

Employee Empowerment - The Competitive Edge?

By

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Employee empowerment and its impact on organizational performance, employee engagement and motivation has been heavily researched over the past years. The findings generally point towards bottom-line benefits of an empowered workforce. This is especially the case for the long-term growth and development of a business. Management and leadership expert, Steven Covey, describes an empowered organization as “one in which individuals have the knowledge, skill, desire and opportunity to personally succeed in a way that leads to collective organizational success”. This statement presents employee empowerment as a win-win concept that benefits both individual employees and the organization. So what does an empowered workforce look like in a competitive business environment and how can one effectively foster a culture of empowerment in the workplace?

An empowered organization does not happen by chance and research shows that it is strongly linked to participative leadership, employee engagement and involvement as well as employee motivation. The core concept is that of creating work environments that give people the maximum possible influence over work-related decisions and the creation of conditions that foster initiative and self-determination. The onus for creating this environment is on both employees and the leadership of the organization.

The advantages of an empowered organization have been identified by a number of researchers. These are mainly:

- (1) Stronger commitment to accomplishing tasks.
- (2) Greater initiative and carrying out role responsibilities.
- (3) Greater persistence in the face of obstacles and setbacks.
- (4) Increased levels of innovation and learning.
- (5) Higher optimism about the success of the work.
- (6) Higher job satisfaction.
- (7) Stronger organizational commitment.
- (8) Lower employee turnover.

It is important to note that the benefits of a culture of empowerment do not come without costs. The following are three potential areas that need consideration:

(1) Unless leaders are confident in their competence and abilities they may feel threatened by their staff's high level of engagement and simply pay lip service to empowerment. This emphasizes the need for thorough recruitment and selection processes as well as ongoing leadership development.

(2) An empowered organization requires a significant investment and raises costs allocated to selection, training and talent management. This highlights

the importance of high caliber training and consultancy from qualified and experienced service providers.

(3) Employee expectations may be raised beyond what top management is ready to provide in terms of autonomy, decision-making and self-determination in goal-setting. Empowerment, therefore, needs to be carefully implemented.

So while the benefits of creating a culture of employee empowerment far outweigh the costs, it has to be a priority value, well-managed and part of a well thought-out organizational strategy that creates the best conditions that reap maximum benefits.

It is also worth considering that certain types of businesses are intrinsically more conducive to having an empowered culture than others. There are specific conditions that make empowerment easier to achieve. Some examples of these are: products and services that are highly customized to suit client needs; work that involves complex non-routine tasks using technology that requires high levels of human intervention; work that requires an ongoing relationship with service users; work that necessitates high levels of skills and professional training; full-time regular employees as opposed to part-time and temporary ones, and; shareholder opportunities for employees. From a staff point of view, employees with a high need for achievement, emotional stability, self-determination and intrinsic motivation are more likely to be empowered than those who lack these qualities.

So as a leader in your business what can you do to create a culture conducive to employee empowerment? The following are some core leadership and management practices that facilitate the conditions for empowerment.

- Share the mission, vision and strategy of your business. The more aware employees are of the purpose and direction of the business the more possible it becomes that they identify with it. Make sure that employees are aware of the organizational values and that these are internalized and practiced in everything they do.
- Share the goals and objectives of the company and make it clear how every individual contributes to these with their role and the work they do. Whenever possible involve employees in setting their own goals and objectives.
- Ensure that employees feel valued and appreciated by providing encouragement, expressing gratitude and praising them whenever praise is due.
- Expect high standards of performance that instill a sense of achievement in employees, while making sure that objectives and targets are realistic and achievable.

- Express trust and confidence in your people. Allow them to take decisions at the highest level possible even if these are different to how you would take them. Resist the temptation to micromanage even if this gives you a greater sense of control.
- Provide easy access to information and resources that will enable employees to make the right decisions and solve problems independently.
- Minimise bureaucratic limitations and excessive controls and maximize authority and influence over issues related to employees' work.
- Recognise and reward contributions and behaviours that show initiative, innovation, extra effort, leadership, etc. Acknowledge and recognize success and give credit to whom it is due.
- Delegate responsibility and authority for significant activities that contribute towards the success of the business.
- Provide regular informal feedback as well as formal performance based feedback as part of a performance management system. This way, employees know where they stand in relation to organizational objectives and receive appropriate rewards and recognition for their efforts and the results they achieve.
- When recruiting employees, look for traits such as achievement drive, self-determination, self-confidence, and emotional stability.
- Adopt a 'coach approach' with employees – explore problematic issues, ask questions, offer guidance and encourage employees to solve their own problems with the necessary support rather than dishing out solutions.
- Create opportunities for the staff to constantly learn and grow. Foster a culture of continuous training and development in your organization.

From an employee perspective, it is also important that you are committed towards your own empowerment by taking an active interest in developing your personal career path, identify areas for growth and development, contribute ideas and give feedback to your leaders, set challenging performance goals and actively participate in team meetings, committees and other working groups. Commit yourself to increasing your qualifications and diversifying your work experience as this makes you more employable and increases your range of employment choices. It is also important that as much as possible you choose work that interests you, provides you with a sense of purpose and is aligned with your personal needs and values. This greatly increases the probability that you will feel empowered in your work, as your impact and contribution will be one that is personally meaningful.

Empowerment needs to be regarded as a strategy that encourages and enables people to develop their talents, competencies, decision-making and problem solving abilities. This type of organizational culture induces a sense of accomplishment, purpose, autonomy and mastery in employees putting them in an optimal state to achieve organizational objectives as well as higher levels of fulfillment and self-actualisation. In a digital age where technology and information are more accessible than ever, it is the emphasis on effective leadership and human factors that makes the difference and gives businesses the competitive edge.