

The Empowerment Checklist

Written by John Roup, HSB Reliability Technologies
Wednesday, 01 April 1998 10:49

A true revolution is taking place in American leadership style as companies move from the era of command and control to one of employee empowerment. Managers and supervisors are being challenged to redefine their roles in this new era.

We at HSB Reliability Technologies have been facing questions about visions, missions, expectations, and empowerment with increasing frequency. Despite a number of books devoted to the empowerment process, our experience has shown us that none seem to touch on every phase of the process. They all emphasize only certain aspects. To help fill the gaps and provide a ready reference for the modern reliability leader we have developed an Empowerment Checklist.

Shared vision

First, the leader establishes the long-term vision for the organization. The leader can be anyone from the CEO to a plant manager to a maintenance engineer leading a reliability improvement effort. A vision is an inspiring description of a prosperous future. Its purpose is to inspire and align an organization. It is critical that visions within an organization support the vision for the organization as a whole. Failure to create such an alignment causes confusion, conflicting efforts, and all the chaos associated with corporate mutiny.

Communicating the vision is just the beginning of the process. Building belief in and support for the vision is the real challenge for the leader. After all, a vision that is not shared is only a dream.

Corporate culture

The leader next works with his leadership group in order to establish the corporate culture in which the employees are to operate. The leadership group covers everyone from the CEO to the people who interact with the first line supervisors.

The lower level of the corporate leadership group, also known as middle management, is much maligned and has been shrinking greatly in stature in most organizations. But middle management serves many purposes, including helping the leader to define the corporate culture.

The formal and informal rules that define the acceptable and desirable patterns of behavior in an organization constitute its corporate culture. It is more important to determine the informal rules that actually are being followed than the formal rules found in manuals and plaques on the

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wall.

How important is it to define a corporate culture? Consider this: a person's compatibility with an organization's corporate culture is possibly the most important selection criteria in all personnel decisions, whether hiring, promoting, or separating. We frequently run into obstacles to improvement in organizations that haven't defined their culture including: "How do you know continuous improvement is what we want to do?" or "Who says empowering or hourly employees is a good thing?"

Missions

Together with input from all levels of the organization, the leadership group then works to turn the vision into shorter-term missions for different people, teams, and organizations. The mission or mission statement defines what is to be worked on and what is to be accomplished.

Key strategies

Leaders also establish key macro strategies that require their level of responsibility and influence in order to be successful. Key strategies define the overall plan of action that a leadership group hopes to implement in order to achieve its mission. The decision to further empower employees is an example of a key strategy.

Organize for success

Leaders retain the responsibility to organize the employees in a structure that will allow them to accomplish their mission. Today, companies need to be organized in at least two ways. First, who is the customer? Second, who is the leader (coach, confidant, interference runner)? In some organizations there may be further differentiation between business and functional leaders.

Leaders need to provide this information. Empowered employees may have considerable input to this process, but not final say. Few employees are likely to expose themselves to the consequences of organizational changes that result from such programs as reengineering. Thus final responsibility is still with the leader.

Roles and responsibilities

With considerable input from employees, leaders establish the roles and responsibilities for

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each employee in the organization. This includes identifying the resources available to the employees and clearly establishing the boundaries of their efforts. Just like in the theatre, an employee's role is the part he plays in an organization. His responsibilities define the activities for which he will be held accountable. Resources are assets, people, and systems at his disposal to achieve the mission. Boundaries define the demarcation between resources that are available to him and those that are not.

Good definition of roles and responsibilities clears up much of the petty bickering and political infighting that plagues many organizations. We recently helped to define the roles and responsibilities for a tool room attendant. He was delighted to participate in the process and commented that in 20 years of working at the plant it was the first time someone had really explained what he was supposed to be doing. Incidentally, his role changed from guardian of the tools (of dubious value) to tool repairman (a profitable activity).

Expectations

From the roles and responsibilities, the leader and employee (or a team of employees) working together establish expectations of what is to be accomplished over a given period. Expectations define the level of performance, or improved performance, that is to be achieved. Increasingly, expectations are defined in terms of balanced scorecards rather than single dimensioned productivity goals. They can also describe specific activities or subjective goals.

Balanced scorecards

Together the leader and employee also agree on the balanced scorecards that will be used to track progress toward achieving the expectations and mission. Balanced scorecards, critical success indicators, or key measures are all the same thing. The question is, What do you propose to measure in order to determine if you are achieving the mission? Be careful here, you will be held accountable for continuous improvement!

Good measures are usually built around those activities that are the key drivers of the profitability or efficiency of an organization's systems. In maintenance this may include percent planned work, PM compliance, mean time between failure, or operating factor. In addition to the traditional financial measures, balanced scorecards also measure the improvement of organizational learning and growth, internal systems, and the benefits for customers and partners.

Consequences

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The leader then establishes the consequences (positive or negative) of achieving the goals. The leader also ensures that incentives are aligned throughout the organization (for departments, teams, suppliers, and customers). Positive consequences include recognition, praise, increased self-esteem, pay increases, bonuses, promotion, and a bigger boat in the driveway. Negative consequences include constructive criticism, retraining, transfer, pay cuts, demotion, and a dinghy in the driveway. Both may be required for success; wisdom is required for proper application.

Coach and facilitate

The employees are now properly empowered. They know what is to be accomplished, by when, and why. They also know the resources available to them and the boundaries of their efforts. They understand the culture in which they are to operate and the tools available for use. They also have a felt need for achieving their goals. However, the leader's work is just beginning. What do leaders and supervisors need to do to gain the trust and commitment of empowered ~employees?

First, they must get out of the way and allow the employees to use all their talent, initiative, and foresight to achieve the expectations. The leader also must remain alert for the need to run interference for the employee when obstacles are encountered, whether organizational or financial. It should also be the leader's desire that employees achieve their mission.

Therefore, the leader also becomes coach, guide, and confidant. He passes on the knowledge, skills, and techniques he has learned from experience. Out in the trenches most learning still takes place through one-on-one coaching, which is something to be recognized and formalized. Being a guide means being consistent. Nothing destroys initiative faster than inconsistent and arbitrary leadership.

Finally, the leader must avoid getting involved on a daily basis. Otherwise, the employee may vertically delegate the responsibility back and the supervisor loses his ability to lead.

Review and redirect

After a given period (3 months, 6 months, a year), the leader and employee reunite to review progress toward achieving the expectations. Performance is reviewed, which starts the process for salary review and other incentive systems. The vision, mission, and key strategies are reviewed and updated if needed, as well as the roles and responsibilities and the balanced scorecards. Then new expectations are established, and the process restarted.

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Accountability

Finally, one tenet remains true: a leader can delegate responsibility, but not accountability. The leader remains accountable for the results of all activity in his sphere of responsibility.

The first and one of the biggest mistakes that many companies pursuing empowerment have made is to assume that empowerment means abdication of authority to the workforce. Our experience on reliability improvement programs has taught us that even empowered employees need a good deal of leadership, support, and nurturing to be successful.

When we have failed to understand or follow the Empowerment Checklist, our reliability improvement efforts have frequently met with frustration and reduced results. When we follow it successfully, results frequently exceed expectations. In fact, double-digit improvements in productivity, reliability, and production capacity are common. **MT**

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Empowerment Checklist

- Create a shared vision
- Define your corporate culture
- Define missions
- Select key strategies
- Organize for success
- Define employees' roles and responsibilities
- Define expectations
- Establish balanced scorecards
- Define consequences(good and bad)
- Coach and facilitate
- Review and redirect
- Retain accountability