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“Empowerment” is one business capability needed for successfully executing customer focused strategies. If properly defined and implemented, it enables company personnel to take customer focused action, feel a sense of ownership, take initiative, make better, timely decisions, and use their self-motivators creatively, all leading to better business performance.

Even though a lot of companies say they “empower” their employees, it seems there may be room for performance improvement or innovation. That’s why “empowerment” should be the subject of one the “non-product questions” used to find opportunities to improve or innovate the “small things” that companies do to complement and enhance the performance of their products and related services.

The conversation that such a question initiates could, at a minimum, identify the principles that, when followed, get the intended positive effects from of the empowerment capability. For example, empowered individuals:

- Have the ability to “make and break” rules that govern their activities, allowing them to make judgment calls performing their tasks.
- Are allowed to make decisions about performing their work - *how* to do their jobs, when to act, who to talk to and when, and what information is needed and to whom it should be conveyed and when.
- Don’t worry about failing because their “mistakes” are “idea generators” that take work efforts forward, not backward.
- Know when they need coaching and training and get it on their own initiative.
- Are permitted to perform different tasks – ones for which they are hired plus those they take responsibility for (and are capable to perform) to get required work done and “make things happen.”
- Have the ability to make decisions without approval, meaning they are implicitly making the “right” ones.
- Aren’t afraid to speak up and know how and when to participate in “tough” decision making activities.

The conversation could also uncover some of what management must do in order create an environment that allows empowerment to thrive. They:

- Make it clear what “accountability” means – e.g., setting clear performance expectations, rewards that fit operational goals (such as teamwork), and consequences. Accountability is a requirement for “responsibility” to work.
- Develop clear operating principles (group, team, company, etc.) and clearly communicate them, aligning them with the goals and motivations of team members.
- Know when their teams need resources (such as company or customer information and accessibility tools) and training programs and make sure the right ones are selected because they seek and use input from their team members.
- Set and communicate clear visions and goals for the company, projects, and market participation.
- Co-develop, with team members, and communicate strategies.
- Make sure everyone understands the company’s customers, their requirements and goals.
- Exhibit patience to build trust. For example, management lets their team develop and implement ideas even though they think they have better ones.
- Develop hiring criteria that emphasizes the characteristics they need to make their empowerment strategy work.

Finally, although already implied, the conversation will highlight what empowerment doesn't mean:

- The individual professional's decisions are only *right* if they're the ones management would make,
- How people make decisions or perform tasks are only *right* if it's done the way management would do them, and
- The ideas team members develop are *good* if they are the ones management would agree with.

It's up to management to make sure people are *prepared* to make good decisions, perform well, and develop solid ideas by either being a coach and/or a mentor or know someone who can effectively be one.

These principle lists are not exhaustive but a good start. What they show is that empowerment is more than just "saying it" – it needs preparation and hard work to make it successful. Once in place, it becomes of those "small things" that helps differentiate the company in the market.