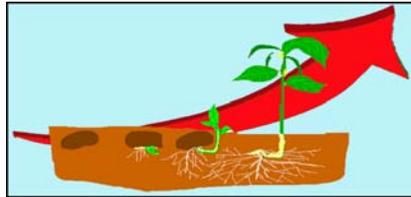


Sew the Seeds of Empowerment¹

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(June 30, 2012)



"I have a question," a colleague said to me as we were reminiscing about our experiences. "You've had many years of experience consulting with a hodgepodge of organizations. When you look back at that experience, what's the first thing that comes to your mind as a critically important element of a successfully functioning organization?"

"Empowerment!" I answered without hesitation. "Creating a culture in an organization in which every person feels they are in control of their own lives, that they can make responsible decisions and take innovative actions without having to track down a manager for every decision they make."

As we talked further, I began to reflect on how I come to see empowerment as such an important factor. I thought back of experiences I had, both in my own life and in the lives of clients with whom I have worked.

Good Old Dad

I flashed on a job I had when I was 16 years old. It was a summer job, working on an assembly line in a small organization that manufactured a new kind of transmission. The assembly line consisted of around 20 people, each doing different but interrelated tasks. I got the job because my father was the Supervisor of this operation.

I remember coming in at seven o'clock in the morning and getting to work. Around eight-thirty, after meeting with his boss, my father would arrive. I remember being impressed at what he did every morning after his arrival. He spent at least a half hour circulating around the room, spending a few moments with each person on the assembly line. He knew something about everyone. Whether they were married or single. Whether they had children and, if so, how the children were doing. He was aware of special events, such as weddings, graduations, and other things special to individual employees.

In the process, he would reinforce the good work each person was doing and give them the opportunity to suggest how what they were doing could even be done more effectively. His message to everyone was that together, we can produce a very high quality product.



As a result of all of his morning ritual, people felt noticed and included. They believed that they had a say about their work and were in control of it. ***They felt empowered.***

¹ From: http://www.arniedahlke.com/120630_Sew_The_Seeds_Of_Empowerment.pdf
Take a moment to explore Arnie's other Timely Tips at: <http://www.arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm>

The Manager Round Table

The second experience that came into my mind was a job I got in Washington D.C. After leaving a full time job in the academic world, I became the Research Director of the Center for Research in Social Systems (CRESS), which later merged with the American Institutes for Research. The head of CRESS was a wonderful man named Pret Abbott.

Every Monday morning, Pret would conduct a manager meeting in his large office. In addition to me, this group included the Program Manager, the Business Manager, the Publications Manager, and the HR Manager. Our meeting would take place seated at a large round table. Pret once told us that he had deliberately selected a large round table, because he wanted to emphasize that no one person ran this organization—that, in fact, we all did it together.



When he had to make a decision on something that would influence the entire organization, he would tell us what was involved and solicit our opinions. He would systematically ask each of us around the table to express what we thought should be done. When we were all finished, he would say, "Okay. I have heard you all, I now need to consider and weigh your input. I'll let you know my decision by the end of the day. And, I'll give you my rationale for how I arrived at it.

This truly was a participative decision-making process.

We all felt part of it. *We all felt empowered.*

The Progressive CEO

The third experience that came to my mind was my work with a CEO and his management staff in a retail organization in Southern California. I remember facilitating his weekly management meetings. During the first few meetings, I focused on getting people to stay on track and constructively handle the various issues with which they were dealing.

I noticed that, frequently, there was reticence in people expressing opinions. So I asked everyone if they were willing to do a 360 management survey among themselves. I cautioned them that it would be a waste of time unless they were completely honest and that I would preserve each person's anonymity by simply reporting numeric results.

They agreed. I administered the survey. I then analyzed the data and gave every individual his or her results expressed in a series of five-point Likert scales. The CEO was amazed to find several low average ratings in his set of scales. To his credit, he said to his managers: "When we do customer surveys we expect 5's on their ratings of us. I expect 5's on your ratings of me. Obviously, I'm not doing everything right. Please tell me what I'm doing wrong."



Slowly, with my facilitative encouragement, people began opening up. Particularly dramatic was a statement from the business manager: "Often when I come into your office with something I want to talk to you about, I've barely begun my conversation and you jump in and dominate it. I then get the feeling that you're not even listening to me."

The CEO was surprised. He said, "I didn't even know I was doing that!"

I suggested they needed some sort of signal. I said "The next time you go into his office and start talking to him, and he interrupts you, hold your right index finger up in the air as a signal that he's doing it."

She began doing that when meeting with him during the following weeks. Lo and behold! It worked! He became much more aware of and actively curbed his tendency to dominate conversations with his managers. The discussions and productivity of subsequent manager meetings dramatically improved. Managers came to feel that they truly had a say in the organization. *They felt empowered.*

The Ambitious Technician

The fourth experience that popped in my mind is about a Technician in the Service Department of an automobile dealership in Georgia. I had been assisting the dealership in a variety of ways, including manager and customer relations training, streamlining processes, and improving teamwork.

One day, just after I had finished talking to a customer on the Service Drive, a Technician came up to me and said there was something he'd like to talk to me about. We moved over to a waiting area, sat down, and I said, "Tell me what you wanted to talk about."

"I'm the Tech for reconditioning used cars that we collect to get them ready for resale," he said. "Every used car I recondition needs some part that requires replacing or extensive repair. Some are simple, inexpensive replacements. Others, such as body damage, are more expensive and take time to repair. My problem is that every time I need to purchase a part, I have to go to my Service Manager to get his approval. Some times he's available, some times he's busy with a customer, and some times he's in meetings."



"I imagine that wastes a lot your time," I said.

"Exactly," he replied. "I could be twice as productive in the same amount of time if I didn't have to go ask permission every time I needed to make a purchase!"

Hearing this, I decided that we should meet with his manager. I asked the manager how much the average cost per month was to recondition a car. He told me about \$300. I then made a suggestion: "During the next three months let the Technician decide on the purchase of any part less than \$1000. For any purchase over that, he needs to come to you for approval."

The manager agreed. Three months later, it became apparent that not only did the Technician's productivity almost double, the average cost of repair was now just slightly over \$700 per car. The manager was delighted. The Technician was pleased. *He felt truly empowered.*

Sew the Seeds of Empowerment

We all feel better about what we are doing when we feel we are in control of own lives, when we feel empowered. As you can see from these few examples the feeling of empowerment can be stimulated in many ways.

As a manager, one of the most valuable things you can do for your organization is to make a decision or take an action that empowers the people who work for you.

There's no question about it. Empowered employees are happier, more productive, and more committed to producing quality customer-valued products and services, which can't help but strengthen your bottom line.

