

Telephone Directories: Empowerment

Description

The concept of empowered employees is gaining acceptance among organizations committed to managing for quality. Drawing as it does upon the creativity, training, and desire for increased responsibility within the work force, empowerment can result in a number of rewarding and surprising benefits to the organization as well as the employees.

Take the case of the telephone company charged with the duty of creating phone books. The traditional process for doing so required 21 different clerical steps, each performed by a different employee. The problems with such a process were manifold: each employee knew his or her job but didn't understand any of the other steps or the overall process; problems were passed along from one step to the next rather than handled immediately; no one felt a sense of ownership for the entire process.

The phone company decided to improve the process by reorganizing it. Each employee was given the responsibility of preparing a complete directory on his or her own. Rather than completing just one step of the process, an employee now had ownership of and responsibility for the entire process.

The results were remarkable. The employee turnover dropped from 28 per year to zero. Absenteeism decreased from three percent to about .5 percent. Errors plummeted from around four per 1,000 lines to about one per 1,000 lines. Clearly, the empowered employees took greater responsibility for their jobs than the previous, unempowered work force did, and, judging by the zero turnover rate, job satisfaction rose considerably.

Learning Points

Organizations must provide a structure that encourages employee involvement. A work force of empowered employees is one of the key results of quality management. One of the major quality tenets is the leadership practice of delegating decision making to the work force to the greatest extent possible. Some of the benefits of this delegation, for both employees and management, include a greater sense of participation and ownership by the work force, and more immediate feedback and earlier response to quality problems. The more employees involved in solving quality issues, the more immediate and tangible the results.

Discussion Questions

Question: What do you think is meant by the term “empowered” employee?

Answer: An empowered employee is one who has the ability and the authority to correct the work process he or she performs whenever the process fails to meet expected results. An empowered employee must be in a state of self-control for empowerment to be a successful management strategy. This means that employees: must know their performance objectives; must receive feedback on how they are performing as measured against their performance objectives; and must be operating in a capable process with appropriate support—training, etc. In addition to self-control, employees must have the means, authority, and accountability to take recovery action when the customer is dissatisfied. Finally, employees must be provided opportunity for individual participation in quality.

Question: What requirements do you suppose must be present if employees are to exercise self-control in their jobs effectively?

Answer: There are three conditions that must be present for employees to be in self-control.

- Know what is expected of them, e.g., performance objectives that are clearly communicated and understood.
- Know how they (the workers) are doing with respect to expectations.
- Have the ability to regulate the process, i.e., the means to satisfy their performance objectives.

Question: What does it mean to “regulate the process?”

Answer: Since the ability to regulate a process successfully is one of the keys to empowerment and self-control, it is important to understand the requirements needed to regulate a process.

- The process is capable of meeting the expected performance.
- The people have the necessary tools, knowledge, skills, and equipment.
- People have the authority to make the needed adjustments to assure that performance is meeting expectations.

If employees are in self-control, *they* are accountable. If they are not in self-control, management is accountable.

Question: What is meant by recovery?

Answer: Employees have the means and the authority to take recovery action whenever their customer is experiencing an unsatisfactory situation. Authority for recovery and its means are explicitly provided . . . not assumed.