

The new world of work

GUIDE TO EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT



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Introduction

Before the pandemic, most managers and leaders probably would have said their employees had a sense of empowerment. But during the pandemic, when doors were locked and employees sent home for a year or more, employee empowerment became an operational imperative. Empowerment was no longer just an ideal to which companies could aspire.

"Employee empowerment is even more relevant to navigate the coronavirus pandemic successfully," Murielle Tiambo, senior engagement manager at PwC, told the [Society for Human Resource Management \(SHRM\)](#). "The ability to remain agile, let go on the details, embrace and institute new ways to stay connected and foster an inclusive team, and focus on outcomes has become an even more essential factor to effective leadership."

People who don't feel empowered at work can tell you what it includes—endless checks and balances, feeling a lack of ownership, and deference to hierarchy.

By contrast, empowerment involves:

- Some level of autonomy
- A sense of control over one's day-to-day activities
- Agile teams with less oversight from upper levels
- An opportunity to contribute to decisions and discussions

When operations went to a [remote model](#) during the pandemic, many companies had no choice but to enable and empower their employees. It simply wasn't possible to manage every detail or oversee every decision from a distance. Empowering employees during that challenging time may have just helped those companies survive.

As the world of work begins to shift to a new, post-pandemic model, every organization has the opportunity to embrace those changes. With a renewed focus on the employee experience, it's essential to understand how employee empowerment will help drive your organization's success.

Benefits of employee empowerment

"While forging ahead into something new introduces its own uncertainties, it also offers the promise of building on pandemic-related accomplishments," according to McKinsey, "like moving to more flexible and innovative working models, implementing new technologies in weeks rather than months or years, empowering teams, stripping down unnecessary bureaucracy, and making faster decisions amid uncertainty."

Indeed, [research continues to demonstrate](#) a link between employee empowerment, job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational commitment.

Empowerment can increase productivity. The [Wharton School](#) cites a study from Zenger Folkman that "found that only 4% of employees are willing to give extra effort when empowerment is low, but 67% as willing when empowerment is high."

The differences between empowered and unempowered employees don't stop there. Empowerment has a direct impact on engagement, too. When [behavioral statistician Joseph Folkman](#) looked at data representing more than 7,000 employees, he found that "those who felt disempowered were rated at the 24th percentile of engagement while those with a high level of empowerment came in at the 79th percentile."

Empowerment or disempowerment?

When trying to empower employees, managers and leaders may have the best intentions, but their efforts and approach can have the opposite effect when not handled well. Consider this scenario:

An employee is a new project manager. During the pandemic, her manager asks her to take complete control of implementing a new instant messaging system.

"I know you have what it takes to get the right system in place," says the manager.

The employee is thrilled by this opportunity to demonstrate what she can do and to find a solution for people to connect, even while working remotely. She asks about a budget and timeline.

"I trust you and am behind whatever you recommend," says her manager.

The employee meets with subject matter experts, holds the project kick-off, and sends her manager an email with an update, including her initial recommendations.

"Thanks for this update. Unfortunately, leadership said we need to limit expenses right now. We can't purchase an instant messaging app after all. I need you to draft a list of five other recommendations, please."

What was empowering for this employee has quickly evolved into [feelings of disempowerment](#). As a result, the employee lacks motivation and is no longer interested in finding a solution for employees to stay connected while working remotely.

4 keys to empowerment

It's easy to talk about and grasp the value of employee empowerment, but making it a reality requires more than intention. It requires action. There are four keys to effectively empowering your employees.

1. Ensure that leaders demonstrate and reinforce empowerment

Employees look to leaders and supervisors as role models for what type of behavior is acceptable. That includes looking to leaders to understand what they consider ethical business practices. Employees also look to leaders to gauge the amount of autonomy and empowerment they can expect. If they voice their opinion or make a decision, will they be rewarded or rejected? Are leaders celebrating independence, or are they squelching innovation with micromanagement?

Research shows that empowerment improves significantly when a group manager invites and accepts ideas and opinions from team members. In addition, a [Harvard Business Review \(HBR\)](#) analysis found that employees were more likely to trust leaders whom they perceived as empowering.

