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Global Coach Group
Lead for Good

Taking the "Fuzz" Out of Empowerment



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What’s Really Holding Back Empowerment?

Employee empowerment. Most companies openly endorse it. The word is frequently engraved on Corporate Vision plaques hanging in organizational hallways. But if empowerment is so frequently touted, why is it one of the fuzziest words in management language? And why do employees complain about micromanagement and second-guessing in many so-called empowering companies?

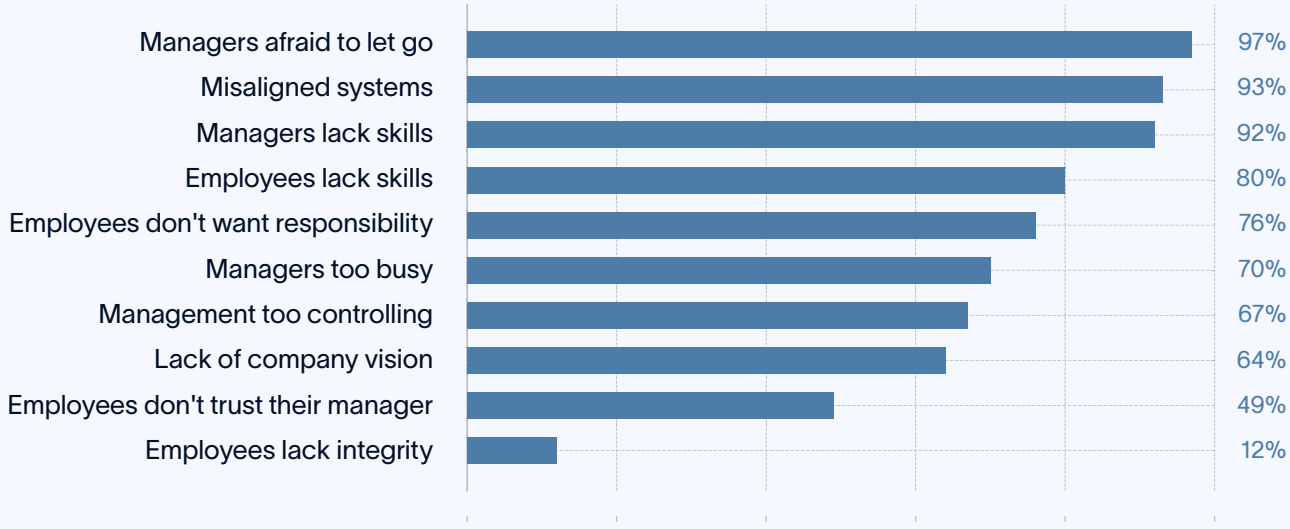
Empowerment is a complex process to implement at nearly every level, especially in highly technical industries where attention to detail is critical. Technically trained professionals, such as engineers and physicians, tend to excel at and enjoy working with details, making it challenging for them to relinquish control when promoted to leadership roles. Some leaders struggle to let go. Others believe they have "empowered" their direct reports, even when feedback suggests otherwise. A FranklinCovey survey of 3,500 managers found that the biggest obstacle to true empowerment is often the managers themselves.

Separate research by Global Coach Group among 19,000 managers and their coworkers showed that managers got their lowest scores from their coworkers on items like ‘Take risks in letting others make decisions,’ ‘Trust people enough to let go and avoid micro-management,’ and ‘Provide effective coaching.’ Clearly, managers are challenged by risk, trust, and letting go.

But let's face it: as managers grow in strategic responsibility, they must let go of their old jobs. And if they hire smart, talented people, they have to develop and empower them to keep them. In other words, their necessary focus on pursuing results and standards of excellence *(i.e., quality and detail) must be balanced with managing and developing people for growth.*

Bright, motivated people want to have decision-making authority. They crave empowerment and will leave companies if they don't feel they are making a difference. However, many managers cite compelling reasons why they can't tolerate even slight differences in execution, as though the need for detail was equivalent to the demands of performing brain surgery.

Empowerment Isn’t Happening—Here’s Why



What’s Really Holding Back Empowerment?

How, then, does the process of empowerment happen within brain surgery? How do newer practitioners learn to execute decisions independently when minor variations can literally mean the difference between life and death? Dr. Dan Barrow, MBNA Bowman Professor and Chair of Neurosurgery at Emory University School of Medicine, shared his expertise. Training a brain surgeon, he said, requires a lengthy process of doctors studying, observing, and performing under close supervision. But eventually, they have to hand the scalpel over. Barrow says that 100% adherence to the supervisor's procedure is unnecessary at that point, as different approaches can yield successful outcomes.

