

Taking the "Fuzz" out of Empowerment by Patricia Wheeler

Employee empowerment. Most companies openly endorse it. The word is frequently engraved on Corporate Vision plaques hanging in organizational hallways. But if empowerment is so frequently touted, why is it one of the fuzziest words in management language? And why do employees complain about micromanagement and second-guessing in many so-called empowering companies?

Empowerment is a difficult process to execute at almost every level, particularly within highly technical industries where attention to detail is paramount. Technically trained professionals such as engineers and physicians excel at and enjoy details.....which makes it difficult for them, when promoted to leadership positions, to relinquish this level of focus. Some people have problems letting go. And some think they have "empowered" their direct reports even when they receive feedback that suggests otherwise.

But let's face it: as they grow in strategic responsibility, managers have to let go of their old jobs. And if they hire smart, talented people, they have to develop and empower these people to keep them. In other words, their necessary focus on detail must be balanced with management and growth of people.

And bright, motivated people want to have decision-making authority. They crave empowerment and will leave companies if they don't feel they are making a difference. But many managers cite compelling reasons why they can't tolerate even small differences in execution, as though the need for detail was equivalent to the demands of performing brain surgery.

How, then, does the process of empowerment happen within brain surgery? How do newer practitioners learn to execute decisions independently, when small variations can literally mean the difference between life and death? I asked Dr. Dan Barrow, MBNA Bowman Professor and Chair of Neurosurgery at Emory University School of Medicine. Training a brain surgeon, he said, requires a lengthy process of doctors' studying, observing and performing under close supervision. But eventually you have to hand the scalpel over, and Barrow says that 100% adherence to the supervisor's procedure is not necessary at that point, as "different approaches can yield successful outcomes."

So it begins with clarity of approach and well-articulated learning, followed by observation and correction, and eventual hand-off with clear expectations and outcomes. In other words, empowerment.

Then if even brain surgeons can allow deviations in execution which empower the next generation of physicians, how can you make sure you have a clear process to empower your next generation of leaders?

Here's the key: empowerment is not a one step procedure. Ideally executed, it requires continuing dialogue between boss and employee, at every level of the organization, beginning at the top. The leader must set the context and drive the process. These steps must happen:

1. The leader must do a seamless job of explaining the delegated task. This involves clarifying "The Empowerment Area" along the following dimensions: task specifics, resources allocated, timeline, clear desired outcomes, and circumstances under which the employee must seek further instructions. The goal: transfer what's in the leader's brain as clearly as possible to the employee, clarifying decision-making authority, resources and their boundaries.
2. The employee's job is to ask every possible question about the task in "The Empowerment Area." The goal is to approximate total clarity and transparency.
3. The leader and employee must craft an internal and explicit contract setting the stage for ongoing dialogue that allows for mutual feedback, feedforward, questions, clarifications, expansion, praise, teaching, and ultimately, a job well done.

Warning signs:

1. Fuzziness - if either party senses a lack of total clarity about the expectation, authority, resources or outcome, empowerment will likely fail. Fuzziness never goes unpunished.
2. Micromanagement or under-management - either will cause failure. Both parties must be clear about how and when oversight will occur.
3. Silence does not equal assent - if , after assigning a task, your employees do not ask clarifying questions, warning signals should sound. Empowerment is a dialogue in which both parties must actively participate.

What's the cost of "fuzzy empowerment?" Confusion, eroded trust and insufficient knowledge transfer, which in turn leads to inefficient execution. Add to that the possibility that talented employees may go elsewhere to develop their careers.

COACH'S TIP: What steps take the "fuzz" out of empowerment?

1. Meet regularly with your direct reports. When meetings happen irregularly or are frequently cancelled, empowerment cannot flourish. Reserve time for ongoing dialogue, whether you think you need it or not.
2. Keep talking. If your direct reports' performance disappoints you when you think you've "empowered" them, circle back to your initial agreement. Perhaps you missed a step, or are unrealistic about the learning curve. Create more dialogue. And remember that you have to balance control and oversight with letting go for learning and true empowerment to happen.

Sound like a lot of up-front work? Of course! The payoff is at the end, when talented employees work more effectively and move up to positions of greater importance to the organization.

Empowerment is both an art and a science. Dialogue and clarity of expectations are key. Without it, good managers and employees cannot grow. Done well, it is great teaching that builds trust. Done poorly, it's just another fuzzy word in management vocabulary.

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