



Book Empowering Employees

Mimi Meredith and Kenneth L. Murrell
McGraw-Hill, 2000

Recommendation

At its best, *Empowering Employees* by Kenneth L. Murrell and Mimi Meredith illustrates the vogue concept of worker empowerment as it relates to real-life business, devoid of the touchy-feely clichés such nomenclature may evoke. The book cannot completely avoid a collapse into idealism and jargon however, and long sections of several chapters amount to cheery descriptions of the motivated and satisfied employees that empowerment will breed. These breezy passages fortunately are grounded by examples of companies like Toyota and AT&T that have embraced empowerment - or portions of it - to great success. So if employee-burnout is an issue in your office, or if you are looking for an easy-to-digest explanation of one of today’s most popular management trends, *BooksInShort* recommends this book to you.

Take-Aways

- Empowering is about instilling and encouraging power in those around you.
- Empowering managers believe that leadership comes from all employees.
- Empowering managers share information with their employees, and include them in finding solutions, making plans and anything else that directly affects them.
- Empowerment is not delegating work you hate to do.
- Empowerment means shared responsibilities.
- Communication is the core of empowerment.
- Trust is essential in empowering relationships.
- Servant-leaders want to serve and empower those they lead.
- Servant-leaders take pride in what others accomplish.
- "We-engineering," as opposed to re-engineering, includes employees in all plans for changing equipment, procedures and practices.

Summary

The Empowering Manager

In an article for Organizational Dynamics, Robert Quinn and Gretchen Spreitzer enumerated the common characteristics of empowered employees, no matter what their jobs or where they work:

- Self-determination - The freedom to decide how to do their jobs.
- A sense of meaning - Their work matters and they care about it.
- A sense of competence - They're able to do their jobs.
- A sense of impact - They can make a difference and others will listen to them.

“During the final decade of the 20th century, empowerment became of the most frequently used words in management. Unfortunately, it also became one of the most misused concepts.”

In an empowering organization, managers and leaders believe that leadership comes from all employees, not just a few who run departments or have corporate titles. Since information is power, empowering managers share information with their employees. To empower, you must act. Empowerment is enabling the growth of individuals and organizations as they add value to the products or services the organization delivers to its customers. Empowerment also relies upon your managerial support of continuous learning and discovery.

“In an empowering organization, managers believe leadership derives from all its employees - not a select few.”

Empowering is not about hogging power for yourself. Empowering is:

- The creative distribution of power.
- Mutual influence.
- Shared responsibility.
- An inclusive, democratic and long-lasting process.
- A way to enable people to use their talents and capabilities.
- A way to foster accomplishment, invest in learning, build effective relationships, inform, lead, coach, serve, create and liberate.

“Although the electronic age promised us more leisure, it seems to have delivered less. Timesaving devices seem to result in time spending. Having information at our fingertips has evolved into information overload.”

Empowerment is not:

- Proclaiming that you're emancipating employees.
- Delegating all the work you don't want to do.
- Something you do to or for someone else.
- Making changes for the sake of change.
- Creating teams so you can justify downsizing.
- Leaving workers to fend for themselves.
- Something that applies to "them" but not to "us."

“The spirit of your organization encompasses its mission and its vision - not necessarily the ones that are posted in the hallways, but the ones that are evidenced by its behaviors.”

Empowerment relies on the healthy, creative distribution of power, where the manager, facilitator, coach or leader changes, depending on the skills and talents a particular task requires. Empowerment means that workers and managers create their answers together, and that each individual adds power to the power of others, with the attitude that the amount of power in any organization is infinite. In a healthy, empowering system, shared responsibility boosts the flow of information and creates partnerships that relieve managers from solo decision making and troubleshooting.

“In an empowering organization, power becomes less about one person controlling another and more about the capacity within every person to create, develop and distribute power to accomplish individual and shared goals.”

For example, Toyota has a long corporate history of implementing employee suggestions from all levels of the company. Toyota's system runs on constant improvement. An assistant manager at Toyota compared "an auto part whose design doesn't get updated to a piece of fruit that doesn't get refrigerated: they're both rotten." This practice contributes to corporate and individual learning whether from mistakes, serendipity or flashes of genius.

Servant-Leadership

Communication is the key to empowering management. Dialogue, not debate, is the core of brainstorming, problem solving and on-going learning. Letting your employees know exactly what you need and asking them what they need is the cornerstone of empowered communication. Henry Tam, director of the Cambridge Centre for Citizenship Development, notes three obstacles that block empowerment - lack of commitment from the top, too little understanding of empowerment and staff silence (or lack of feedback). You should worry if your employees keep their ideas, opinions and feelings to themselves. Encourage them to communicate. Often employees keep silent out of fear, cynicism or apathy. Create an environment in which no one needs to be afraid to speak. Ask questions in a trusting way. If you behave as if you mistrust people, you will engender fear, frustration and paranoia among employees.

“Be suspicious of ‘overnight cures.’ They’re tempting, but they just may lead you down an old road with a new name.”

