

# **Empowered Employees: A New Team Concept for Total Customer Satisfaction**

By Mary Ann Hellinghausen  
in collaboration with Jim Myers

Since cavemen began pooling hunting skills to catch their prey, mankind has relied on teamwork to survive. Teamwork in the business world traditionally meant pooling employees' resources so the best can work together on different aspects of a project; then, report to a middle level manager who made the final decision.

But, as more businesses strive to achieve **Total Customer Satisfaction** by anticipating and solving problems before they occur, a new kind of team has evolved with a goal of ensuring customer satisfaction from the start.

Teams of *empowered* employees, with the authority and autonomy to make significant changes in the way a company does business, are the driving force behind efforts to attain **Total Customer Satisfaction** today. They still are called teams, but now the team makes all the decisions with the middle manager either eliminated or reduced to a coaching status.

In theory, it is easy to use the word team to describe groups in your workplace, but creating true empowered teams takes forethought and upper level management's insight and confidence that employees can really run a company. McGraw-Hill's Higher Education Group, the third largest college textbook publisher in the nation, located in Burr Ridge, Illinois, saw this as a necessary method to handle its reduced staffing and far-flung operations.

The use of empowered employee teams to solve problems, lower costs, increase quality and, in short, improve customer satisfaction, is gaining momentum in today's global business environment. This is happening for all the right reasons. A strong empowered team, made up of the right people who are given a clearly defined task, can increase productivity and make the employee realize how strongly he or she is valued.

However, you cannot just throw people together and call them teams.

## **Tips for Successful Empowered Teams**

So how are good teams created? The first step is to define the project to be completed, identify how much empowerment is needed and recruit the best people to work on the problem.

McGraw-Hill first defines the budget for each new book title and determines when that book should hit the street. Using these two guidelines the empowered McGraw-Hill team makes all the decisions for each title released. Each team is composed of a subject matter expert, a staff member familiar with the author, a designer, a grammarian, production line per-

sonnel and an editor who also serves as the team's facilitator. The teams have a representative from each department within the company who typically touches the new release in some way, says Merrily Mazza, Vice-President of Editing, Design & Production.

Recruiting the right people for a team and ensuring that they represent a cross of disciplines and areas pertaining to your project are extremely important. If you're missing a key person on a team, the team may be flawed.

Motorola, one of the world's premier, customer-driven corporations and winner of the 1988 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, developed a culture to help businesses reach higher industry standards. Initiatives such as Six Sigma, Designing for Manufacturability, and Cycle-Time Reduction through Cross-Functional Process Mapping, to name a few, require the formation of empowered teams to implement these methodologies. These teams, at Motorola and elsewhere, are continually proving that empowered employees working together, from the lowest position to the highest, can dramatically change an entire company.

Team members who are actually in the trenches, getting their hands dirty, are important to the team process, says Eric Sakurai, a Master Black Belt in charge of driving Six Sigma initiatives for suppliers of GE's Aircraft Engine (GEAE) division.

If your team is working on a manufacturing process problem, include an operator someone who is actually doing the job and feeling the pain, Sakurai says.

GEAE, which brought in a team of Motorola University (MU) facilitators to help implement their supplier initiative program, is already seeing signs of quality improvement and defect reduction as the result of empowered teams.

The \$300 million invested worldwide in quality improvement at General Electric in 1997 has started to deliver an estimated \$600-700 million in savings, according to their annual report.

The Six Sigma concept grew out of various quality initiatives at Motorola and established a single matrix for quality, Total Defects per Unit. By having a single language throughout the company, management can now measure and compare the quality improvement rates of all divisions.

A performance level of Six Sigma equates to 3.4 defects per 1 million opportunities for a defect to occur. Companies using Six Sigma are looking to deliver products or services which are essentially free of defects.

Empowered teams are a crucial element of the Six Sigma initiative.

Teams address all company aspects from manufacturing, out-sourcing, engineering to services and beyond. Critical suppliers are taught to do the same. GEAE's end results are improved products and services, resulting in higher customer satisfaction.

## **Cross-Functioning**

Cross-functioning teams are vital to a project's success. Everyone on the team has a role whether the team members get along or not. Sometimes a team organizer leaves someone off a team because that person is considered hard to get along with. People who can think differently, out of the box so to speak, are needed, too. The people Mazza usually picks are the most vocal and the most assertive. If everyone can respect each other's role and input, then the group functions much as an athletic team does—the output of the team is greater than any individual's output.

