

# Empowerment

## ...When Are You Ready?

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Empowerment is a concept easy to embrace and hard to execute. Any organization which relies on knowledge, creativity, and effective problem solving to achieve its purpose needs empowered people to be effective. Leaders are only likely to empower people they believe will make good choices.

So how do you assess the capacity to make good choices? At what point should leaders empower others? What should a person do to demonstrate to leadership that they are ready for higher levels of responsibility?

I coach leaders and high-potential professionals to pay careful attention to three choice points: what kind of **action** is taken; whose **interests** are served; and how **dissent** is managed. The way people handle these choice points are important indicators of the value that they can contribute and the readiness for high levels of empowerment.

### Choice 1: Bold Action vs. Mediocrity

Empowerment is useless unless something is done with it. I believe top organizations become that way when people take bold actions to accomplish goals. Bold initiative, however, should still fall within these criteria:

- it advances the organization's mission, purpose, or vision (which requires the mission, purpose, and vision be articulated and understood);
- it applies appropriate levels of technical knowledge;
- it takes appropriate risk management steps (I am advocating boldness, not recklessness).

Simply playing it safe, avoiding failure rather than seeking success, or being satisfied with 'good enough', does not create outstanding organizations. *Advice for leaders: Regardless of success or failure, reward bold effort on behalf of the organization's purpose. Weed out inaction and mediocrity.*

### Choice 2: Team vs. Individual Interests

Self-interest is a fact. Effective organizations leverage this reality by creating structures so the self-interest of individuals aligns with overall organizational purpose. There will always be times, however, when the interests of the organization (or customer) are in conflict with the interests of an individual (or his/her department). What is desired, of course, are people that place advancing team and organizational goals above immediate self and special interests. Not martyrs who give up any personal life for the company, but those who simply make decisions for the larger good. What is not needed is the sales associate who steers customers to wrong products simply to make commissions; the executive who is building his own bureaucratic fiefdom; and others who are oblivious to the larger strategic issues. *Advice for leaders: Reinforce behavior that advances organizational and team interest. Weed out unaligned self and special interests.*

**Empowerment should follow when clear choices for bold action, organizational interests, and open communication are demonstrated.**

### Choice 3: Expressed Dissent vs. Lockstep Agreement

People who are truly engaged in any enterprise will ultimately have disagreements. High performance organizations encourage open and respectful expression of dissent. Open communication is valued. Leaders provide venues for frank discussions that allow people to put issues on the table and dialogue. Dialogue creates a means for conflict resolution which leads to stronger commitments and better decisions. Organizations that discourage dissenting voices are cutting off brainpower, and not only that of the dissenters, but everyone else as well.

Effective organizations also know the difference between conflict and toxic behavior. They encourage the former, but seek to eliminate the latter as quickly as possible. Healthy conflict ultimately leaves people feeling that real issues are being addressed. Toxic behavior that is allowed to perpetuate leaves people feeling helpless, unsafe, or out of control – conditions that will seriously undermine performance. *Advice for leaders: Cultivate genuine dissent. Vigorously weed out toxic behavior.*

Empowerment should follow when clear choices for bold action, organizational interests, and open communication are demonstrated. In fact, *failure* to empower those who consistently demonstrate these choices reduces the value they could be contributing to an organization.

Empowerment requires trust that people will take initiative, in the best interests of the organization, based on the best information available. To build empowerment, leaders need to do three things:

- articulate expectations for action, strategic interests, and open communication;
- reinforce desired behavior, and weed out what is not;
- set an example.

Cultivate empowerment, then watch the knowledge, creativity, and effective problem solving that fuels your organization take off.



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