EMPOWER THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

By Marilyn Thiet

US companies are in the midst of a crisis when it comes to employee engagement. Gallup reported that approximately 70% of the US workforce is disengaged. Multiple factors have been attributed to this disengagement. These factors range from post recession workplace stress to the influx of millennials into the workforce. As leaders we can either sit back and hope this passes, which is most unlikely, or we can take action.

Empowerment is a buzzword that has been bantered around in leadership circles for years. Empowering employees increases employee engagement and productivity. But what does empowerment really mean and how can we achieve it? According to businessdictionary.com, empowerment is "a management practice of sharing information rewards, and power with employees so that they can take initiative and make decisions to solve problems and improve service and performance. Empowerment is based on the idea that giving employees skills, resources, authority, opportunity, motivation, as well holding them responsible and accountable for outcomes of their actions, will contribute to their competence and satisfaction."

So how is a leader supposed to transition empowerment from a buzzword into an everyday practice of concrete actions? The answer comes from the definition itself.

 1. **Share information.** Talk to your employees daily. Let them know what is going on at the highest levels. Share the vision and their role in helping the company reach that vision. Acknowledge the challenges you are facing and let them know the plan to overcome those challenges. LISTEN to your employees; let the information sharing flow both ways. Understand what is going on within the workplace from their perspective.

2. **Give praise and recognition daily.** Thank people for what they do and the contribution they make to the company. Not in a mass all employee email, but person to person, individualized with specifics. Make your employees feel valued and appreciated. For those of you holding onto ancient leadership ideologies such as not needing to thank someone for just doing what they should be doing, let those ideologies go. Appreciated employees are more engaged and will stay at a company longer. Disengaged employees will leave your workplace and finding replacements drains your resources unnecessarily.

3. **Give employees the training they need to make more informed decisions for the organization.** And then give them the power to make those decisions. So what if they make a decision that is different from how you would have handled it. Create an environment where effort is rewarded as much as results. Empower and create a culture in which it is safe and encouraged to take risks and even to occasionally fail. The improved

productivity and loyalty of an empowered work force will outweigh the results of an occasional failed initiative.

4. Hold employees accountable. They want to be held accountable and want those around them to be held accountable. Practice setting up proactive accountability instead of reactive punishment. Set clear expectations and then take the time to make sure there is understanding and alignment to the expectations. Don't assume the expectation is understood or agreed upon unless you take time to clarify. Check in often and offer your support while expectations are being carried out.

Empowerment is a two way street. The more empowered your employees are, the more engaged they are, the more productive they become. In turn empowered employees empower their leaders to do the things they should be doing, setting the vision and developing the strategy, aligning organizations, driving innovation and the leading the business to success.