A strong leader/facilitator is needed to mold individual members into a team and to keep the team focused on its goal. The leader guides rather than leads and also must recognize each team member's role and contribution. The leader/facilitator is an equal with other team members and participates in his/her area of expertise as well as coordinating the reporting process.

A major corporation culture change occurs when the team's authority is recognized by senior management. Once management has defined a goal, the team should be in-charge from then on. Middle managers should not micro-manage from the outside the goings on of the team; rather, management needs to trust the team's authority.

In fact, too much management can kill a successful team, the experts say. Requiring weekly updates can be de-motivating to team members and the team might spend more time on the reporting process than on the actual task that needs to be completed.

## **Culture Shift**

A culture shift often must occur within a company for empowered teams to work successfully. In today's corporate world, middle managers are often times the biggest obstacle a company must overcome if they want to have effective empowered teams. In order for teams to be successful, middle management has to let go of some of its power in order to empower the teams to get things done. Ideally, a team should consist of about four or five core members, and others brought in as occasional resources when necessary. If a team is large, it can be broken down into subsets, defined by the team members' areas of expertise.

Time limits on projects are crucial. Never let the time frame get too long, says Mazza, noting that a massive team project undertaken at McGraw-Hill took only three months because the team was focused and had a tight deadline. Leaving the project open-ended courts disaster. She recommends never letting a project linger past six months.

Intensity is the key to a team's success. Even if you have a year-long project, you have to work as if every day is important - be intense every day.

## **Training**

As mentioned previously, picking the right people for a team is crucial to a team's success.

Officials at GE's Aircraft Engine (GEAE) division agree, and that is why the first things employees learn are basic leadership and team skills. Recently, GEAE began teaching team skills to their supplier companies as well. At least 1,000 of GEAE's supplier executives globally have received a one-day supplier leadership training course emphasizing the importance of team skills.

GEAE is requiring higher quality products from its suppliers and is willing to help them reach Six Sigma quality by providing the necessary training, says Sakurai, the Master Black Belt for GEAE's suppliers. Many suppliers are seeking this help on a volunteer basis, with the initiative receiving a lot of enthusiasm from all participants, he says. GE has realized that everyone must work together to improve customer satisfaction.

## **Team Rewards**

Team rewards for a job well done can be a tricky business. Actually, we have not come up with a way to handle it, says Mazza. On every team there are a few who were incredibly outstanding and others who just did their work without great achievement. Our reward structure is based on individual performance, Mazza says.

Monetary rewards often are not necessary or expected. Being recognized for a job well done by senior management, ranging from a visit by the CEO or VP personally congratulating an employee with a pat on the back or a dinner out with a high level manager - that's the kind of thing people remember the rest of their lives, Berg says. If the team's success is recognized by another of the company's departments, that peer group action is extremely well received by the honored employees. Appreciation and recognition fuel any team's success patterns.

Motorola sponsors its own Total Customer Satisfaction (TCS) competition which showcases the quality achievements of Motorola teams each year to the company's top executives. Sometimes, Motorola team members who have worked together for months never see each other face to face until they meet at the TCS competition, says Diane Prange, MU team trainer. In today's high-tech communication environment, it is not difficult for team members to communicate via e-mail, telephone and video conferences.

## **Team Success Story**

Empowered employees are solving thousands of problems at companies across the nation every day. At McGraw-Hill, a 25-member team was formed to solve severe customer service problems when the company purchased another publishing company. Using the empowered teams' technique resulted in success in only three months.

The large group separated into more manageable subsets based on their specialties and how they affected customer service. Everybody got very focused and in three months, the customer service problems were gone.

## **Results**

Facilitators from Motorola University with a proven track record for creating empowered teams often are helpful because, as outsiders, they are not immersed in the company's culture or politics. This makes it easier to recommend changes. But, when the initial training is over, the newly-created teams must commit to take charge and continue the momentum.

To fully implement the team building process takes time and effort, but the benefits of an empowered work force are immeasurable. Results from companies using the empowered team concept show:

- dramatic results occur with committed and creative teamwork
- employees become more confident and motivated through the team process
- a better and stronger company is the end result
- In today's work environment, empowered teams help keep companies one step ahead of the competition, with better products, better tailored to fit their customer's needs.

For more information contact - Charles Loew at 1-520-568-6355; E-Mail at Charles.Loew@masetllc.com.

®SIX SIGMA is a registered trademark and service mark of Motorola, Inc.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS:** *The authors are publicists working for MOTIVATORS®, INC., a Houston, Texas-based public relations agency that researches and writes articles on contemporary business topics for a variety of U.S. corporations.*