



"Empowerment" is one of those buzzwords which is so common in the area of people management. Many are unclear what it means, let alone know how to do it.

Empowerment literally means to give power to someone else. To empower them. Why would an organisation want to do that? There are several compelling reasons. Among the most pressing ones are:

1. As organisations become more competitive and leaner, they are shedding levels of management and becoming flatter. So, more authority is getting pushed down the line - lower level staff are becoming empowered.
2. There is greater recognition now, that people 'at the coalface' - be it on the front counter serving the customer or on the production line - probably know their jobs better than anyone else. Empowering them to solve problems and make decisions therefore makes good sense.
3. There is also a greater recognition that to have a dedicated, committed and flexible workforce means involving them as partners in the business - really giving them power in how things are done - rather than just treating them as beings just one rung above machines.

Empowerment can take many different forms. It can be done via:

- Training and development to broaden a person's range of skills ('multi-skilling')
- Giving people more authority and responsibility in their jobs (so they become a quality or service 'strategist' rather than a 'robot')
- Giving people access to information about what is happening now and what is planned for the future
- Genuinely involving people in making decisions about how things are done.

We have identified four key steps any manager, supervisor, team leader or other must go through if he or she wants to empower others to take more responsibility, use more initiative, and reach their

potential. They are:

1. Empower yourself
2. Model empowerment to others
3. Management guarantees
4. Take risks

1. Empower Yourself

Before you can even start thinking about empowering others, you have to start by empowering yourself, if you have not already done so.

A major characteristic of people who have not empowered themselves is that they constantly feel the victim of hostile circumstances. They feel they are constantly exposed to difficult situations caused by insufficient resources, unsympathetic management, inconsiderate clients, incompetent staff, malfunctioning equipment or not enough time.

Psychologists describe this as 'externalising' - the tendency to blame things on external factors. A major way of empowering yourself is to start 'internalising' - seeing yourself as in control of what happens in your life. Feeling that you are in the driver's seat, that you have the responsibility for what occurs around you.

A major way of moving from an 'external' to an 'internal' focus is to change the way you describe things. Instead of saying that you don't have enough time because of "telephone interruptions", try saying instead that it's because of "the way I manage telephone interruptions". Instead of saying that "people place unfair demands on me", try saying, "I don't say 'no' enough".

2. Model Empowerment to Others

When dealing with people who you want to empower to take responsibility, initiative and reach their potential, you need to ensure that you are modelling or demonstrating how to do it.

If you as a manager and supervisor are blaming

others, externalising, not taking responsibility, it is likely that this is the sort of behaviour you will get in return. It's called the boomerang principle of behaviour. You get back what you put out.

3. Management Guarantees

A major aspect of empowerment of people is giving them a say in what is done and how it is done. Organisations around the world are looking at various forms of industrial democracy, worker participation and employee involvement to tap into 'coalface' expertise and also to build commitment and dedication.

If staff and workers are going to be truly empowered in this way, they must have access to high quality information about strategic plans, management directions, available resources and so on.

But even more importantly they must know that this is not an exercise in sham democracy. They must have some sort of specific, water-tight management guarantee that their ideas and suggestions will be acted on. Otherwise cynicism

sets in very quickly.

Management guarantees may deal with promising that staff will have access to certain information or resources, that management will get back to the, within a certain time, or even that their ideas or suggestions will be implemented.

4. Take Risks

As a manager or supervisor, the fourth step to genuinely empowering your staff or workers is to be prepared to take risks. If your staff or workers come up with an idea or suggestion, give it a go, try it out. If they are wrong you can always learn from the experience. If they are right you may have just discovered a better way of doing things.

If you are genuinely concerned, you can always trial or pilot an idea. Give it a go on a small scale, then evaluate how things went. A staff member who at least is given a chance to prove an idea will not feel unmotivated, or disempowered if it fails. But they will feel this way if they are not given a chance in the first place.

REFERENCE

Empowering People, a video training package produced by Ash.Quarry Productions and distributed by Seven Dimensions Pty Ltd, ph: +61 3 9686 9677.

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www.7dimensions.com.au.