

Empowering Leadership

What it Is and When it Works

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Empowering leadership can be a powerful way to motivate for employees, but it can also be perceived as burdensome. Dr Allen Lee shows how to find the balance.

The 21st Century has seen a fundamental shift in our understanding of what motivates people and one of the most enduring messages has been that employee empowerment is a powerful weapon to harness human capital. The empowerment of employees involves shifting control and power away from organisational hierarchies by granting employees discretion and command over their day-to-day activities and giving them a voice in wider organisational decisions. The resulting feeling of 'psychological empowerment' reflects a powerful form of motivation characterised by active involvement in one's job. Furthermore, the benefits of empowerment are evident in increased performance and job satisfaction.¹



Given the advantages of an empowered workforce, a central concern for leaders is what they can do to empower their followers. Empowering leaders are those who effectively delegate authority to their employees, promote their autonomous decision making, share information and ask for input. Such leaders provide opportunities for empowerment within a supporting relationship. A large amount of research has shown that when leaders engage in behaviours that aim to empower their followers, it can be extremely productive. Research conducted in schools, for example, has highlighted the potential benefits of being an empowering leader. One study looked at the behaviours of school principals in California high schools and found that when teachers felt their principals were empowering, they were more satisfied with their jobs and were rated as better performers.² Interestingly, this study also found that followers who rated their leader as empowering were also less likely to be resistant to suggestions made by their principal.

Findings like this suggest that having an empowering leadership team is an effective way to motivate staff and get the most out of them. This is because employees of empowering leaders are more likely to feel empowered at work – they feel a greater sense of autonomy or control in their work, they feel that their job has meaning and is aligned with their values, that they are competent in their abilities and that they can make a difference. Empowered employees are more likely to be powerful, confident individuals who are committed to meaningful goals and demonstrate initiative and creativity to achieve them. They typically have the freedom to generate novel ideas and the confidence that these ideas will be valued. Employees are also more likely to trust leaders who they perceive as more empowering. They typically show greater faith in their leaders and are more likely to put in effort without feeling that they will be exploited. This is not as intuitive as one might think. When a leader tries to empower employees, he or she asks them to take on additional challenges and responsibility at work. Employees could interpret such delegating as the leader's attempt to avoid doing the work him or herself. But because truly empowering leadership is also about mentoring and supporting employee development, this can create a trusting relationship. Trust reduces uncertainty in the environment by instilling a sense of safety, which enables employees to take on more risks without feeling vulnerable.



However, the benefits of *being* an empowering leader are not always seen. In fact, recent research highlights that attempting to empower one's employees can backfire. For example, a recent study found that some followers perceive attempts at empowerment as laissez-faire leadership.³ Laissez-faire leadership reflects a passive leadership style in which a leader abdicates responsibility to their followers. Interestingly, the aforementioned study found that followers' expectations of

empowerment determined how they perceived the same type of behaviour from their leader. Followers with low empowerment expectations expect their leaders to be more direct and may find their work roles ambiguous and overloaded if too much autonomy is provided. Thus, when followers have low empowerment expectations, they perceive 'empowering behaviours' from a leader as an abdication of their responsibilities. Another way that empowering leadership can backfire is through a process of overburdening. Recent research has highlighted two paradoxical processes that can occur as a result of trying to empower one's followers.⁴ The first of these processes is termed enabling – the positive mechanism of empowering leadership which exerts its influence on followers' work role performance via increasing followers' self-efficacy, or their belief in their capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required



to produce given attainments. Simply put, giving employees the opportunity to have control over their jobs and the autonomy to find their own solutions to problems can enhance their confidence and self-belief. Indeed, individuals' self-efficacy can be enhanced through positive emotional support, words of encouragement, positive persuasion, models of success with whom people identify, and the experience of mastering a task: all of which are a part of effective empowering leadership behaviour. The second mechanism associated with empowering leadership is a negative one, namely burdening. Although the behaviours associated with empowering leadership, such as fostering participative decision making or providing autonomy from bureaucratic constraints, should increase followers' autonomy, at the same time,

it is possible and perhaps likely, that several undesirable reactions could result from this increased autonomy. Research demonstrates that higher levels of autonomy can distract from the performance of a task, as individuals are required to engage in more interference and will often be required to switch between different tasks. For instance, individuals with higher degrees of task autonomy will have greater opportunities to engage in decision making that is related to task implementation, which requires additional demands to perform the task itself. Put simply, additional autonomy can make a person's job harder. Accordingly, researchers have argued that empowering leadership may be subject to the Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing effect, which arises when a typically beneficial behavior (e.g., empowering leadership) reaches an inflection point, after which its relationship with a desired outcomes ceases to be linear and positive and actually becomes counterproductive.

On the one hand, empowering employees has the potential to be an extremely effective form of leadership that can give followers the latitude to develop their skills, build their self-belief and be creative. On the other hand, the delegation of responsibility may be seen as an absence of leadership altogether and may create additional stress for employees. So, what should leaders do? Here are some suggestions for leaders when considering empowering employees.

Leaders need to engage in active communication with their followers to (a) understand followers' expectations and (b) consequently align them with the needs of the followers. Empowering leadership can be easily misinterpreted by followers, resulting in rather ineffective leadership evaluation. An ongoing feedback loop between leaders and followers about the empowerment given and perceived might be necessary to find the right level of empowerment within the relationship.

Empowerment needs to be done correctly. When it comes to being an empowering leader it is important not just to focus on the delegation of responsibility and the provision of autonomy. While these are important, the key is that such behaviour is performed within a supporting relationship. Leaders need to understand which employees might benefit from additional responsibility and which employees might become overburdened by additional pressure. Crucially, followers need to feel safe to take risks and make mistakes. Without this feeling of 'psychological safety' empowerment will not work. It is about knowing each employee and what they need from their leader.

Leaders should be aware of the negative effects of empowering behaviours as well as the positive effects on followers. Thus, leaders should always try to keep a balanced view when they engage in empowerment toward their followers. It is crucial for managers to remember that empowering leadership has its own limits and to be realistic when they use empowering leadership to achieve the most positive effects. In particular, providing autonomy to followers may be perceived as burdening and may actually make their jobs harder. Care should be taken when giving followers additional responsibilities. Ask yourself – can this individual handle additional responsibility or am I adding to their workload?

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