Make sure your leaders are on board with empowering employees. When they encourage, recognize, and celebrate employees for taking the initiative, you'll experience the powerful ripple effects in improved engagement and widespread trust.

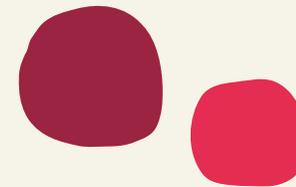
2. Create opportunities for employees to take action

One definition of employee empowerment states that it is "defined as the ways in which organizations provide their employees with a certain degree of autonomy and control in their day-to-day activities."

This means employees need opportunities to make decisions, delegate, and navigate how to learn from mistakes. According to experts, empowering leaders set goals and benchmarks, but they allow employees to decide how to go about reaching them.

Be sure you gauge the appropriate level of empowerment for each employee during each stage of their career journey. In [one study](#), researchers found that when attempting to empower employees, some leaders "burdened their employees and increased their level of job stress. The empowering leaders who did see better performance on routine tasks were the ones who developed good relationships with their employees and were more trusted."

Providing opportunities for employees to take action helps inspire creativity and encourages them to pursue and contribute ideas that will benefit your organization. Given a chance to demonstrate their skills and abilities, employees will also get more personal satisfaction from work, which leads to better engagement and results.



3. Provide intentional ways for employees to connect with your mission

An important part of empowerment is individual alignment with an organization's mission, values, [and goals](#). That alignment with your mission drives engagement that then contributes to overall success and customer satisfaction.

"As more and more leaders come to understand that employee empowerment is paramount to achieving organizational goals, they realize that people are their most strategic asset. All other organizational elements—technology, products, processes—result from the actions of workers," [according to Forbes](#). "To that end, leaders are increasingly concerned about ensuring that their employees feel truly empowered to contribute to the company's mission and drive value to customers."

To ensure your employees connect with the "why" and the mission that drives their work, they need access to information that helps them understand the organization's goals. They need time and discussion devoted to helping illustrate why their work matters. Finally, they should be able to reflect on how they define their success.

You can provide time for them to connect to your mission through town hall meetings, discussions with leaders, as well as training and development that focuses on foundational truths that drive your business.

4. Establish a framework for ongoing feedback

Employees crave and appreciate feedback about their work. Not only does feedback help build employee confidence and improve decision-making abilities, but it also creates a clear path for empowerment. Employees want to know what they're doing well, but they also want to understand how they can develop and grow. Even in the case of negative feedback, if it's delivered appropriately, it will help improve performance. When everyone feels comfortable sharing their work and asking for and receiving feedback, the [entire organization benefits](#).

By shifting the emphasis from a single [performance review](#) every year to ongoing discussions about professional growth, companies can transform feedback into a process that facilitates a culture of development and opportunity.

There are a variety of feedback models you can use. The most important thing is to help managers and colleagues understand how to provide practical, helpful feedback and communicate in a way that makes the feedback process empowering. Instead of avoiding giving feedback, remind your employees that it's an opportunity for growth—for everyone involved.

Are you empowering employees? Ask these five questions

You know employee empowerment can make a difference. But you're still not sure how to evaluate if it's happening in your organization. Use these five questions to assess what's working and identify areas for improvement.

1. Are employees considered part of your vision?

Your organization has a vision. For employees to embrace that vision, they need to see themselves as an integral part.

[Delta Airlines' vision statement](#) provides an excellent example of empowering employees:

"We—Delta's employees, customers, and community partners together form a force for positive local and global change, dedicated to bettering standards of living and the environment where we and our customers live and work."

Not every vision statement will specifically name employees. However, it should be understood and implied that employees are a key driver in achieving your vision. How are expectations established?

2. How do managers set expectations?

If a critical step in empowerment is setting expectations that an employee can use to guide their work, you need to ensure how managers are setting those expectations. Employees feel empowered when they **know what is expected of them**, have the tools to do their assignments, and can ask for help if they need it.

As you examine employee empowerment in your organization, ensure you know how expectations are established. Ideally, they should be set verbally and documented, and tracked in your HRIS so that employees and managers alike can feel confident that they both know what is expected.



