Empowerment

What is empowerment?

Empowerment is the control that each individual has over his/her situation. It takes place when managers choose to give away control to their team. Having invested time and money in developing both the individuals and the team, it makes sense to let them make reasonable decisions on subjects they are knowledgeable about. They may even have a better level of knowledge of the situation than their manager, especially of the detail, as they are often closer to the situation. Being involved in this way is also likely to increase morale, and has the added advantage that managers can free up valuable time for themselves.

How is empowerment different from delegation?

Empowerment involves delegation. Part of the process of delegation involves the manager showing the employee a specific way to do a task, where each step is followed. By contrast, when a manager empowers a team member, they will describe and agree the outcome needed, and then let the employee make a choice on how to solve the problem. The manager will still need to ensure a clear understanding of what the boundaries are and ensure the individual is committed to the success of the task.

Control then takes the form of facilitating & monitoring. Just as with any sport, the team makes many of the decisions on the pitch, but there is still a coach to guide before, during & after. It is even more important to review and evaluate when the team or individual is not used to empowerment, to assess what both they and the manager might need to change next time.

What causes empowerment to fail?

As with any other management techniques, empowerment is not foolproof, and as with delegation, it cannot be substituted by abdication. Other reasons why empowerment can fail include:

- **Trying to change overnight** – especially where the employee is used to tight control, it will take time for everyone to adapt to a new way of working.
- **Not explaining boundaries** – the team or individual will still need to know if there are courses of action which are not open to them.
- **Not allowing open communication** – empowerment cannot work in an atmosphere of mistrust or poor communication.
- **Keeping information secret from employees** – see above.
- **Having employees think they are doing it alone** – the team need to know they can rely on the support of their manager when needed.
- **Not having a monitor** – the team should themselves check to make sure they are on course, not the manager.
- **Not giving feedback** – this is an essential part of the review process.

Empowerment and team development

It is worth noting that empowerment is one of the key factors in helping a team to develop as quickly as possible. A team which is allowed and encouraged to set it's own targets, standards, and values, will become effective much quicker than one that is held back by lack of trust.

Could you empower your team?

Many managers do not feel comfortable giving up so much control to the team. Where close control is called for, delegation often remains the best choice, as this keeps the manager close to the task. However, where you are able to manage at a distance, empowerment could be useful. This need not just be in large teams, but could be used for example when a manager is on holiday or needs to attend a meeting.

If as a manager you can trust another individual to run your part of the business when you are not there, could you empower them by 'giving away' sufficient of your authority while you are at work? Ask yourself:

- Do you really need to get involved in the detail of the task?
- Do you feel the need to constantly monitor the decisions they make?
- Does the method they use really matter if it achieves the result?
- Do they need further training to complete the task?
- Do they need constant support?
- Will you be nearby all the time?

If you answered 'Yes' to many of these questions, empowerment may not be the best choice for you. If however you answered 'No' to all or nearly all of them, it could be worth working towards empowering your team.

For related topics see Top Tips:
- ➔ **Delegation**
- ➔ **Leadership**
- ➔ **Objectives - Writing**