EMPOWERMENT.

Checklist 048

» INTRODUCTION

As part of a general shift away from traditional hierarchical, command and control styles of management towards more consultative and participative approaches, the concept of empowerment became increasingly popular during the 1990s. Currently, the term itself is perhaps less frequently used, but the thinking behind it still plays an important role in management thinking and practice. Empowerment is seen as a key aspect of the currently popular notion of 'employee engagement' with 'empowering leadership' cited as one of the four key enablers of engagement by the Engage for Success movement in the UK.

Empowerment is an approach to management which is based on the belief that workers' abilities are often under-used and that, employees can and will make a greater contribution if they are empowered to do so. Empowerment gives employees greater authority to think for themselves, to participate in problem-solving and decision making and to innovate and take initiative. It can reveal and develop their talents, increase their sense of engagement with and ownership of their work and boost morale and job satisfaction.

Whilst there are clear benefits for employees, empowerment also offers considerable advantages to organisations in building stronger workplace relationships, increasing levels of discretionary effort and leading to improvements in efficiency and performance. Empowerment can also help to free managers from dealing with minor day to day activities and give them more time to reflect on longer-term strategic issues.

At the same time ceding power and authority to employees inevitably involves a degree of risk: employees may make mistakes, new initiatives may fail, individuals may use their new-found authority inappropriately or share sensitive commercial information outside the organisation. Empowerment is a complex process that requires careful management and involves setting appropriate boundaries and balancing the risks against the potential benefits.

The ability to empower others, by creating an environment of trust and energising, supporting and coaching their team members is a crucial skill for managers, but one which they may be unwilling or reluctant to put into practice. Some managers are more comfortable when they feel they are in control, especially at times of economic difficulty and pressure. Others may be apprehensive about having to accept decisions they would not have made themselves or take responsibility for the mistakes of others. This checklist outlines some key considerations when seeking to introduce or develop empowerment and provides some basic guidance on managing the process.

» DEFINITION

Empowerment is a process whereby employees are given greater discretion to make decisions and to act on those decisions without referring to their managers. Power and authority are shared to enable the organisation or department to function more effectively. Empowerment may be an organisation-wide initiative or may involve giving individuals or small groups of employees the responsibility to carry out specific tasks and projects.

The distinction between empowerment and delegation is not always clear cut. However, empowerment is generally seen as a more comprehensive approach to management, while delegation is commonly used in relation the assignment of responsibility for a specific task or activity.

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1. Review the current situation

Consider the management philosophy and practice of the organisation in which you work. Ask yourself:

›   How are decisions currently made? Who is involved?
›   Is top-down decision making the norm?
›   Or is decision making more participative and collaborative?
›   To what extent are employees already empowered?
›   What are the expectations of managers and employees at different levels in the organisation?

2. Understand the importance of organisational culture

Empowerment requires a climate of trust, openness and experimentation in which employees feel free to make suggestions, and try out new ways of doing things without fear of recrimination if things go wrong. Some organisational cultures are more conducive than others to empowerment. The following classification is adapted from the work of Charles Handy (Understanding organizations, 4th ed, 1993) and Edgar Schein (Organizational culture and leadership, 1985):

a)   **Role** culture – characterised by defined functions and specialists, set procedures and job descriptions

b)   **Task** culture – focused on tasks and projects, where the chief concern is to bring right resources and people together and let them get on with the job.

c)   **Fear** culture where:
›   decisions - and truth - come ultimately from senior managers
›   relationships are principally vertical and linear
›   each person has a niche which cannot be invaded
›   exchanges take place by agenda and prearranged appointment
›   there is deference to rank and authority
›   people use formal communication processes to 'cover their backs'.

d)   **Trust** culture where:
›   ideas come from individuals
›   employees are responsible and motivated
›   there is an air of informality and few closed doors
›   employees can make mistakes without fear of blame or recrimination
›   there are continuing opportunities for learning.

Consider the culture of your own organisation - our related checklist on understanding organisational culture provides further guidance (See Additional resources below). It should be easier to introduce empowerment in a task or trust-based culture than in a role or fear culture. In the latter, a culture change programme might be needed or empowerment might be introduced in stages.

