

# Empowerment: IS IT A MYTH?

**E**mpowered employees and satisfied customers are the key to a successful business. In fact, I would guess that most companies don't really understand what empowerment is. My definition of empowerment is this: Giving employees the authority to bend and break the rules to take care of a customer on the spot to the customer's, not the company's, satisfaction. The reality in most organizations is that empowerment is a myth because most employees are afraid they will be fired or forced to pay for whatever they give the customer as compensation for a problem they experienced with the company.

Here are five steps to make empowerment a reality in your organization:

1. Train every employee including the managers and supervisors on customer service and empowerment: what it is, how to use it, and how to enforce it. Most employees feel it's safer to bump a problem up the ladder, but the magic of empowerment occurs when a frontline employee handles a customer's problem—quickly and to the customer's satisfaction. When employees are trained and empowered to handle customer complaints, not only will they maintain customer loyalty, they will restore it.
2. Eliminate policies and procedures that get in the way of empowerment. Most policies and procedures are geared to protect the company from ignorant employees and dishonest customers. You can't tie employees' hands with cumbersome policies and procedures and expect them to provide exceptional service in an empowered way.
3. Eliminate the "fear factor." Management fears empowerment because they think customers are liars and cheats who will take advantage of employees and employees will "give away the store" when trying to assuage upset customers. Employees also fear empowerment because making empowered decisions means taking risks. Let employees know that it is ok to make a mistake in the process of working to win customer satisfaction.
4. Reinforce. When an employee is empowered to make decisions that will benefit the customer, everyone wins. Reinforce that employees will not be reprimanded or fired for making empowered decisions. Employees gain self-confidence, managers and executives have more time to address other issues, and the organization will have loyal customers who wouldn't dream of doing business with anyone else.
5. Recognize. Celebrate the empowered actions of your employees; feature them in your organization's publication, give them a round of applause in front of their peers and a prime parking spot near the door for a month and send them a congratulatory e-mail—and copy it to upper management. When you recognize your empowered employees, you send a message to the rest of the workforce that empowerment is important. Make heroes of your empowered employees—and get rid of those employees who refuse to make empowered decisions.

Empowerment is the most critical skill an employee can master and a company can drive in order to lure—and keep—customers. If empowerment is a myth in your organization, I suggest you begin now to empower your employees and create the magnet that will draw customers—and their money—through your doors and keep them coming back to you. **RO**

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