



Empowerment and Trust By Lisa Dennie

Organizations have been debating the “why’s” and the “how-to’s” of empowering their employees for decades. In 1988, William Byham and Jeff Cox wrote a book called *Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment: How to Improve Productivity, Quality, and Employee Satisfaction*. Their work brought the concept of empowerment to mainstream management circles in North America and set off the debate.

Over time various levels of empowerment have been used in organizations to bring out the best employees have to offer. However, many managers have difficulty letting go of the reins. As most managers will tell you, the buck stops with them as far as accountability for results goes. They feel they must monitor every step of the work process to ensure that nothing goes wrong. In this context, many companies in Canada and the United States still run as top-down organizations. The majority of decisions come from the higher ups, executives and managers leaving little room for input from, what I call, the frontline, the eyes and ears of every organization.

A recent report published by The Ontario Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity, called “Management Matters” (<http://www.competeprosper.ca>), states that ignoring input and ideas from employees thwarts the prosperity of organizations. According to the report, companies that encourage and nurture creativity and innovation, rise to the top of their markets and are poised to continue to prosper as we move into the “Knowledge” or “Creative Age”.

Creativity is the fire that forges the gold. The gold is the viable business product or solution that aligns with an organization’s strategic goals and impacts the bottom line in a positive direction. Organizations hoping to mine the nuggets of gold that its people have to offer need to adapt management best practices that encourage the fire of creativity.

The best practice to encourage employee creativity and offer innovations at work is to empower them. That means that the frontline staff has the authority to make decisions that impact their work and are able to carry out their jobs without checking in with a manager at every step. Empowerment includes both support and accountability for results.

The basis for true empowerment is trust. As a manager, you must ask yourself the question: “Do you trust them and do they trust you?” If the answer is “Yes” to both parts, you are in a position to empower your staff.

Building trust with your team is the same as building trust in any relationship. If you are consistent in your approach and response, treat mistakes or poor results as learning opportunities not to be punished and if your team members believe that you are always acting in their best interests, they will trust you and will offer their best ideas and innovations.

Mutual accountability is the key to building trusting relationships with those who work for you. Give and solicit feedback often for continuous improvement, hold them accountable for solving their own problems (offering the support they need) and ask them to hold you accountable for your responsibilities.

The question in the 21st century should not be “Should we empower employees?” but “How can we ensure that all employees feel empowered to offer their best, everyday to realize the organization’s vision, reduce wasted effort and resources and add to the bottom line?”

This is the key to prosperity in the Creative Age.