



4 Ways to Empower Your Team

By Solomon Ives, P.E.

What is your firm's greatest asset? Your client's trust? Your firm's branding? Or could it be the sum abilities of your staff? If staff ability even ranks in your top three, then developing staff and utilizing their talent effectively is crucial for success. A key way to do this is to empower them.

Empowerment gives colleagues the courage and strength to take risks and try new roles that will stretch their abilities. As a young engineer, being empowered has released untapped talents within me and inspired my best effort. Whether you lead an entire firm or only a small project, everyone stands to benefit when those around you perform at their best.

Empowerment

Latitude

Give those around you latitude to take risks and try new things. An empowering moment in my career happened during my first year-end review. My supervisor asked me a series of questions to uncover my unused abilities and invite me to suggest ways to improve my experience at the firm. Questions such as "Are we fully utilizing your talents?" and "What is inhibiting your success?" allowed me to explore new ways to add value to the company. Far from the expected "summary of strengths and weaknesses" or "improvement areas," the questions were aimed at maximizing my satisfaction and contribution at the firm.

These questions gave me the freedom to expand my job description. As time went on, my supervisor and I discussed design processes improvements, staff development, and client relationships. I began to manage projects, have lunches with architects, and write proposals.

As engineers, we tend to keep a narrow focus to maximize efficiency. An empowered engineer knows they have the freedom to zoom out and engage all of their unique talents and interests to work smarter, not just harder. My career shifted for the better at that first year-end review because my supervisor gave me the latitude to think outside the box.

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Support

When an engineer takes a risk and shares a new idea, they need support to work it out. Help them set SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Action-Oriented, Realistic, Timely). If appropriate, set expectations for the budget of time they can spend on the initiative. As long as their ideas align with the company's direction and values, support them to do it. If they've earned a measure of your trust, take a proportionate level of risk on them.

Ask yourself "How can I help them to get their idea off the ground?" or "What resources or public endorsement do they need from me?" This focus contrasts to the traditional leadership style that maintains top-down control to direct the team towards the leader's goals. To empower is to get *underneath* a co-worker's idea and supply power to help them succeed. An action as simple as attending a meeting they lead or using a document they created goes a long way to communicate that you believe in their ability to create value. In my experience, receiving that trust has energized my creativity and motivated me to return the goodwill by focusing on the company's objectives.

Accountability

Follow-up with someone and you will prove to them that you take their development and ideas seriously. Ask questions on the status of their initiative. The point is not to grade their performance, but to develop new strategies and new ways to provide support. Are any adjustments needed to ensure goals are met? Would it be helpful to set up regular meetings?

Celebrate moments of success, as well. It will build confidence and invite further creativity and risk-taking. When we see the connection between our efforts and tangible results, it also builds a sense of power and ownership.

It's important to stay honest here. If it becomes apparent that a goal is unrealistic or that the budget needs to change, that should be clearly acknowledged. Pretending

that goals have been met when they haven't is demoralizing – remember, the initiative is fueled by a desire for genuine success.

Patience

Empowerment is a messy business. Some ideas will turn out to be mistakes. Time can be wasted, and it can be awkward or disappointing. But those moments are the very best opportunities to learn and grow. If a problem arises, discuss honestly what went wrong and what can be improved the next time. If possible, give them a second opportunity, soon, to help their confidence rebound. If you immediately take control when a problem arises, it steals the opportunity for both of you to learn. Additionally, when a company leader spends time fighting another engineer's fires, they have less time to do their job: grow the company.

The Value Created

Empowering people costs time and resources, but the profit gained outweighs the cost. Imagine a staff team that takes the initiative to improve themselves and make suggestions. Imagine a team that has earned your trust and is internally motivated to see you and the company-at-large succeed. I have experienced the shift in myself from being a "worker" who trades my labor for wages, to being a "partner" who seeks the mutual success of my company and myself. The result is more value created for the firm, its employees, and our clients.

Who could benefit from your empowerment? Who do you have influence with? There may be situations where more authoritative leadership styles are prudent. But a leader who never takes the time to empower will become the limiting factor in their team's success. Let's not fear mistakes, conflict, or "wasted" time when the potential talent inside our colleagues is waiting to be unleashed. ■

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