 70 percent of organizations have adopted some kind of empowerment initiative for at least part of their workforce (Arnold, Arad, Rhoades & Drasgow 2000).

It is important to understand that empowerment can be developed at 3 levels:

Level 1: Organizational Level

An organization that cultivates employee empowerment can better:

- Embrace change such as digital transformation
- Recognize employees' contribution to the business
- Reward responsible ownership in the workplace
- Support collaboration, including cross-departmental collaboration in the workplace
- Foster a culture of employee engagement
- Retain top talent

Level 2: Managerial Level

Empowered team leaders can:

- Better support the team and help each team member reach their targets
- Provide the information the teams need when they need it
- Inspire and motivate employees
- Help better connect employees, including the ones working remotely
- Facilitate work processes
- Spread team spirit in the workplace
- Better communicate the business goals and long-term vision

- Make the teams more successful

Level 3: Individual Level

When employees feel empowered and trusted, they:

- Are more willing to go the extra mile for the team and the business
- Take ownership over their work
- Generate ideas
- Know how to take prudent risks to take the business to the next level
- Find meaning and purpose at work
- Feel proud of the company they are working at
- Feel more motivated and engaged

Empowerment on the organizational and managerial levels should exist by default. However, achieving individual empowerment requires much more work and effort and it involves several functions in the organization (Lawler, Mohrman & Benson 2001).

HOW TO EMPOWER EMPLOYEES THE RIGHT WAY

Encouraging employees to give more of themselves to the business is important, but it comes with a caveat: you need to be careful when giving employees more freedom and responsibility because employee empowerment can have some negative consequences if it is implemented incorrectly (Lawler, Mohrman & Benson 2001).

Empowerment Does Not Mean Removing Structure

Many managers believe that empowerment equals freedom, and while that may be true for the most part, many leaders confuse freedom with a lack of support, direction, guidance, or support.

Denying your employees guidelines or help will leave them frustrated, confused, and ill-equipped to do their jobs. Supervisors are responsible for directing employees in a way that gives them the knowledge and resources they need to succeed, while also allowing them enough room to fulfill their responsibilities on their terms. Finding this balance is an important part of the employee empowerment process.

Give More Information

Many employees receive only the basics when it comes to the information they need to do their jobs. While this is pretty commonplace, it fails to empower employees because they do not have enough information to truly make their own decisions.

For example, if employees do not know what the end goal is of a given project, they may miss out on

valuable opportunities to improve the finished product, do their work more efficiently, or give certain aspects of the project priority over others. Giving your employees more information about the work they are doing and how it relates to the whole gives them the power to make judgement calls about their responsibilities, which will help your employees feel more involved, give them a sense of ownership, and likely lead to a better result.

Keep Your Employees Accountable

While it may seem contrary to empowerment, consistently holding your employees accountable for their responsibilities will empower them to take genuine ownership of their work (Spreitzer, & Quinn 2001).

Depending on your workforce's circumstances, this could mean administering consequences, praising them for work well done, or providing incentives for improvement. When people take ownership of their work, they are more likely to put in extra effort and feel pride in the success they achieve.

Encourage Two-Way Communication

Another mistake that many business leaders make is not allowing for open, timely dialogue that travels up and down the organization. Communication often comes only from the top down, leaving lower-level employees powerless to influence their work environment.

Establishing better communication practices can help your employees feel empowered to grow and contribute to the big picture. Besides, employees on the front lines often have deep operational knowledge and valuable perspectives to share that are very different from that of employees higher up in the chain of command.

Some key challenges in building empowerment at work

Empowerment practices are implemented with the hopes of building employee commitment, overcoming worker dissatisfaction, and reducing absenteeism, turnover, poor quality work, and sabotage. But all too often these implementation efforts fail to achieve the intended results. Why? First, some managers confuse empowerment with a quick fix and give up before it has been successfully implemented. The transition from a more traditional command-and-control system to an empowered organization requires a culture change. It is not unusual for a culture change to take upwards of five years to stick. Culture changes take discipline, consistency, and patience. The long-term approach necessary for successful empowerment implementation efforts appears at odds with a business environment that requires quarterly results. This long-term approach is especially difficult as leadership transitions bring frequent changes to the vision for the organization.

Second, sometimes there confusion about what is meant by the term empowerment. For example, it is not uncommon for managers to tell employees that they are empowered but not explain what they mean by empowerment. An employee may assume what the manager means by empowerment – he or she responds enthusiastically by making a decision independently that they may have had to get approval for

in the past. The manager responds negatively because he or she was just looking for employees to share more ideas with them, not actually make decisions on their own. The employee feels dejected and returns to his or her old ways of working. As such, a key issue is for managers to be clear and explicit about what they mean by empowerment.

Third, some managers lack the courage to genuinely empower their people. These managers are afraid they will lose control if they genuinely empower employees. They worry about loose cannons who are not aligned with the goals of the unit. They worry that employees will make mistakes. They assume that they alone are the source of the best ideas. These concerns are especially strong for managers who have spent significant time in command and control bureaucracies. Starting with small initial steps at sharing power, setting clear limits for empowerment, and building trusting relationships are effective mechanisms for reducing these concerns.

And fourth, some empowerment efforts fail because employees resist efforts at empowerment. A very small percentage of employees value the simplicity of following directions and being told what to do. Some employees have been trained and conditioned to follow orders for much of their work lives. Taking the initiative will feel counter-cultural to them, and it takes time for them to learn to be more proactive. To empower them, managers can set up small initial steps to build comfort and confidence. Training and development program can also bolster their confidence to act in more empowered ways.

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