

Leading through Empowerment

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by Gary Bradt, PsyD

What got you to the top will not keep you there. This is a difficult lesson to learn. Many leaders earn success by getting involved and accomplishing things. They are tireless workers willing to do whatever is necessary to complete the task. Their diligent efforts lead to rewards, recognition, and promotions. However, at some point that all ends. Continuing on the same path that initially led to success results in stagnation, even failure. By remaining on that path, the leader works as hard as he or she ever did, but the results do not follow.

Where does the leader go wrong? One simple, but far-reaching error: failing to recognize that rules change as you climb the leadership ladder. Once you reach a certain organizational level, your job changes dramatically: you are no longer expected to accomplish those tasks, you are expected to make sure that things get done. Exploring the subtle yet powerful differences between doing things and getting things done is a lesson in how to empower others. Mastering this lesson will allow you to remain an effective leader while accepting greater responsibility.

Why Empowerment?

Ours is a "doing culture." We value activity and making things happen. Those on the job who hustle and do things draw praise and recognition. That praise and recognition leads to promotion, reinforcing the behavior that preceded it. With each step up the ladder you hustle even more, striving to do more of the things that brought you success.

Eventually, success leads to supervising others, a point at which your job responsibilities fundamentally shift. Work still involves getting things done, but now it means getting them done through others, or delegating. While other people perform the daily tasks, your job is to properly lead and manage those people. Many leaders fail or plateau in their career when they reach this level because they fail to make the shift from doing to leading. Empowerment is the key for overcoming this stumbling block. Yet many leaders scoff at this concept, charging ahead, blind to its meaning and potential benefit.

Why Leaders Resist

Leaders often resist empowerment movements within their organizations. Some resist because they do not understand what empowerment means, believing that it entails letting employees do whatever they want. Such leaders think that empowering others reduces the leader to an impotent coach who stands idly by while others make poor decisions.

Other leaders resist out of their need for control. They fear that letting others make decisions or take action opens the door for errors that will reflect poorly on the leader. Such leaders are frequently so self-confident that they believe no one can do things as well as they.

Finally, some leaders resist empowering others because they fear losing the sense of satisfaction that comes from seeing the fruits of their labor at the end of the day. They enjoy pointing to a tangible list and saying "that is what I got done today." By empowering others to accomplish tasks, the leader may feel unfulfilled, as he or she cannot point to anything specific that he or she actually did. This can lead to a sense of guilt and belief that the leader is not doing a good job.

Why Followers Resist

Leaders are not alone in resisting empowerment. Followers may resist as well—sometimes for very good reasons. They may sense that management is not truly committed to empowerment. Hence, employees may react with skepticism when they are given the freedom to make decisions and act independently. This is especially true for organizations where command and control has been the prevailing management style. Rarely does that type of work culture change simply because an upper-level manager decided to preach empowerment.

Others may fear they lack the necessary skills to live up to their new roles. A supervisor who historically needed approval to purchase pencils will not embrace the sudden opportunity to make decisions involving thousands of dollars. He or she will likely feel overwhelmed and reluctant to act on these newfound freedoms and responsibilities. Unfortunately, too many leaders mistakenly view this reluctance as proof that employees do not really want to be empowered, concluding that empowerment does not work.

Finally, some followers may resist empowerment because it is easier to let someone else shoulder the load. While usually in the minority, these employees resist assuming responsibility even as they complain about those who exercise it regularly. Empowerment would nudge them out of their protective shell to which they have become all too accustomed.

Fortunately, these common forms of resistance can be overcome. The keys lie in understanding what empowerment is and articulating a clear strategy for its implementation.

Overcoming Resistance

Resistance is overcome when both leaders and followers understand the concept of empowerment. It is not a means for abdicating responsibility; it is a means for creating shared responsibility. Empowerment is not letting people do whatever they want. It is teaching, training, and encouraging them to do what make sense for them and the organization. Empowerment cannot be broken down into a series of training programs, though training may enable empowerment efforts.

