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Empower Employees to Be Self-Confident

Empowerment of employees for increased productivity includes the development of self-directed work teams. Self-directed work teams are formally established work groups in which all team members undertake tasks and approach problems together without the direct involvement of management. Ideally, the group manages itself. Group members meet regularly during work hours to identify, discuss, and solve work-related problems. In many organizations, this involves dramatic culture change. Often this change is attainable, but it takes real commitment on the part of leadership, and it takes time. On a smaller scale, teams can be used to deal with just one project. Given challenging goals, sufficient training, and reasonable guidelines, self-directed work teams produce high-quality communication, involvement, and contributions from otherwise isolated employees.

The authority and responsibility given to a self-directed work team depend largely upon the capabilities and skills of the people involved. The size of the company and the nature of the business are also important factors. Self-directed work teams function effectively in designing and implementing procedures for accomplishing routine, day-to-day projects. When an appropriate, creative learning environment has been established, self-directed work teams can move to higher level tasks like brainstorming and planning for more complex problems and goal setting.

Self-directed work teams are possible when you refuse to view people as problems. Instead, encourage people to become problem solvers. Members of a self-directed work team are in a position to provide valuable input since they are closest to underlying problems and are able to readily identify issues not immediately evident to a manager. Their competence in individual areas of specialization relieves you of important, yet excessively time-consuming details.

Select members for a self-directed work team who possess diverse yet complementary personalities for balanced teamwork and group problem solving. Include members who demonstrate leadership abilities and the ability to motivate the rest of the group. Provide basic instruction in the skills of group dynamics. Explain the benefits of each member's full participation. Emphasize the value of each member's contribution by asking questions that encourage team members themselves to point out the purpose and benefits of team involvement. Help them recognize the purpose of working in self-directed work teams: to capitalize on the knowledge and skills of a large number of people – for the highest possible level of results.

Self-directed work teams initially arrive at solutions more slowly than an individual authority figure does, but as their expertise improves, so does their pace. An additional advantage is the group's ability to provide win/win solutions for problems and strategies for reaching goals. Self-directed work teams also usually enjoy the benefit of increased commitment levels. Self-directed work teams, however, are not always appropriate for every work environment. Recognizing the needs of your organization helps you make that decision.

Encourage participation through varied approaches: one-on-one coaching to overcome fear, pairing team members in mentoring relationships, developing surveys for soliciting input, and additional leadership development courses. Be an example of courage yourself by trying original ideas to address the specific needs of your organization. In extreme cases, some employees simply are not able to adapt to high-involvement teams; for those individuals, a transfer or alternative assignment may be the only option. For the morale of the team, however, do all you can to discover and develop the strengths of all team members.

Because workers possess diverse skills, education, and motivation levels, developing self-directed work teams requires a highly motivated, skillful leader. The challenge of addressing diversity is often a necessary cost of increased productivity gains. Performance measurement and equitable reward systems grow complex

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as employees and team members become accustomed to management practices that support increased power sharing, individual development, and process flexibility.

Self-directed work teams free you for new priorities and release you from the tyranny of urgent matters that should be handled closer to the problem. Giving responsibility to a team, however, does not erase your responsibilities. To keep momentum rolling, provide periodic supervision and tracking of the progress of the work team.

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