



# The Real Meaning of Empowerment

**Want to motivate your staff? Empower your employees—don't delegate. The result? Increased job performance and company success.**

"Joan, we need to revise the blueprint drawing on the pressing machine to show its placement three feet to the west," said Jack, the company representative.

Joan, the contract engineer, responded, "I need to call my boss and get his approval."

"How come?" Jack asked. "I've shown you why the drawing is wrong. We need the machine in operation by 6:00 p.m. tomorrow."

Joan said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not authorized to make the decision. I'll phone my boss."

After several minutes, Joan said, "Jack, my boss must be in a meeting or at another job site. I'll keep trying to reach him."

Joan contacted her manager four hours later and received approval to relocate the pressing machine. Contractors started the machine four hours late, resulting in lost production and additional stand-by labor costs. If Joan had been empowered, the outcome would have been different.

The essence of empowerment is to release, rather than ignore or underutilize, employees' experience, initiative, knowledge, and wisdom. Employee performance is a major factor that leads to the success or failure of a business. Empowering employees enhances their skills and performance.

Delegation is not empowerment; it is giving an employee tasks so a manager can work on other jobs. Empowerment is assigning responsibilities, authority, and decision-making power to employees and holding them accountable for results.

In her article, "An Overview of Employee Empowerment," Heloisa Fragozo defines empowerment as "the enlargement of employees' jobs, giving them the responsibility and authority to make decisions about their work without supervisory approval while creating value for the ultimate customers."<sup>1</sup>

## Source of Empowerment

Upper management is the source of empowerment. They empower the level of management reporting to them. That level then empowers the next-lower level, and the process

continues down through the company hierarchy. Each level of management must receive the authority and decision-making power to accomplish its particular responsibilities. Each level must relinquish authority and decision-making power to employees on the level directly below it.

In her article, Fragozo notes that "the power managers have—to influence behavior of employees and work responsibilities—must now be shared with employees through the creation of trust, assurance, motivation, and support. Work-related decisions and full control of the work is pushed down toward the lowest operating levels."<sup>2</sup>

Some employers have instituted empowerment programs that are, in fact, not what they are supposed to be. Adrian Wilkinson, in "Empowerment: Theory and Practice," states that, "Even though employers have instituted 'empowerment programs,' they varied in the decision-making powers given to employees. They were more of an effort to increase employee contributions to the company."<sup>3</sup>

## Elements of Empowerment

Elements of empowerment distinguish it from delegation. In their book, *Three Keys to Empowerment*, Ken Blanchard, John Carlos, and Alan Randolph state, "In a hierarchy, structure is created to inhibit the behavior of people. Rules, procedures, policies, and management relationships inform people about what they cannot do or how they must do a task.

In empowerment, the structures have a different purpose and take different forms. Now, the structure is intended to inform team members about the ranges they can act with autonomy.

Employees to be empowered must know what their specific responsibilities, authority, decision-making powers are to operate within the new boundaries to be created."<sup>4</sup>

Carol Yeh-Yun, author of "The Essence of Empowerment: A Conceptual Model and Case Illustration," writes that three elements exist within empowerment. Each needs to be present for empowerment to be successful.

- **“Style**—Empowered employees have a working style of self-management and possess a team spirit. Employees make, implement, and are held accountable for work-related decisions.”
- **“Skills**—Empowered employees are trained to have effective problem-solving and communication skills. They challenge inefficient policies and identify problems.”
- **“Staff**—Empowered employees are bred in empowering organizations. With empowering leaders as drivers, immersed in a culture of empowerment and reinforced by empowering management practices, employees are expected to grow.”<sup>5</sup>

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In “Let Your Employees Handle the Trees,” Tom Dossenbach states, “There is a big difference between motivating someone to achieve and telling them how to perform tasks to accomplish your goals. When you give an employee permission to use their creativity, they become more inspired and more effective. In addition, they will feel more accountable for their actions and outcomes of a challenge.”<sup>6</sup>

Dossenbach believes “empowerment should not be restricted by one’s natural abilities. Everyone should be set free to tap his or her own unique talents to the maximum extent possible.”<sup>7</sup>

Employees have their own unique aptitudes and abilities. Train them to enhance these abilities and develop their aptitudes.

## Six Steps to Empower Employees

Perform six steps to empower employees. The steps are in sequence and in a logical order, and each is necessary to fully empower employees.

**Step #1: Acquire empowerment.** Upper management starts the empowerment process. They must be willing to relinquish authority and decision-making power to lower levels of the organization.

**Step #2: Choose employees to empower.** Employees must want to be empowered. Some employees are unwilling to accept additional responsibilities and decision-making power

regardless of potential rewards. They need skills to make correct decisions and accomplish additional responsibilities.

**Step #3: Provide role information.** Upper management defines your role and assigns responsibilities, authority, and decision-making power to meet company and department goals. Define your role to employees. Define the responsibilities, authority, and decision-making power that you will assign to employees. Define boundaries to clarify decisions employees will and will not make. Also, specify performance criteria and rewards for outstanding achievement.

