

## **Aligned Empowerment – Could it become a Buzzword? by Jim Austin**

Sit down with today's manager and get into a discussion about "empowerment" and see what kind of reaction you get. Generally a yawn, right? You might get a shrug, a nod, or maybe even rolling eyes but it would probably be a rare day to find anyone getting genuinely excited about such a dated topic. In his 1997 book "The Circle of Innovation" (which is a GREAT read by the way), management guru Tom Peters writes off the term, calling it "overused", striking it in fact, from his vocabulary. The term I tend to hear more often today is "enabling". We, as leaders, are enabling our people now to manage their responsibilities more effectively. A subtle difference in terminology perhaps, probably stemming from all those trendy changes we're somehow becoming accustomed to as innovative thinkers continue to find fresh new ways to define our modern management philosophies. But empowerment is a basic staple and in a growing number of organizations power is shifting from managers to employees.

The "concept" behind empowerment is strong. It's actually been lingering around the US management scene for quite some time now. Dating back to construction teams in the mid 1800's, managers recognized early on the value of delegating full responsibility and control to work teams laying down roads and railways in the rugged American wilderness. As it relates specifically to the evolving discipline of "Quality", empowerment probably wasn't fully embraced until some time in the mid 1980's. Relatively speaking then, we've seen this term quickly lose its luster. Regardless however, of all the trendy changes we're seeing wash through today's business language, the concept of "empowerment" endures, being one of the most basic tools hanging out there on our management tool belt.

Our "Baldrige" still recognizes empowerment! In the 2003 Baldrige National Quality Program (BNQP) Criteria for Performance Excellence, we find that "the term refers to giving employees the authority and responsibility to make decisions and take actions. Empowerment is aimed at enabling employees to satisfy customers on first contact, to improve processes and increase productivity, and to better the organization's business results. [*Take note that*] Empowered employees require information to make appropriate decisions; thus an organizational requirement is to provide this information in a timely and useful way."

Empowerment in a nutshell! Scientists who study organizational behavior find that more and more of today's employees are not being managed in the "traditional" authoritarian style used by generations of past managers. (Greenberg & Baron, 2000) Instead, power is being shifted down the ladder. We're not being stuck with stale terminology. We're simply tending to empower our people more today than we ever have, and we should be excited about it! The question becomes, are we empowering our people effectively?

It's not after all, a declarative activity. We as leaders can't in other words, command empowerment and expect to achieve anything great as a result. Consider this. Organizational leaders genuinely interested in improving their business are told that empowered employees contribute to operational excellence. The clear solution is to step away and let the next level of management assume ownership of whatever

particular activities are driving the organization. Free of boundaries, the empowered group meets, and decides to launch a series of projects designed to make their lives easier and more productive. After a significant investment of time and resources, senior leaders patiently bear out all the “changes” and ultimately find the projects are successful. But the business doesn’t prosper. Why?

Because empowerment has an invisible partner, and it comes in the form of “alignment”. Alignment? Typically, the word takes our mind off in a different direction. It’s a “strategy” word, after all isn’t it? In the BNQP criteria “the term “alignment” refers to consistency of plans, processes, information, resource decisions, actions, results, analysis, and learning to support key organization-wide goals.” [*Note the emphasis on plans, consistency, and goals.*] The one common thread, “information” just doesn’t grab our attention, capturing the true essence that connects the concepts of alignment and empowerment.

Aligned empowerment! That’s a fresh new term we might need to adopt. Greenberg and Baron underscore an important point in their book “*Behavior in Organizations, 2000*”. “The key to empowering people successfully is the sharing of expert information (as opposed to the hoarding of information that has been popular in the past).” Sharing information “consistent” with the organization’s goals and objectives; THE essential step toward successfully empowering our people.

Organizational leaders develop vision, they have a mission, and they espouse core values. Framed by these guiding principles, leaders develop strategy and measures, and then work to “align” their organization to achieve results. Organizational leaders have got to effectively communicate (share) these principles in order to reap all of the benefits that can potentially be gained by effectively empowering their employees.

Absent alignment, empowered teams are left to do the best they can do with the most they can know. Good teams can own and optimize good processes, but without a clear understanding of where their effort fits into the overall scheme of an organization’s goals and objectives, they can’t effectively drive high overall performance. It happens in big and small companies alike.

In a small organization, senior level managers empowered the next tier to take ownership of local operating results so they could focus on the higher level, “strategy development and implementation”. The lower level managers took off, identifying a series of resource intensive projects designed to improve what they perceived to be their biggest day-to-day challenges. When the senior managers began to deploy their strategy, it became clear they were facing conflicting priorities, and the resources they needed to achieve the higher level results were already tied up on less fruitful operational level activities.

In a very large manufacturing organization, work teams were being empowered to identify and correct opportunities for improvement at individual work centers. Orchestrated by a well-organized management group who made sure the teams were first trained in the overall goals and objectives of the company’s business excellence initiative, small incremental improvements quickly generated dramatic increases in productivity and reliability. Measurement charts posted throughout the facility pointed

back to the precise point in time when the empowered teams were cut loose to make their own [*effective*] decisions.

Empowerment and alignment clearly go hand in hand. In order to avoid the mistakes our small company made, and replicate instead the achievements our large company enjoyed, we just need to adhere to a few simple rules;

**Rule # 1: Share the knowledge – motivate the team.** Get them involved. Knowing the big picture helps people prioritize and it's really the only way to achieve alignment. Sometimes it helps to walk people through the same process that led senior managers to reach their own conclusions in the first place. After all, the more minds we can put on task, the better.

**Rule # 2: Coach, don't control.** Inspire people to achieve, and they will.

**Rule # 3: Focus on common goals.** Make it loud and make it clear. Make it visual. Don't take the chance that someone can "assume" what senior leaders are thinking.

**Rule # 4: Encourage learning.** Knowledge is becoming THE company's most valuable resource. Embrace the power.

**Rule # 5: Encourage people to take responsibility.** Give them guidance, and let them run with it. Holding people accountable, done properly, only reinforces the importance of their contribution.

**Rule # 6: Give people the capability to make decisions.** Draw the line. If \$50 is the limit, so be it. Any authority is better than none – and your customers are going to recognize your front line for it.

**Rule # 7: Give people ownership over the processes they work with.** The pride will become self-evident. You'll see it in the results.

If you know of other cases where empowered employees contributed to or sustained significant business improvement, contact me directly and I'll highlight your examples in future quality articles. Get excited about empowerment, but don't forget to align!

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