The Dark Side of Empowerment

Empowerment

Authority or power given to someone to do something.

The process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights.

So how could anything so noble have a dark side?

The concept of "empowering" employee groups started to gain real currency around 20 or 30 years ago, largely in response to what were seen as "old fashioned" management approaches emphasising detailed task instruction. These left little if any room for employees to use their own thinking and initiative, empowerment was seen as a way of achieving a more balanced management approach.

In his book Intelligent Leadership[1], Alistair Mant talks about a balanced management approach depending on achieving balance in the three main management tasks of Tasking, Trusting and Tending.

Tasking in a balanced way meaning being very clear about the output required but allowing appropriate freedom for employees to decide how to achieve it.

Trusting in a balanced way meaning firstly ensuring that someone is capable of doing the task and then letting them get on with it.

Tending in a balanced way meaning giving appropriate feedback at agreed and sensible check points along the way.

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[1] Available from Allen and Unwin

A combination of BALANCED TASKING AND TRUSTING allows the employee to exercise *judgement*.

Trusting and Tending together make the work *coherent*.

Tending and Tasking in tandem mean the employee can proceed safe in the knowledge that appropriate *review* structures are in place.


The old fashioned manager who exerted TOO MUCH CONTROL replaced those balanced management actions with a combination of *Micro-management*, *Distrust* and *Policing*.

Micro-management and Distrust together lead to *frustration* ("I have done this job 50 times and you still act like I don't know what I am doing!")

Distrust and Policing lead to *alienation* from the work ("It's clear you don't think I can do it and every time I try to do the right thing I get told off – I no longer care")

Policing and Micro-management lead to *paralysis* ("I am not doing any more until you tell me exactly how you want it done")
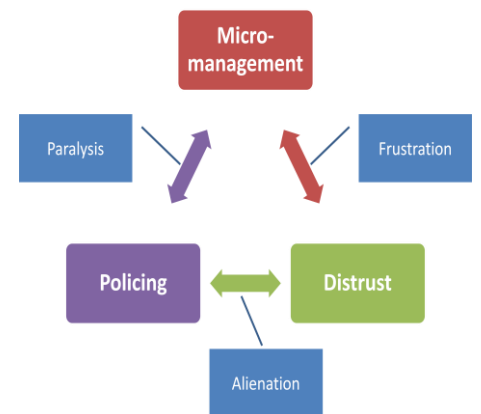

So if empowerment is the antidote to too much control then it must be a good thing?

Well, not if the pendulum swings too far the other way and empowerment becomes distorted and exaggerated and turns into abandonment.

In this ABANDONMENT management style instead of Tasking work is simply *handed over* without appropriate context or clarity about boundaries and expected outcomes.

Trusting turns into throwing *unsure* employees in at the deep end without checking if they can swim, and Tending is replaced by *ignorance* about whether the task is being done properly or not.

The employee who is abandoned by their manager is unsure if they are able to exercise judgement, are scared to take ownership of the work and don't know until too late if they are doing it to the required standard.
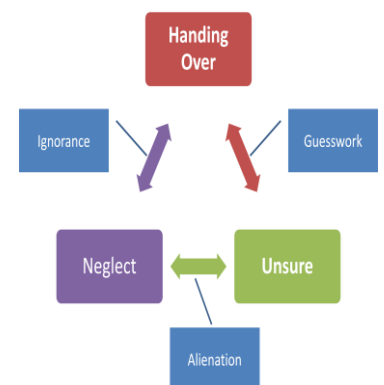
When I raise this type of out of balance manager in seminars those in the room roll their eyes in recognition - and then usually start to worry if that definition might apply to them as well! They know how busy they are, how difficult and time consuming it is to properly Task, Trust and Tend to employees and they have also been told by the world that they need to empower their teams.

But it gets worse! Busy managers often "whiplash" their employees between the two extremes. They start off by abandoning them (often because they feel too busy to manage them properly) and then when they find out that things are not happening as they want they try to get things "back on course" by intensively micro-managing for a brief period of time. Then they revert to abandonment until the next bout of micro-management.

Unfortunately as we all know, having one foot in boiling water and one foot in an ice-bucket does not mean that on average we are OK.

Australian employees like to call these sort of managers "seagulls" - because like seagulls they fly in, make a lot of noise, and then fly off again leaving a mess behind them!

So how should you get in balance when it comes to Tasking, Trusting and Tending

1. Be aware that too much "empowerment" can be a bad thing, just as too much control can be.

2. Be prepared to spend the time and effort to Task and Trust properly up front – it will save time in the long term

3. Balance will require different things with different teams in differing circumstances. If you are not sure then get your team together, explain the difference between Balance, Too much Control and Abandonment and then ask them what Balance would look like to them. You don't have to agree with them – but you should at least have the discussion!

And don't be a seagull.