So it begins with clarity of process and well-articulated learning, followed by observation and correction, and eventual hand-off with clear expectations and outcomes. In other words, it begins with empowerment. Then, if even brain surgeons can allow deviations in execution that will empower the next generation of physicians, how can leaders make sure they have a clear process to empower the next generation of leaders?
Here's the key: Empowerment is a continuous development process, not a one-step procedure. Ideally executed, it requires a consistent dialogue between leader and employee at every level of the organization, beginning at the top. The leader must set the context and drive the process.

To empower employees and take the "fuzz" out of empowerment, the following steps must happen:

Definition

Empowerment gives direct reports (or other employees) greater discretion and resources to make decisions and take action. This distribution of control better serves customers and the interests of the organization.

Research on Cognitive Elements of Empowerment by Thomas and Velthouse suggests that empowerment (and complete meaningful work) positively contributes to:

- Employee engagement and well-being
- Initiative and motivation
- Self-belief and resilience when faced with set backs, and the ability to visualize oneself overcoming problems

Empowerment Process
→ Let Go & Let GROW

1

Define Empowerment Mandate

- Culture, Behavior, expectations

2

Focus

- Assess abilities & talents
- Set areas for empowerment & professional development

3

Contract MAP
(Monthly Action Planning)

- Agenda for meeting
- Roadmap for execution

4

Regular & Formal Meeting

- 1–2 / month
- Clarify tasks
- Prescribe success
- Understand each other
- GROW people & process

5

Informal Follow Through GROW Dialogue

- 1–2 / month

6

Quarterly Progress Review

- (In)formal assessment on progress
- Feedforward

1 Define Empowerment Mandate

The leader needs to explicitly and regularly communicate and clarify with employees the level and progress of empowerment. Empowerment is a continuous process of progress and not a one-step approach. Empowerment is NOT a free-flowing, non-structured, ‘Decide It Yourself - DIY’ environment for employees. The leader must clearly communicate the basic meaning of empowerment to employees in the organization. Empowerment is a process of giving direct reports (or others):

- Greater discretion and resources to make decisions and take actions
- Including greater associated responsibilities, risk and reward
- Leading to distribution of control (power and accountability) to better serve both customers and interests of the organization

2 Focus Empowerment

Clearly define what empowerment means in relation to job responsibilities (linked to the job description), the scope of decision-making authority, and the boundaries and risks involved. This should be tailored to the individual's capabilities and should clearly articulate both the WHAT and the WHAT NOT of empowerment.

2.1 Assess Abilities and Talents

Empowerment cannot just be handed down; it needs to be transferred and accepted by both leader and employee. An easy way to facilitate this process is to determine the employee’s abilities and talents based on recent assessments and/or during a one-on-one discussion with the employee. Based on this information and areas to develop, it should become clear in WHAT areas the employee CAN and WANT to be empowered.

2.2 Determine Areas for Empowerment and Professional Development

The following discussion should answer the question: ‘Based on the current/future job requirements, what areas of empowerment will also contribute to the employee's professional development?’

3
Contract Empowerment through Monthly Action Planning (MAP)

The leader should contract the empowerment with the employee. A practical way to do that is as follows:

Fuzziness

If the action planning is fuzzy, ambiguous, unorganized, or late, then a lack of understanding is likely. The employee (and possibly the leader) risks being disorganized in execution, disagreements will surface, and results will suffer.

3.1 24–48 hrs before the empowerment meeting (ref. 4), the employee provides the leader a draft MAP outlining the key business issues describing: What, Who, When, Resources, Refer back to leader if ..., Expected results, etc. (ref. 4.1).

3.2 The MAP serves as a discussion agenda and makes the empowerment meeting more efficient. It organizes the employee and the leader and structures the meeting agenda. In this way, the employee stays proactively in charge and is empowered in the decision-making and execution process.

3.3 Following the meeting, the employee finalizes the MAP and sends it to the leader within 24 hrs. The MAP doubles as an execution guideline and empowerment contract since it serves as a mutual, internal, and explicit contract.



4
Regular & Formal Empowerment Meetings

The leader should meet regularly with each empowered employee who reports to them, for example through biweekly or monthly Business Review Meetings. When meetings happen irregularly or are frequently cancelled, empowerment cannot flourish. Take time for people; regular meetings nourish mutual trust and self-confidence of the employee. Reserve time for ongoing dialogue, whether you think you need it or not. You cannot be efficient with people; you can only be effective.

Fuzziness

Empowerment will suffer if either party senses a lack of clarity about the expectations, authority, resources, or outcome. Fuzziness never goes unpunished.

> *Silence does not equal assent—if your employees do not ask clarifying questions after being assigned a task, warning signals should sound. Empowerment is a dialogue in which both parties must actively participate.*

4.1 Clarify Each Empowerment Task

The leader must seamlessly explain the delegated responsibilities and tasks along the following dimensions: task specifics, resources allocated, timeline, clear desired outcomes, and circumstances under which the employee must seek further guidance. The goal is to transfer what is in the leader's brain as clearly as possible to the employee, clarifying decision-making authority, resources, and boundaries.

