Employee Empowerment

G.A.HEMA

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR DEPARMENT OF COMMERCE PSG COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCE COIMBATORE-14.

ABSTRACT *Employee empowerment is giving employees a certain degree of autonomy and responsibility for decision-making regarding their specific organizational tasks. It allows decisions to be made at the lower levels of an organization where employees have a unique view of the issues and problems facing the organization at a certain level. Asking employees to share the leader's vision for organizational success and inviting them to participate in the decision-making processes that are needed to see that vision become a reality are two ways that a manager can demonstrate their appreciation. A large part of that dynamic is a sense of trust, meaning the manager has to be able to trust the employee to be capable of making effective decisions on their own.*

Theoretical Approaches to Empowerment

Three theoretical approaches have been used to study empowerment: socio-structural perspective, psychological approach, and the critical perspective.

The **socio-structural perspective** focuses its attention on developing or redesigning organizational polices, practices, and structures to give employees power, authority, and influence over their work.

The **psychological approach** focuses on enhancing and enabling personal effectiveness by helping employees develop their sense of meaning, competency, self-determination, and impact.

The **critical perspective** challenges the notion of employee empowerment and argues that efforts to create empowerment may actually lead to more, albeit less-obvious, controls over employees.

Advantages to Employee Empowerment

Employee empowerment should lead to increased organizational responsiveness to issues and problems. Employee empowerment should be an increase in productivity. It should also lead to a greater degree of employee commitment to organizational goals since employees can take some degree of ownership in the decisions made toward goal achievement.

Disadvantages to Employee Empowerment

Employee empowerment is not without some disadvantages. It can lead to decreased efficiency because decisions may not be uniform and optimized for organizational goals. It can also create problems with coordination throughout the organization because decisions are decentralized and not managed at the top. Manager and employee relationships can become tense as the boundaries of authority can be blurred. Finally, according to the critical perspective, attempts at employee empowerment can be counterproductive, actually creating greater controls over employees. For example, empowering employees through the use of teams may create peer pressure.

How to Empower Your Employees?

From the time that we're born, we're on this path to self-sufficiency. We want to be able to do things on our own with a little help along the way when we need it. Indeed, a key ingredient in self-sufficiency is a solid support system. However, supporting is not the same as doing; a good support system is there to provide the foundation for someone else to achieve greatness, not to do it for them.

Empowerment occurs when an employee is given the freedom, power, trust, autonomy, and encouragement to carry out job-related tasks. When used as a motivational strategy, empowerment can provide an employee with a sense of pride and ownership over their work. People want to feel in control of their destiny, especially in the workplace. Essentially, empowerment provides a worker with intrinsic, or self-induced, rewards by allowing them to make decisions on their own and see the success that follows. Employees associate their success with their own abilities, motivating them to continue to strive for higher levels of productivity in future tasks.

Managers can promote organizational success by inviting employees to be innovative in their ideas, solutions, and decisions while at the same time giving them authority to see them through to implementation. Empowerment enables subordinates to work independently as they control their own jobs by using their own knowledge, skill sets, abilities, and decision-making skills to achieve personal and organizational success.

8 Tips for Empowering Employees

Having empowered employees is the dream of every leader. All managers want people who show initiative by taking on and completing tasks with little guidance. Of course, the expectation is that these people will perform only in ways consistent with company objectives and values. And there lies the leadership challenge. Often the leadership has not done their part to empower the employees or, worse, has gotten in the way through micro-management. Not all leaders have selfish intentions or poor skills; many simply haven't had the training, time or focus to create an environment of empowerment. Below are eight tips to help make your company a place where people feel good about stepping up and taking it on.

1. Foster Open Communication

So many companies are built on top-down communication from management. Employees in this environment feel there is no purpose in taking a stand, since they have no direct channel and don't feel they'll have an impact. As a leader, you may have clear direction and more experience, but that doesn't invalidate feedback and ideas from people on the front lines. Give employees structured ways to make their thoughts, feelings and observations known easily and regularly. Help them understand that their input is valued even if you decide to go a different way. Make sure you acknowledge them for sharing and reward valuable input that helps the company.

2. Reward Self-Improvement

Many leaders complain that employees are stagnant but do little to help them grow. In such cases, somehow management has the idea that promotion and money are sufficient to get people to advance. More often than not, people don't have the resources or knowledge of what to do. Many entrepreneurs are so accustomed to self-improvement that they assume everyone thinks the same way. Budget dollars and time toward management and personal development training. Help employees set a plan for growth and reward them as they advance. They'll be grateful and apply their newly-learned skills as they step up to leadership opportunities.