Ultimately, empowerment is a shared philosophy and covenant between followers and leaders. It taps into and develops everyone's talents. Empowerment implies that those closest to the work make decisions about that work. It means that trained, competent people make sound behavioral choices with direction, guidance, and support from their leadership.

For leaders, empowerment means freedom to get more done while personally doing less of the hands-on work. It means changing your focus from actually doing things to making sure those things get done. It means exponentially increasing the impact of your leadership by helping others grow in their job-related skills. Empowering leaders measure themselves based on their followers' accomplishments.

Five Steps to Empowerment

For those interested in becoming an empowering leader, here is a five-step checklist to guide your efforts:

- stop doing, start leading
- hire people with the necessary skills or train them
- give people the resources they need to do the job
- be available to provide ongoing support
- see yourself as servant, not boss

Stop Doing, Start Leading

Clarify where the organization is going and how it can get there. Think long term while keeping an eye on today. Taking a broad view, identify work for today that will get tomorrow's results. Then recruit and organize people to do that work.

Shift your focus from performing tasks to leading the people who do the work. Stop doing and start leading. If you fail to make this shift you will eventually become overwhelmed with too much to do while the people you lead languish.

Hire People with Needed Skills or Train Them

Whenever possible, hire and promote smart, capable people. Rarely will you go wrong by surrounding yourself with intelligent people and stepping out of their way. This is frequently bypassed for two reasons: either such people are unavailable, or the leader fears being overshadowed, which prevents him or her from hiring or promoting the right people.

Empowering leaders realize that capable people are keys to their success, not threats. Remember that you are measured by what they accomplish, so leveraging other people's skills will complement and highlight your own.

If people lack requisite skills, train them. It is ignorant (if not cruel) to empower people to act when they lack the requisite training, knowledge, or skills. For example, who would feel comfortable flying with a pilot empowered to take the controls and make all the decisions during his first training flight? It is smarter and more effective to ease people into their roles until they have developed competence and confidence to act independently.

Give People the Resources They Need

As an empowering leader, your job is not to do things, it is to get things done through others. Your job includes making sure that those who are doing things have the resources they need to do their jobs. Those resources may include physical materials, money, people, time, or support from upper management. Your job is to identify the need and meet it. Do not assume that you already know everything followers might need to do their jobs.

Do not assume that what you needed in the job when you did it is what they need now. Everyone is different and circumstances change. Ask them what they need and listen to their answers.

You need not provide for everything they ask. If their requests are unreasonable, explain why. But first ask questions and find out why they think as they do. This is an opportunity for both of you to learn more about what the job actually entails. To accomplish this, you must stay in touch with your followers.

Provide Ongoing Support

Empowerment does not mean abdication of responsibility. It means that after you set direction, match people to the task, provide them with resources, and remain available for guidance and support. This support takes many forms, depending on those involved.

Some may need moral support and assurance, while others may need someone to share ideas with. Still others may need additional training and direct supervision if the task proves more difficult than anticipated, while some may need to be left alone and given room to operate. It is your job as an empowering leader to determine what level of support is required and provide it.

Sometimes you need to provide support that your followers do not want—or recognize that they need. For example, imagine a 12-year-old child who wants to learn to drive. You would never empower him to drive before he was ready, even if he thought he was. You would give the child all the guidance necessary to keep him safe and the car intact. Do the same when entrusting employees with organizational assets, material, etc. It is not wise to empower people for duties that they may want but are not yet ready to assume.

View Yourself as Servant

Too often leaders feel they have to be the boss. They think they need to be the ones to direct others—telling them what to do. After all, your employees work for you, right? Wrong. As a leader you work for your followers. You serve them by providing direction, resources, guidance, and support. To the degree that you serve them, they will perform for you.

Again, this does not mean that you assume a weak position and let people do what they want. It means that you assess their needs and meet them to the best of your ability. Doing so frees them to do more—allowing you to assume more responsibility. The more people you serve, the more you will gain.

Conclusion

To be an empowering leader, you must involve everyone in the workplace. Remember, empowering others does not mean standing aside and letting others take charge. It requires power—the power of identifying talent and unleashing it.

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