

Real Empowerment of Young People At the Work Place

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The word empowerment has been used for more than a decade now in development conversations.

In my experience as a development worker in the non profit sector, it is often that I use the sociological definition as defined by Wikipedia “ Empowerment often addresses members of groups that social discrimination processes have excluded from decision-making processes through – for example – discrimination based on disability, race, ethnicity, religion, or gender”. I like the simplified interpretation of giving/sharing power with those groups/persons that do not possess it, or developing capabilities of others. This is what comes to my mind when I think of the word Empowerment.

Most organizations while developing their empowerment programs to achieve their missions; design programs/projects to enhance status of their target population, often labeled as the “marginalized”, “vulnerable”, “beneficiaries”...who are outside the organization and often times condone putting strategies to empowering those, especially the young working within the organization. Of course the primary purpose of why any organization would be established is to service its primary stakeholders, and give voice to its primary constituents. But I strongly believe that only an empowered organization that invests in empowering its young aspiring leaders can bring about the change it desires to see in the community, society and the nation as a whole.

Although this seems like a simple management concept perhaps common knowledge to most in positions of power, and some may even go further as having it in a written statement in their human resource development manuals, I observe few follow through to empowering young aspiring leaders in the “ Real” sense.

Why? I ask myself. One reason is fear of insecurity of loosing positions. Young people bring in new ideas, which may require changing process of doing things from business as usual and require new set of skills.

This threatens comfort zones of those in position and creates a fear of being replaced by those possessing new skills. I see insecurity also coming from people's perception of low self worth. They view that empowering and bringing those young leaders a level closer will uncover their perceived knowledge, skills and leadership gaps. This often requires a certain degree of humility and vulnerability, which leaders must sometimes show to their young coworkers. I also often observe that young coworker's effort is seldom mentioned for accomplishments gained through team efforts. People on top claim the credit whereas if the outcome was otherwise, it is blamed on the young coworkers lack of experience. This I believe emanates from an egocentric nature of humans, a quest for a constant affirmation to service ones ego.

The top five simple principles that worked well from my experience in empowering young leaders in organizations are:

- 1) Provide opportunities- potential young leaders must be provided with opportunities to assume leadership positions. Exposure is the best way to synthesize gains from academic institutions and the best way to reinforce knowledge and develop leadership skills.
- 2) Further opportunities through formal and informal trainings.
Organizations must create ways for their young employees to access short term trainings/courses related to their work as well as look out for means for them to pursue higher studies.
- 3) Mentor/coach: pair up employees with similar job positions either from within or outside of the organization to share experiences, challenges, skills and more. I found this to be the most effective whereby learning from one another is tailor made and meets the specific needs of one another. This method is the least costly and can happen over a long period of time.
- 4) Create structures for growth: Organizations in their growth model need to be making rooms for internal upward movement, which is pivotal to motivation and brings out latent potential.
- 5) Trust, trust, trust and give responsibilities! This is perhaps the most difficult to do for most leaders. A very good role model of mine in a leadership discussion once said to me " I give people responsibilities, not tasks. Job designs must be carefully thought of to help exercise leadership skills. Believe in the capabilities of the young, open doors to tolerate mistakes, provide challenges to stretch and use abilities to the maximum and ensure to delegate responsibilities not tasks.

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