

effective environments newsletter



CONSULTANTS TO NONPROFITS, SMALL BUSINESSES & ENTREPRENEURS

Putting the Meaning Back Into "Empowerment"

It's been a long time since "empower" was a word that really did. Now, often considered empty, meaningless corporate jargon, the word is rarely heard with a sense of inspiration and possibility. Rather, the prevailing response is: "Yeah, yeah . . . 'empower.' Someone's going to try to make me do something and wants me to pretend to like it."

Pity. Through overuse, or unmindful use, "empower" is in danger of losing much of its meaning.

In our experience, this term — and what it represents — remains timely and vitally important. Indeed, when looking to express the true meaning of the word, there is no synonym. "Support" does not mean the same thing; nor does "enable"; nor does "help."

To us, "empower" means to recognize and acknowledge the innate power in oneself or another and, by communication and action, to create an environment in which that power is unleashed. To empower someone is to call forth the potential, the possibility, the greatness in another person. It means choosing to interact with

the other person's higher self, rather than with their pettiness or considerations. In fact, it also means remembering (and expressing) your awareness that the pettiness and considerations you observe are NOT who people really are.

When someone expects us to demonstrate greatness, we tend to respond. When a demand is made of us to rise above the circumstances and produce extraordinary results, we often find that we can. In the process, we discover that we were not as limited as we thought — we really were a powerful person. We've been "empowered" to express or demonstrate our greatness.

Empowering someone, then, is not a casual or passive en-

deavor. It does not occur through laissez-faire (as in, "we will empower people to make their own choices by leaving them alone.") To empower is to

speak or act affirmatively — creating an environment in which another is unleashed to express his or her own power. True educators are masters of empowerment, as are excellent managers or bosses.

Volumes have been written on the art of empowering others. (For a few titles, see the recommended resources printed elsewhere in this newsletter.) In this article, we focus our discussion on the qualities we see are essential for empowering another person.

Qualities of an Empowerer

Empowerment isn't a set of rules — it is a commitment. Its success is a function of the strengths and talents of the person seeking to empower another. Cultivating

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particular qualities in yourself can enhance your ability to call forth the best in others.

1. **Generous World View.** How



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you regard people in general has everything to do with empowering others. Are people fundamentally good, trustworthy and able? Or are they basically lazy, selfish or incompetent? Your starting point will color every word you say, your tone of voice and your actions.

2. Active Listening. It is essential to be able to hear not only what they say but also what is unsaid. Listen for people's commitments, dreams and fears. Listen for greatness. Especially, listen and look deeply for the qualities they bring and what they need in order to share their unique gifts without constraint.

3. High Standards and Vision. No one can empower another from a place of complacency. If there is no need for greatness, there is no empowerment. Consider what is possible and what is needed — and what will make a difference. Then, ask for THAT.

4. Mindful Speaking. The words we use have immense power to build or to destroy. Language, indeed, shapes the world we see and can alter reality. To empower another, it is imperative to be conscious of the words we use and how they are heard by another — and to deliberately choose words that open doors, provide fresh perspective and foster excellence.

5. Patience and Compassion. Few fly on the first attempt and initial short falls are not harbingers of failure. Hold fast to the standard or vision you are invit-

ing them to reach and refuse to accept anything less. At the same time, be compassionate and patient. The only failure lies in giving up. Remember that forgiveness, encouragement and second chances are sources of empowerment also, and so are lessons learned!

Conclusion

The word "empower" has fallen into disfavor. Its meaning, however, is still relevant and important. We invite you to keep the word in your lexicon and the practice in your repertoire. Seize every opportunity to explore what it means to empower — and what works and what doesn't work in going about it. You will find the results remarkable.

Recommended Reading

Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment: How to Improve Quality, Productivity and Employee Satisfaction, William C. Byham with Jeff Cox, The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998.

The 3 Keys to Empowerment: Release the Power Within People for Astonishing Results, Ken Blanchard, John C. Carlos, Alan Randolph (1999).

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As always, we invite your comments and welcome suggestions for possible newsletter topics.

We're Moving!

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