Overprotecting Your Team Members Puts Them at Risk. Do This Instead

A lot of companies talk about empowerment without realizing they're not practicing it.

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As Gallup has shown for 18 years, [employee engagement](#) is floundering. In the U.S., engagement in August hovered around [32 percent](#). That means less than a third of employees are putting much effort into their work -- or caring about the outcome.

[Leaders](#) know employees need to be engaged to take [ownership](#) of their work, but it turns out engagement and ownership may be one and the same. A Society for Human Resource Management report revealed that to be engaged, [70 percent](#) of employees needed to feel empowered to handle opportunities at work. Another study found those who were highly empowered at work had engagement in the [79th percentile](#).

Engagement and high performance require an injection of empowerment. But a lot of companies talk about empowerment without realizing they're not practicing it.

Employees living in a bubble

Managers who want to empower their employees point to how they are sending them to training, letting them help with projects, giving them flexible schedules. By getting to learn and make decisions, employees are taking control, right?

Not exactly. Empowerment includes allowing employees to take real risks and fail. Letting employees take over things that contain safety nets gives them some control, but it doesn't empower them to stretch themselves. Gallup reported that 87 percent of Millennials deem professional growth a key motivator.

By preventing their failure -- out of a reluctance to cede control or a real fear of losing money -- leaders hold them back. Sometimes, that "prevention" is subtle: Bosses who criticize employees for failing or redirect them send a signal that risky contributions aren't welcome.

Wrapping your employees in bubble wrap is a hindrance to your company as well. Companies that don't allow team members to think for themselves repeat the same ways of thinking and solving problems. When they stagnate, they won't be able to turn to their employees for fresh ideas. Those great insights will have been repressed right out of them.

A surprisingly safer alternative

If protection isn't good business, what is? By developing a culture in which opportunities are identified, tests are designed and feedback is gathered, people will continuously grow. Better yet, they'll avoid the demoralizing feeling of not growing.

In fact, failure can glue a culture together. One company I interviewed said its year-end party celebrates both the year's successes and its biggest failure. I talked with an Inc. 500 marketing company, Chacka Marketing, and found a similar feeling. The CEO of Chacka, Janel Laravie, was excited because someone had written 25 perks unique to working at the company.

The list was shared, and employees weighed in on how awesome it was to work there because they were empowered to make their own decisions. They then began including benefits the original list hadn't incorporated. Not a single person mentioned feeling like an outcast or un-trusted as a result of having tried something new and failed.

My own team has been using different tools to market the "Leaders in the Trenches" podcast that features insights for executives on building company cultures that result in fast growth and serve as a competitive advantage. A teammate focused on finding a tool that did what we needed. I had no idea whether she'd set herself up for failure -- who knew whether such a tool existed or was within our budget? -- but she came back with a free tool that worked. She grew herself and the team by taking a chance.

Here's how you can boost your team's sense of empowerment:

1. Help them understand failure. The point should be teaching your team to think critically, not to avoid failure. Help them think through issues by asking questions. If an employee suggests a

project, ask about the benefits -- and then ask what could go wrong. Then, ask how the employee would overcome those setbacks. Push her to think of all the stakeholders involved.

2. Put your employees first. Prioritize your team's ability to develop new skills. Give them full ownership of projects. If something has the potential to be costly, have employees give you status updates, which will allow you to practice No. 1 again. Regularly ask employees about areas they want to grow in -- this will enable you to award specific opportunities as they arise.

3. Celebrate failure. Figure out what a celebration would look like at your business. Is it an award for the most audacious risk taker? Is it a company-wide shout-out email listing what was learned and why it was worthwhile? Is it a vote for which department's failure earned a pizza party?

Failure sometimes is the very essence of empowerment. By letting your employees take chances, you can grow their skills and their engagement. High performance comes when people get to find out what they're truly capable of.

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