



## **Engagement and Empowerment**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Engagement and empowerment are two words that get tossed around organizations and OD circles. These words are often confused. I have heard the terms used interchangeably, which is a mistake. The best way to demonstrate the difference between these words is to contrast two scenarios. I will focus on a specific job (customer service representative) for the description, but you can easily extrapolate the concepts to any job once the distinction is clear.

### **Engaged but not Empowered**

Here the customer service person is fully on board with the goals of the organization. She knows her job and wants to help the customer. Unfortunately, she is constrained by numerous rules that tie her hands from fully providing service. For example, she may not be able to issue a refund until the incorrect merchandise has been returned and verified to be in good shape. She may have to get "approval" from a superior to authorize a shipping waiver. There can be numerous administrative hurdles that keep this engaged customer service employee from having the power to execute her job to the satisfaction of her customer. If she is talking to a customer with a faulty chain saw, she might say, "That is a shame you are having a problem with your chain saw. I need you to take the saw in to one of our service centers in your area to verify this is not an operator type of problem before I can have you send it to me and get you a replacement saw."

### **Empowered but not Engaged**

In this case, the customer service rep has the power to do anything she thinks is useful, but this particular person is not connected well to the business goals. She really does not care if the organization does well; all she wants to do is make the customer feel great. In this case, when a customer complains about his chain saw not working properly, she might say, "Oh I am sorry you have had that problem. Let me send you a

full replacement chain saw, and I will also include a carrying case (valued at \$60) and some coupons for 6 free chains (valued at \$80 total)."

It is obvious that neither of these conditions is the best situation for the employee and the organization. We need to have employees who are fully engaged in the business *and* fully empowered to accomplish their tasks.

Let us take a look at the impact of these two words on the viability of an organization.

## **Engagement**

In "Smart Trust," Stephen M.R. Covey reported on some research showing that in the average company there are two engaged employees for every one disengaged employee. In this case, much of the inherent power of the individuals is leaking out and not available to the organization. Contrast that situation with world class organizations where there are nine engaged employees for every one disengaged employee. You can see the huge difference, and that difference goes quickly to the bottom line.

Having people engaged in the business means having them truly understand the vision for the organization and fully comprehend their role in making that happen. Beyond understanding, to be fully engaged, a worker needs to be fully committed to accomplishing her role, not just involved in the work. Someone once said that the difference between involvement and commitment is like the difference between eggs and bacon. In the case of the eggs, the chicken was involved; in the case of the bacon, the pig was committed!

## **Empowerment**

Empowerment is more closely related to trust. Employees bring their own internal level of empowerment and confidence in their abilities to do their jobs. Managers can increase empowerment through clear communication and a trust-building management style. Unfortunately, managers can decrease an employee's empowerment and confidence level through negative communication or too many restrictions.

The extent to which people engage their personal power for the benefit of the organization, and the level of freedom they are given to do things right, will determine the level of empowerment experienced by the organization. In OD circles, we use the term "maximum discretionary effort." The goal of empowerment activities is to solicit maximum discretionary effort from all people. How can we accomplish that in the real world?

First, it is important to realize that what empowers me is probably somewhat different from what empowers you. For an organization to obtain the highest level of empowerment, there needs to be a matching effort between each individual and the

conditions that will create a culture that extracts maximum discretionary effort for that person. It sounds complicated, but it is really a process of knowing the people who work for you.

The secret sauce to create a culture of higher empowerment is trust. As trust increases, people naturally feel more empowered because they are allowed to make decisions based on a firm understanding of the goals, but they can accomplish those goals in their own unique way.

Try to avoid mixing the concepts of empowerment and engagement. They are two very different concepts, although they sound almost the same. Seek to obtain both of them through the liberal application of trusting behaviors, and you will experience the best effort that people have to offer.

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