Become a servant-leader, someone who offers resources when workers need them to perform their duties and when customers need them to be satisfied. Making these resources available increases innovation and helps your company stay competitive. Servant leaders understand that their role is to facilitate the success of those they lead - in other words to serve them. After all, no leader wants employees who are fearful, left out in the dark and frustrated because they have no opportunity to be creative. That mix does not lead to success for the leader or the company.

“Managers who act in ways that enhance empowerment contribute to building organizations that endure.”

AT&T's Robert K. Greenleaf, who coined the term servant-leader, explains that servant leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead." The servant-leader makes sure that other people's highest-priority needs are being served. This makes sense. People won't follow a leader who isn't concerned about them and their success. When you are a servant-leader, your employees:

- Won't wait for you to tell them what to do.
- Will risk more, create more and trust more, because you support them.
- Will support the organization's values and mission by their words and actions, because you clarify and discuss those values with them and establish goals that bring the organization closer to achieving its mission.
- Will feel valued, which will be reflected in their performance.

“Spirit comes from being able to answer these questions: ‘Who are we?’ ‘What do we believe?’ ‘Why are we here?’”

As a servant-leader, your role is to see that empowering your employees results in products and services that delight customers and help the company grow. This requires that you act in ways that sustain your organization and the people working in it. To build sustainability:

- Reward innovation and creation instead of damage control.
- Promote ownership of the whole organization - not just your part of it.
- Have more "fun to do" and less "have to do."
- Aim for smaller but more frequent payoffs.
- Find "the good life" inside the organization, not only in time away from work.
- Take pride in what you and others accomplish within a certain amount of time, rather than complaining or bragging about how much overtime you work.
- Create an organization that's a healthy place for the people who work there -- healthy for their bodies, minds and souls.
- Remember the "three R's of Empowerment" - respect, resources and reinvestment.

Turning Re-Engineering into We-Engineering

The term re-engineering captured the imagination of leaders and managers throughout the '90s. The term typically refers to revising business processes to adjust for rapid change. Often this process includes installing new or upgraded technology. The next time you think about re-engineering, consider "we-engineering" instead. When you engineer something, you design, construct and use it. Often, companies do that without taking into account how the changes will affect employees. If you don't consider employees, they will feel the change has been thrown at them and they will resist it. They may even feel the change is intended to manipulate or intimidate them.

“Every manager finds empowering decision making a different experience.”

In we-engineering, you consciously, not accidentally or haphazardly, empower people. You design, construct and use technologies, organizational space, procedures and relationships in empowering ways, taking employees into account and including their feedback in both planning and implementation. No matter what changes you may be instituting, listen to the people who will be affected. They may be in a better position to help you design the most effective changes.

Participative Management

Traditionally, workforce-management relationships have been 'transactive,' meaning that one bit of power is exchanged for another, or one level of performance is swapped for another. Empowering workforce-management relationships, however, are structured as 'transformative' relationships in which power is created, responsibilities and creativity increase, and performance continuously improves. Begin with a transition phase, moving from individual goals, concerns and changes to organizational ones. This transition itself changes reporting relationships and team relationships, but you can create participative management in five steps:

1. Use leadership skills that foster trust. Show your belief in employees and your mutual commitment to excellence. Trust them with significant, increasing responsibilities and jointly aim for successful performance.
2. Build teamwork skills and valuing skills. Accept individual differences, encourage leadership skills and strengthen group commitment, communication and decision-making.
3. Create strategic vision from the ground up. Involve all the stakeholders in this process, and support it.
4. Ensure that your behavior and what you say are consistent. Don't send mixed signals.
5. Change the hierarchy to broaden employees' control and freedom. Include employee input when planning, and create an inclusive, participatory, dynamic process.

“Become an empowering manager and invest in human capital.”

Create a comfortable office environment that's conducive to creativity. Make everything safe and ergonomically supportive. Productivity will go up and disability claims will go down, as will time lost to illness. If you don't know what ergonomics issues exist in your workplace, do some research and find out. Forget hard-backed chairs and other equipment no-no's that can lead to muscle strain, repetitive motion problems, and other physical ramifications.

Employee Magic

When you empower your employees, magic happens - people end up loving their jobs. In turn, this attitude creates a productive, competitive, successful company, with a great reduction in burnout. What makes employees hate their jobs or burn out?

- Boredom and not having enough work to do.
- Overwork, lack of respect, and a dearth of creative outlets.
- Poor relationships at the office.
- Uncomfortable working conditions.
- Not being told exactly what's expected.
- Office politics.
- Management inconsistency.

The journey to empowerment is never finished; it's a constant and rewarding process that leads to more and more success.

About the Authors

Ken Murrell , professor of Management and Management Information Systems at the University of West Florida, is an international consultant, a community activist and empowerment pioneer. He’s worked with the World Bank, the U.N. Development Program, the U.S.I.A., and firms of all sizes including Motorola, Pfizer, BellSouth and Toyota. He taught around the globe, and consulted in Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East. **Mimi Meredith** owns Wordsmiths Unlimited, where she writes, edits and designs public relations materials, training manuals and books. She has a master’s degree in computer science, worked as a social worker and a trainer, and spent five years as research associate at the University of West Florida’s Educational Research and Development Center.
