Creating an Empowered Environment

Presented by
Jennifer Hill

CM14
5/3/2018
3:30 PM
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By Jennifer K. Hill

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.
What is Empowerment?

Empowerment is defined as:

- 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.

What we are going to cover

- The current state of empowerment in the workplace
- Recognizing common obstacles and pitfalls when creating an empowering environment
- Learning to respond rather than react
- Identifying ways to break free of the “Drama Triangle”
- Five ways to generate an indispensable and empowered team
- Three quick ways to create an empowered environment
The Current State of Empowerment in Law Firms

• Technology has changed the landscape of the legal community
• Post-recession and post-election there is a lot of fear and uncertainty in the workplace
• A large percentage of law firm staff are always keeping their eyes out for new positions because of lack of pay, appreciation, growth, and/or firm culture/environment
• Many managers, staff and attorneys no longer find fulfillment from their work and thus are less productive and efficient
• Everyone is out for themselves and there is a huge lack of empowerment in many workplaces

Common Obstacles and Pitfalls to Empowerment

• Looking for the bad apples/expecting the worst
• Punishing bad behavior
• Feeling threatened by employees
• Being afraid to praise employees for fear that they will have the upper hand
• Responding from a place of emotion to upsets or conflicts
• Not investing the time initially to get someone trained and powerfully set up in their position
How do you Create an Empowered Environment?

• Look at how you perceive others and how you are perceived
• Check in to see what ways that you allow others to contribute to you and where you are stopped at being contributed to
• Pay attention to how and what you listen for in other’s speaking
• Become aware of how your language can impact others both negatively and positively
• Learn to harness your animal instincts

Your perceptions affect your reality

• Is perception reality?
• How are our perceptions created?
• How does the way we perceive people impact the way they show up?
• When you are approached by a “problem child” staff member or attorney, what do you mentally tell yourself about that person?
• What is the harm in choosing a “good” perception?
Contribution

• What types of contributions do you accept?
• What types of contributions do you reject?

Tools for better listening

“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”
Stephen Covey
- Remove any distractions
- Use key-word backtracking (repeating key words they put emphasis on)
- Matching and mirroring their body language
Reacting vs. Responding

• Reacting: an instinctual act designed to counterbalance something else (weak)
• Responding: a choice to act (powerful)

*The moment we notice that we are reacting from a fight/flight mentality, we then have access to choose something different.

Are you reacting or are you responding?

• When someone in your office makes a mistake, how do you react and/or respond?
• Prior to individual and/or team meetings, what do you do to set yourself, the individual, or the team up powerfully?
• What situations cause you the most pain in your current role?
• What does it look like to react/What does it look like to respond?
5 Steps to Creating an Empowered Perception of your Team

1) PAUSE
2) ALLOW A BREATH
3) Ask yourself, am I taking this personally?
4) Ask yourself if what you are about to say is the truth and if it needs to be said
5) Ask yourself if you can say it from a non-emotional place

4 Ways to have your Communication be Empowering

1) Check your perspective
2) Be mindful of your tone
3) Choose your language
   - Omit words such as: “try” “might” “should” “hard” etc…
   - Replace with words such as: “can” “will” “am”
4) When in the midst of confrontation, get curious rather than assume
Accountability & the “Drama Triangle”

• “If you want to know what you are committed to, look at what you have.”
• Drama Triangle: Hero/Victim/Perpetrator
  - If you are standing in any one of those stances you are not accountable because you are blaming one of the other stances in the triangle.
  - Example “You made me feel X”
• Start by accounting for how you are contributing to that situation.
• Results of Drama Triangle can include: guilt, blame, shame, anger, frustration, resentments etc…

Five ways to Generate a Happy and Indispensable team

• Encourage participation in team building lunches, happy hours, workshops etc…
• Provide technical training, professional development and room for growth where possible
• Offer monthly or quarterly constructive feedback rather than just during annual reviews
• Create “spot award” program
• Adapt to each of your team member’s language of appreciation
Three Quick Ways to Create an Empowered Environment

• Create an environment that thrives on communication and feedback
• Nip office gossip in the bud
• Reward and acknowledge good behavior and accountability

Overcoming conflict with ease

• Check your judgments at the door
• Be accountable
• Pay attention to non-verbal body language and cues
• Acknowledge what the person is upset about
• Paraphrase and repeat back to the person what they have expressed an upset about
Two phrases to use when giving feedback

• What I saw that worked was…
• What I would like to see more of is…

How to create greater workability between attorneys & staff

• Create an inclusive environment
• Invest in training your attorneys how to manage/relate to people, as well as offer regular conflict resolution training
• Empower your staff by using the earlier tools
• Set the example of what you want to see in your office
Check how you are perceived by others by asking the following questions:

- What was your first impression of me when we met?
- Where have I surprised you?
- Where have I disappointed you?
- What can you count on me for?
- What can’t you count on me for?
- What is your impression of me now?

Exercise

- For 24 hours use a notepad or your smart phone to make a mark every time that you do any of the following:
  - Complain
  - Justify
  - Blame
5 Elements to Remember when Creating an Empowered Environment

- Be an opening for contribution
- Remember to look for the good in every situation and person you encounter
- Pause before you respond
- Be accountable
- Use empowering language

Thank you!

Jennifer K. Hill  
President/Recruiter/Speaker  
JHill’s Staffing Services, A Division of Marcum Search  
310-914-0140  
jennifer@jhccs.com  
http://latalkradio.com/content/get-yourself-job  
www.jhccs.com  
www.getyourselfthejob.com
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