



IS YOUR STAFF “EMPOWERED”?

The widespread use of certain words creates enormous confusion. When you hear "vision" or "contemporary worship," the ideas and images that come to mind for you may be quite different than for me. "Empowered" is another of those words. Leaders know that they should "empower" their staff, and staff members generally want to be empowered. In many cases, a leader may believe that he or she is practicing empowerment, but staff may feel that their hands are tied. This gap in meaning between a leader and staff members can be wide and filled with frustration.

A simple analogy illustrates four different kinds of empowerment. Let's take a ride in a gasoline powered, 4-wheeled vehicle:

- Vehicle A is the car at the amusement park that kids love to drive. The only real control is the gas pedal, which will allow the vehicle to accelerate to a top speed of 4 miles per hour. The steering wheel provides an illusion of control. In reality, the car is guided by the tracks in the middle of the path. An adult only rides in this car to accompany eager children. Nevertheless, the child driver is “empowered.”
- Vehicle B is a go-kart. It has gas and brake pedals, and a meaningful steering wheel. The carts only have a top speed of 25 miles per hour, and they are restricted to a defined track by rails, but the thrill level of these vehicles can be enough to engage teens and adults and to terrify a young child.
- Vehicle C is a fully-functioning, technology-enhanced automobile. The added features, which are designed to protect a teen driver, include a speed regulator and GPS tracking. The vehicle provides a sense of being "unrestricted," but the driver does not have complete freedom.
- Vehicle D is also a fully-functioning automobile, but this one is equipped with four-wheel drive, oversized tires, and heavy duty shocks. It can be driven on any road and can also handle a variety of exciting off-road adventures.

All four vehicles have power, and all four drivers are "empowered." But the degree to which each is empowered is dramatically different. In the first three cases, the vehicle (and its driver) has limitations that restrict their freedom. There is nothing wrong with any of the vehicles and boundaries, but there are wrong applications for each of them.

If you are a leader, these concepts have three important implications for you:

- *Be clear about what you mean.* If a staff member only hears, "I'm empowering you to do this project," then misunderstanding is virtually guaranteed (unless the staff member has worked with you for a long enough time to have been down this road several times). Discuss what you mean by "empower," or even better, use other words. Describe your expectations and boundaries, and the kinds of updates that you want to receive.
- *Don't feel guilty if you don't fully empower.* Just like the drivers for the different kinds of vehicles, some staff members don't have the skills, knowledge, or experience to be given full autonomy for an assignment. That doesn't make the staff member a poor performer, and it doesn't mean that you're a bad boss. As a leader, you need to assess



the readiness and capabilities of each staff member. Yes, you need to take some risks and allow them to fail. But giving full authority to someone who isn't ready is unwise, just as it would be to give the car keys to a 10-year old.

- *No one wants to go backwards.* A child may be thrilled about driving the car at the amusement park ... until he's been behind the wheel of a go-kart. After that, the puttering pace and constraints of the amusement park will be boring. A staff member who has been given the freedom to "make things happen" will be resentful if managed tightly on a future project. This is especially true if they succeeded in the earlier work and if there is not a clear reason for the different management approach. With new staff members, the "don't go backwards" concept is equally applicable, so it is important for the leader to learn what the person's previous work environment was like.

Empowerment is important. It's how a leader can release people to use their God-given abilities and multiply an organization's impact. Whether you're a leader or a follower, I hope you'll take the time to apply these lessons and gain much-needed clarity.