

Harness The Power Of Empowerment¹

Arnie Dahlke
(July 15, 2009)



We prefer to be in control of our own lives. We want a say in whatever happens to us, not have it imposed on us.

When events beyond our control change our lives, we feel powerless. We become anxious. Some of us even become overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness.

Bombarded by daily stories of business failures, downsizing, and company layoffs, thousands of people are feeling a loss of control during these stressful economic times. They are preoccupied with their anxiety. They are fearful of losing their jobs. As a result, their focus on work narrows to one of survival.

For many of them, being distracted by a loss of control over their lives has an adverse effect on their job performance. The quality of their work diminishes. Worrying about their own survival, their cooperation with others deteriorates. Their relating to customers becomes more careless. For some, even their health is affected, which compounds their feeling a loss of control.

When this happens, an organization suffers. In our current economic climate, the last place a customer with limited resources wants to go for a quality product or service is an organization that is not delivering it.

So, what can you as an employer or manager do about this state of affairs? How can you counter it if it has already happened in your organization? How can you prevent it if it has not?

Surely your choices are limited. Undoubtedly, you, too, are worried about your own survival and the survival of your business.

While there is no magic bullet, there is at least one thing you can do to put a bandage on the situation: *find ways to empower your employees.*

Empowerment gives people more control of their own work lives. They feel that what they do is an important part of the success of their organization. They take more ownership in their work. They are more self-motivated. Theodore Roosevelt once said: "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it."

¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie's site: www.arniedahlke.com

There are four steps involved in empowering people, as illustrated in the *empowerment button*. To empower people, tell them what you want them to achieve and then give them the tools that will allow them to achieve their objective in their own way, with the freedom to make important decisions.



It starts with you and your employee sitting down together to define the employee's performance goals. One great technique for beginning this discussion is for *each* of you to independently list *your* expectations of the employee's performance. Both of you then compare your lists—what you expect of the employee and what the employee *thinks* you expect of him or her. Invariably, the lists will be different. Discussion of the differences helps clarify the defining of performance outcomes. When the two of you mutually define goals, your employee will be much more likely to take ownership of his or her own performance.

Having defined performance goals, the second step—and this is a very important step—is for you to give your employees all of the

information they need to make decisions on their own, to *empower* them. Budgets—what costs are involved? How much money is available to them for making a decision to fix a customer's problem? How far can they go in any one decision? Where does their department budget fit in with the bigger company picture? And so on.

The more latitude people have in making decisions on their own, the more they will feel in control of their own work lives, the less they will feel stressed, and the more they will feel they have a greater stake—a personal sense of ownership—in their organization's overall performance.

Now comes the hard part: the third step. You must be *willing* to give people the autonomy to take actions on their own. This means giving up some of your power.

Finally, step four, which is a difficult step for many people to take. Employees will make mistakes. They will make a wrong decision or take an inappropriate action. With your own reputation at stake, you may be very tempted to come down hard on them when these mistakes happen. The challenge for you is to keep your cool. You must support the decisions they make and the actions they take. Otherwise you will never truly empower them.

If you disagree with what someone has done, you need to let that person know why and what you would have done differently. Then you need to discuss the differences between the two of you. Who knows? Your employee may have a rationale that convinces you to change your view of a situation. Help him or her see that every mistaken decision or action is an opportunity to learn. Never use mistakes as an opportunity to punish. Punishment makes it riskier for people to make decisions or take actions in the future, which sabotages any attempts to empower them.

When you define goals mutually with your employees, give them the information they need to make decisions, allow them to make decisions on their own, and then use their mistakes to help them learn, they will feel more in control of their lives at work. And, in the end, they will be more competent and more productive.

As I said earlier, I have no magic bullet for the stress caused by these economic times. But empowering your employees surely will help counter their feelings of losing control over their own lives. It will ease their anxiety at least a little. Feeling more in control, they will create products and services of higher value to your customers. Customers will then be more likely to choose you over a competitor. That, in turn, should help ease any anxiety of your own that you have about these stressful times.