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Empowering Employees: Stick to What Really Matters

By James Clark

“The world has an employee engagement crisis, with serious and potentially lasting repercussions for the global economy.”¹

According to a Gallup report, as of 2015 only 32 percent of U.S. employees are engaged in their work, and that level has not moved significantly since the study began in 2000.² Another Gallup survey reported that companies in the top quartile of engagement scores outperform those in the bottom quartile by the following measurements:³

- 21 percent in productivity
- 22 percent in profits
- 10 percent in customer ratings

They also saw lower turnover, lower absenteeism, lower safety incidents and lower quality defects, among other improvements.

An engaged employee will utilize a proactive approach to bring value to the organization, along with the personal satisfaction that the employee gains. One element of developing an engaged workforce is to grant employees a level of autonomy that will empower them to make appropriate decisions, and to control their work product.

Granting employees autonomy can't be done by simply abdicating management responsibility. Leaders need to find a proper balance between direction and employee empowerment. When management achieves the right balance, it allows employees to have sufficient direction and information to make good decisions, and they feel empowered to confidently move forward and act.

Years ago, new to a management role, I found myself frustrated by my interactions with a direct report. I was anxious to do things “right,” as I saw them, but we never seemed to be on the same page. He was resistant to my efforts to steer us where I

thought we should go. In speaking to my supervisor at the time, he offered some advice that has stuck with me ever since. This has allowed me to work better with my team members so they can grow within their positions and feel a sense of empowerment and satisfaction in their work. It also allowed me to develop a balance in my working relationships that I had not yet achieved.

My supervisor referred to the account in the book of 1 Kings, chapter 3 of the Old Testament:

Two women had children born three days apart. One night, one of the children died, and the mother of the deceased child swapped the babies while the other mother slept. The next day the case was taken to Solomon as the two women disputed which child was her own. Solomon resolved the dispute by ordering the living child to be cut in half and one half given to each woman. The rightful mother pleaded for the life of the child, being willing to give up the baby as opposed to seeing him killed. The other mother was satisfied with Solomon's decision, selfishly deciding that if she couldn't have the child to herself, then neither could the other woman. Solomon recognized the feelings of the rightful mother and restored the child to her.

My supervisor pointed out that the solution implemented by Solomon only works because the object of the dispute was a baby. Had the dispute been over some possession, say a loaf of bread, the proposition of cutting it in half would not have worked to reveal the rightful owner. He then told me that what I needed to consider was whether the issues that I was having with this individual were a baby, meaning something very important, or a loaf of bread, meaning something that didn't really matter.

His point was that when something really matters there can be no compromise. During your daily work, if you really think about what truly matters, you will find that most issues are symbolized by a loaf of bread. These may be things like report formatting, choice of words, style of chart or even methodology employed for an analysis. There are very few issues that rise to the status of being a symbolized by a baby. Things like drawing proper conclusions, ethical conduct and compliance with laws and Standards of Practice really matter, and leaders need to be sure their teams pay attention to them and other similarly important elements of our work.

I have found over the ensuing years that this advice has been very helpful in both day-to-day human relations and in my relationships with those who report to me. Certainly, in fulfilling leadership duties it is important to guide, mentor, educate and coach our direct reports. They need that guidance to advance, learn, have confidence in the decisions they make and grow

their careers. But they also need the balancing influence of freedom and autonomy that leads to empowerment and increased engagement.

One of the key aspects in empowering your employees is to take a step back and let them produce their work in the best way *they* see possible. Looking over their shoulders, wordsmithing communications, dictating formatting in reports and running their work through a management filter is micromanaging and is akin to turning loaves of bread into babies. It's the equivalent of taking something that doesn't matter, and elevating it to the level of something that does.

Asking yourself "Does it matter?" will help you to gain perspective and give your employees a chance to grow. There are more productive ways for managers and leaders to mentor and coach their employees. Regular one-on-one meetings and productive feedback offer opportunities for leaders to help employees improve their work product in both small and large ways and can give them learning opportunities. This can be done without the cost of discouragement that comes with the manager scrubbing their work product in such a way that does not add any real value.

The wisdom of Solomon came from knowing what was important and really mattered. When your employees gain the confidence

that comes with diligent coaching, mentoring and direction to help them succeed, coupled with the freedom to act on their own, make level-appropriate decisions, and incorporate their own background and learning into their work, they will increase their sense of empowerment and engagement and help drive overall success of the organization. After all, as Steve Jobs said, "*It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.*" ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Mann, Annamarie, and Jim Harter. 2016. The Worldwide Employee Engagement Crisis. *Gallup Business Journal*, January 7, <http://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/188033/worldwide-employee-engagement-crisis.aspx> (accessed May 18, 2018).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Sorenson, Susan. 2013. How Employee Engagement Drives Growth. *Gallup Business Journal*, June 20, <http://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/163130/employee-engagement-drives-growth.aspx> (accessed May 18, 2018).



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