3 Assess management and leadership styles

An important aspect of having the right culture for empowerment is managers who adopt a suitable leadership style. Tannenbaum and Schmidt's leadership continuum provides one way to analyse leadership styles by representing the relationship between the manager and his or her team on a sliding scale, moving from a situation where the manager makes a decision and announces it to the team to a situation where team members make decisions within certain defined limits. Tannenbaum and Schmidt suggest that leaders and managers should be aiming to move up this scale over time, delegating increasing levels of authority and power to their employees.

Be aware that greater empowerment will affect the dynamics of your relationship as a manager with those who report to you, and be prepared to make adjustments to your personal management style including the way you communicate with your team and the approach you take to setting and achieving objectives. Our related checklists on management and leadership styles provide further information (See Additional resources below.)

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4.   Recognise barriers to empowerment

These may include:

› organisational culture – as discussed above, many organisations operate in ways which are inherently controlling, bureaucratic and unreceptive to change
› psychological factors –managers may feel that empowerment means losing control, while employees may not wish to take on increased responsibility or suspect that they are being exploited
› rigid routines – these often discourage people from taking responsibility
› specialisation – some employees may have a very specialised or narrow job role and may see new responsibilities as a threat or an imposition
› poor information sharing – some managers may be unaware or uncertain of what their teams know or have access to.

Keep the specific barriers you identify in mind and work out strategies to address them. This could involve anything from working to modify organisational culture and expectations, to changing bureaucratic processes or providing assurances and clarifications to individuals.

5.   Clarify your goals

The understanding you have gained through focusing on the management culture and practice of your organisation will help you to decide on how best to move forward and what the next steps should be.

Clarify what you understand by empowerment and what you wish to gain from it. Is it primarily about:

› more consultative decision making processes?
› more active delegation?
› increased responsibility and authority for problem-solving and decision-making?
› greater autonomy for employees in fulfilling their job roles?
› the development of individual employees and their capabilities?
› improvements to the bottom line?

Consider how you can best introduce or develop appropriate levels of empowerment. Are you in a position to develop empowering management practice in your own team or is broader organisational change needed? Discuss what you have in mind with colleagues and senior managers and establish a unified and integrated approach.

6.   Carry out a skills audit and assess the scope for empowerment

Carry out a job analysis, taking advantage of the expertise of your HR department. Find out what people actually do in their present jobs, and check this against both formal job descriptions and the implicit knowledge and skills used to fulfil the job role. Look out for situations where empowerment is effectively already happening and areas where it would be appropriate.

Although, empowerment is primarily about giving employees the authority to decide how best to carry out their roles, rather than allocating new roles, it can be helpful to investigate hidden talents which employees may have. Ask people about themselves - do not just assume you know all there is to know). Draw up a 'talent rota' of currently under-used talents, including those currently used outside the workplace. Think about how the opportunities available fit with the skills and experience your employees currently have.

7.   Communicate clearly

If empowerment is to work well, it is vital for all those involved to understand what is involved. Make sure that the concept and its advantages are clearly communicated and that everyone understands how the process works, what is expected of them and what the results are likely to be.

Those who are used to carrying out orders rather than thinking for themselves or who carry out a very narrow range of tasks, may feel threatened by or suspicious of empowerment. Make it clear that empowerment is not about taking on new tasks but about finding better and more productive ways to carry out existing ones. Stress that job responsibilities will not be extended without appropriate adjustment to remuneration, and if additional rewards are to be given, explain clearly how the system will work.

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Others may fear that they will be unable to fulfil the responsibilities they are being given, or resist being pushed out of their comfort zone. Allow people to express their concerns and reassure them that they will be given any training or support they need.

8.   Set clear boundaries and agree terms of reference

Providing clear boundaries of authority and accountability is crucial to the success of empowerment and will also help to limit the risks of empowerment. Empowerment should not be extended to decisions which will affect the strategic direction, values or mission of the organisation. Individual employees must be clear about the scope of empowerment - what they are responsible for, which decisions they can take themselves, which should be made in consultation with others and which need to be referred upwards. Once boundaries have been set they can be reinforced in practice by 'case law' examples, so that team members gain a clearer understanding of when to do without telling, when to do and tell, and when to ask before doing.

9.   Agree performance objectives and measures

It is also vital to agree on objectives and how progress towards them will be measured. Empowerment is unlikely to be successful unless those who are being empowered understand and accept the responsibilities assigned to them, believe that the objectives set are realistic and achievable and are committed to working towards them.

