

# COACHING YOUR EMPLOYEES TOWARD EMPOWERMENT

The practices of participative management and employee empowerment can be described as the sharing of information and power with employees at all levels, including front-line employees. This practice is crucial to the success of businesses today because it ultimately allows employees to make on-the-spot decisions that help the organization deliver higher quality service, at a faster pace, to the customer. Empowerment also creates tremendous growth opportunities for employees.

Recognizing the benefits of empowerment, many organizations today are jumping "on the band wagon" without the proper preparation and planning for such a strategy. As a result, many of the empowerment initiatives seem to fade away just as quickly as they appeared.

## Practice Versus Theory

Most managers and supervisors – and even team leaders – do not understand how to apply the theory of empowerment in a practical and effective way. What many do not realize is that employees, who are used to working in traditionally hierarchical or autocratic cultures, cannot be "empowered" overnight. In fact, in many cases they will not want to be empowered. To work, in most cases, the empowerment process has to be a gradual one.

Managers, supervisors, and team leaders can coach and prepare their people for changes by taking incremental steps and by giving employees more authority and responsibility as they become prepared to handle it. Organizations that do not support their managers, supervisors, and team leaders to take on such a coaching role, while trying to empower their workforces, usually fail and fall back into their old ways. Such failure destroys trust throughout the organization.

One way those in charge can coach front-line workers through this change is to conduct regularly scheduled (weekly, monthly, or quarterly) one-on-one meetings with them through which progress, growth, and development can take place in a timely and motivating manner. I call such meetings Personal Development

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Interviews (P.D.I.s) because they can become the vehicle for gradually preparing front-line workers for accepting change.

It has been my experience that this structured coaching vehicle helps managers, supervisors, team leaders, and front-line workers to practically employ the theories of empowerment and participative management in the gray reality of their work environment. Such meetings permit the manager and employee to intelligently review and evaluate progress toward agreed upon objectives and goals, as well as determine the front-line worker's readiness level for increased responsibility. In addition, it provides an opportunity for the manager to create a motivational environment in which each employee sees his or her job as a means of attaining personal career goals.

The Personal Development Interview

is made up of four interrelated essential components consisting of a planning, facilitating, evaluation, and motivation phase. They are not necessarily addressed in this particular order every time a manager or coach conducts a P.D.I. Instead, as managers conduct P.D.I. coaching sessions, they incorporate aspects of each component as they see necessary.

## Planning

The first step under planning is to determine where employees currently stand in regard to the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and habits (KASH) they need to be effective in an empowered organization. After all, these will be the main areas in which persons in charge will have to focus their coaching efforts to prepare their people for a more empowered environment. I use the acronym KASH to refer to these personal development areas.

Once KASH areas that require coaching are agreed upon, the employee, in conjunction with their coach, can focus on setting some specific and measurable goals for development. For example, one employee might need to set a goal for sharpening decision-making skills, while another might need to improve his or her time management skills or work habits.

Changing attitudes is probably the most difficult area because employees first need to become aware of how they think and act towards others. Initially, they may look negatively at having to consider these aspects of their lives. The key here is for the coach to help the employee in ways that allow the employee to develop confidence and convictions about what they believe, think, and how they act towards others. Attitudes can have a tremendous impact on the employee's empowerment.

To facilitate the setting for such personal development goals, an action plan which documents the methods and steps for achieving those goals should be developed. Such a document can help identify possible resources that will be needed, as well as provide benchmarks to guide the employee.

In reality, the coach is actually empowering employees through this planning process because he or she is giving the employees a sound strategy through which they can ultimately set their own job and team performance goals in the future. However, front-line employees cannot be expected to plan their own performance goals until they are clear on the organization's mission, as well as the goal and priorities of their department or team. As a result, their coach should reinforce the mission and goals on an ongoing basis.

### Facilitating

Once an action plan has been developed for development in the KASH areas, the coach can focus his or her coaching efforts on the facilitating component of the P.D.I. Facilitating a P.D.I. component is simply providing the necessary resources, support, and guidance the employee needs to achieve his or her development goals.

For example, the coach may need to assist the employee with prioritizing and scheduling. In some cases, employees may need job skill training, which the coach can provide personally or arrange for. In any case, the coach's concern should be to do whatever has to be done to enable the employees to achieve the KASH goals they set in the planning process. Obviously, not all facilitating and coordinating activities can be executed within the actual P.D.I. meetings. However, the P.D.I. provides a framework for communicating and confirming these activities on a regular basis.

### Routine Evaluation

The evaluation component of the P.D.I. can be described as monitoring

the employees progress toward KASH goals on a continuous basis. The employee should develop and initiate his or her own system for monitoring progress while planning goals – if at all possible.

The coach's job here is to review that progress (or lack of) and give feedback for continuous improvement. Such monitoring will allow the coach to reinforce or redirect the employees efforts and will increase the chances for successful achievement of the goals. In addition, routine evaluation will help the person in charge and the employee determine the employee's readiness in terms of KASH to take on additional responsibilities and become more empowered.

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### Motivation

Perhaps the most important coaching activity the person in charge can engage in throughout every P.D.I. (and throughout every day) is creating an environment that fosters trust, growth, and continuous improvement. The best way to create this kind of environment is to help employees to see how their work can satisfy their career needs and support their own values. Creating such an environment is not as difficult as some would think. By utilizing a few common sense steps, coaches can go a long way toward getting their people excited about empowerment.

For example, the coach can use every P.D.I. as an opportunity to give employ-

ees recognition for work well done or for progress toward goals. At the same time, the coach can also identify areas for growth in which he or she can provide guidance for improvement. Such feedback, on a routine basis, will help to build trust and confidence.

Another common sense step that the coach should practice is simply listening to his or her people. Many persons in charge hear their people but do not really listen to them. As a result, they lose the opportunity to identify the personal needs and values of employees which can motivate them if linked to their work.

The key is to listen to employees on a continuum so that over time the coach can see a pattern of needs and values. Again, conducting the P.D.I. on a routine basis will allow the coach to do this.

All of the roles and coaching activities outlined in this article should be part of what managers do throughout every day, and not just in their Personal Development Interviews, if they want to prepare their front-line employees to be more empowered. However, such interviews can give persons in charge a framework for implementing these techniques in a more structured and focused manner. As employees show they are ready and able to take on more, the interviews can become less frequent.

### Reference

I have been using the acronym KASH for many years. According to Life Insurance Marketing Research Association, it is an acronym that has become part of standard life insurance industry terminology.

*Article reprinted from*  
***Carlson Learning  
Company Journal***

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