

# Embrace empowerment beyond buzzwords

## Resources, responsibility & authority



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In this series of Supermarket & Retailer's articles, we share stories of what some organisations and managers have done to motivate and inspire their teams. We give you practical ideas of what you can do to create the most amazing, customer-driven company in the world.

The biggest fringe benefit that you get when you become a manager is not the extra money, or a nice private office. It's the fact that you are given power over other people. And yet, paradoxically, like love, the more power you give away, the more power seems to come back to you. In this month's column I'd like to focus on some of the key ideas of empowerment.

'Empowerment' is a word that is thrown around – and misunderstood – too often in today's world, but empowerment is really about giving people

on your team the resources, the responsibility and the authority to get things done their way, and it can unleash tremendous amounts of energy and enthusiasm. There's nothing that pumps up an employee's energy more quickly or completely than when he or she is supported for showing personal initiative, or for going out on a limb to provide better service to a customer.

Employees love to feel that they are trusted and valued members of your business: after all, for the past 50 000 years as human beings we have known that to thrive we must become part of a 'tribe'. In fact, the powerful chemical endorphin is released into your body when this occurs, giving you a sense of belongingness that is very powerful. It also reduces the negative effects of stress, anxiety and uncertainty.

Simon Sinek has noted that, "...Intimidation, humiliation, isolation, feeling dumb, feeling useless and rejection are all stresses we try to avoid inside the organisation. But the danger inside is controllable and it should be the goal of leadership



to set a culture free of danger from each other. And the way to do that is by giving people a sense of belonging. By offering them a strong culture based on a clear set of human values and beliefs. By giving them the power to make decisions. By offering trust and empathy."

If you listed all of the reasons why people just don't do what they are supposed to do at work, you'd probably get to at least thirty and still not cover everything. Some big themes will emerge. (For example, a lot of what people say and do is as a result of the consequences – what happens





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after they said or did something – or even the anticipation of these.)

However, there will also be a whole group of reasons that relate to empowerment, respect and trust in your business, and this is the theme of this month's article. When people are given independence and autonomy, not only does it free you up to focus on other important issues, but your employees are in all likelihood able to make better decisions because they work in the job all day long. When they feel trusted and respected, they will also be a lot happier in their jobs.

But it gets even better. Author John Maxwell writes that the ultimate pinnacle of leadership is not only the ability to inspire and motivate others

to do what you need them to do, or to be the best they can be, but to be able to develop them as leaders in their own right – to replicate yourself, so to speak. Thus, as you empower others you are also helping them to grow. Ultimately, the great leader develops people that can achieve or even surpassed his or her own abilities. In other words, helping people to be leaders in their own right. A good leader finds other leaders; builds them up; gives them the resources, authority, and responsibility; and then lets them go off to achieve. The opposite situation is when a leader undermines his team members and creates barriers that people in his team cannot overcome. That is just stupid.

At the most basic level, empowerment can only

be achieved by a leader who feels secure. When your people are empowered and enabled to make decisions that affect your customers without having to ask for permission every time, it leads to better experiences for both customers and employees.

But you cannot simply wave your hand over your team and vaguely say, "From now on you are empowered." There are too many examples of how challenging work can be, so you don't want them to feel 'thrown in at the deep end' without adequate support. As a manager, this may possibly be the most difficult thing for you to do initially, but you simply cannot take responsibility, and be in control of, every single one of the hundreds of



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- In the same breath, you have to also do something that doesn't come naturally: encourage risks that are reasonably well thought through.
- Talk them through complex work that you currently do, and explain why you do things in that way. Then sit next to them while they do the same and ask them to tell you what they need to do next.
- Get them involved in specific improvement projects where they learn from each other.
- And above all, use your empathy and leadership to create a feeling of safety so that they aren't afraid to try something new.

moments of truth that occur every day. If, however, you can create that sense of ownership and personal responsibility, nothing will be able to stop you. Hand over gradually and coach them through the challenges.

Some ideas include...

- Get people involved in all the work processes and show them the big picture.
- Ask them why they made certain decisions, and then ask them what they would have done differently if they had another chance.
- Gather their ideas and suggestions for better ways of doing things. Show them that you value their ideas. Thank them for the ideas – and never steal credit for their ideas. (It also means that all new ideas are rewarded – even if they are not so good.)

As far as you are concerned don't be worried that you will 'lose' something when you empower people: those endorphins I mentioned before also help you. The reality is that seeing people around you flourish releases endorphins that make it all worthwhile. You know the wonderful feeling that you get when you help someone else that is in a tight spot.

To summarise it all: People want to be great. If they aren't, it's because managers don't allow them to be. It is definitely true that no employee has ever been inspired by the thought of making shareholders richer. Empowering people also empowers you as their leader. You get to achieve much more, and you also become a better leader in the process. The quality of their performance increases, and your customers have far better experiences.

As Goethe put it many years ago...

“ Treat people as though they were what they ought to be and you help them become what they are capable of being. ”

## TEACHING MOMENT



Given the positive benefits of empowering others in your organisation, why do some leaders resist this ability to empower others? It comes down to a combination of three things:

- A desire for job security, (“If I taught them everything I know they will take my job.”)
- Resistance to change: the only person who likes change is a wet baby. The rest of us do whatever we can to maintain the status quo. But true leaders are those people who run head first into the unknown, and risk a little.
- Lack of self-worth: Again, true leaders put their own interests aside to protect us or to pull us into the future. They often sacrifice what is theirs to save what is ours ... And they would never sacrifice what is ours to save what is theirs. **SR**



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