

Help! My Team Won't Accept Empowerment!

Lt. Col. Martin Tillman, USA

Many organizations have a problem with empowerment. It's just that we often tend to look at it only from the standpoint of a manager's lack of willingness to give up enough authority—in other words, from a subordinate's point of view.



A friend and colleague recently dropped by the office to tell me about his new job. It sounded fantastic, lots of responsibility and challenges—setting up a new organization and merging an existing organization into it. But Rick (not his real name) had one major frustration: the people at a remote site were just not interested in helping to set up the new organization. They weren't offering any ideas on how to make the transition happen or—more important—how to make the new organization successful. As a result, Rick felt the people at the remote site were resisting his efforts to empower them.

This is a particularly interesting situation because Rick has been in charge of several mid-sized organizations over

his career, is a graduate of the Defense Acquisition University's Advanced Program Management Course, and has taught strategic direction in days gone by. So if anyone should know how to handle a situation like this, Rick should. But Rick believes he has a team that doesn't feel empowered despite his best efforts to empower them.

As a result of my experience and outside readings, I know Rick's situation isn't all that unusual. Many organizations have a problem with empowerment. It's just that we often tend to look at it only from the standpoint of a manager's lack of willingness to give up enough authority—in other words, from a subordinate's point of view. According to the April 2001 GAO report (GAO-01-510) *Best Practices: DoD Teaming Practices Not Achieving Potential Results*, "In

Tillman is currently assigned as an instructor of program management and leadership with the Defense Acquisition University at Fort Belvoir, Va. He has previously held positions in both program management and contracting with the U.S. Army and the United Nations Headquarters.

the programs experiencing problems, the teams either did not have the authority or the right mix of expertise to be considered integrated product teams.” Yet Rick’s situation involves not lack of authority or expertise—they are adequately trained, have the necessary skills, and he wants them to take ownership—but lack of willingness on the part of subordinates to accept the level of empowerment offered by their manager.

Rick didn’t indicate, during our chat, a problem with the people themselves. According to Rick, they are all typical, hardworking DoD employees, such folks as you and I might come into contact with on any given day in the offices where we work. He also didn’t think that resistance to change was the problem. Sure, Rick admitted, they’d been through some reorganizations and downsizings before and might, therefore, be a little skeptical of the new organization. There’s bound to be some fear of change no matter where you work—it’s just human nature—but Rick said he’d offered reassurances to the team that the positions and people wouldn’t be negatively impacted by the reorganization.

Point One: Not Everyone Wants to be Empowered

As I think about Rick’s situation, a number of possible reasons for why his folks refuse to get engaged come to mind. First, it may be as simple as this: the people at the remote location just don’t want to be empowered. They’re quite satisfied with the old business model of just doing as they’re told and going home every evening unencumbered by thoughts of work.

It’s not uncommon to assume—mistakenly—that everybody wants to feel empowered and to influence his or her areas of responsibility. To know for sure what’s going on, Rick would probably have to conduct a survey of some sort followed by additional research to corroborate the findings. Rick didn’t mention this as a possibility, and it’s not an approach typical of DoD folks—in my experience there are just too many type A personalities around. I’ll put that one on hold for now and mention the possibility to him the next time we talk.

Point Two: Make Sure There’s a Common Vision/Strategic Direction

A second possibility that comes to mind relates to leadership—whether there exists a common understanding of where Rick wants to take the organization and how he wants it to function. How can we, as leaders or managers, expect our subordinates to help us achieve our hopes and dreams for the organization if they aren’t even sure where we’re leading them? I wonder if Rick really tried to include his new teammates in developing the plan for getting the new organization on board. You know, developed a clear vision of where the organization is headed, created a mission statement to better define everyone’s

Key Considerations to Empowerment

- ☞ Not everyone wants to be empowered
- ☞ There must be a common vision/strategic direction
- ☞ Convey the strategic direction in a manner that inspires and helps people to see their role in its accomplishment
- ☞ Gain your subordinates’ trust
- ☞ Build on shared values
- ☞ Strive for complete business process/vision alignment
- ☞ Don’t forget to use the right tools

