President's Corner

To empower or not to empower – That is the Question

I want to take a moment and talk about the concepts of empowerment, growth, agency, and actualization. I strongly believe that anyone can be a leader, anywhere, at any given time. Martin Luther King Jr said: 'a leader is an individual who has the ability to influence a group of individuals in achieving a common goal.' I also believe that if any member of a team wants to achieve a common goal, they want to do value-adding work, they want to see how they effect change and how their ideas bear fruit.

My question is, how do you, as a leader, step back and allow your team members to not only identify the problem on their own, but also solve that specific problem? How do you, as a leader, work with failure and rising strong?

Leadership and how we work with power go hand in hand. The absolute worst experiences in my life and my career were when I felt powerless. When I believed I had absolutely no resources and no tools to overcome hardship or address challenges. Again, looking towards Martin Luther King Jr, he defined power as the ability to achieve purpose and effect change.

When you're a leader you have a responsibility to bring out the best in your employees, not to control their outputs. Controlling your team members will only encourage the fear of missing targets or losing that bonus, or worst of all, the fear of failure. I believe the key to successful leadership, as Peter Drucker so elegantly put it, is for leaders to sometimes get out of the way. '90% of what we call management,' Drucker said, 'consists of making it difficult for people to get things done.' This prompts the question, what do leaders need to do? Paint a picture of a better future; help determine the path to achieving that future and then create a safe space and an open environment that will empower your team members to grow, innovate, and win.

I believe this will require you to give your power away.

Power itself is neither good nor bad. It's all about how you, as a leader, work with power. In the words of Brene Brown: '*Power over* is driven by fear. Daring and transformative leaders share power with, empower people to, and inspire people to develop *power within*.'

Brown explains it in this way. When you want power over, when you want to control, you will believe that power is finite and use fear to protect your own power. You will leverage fear to divide and devalue basic decency. You will give people experiencing fear and uncertainty a false sense of conviction of your control over them. Being right will be more important to you than getting it right. You will encourage a blame culture.

When you want to give power to and instill power within, you will believe that the team becomes more powerful when power is shared. You will leverage the power of relationships and connection. You will create a culture of learning. You will move away from blame to a culture of ownership. You will think of leadership as serving others.

In the book *Alive at Work* D.M.Cable[1] explains that one of the ways to achieve empowerment is to adopt the humble mindset of a servant-leader. Servant-leaders view their key role as serving employees as they explore and grow, providing tangible and emotional support as they do so. I think

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[1]Cable, D.M. 2018. Alive at Work: The Neuroscience of Helping Your People Love What They Do. Harvard Business Review Press.

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the most important definition, in this book, of a servant-leader was that this type of leader has the humility, courage, and insight to admit that they can benefit from the expertise of others who have less power than them. It was encouraging to read the theory that servant-leadership acknowledges the responsibility of a leader to increase the ownership, autonomy, and responsibility of all team members.

In an article about the book, *Alive at Work*, the author refers to two case studies.

Case study 1

A study of a UK food delivery service found that the engagement of its drivers was dipping while management was becoming increasingly metric-driven in an effort to reduce costs and improve delivery times. Managers held weekly performance debriefs with drivers and went through a list of problems, complaints, and errors with a clipboard and pen. Eventually, the drivers, many of whom had worked for the company for decades, became resentful. However, this traditional model was disrupted by newer delivery companies and the management team of the case study company decided that things needed to change. The company needed to compete on great customer service, but needed the support of its employees who provided the service. And management needed ideas that could make the company more competitive. The new approach? Instead of nit-picking problems, each manager was trained to simply ask their drivers, 'How can I help you deliver excellent service?' Some drivers started to offer suggestions. For example, one driver suggested new products like yogurt and fun string cheese that parents could get delivered early and pop into their kids' lunches before school. Another driver thought of a way to report stock shortages more quickly so that customers were not left without the groceries they ordered. Small changes created a virtuous cycle. As the drivers got credit for their ideas and saw them put into place, they grew more willing to offer more ideas, which made the depot managers more impressed and more respectful, which increased the delivery people's willingness to give ideas, and so on. These innovations helped the company deliver better customer service.

Case study 2

When Jungkiu Choi moved from Singapore to China to start as head of Consumer Banking at Standard Chartered, he learned that one of the cultural expectations that his new job entailed was to visit the branches and put pressure on branch managers to cut costs. Jungkiu changed the nature of these visits. Instead of emphasizing his formal power, he started showing up at branches unannounced, and starting his visit by serving breakfast to the branch employees. Then, Jungkiu would hold 'huddles' and ask how he could help employees improve their branches. Jungkiu's approach reduced employees' anxiety and encouraged ideation and innovative ideas. Over the course of one year, Jungkiu visited over eighty branches in twenty-five cities. The huddles exposed many simple 'pain points' that he could easily help remediate. These experiments paid off in terms of company performance. Customer satisfaction increased by 54% during the two-year period of Jungkiu's humble leadership. Complaints from customers were reduced by 29% during the same period. The employee attrition ratio, which had been the highest among all of the foreign banks in China, was reduced to the lowest.

My question to you is; do you empower your team members? Are you creating a culture of learning and growth? Do your team members have agency and actualization? As our own leader, Nelson Mandela, explained: 'A leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.'

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