

## Empowering Employees and Teams for High Performance

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Increasingly the issue of employee empowerment is coming up in our engagements. Our observation is that more people in organizations, at all levels, are feeling less like they control their own destiny in the workplace. Employees who feel empowered in their jobs make better decisions and produce higher quality outputs, which allow a company to remain agile—and in these times agility is necessary for survival. So **why do employees no longer feel empowered in their jobs?** Our experience suggests the following trends and implications for the loss of confidence and authority in the workplace.

### **TRENDS**

- Most leadership teams experience a significant change in personnel every 2-3 years.
- There is a move (especially in the past 10 years) to increase spans of control for managers from an average of 4-5 direct reports to 10-12.
- The US corporate training market shrank by over \$2 billion last year, the largest decline since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>
- Fewer people are making decisions due to the overall downsizing and flattening of organizations.
- Financial and economic challenges have caused companies to tighten controls, slash budgets and significantly lower people's responsibility levels.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

- Shifting priorities and policies which create turmoil within the organization.
- Greater need for people and resource management skills in the leadership role.
- More disciplined and systematic approaches to training, development, and succession planning are needed.
- More employee dependency on their managers to make decisions.
- People fear for their jobs and lack the confidence to be decisive; greater need to engage the people who remained within the organization over time.

### **Elements of Employee Empowerment**

In an effort to understand the effects of these implications on employee and team empowerment, the ArchPoint team researched the subject, fielded a survey and conducted interviews with key industry executives and a cross section of clients from CPG, B2B and retail industries. After analyzing the data and pooling our collective knowledge from years of working with high performing organizations, we have identified 11 characteristics critical to employee empowerment. To ensure empowerment at all levels within the company, people need to understand the following:

1. **What are the key Priorities?** People on your team should know the company priorities so well that they can judge what work is most important. While this seems simple, we find confusion at different levels of the organization as to the priorities of the business. Being clear on what we call "OGSM" is essential (Objectives, Goals, Strategies and Measures). Close to 70% of respondents gave a "very relevant" rating to this survey item, making understanding company priorities one of the most important elements for employee empowerment.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.litmos.com/2009/01/do-companies-really-want-to-sacrifice.html>.

2. **What Principles/Values do I follow?** Team members need to understand company principles and values so completely they can “walk the talk.” World-renowned author Stephen Covey’s work in the early 1990s suggests that principle-centered leaders are more adept at self-management.<sup>2</sup> Covey’s premise is that if a leader understands the basic principles and values of an organization, they can make decisions that are aligned to them.
3. **What am I Accountable for?** People should understand their accountabilities so well that they consistently deliver results. Famed financial author Dave Ramsey says it best: “Building personal accountability among the team members should be the heart and soul of a company’s business strategy.”<sup>3</sup> Over half of respondents gave a “very relevant” rating to this survey item, making understanding accountabilities one of the most important elements for employee empowerment. Simply stated, people have to know what they are responsible for.
4. **What is my expertise (Content Mastery)?** People on your team should be respected as highly competent experts who reliably deliver results. Research done by the CCI Assessment Group identifies technical competency as one of the key capabilities of individuals on high performing teams.<sup>4</sup> Our experience suggests that experts tend to take more risks based on their content knowledge and therefore feel more empowered to make decisions. Why is this important? Because if people are respected for their competencies, they will more likely be leaders to others and influence more educated decision-making.
5. **What Authority do I have?** The team should be clear what type and size decisions each person can make. A Lominger International study suggests that teams are more successful when they are given the authority to make decisions that will influence results.<sup>5</sup>
6. **What is my method for Problem Solving?** People should follow an effective process for problem solving resulting in fewer decisions being pushed up. Our experience suggests that empowered individuals more effectively manage through issues to a positive outcome. Good problem solvers look for root causes in problems versus immediately blaming individuals. While “people” competencies are sometimes the issue, many times it is related to structures, systems and processes.
7. **How do I resolve internal Conflict?** Team members should be able to resolve internal conflict without needing to involve others. The British mediator Alan Sharland’s research led him to conclude: “Empowerment is a continuous aim of effective conflict resolution.”<sup>6</sup> The best way to develop team members includes making sure they know how to set up the rules of engagement and ensuring they are trained in group facilitation and conflict resolution skills, according to more than two-thirds of the 278 respondents to a survey from the Institute for Corporate Productivity.<sup>7</sup> Productively resolving conflict is essential to helping team members mature and grow.

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<sup>2</sup>Covey, Stephen R. *Principle Centered Leadership*. New York: Fireside, 1991. Print.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.daveramsey.com/>.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.shrm.org/TemplatesTools/AssessmentResources/SHRMTTestingCenter/products/cci/Pages/tdp.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup>Pearman, R. R. (2007, August). Building learning teams. *Chief Learning Officer*, 42-45.

<sup>6</sup><http://www.communicationandconflict.com/empowerment.html>.

<sup>7</sup>Institute for Corporate Productivity. (2008, August). *Taking the pulse: Teams*. Retrieved from [www.i4cp.com](http://www.i4cp.com).

8. Do my superiors/team members **Trust** me? Team members need to feel completely trusted to make independent decisions. A Lominger International study presents 7 fundamentals employees need to be successful team members, one of which is *trust*.<sup>5</sup> Here again, if you are trusted by your team and your superiors, you feel more empowered to be the owner of situations.
9. Do I **Collaborate** freely? Team members should willingly collaborate and work together to achieve better results. In "Twelve Tips for Team-Building", Susan Heathfield lists Collaboration and recommends asking a series of questions: "Does the team understand team and group process? Are team members working together effectively interpersonally? Do team members cooperate to accomplish the team charter?"<sup>8</sup> Collaboration is a key competency for team members due to the complex work processes and fast pace of change in today's organizations.
10. Do I regularly **Reflect** on my performance? People should regularly reflect on and learn from successes and failures. As referenced earlier in the GE example, one of the expectations of the LIG program is that individuals and teams reflect on their successes and failures. In a fast paced environment, this often does not happen.
11. How do I stay **Balanced**? People on your team need to be able to balance the strategic priorities in addition to handling the day to day urgent issues. General Electric (GE) has been trying to tackle this for years with their 4-day Leadership, Innovation and Growth (LIG) program, where managers learn to balance short and long-term thinking.<sup>9</sup>

These findings are the culmination of research, survey data and years of experience with high performance organizations. We invite and encourage you to add your voice to the research for better understanding the issues of employee and team empowerment. Take our survey at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TeamEmpowermentSurvey>. If you would like a copy of our survey findings, email us at [empowerus@archpointgroup.com](mailto:empowerus@archpointgroup.com). Keep up with *The Point* and be on the lookout for updated survey findings later this year.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://humanresources.about.com/od/involvementteams/a/twelve\\_tip\\_team.htm](http://humanresources.about.com/od/involvementteams/a/twelve_tip_team.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Prokesch, S. (2009, January). How GE teaches teams to lead change. *Harvard Business Review*, 99-106.