4.2 Prescribe Success

in terms of goals and required results in ways that will guide and direct employees' activities. The focus should be on WHAT deliverables and less on HOW (process). Stay away from restrictive communication, e.g., directions not to be pursued, behaviors to avoid, and negative feedback, as this leads to restricting empowerment and consequently demotivating employees.

4.3 Understand Each Other

The employee’s job is:

- ✓ To summarize the tasks in the “Empowerment Area”
- ✓ To ask any questions about the tasks in the “Empowerment Area.” The goal is to approximate total clarity and transparency.

4 Regular & Formal Empowerment Meetings

Coaching Others to GROW in Leadership Effectiveness

Coaching people by asking GROW questions:

Goal	What is the objective?
Reality	What is happening now?
Options	What are the options?
Will	What will you do by when?

4.4 GROW People and Process

Empowerment is about leadership development and personal growth. Therefore, the leader should ask open-ended questions related to the process to avoid micromanaging the employee. The open process questions all focus on HOW to get to the results using the GROW model. This puts the responsibility to come up with valuable solutions and results with the employee. The leader can act as a coach where desirable.

5 Informal Follow-through GROW Dialogue

The leader and employee must use the action planning as a contract, setting the stage for ongoing, less formalized dialogue at work that allows for mutual feedback, feedforward, questions, clarifications, expansion, praise, coaching, learning, and ultimately a job well done.

Outside the formal empowerment meetings, leaders and employees must keep talking informally (in the hallways) or more formally during (bi)weekly follow-through meetings. These meetings are excellent for coaching and feedback. The leader should ensure that feedback is:

- **Timely**
  related to issues that are fresh and relevant
- **Balanced**
  less is more, don’t micromanage
- **Specific**
  fact-based and check for understanding
- **Objective**
  mostly facts and few emotions
- **Constructive**
  positive, encouraging, and future-oriented

> *Micromanagement or under-management will both cause failure. Both parties must be clear about how and when oversight will occur.*

Suppose the employees’ performance disappoints their manager, as they think that they had been "empowered". In that case, the leader should circle back to the initial focus (ref. 2). Perhaps steps were missed, or expectations about the learning curve are unrealistic. Create more dialogue. And remember that one has to balance control and oversight with letting go for learning and true empowerment to happen (Let GO and Let GROW).

6

Quarterly Review the Employee’s Empowerment Progress

These are the key moments to review and ‘measure’ how the empowered employee has developed and consider further empowerment through handoff and clarity on expected outcomes. The leader needs to monitor the growth of employees and loosen the reigns as the employee’s competencies grow based on delivery of results: ‘Let GO and let GROW’. This creates a step-by-step process of widening and clarifying the empowerment focus (ref. 2).

Does the aforementioned sound like a lot of up-front work? Of course! The payoff is at the end, when talented employees grow and work more effectively and move up to positions of greater importance to the organization.

Empowerment is both an art and a science. The whole empowerment process is like a chain; it is as strong as its weakest link. Dialogue and clarity of expectations are key. Without them, good leaders and employees cannot grow. Done well, empowerment is great teaching that builds trust. Done poorly, it's just another fuzzy word in management vocabulary.

What’s the Cost of “Fuzzy Empowerment?”

Confusion, eroded trust, and insufficient knowledge transfer, which in turn lead to inefficient execution. In addition, talented employees may go elsewhere to develop their careers.



For Clients



We Deliver a Triple Win

Better Leaders, Better Teams, and Better Results — boasting a 95% success rate confirmed by coworkers, based on more than 100,000+ leaders coached.

Global Coach Group delivers the best results-based coaching worldwide through our network of over 4,000 world-class certified coaches, powered by our proven Triple Win Leadership Coaching approach and proprietary digital tools.

Triple Win Leadership Coaching, captured in Everybody Wins by Will Linssen — Amazon #1 International Bestselling Author.

Author



Will Linssen

Will Linssen has been ranked World’s #1 Leadership Coach by Global Gurus (USA) and World’s #1 Coach Trainer by Thinkers50 (UK), serves as advisor to the Harvard Business Review, and is recognized as a LinkedIn Top Executive Coaching Voice. He is an Amazon #1 International Bestselling Author. With more than 30 years of experience in executive leadership across Europe, North America, and Asia, Will holds the International Coaching Federation’s highest accreditation: Master Certified Coach.

He is the founder and CEO of Global Coach Group, the world’s #1 international leadership coaching network, with over 4,000 coaches worldwide serving Fortune 500 companies and leading multinational corporations.