



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H005DX
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
APRIL 23, 2010

ARTICLE **MANAGING PEOPLE**

Empowering Your Employees to Empower Themselves

by Marshall Goldsmith

MANAGING PEOPLE

Empowering Your Employees to Empower Themselves

by Marshall Goldsmith

APRIL 23, 2010

As a manager or leader, do you let your people assume more responsibility when they are able? Do you know when that is, or do you keep telling yourself that they aren't ready yet?

In my travels from organization to organization, I talk with thousands of people every year who want to be treated as "partners" rather than as employees. They want information to flow up as well as down. But, oftentimes, leaders do not want to give up control.

I knew a CEO who was the leader of one of the world's largest global organizations. He received feedback that he was too stubborn and opinionated. He learned that he needed to do a better job of letting others to make decisions and to focus less on being right himself. He practiced this simple technique for one year: before speaking, he would take a breath and ask himself, "Is it worth it?" He learned that 50% of the time his comments may have been right on, but they weren't worth it. He quickly began focusing more on empowering others and letting them take ownership and commitment for decisions, and less on his own need to add value.

Your employees understand their jobs. They know their tasks, roles, and functions within the organization, and it's time for you to let them do what they need to do to get the job done. But there is a critical point that is often missed: It isn't possible for a leader to "empower" someone to be accountable and make good decisions. People have to empower themselves. Your role is to encourage and support the decision-making environment, and to give employees the tools and knowledge they need to make and act upon their own decisions. By doing this, you help your employees reach an empowered state.

The process does take longer — employees will only believe they are empowered when they are left alone to accomplish results over a period of time — but it’s effective and worth the time. If a company has a history of shutting down or letting go of initiators, for instance, the leader can’t just tell employees, “You are empowered to make decisions.”

Part of building an empowering environment is dependent on the leader’s ability to run interference on behalf of the team. The leader needs to make sure people are safe doing their jobs. To make sure this happens, an ongoing discussion of the needs, opportunities, tasks, obstacles, projects, what is working and what is not working is absolutely critical to the development and maintenance of a “safe” working environment. You are likely to spend a lot of time in dialogue with other leaders, employees, team members, and peers.

Following are a few things leaders can do to build an environment that empowers people.

1. **Give power** to those who have demonstrated the capacity to handle the responsibility.
2. **Create a favorable environment** in which people are encouraged to grow their skills.
3. **Don’t second-guess** others’ decisions and ideas unless it’s absolutely necessary. This only undermines their confidence and keeps them from sharing future ideas with you.
4. **Give people discretion** and autonomy over their tasks and resources.

Successful leaders and managers today are willing to exercise their leadership in such a way that their people are empowered to make decisions, share information, and try new things. Most employees (future leaders) see the value in finding empowerment and are willing to take on the responsibilities that come with it. If future leaders have the wisdom to learn from the experience of present leaders, and if present leaders have the wisdom to build an environment that empowers people, both will share in the benefits.

There are many more things that leaders can do to build an environment that empowers people. Please send any ideas you have. I would love to hear them!

Marshall Goldsmith is recognized as one of the world’s leading executive educators and coaches. Dr. Goldsmith’s 30 books include [What Got You Here Won’t Get You There](#) and [MOJO](#).
