

Building Higher Trust 62 Engagement and Empowerment

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



Engagement and empowerment are two words that we hear in 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, the organization constrains her by numerous rules that tie her hands from fully providing great service. For example, she may not be able to issue a refund until the customer returns the incorrect merchandise. She may have to get "approval" from her supervisor to authorize a shipping waiver.

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 does not follow 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, she might overcompensate the customer to the detriment of the organization.

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. Consider this 2X2 matrix to take all possible combinations into consideration.

Engagement	High	Bad service but meets goals of organization	Great service and also meets organization goals
	Low	Bad service: Goals of Organization not met	Great Customer service but gives away the store
		Low	High
		Empowerment	

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 only 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 use their personal power for the benefit of the organization, and the level of freedom they have 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?

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

In the environment of the past couple years, the ability to build and maintain trust is much more difficult. Many people are feeling frayed by the numerous pressures they face every day. It is more important that leaders show empathy and demonstrate they really care about their employees. It is about how they do what they do and how they say what they say that matters in these times.

Conclusion

Try to avoid mixing the concepts of empowerment and engagement. They are two very different things, 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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