

No Guts, No Glory: 10 Ways to Ease Into Empowerment

By: JoAnna Brandi

It's hard to be one of the best – it's hard to be great. It takes *real effort* to be a Nordstrom, a Container Store, a Whole Foods or a Southwest Airlines. It takes focus, commitment and discipline to *craft a culture* that yields consistently positive customer experiences -- and consistently profitable returns.

In today's business world this kind of performance cannot be achieved without *empowerment*. It's a word that's gotten a bad rap in the last few years as companies without a full understanding of what it *really* means attempted to push power, *without authority*, to the front lines. When implemented poorly as a 'one time event,' empowerment initiatives do more harm than good. When implemented as an *ongoing process*, it liberates the *brilliance* of your workforce, re-energizes your organization and thrills your customers!

In its broadest sense, say Dennis T. Jaffe and Cynthia Scott, authors of *Take This Job and Love It*, empowerment means, "the organization shifts from limiting the power to determine its future and how it will get there to a few top executives, to include every level of the organization in the process." It takes guts to do this, to create and sustain an empowerment process. It requires courage to look within, challenge old assumptions and embrace new ideas from people at every level. Here are ten effective ways to ease into the empowerment process:

- Define what management means by empowerment. Understand the difference between perceptions and *definitions*.
- Take an honest look at your *real* values and beliefs (as contrasted with your espoused values and beliefs). Are you walking your talk and talking your walk?
- Using feedback, determine if most of the workforce will support the effort (if not, stop here). Ask people what they need in order to take the risks associated with empowerment.
- Revisit vision/mission/goals - Make sure they are customer-focused, clear and understandable to all. Define the words if necessary (what does it mean to be a "premier" company?).
- Assess current level of skills in the organization, including individual readiness, personal and intergroup relationships as well as organizational structures and "policies."
- Assess the adequacy of the information system in company; can it support the effort? People need information to be empowered.
- Plan ongoing training efforts in interpersonal communications/team skills. These relationship skills are at the hub of *any* change initiative, and can make or break the effort.
- Work with employees, in teams and individually, to begin the process of challenging old beliefs and assumptions. Look at assumptions about the customers, the marketplace and your competencies.
- Together, with their input, make the vision come alive in ways that everyone understands and supports.

- Create it! Be sure to regularly assess and refine the process and the goals toward which you're working.

Choosing to empower your employees is a bold move. The leadership in a company must have sensitivity, intelligence and the patience, moving the initiative at a pace that respects where employees are now, and where they've been. It must be skillful at building and maintaining an environment of trust and emotional safety, enabling everyone to take steady steps forward.

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