3. Encourage Safe Failure

Many employees, by their very nature, are risk-adverse. That's why they are employees and not entrepreneurs. If they work in an environment where the boss is always correcting them before they have a chance to execute, they will constantly look for approval before taking action or, worse, simply avoid any new or dynamic action. Give employees the opportunity to try new things in a way that doesn't put the company in danger. Create milestone checkpoints or set up laboratory environments where people can test new ideas and learn from the failures as well as the successes. Then your employees will gain understanding and feel comfortable innovating.

4. Provide Plenty of Context

Most leaders carry lots of information in their brains. Unfortunately, many employees don't get the benefit of all that information, yet they are expected to take action and make good decisions as if they understood every nuance. Great leaders figure out how to extract the important information from their minds and share it in a structured and consistent manner. An employee who clearly understands the core values, purpose and direction of the company can easily make consistent decisions and take appropriate action at any junction. It's on you as the leader to impart your vision. That's how you lead.

5. Clearly Define Roles

People who don't know what they are supposed to do can't do it very well. Additionally, they need to know their boundaries so they don't step on others' toes or create inefficiency through redundancy. Establish specific roles and responsibilities with employees so all are clear and can work together cooperatively.

6. Require Accountability

People need to know when they are meeting expectations and, more importantly, when they are not. No one will maintain accountability if they don't understand the consequences of failure. And if they see others not being held accountable, they will see little need to make the extra effort for success. Be consistent and diligent in your measurement and rewards so employees are motivated to do their best.

7. Support Their Independence

A leader who is constantly looking over the shoulder of employees is little more than a babysitter. Give your employees reasons and opportunity to stretch out on their own and even lead others. They may stumble, but they'll learn a lot and build the respect of their colleagues while preparing to be great empowering leaders themselves someday.

8. Appreciate Their Efforts

Yes, it's true that people get paid for the job. But the best employees don't work at your company just for the money. Empowered people need a greater level of satisfaction than simply financial stability. They need to feel that leadership appreciates their contribution and values their participation. Don't be shy about finding ways to say "thank you" or celebrating the good things your employees do.

Structural Examples of Employee Empowerment

Employee empowerment can vary in degree and scope and can permeate through the various levels of the organization. Here are several great examples of employee empowerment that can be implemented on a wide scale to re-balance the fundamental way decisions are made regarding planning, production, service, and human resources.

Transfer of Quality Control – In the final analysis, we are all judged by the "quality of our work," and this is why empowerment often starts with decisions that involve quality control. Many Total Quality Management (TQM) practices include a strong component of employee empowerment that can be adopted in most organizations. A good example of this type of empowerment occurred during the 1950s when Toyota first set up the Kanban system, which enabled employees to determine production levels to meet real time demand based upon visual signals used on the production floor.

Inclusion Through Consultations – Seeking the consultation of those directly involved with performing the tasks when constructing the project charter is another effective way to increase employee empowerment. However, the consultation must be substantive to have a lasting empowering effect. Calling a last minute meeting to seek others input when there is no time to rework the project only qualifies as lip service consultation. Even if the consultation is solicited well in advance of a project deadline, there must be joint decision-making for the empowerment to be viewed as more than a rubber stamp.

Increased Role in Hiring Decisions – Having a real say in the hiring decisions that affects the employee's department or area is another good example of employee empowerment. A team with good rapport among the members will be more productive. To be truly empowering, employees should be given the opportunity to screen candidates from resumes and cover letters, to participate in the interview process and be present during walk-throughs with potential candidates. If there is a consensus candidate, the employees' choice should stand unless management can point to a specific and good reason to deny the candidate the position.

Asking for Volunteers – Asking for volunteers for projects is another great example of employee empowerment because it creates at the inception of the project a team of employees who already have a greater sense of ownership from the mere act of volunteering. When a person volunteers for an assignment, his or her perspective shifts and the person feels a stronger connection and commitment than if the task had been assigned arbitrarily. As long as employees are not pressured into volunteering or do so only out of a sense of obligation or anticipation of future gain, then their willingness to volunteer comes from a genuine interest and will be empowering.

Conclusion

While employee empowerment comes in many forms, it can vary in degree and scope. The result is often one of increased motivation and job satisfaction. Therefore, effective managers continually look for ways to empower their staff to reach those personal and organizational successes.

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