



## Empowering Staff in the Workplace

If I didn't see it myself, I wouldn't have thought it was possible. I was asked to facilitate an organization of about 30 employees including management. I was a bit taken back by the disarray, chaos, and anger that I experienced in some of the ensuing discussions. I spent several hours listening to the employees vent about the distrust, broken culture, and disrespect that had developed as a result of recent administration's management style.

A new manager came in to restructure and rebuild confidence in this group of disgruntled employees and was determined to have a comeback with the demoralized team.

Fast-forward three years... I was asked to facilitate a discussion with most of the same workers again. When I walked into the meeting room I thought, "where did you put the staff that I worked with three years ago?"



People were laughing, talking, and enjoying an array of breakfast delicacies. There was energy and a respect for each other and management that wasn't there a few years earlier.

Our facilitated discussion this time was engaging, wanted, and positive. They said more than once that whatever pending changes they would have to face in the near future they would get through it because they had each other's back. They also commented that even if key players had to retire or transfer out, the work would go on smoothly because they worked together so well.

*A couple of questions could be appropriate at this point:*

1. How did this talented staff get so far down in morale that several were seeking employment elsewhere?
2. What possibly could assist in their comeback after such a season of professional let down?

## Empowering Staff in the Workplace

### The Problem: Top-Down Management Style

Let's start with the problem first. The previous management style in the above-cited situation was a management driven model. Employees were informed of what was going to happen next with no input solicited at all and if it was, it was already after the fact.

For example, when there was a staff meeting, the agenda was set by management. Decisions were already made and the staff was simply told what to do. Declarations by leadership were made rather than a forum for ideas, opinions, and other perspectives. The goals were already set, and the staff was simply to comply and "do their job."

When this chain of command style of management dominates the workplace culture, it's no surprise that at the end of a staff meeting no one says anything or responds with questions, even when asked. To which I reply, "What's there to say? The decisions have already been made, there is nothing to discuss."

### Common Symptoms of Top-Down Management

When there are creative employees in any given office or organization, and their skills or creativity are not tapped into by leadership, problems start to surface.

I once worked with an engineer that owned a company with six other engineers. He told me that he couldn't figure out why his crew kept quitting, leaving him with a high turnover rate. He said it finally dawned on him that his management style was the "my way or the highway" style. Eventually the other engineers felt their education, skills, and insightful ideas were being eclipsed, so they went elsewhere where they had a voice and could stretch their imagination and problem solve. The owner finally decided to get out of the way and let them proceed on projects in the way they felt was more efficient. The result: they stopped quitting and felt more energized to show up to work each day.



A few common characteristics surface with this type of leadership:

- No collaboration or discussions are encouraged.
- Frequently staff is afraid to open up, fearing retribution.
- Gossip increases since staff is left to figure things out on their own.
- Discipline is brought to the entire staff rather than the two or three who have caused the problem.
- Favorite staff members or supervisors get away with intimidation or bullying tactics.
- All sick days and vacation times are taken to get out of work.
- Monday mornings are dreaded when faced to go back to the "salt mine."
- Communication channels from the top down are non-existent.
- There is absolutely no trust in leadership.

I mentioned earlier that the discouraged and discarded staff received a new manager who was determined to bring change and a new spark. The restoration of this group was so stunning that I asked the new manager what steps she used to bring back morale and revive the troops:

## Empowering Staff in the Workplace

---



One of the phrases I love when a staff is facing changes is, “a change imposed is a change opposed.” In other words, good leadership looks for staff implementation, ideas, and buy-in, especially in the areas that impact them directly.

### Management Style: Empowering Your Staff

#### 1. *Emphasize the importance of staff input and buy in.*

She began by insisting she had to empower her staff. She told me that in certain specialty areas they had much more experience than her and they were the ones in the trenches. So she wanted to hear from them.

One of the phrases I love when a staff is facing changes is, “a change imposed is a change opposed.” In other words, good leadership looks for staff implementation, ideas, and buy-in, especially in the areas that impact them directly. This is especially true for the younger generations of ages in their 20’s, 30’s, and 40’s.

There is no such thing as a one-man baseball team or a one-woman symphony. Victories in the workplace are won by many. People are much more motivated when they can invest and speak into a particular project. I always took more meticulous care of my landscape when I owned the property rather than renting from someone else.

#### 2. *Develop a plan for staff and management expectations.*

Her entire staff created a living document highlighting guidelines, procedures, and discipline, which were executed consistently and fairly. The expectations were revisited yearly by all and discussed and revamped if necessary.

#### 3. *Meet with each staff member and listen carefully to their desires.*

The new manager met with each staff member and asked three questions:

- What are your strengths in the department?
- What do you need to progress? Training, technology, software program, etc.
- What is the best way for you to excel in the area of your responsibilities or how do you want to run your program? Amazing!

#### 4. *Develop a new atmosphere of communication that takes on various forms.*

- Morning huddles. Brief meetings to establish the goals for the day that invoked questions and discussion.
- Set consistent monthly meetings for the entire staff.
- Send out weekly updates at the end of the week regarding changes, accomplishments, department needs, new purchases, etc.

## Empowering Staff in the Workplace

5. *Terminate the toxic employees or managers that drag the entire staff down.*

This involves several verbal warnings, write ups, evaluations with new action plans, and strategies for improvement. Employees whose bad behavior had been given a pass for years were finally made accountable. Those who had been stirring the pot for years were appropriately released and the sense of entitlement was eradicated.

I once worked with a dentist office for two years and threw every training, mediation, and one-on-one counseling opportunity at them. The problems persisted until a dental consultant came in to assess the situation. He was there for a few hours and quickly determined that the troublemakers were the two at the front desk. They were terminated immediately and the entire office culture changed overnight.

Sometimes drastic measures are necessary to correct drastic situations.

There was eventually an article written in our local newspaper written highlighting this transformed staff; I'll end with a quote: *"The office used to be in total disarray. Now we respect each other and work with each other. The internal strife has faded away...."*

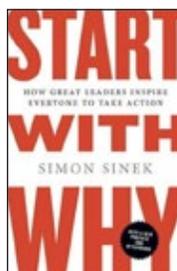
*Our new manager was instrumental in the changes. She worked with every staff member to determine their strengths and to develop the best plans for moving forward with our work.... She held the office together during trying times. Her work has been exemplary."*

### Conclusion

For excellent must reads on empowering your staff, I recommend:



*Leaders Eat Last*  
by Simon Sinek



*Start With Why*  
by Simon Sinek



*It's Your Ship*  
by D. Michael Abrashoff.



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.