**Step #4: Share company information.** In their book, *Three Keys to Empowerment*, Blanchard, Carlos, and Randolph state, “Help people to understand the need for change, teach company financials, share some sensitive information, list facts people have and need, share good and bad information, and view mistakes positively. Explain company vision and values, clarify priorities, and teach decision-making and problem-solving skills.”<sup>8</sup>

**Step #5: Provide training to employees.** Fragoso states in her article that “employees must have a clear vision of success. Teach them the basics of cost and revenue. Open financial books and inform employees of the situation so they can feel more related to the company. Let employees decide how to handle clients, and give them discretionary power when deciding what to spend in order to mend a certain problem.”<sup>9</sup>

Most companies will train new employees. Current employees with experience and knowledge also need training. Training should be continuous because it is a major key to the success of a business.

**Step #6: Inspire individual initiatives.** An inspired employee is a highly productive resource to a company and department. Christopher Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal in their book, *The Individualized Corporation*, state that to “build on the belief of the individual [one must] create a sense of ownership (create small performance units, decentralize resources and responsibilities), develop self-discipline, establish clear standards and expectations, and provide a supportive environment (coaching, openness to challenges, and tolerance for failure).”<sup>10</sup>

## Benefits of Empowerment

Employee empowerment benefits a company by developing personnel and attaining objectives and goals and overcoming challenges. Among other benefits are

**Company success.** Fragoso notes that, “Empowerment is a win-win situation—customers benefit from sharp employees; companies benefit from satisfied customers and sharp employees; and employees benefit from improving their confidence and self-esteem.”<sup>11</sup>

*Development of employees' skills.* In his study, "Empowerment: Commerce Bank and Cast-Fab Technologies," Jason Hayes writes that, "Empowerment is one of the greatest ways that I have found to develop employees. Giving them the opportunity to solve their own problems and please customers in their own way helps some of them to be ready to move into the supervisory position themselves. Also, when an employee feels as though he/she has some ownership in the job, overall job satisfaction increases."<sup>12</sup>

*Goal attainment.* Empowered employees meet department and company goals and promote an increasingly positive and progressive workplace. Employees increase in motivation, self-direction, productivity, commitment, social interaction, and develop behaviors useful in other areas of their lives. Goals are an integral part in planning for individual and company successes.

*Enhanced problem-solving.* Empowerment gives employees the opportunity to solve problems as they arise. Letting small problems simmer—not be solved—may allow them to grow into bigger and unmanageable problems. Time spent solving problems uses time to accomplish necessary tasks.

*Use of employees' full potential.* Upper management must be committed and provide employees with resources to promote continuous improvement in their company. Use and develop employees to their full potential, leading to a successful company and satisfied employees.

## Reward Empowered Employees

Base rewards are factors that motivate individual employees. Motivators inspire a person to succeed. Examples of motivators are admiration, self-esteem, respect for others, promotion, money, and recognition.

Individual rewards may include direct monetary rewards, promotion to a new position, monetary bonuses, job benefits, attendance at wellness programs, and special roles and assignments. Also, give work-life awards (educational seminars, employer-provided health care, job-sharing, discounts at health clubs, and child care).

Self-goal-setting, self-criticism, and self-leadership characterize empowered employees. Empowered employees know company goals and their roles within those goals. Empowered employees become competent and committed to the company.

Earlier, you learned about Joan's dilemma trying to locate her boss to approve changing the placement of a machine. An "empowered" Joan would result in a different outcome than the late start of the machine.

"Joan, we need you to revise the blueprint drawing on the pressing machine to show its placement three feet to the west," Jack said.

Joan responded, "I agree. Let's make the change, and there is no reason why we can't meet the scheduled start

of the machine by 6:00 p.m. tomorrow evening."

The machine went on line three hours before the scheduled time, resulting in reduced labor costs and additional production output. **CM**

## Endnotes

1. Heloisa Fragoso, "An Overview of Employee Empowerment: Do's and Don'ts." Accessed at [www.iusb.edu/journal/2000/fragoso.html](http://www.iusb.edu/journal/2000/fragoso.html).
2. Ibid.
3. Adrian Wilkinson, "Empowerment: Theory and Practice," *Personal Review* (January 1998): 40.
4. Ken Blanchard, John Carlos, and Alan Randolph, *The Three Keys to Empowerment* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1999): 11.
5. Carol Yeh-Yun, "The Essence of Empowerment: A Conceptual Model and a Case Illustration," *Journal of Applied Management Studies* (December 1998): 223.
6. Tom Dossenbach, "Let Your Employees Handle the Trees," *Wood & Wood Products* (October 2004): 23.
7. Ibid.
8. Blanchard, Carlos, and Randolph, *The Three Keys to Empowerment*: 252.
9. Fragoso, "An Overview of Employee Empowerment."
10. Christopher Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal, *The Individualized Corporation* (New York, N.Y.: Harper Business, 1997): 322–324.
11. Fragoso, "An Overview of Employee Empowerment."
12. Jason Hayes, "Employee Empowerment: Commerce Bank and Cast-Fab Technologies," School of Business, Emporia State University (January 16, 2003).

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