10.   Provide the information and resources needed

You also need to think through what, if any, additional resources and information empowered employees will need access to if they are to carry out their responsibilities successfully. Consider what changes will needed and put new arrangements in place. Accept that the process of empowering employees will inevitably involve them in making decisions on expenditure. Existing budgets may be need to be redefined, and levels of spending authority adjusted. This should not be feared - employees often find ways to spend less than managers to achieve the same results.

11.   Provide training and support

Giving people responsibility and resources to complete tasks is one thing - setting them adrift without support and guidance is quite another. Employees may need a good deal of support in the early stages, especially if they are apprehensive about taking on extra responsibility. As a manager you must understand that empowerment is not an opportunity for you to abdicate your responsibilities. You will remain accountable for outcomes and need to find a balance between excessive supervision and micromanagement and a lack of support.

12.   Allow employees to get on with the job

Once the ground has been prepared, empowerment can start to take effect. Be aware that empowered employees may do things differently than you would have done them yourself. They may make decisions that you feel will be unproductive. Understand that empowerment must be genuine and resist the temptation to intervene or overrule decisions you don't like. Empowerment is a process of learning and development. Inevitably, if you seek to foster innovation and experimentation, mistakes will be made. Allow employees to learn from their mistakes. Don't resort to blame or recrimination or you will effectively sabotage the whole process of empowerment. Positive changes will prove their worth in time; poor changes are unlikely to survive. In a culture of change, changes will not necessarily be permanent.

13.   Monitor and support developments

Decide on the best way to monitor progress on an ongoing basis. Regular team meetings or one-to-ones can be used to check on achievements, give and receive feedback, discuss problems and provide support. Be sure to recognise and reward successes and build on them for the future.

You will know that empowerment is working when you find, for example, that customers become more satisfied, bottom-line results start to improve, and people:

   › are able to run things without your hourly or daily involvement
   › show initiative and take ownership of their responsibilities
   › don't require you to solve 'their' problems.

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Bear in mind that in cases where empowerment really isn't working, even after a reasonable period of adjustment, it may be necessary to think through the reasons and consider reversing the process or finding a better way to manage the process.

» POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Managers should avoid:

› seeing empowerment as a threat rather than an opportunity
› failing to set clear boundaries and guidelines for employees
› failing to recognise or reward people who take on extra responsibilities
› going to extremes – either micromanaging or abdicating all responsibility.

» ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

The busy manager's guide to delegation, Richard A. Luecke and Perry McIntosh
New York: New York: Amacom, 2009

Leading empowerment: a practical guide to change, Michael Applegarth
Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2006

Supervisory management: the art of inspiring, empowering, and developing people 6th ed, Donald C Mosley, Leon C Megginson and Paul H Pietri
Cincinnati: Ohio: Thomson South Western, 2005

You don't have to do it alone: how to involve others to get things done, Richard H. Axelrod and others
San Francisco: California: Berrett-Koehler, 2004

Grass roots management: how to grow initiative and responsibility in all your people, Guy Browning
London: Prentice Hall Business, 2003

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JOURNAL ARTICLES

Examining the differential longitudinal performance of directive versus empowering leadership in teams, Natalia M Lorinkova, Matthew J Pearsall and Henry P Sims
Academy of Management Journal, April 2013, vol 56 no 2, pp 573-596

More than lip service: linking the intensity of empowerment initiatives to individual well-being and performance, Michal Biron and Peter A Bamberger
International Journal of Human Resource Management, January 2011, vol 22 no 2, pp 258-278

Delegating and devolving power a case study of engaged employees, Richard J Pech,
Journal of Business Strategy, 2009, vol 30 no 1, pp 27-32

These articles are available for members to download from CMI's library. More information at
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RELATED CHECKLISTS

068	Motivating your staff in a time of change
112	Successful delegation
232	Understanding organisational culture
256	Understanding management and leadership styles
084	Conducting a skills audit

RELATED THINKERS

15	Rosabeth Moss Kanter: pioneer of empowerment and change management
50	Kurt Lewin: change management and group dynamics

RELATED MODELS

Tannenbaum and Schmidt Leadership Continuum
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

» NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MANAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

Unit BA2 Provide leadership in your area of responsibility

» MORE INFORMATION

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