

What is an empowered team?

An empowered team is one where the knowledge, experience and motivation that already exist within the team is fully utilised, as they are given more freedom over the way in which they work.

The individuals in an empowered team, also referred to as 'self-directed' or 'self-managed', are not intrinsically different to that of an average team.

It is not the team members or team roles that are different but the team's expectations, your expectations of their performance and the parameters in which they work.

This is done by giving team members the authority, responsibility and accountability to perform tasks in the manner that they see fit within the parameters they have been set. In this way they can achieve team and organisational goals.

The structure of an empowered team is often flatter than that of a traditional team.

Traditional teams are normally hierarchical, with team members reporting to a team leader who maintains responsibility and authority over the work of the team.

In empowered teams, on the other hand, the hierarchical structure is replaced by the equal collaboration of team members in a flat structure. Empowered teams still have team leaders, but they take on more of a supporting role than a directing role, coaching team members and helping them to find the skills and resources that they need to achieve their goals.



How empowerment might look for the team:

- Deciding how they will do their work
- Planning their own work
- Finding new, improved ways of working
- Becoming multi-skilled, working on various team tasks
- Sharing team leader duties
- Making their own decisions and solving their own problems
- Working within parameters or guidelines set by the team leader

The empowered individual

Teams are, of course, made up of individuals, so an empowered team will only be successful if the individuals themselves are ready and willing to take on the extra responsibilities that empowerment brings.

Power isn't just another thing that you can delegate – it is an entirely individual choice.

It will only be accepted if you create a suitable culture for empowerment in the first place.

A culture of empowerment

For an empowered team to flourish there needs to be a culture of empowerment that:

- Is open and honest about the purpose and implications of changing to an empowered way of working
- Recognises the benefits of empowerment for individuals as well as the team/organisation
- Supports people to develop the skills and confidence they need to become personally responsible for the achievement of team/organisational goals
- Welcomes new ideas and encourages people to challenge accepted wisdom in the spirit of continuous improvement
- Treats mistakes as learning opportunities and doesn't cast blame – people will be reluctant to be accountable for tasks in an environment in which they are afraid to make mistakes
- Encourages the sharing of relevant information about the team/organisation – for team members to achieve their goals successfully, they will need to know the 'bigger picture', i.e. Not just what they should be achieving, but why
- Involves the reallocation of power, not according to seniority but to proximity to the task in hand

It may seem contradictory, but your role in the beginning will be directing, as you help the team to build the skills that they need and adapt to their new ways of working.

Empowerment takes time to establish – you can't just change the culture overnight and expect your team to be able to get on with it.

Team members will need to learn many new things, including:

- Tasks that you would previously have done as team leader, such as making decisions, solving problems, drawing up rotas or chairing team meetings
- Teamworking and interpersonal skills (as team members will work much more closely with each other), such as negotiating, coaching, giving and receiving feedback, and handling conflict

Does empowerment mean throwing away the rule book?

No, it doesn't... People still need broad parameters to guide them towards the achievement of their goals. Empowered teams may have a great degree of freedom and autonomy over the way in which they work.

However, they still need guidelines or parameters to help them understand what is expected of them, so that they can channel their efforts appropriately and work with confidence.

You'll need to draft a set of guidelines or parameters with your team to clarify expectations and ensure that you have a mutual understanding of what they should be aiming to achieve.



Benefits of empowerment

Some of the potential benefits of an empowered way of working are:

1. *Cost savings* – as team members have the autonomy to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of working practices
2. *Innovation and continuous improvement* – in an environment that encourages ideas, creativity and the questioning of established wisdom
3. *Effective decision-making* – the power to make decisions is given to those who need it most to get on with their jobs
4. *Commitment* – the increased autonomy gives team members a sense of personal responsibility and therefore more commitment to achieving team goals
5. *Motivation* – as team members have a clear sense of purpose and ownership of the team goals, opportunities for learning new skills and furthering personal development are increased
6. *Increased productivity* – as the culture created by empowerment is one of high performance in which team members take on personal responsibility for the achievement of team goals
7. *Improved customer satisfaction* – as a result of all of the above

What's the leaders role in an empowered team?

You might be wondering where you fit in, especially as many team leader duties might be split across the team. In fact, your role will be as crucial as it always has been, but you'll be leading the team in a different way.

You'll be there to support and guide the team, equipping them with the skills and resources they need to do their work and helping them keep on track towards their goals.

Your key responsibilities will be:

- Defining team goals and working guidelines
- Advising team members and providing feedback
- Developing people's skills through coaching and training
- Encouraging people and boosting their confidence
- Helping the team to acquire the resources they need
- Maintaining an empowering culture that fosters self-motivation and personal responsibility
- Helping the team to build networks and channels of communication within your organisation

Conclusion

As your team become more and more confident with their new empowered way of working, you'll have more time to focus on strategic team/organisational goals and long-term planning.



If you have a question about developing leadership skills, or if you're looking for support with a specific situation call us on 01926 633333, alternatively you can email us at info@bourton.co.uk.