

Building Higher Trust 112 Empowerment and Trust

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Empowerment and trust usually go hand in hand. It is like looking at two sides of the same coin. Organizational redesign for more empowerment can be an incredible way to improve the performance of a group. If poorly done, it can lead to a loss of morale and productivity.

Where is the magic to achieve empowerment and trust?

The magic is in how you approach the problem as a leader. Trust is essential for a great result. As a Division Manager in a large manufacturing organization, I had the opportunity to witness some fantastic productivity improvements based on trust.

A classic and real example

A Classic example occurred in a small, isolated work group in John's department. He had done some cost benchmarking. He needed to make a significant shift in productivity to be competitive. He was considering a consolidation of this group with another in a different building.

He bounced the idea off the workers and, of course, it was pretty unpopular. Calling all 19 people in the group together, he gave them two weeks to come up with an alternate plan. Lacking that, he would go forward with the consolidation. The trick here is that John put the power in their hands, but he provided help to them.

John provided a facilitator so the team could meet efficiently to work on the problem. They worked for two weeks while keeping up with production.

The plan based on empowerment and trust

Finally, they called John and me in at 6 AM one day to report progress. They revealed a plan that, in three months, would improve quality and delivery while reducing the crew size from 19 down to 9 people. They wanted to know if they had our "permission" to do

it. I told them it felt like I had just caught the winning touchdown pass in the Management Super Bowl!

They had removed an organization layer and eliminated some straight-day jobs. Everyone had to get additional training and give up some perks they were previously enjoying. In the end, they got down to 10 people rather than 9, but you never saw a more energized and dedicated bunch of people. They **owned** the change because they had invented it.

Nobody had to leave the company

One key was that John guaranteed people upfront that we would find good jobs for anybody freed up by the exercise. People trusted that promise based on John's integrity.

Empowerment and trust

Without that condition, the result would have been tepid rather than red-hot. Also, without a trained facilitator, things would have degenerated into a kind of organizational food fight. The team felt empowered to make changes. This is an excellent use of a consultant: to keep people on task. Ultimately, trust was the key that unlocked the door to excellence. John trusted the workers, and they trusted him. It worked!

Conclusion

By allowing the team to solve the problem, John empowered them and trusted them to deliver. A 50% productivity improvement in 3 months was a fantastic result. When you add improved quality and delivery, it was a home run.

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