



## How to Empower Employees to Make Effective Decisions on the Front-Line

Employees need the power and authority to make the critical decisions necessary to produce quality products and serve customers effectively. Empowering employees is a lot easier than most managers tend to believe.

By Mac McIntire

**E**mployee empowerment is a management concept that vexes many supervisors. Although most managers say they want to empower their employees, few actually do it well. Employee empowerment is a buzz-word often used by management, yet seldom practiced effectively in most organizations.

The lack of employee empowerment within companies occurs for many reasons.

Empowering employees requires a great deal of trust by a manager. The manager must trust the employee will make decisions and accomplish assigned tasks in the same manner the manager would if the manager were taking the actions. Many managers lack the confidence their employees will perform equally well to themselves, so they hesitate to give up decision making authority to their employees and risk the chance of wrong decisions being made.

Some managers struggle between knowing they need to give their employees the authority to act independently while fearing the employees will actually become independent. If the employees are empowered to make sovereign decisions, the managers worry, the company may no longer need the manager. Hence the managers are hesitant to give up power they believe ensures the need for their supervisory role.

On the hand many employees are afraid to take on added responsibility. They fear the additional workload or job pressure. Even more, they fear being held accountable for the decisions they make. They are hesitant to put their own anatomy on the line, knowing that it may be their butt that gets kicked if something goes wrong.

The primary reason why managers and employees struggle with the concept of empowerment is because they both have a misconception of what real empowerment actually entails. Managers often operate under a false assumption that employees are empowered merely by wishing them to be so. "You are empowered," the managers say to the employees. "You can make decisions. You can take risks." They think empow-

erment occurs when employees are told in a broad-brush manner they are empowered.

"Yeah, right! We're not empowered," the employees respond, falsely believing they have no power and can take no action without managerial input.

Many managers and employees wrongly believe empowerment is an all-or-nothing proposition. A person either has power, or they don't. But this is not how empowerment works.

### Definition of Empowerment

Employee empowerment does not mean absolute authority or absolute power. Empowerment is the extent or degree of responsibility and authority given to an employee or to a team. Different people and different teams will have varying degrees of empowerment based upon their level of experience and expertise. Employees who have the trust, respect and confidence of their managers will have a far greater degree of empowerment than employees whose actions are suspect. Empowerment is the act of identifying the tasks on which an employee is trusted to act independently versus those tasks the employee must get input on or approval before proceeding.

Employee empowerment also entails identifying how much responsibility and authority an individual can effectively handle without becoming over-burdened or distressed.

The concept of employee empowerment is analogous to the process of sending power through a light bulb. If 100 watts of power is sent through a 10-watt bulb, the bulb will blow up. If 10 watts of power is sent through a 100-watt bulb, the bulb will glow dimly and not achieve its full capacity.

Likewise, if 100 watts of empowerment is sent through a 10-watt employee, the manager may fry the brain of the employee. Some employees cannot handle more than a few watts of responsibility and authority. Empowering these employees with a surge of new responsibilities may cause sudden spasms of anxiety and rapid burnout.

On the other hand, if a manager sends 10 watts of empowerment through a 100-watt employee (one who is fully capable and willing to do more), the employee will never achieve his or her full potential. Highly capable employees who are underutilized become de-energized when their talents and abilities are not used fully. Eventually, 100-watt employees who are only given 10 watts of power either become 10-watt employees or they leave the company and go somewhere where they can reach their full potential.

## How to Empower Employees

Effective empowerment requires an open dialogue between the manager and the employee. It entails identifying all of the tasks and responsibilities the employee is expected to perform. Once the full extent of the tasks are determined, the manager and employee discuss which of these tasks they mutually agree the employee can perform independently, and which tasks require the involvement of the manager before action is taken. They discuss the employee's willingness and readiness to be held accountable for the decisions he or she makes and the actions one will take in those areas where one has the authority to do so.

