



The future of management: the empowered employee or adult day care?

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Abstract

Our young employees are not the same as they used to be. The internet, rise of social media, decline of religion, increase in family breakdown, and massive technological advancements are just a few of the significant changes that are occurring in society. Many employers now feel that today's young adults are more distracted, less empathetic, less conscientious, more entitled, and less disciplined. While this is clearly a massive generalisation, the trend is apparent. How are managers going to respond? With increased focus on process and procedure and even more micromanagement? This is not a solution. I believe our employees should be empowered and accountable. We need to treat our employees like adults not children, and not doing so will lead to many problems.

Keywords: management, leadership, social capital, empowerment

How can managers empower employees?

It's simple: we should work with employees to agree on expectations, equip them with the knowledge and skills they need, and get out of their way.

There are four key components to this approach:

1. Work with employees to agree with crystal clarity on their role, their deliverables, and their performance indicators

As a manager you should have a pretty good idea of what needs to be done and how much you can pay someone to do it. This is the transaction that matters. By working with employees to define with as much clarity as possible their deliverables you shift the focus from procedure to performance. Do you pay your employees to follow rules and procedures or do you pay them to delivery results?

Of course, many rules and procedures are important, at least as they relate to deliverables. If the employee is performing customer service, then a deliverable may be providing that service during specific hours. As much as possible the focus should be on performance rather than arbitrary rules and procedures that don't relate to deliverables.

To put this another way: if an employee's deliverables

are not tied to certain hours then don't have rules about when and how much they need to work, and where they need to work. Does it matter if they are in the office at 7am and playing golf at 2pm? Does it even matter if they are lying on the beach in Bali if this doesn't affect their ability to meeting their deliverables? What matters is that they complete the work, not the means they take to achieve that end.

2. Equip your employees with the capacity they require to meet the agreed expectations

Ask your employees what they need to be successful and pay for training, tools, and resources that are required. It's rare for someone to have everything they need to excel in their role. There is normally some new skills, knowledge, or practices that they could learn, ways to do things better, or some tool or resource that they could benefit from.

There are several good reasons why employers should provide capacity building for their employees. The most obvious reason is that it allows them to do their job better. Another important reason is that it demonstrates that they are supported and valued, so helps to build loyalty and belonging.

3. Get out of their way but remain available, approachable, and open to assist when required

Your employees quite literally have a job to do, so let them get on with it and resist any urge to micromanage. Micromanagement reduces accountability because it removes the authority to take alternative actions that would have led to success, or at least to the mitigation

of failure. This is clearly counterproductive since it disempowers employees. This is most problematic when they feel that they are accountable for failure but do not have the freedom to determine their fate.

I won't be looking over your shoulder, but I will expect you to come see me if you need anything, and I will make myself available to you.

Getting out of their way does not mean that management is absent, just that it is not overly authoritative and excessively controlling. Most organisations are highly dynamic, so management needs to be present and approachable so that they can support their employees and adjust strategies and resources as required.

4. Regularly monitor performance and constructively hold employees accountable

One of the keys to empowering employees is the way they are held accountable for their performance. Performance reviews should be a careful balance between evaluating their deliverables and identifying solutions to any problems that may have hindered their performance. We could call this constructive accountability since it allows them to take responsibility for their performance and simultaneously focus on improvement.

This is not to say that if they have spent most of their time at the beach and underperformed on their deliverables that they are not held to account. But the focus should be on solutions, and in that situation spending more time in the office may be one of the solutions.

Are we running adult day care?

I've worked with a lot of organisations and unfortunately I've found many workplaces are too focused on rules and procedures and have widespread micromanagement practices. This approach to management tends to stifle innovation and creativity, disempower employees, and can result in loss of trust and belonging. The result is a negative organisational culture and poor social capital.

I understand the problem: if managers have doubts regarding employees' competence then a normal response is to put in place structure and controls. But this is making the problem worse. It means that employees cannot be trusted to do the right thing, to be responsible, and accountable for their actions. It also means that the manager takes responsibility for the performance of the employees. It's no longer up to employees to excel, but merely follow the rules and procedures – to go through the motions.

It should be noted that micromanagement can also be caused by managers who are detail-oriented, emotionally insecure, have problems with trust, or are narcissistic. It can also come about as the result of a fundamental breakdown of the concept of delegation, which may come from mismanagement or even neglectful

management.

With clear deliverables and performance indicators there should be no need to micromanagement.

Can employees be trusted to do the right thing?

This question appears to be part of a more general societal trend. It seems that in many countries government no longer trusts its citizens to look after themselves and do the right thing. These countries are becoming 'nanny states' where governments are overprotective or interfering unduly with personal choice.

I'm most familiar with examples in Australia where there are fines for not wearing a helmet riding a bicycle, for having a dog at a café, for having alcohol in a public place, for not immunising your children, for leaving car keys in an unattended vehicle, and a range of other incentive or disincentive-based controls.

While these may be good things to encourage, can we not trust our citizens to do the right thing? Are we assuming that the average person is too stupid and ignorant? Are we not reducing personal responsibility and effectively removing their accountability?

Unfortunately, this has flow on effects for organisations in these countries. It could be claimed that nanny states may their citizens 'dumber', but it would be more accurate to say that citizens in these countries are less used to being accountable.

Regardless, this should not make employees any less trustworthy since organisations can manage their employees with the reward of remuneration and the threat of termination. So, through appropriate management, organisations can make their employees accountable and in these circumstances employees can be trusted to do the right thing.

The days of running adult day care centres are over

The best organisations have taken the lead on management practices and are already enjoying the benefits empowered employees and the resulting positive organisational culture. But there are still many other organisations stuck in the adult day care model of management.

Ask yourself the question: how do my organisation's rules and procedures relate to my deliverables? If they don't, you're still in day care.

If you don't know what your deliverables are because you're so focused on your rules and procedures, you're still in day care.

If you're not accountable for your performance, you're still in day care. Sorry.