Top Ten Ways to Make Employee Empowerment Fail

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Empowerment is a panacea for many organization ills — when empowerment is implemented with care. People in organizations say they want empowerment — and often, they mean it. Managers say they want employee empowerment — and often, they mean it, too.

Organizations that are committed to the ongoing growth of their employees recognize empowerment as one of their most important strategic methods to motivate employees. Employee empowerment is also a key strategy to enable people who have the need, the answers, and the knowledge, to make decisions about how to best serve customers.

If employee empowerment is such a great tool and strategy for accomplishing work, customer service, and employee motivation, how come employee empowerment is so rarely implemented effectively? Here are my top ten reasons why employee empowerment fails.

Why Employee Empowerment Fails

Managers pay lip service to employee empowerment, but do not really believe in its power. As with all management and business buzz words, employee empowerment can seem like a “good” thing to do. After all, well-respected management books recommend that you empower employees.

When you empower employees, they grow their skills and your organization benefits from their empowerment. Employees know when you are serious about employee empowerment and when you understand and walk your talk. Half-hearted or unbelievable employee empowerment efforts will fail.

Managers don’t really understand what employee empowerment means. They have a vague notion that employee empowerment means you start a few teams that address workplace employee morale or safety issues. You ask people what they think about something at a meeting. You allow employees to help plan the company picnic. Wrong. Employee empowerment is a philosophy or strategy that enables people to make decisions about their job.

Managers fail to establish boundaries for employee empowerment. In your absence, what decisions can be made by staff members? What decisions can employees make day-by-day that they do not need to have permission or oversight to make? These boundaries must be defined or employee empowerment efforts fail.

Managers have defined the decision making authority and boundaries with staff, but then micromanage the work of employees. This is usually because managers don’t trust staff to make good decisions. Staff members know this and either craftily make decisions on their own and hide their results or they come to you for everything because they don’t know what they really can control.
One HR manager added ten days to the company hiring process because he required his signature at certain milestones in the process. The paperwork was buried on his desk for days, but staff did not proceed without his signature. His lack of trust made employee empowerment a joke. Do employees make mistakes? Certainly, but fooling them about their boundaries is worse.

**Second guess the decisions of employees you have given the authority to make a decision.** You can help staff make good decisions by coaching, training, and providing necessary information. You can even model good decision making. But, what you cannot do, unless a serious complication will result, is undermine or change the decision you had empowered a staff person to make. Teach the employee to make a better decision next time. But don’t undermine their faith in their personal competence and in your trust, support, and approbation. You discourage employee empowerment for the future.

Managers need to provide growth and challenge opportunities and goals that employees can aim for and achieve. **Failure to provide a strategic framework, in which decisions have a compass and success measurements, imperils the opportunity for empowered behavior.** Employees need direction to know how to practice empowerment.

**If managers fail to provide the information and access to information, training, and learning opportunities needed for staff to make good decisions, don’t complain when employee empowerment efforts fall short.** The organization has the responsibility to create a work environment that helps foster the ability and desire of employees to act in empowered ways. Information is the key to successful employee empowerment.

**Managers abdicate all responsibility and accountability for decision making.** When reporting staff are blamed or punished for failures, mistakes, and less than optimum results, your employees will flee from employee empowerment. Or, they'll publicly identify reasons why failure was your fault, or his fault, or the other team's fault. Fail to publicly support decisions and stand behind your employees. Make staff feel deserted. You can make employee empowerment fail in sixty seconds. I guarantee it.

**Allow barriers to impede the ability of staff members to practice empowered behavior.** The work organization has the responsibility to remove barriers that limit the ability of staff to act in empowered ways. These barriers can include time, tools, training, access to meetings and teams, financial resources, support from other staff members, and effective coaching.

**When employees feel under-compensated, under-titled for the responsibilities they take on, under-noticed, under-praised, and under-appreciated, don’t expect results from employee empowerment.** The basic needs of employees must feel met for employees to give you their discretionary energy, the extra effort that people voluntarily invest in work.

If you dole out more responsibility than their positions should require and cause employees to feel overworked or underpaid for the work expected, you need to make adjustments. People want empowerment, but they don’t want you to take advantage of them, nor do they want to *feel* as if the organization is taking advantage of them. Ensure that the responsibilities match the job, that the person is doing the job in the job description – or change it.
Employees often believe that "someone," usually the manager, has to bestow employee empowerment upon the people who report to him. Consequently, the reporting staff members "wait" for the bestowing of empowerment, and the manager asks why people won't act in empowered ways.

Think about employee empowerment, not as something a manager bestows on employees, but rather as a philosophy and a strategy to help people develop talents, skills, and decision making competency. This growth helps employees feel competent, capable, and successful. Competent, capable, successful people best serve your organization. Avoid these ten employee empowerment traps. Don’t let employee empowerment fail in your organization.

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