

The Role of Empowerment Electric Fences?



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As we lead in our particular organizations, one issue continues to stand out – Empowerment. The big questions, When do we allow our employees to work independently of a supervisor or leader? What skills and competencies are needed in order for the employees to be successful? What training do they require?

In Baldrige Criteria terms (Baldrige National Quality Program Criteria for Performance Excellence), it is about capacity and capability. Workforce capacity is defined as the “ability to ensure sufficient staffing levels to accomplish its work processes and successfully deliver your products and services to your customers, including the ability to meet seasonal or varying demands” (p. 61). Workforce capability is defined as “organization’s ability to accomplish its work processes through the knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies of its people” (p. 61).

Empowerment is the key to addressing capacity and capability issues in your organization. Successful organizations have developed intentional training plans, both on-the-job and in the classroom designed to improve and enhance capacity and capability of the employees. It has been my experience that often supervisors are reluctant to allow empowerment for their employees because of a possible loss of control. I would like to suggest that it is our obligation as a leader to allow our employees to be trained and then accomplish the work after we insure they can do it.

Empowerment, simply put, reminds of a simpler time for me on the farm. My grandfather told me that leading people was like our electric fence. The electric fence controlled the cows in the pasture. They (the cows) knew not to go near the fence even if the grass was greener on the other side. The electric fence was an apparatus of torture if you wandered intentionally or unintentionally too close to the power – it did not discriminate your intentions. The purpose of the fence was to segregate the pasture into specific areas (accomplish work) and allow the cows (employees) to graze each segment as the farmer (supervisor) deemed appropriate. The electric fence served as a barrier to the cows moving and exploring other fields (opportunities). It (the limitations) would cause some pain if the cows stepped literally out of line (went on their own).

Invisible but detectable electric fences (outdated or wrong policies and procedures) are installed to ensure that the people do not move outside the lines of the organizational structure. Sometimes the electric fences are installed by the organization, by individual supervisors, or by the employees

themselves and are perpetuated by fears. We probably eliminate some organizational possibilities for innovation and flexibility by establishing these hypothetical electric fences.

Leaders should remember that particular analogy when supervisors try to restrict or control employees. Do our employees feel pain when they try to do something for the organization or do they feel restricted by outdated policies and procedures? Supervisors must increase employee capacity and capability to overcome the possible electric fence syndrome and provide the best possible processes and services for customers, patients, students, suppliers, partners, and collaborators. It is too important in these trouble times.