During this discussion the empowerment of the employee is clearly spelled out in what I refer to as the *black zone*, *green zone*, and *red zone* boundaries.

The **Black Zone** is the sum of all tasks and responsibilities the employee is expected to carry out in his or her role. It is a literal list of all possible activities the employee may be required to perform in his or her job classification. It includes everything the employee is expected to do at work.

The **Green Zone** entails those tasks and responsibilities on the list in which the employee is free to make decisions or to take independent action without seeking further guidance or approval from anyone else. Tasks and responsibilities placed in the green zone are those where the employee has the authority to take whatever action or to make whatever decision the employee deems appropriate. Green zone items require no additional approval from a manager. The employee merely keeps his or her manager apprised of the progress on green zone tasks.

Green zone issues usually include those tasks where the manager has full confidence that the employee will fulfill his or her responsibilities correctly without further input from the manager. Typically these tasks are those where the manager trusts the judgment and decision making abilities

of the employee and respects one's capacity to make the right choices. Consequently, the manager can support the employee's actions and decisions without having to be involved.

The **Red Zone** identifies those tasks and responsibilities where the employee must seek input or approval from others before taking action or making a decision. Red zone items are those tasks where the employee does not have the authority to take independent action or to make independent decisions. The red zone shows where the employee must get input or approval before proceeding.

Red zone items are those where the manager does not feel confident the employee will make the right choice or take the right action without input from the manager or others. The red zone is used when a manager does not feel the employee has the right skills, knowledge, ability or experience to take the correct action or make the right decision alone. These tasks are those where the manager may not trust the judgment or decision making ability of the employee, or where the risk is too high to leave the decision solely in the hands of the employee. The red zone also is used to identify those tasks where the manager wants to make sure the employee solicits the input and involvement from others before taking action. An IT employee, for example, may be fully competent to make independent decisions regarding what hardware or software to purchase, yet a manager may place such decisions in the red zone because he or she wants the employee to get input from end-users before proceeding.

Although a manager's goal should be to enlarge the employee's green zone to the fullest extent possible, the employee will never be totally free of red zone items. Legal, regulatory and compliance requirements restrict an employee's actions. Additionally, a manager can never empower an employee beyond the manager's own empowerment. There will always be tasks, issues or responsibilities that are within the manager's own red zone, and therefore automatically become red zone items to the employees beneath that manager.

Once the zones have been established the manager needs to respect the boundaries that have been set. If an employee comes to the manager requesting the supervisor's opinion on a green zone issue, the manager should not offer an opinion. This would violate the green zone. The green zone means the employee needs to think the issue through and make a decision using his or her own judgment. Less confident employees often come to managers on green zone issues seeking

input before taking action. This is because they don't trust their own judgment. If the manager provides guidance on the issue, the employee will never learn to trust his or her own thinking. They will continue to seek input in the future, thereby shrinking the green zone.

One of the most difficult challenges for a manager who has empowered an employee is to stay out of the green zone when the employee makes a bad decision. Most managers feel compelled to counsel the employee so the mistake will not happen again. But this will only shrink the green zone. Employees who sense even a slight rebuke for errors on the green zone will be less inclined to take risks in the future. To be truly empowered an employee must be free to make mistakes. One's most profound learning experiences often come when people make mistakes and are forced to learn from the consequences of those mistakes. If the manager steps onto the green zone to correct the employee when a mistake is made, the employee will be kept from discovering their mistake through the consequences that would naturally follow.

Good managers let their employees fail. They let them learn from their own mistakes. They stay out of the green zone. Bad managers charge into the green zone, not realizing that in doing so they teach the employee to get the manager's input every time before taking action. Thus the employee becomes risk adverse in the future and the green zone shrinks even smaller. A manager's mantra must always be to "stay out of the green zone."

### **Accountability versus Responsibility**

Another difficult concept for managers to fully understand is the difference between responsibility and accountability. These two qualities are not the same.

