

THE SECRET OF EMPOWERMENT

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Empowerment, if understood and used wisely, is one of the best techniques available to a leader. Leaders who do not use empowerment are strictly micro-managers and can only accomplish limited goals. These individuals follow the mantra “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” Even the best of those who empower others to make decisions and complete tasks sometimes revert back to “their comfort zone” of doing a job themselves rather than risk failure. Empowerment, as its name implies, strengthens the group, job, company, or even performance team. The secret is simple: allow others the opportunity to display their talents and take ownership in their work and thus, improve the group as a whole.

Empowerment is not without risk. Before a person can empower another, he or she must have the courage to step back and allow that person room to exercise his/her decision making abilities even if this might mean experiencing setbacks along the way. A good leader might even see failure ahead in the way a person is performing or thinking about a job and actually allow a minor disaster to occur as a “learning tool” for others. Naturally, good leaders know when to step in and remedy the problem before a major catastrophe results.

Why is empowerment useful as a leadership tool? The answer, again, is very simple. When you empower another individual to make decisions, there is an inherent sense of trust that has passed from you to that person. If the person believes that you are willing to trust his/her judgment and abilities to handle a task, that individual’s self-esteem is immediately raised and he/she is encouraged to do a stellar job. After

all, you have put your faith in him. The key goal is to make each and every member of your group/team feel important and to embrace a feeling of ownership and responsibility for the overall success or failure of the group.

em·pow·er

- 1** : to give official authority or legal power to
- 2** : enable
- 3** : to promote the self-actualization or influence of

Prior to beginning the empowerment process, make sure that everyone is on the same page with a definition. Does empowerment mean “I can do whatever I want with this task and make independent decisions with complete autonomy”? Does empowerment mean, “I am empowered as long as I do everything the way my boss, teacher, parent, or peer would do it”? Once everyone has the same idea of what empowerment means, the process can begin. In its simplest form, empowerment is treating people as adults whatever their role is, no matter where they sit in the hierarchy. On occasion, empowerment can be a dangerous thing. What if the other person does not want what I want? What if they venture from the agreed upon game plan? What if once they are empowered they start doing things differently than anticipated? All of these are legitimate questions.

Before empowering others, it is important to understand some general

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rules of 21st Century Behavior as presented by the “Impact Factory”. These include:

1. Identify what people do well and have them do more of it.
2. Set clear expectations and boundaries.
3. Allow mistakes, yet have real consequences.
4. Have consequences, not threats.
5. Consider all ideas no matter how far-fetched.
6. Find out what other people want and give it to them (within reason).
7. Listen to what people are saying, not just what you want to hear.
8. Encourage discussion and debate.
9. Deal with the boredom factor.
10. Make it clear how everyone in the group fits in and make time for each.
11. Try new things, break patterns.
12. Publish successes and be quick to give credit and acknowledgement.
13. Run appreciation sessions—don't just meet when things go wrong.
14. Have aspirations, but dream with your feet on the ground.
15. View conflicts in terms of resolution, not something to be avoided.

It is my belief that successful teams thrive on passion, compassion, humor and ability. Although there may be a hierarchy or ‘pecking order’ in the organization, this is not seen as rigid and inflexible. No one lords their rank or position over another. Everyone has a sense of importance and their roles are never minimized. Here are a few rules that one might consider if trying to create an atmosphere conducive to empowerment.

Rules of Empowerment

- ***When having meetings or group discussions, leave your rank outside. Everyone is of equal importance.***
- ***Speak in a tone that is positive and constructive. Leave the threats, anger, and “put downs” outside.***
- ***If you have strong feelings about a matter use reason and logic rather than anger and passion.***
- ***Always show respect to others. Never indicate a lack of interest through sighs, yawning, or daydreaming.***
- ***Respect confidentiality. What happens behind closed doors stays behind closed doors.***

With all of this information, how can you as a teacher or leader utilize the idea

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of empowerment for the betterment of your group? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Meet individually with all members of the group and get to know them. Determine their likes and dislikes as well as goals and aspirations. In the discussion, ask questions that will help determine what types of individual they are: drifters, deciders, doers, or masters.
2. Make a list of the people in your group and identify them as drifters, deciders, doers, masters. You might just want to make a mental list after listening to their comments during your one on one meeting.

DRIFTERS... Those people who simply drift along without focus or well defined goals. These people are always content to go with the flow.

DECIDERS... People who make decisions but never follow through. They always have opinions, and sometimes good ones, but avoid working to implement ideas.

DOERS... These individuals faithfully do whatever is expected without ever questioning. They never think about how they might improve the situation or exceed the expectation of their directors.

MASTERS... These people make conscious decisions to be exceptional. They follow through after decisions are made. They take pride in making contributions for the good of the group. They are their own worst critics and continually strive for improvement and perfection.

3. Make a list of goals for the group. These might include: better choreography, fund-raising for an away trip or contest, better variety of team socials and team building activities, new community service projects to improve relations, raising the grade point average of the team, etc. Each of these projects requires different strengths.
4. Appoint members to each of these groups. You may accept volunteers but try to give reasons for your selections that are self-esteem building and encourage participation. For example, “Rachel, I would like you to head up our scholarship and tutoring committee. Your academic record is stellar and all of the faculty members I have spoken with say you would be great to conduct tutoring and study hall sessions for our academic improvement. After all, if we have members failing, the group can not utilize their performance talents.” Or, “Susan, I understand that you are very active in your church and

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- community. Would you consent to serving as Chairman of our Community Service Committee?" You can also appoint co-chairman and volunteers. Also remember that a person does not have to be the chairmen to be empowered. There is room for every type of person. The trick is to understand where each person is best-suited.
5. After the committees are formed and the chairpersons named, individually meet with each to review general goals and boundaries of their work. Encourage creativity and innovation. Set times for each group to report their progress to you and the entire team. Accountability is not lost in empowerment.
 6. Always be willing to reassess things. Sometimes people "step up" who you believed would not and, likewise, people who seemed to want empowerment talk a great game but are not good with follow-through and attention to detail.
 7. Be a good listener. Pay attention to what others say and do. For real progress to occur, you must be willing to initiate and encourage change. This means being able to support other people's ideas and solutions even if they are not always in line with your own thinking.

One final note—delegation and empowerment are not synonyms. Delegation of responsibility alone does not always involve empowerment. Taking attendance each day, helping to distribute uniforms, etc. are tasks that require no creative element to perform. These are simply duties that are well-defined and bounded. Empowerment goes beyond delegation. When you empower another, you are asking that person to take all of his/her skills and use them along with innovation and creativity to address an issue. New ways to recruit members for the team, better methods to improve technique, more effective ways to study, etc. are good examples where one has the opportunity and permission to be creative in his/her approach. Understand the difference and remember not everyone wants to be empowered. Some individuals love well-defined tasks in which success is easily measured and creativity is not really required. They are very happy to serve in jobs of this nature and should be made to realize the importance of these tasks.

As an educator, there is no greater reward than empowering students to fulfill their potential. Reduce frustration and circumvent catastrophe by having an organized and informed approach to empowerment.

