

SalesandService Excellence

ESSENTIALS

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Essentials of
team leadership

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Stu Schlackman

Empowerment Isn't About Breaking, But Bending Rules!

Making fast decisions on the spot is key

By John Tschohl

Empowerment means every employee has to make fast decisions in favor of the customer. It's important that we are honest and sincere in our efforts to service our customers. The only way we can do that is by empowering employees to satisfy the customer quickly and to their satisfaction.

Most employees are rule and process driven. They worship rules. Almost all employees assume they will be immediately fired if they make a decision in favor of the customer, when in fact, most decisions require no money and about 80% will cost under \$50. *They have to bend the rules.*

Throughout history, worker responsibility was implemented when efficiency had priority over control. When employees were empowered and given responsibility, they used the best of their talents and skills to maximize the opportunities.

As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.—Bill Gates.

In an article entitled *Short history of Frontline Decision Making Responsibility* by Bob Webb, he talks about the following two examples:
1800s Railroad Construction

In 1864, the Central Pacific Railroad Company was pushing construction of the railroad from Sacramento California into the Sierra Mountains. Someone at the Central Pacific noticed the efficient work habits of Chinese. It was obvious that Chinese ingenuity could do the impossible, so the company decided to experiment with a Chinese construction crew.

Company managers also did something unheard of by American managers, they adapted the worker responsibility style of the Chinese, giving full control of the project to frontline work teams. As a result, track laying increased until it reached a record ten miles in one day, a record that still stands today. The worker responsibility concept was so successful, most railroad construction companies adapted it.

If responsibility leadership is so efficient, why are not more companies using it? Answer: Most leaders do not want to give up control. Control is job security and/or a feeling of importance. The typical CEO will let a company go bankrupt before trusting others with responsibility he thinks should be his.

1904 - The Panama Canal

John Wallace was the first chief engineer of the Panama Canal. He developed his engineering and management techniques in the eastern railroads and was a member of many engineering societies. His leadership style was by control. During his tenure, it became obvious Wallace knew nothing about leadership associated with motivation and efficiency. After one year, he threw in the towel. He blamed his failure on lack of money, not leadership.

John F. Stevens became the second chief engineer. Stevens learned how to motivate and maintain worker loyalty by treating workers as valuable assets. Stevens knew how to organize work environments that energized and motivated the workers. Aug. 15, 1914 construction was completed and the Panama Canal officially opened for traffic from around the world.

In my book *Empowerment a Way of Life*, I illustrate four challenges that all businesses face. They are:

#1. Many executives don't trust the customer. They believe the customer is trying to take advantage of them. Employees feel the same way.

#2. We don't trust employees. We pay them as little as we can and have even less confidence in their ability to make decisions. We have a belief that our lying, cheating customers are going to take advantage of our incompetent employees.

#3. With Empowerment you don't need as many managers and supervisors. They're not overly excited about losing their perceived power, nor are they thrilled about the potential of losing their jobs.

“

Employees need to be able to bend rules so the customer always wins—John Tschohl.”

#4. Very few employees are on their knees at night praying for empowerment. It's just too risky.

A company's success lies in empowered employees. It is important to train employees and make sure they have trust in what empowerment will bring to a company. Satisfying customers quickly benefits everyone. Moreover, happy, empowered, fulfilled employees are the key to creating “over-happy customers” for your company. When employees are empowered and given responsibility, they use their talents and skills to maximize the opportunities.

Empowerment is NOT about breaking the rules, but *bending* them to keep the customer happy. It is making fast decisions on the spot in favor of customers. **SSE**



John Tschohl is an international service strategist and speaker. He is Founder and President of the Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Described by Time and Entrepreneur magazines as a *customer service guru*, he has written seven books on customer service.

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