

Empowering Employees Before, During and After the Pandemic

By Arlene S. Hirsch

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Employee empowerment is a management philosophy that emphasizes the importance of giving employees the autonomy, resources and support they need to act independently and be held accountable for the decisions they make.

Employee empowerment can have a significant impact on employee satisfaction, productivity and engagement. The hallmark of this approach is a willingness among leaders and managers to share power with their teams in order to achieve better results for the company, employees, and customers or clients.

Transition from Top-Down Management

In the early 2000s, Tasty Catering moved from a command-and-control leadership model to one of employee empowerment, and the impact of the transition on the organization's bottom line has been enduring and significant. In an industry where turnover averages 45 percent, the commercial catering company has 4 percent turnover and what co-founder Tom Walter calls "incredible profit margins."

But this didn't happen overnight. It has been an evolving process that required a sustained commitment from senior leadership.

Walter and his brothers Larry and Kevin opened their first Tasty Dawg fast-food restaurant in the 1980s. The unexpected popularity of their restaurant's corporate catering service led to the creation of Tasty Catering, a 150-employee commercial catering company in Elk Grove Village, Ill. But in the early 2000s, the business was struggling, and morale was low.

That's when Walter's then 24-year-old son Tim (who worked in the finance department) and Tim's 23-year-old friend Jamie Pritscher (who worked in logistics) delivered an ultimatum: Shift from a leadership model of command and control to one of employee empowerment and accountability, or they were leaving.

"We were desperate," Tom Walter said. "The business was floundering. So we figured we had nothing to lose by giving it a try."

"Giving it a try" in this case meant entirely reinventing the corporate culture in order to instill in all employees the notion that they are accountable to each other and responsible for their own success.

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The culture, which was designed by the employees, is built on the foundation of seven core values:

1. Always moral, ethical and legal.
2. Treat all with respect.
3. Quality in everything we do.

4. High service standards.
5. Competitiveness, strong determination to be the best.
6. An enduring culture of individual discipline.
7. Freedom and responsibility within the culture of individual discipline.

Walter cited employee Jessica Lopez as an example of empowerment. While she was working as an event captain at a wedding at a local municipal building that was otherwise closed for the weekend, the power went out. Rather than cancel the wedding or perhaps wring her hands in despair, Lopez jumped into action by calling the company warehouse and ordering 10 generators to be brought to the venue. She then called an electrician to hook up the generators so the show could go on.

This ethos of employee empowerment has been a key factor in Tasty Catering's survival during the pandemic, when so many commercial catering events were canceled or postponed.

"We are fortunate to have people who can think on their own and know how to make decisions," Walter said. "During a very challenging time for our company, they found new revenue streams to help pay the overhead."

Employees have individually and collectively pitched in to help the company solve problems and generate new revenue streams. When it was clear that Tasty Catering could no longer serve open dishes of food, a chef changed its packaging so it could serve individual hot meals. The company's delivery drivers scouted the area for office buildings with full parking lots and then reported their findings to the sales team. Another resourceful sales rep arranged to have food dropped off to National Guard troops who were stationed at McCormick Place convention center in Chicago.

Cultural Alignment

Actions like the ones Tasty Catering employees took are part of a cultural alignment that supports and encourages employees to act—as long as those actions are consistent with the company's core mission and values.

"Empowering employees to achieve something requires alignment between individual aspirations and organizational goals," said Murielle Tiambo, senior engagement manager at PwC in New York. "Employee empowerment is even more relevant to successfully navigate the coronavirus pandemic. Companies have been forced to shift to digital or virtual work overnight. The ability to remain agile, let go on the details, embrace and institute new ways to stay connected and foster an inclusive team, and focus on outcomes has become an even more essential factor to effective leadership."

Empowerment begins at the top, with leaders modeling the types of behaviors and attitudes they want managers and their managers' direct reports to emulate.

"Managers have to learn how to engage differently with their direct reports so that there is less instruction and more two-way dialogue," Tiambo said.

She recommends that leaders create space for regular and consistent trust-building conversations. These discussions build mutually beneficial relationships that help leaders get comfortable delegating responsibilities and allow employees to ask for help and share their success stories.

"You are giving them a voice and ... the much-needed space to get emotionally connected to the company's strategy and give it their best, as well as turn any mistakes into learning opportunities," Tiambo said.

While some managers may find it difficult to let go of the need to control what their employees do, doing so is especially important during the pandemic, when so many people are working remotely.

Trust and Delegate

For Shauna Geraghty, vice president of global talent acquisition at Talkdesk, a tech company in San Francisco, employee empowerment is key to her company's hyper-growth strategy.

Geraghty manages a team of 100 dispersed employees, with only one direct report in the office with her. But she doesn't see distance as a barrier. Instead, she looks for ways to establish foundational principles, like trust and communication, which does not require being in the same office.

Geraghty's team is the backbone of the organization and central to its growth.

In the last year, headcount doubled from 500 to 1,000 employees, and there are plans to double it twice more in the next four years.

"If you can't establish trust and delegate, then you can't empower employees," Geraghty said. "It's a bidirectional process of trust and accountability. Both parties have to trust each other and hold each other accountable."

At Talkdesk, employee empowerment has both an organizational and a psychological component. From an organizational perspective, the company needs to put processes and policies in place that facilitate employee empowerment. From a psychological standpoint, the manager or leader needs to facilitate that process by providing the support and feedback that give employees confidence to act independently and be confident in their decision-making processes.

An analysis of research on employee empowerment conducted by professors Allan Lee, Sara Willis and Amy Wei Tian found that employee empowerment is associated with stronger job performance, job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (<https://hbr.org/2018/03/when-empowering-employees-works-and-when-it-doesnt>).

Empowering leaders were more likely to have employees who generated new ideas, looked for novel ways to solve problems, helped others in the workplace, volunteered for extra assignments and were willing to support the organization outside of their official capacity.

The research also showed that empowering leaders generally had employees who were more creative and helpful, and they were more likely to be trusted by their employees.

PwC's Tiambo explained, "The magic is in the engagement. Employers who are intentional about how they are engaging with employees will eventually empower them to act more autonomously."

The Power of Self-Determination

Empowered employees not only have control over their workload, but they also have confidence in their ability to influence the direction of their careers. Some of the most motivated and inspired employees determine their own career destiny.

At Talkdesk, employees have the freedom to choose their own professional path. For some, this means transitioning into management roles, while for others, it means continuing to grow as subject matter experts and individual contributors.

Employees can also try out new roles to see whether there's a fit. "If someone who's been working as an individual contributor wants to try management and then discovers it's not right for them, we let them move back into an individual contributor role," Geraghty said.

Tasty Catering's current CEO, 33-year-old Kornel Grygo, started out as a part-time delivery driver 13 years ago while attending the University of Illinois at Chicago. He quickly realized that he wanted to build his career with this company.

"What made me fall in love with Tasty is that the culture is not just words on the wall," Grygo said. "Everyone lives and breathes it. We make all decisions based on if they fall in line with our culture, and this makes the decision-making process that much easier."

After college, Grygo joined the company full time and three years later was promoted to director of logistics. When he shared his dream of becoming the next CEO with Tim and Tom Walter, they encouraged him to gain experience on the sales side of the business.

In 2016, Grygo was promoted to chief revenue officer, and, at the same time, Tom Walter began mentoring him to become his successor. Now Grygo is following in Walter's footsteps.

"Even though I am the leader of this company, we make decisions as an organization, with input from everybody. I believe that is why we have been so successful in the past, and my responsibility is to continue to ensure that the culture operates this way well into the future."

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