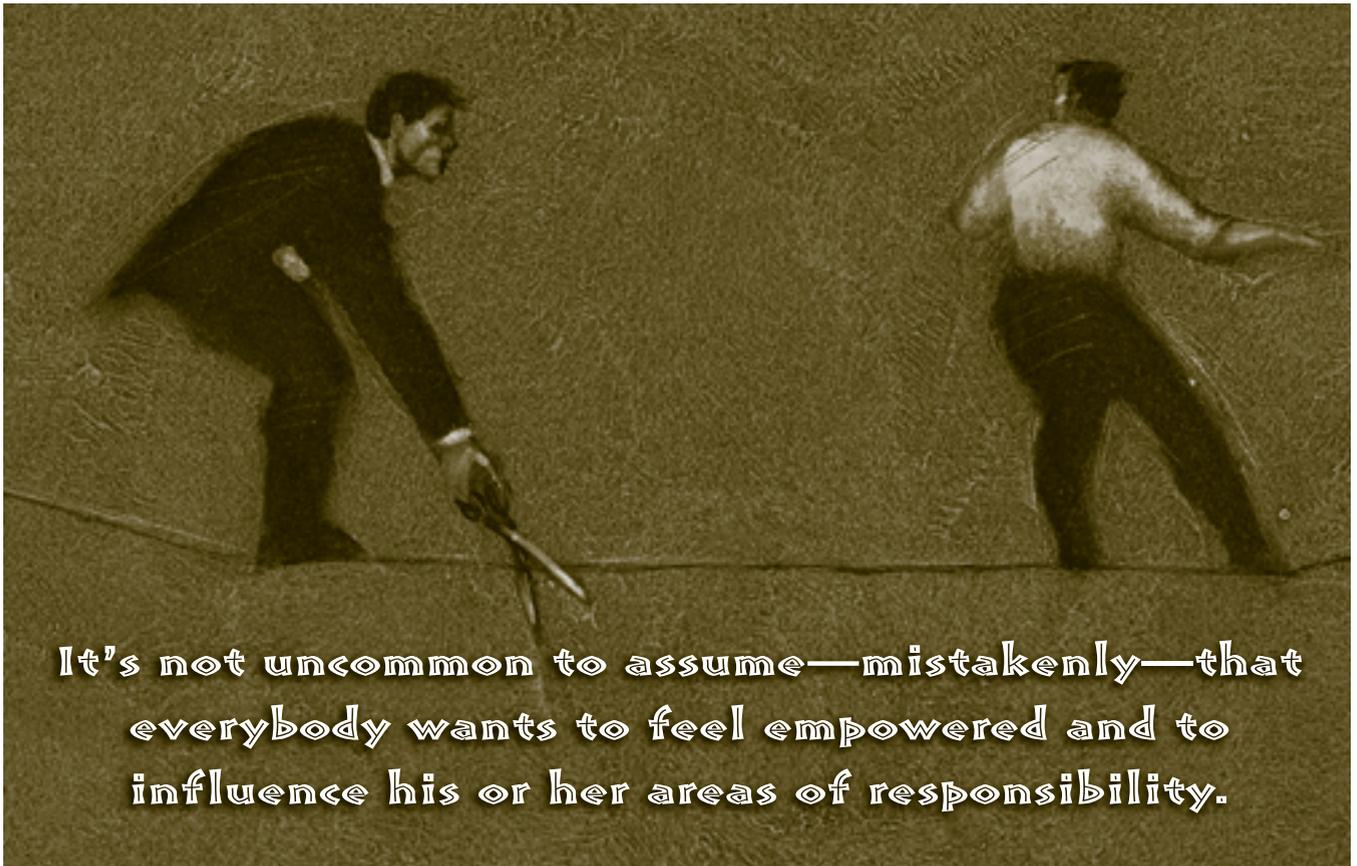
boundaries, and set some goals to help crystallize individual short-term efforts. Has he attempted any team-building activities or started on a charter? If he has, team members could then use their individual skills and knowledge to help the organization achieve that vision. I suspect Rick has probably covered this adequately—it’s pretty much common sense for an experienced, senior leader of his stature—but I’ll make another note to myself to ask next time I see him, just in case.

Point Three: Convey the Strategic Direction so People See their Roles in its Accomplishment

As John P. Kotter argues in his book *Leading Change*, a critical and unfortunately often-missing part of strategic direction is the ability of managers to sufficiently convey their vision to subordinates. A properly communicated strategic direction is not only clear to all employees, but it also helps them to “see” their own roles in making the achievement of the vision possible and to stir their emotions so they *want* to make it happen—a more difficult task to accomplish. Maybe this is something Rick inadvertently tripped over. I’d better ask if the first-line supervisors are meeting with their folks to personally explain the vision and their role in achieving it. Has he identified milestones or key events as metrics to be reported back to him periodically? Does he actively promote and publicize, in a variety of ways, comments about where they are going and the progress being made?

Point Four: Gain Your Subordinates’ Trust

Sometimes the root of the problem is really something much more fundamental. Rick may not have his subor-



It's not uncommon to assume—mistakenly—that everybody wants to feel empowered and to influence his or her areas of responsibility.

dinates' trust. It's a new organization and he is a new boss, and trust does not happen overnight. In fact, it takes a lot of our valuable time to cultivate it. First, we must make ourselves available to everyone who works for us—to appropriate degrees, of course, based on whether they are direct reports or not. Second, we must get to know each of "our" people, and they must get to know us so that we can all feel comfortable in our back-and-forth communications. This involves accepting a certain amount of vulnerability. We may not be as impressive as we sometimes would like to pretend. In other words, our subordinates have to feel they know us well enough that they can present an idea or opinion in such a way that we will listen. Rick's folks have to feel that they can express their opinions in their own way without hurting themselves, crossing an immediate supervisor, or offending Rick.

