

Ten Ways to Empower People

Many organizations are expecting much more of their workers. Rank and file workers are often expected to perform the functions that were carried on by their supervisors and middle managers only a few years ago. As more is expected of workers, there emerges a need for companies to provide workers the wherewithal (the authority, resources, skill, etc.) to perform.

The following are ten ways some organizations are attempting to empower their employees:

Providing the necessary skills to do the job. It's a law of the workplace. Employees can't do what they don't have the skills to do. For workers to have the necessary skills to complete assigned projects, companies need to assess gaps between the current skills levels of employees and current/future job skill requirements. Training, education, and development activities must then be provided to close all discerned skill gaps. Empowerment requires that all workers be trained and retrained in the right skills. The business environment and company's objectives shift and therefore so do the initial skills required in most positions. Skill sets require ongoing review to ensure individuals stay empowered.

Granting sufficient authority to do the job. A second straightforward method of empowering workers is simply to give them the power to complete their assigned jobs. Employees who have been charged with completing major projects but denied the authority to take the necessary steps to complete their jobs will not feel empowered. Instead they are likely to feel that they are not fully trusted to "handle their jobs." Furthermore, waiting for days for others to make decisions and take actions can cause major delays in projects and lead to almost unbearable frustration.

Articulation a vision of the completed job. A third way to empower employees is help them visualize the end results of their work before they actually begin a project. These way workers can use more of their own skills, past work experience, and ingenuity to achieve the desired outcome. Employees can better weigh all alternative decisions and actions in terms of the potential contributions they might make to the desired end product.

Explaining how a project fits into the big picture. An affliction affecting many organizations is that 'the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing.'" The resulting lack of coordination limits the effectiveness of individual workers and prevents work groups from achieving any kind of synergy. An antidote to this workplace malady is to explain to employees how their jobs and work projects fit into the big organizational picture. Only by knowing the big picture can workers identify with it and feel they are making a contribution to it. The resulting expanded sense of accomplishment and pride can be empowering.

Stating the relative importance of a project. The nature of most jobs requires workers to be excellent stewards of their time. Among other things, this entails spending the most time on projects that are of the utmost importance to the company at any given time. No one benefits when employees unknowingly spend 50 percent of their time on a project that has dropped from number 1 to number 6 in priority. Therefore, managers need to tell their subordinates the current priority status of every project. This will enable employees to exercise more effective control over their time and their own individual productivity.

Supplying adequate information to do the job. Traveling down a narrow, unfamiliar, twisting mountain road during a driving rainstorm is not apt to instill a sense of power in many individuals. The lack of information about the road and the surrounding area is likely to cause a driver to bring her /his excursion to a sudden halt. It could even result in a serious accident. So it is with work projects. Their successful conclusion depends on workers being able to secure relevant, accurate, and up-to-date information on all aspects of the project. It really is so: Information is power, and nothing empowers workers more than power.

Allocating ample resources to do the job. Care to travel in a small plane from coast to coast on one tank of gas? Of course not! One tank is insufficient fuel to make such a trip. However, workers are often expected to accomplish similar feats with inadequate resources. It is intimated that their personal commitment and creativity will more than make up for any shortfall in resources. Nothing could be further from the truth. If firms truly want to provide workers the wherewithal to bring important projects to fruition, they can empower them by allocating ample resources to do the job.

Building employees' self-confidence to do the job. Expectancy theory holds that employees who believe they can achieve a certain result are more apt to attempt it and be successful at it. Thus, building employees' confidence in their own abilities is yet another way they can be empowered. This can be accomplished over time by: (1) providing workers opportunities to grow and develop through training and incrementally more challenging work assignments, (2) acknowledging and rewarding past accomplishments, and (3) exhibiting trust in employee's abilities and judgment.

Extending permission to take acceptable risks. An old adage claims that if "nothing is ventured" then "nothing is gained." So it is in business. If companies want to increase market share they must be willing to take a few risks and attempt to create new products and/or services. Realizing that certain ventures will be highly successful but many new endeavors are likely to be miserable flops, firms must also allow their employees to take risks that it feels are "acceptable." They can empower their workers by not always insisting that they "play it safe."

Giving feedback as to how the job is progressing. The former mayor of New York City, Ed Koch, became well known for his question, "How am I doing?" Almost everywhere he traveled in the Big Apple he would ask the citizens, "How am I doing?" So it should be in the workplace. Workers need be encouraged to ask about how they are doing. They must be given continuous feedback on the progress they are making on all important projects. Feedback helps employees to remain on the "right track," build their self-confidence, and develop professionally.

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