

In the workplace: The importance of employee empowerment

Even Steve Jobs, the management maverick and incurable tyrant, knew that the best, time-tested strategy is none other than regularly securing the best possible ideas from workers rather than following the dictates of a corporate hierarchy. This writer discovered that principle again with Susumu Minegishi, a former disciple of Toyota management superstar Taiichi Ohno (1912–1990), creator of the Toyota Production System (TPS), also known in the West as “lean production.” “At Toyota, all workers must participate in operational policy making so that it will be easy for them to follow it,” says Minegishi, the consulting head of the TPS Training Center, Hirayama Corp.

Now retired from Toyota after serving for more than 41 years, Minegishi advises that if workers have that sense of shared ownership in formulating factory rules, corporate goals can be easily achieved. “Furthermore, you should not even penalize the workers who have committed product defects or they will only perpetuate hiding the workplace problems,” explained Minegishi to a group of 17 Asian business executives and kaizen practitioners participating in a lean production study tour organized by the APO and Japan Productivity Center. “Imagine the grave consequences if they do that,” warned Minegishi.

This belief is best understood within the TPS context, in which every Toyota worker “must build quality into the process” and is authorized to “pull a rope” to stop a moving assembly line. This way, even ordinary employees can become quality inspectors in their own right. Everyone who cares, even modestly, about employee suggestion schemes and quality circles can vouch for the supremacy of the empowerment approach over other management principles. After all, people empowerment or

“respect for people” is in Toyota’s DNA and is credited as the dynamo that helped it become the world’s number two auto manufacturer.

The formative management lessons that Minegishi got from Ohno were far ahead of their time. Despite his being a toxic boss to his colleagues, Jobs was no different from Ohno, who required all of his engineers to stand inside a chalk circle until everyone discovered the true meaning of his/her job and that of the organization. As Minegishi explains, he carries an old, used brown envelope bearing the erased names of Toyota executives who had used it many times over to signify how Toyota has been continuously trying to save on costs and eliminate non-value-added factors in work processes.

There is no doubt about it. The idea of employee empowerment is truly remarkable. It increases the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions that benefit the organization. It is one prerequisite for doing productive corporate work. There is only one thing imperative with empowerment: “The technology for developing people is not new or remarkable. The commitment to doing it every day, consistently, at a high level is unfortunately very rare and remarkable,” wrote Jeffrey Liker and David Meier in their 2007 opus *Toyota Talent*.

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