Point Five: Build on Shared Values

Shared values also have a lot to do with gaining trust. Rick's folks won't automatically subordinate their personal values to the organization's values just because they work there most of the day. In other words, employees don't necessarily give up their own priorities (such as time) just because the organization decides an end product is needed next week, when in reality it should take a month to complete. In addition, most of us (including Rick's people) have learned over the years that what a boss may say from the corner office or top floor is not always what he or she really expects or wants. So Rick's

folks really need that trust relationship in order to discover what is truly valued by the organization. Rick will get team buy-in when his folks' individual values intersect with the new organization's values. Rick needs to spend time with his people explaining just what is truly valued by the new organization and why, then helping each direct subordinate to understand why accomplishing it is in his or her personal best interests as well—it's not just a matter of "because it's your job." And then the subordinate managers must likewise spend time with their own subordinates.

For example, if such values as quality, speed, honesty, and fairness are shared between the new organization and each of the individual employees, isn't it more likely that everyone in the organization will feel comfortable (read this as trust) talking about what's going on and the issues surrounding those values? If everyone shares those same values, couldn't Rick expect his subordinates to be more participative in a meaningful way? He might even find the organization functions more as a team. It all boils down to *really* valuing people's opinions and *truly* wanting them empowered, not just giving it lip service.

Point Six: Strive for Complete Business Process/Vision Alignment

Individual members may not fully commit to each and every organizational value, but if they are not actually averse to a particular value and they see that it is backed

by appraisal, reward, and punishment processes, they will most likely adapt to it on the principal that it's easier and in their best interests to go along. Individuals will help to obtain the new vision by bringing those processes or issues that are in conflict with the team's efforts to the manager's attention and seeking resolution in order to make their jobs easier. This is important because our organizations are growing, changing creatures, so there is always a need for our policies and processes to be better aligned with our goals.

Point Seven: Use the Right Tools

There are so many other things that, by extension, affect our feelings of empowerment and success—motivational factors (does the remote location feel a need to get on board right now), conflict management, accountability, and coaching to name a few. Rick may already have thought about all these ideas and successfully accomplished them and instead is stymied by something so simple that he overlooked it. Is he using the right tools to get their input? It could be that the team Rick is so concerned about is made up of very strongly introverted personality types, and he just needs the right vehicle to get them actively involved. Rick may need to provide an agenda ahead of meetings so that attendees can be better prepared to comment. Maybe he shouldn't expect an immediate reaction to new issues but allow time for reflection so that his people can formulate their thoughts ahead of time for the next meeting. He might even try one of the management tools for problem solving, like silent brainstorming, radar charting, affinity diagrams, or using a prioritization matrix to get their input.

What's in it for You?

Maybe you've been experiencing a similar situation to Rick's in your work environment—either as a manager, feeling that your subordinates are not willing to accept empowerment, or as a subordinate, not feeling empowered. This article is written as a reminder of some pretty basic concepts regarding empowerment. I find that in my life it's often not the complex, hard-to-fix issues that get overlooked so much as the commonsense, fundamental stuff that everyone knows. Now may be as good a time as any to consider whether you are appropriately empowered in your current job. The organizational benefits of empowerment are well known and documented. Does your boss feel the same way you do about your degree of empowerment? If not, is it one of the basics mentioned above standing in the way of success, and if it is, what can you do to kick-start the solution?

Having thought about Rick and his situation, I think I'll give him a call and see what he came up with for a solution. I'll let you know in a later article.

Editor's note: The author welcomes comments and questions. He can be reached at martin.tillman@dau.mil.

Marine Corps Commandant Releases 2004 Version of Concepts & Programs



Marine Corps Commandant, General Michael W. Hagee has released the 2004 version of Concepts & Programs, which describes major programs of the U.S. Marine Corps and how they support the ideas and concepts that are significantly enhancing the ability of the nation's naval expeditionary forces to project sustainable combat power in the 21st century. Concepts & Programs, available for downloading at <<http://hqinet001.hqmc.usmc.mil/p&r/concepts/2004/TOC1.HTM>> also contains data that provide a snapshot of the Marine Corps organization, personnel, and resources. This information, Hagee said in a message published in the frontispiece of Concepts & Programs, "provides an important reminder of what it takes—along with an unwavering warrior ethos and devotion to duty—to create and maintain a successful fighting force."