3. How do employees receive feedback?

One way to ensure feedback becomes part of your operational model is to establish a model or framework that meets your needs. Maybe it must be easy to use, promotes sharing, or has an element of fun. Regardless of the specifics, a feedback framework should encourage dialogue and coaching.

A robust [HRIS](#) (like bob) can help you create your own culture around feedback. When your system is tailored to your company and your people, feedback becomes part of daily activities that you can use to empower employees.

4. Do managers delegate?

Whether by observation or direct inquiry, identify if delegation is happening. One way to assess if empowerment is a reality is to observe managers. If they are stressed and overworked, they might not be delegating enough or allowing employees to take action.

Also, consider team representation in cross-functional meetings and on projects—is the manager or leader always present? That may indicate a manager’s reluctance to share responsibilities with their team members.

As part of your annual [employee survey](#) or regular check-ins, ask employees to rate the level of autonomy they have on projects. If managers aren’t delegating, there may be a need to train them to create opportunities for independence.

5. How does recognition occur?

When you're empowering employees, you want to reinforce their efforts. That will keep the trend going and build a strong foundation. You can strengthen their efforts by recognizing and rewarding employees when they take empowered actions. If they take on new responsibilities—thank them and celebrate what they did well.

Take a look around your organization to confirm if recognition is happening. Is it happening in individual teams? Are leaders prioritizing thanking and acknowledging employees' work? Do you have systems in place that make it easy for peers to celebrate one another's accomplishments? Recognition is twofold—it reassures those who are being recognized and encourages others who witness the recognition. It may serve to inspire them to take the initiative in their role as well.

It's clear that employee empowerment not only benefits staff members, it ultimately benefits the entire organization. Use these questions and identify areas of opportunity. Talk to your employees—gather their input and use it as the insight to drive empowerment forward.



Conclusion

If we think of empowerment as only an aspiration or an ideal, we miss the point. When employees have a sense of autonomy, it can improve job satisfaction, which can decrease overtime costs, reduce turnover rates, and enhance the overall employee experience.

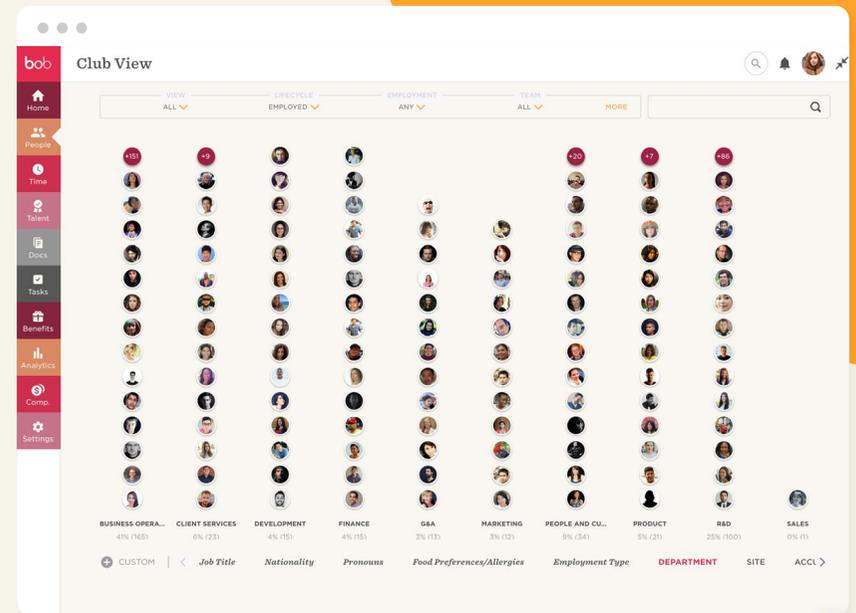
The benefits are not just related to experience and engagement. These improvements directly impact the bottom line, [according to Gallup](#). Businesses with highly motivated and engaged workers are 21% more profitable.

To take advantage of all today's talent has to offer, your organizational practices, systems, and processes need to evolve toward a more empowering approach. When you reduce micromanagement and extensive oversight, you unleash the potential of an empowered workforce.



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