An employee has **Responsibility** for all of the tasks he or she is required to perform. They are responsible for everything within the black zone. It is the employee's responsibility to make sure everything is accomplished on the list of tasks for one's job classification. The worker is responsible for doing it all.

The primary reason employees give for not wanting to be empowered is saying they don't want to be responsible. But an employee becomes responsible the moment they accept the job. Responsibility comes with the work. An employee is automatically responsible for doing everything they are tasked to perform at the level required by their boss. The only way an employee can avoid responsibility for one's work is to quit one's job.

**Accountability** is defined as those tasks for which the employee is answerable for his or her actions. An employee can only be held accountable for actions over which he or she had the authority to choose how he or she would perform. Accountable tasks are those green zone issues where the employee may be required to justify or explain one's actions. Since the employee has free reign to act independently on these items, he or she must be willing to account for one's decisions and actions. They must report back on their stewardship and be ready to reap the rewards or bear the consequences for the choices made.

A manager cannot hold an employee accountable for red zone issues if the manager is the one who made the decision or demanded the action. If an employee is carrying out an order or implementing a decision that has been dictated to them, the employee cannot be held accountable if something goes wrong. That is unless the employee failed to fulfill one's fiduciary responsibility or otherwise caused the task to fail because of their action or inaction. In such cases where the employee did not do all he or she could to make the decision work, the employee definitely should be held accountable.

Another level of accountability is **Shared Accountability**. An employee shares accountability with the manager on red zone issues if the manager makes his or her decision based upon the employee's information or recommendation. If an employee suggests a certain action be taken, and the manager concurs with the employee's proposal, both the manager and the employee should be held accountable if something goes wrong. Employees are held accountable for recommending decisions since those recommendations should have been based on sound reasoning and good judgment.

*(The graphic at the end of this article provides a visual overview of the empowerment process.)*

### **When to Empower Employees**

As previously mentioned, employee empowerment can only be accomplished through an open, two-way dialogue between a manager and an employee.

Empowerment is individual-specific. Blanket empowerment (such as giving all employees authority to approve expenditures below \$50) is a form of empowerment, but it is a less effective method of empowering employees. With blanket empowerment all employees are given the same authority level regardless of experience or expertise. One would hope a front desk clerk at a

hotel who has been in her position for several years would have superior decision making abilities than a front desk clerk who is new in his role. Consequently, the experienced worker should be granted greater power and authority than her inexperienced colleague. When experienced workers are given equal empowerment to less experienced workers, it lessens the value of the qualified worker and decreases their motivation to perform at their advanced level of experience.

The process of empowerment starts during the recruitment and selection of a potential employee. It is here the manager begins to discern to what extent the manager will be able to trust, respect, and have confidence in the candidate based upon the candidate's past experience and expertise.

The empowerment process continues after selection during the orientation and training of the new employee. During this period the manager outlines the black, green, and red zones by clarifying the goals, direction, roles, responsibilities, authority and boundaries for the employee.

Once the employee is functioning within his or her assigned tasks the manager continues to monitor the employee's progress to look for opportunities to expand the green zone. On-going performance feedback is necessary to ensure a continuous dialogue occurs between the manager and the employee. It is through this dialogue the manager will gain the trust, respect and confidence necessary to empower the employee even more.

Simply stated, empowerment is the extent to which a manager has trust, respect, and confidence in an employee's ability to make appropriate decisions or to take appropriate action on work-related issues. When a manager trusts the employee's judgment, respects the employee's opinion, and has confidence in the employee's decision-making abilities, the manager will be more inclined to grant the employee the power to work free of close management scrutiny. Thus, the employee becomes truly empowered, rather than the pseudo-empowerment that is common in many organizations. §

**Innovative Management Group** offers highly-effective management training programs that teach managers how to effectively empower, manage and hold employees accountable for their assigned tasks. Our *Accountability Management Workshop* provides managers with the tools, resources and methods to ensure front-line employees perform at the highest level possible.

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# Black, Green and Red Zones

